

## ATLAS SHRUGGED, THE PHENOM

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### *Comments on the cultural impact of the film*

by Brian Wright

After more years than I can count, Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged* reached the silver screen yesterday, Friday, April 15, 2011. A small group of my idea-interested friends and I attended the 7:15 showing at a cineplex in Lansing, Michigan. The show was not sold out. In fact, I estimate less than 1/4 of the 400 seats were filled... average age 40-something, with perhaps 40 30-somethings and below. Hardly any teens.

Regardless of the numbers—*Atlas Shrugged the Movie* (ASM) was not marketed like *Harry Potter*—the film is an important cultural milestone(s). My focus in today's column is the cultural and ideological relevance of the film. On Wednesday next, I review the movie itself. — bw



The most important cultural realization comes to me after the showing, as Therese and I join a handful from the Mid Michigan Humanist group for postpartum drinks and discussion. {FYI, IMHO,[1] humanists or secular humanists in modern America tend to be either neo-liberal (democratic-maternal statist) or classical liberal (libertarian), with the latter growing more prevalent today.} That realization is the number of individuals with my deep understanding of the philosophical edifice of Ms. Rand is next to none... yet unlike my early Randian days, I'm delighting in opportunities to reach out and move toward a common appreciation of her art, and its importance to our future.

Virtually all the humanists in our after-movie gathering have libertarian sympathies—and most have read the 1164-page novel *Atlas Shrugged* at one point in their lives—yet hold out for a substantial role of government in the economy "to restrain excesses of 'capitalism'" and provide "a social safety net." Tonight I find myself clarifying several of the key ideas that Ayn Rand developed that were expressed in the movie. Here are the four key ideas I see in ASM:

- Innovation and the joy of creation
- The importance of industrial production
- Egoism and reason vs. altruism, faith, and force
- The distinction between the productive class and the political class

Each of these points emerges from time to time as the theme of *Atlas Shrugged* comes forward: That theme is "What happens to society when the 'men of the mind,' the men of honest ability in any field, go on strike?" By the way, the movie does a 10-star job of getting across the theme and the related key ideas within its artistic format limits.

### ***Culture Dampening***

One example from my conversations tonight in the restaurant is sufficient to explain the general problem of moving ideas into culture. In the movie/book, Hank Rearden of Rearden Steel and Dagny Taggart of Taggart Transcontinental (Railroad) are desperately trying to build track into Colorado—so they can bring Ellis Wyatt's oil to market and 'save the country.' The response of the government and its corporate

insiders is to interfere—through various legislation always accompanied by a 'good for mankind' public service message—with all of Hank's and Dagny's efforts. What Bill across from me, with his neo-liberal sensibilities, doesn't appreciate is the difference between productive business leaders like Hank and Dagny vs. corporate-welfare muthas like Orren Boyle.

It boils down to a problem of definition. What's capitalism? Most people think the current American corporate-state system of legal privilege represents the natural free market that recognizes the inviolate individual rights of life, liberty, and property. Au contraire. The confusion is understandable because most people do not understand the nature of "the corporation," which is and always has been a creature of the coercive state. [2]

Ayn Rand was the quintessential advocate of capitalism. She viewed it as a moral ideal. But she and her disciples were/are unclear on the concept of how corporate privilege fits into that ideal. For the most part they don't deal academically with the issue—whether or not state-privileged corporations are consistent with capitalism. In a book or movie it doesn't make a lot of difference, because any viewer can see chasms of separation between productive persons and fraudulent posturing persons who use the state to stick knives in everyone's backs. On the street that's all that matters, you have your setup then between good and evil and, with a happy ending, the good wins.

What does it mean for the impact of ASM on public awareness?

The full effect of the message that zero-privilege capitalism is idealistic is lost by the fact that its leading proponents—Rand et al—don't see the privilege of corporatism. Nonetheless, a morality play showing the conflict between good businessmen and sleazy ones can be effective in raising awareness of what ails our country.

### ***The Big Deal***

Without a doubt, ASM is a sterling movie of ideas, and the four I mention above—however vaguely grasped by a general public misled by decades of government schools and the advent of "TV Planet"—will play their way into the public consciousness. Perhaps slowly at first. Americans are not accustomed to movies illuminating big ideas in conceptual terms. Moreover, this is a movie that stands up for the good guys—which are all of us who insist on critical thought and on our rights to live as we choose for our own sakes. The average fellow has never heard a movie character state categorically that he intends to seek his own joy and abundance in life, neither sacrificing himself to others nor others to himself. It's nice to see these good guys win, even when still relatively few people understand how good these good guys are. :) This will change.

When I walked out of the theater, there was a newfound spring in my step and confidence in my voice and bearing. On the most profound level, it made me feel as if I were "right," and have been all along. Certainly others who have fond familiarity with the Randian oeuvre felt the same. And I speculate that those who are innocent of the book ideas, who may never have even heard of Ayn Rand, will experience a similar—yet not so intense—boost in authentic self-esteem. The movie, the ideas so well expressed by believable artists and artistry, makes me feel young again. That we're going to turn our country and planet around and throw out the MOPSters (men of the power sickness). A natural high like no other: also, that the "great masses" will ultimately throw off their chains along with their externally contrived ignorance and rise to the

occasion. Can't wait for ASM 2 and 3. It's great to be alive on the eve of the New Paradigm!

[1] for your information, in my humble opinion

[2] In fact, the American War for Independence was largely a revolt against the privilege bestowed upon the royal corporation, East India Company, by the Crown to the detriment of the colonists' production and trade in important stuff like rum and tea...

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