



All watched over by Ayn Rand

Description

The Fountainhead by Ayn Rand fascinates architects. It's one of the few novels (and films) with an architect as the central character. Loosely modelled on the heroic figure of Frank Lloyd Wright, it glorifies architects and buildings, or at least supposedly original and authentic highly technical architects and architecture.



It also presents a picture disturbing to many, of the architect-hero as independent genius,

answerable only to his (always male to Rand) own internal sense of integrity and worth. Often misunderstood and unappreciated in his own lifetime, the truly great architect ought not pander to the mediocre arbitrariness of mass opinion.

Social architecture this is not.

I used to show an excerpt of the film's climactic courtroom scene in lectures on design theory to highlight the power, pitfalls and persistence of Rand's style of individualism in the creative disciplines. In its strident sermonising of individuality against collective mediocrity I also thought the film in the company of Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* and even *Star Trek*.

So it was good to see an interest in Ayn Rand revived through the stylish first episode of the latest documentary series by Adam Curtis: *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*. The episode manages to weave together several unlikely stories: Ayn Rand's philosophy, somehow combined with her love affair with one of her followers; President Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky; the development of postwar global economics; and the digital revolution.

In *The Fountainhead*, such is his aversion to compromise, the architect dynamites his own building. Through visual reference the documentary associates this wilful destruction with the collapse of the New York World Trade Centre, and of course the persistence of capitalist greed.

The economic thread of Curtis's documentary presents the entrepreneurial culture responsible for the boom in computerisation and the promotion of the machine ethos as strongly under Rand's influence.

The stories only just fit. The digital age draws on many philosophies. The rhetoric surrounding social media, for example, appeals to a range of utopian narratives, not least, a hyper-liberal anti-Randian benign collectivism.

In a way Rand was not the independent thinker (influenced only by Aristotle) she claimed. I always thought her novels those of an unregenerate Romantic, elevating the standard triple of imagination, individualism and genius, if not against science then bureaucracy. Max Weber is there, as is Adam Smith's free market philosophy, and Utilitarianism. Even if Rand encountered these philosophies only after formulating her own, such ideas were part of her intellectual baggage. Her philosophy of the individual had no way of acknowledging such cultural embedding.

I still derive perverse enjoyment from *The Fountainhead*. As melodrama it pushes an idea to extremes: in particular the thought that selfishness exceeds altruism. She has her architect hero Howard Roark explain.

The "common good" of a collective—a race, a class, a state—was the claim and justification of every tyranny ever established over men. Every major horror of history was committed in the name of an altruistic motive. Has any act of selfishness ever equaled the carnage perpetrated by disciples of altruism?

Conversely, I like the thought that under a Randian reading, people who come across as entirely selfish and disregarding of others could be accused of **not being selfish enough**. They only meddle in their vices rather than indulge them to the full, though "self-affirming" (Tillich, 1952) would be a better descriptor for this particular vice.

If only autocrats and despots took their own interest truly to heart then their behaviour would be indistinguishable from someone who is in fact well-socialised, ie aware of their own frailties and contradictions, and contributes to the common good.

Here's what Rand's architect says about himself (as creator):

No creator was prompted by a desire to serve his brothers, for his brothers rejected the gift he offered and that gift destroyed the slothful routine of their lives. His truth was his only

motive. His own truth, and his own work to achieve it in his own way.

It is mainly by their rhetoric that these Randian heros are recognised as so objectionable. If only they would keep quiet we might actually grow to like them.

Bibliography

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