

Libertarians Shrugged

The Atlas Shrugged movie is not as bad as they had feared it would be.

By David Weigel

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Atlas Shrugged: Part I, the new cinematic adaptation of Ayn Rand's multimillion-selling novel, ends with a long list of special thanks. The producers thank the Club for Growth, the organization that helps liberal Republicans spend more time with their families; FreedomWorks, the non-Koch-funded Tea Party group; the Atlas Society, a think tank that promotes Rand's ideas and legacy; and Ronnie James Dio. The late singer for Elf, Rainbow, and Black Sabbath, one of the founding banshees of heavy metal, was one of the people who kept the project alive.

John Agliano, a board member of the Atlas Society and one of the film's two producers, bought the rights to adapt *Atlas Shrugged* 18 years ago. In 2010, the rights were about to be "lost forever" after years of dithering by studios, funders, and eight screenwriters. Agliano hooked up with Harmon Kaslow, who had less experience in the libertarian universe but more experience making films, and in six weeks in the summer of 2010 they finished production of the movie. For months they have been previewing it to the sort of people who

could help promote it—CPAC, the Cato Institute, libertarian businessmen.

"I put together clips for that Koch meeting that happened in Palm Springs last month," says Kaslow. "I thought, 'Which of these scenes would be the ones that really wealthy people to relate to?' " Sadly, the preview never made it onto the schedule.

I saw the movie, which is scheduled to be released nationwide April 15—a date not chosen at random—at a screening for journalists and libertarian activists on Wednesday. The consensus was that the movie is not as bad as libertarians had feared it would be, after all those delays and those iffy prerelease clips and that tiny budget. (Agliano says producers have spent "something in the \$20 million range" on the project over the last 18

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years.)

It doesn't need to be good. *Atlas Shrugged* has sold somewhere between 7 million and 8 million copies in the United States. In 2009, the first year of the Tea Party, it sold around 500,000 copies. Themes from the novel, like the question "Who is John Galt?" and the concept of "looters" who subsist on the work of others, were sketched onto Tea Party signs. Members of Congress compared President Obama's policies to the policies of the novel's villains, a flabby crew of lobbyists and lazy businessmen.

Of course, the novel is very long. *Atlas Shrugged* readers remember what age they were when they started the book; they don't always remember if they finished it. This movie, directed by *One Tree Hill* star Paul Johansson, compresses the novel's first 400 or so pages into 102 minutes of exposition, boardroom scenes, tasteful parties, and computerized high-speed rail montages. Anyone who's seen a SyFy Channel original movie in which a mutated insect battles a mutated amphibian will be comfortable with the production quality. Anyone who's seen a faithful Christian adaptation of a Bible story will be comfortable with the style of adaptation—as much original text on-screen as the screen can hold. The actors and scenes are there to present Rand's philosophy to the *Twilight* and Nicholas

Sparks set.

The plot begins on Sept. 2, 2016, as the disembodied voices of news anchors helpfully explain that oil prices are so high that rail has become the only affordable method of transportation. Times are bad. Sad people warm themselves by the heat of trash-can fires. Businessmen in suits write their résumés on sandwich boards and walk back and forth. It rains a lot. A businessman is followed out of a diner by a man covered by a black hat and opportune shadows. That man is John Galt—a genius who's building a hideaway of geniuses.

"Midas Mulligan!" he yells.

"Who's asking?" says the businessman.

"Someone who knows what it's like to work for himself and not let others feed off the profit of his energy!"

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The businessman ponders this. "That's funny. Exactly what I've been thinking."

Mulligan disappears, and we learn (if we didn't know this already from Tea Party signs) that he has joined a strike by productive intellectuals who've had it with oppressive, redistributive laws. We figure this out long before Dagny Taggart does. Played by Taylor Schilling with the legginess and steeliness that Rand intended, Taggart tries to save her family's rail company, Taggart International, from the mismanagement of her dithering brother James and his political friends, well played by overweight character actors who are rarely seen without a drink or a steak.

So she hooks up with handsome industrialist Henry Rearden, whose company produces a revolutionary metal alloy that could be the salvation of Taggart International. Rearden is played by Grant Bowler, who looks and acts more like Daniel Craig's James Bond than Daniel Craig does. ("Rearden would never have a faux-hawk," said one libertarian at my screening, aghast at Rearden's stylish hair.) Dagny and Henry get into a lot of arguments with James—as when they defend Taggart's deal with an oil magnate named Ellis Wyatt.

"You keep pissing off the heart of this operation!" says Dagny. "Wyatt is going

to provide the blood it takes to keep this company alive! Do you understand that?"

"That metal is completely untested!" says James, waving a sheaf of research. "The consensus of the best metallurgical authorities is highly skeptical!"

Most of the dialogue clunks like that. "There's not much you can do about the dialogue," sighed Fred Smith, president of the libertarian think tank CEI, after the screening. It's supposed to clunk. The book doesn't sell millions of copies because it's subtle. It sells because it offers a fully formed philosophy of reason and self-interest, much of it in a speech by Galt. (The speech will be in the third movie of this planned trilogy, if it gets finished.)

So the movie doesn't work as drama; as allegory, it works about as well as the Randians could want it to. (If it was

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meant to be drama, somebody in the year 2016 would get tired of hearing mysterious people ask "Who is John Galt?" and Google it already.) According to Agliandolo, when the movie was shown to Rand's former lover and "intellectual heir" Nathaniel Branden, he wept.

It also drives home just how unlike *Atlas Shrugged* the Obama years have actually been. Rand's dopey bureaucrats are able to talk about anti-ingenuity legislation one day and pass it the next. One bill makes it illegal for anyone to own more than one company; another puts a surtax on the state of Colorado, because it's doing too well. The Obama administration, during the crisis years of 2009 and 2010, had mixed luck with passing legislation, and it never actually raised taxes except on cigarette smokers.

Sure, *Atlas Shrugged* the novel has worked as a thought experiment. The movie sort of works as a thought experiment. It's an incomplete thought. The federal government's massive bank and auto industry bailouts eroded trust in the government and in companies that took bailouts—this even after the companies staggered back to profit and started paying the money back. These developments don't resemble the novel's plot at all; they were stopgap measures by scared capitalists, who socialized risk to prevent real socialism from taking

hold. Rep. Paul Ryan, the GOP's fiscal brain, voted for TARP a few months before he phoned the Atlas Society to ask how this movie was coming along.

If this movie breaks big, or even if it gets an afterlife on Netflix, will it make as many converts as the novel? Doubtful; Rand's gospel of selfishness works better on the page than on film. This installment of the movie ends with Dagny hiking up Wyatt's property to see the oil wells he set ablaze when he left to join Galt. He left a sign, daring the bureaucrats to take it over: "I'm leaving it as I found it." But he's not leaving it as he found it. He bought mineral rights, made a profit, and left the land with a lot less oil and a few more towering infernos. This may be a sign that Agliandolo and Kaslow made a successful allegory: It's open to an interpretation that they never intended.

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