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## P.J. O'Rourke: Atlas Shrugged. And So Did I.

Atlas shrugged. And so did I.

[The movie version of Ayn Rand's novel](#) treats its source material with such formal, reverent ceremoniousness that the uninitiated will feel they've wandered without a guide into the midst of the elaborate and interminable rituals of some obscure exotic tribe.

Meanwhile, members of that tribe of "Atlas Shrugged" fans will be wondering why director Paul Johansson doesn't knock it off with the incantations, sacraments and recitations of liturgy and cut to the human sacrifice.



atlasshruggedpart1.com

Actress Taylor Schilling as Dagny Taggart, in "Atlas Shrugged."

Upright railroad-heiress heroine Dagny Taggart and upright steel-magnate hero Hank Rearden are played with a great deal of uprightness (and one brief interlude of horizontality) by Taylor Schilling and Grant Bowler. They indicate that everything they say is important by not using contractions. John Galt, the shadowy genius who's convincing the people who carry the world on their shoulders to go out on strike, is played, as far as I can tell, by a raincoat.

The rest of the movie's acting is borrowed from "Dallas," although the absence of Larry Hagman's skill at subtly underplaying villainous roles is to be regretted. Staging and action owe a debt to "Dynasty"—except, on "Dynasty," there usually was action.

In "Atlas Shrugged—Part I" a drink is tossed, strong words are bandied, legal papers are served, more strong words are further bandied and, finally, near the end, an oil field is set on fire, although we don't get to see this up close. There are many beautiful panoramas of the Rocky Mountains for no particular reason. And the movie's title carries the explicit threat of a sequel.

But I will not pan "Atlas Shrugged." I don't have the guts. If you associate with Randians—and I do—saying anything critical about Ayn Rand is almost as scary as saying anything critical to Ayn Rand. What's more, given how protective Randians are of Rand, I'm not sure she's dead.

The woman is a force. But, let us not forget, she's a force for good. Millions of people have read "Atlas Shrugged" and been brought around to common sense, never mind that the author and her characters don't exhibit much of it. Ayn Rand, perhaps better than anyone in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, understood that the individual self-seeking we call an evil actually stands in noble contrast to the real evil of self-seeking collectives. (A rather Randian sentence.) It's easy to make fun of Rand for being a simplistic philosopher, bombastic writer and—I'm just saying—crazy old bat. But the 20<sup>th</sup> century was no joke. A hundred years, from Bolsheviks to Al Qaeda, were spent proving Ayn Rand right.

Then there is the audacity of bringing "Atlas Shrugged" to the screen at all. Rand devotees, starting with Rand herself,

have been attempting it for 40 years. The result may be as puzzling as a nude sit-in anti-Gadhafi protest in Tripoli's Green Square, but you have to give the participants credit for showing up.

In "Atlas Shrugged" Rand set out to prove that self-interest is vital to mankind. This, of course, is the whole point of free-market classical liberalism and has been since Adam Smith invented free-market classical liberalism by proving the same point. Therefore trying to make a movie of "Atlas Shrugged" is like trying to make a movie of "The Wealth of Nations." But Adam Smith had the good sense to leave us with no plot, characters or melodramatic clashes of will so that we wouldn't be tempted to try.

"Atlas Shrugged" presents other problems for a moviemaker. The book was published in 1957 and set in an America of the future. But time seems to have taken a U-turn, so that we're back in a worse Great Depression with a more megalomaniacal business competition-loathing FDR-type administration. All sorts of things have been uninvented, such as oil pipelines so that oil has to be shipped by rail, railroads being the dominant form of transportation. Airplanes exist, but knowing where to fly them apparently doesn't, because a secret hidden unknown valley in the Rocky Mountains figures in the plot, which also hinges on a substance that's lighter and stronger than steel. This turns out to be a *revolutionary new steel alloy!* Because Rand forgot about plastics.

The "Atlas Shrugged" movie simply accepts these unimaginative imaginings. No attempt is made to create a "future of the past" atmosphere as in the movies about Batman (a very unRandian figure, trapped in his altruism costume drama). Nor is any attempt made to update Rand's tale of Titans of Industry versus Gargantuas of government.

An update is needed, and not just because train buffs, New Deal economics and the miracle of the Bessemer converter are inexplicable to people under 50, not to mention boring. The anti-individualist enemies that Ayn Rand battled are still the enemy, but they've shifted their line of attack. Political collectivists are no longer much interested in taking things away from the wealthy and creative. Even the most left-wing politicians worship wealth creation—as the political-action-committee collection plate is passed. Partners at Goldman Sachs go forth with their billions. Steve Jobs walks on water. Jay-Z and Beyoncé are rich enough to buy God. Progressive Robin Hoods have turned their attention to robbing ordinary individuals. It's the plain folks, not a Taggart/Rearden elite, whose prospects and opportunities are stolen by corrupt school systems, health-care rationing, public employee union extortions, carbon-emissions payola and deficit-debt burden graft. Today's collectivists are going after malefactors of moderate means.

Hence the Tea Party, and Ayn Rand is invited. Not for nothing is Kentucky Senator Paul named Rand. The premise of "Atlas Shrugged" applies to every maker in a world of takers. What if, *pace* Adam Smith, the takers do indeed expect their dinner "from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker"? And what if the Safeway meat-cutter, the beer-truck driver, and the guy who owns the Dunkin' Donuts franchise say to hell with "their regard to their own interest"? What if they go off with John Galt to a secret hidden unknown valley in the Rocky Mountains? A lot of people will be chewing air and drinking puddle water.

"Atlas Shrugged—Part I" has to be praised just for existing, for keeping the premise available. Perhaps Hollywood progressives—

inveterate takers—will take it. Many another movie could be made about a labor action by those who perform life's actual labors. Maybe it's a slacker comedy where Zach Galifianakis shaves, loses weight and refuses to speak in non sequiturs. Maybe it's a sci-fi thriller where the Internet has gone on strike and mankind must face a post-apocalyptic world without Twitter. Or maybe it's a horror film set at my house, "Wife on Strike!"

*Mr. O'Rourke's many books include "Don't Vote—It Just Encourages the Bastards."*

Watch the trailer for "Atlas Shrugged":

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