FROM THE DIRECTOR’S DESK

Reviewing the Reviewers

By David Kelley

We always knew the reviews of *Atlas Shrugged Part 1* would be hostile. When Ayn Rand’s novel was published in 1957, critics on both left and right attacked it savagely. The novel challenged not only the politics of the mixed economy and welfare state but also the ethics of altruism, in both its religious and its secular (egalitarian) forms. So it was equally predictable that the film—which is true to the novel in conveying those themes—received the same treatment when it premiered last April 15.

At the same time, the novel was a huge popular success, an immediate best-seller, revealing the stark disparity between the intelligentsia and the wider public. Bennett Cerf, Rand’s publisher at Random House, said, “In all my years of publishing, I’ve never seen anything like it. To break through against such enormous opposition!” *Atlas Shrugged* tapped a deep vein of individualism and the distinctively American “Don’t tread on me” spirit. In the last few years, as increasing numbers of people feel trod upon by burgeoning government, sales of the novel and references to it in the media have reached unprecedented levels. Publicity surrounding the film added yet another boost to sales.

Will the film repeat the history of critical disdain but commercial success? That remains to be seen. The initial theatrical run has so far been disappointing. As an independent film, with a very limited budget for production and less for promotion, producers John Aglialoro and Harmon Kaslow relied chiefly on social media and advance screenings for sympathetic groups. After a successful opening weekend, however, box office results declined steeply. (Continues on page 2.)
What critics are attacking is Rand’s new concept of egoism: that one’s own life is an end in itself.

I expect them to abandon so completely the standards of film-reviewing.

As expected, many critics reacted not merely to the film but to the themes of Atlas Shrugged as such, novel and film, and to the philosophy of Objectivism they express. Here is Michael Phillips, a prominent critic for the Los Angeles Times:

Conceived as the first of a proposed three-part series, director Paul Johansson’s movie is the work of true believers in Rand’s pet theory known as Objectivism, which can be described as “Us? There is no ‘us’!” In Rand’s worldview it’s me-time, all the time. The capitalistic visionaries among us have been hounded and taxed and ground down so relentlessly by the federal government and other societal evils, there’s nothing to do but blow the whole thing up and start anew, in a civilization run by the mysterious John Galt, who respects the rapacious dog-eat-dog nature of humankind and the sexy, life-enhancing virtues of unfettered economic competition.

That is Phillips’s entire summary of the main plot and theme of the film. Leaving aside the ugly sarcasm, let us count the errors. The strikers do not “blow up the whole thing”; they simply withdraw so that society has to live with the consequences of its own practices and moral principles, and confront the fact that parasites and looters can’t survive when the victims are gone. The meaning of the strike, moreover, is not revealed until Part III of the novel and is only hinted at in Atlas Shrugged Part 1. Phillips is obviously not just reviewing the film but targeting Rand and Objectivism in toto.

Finally, and most importantly, Rand did not believe “there is no us,” much less advocate “dog-eat-dog” egoism. She could not have made it clearer that she did not believe in sacrificing others to self. Running throughout the novel, the film, and every other statement of the philosophy is the message of justice: Respect the rights of others and deal with them by trade, exchanging value for value as independent equals. It is the villains, not the heroes, who fit Phillips’s description. For example, the “Anti-dog-eat-dog” bill, which forced a competing railroad out of business, was engineered by James Taggart and his cronies. Dagny is horrified by the injustice: “The Phoenix/Durango is a good line, Jim. Dan Conway put his entire lifeblood into its success.”

Most of the reviewers in major media wrote with the same tone of snarky, evasive condescension as Phillips, avoiding any effort to describe the central moral conflicts in Atlas Shrugged except in the form of dismissive epithets that repeat the usual myths about Rand. For example:

- Roger Ebert, Chicago Tribune: “[Ayn Rand’s] philosophy reduces itself to: ‘I’m on board; pull up the lifeline.’

- Carina Chocano, New York Times, on Hank and Dagny: “He’s just happy to be with someone who hates humanity as attractively as he does.”

As Walter Donway noted in a Facebook essay on Chocano’s review, “One of the strangest things about the reviews of Atlas Shrugged Part 1 is that they never name or describe what they are attacking, but make it unmistakably clear that they know.” What they are attacking, of course, is Rand’s new concept of egoism: that one’s own life is an end in itself, and that virtue and honor do not permit sacrifice to others, much less require it.

Many critics also reacted to the romantic portrayal of achievers as heroes. “Upright railroad heiress Dagny Taggart and upright steel magnate hero Hank Rearden,” sneered libertarian humorist P. J. O’Rourke, “are played with a great deal of uprightness.” Several reviewers made fun of Hank Rearden’s line in a phone call from Dagny, “What we’re doing—my metal, your railway—it’s us [sic] who move the world…” They cited the line without explanation as too ludicrous for words (and not because of the grammatical lapse). That scene never fails to move me; actor Grant Bowler perfectly captured Rearden’s quiet confidence and his deep sympathy for a troubled comrade. I can only assume that the reviewers simply cannot conceive of business people as heroes. Ebert complains, in the same vein, “The dialogue seems to have been ripped throbbing with passion from the pages of Investors’ Business Daily. Much of the excitement centers on the tensile strength of steel.”

In anticipation of Atlas Shrugged Part 1 reviews, The Atlas Society created a series of essays called “Myths About Ayn Rand,” for the new Atlas Shrugged tab on our website. These essays confront common errors about Ayn Rand, Atlas Shrugged, and the philosophy of Objectivism, especially as they are found in the media and recent reviews of the movie. Each essay is a category of error such as “Rand was for dog-eat-dog selfishness,” and contains examples from recent articles. This section of our website is a way to hold journalists accountable for their reporting on Ayn Rand as well as counter the misconceptions that they cause. Read “Myths About Ayn Rand” at http://www.atlassociety.org/atlas-shrugged/myths-about-ayn-rand.
**EVENTS**

**Atlas Shrugged Part 1**

Premiere in New York

The Atlas Society hosted the final premiere of *Atlas Shrugged Part 1* before the movie hit theaters on April 15, 2011. Our event took place to celebrate the achievement of producer John Aglialoro and his team, as well as to offer TAS members an exclusive opportunity to meet the movie’s talented team and see the film ahead of time.

**Audience members watched the film in the company of those who created it and others who shared its values.**

The elegant celebration took place in New York City on the evening of April 14, at the Hudson Theater in the Millenium Broadway Hotel, just blocks away from the bright lights of Times Square. The Atlas Society carried out the event with the help of Patrick and Laurie Gentempo, entrepreneurs and longtime Objectivists.

The event featured remarks by Patrick Gentempo, TAS Trustee Jay Lapeyre, TAS Executive Director David Kelley, and John Aglialoro. After these speakers, there was a panel of people involved with the *Atlas Shrugged* movie including post-production supervisor John Orland, scriptwriter Brian O’Toole, and actors Navid Negahban (who played the character of Dr. Stadler), Graham Beckel (played Ellis Wyatt), Michael Lerner (played Wesley Mouch), and Matthew Marsden (played James Taggart). The panel answered questions about what it was like to work on the movie.

Finally came the main event: the showing of *Atlas Shrugged Part 1*. The audience watched the film in the company of those who had created it and others who shared its values. After the showing of the film, attendees at the event gathered for a cocktail party, where they could discuss the movie and meet the people involved. The Atlas Society is grateful to all who joined us for this special event.

Our April 14 celebration was just one of The Atlas Society’s many efforts in promoting the movie and positioning ourselves as a resource for viewers interested in learning more about Ayn Rand’s philosophy. Other efforts include our December 7, 2010, event showing a “sneak peek” of the movie; David Kelley’s early review of the film on February 24; clips shown at the CPAC and Students for Liberty conferences on February 11 and 18, respectively; screenings in Washington, D.C., and New York on March 2 and 3; a speech by Will Thomas at a pre-screening event on April 8; and a presence at the official premiere at Union Station, Washington, D.C., on April 12. The Atlas Society also created a new *Atlas Shrugged* tab on our website, with a special subsection devoted to the movie, including “Myths About Ayn Rand” (see page 2) and video commentaries (see page 7). For more information about the movie and The Atlas Society’s events, see our website, atlassociety.org.

For more pictures and information about The Atlas Society’s events and activities, “Like” us on Facebook.

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**New friends**

Patrick and Laurie Gentempo helped to make the April 14, *Atlas Shrugged* movie event a success. Pictured here with TAS Executive Director David Kelley (right).

**Devil’s advocate**

Michael Lerner (who played Wesley Mouch) and Matthew Marsden (James Taggart) discuss what it was like to act as the villains of *Atlas Shrugged*.**“I loved the spirit that was evoked the evening the film was screened for The Atlas Society. Again, [The Atlas Society] team did a great job.”**

—Graham Beckel, played the character of Ellis Wyatt in *Atlas Shrugged Part 1*. 
2011 Graduate Seminar to Focus on Induction

The Atlas Society’s 8th annual Graduate Seminar in Objectivist Philosophy and Method is planned for July 31–August 5 at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C. This intimate, graduate-level seminar offers a week of intensive training in the Objectivist methods of thinking in essentials and reasoning contextually.

Instruction in 2011 will focus on the Objectivist theories of concept formation and induction, drawing on David Harriman’s *The Logical Leap* as a key text. We will discuss strengths of the Objectivist case and look at areas in need of further research. We will discuss key skeptical arguments and how to counter them. This subject matter should be of interest to students in any field that relies on integrating data. The instructors are David Kelley, William R. Thomas, and David Ross. Full details of the seminar are explained in the syllabus.

Applications for the Graduate Seminar will be accepted on a rolling basis until July 9.

A SPECIAL GRADUATE SEMINAR / SUMMER SEMINAR CONNECTION

Supporters of The Atlas Society who attend the Summer Seminar conference in Anaheim, California, in July will get a direct look at some of the fruits of past Graduate Seminar instruction. The Summer Seminar program in 2011 features several sessions originally developed as part of the 2010 Graduate Seminar, including Kate Herrick on the problem of induction, Kathy Prellwitz on utilitarianism, and Jason Walker (pictured at left) on the rule of law. In addition, Graduate Seminar instructor William R. Thomas will share some of the Graduate Seminar curriculum at the Summer Seminar, in the form of a pair of workshops on defining concepts.

These student’s presentations are a mark of success for The Atlas Society’s Graduate Seminars and overall student outreach, as the purpose of our student programs is to create intellectuals who can successfully represent Rand’s ideas to a larger audience and in their academic careers. If you would like to help The Atlas Society provide opportunities for students and promote Objectivism in academia, contribute to TAS today.

CONTRIBUTE NOW

To support The Atlas Society, go to [atlassociety.org](http://atlassociety.org) or call (202) AYN RAND.
Summer Seminar to Host Quality Speakers

The Summer Seminar is getting closer! The Atlas Society, in conjunction with Free Minds Institute, will hold the event in Anaheim, California, near Los Angeles. The program will run Thursday, July 7, through Wednesday, July 13 (but plan to arrive on Wednesday, July 6).

It is the 21st meeting of the Summer Seminar, the travelling intellectual feast of open Objectivism. With over 60 speakers and events planned, there is something for everyone with an interest in Ayn Rand and her ideas. And the gathering will sparkle with the convivial good cheer that is the trademark of The Atlas Society’s vision of benevolent, rational individualism.

Read on for just a sample of the variety of fascinating talks and workshops on the program:

David Kelley will speak on a fundamental issue in the theory of induction: whether causality can be perceived. Edward Hudgins will explore the limits of rationality and ask whether we expect to see a more rational society in the future. William R. Thomas will give a pair of lectures laying out an Objectivist approach to foreign policy.

Energy expert Robert Bradley will discuss “The Energy in Atlas Shrugged.” Philosopher Stephen Hicks will relate his experiences using entrepreneurs to teach philosophy. Painter Michael Newberry will explore the varieties of visual pleasure. And Barbara Branden will update key ideas from her classic course on “Efficient Thinking.”

As this issue of the newsletter goes to press, additions to the program include Brian Doherty, senior editor of Reason magazine and author of Radicals for Capitalism, and Michael Shermer, founder of Skeptic magazine and author of The Mind of the Market and The Believing Brain.

The site for the Summer Seminar is Embassy Suites Anaheim—South, 11767 Harbor Boulevard, Garden Grove, CA, 92840. Find them on the web or call 1-714-539-3300 for reservations. Go to www.freeminds2011.org for all the information.

Anaheim is a perfect vacation spot. It’s the home of Disneyland and the Angels baseball team, and it is near the Pacific beaches and all the cultural delights of the Los Angeles area. Bring your whole family, or come for an extended vacation!

Come spend a week in an intellectual environment charged by respect for the values of reason and human achievement. For more information email freeminds.edu@gmail.com or contact The Atlas Society at tas@atlassociety.org.

FINANCIAL AID FOR STUDENTS

The Summer Seminar has low, super-discount registration rates for current full-time students. In addition, The Atlas Society offers financial aid scholarships to help students attend the Summer Seminar. You can find the application form on the TAS website, or you may email William Thomas at wthomas@atlassociety.org for any information. Financial aid funds are disbursed on a first-come, first-served basis, so apply soon if you are eligible.

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REVIEWING THE REVIEWERS

(By David Kelley. Continued from page 2.) Ebert’s attitude is a throwback to the 19th-century intellectuals like Thomas Carlyle who reacted with horror to the new world of industry and commerce, unable to grasp the spiritual element in material production, the fact that increasing the tensile strength of steel is an exercise of intelligence, imagination, courage, integrity, and discipline.

With few exceptions, the critics also attacked the cinematic quality of the film. The reviewers most hostile to its themes also tended to issue blanket attacks on the acting, script, camera work, score, etc., speaking as aesthetic oracles without explanation or evidence. Some of these judgments were simply bizarre. Timothy Farmer in Filmstage, to mention just one example, said, “There is absolutely no chemistry between the characters.” No chemistry? Did he see the same film I did? Over and above the electric charge between Taylor Schilling (Dagny) and Grant Bowler (Hank), I saw great ensemble acting in virtually every scene.

As someone partly involved in the production, I know all too well the severe limitations of time and money that the producers and their team had to deal with; there are a number of things that could have been done better with more time and money. But every time I see the film I am struck anew by its cinematic quality, that could have been done better with more time and money. But the producers and their team had to deal with; there are a number of things that could have been done better with more time and money.

Were the critics out to get the film, to deprive it of the audience needed for greater box office success? I don’t like to attribute motives, beyond observing the obvious herd instinct of like-minded culturati. But you have to wonder when you see critics gloating at the box-office decline after the first weekend (Alex Parene, Salon: “The market, in its infallible wisdom, declares Ayn Rand boring”). A number of hostile reviewers went out of their way to claim that the film does not measure up to the book and will disappoint fans of the book. Coming from people like Roger Ebert, who are obviously not sympathetic to the book, this looks like an effort to discourage would-be movie-goers.

And the sheer scale of repeated Atlas-bashing is also revealing, a point well made by Robert Bidnotto on his blog:

“Ask yourself how many other “mediocre” or even “bad” films have ever generated this level of untempered wrath, raging vituperation, incessant insults, and unrestrained gloating over their artistic or commercial shortcomings. Does this not suggest that something much deeper is going on? If the film’s critics (professional and amateur) truly believed that it was merely mediocre, then what explains their unrelenting, over-the-top spewing of venom? Similarly, if Rand and her ideas were simply silly, wouldn’t her intellectual opponents just dismiss her lightly, without such ado?

Regardless of their intent, did the critics in fact kill the movie? No. To paraphrase Mark Twain, the reports of its death are greatly exaggerated. The producers are already working on international distribution and negotiating with cable companies for a video-on-demand release. And a DVD release is expected by next all. Aglialoro is also committed to going forward with Part 2, for which screenwriter Brian O’Toole has already completed the first draft of a script. The official website has also been launched. You can view it at atlasshruggedpart2.com. “The only thing the critics killed,” says Aglialoro, “is their credibility as professional, objective reviewers.”

Atlas Shrugged is an enduring work because its themes are timeless. Atlas Shrugged Part 1 gives us our first cinematic glimpse of those themes, and I think it will endure as well. But its fate may be more like that of The Fountainhead, whose sales grew slowly through word-of-mouth, more like that of Atlas Shrugged itself, published when Rand was already recognized as a major novelist. On whatever scale, at whatever speed, the film will continue to expose new people to Objectivism, and we at The Atlas Society will continue to focus on helping people make the connection from the film to the philosophy.

Meanwhile, it is beyond doubt that the film has achieved one superlative success. The reaction of the critics shows how threatened our cultural leaders are by the ideas of Atlas Shrugged, and how evasive they have to be in attacking it. The film obviously touched a nerve—a pain nerve—and it is a great credit to Aglialoro to have fashioned the scalpel.

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Hudgins at APEE

Direct orders
Edward Hudgins offered a talk entitled “Is a Moral Foundation Necessary for Spontaneous Order?” on a panel devoted to Ayn Rand and F.A. Hayek at the Association for Private Enterprise Education conference on April 11, 2011.

Video Commentary

As part of The Atlas Society’s effort to position ourselves as a resource for those who see Atlas Shrugged Part 1 and want to know more about Ayn Rand’s philosophy, we have recently created a series of video commentaries on our website. The videos feature David Kelley explaining scenes from Atlas Shrugged Part 1 in terms of their philosophical meaning. Kelley analyzes three different scenes: “Dagny confronts James,” “Rearden and his dependents,” and “Rearden Metal is not for sale.” The videos are of very high quality, thanks to a collaboration with Ozymandias Media.

Other audio-visual features on our website include ongoing webinars by Will Thomas. Recently, Thomas hosted three webinars about the movie: “Hank Rearden,” “Dagny Taggart,” and “Atlas Shrugged Part 1: the ideas behind the movie.”

David Kelley’s video commentaries and Will Thomas’s webinars can both be found at www.atlassociety.org/atlas-shrugged. You can receive notifications from The Atlas Society by signing up for our email updates at www.atlassociety.org/stay-informed or emailing tas@atlassociety.org.

Sign up for email updates today! Email tas@atlassociety.org

OBJECTIVIST MUSHER RACES IN THE IDITAROD

An article in the Anchorage Daily News about sled dog musher Ed Stielstra caught the attention of Laurie Rice, research assistant for The Atlas Society. Stielstra listed Atlas Shrugged as his favorite book and named one of his sled dogs Ayn Rand.

Ed Stielstra finished 27th at the Iditarod in Nome, Alaska, on March 17, 2011. After receiving an invitation from The Atlas Society, Ed Stielstra and his wife, Tasha, along with Ayn the dog, visited TAS’s offices in Washington, D.C., on April 26. They met the staff, discussed Objectivism, and told us about their dog-sledding lifestyle. See more pictures of their visit at The Atlas Society’s Facebook page.

If you have an interesting picture or story about how you’ve promoted the ideas of Objectivism, contact tas@atlassociety.org.

The Atlas Society
Objectivism in life and thought

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