



Published on *The Political Studies Association (PSA)* (<http://www.psa.ac.uk>)

[Home](#) > Batman Shrugged: Ayn Rand's Influence on Comic Superheroes

Batman Shrugged: Ayn Rand's Influence on Comic Superheroes ^[1]

By Claudia Franziska Brühwiler

In 2009, *The Economist* noted that “Atlas felt a sense of déjà vu ^[2]”: in the wake of the economic crisis and the market interventions by the US government, the novels by Ayn Rand (1905-1982) experienced an actual renaissance and would keep making news thanks to the Tea Party movement as well as due to high-profile US politicians like Paul Ryan ^[3], who had to explain the extent of Rand's influence on them. Once again, Americans discussed the appeal of novels like *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), and how a Russian immigrant could become “the ultimate gateway drug to life on the right,” as historian Jennifer Burns put it.

While most people are aware of Rand's political impact, her legacy in American culture—low and high brow—is less frequently commented on, even though it is the one arena in which she has been a constant source of inspiration. From Mary Gaitskill's novel Two Girls, Fat and Thin ^[4] to the “Ayn Rand School for Tots” featured in The Simpsons ^[5], Rand's work and persona have been satirized, ridiculed, celebrated, and perpetuated in different forms and contexts. Her presence is, however, most markedly felt in one particular form of “low brow art,” namely in the superhero comic book genre, as I discuss in a recent article ^[6].

The best known example of a comic artist greatly influenced by Ayn Rand's work is none other than the co-creator of Peter Parker (aka “the Amazing Spider-Man”) Steve Ditko. His dedication to her concept of rational egoism and other tenets of Objectivism—Rand's brand of philosophy—not only affected his collaboration with Stan Lee, whose claims on Spider-Man Ditko increasingly rejected and finally made him abandon the most successful creation of his career. Rand's influence was also felt in the plotlines and characterization of Spider-Man in the 1960s, and even led Ditko on a quest for the ultimate Randian hero. Starting with “the Question,” a character resurrected in the legendary *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, Ditko found in Mr. A the ideal Objectivist hero ^[7]. Named in reference to the law of identity (“A is A”), Mr. A pursues a clear-cut morality of “either/or,” demanding people to choose their side and not allowing for moral ambiguities. Ditko forewent commercial success in order to create what he believed in and saw as the task more worthy of his talent and time, a decision again in line with Rand's demand that we do not simply seek society's approval and admiration, but rather live in pursuit of our highest values.

Steve Ditko may be the most dedicated and most prominent Randian comic book artist, yet he is not unique in that others have also found inspiration in the brand of heroism exemplified by John Galt and Howard Roark. Frank Miller, whose *Sin City* would be home to a Roark family, acknowledged a “creative debt” to Rand in a postscript to *Martha Washington Goes to War*. And indeed, the eponymous heroine of that particular comic has to witness how

America's best and brightest disappear and withdraw their talent from society—an echo on Galt's Gulch in *Atlas Shrugged*, a refuge for the most creative minds who refuse to have their skills exploited by an encroaching government.

Fittingly, we can also find Rand's traces in the stories of the one masked crusader who is anyway often called a hero of capitalism: Batman aka Bruce Wayne, a wealthy, but cold businessman who despises governments for their ineffectiveness and dependency on forces like him. While references to Rand in Miller's *Batman* may not surprise, one could even find remarkably familiar plotlines in one of the most recent additions to the saga, namely in Chip Kidd's and Dave Taylor's *Death by Design* ^[8] (2012): at an unspecified time in Gotham City's history, Bruce Wayne is set to tear down the Old Wayne Central Station. Though the building had been commissioned by his father and is considered an aesthetic masterpiece by architect Garnett Greenside, the structure has never been stable and flawed from the beginning. In its stead, Wayne wants to see Kem Roomhaus's futuristic vision become reality. When he announces his plans to the press, however, a construction crane plummets, a harbinger of further troubles. Wayne (aka Batman) is surrounded by opponents to his mission: a mysterious masked avenger exposes Roomhaus, a caricature of Rem Koolhaas ^[9], as an incompetent babbler, more apt with words than actual constructions; beautiful socialite Cyndia Syl fights for the maintenance of the original building; and it becomes more and more likely that the architect himself, who had disappeared under mysterious circumstances, is still alive and also willing to sacrifice his creation, just like he had been willing to sacrifice his marriage for his work.

Sounds strangely familiar? If one thinks back to *The Fountainhead*, we can indeed detect many similarities: apart from the characters' names and the general aesthetic of the comic, we encounter in Cyndia Syl another Dominique Francon, Rand's (seemingly) indomitable heroine who ultimately fights for the integrity of Roark's artistic vision. Roark likewise shares some traits with Garnett Greenside, in particular the persistence, the total dedication to a vision, and their indifference to society's expectations. Kem Roomhaus, by contrast, finds his counterparts in Rand's many spoofs on modernist writers, who sell empty words as essence and meaning. Yet *Death by Design* is not a copy of *The Fountainhead*, as already its architectural hero is ironically set apart from Roark by placing "effect before everything," whereas the latter pursued a purist functionalism. Moreover, we find in the actual superhero, Batman, a character of more contradictions and inner turmoil than even Rand's Gail Wynand has to struggle with.

Still, *Death by Design*, together with the works by Steve Ditko, Alan Moore, Frank Miller, and many others stand for one thing: the way Rand has not only influenced political thinkers and businesspeople, but also captivated creative minds. With her in the background, the innocent pastime and guilty pleasure of comic book reading gets a political flavor.

Claudia Franziska Brühwiler ^[10] is a Lecturer at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of St.Gallen, Switzerland. Her article ^[6] "A Is A': Spider-Man, Ayn Rand, and What Man Ought to Be" was published in the latest issue of *PS: Political Science and Politics*.

Image: Ben Salter (CC BY 2.0)

Related downloads:

Image:



Groups audience:

[Insight Plus](#) ^[11]

Group content visibility:

Use group defaults

Higher education

- [Campaigns](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Membership benefits](#)
- [Professional development](#)
- [Publications](#)
- [Specialist groups](#)
- [Travel grants](#)

Schools

- [Events](#)
- [Forum](#)
- [Newsletter archive](#)
- [Political Insight](#)
- [Useful articles](#)

Media & Policy

- [Briefing papers](#)
- [Experts Directory](#)
- [Media briefings](#)

Source URL: <http://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/blog/batman-shrugged-ayn-rand%E2%80%99s-influence-comic-superheroes>

Links:

- [1] <http://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/blog/batman-shrugged-ayn-rand%E2%80%99s-influence-comic-superheroes>
- [2] <http://www.economist.com/node/13185404>
- [3] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/15/opinion/ayn-rand-wouldnt-approve-of-paul-ryan.html?_r=0
- [4] http://www.amazon.com/Goddess-Market-Rand-American-Right/dp/0195324870/ref=ntt_at_ep_dpi_1
- [5] http://simpsons.wikia.com/wiki/Ayn_Rand_School_for_Tots
- [6] <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=9135968&fulltextType=DS&fileId=S1049096513001674>
- [7] <http://www.dialbforblog.com/archives/296/>
- [8] <http://www.dccomics.com/graphic-novels/batman-death-by-design-deluxe-edition>
- [9] <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/jan/29/batman-koolhaas-death-by-design/>
- [10] https://www.alexandria.unisg.ch/Personen/Claudia-franziska_Bruehwiler/L-en
- [11] <http://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus>