

The Strange Attractor in Randian Aesthetics

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Introduction: Linear Conclusions

The purpose of this reply is to provide commentary on issues raised in three articles that appeared in the initial volume of *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*. Hopefully, this modest contribution will provide some provocative ideas while adding to the already evident quality of discourse. Rather than merely defend or critique the ideas of Ayn Rand, the goal here will be to suggest broader margins of discourse involving Randian theory, especially in the realm of aesthetics, epistemology, and cultural theory.

In his article, "Ayn Rand and the Cognitive Revolution in Psychology," Robert Campbell (1999) does a fine job of relating the development of Rand's philosophical epistemology to the "cognitive revolution" that has overthrown behaviorism and Freudianism. Campbell concludes that Objectivists must recognize the psychological roots of Rand's philosophy, or they will be unable to respond to contemporary developments in psychology, such as "new connectionism," "perception and action robotics," "interactivism," and "Dynamic Systems Theory." Whether this is true or not for Objectivist theory will have to be addressed by those who are Objectivist philosophers.

As a utopian theorist, my focus shall be on Campbell's discussion of "dynamic systems," because it was accompanied by a lengthy note that referred to my essay "Skyscrapers, Supermodels, and Strange Attractors" (in Gladstein and Sciabarra 1999). That essay, which appeared in the anthology *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand*, con-

trasted Rand's aesthetics with those of feminist Naomi Wolf, and then compared both with the emerging postindustrial cultural aesthetics that express many of the chaotic processes and forms being identified in various realms of the physical and social sciences. The essay also focused on Rand's cultural aesthetics in *The Fountainhead*, especially Roark's buildings, which are vividly described in terminology that is consistent with the fractal forms of chaos theory. Among its many conclusions, the essay argued that aesthetics is at the heart of Rand's epistemology and her cultural vision. Whereas Campbell finds the essay to be successful in its demonstration of Rand's "fascination" with chaotic relations in Roark's buildings, he concludes that it is "incorrect to extend this analysis into epistemology, as Vacker seeks to do" (1999, 130).

In his article, "Liberty and Nature: The Missing Link," Gregory R. Johnson (1999) offers a firm challenge to Randian theory, which he believes is unsuccessful in grounding the claims of liberty upon the principles of nature. According to Johnson, the central problems with Randian theory are the intellectualist and reductionist tendencies, which he sees as perfectly symbolized by the trajectory of Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead*. In a highly aesthetic analogy, Johnson compares Roark in a state of nature (in the famed opening passage of the novel) to Roark atop the Wynand Building (in the utopian concluding passage). Johnson argues that, with the world "anchored to [his] feet," Roark becomes a symbol for Rand's vision of human destiny, where humans are at the center of the universe. And atop the emerging Wynand building in Manhattan, Roark becomes a symbol for Rand's vision of human destiny, expressing reason through the technological mastery of nature. In this analogy, Johnson sees Rand as embracing Frances Bacon rather than Aristotle, where humans are "at the center of the cosmos" rather than "anchored" to a world that is the center of everything. He concludes that since Rand viewed Roark as an ideal man, his "path from the natural world to a world of his own creation maps the ideal trajectory of human history" (160). In the end, for Johnson, Roark represents the ultimate in Randian rationalism and reductionism.

Finally, in his article "Music and Perceptual Cognition," Roger E.

Bissell offers interesting insights on the epistemics of musical perception and develops the connection between linear plot construction and the experience of music. In a spirit similar to Johnson's linear conclusion, Bissell concludes that "music offers us the opportunity to reenact, solely within the perceptual field of hearing, the volitional process of integrating actions and values and goals into a complex plan of goal-directed action" (1999, 77).

At first glance, the conclusions drawn by Campbell, Johnson, and Bissell would seem obviously correct. After all, what could chaotic systems have to do with Randian epistemology and how could anyone dispute Rand's embrace of the Baconian view of nature at the conclusion of *The Fountainhead*? Certainly, Rand's theory of art and music expresses the moral ideal of self-directed action, as embodied by individualists such as Roark. But beneath the veneer of firmly stated conclusions, we find more of the reductionism that so plagues the realms of physical and social science, including Objectivist theory and criticism. Campbell, Johnson, and Bissell do not take into full consideration the aesthetics of Rand, especially those presented in *The Fountainhead*, and how aesthetics is at the core of Randian theory.

Chaotic Aesthetics in Rand

Campbell's claim that it is incorrect to extend "dynamic systems" into Rand's epistemology is misguided. First, he associates the claims of my essay mostly with "dynamic systems." While it is true that I use the word "dynamic" on several occasions, I make clear that there is much more to the cultural aesthetics described in *The Fountainhead*. Rather than being merely "dynamic," they are "chaotic." Whereas dynamic systems could be simple and linear, chaotic systems are distinctly complex and nonlinear. Second, it is possible to conclude that Rand's theory of art, as applied to her own art, necessitates the introduction of chaos theory into her epistemology. As discussed in my *Feminist Interpretations* essay, the chaotic aesthetic is expressed in many of Rand's descriptions of nature. Here is the opening scene, with Roark on the cliff:

He stood naked at the edge of a cliff. The lake lay far below him. A frozen explosion of granite burst in flight to the sky over the motionless water. The water seemed immovable, the stone flowing. The stone had the stillness of one brief moment in battle when thrust meets thrust and the currents are held in a pause more dynamic than motion. The stone glowed, wet with sunrays.

The lake below was only a thin steel ring that cut the rocks in half. The rocks went on into the depth, unchanged. They began and ended in the sky. So that the world seemed suspended in space, an island floating on nothing, anchored to the feet of the man on the cliff.

His body leaned against the sky. It was a body of long straight lines and angles, each curve broken into planes. He stood, rigid, his hands hanging at his sides, palms out. (Rand [1943] 1968, 3–4; cited in Vacker 1999, 132–33).

And in the stone quarry:

He stood on the hot stone in the sun. His face was scorched to bronze. His shirt stuck in long, damp patches to his back. The quarry rose about him in flat shelves breaking against one another. It was a world without curves, grass or soil, a simplified world of stone planes, sharp edges and angles. The stone had not been made by patient centuries welding the sediment of winds and tides; it had come from a molten mass cooling slowly at an unknown depth; it had been flung, forced out of the earth, and still held the shape of violence against the violence of the men on its ledges. (Rand [1943] 1968, 203; cited in Vacker 1999, 145)

In my judgment, these passages illustrate an existential or metaphysical aesthetic at the heart of Rand's overall world-view, and it is an aesthetic vision that expresses chaotic processes, turbulent patterns,

and fractal forms. Roark may be at the center of a Baconian world, but it is not a sterile or mechanistic Newtonian universe.

This is not a trivial matter, for Rand believed art to be a concretization of metaphysics, which she then directly connected to psychology and epistemology. According to Rand: "Art is a concretization of metaphysics. Art brings man's concepts to the perceptual level of his consciousness and allows him to grasp them directly, as if they were percepts. This is the psycho-epistemology of art and the reason of its importance in man's life" (1975, 20). This statement opens the door to several questions. If art is a concretization of metaphysics appealing to the psycho-epistemological needs of humans, then what does it mean when Rand's own work of art, *The Fountainhead*, provides descriptions of the world that express deeply chaotic and turbulent forms? Before exploring this question, it should be pointed out that aesthetics and art are not co-extensive, for aesthetics is a much broader category than art, encompassing visions of nature, science, human living, social and cultural forms, and so on. Aesthetics involves the forms and functions that span the realms of the beautiful and sublime, the ugly and the ridiculous, and is much more than the mere presentation of a "moral ideal" as declared by Rand. As a category or activity within aesthetics, art will necessarily reflect the broader aesthetic world-view held by the artist and/or audience, within which the art may or may not express a moral ideal. By the terms of her stated theory of art, this would seem to be no less true for Rand and the descriptions of nature and Roark's architecture provided in *The Fountainhead*.

Campbell's conclusion that it is incorrect to extend "dynamic systems" or chaos theory into Randian epistemology may appear true, if we only consider the terminology presented in the *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (Rand 1990). We should remember that Rand was an artist first, and a philosopher second. Campbell seems to have overlooked Rand's fiction and her book on art and aesthetics, *The Romantic Manifesto* (1975), where she connects both art and aesthetics to epistemology, as explicitly illustrated by such chapter titles as "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art" and "Art and Cognition." Rand suggests a link between metaphysics and epistemology through

aesthetics. Campbell's mistake lies in his reductionist approach, seeing psychology as the only source of Randian epistemology. Similarly, by ignoring the totality of the aesthetics and metaphysics presented in *The Fountainhead*, it would seem that Johnson has committed the same reductionist error in his very critique of reductionism. While linearity or reductionism may be present in Randian theory, there also exists clear evidence of nonlinearity and organicity in her epistemology and aesthetics.

When we consider *The Fountainhead* and *The Romantic Manifesto* together, then it seems quite necessary to introduce both chaos theory and aesthetics into Rand's epistemology. If art is a concretization of metaphysics appealing to the psycho-epistemological needs of humans, and if art brings "concepts to the perceptual level," then what do the "concepts" (as expressed through things in the natural world) represent when they are "perceived" in turbulent processes and chaotic forms? They likely represent or symbolize what Rand (the artist) sensed was a chaotic and nonlinear view of nature and of human existence with nature, which I believe is consistent with how Rand (the philosopher) viewed concepts, as open-ended and capable of virtually unlimited adaptation and modification. While this is a complex issue and cannot be fully explained here, my *Feminist Interpretations* essay contains a three-page passage that sketches a connection between Rand's epistemology, aesthetics, and chaos theory (1999, 142–44). My forthcoming book, *Chaos at the Edge of Utopia*, further integrates chaos and concepts through aesthetics. In my view, the chaotic forms in nature so poetically described by Rand represent the inherently nonlinear processes in nature, including the natural human power of concept formation.

For evidence of Rand's Baconian and reductionist view of nature, Johnson relied on the beginning and ending of *The Fountainhead*, without referring to the numerous scenes in the novel that express chaotic aesthetics in fractal forms. This is especially true of Roark's buildings. For example, Rand describes Monadnock Valley as follows:

He knew that the ledges had not been touched, that no

artifice had altered the unplanned beauty of graded steps. Yet some power had known how to build on these ledges in such a way that the houses became inevitable, and one could no longer imagine the hills as beautiful without them—as if the centuries and the series of chances that produced these ledges in the struggle of great blind forces had waited for their final expression, had only been a road to a goal—and the goal was these buildings, part of the hills, shaped by the hills, yet ruling them by giving them meaning.

The houses were of plain field stone—like the rocks jutting from the green hillsides—and of glass, great sheets of glass used as if the sun were invited to complete the structures, sunlight becoming part of the masonry. There were many houses, they were small, they were cut off from one another, and no two of them alike. But they were like variations on a single theme, like a symphony played by an inexhaustible imagination, and one could still hear the laughter of the force that had been let loose on them, as if that force had run, unrestrained, challenging itself to be spent, but had never reached its end. Music, he thought, the promise the music invoked he had invoked, the sense of it made real—there it was before his eyes—he did not see it—he heard it in chords—he thought there was a common language of thought, sight and sound—was it mathematics?—the discipline of reason—music was mathematics—architecture was music in stone—he knew he was dizzy because this place below him could not be real. (Rand [1943] 1968, 528–29)

If architecture is an art form, and Roark's buildings are considered the ideal forms of architecture, then what does it mean when his art expresses the same chaotic and turbulent patterns? The Monadnock resort is clearly within the utopian tradition of modernism, suggesting a world remade through architecture and technology; also, the references to art and music have long been part of the utopian

tradition. In fact, Rand implies that Monadnock is an architectural expression of “the first phrases of Tchaikovsky’s First Concerto—or the last movement of Rachmaninoff’s Second” (528). When we consider the natural and architectural forms that Rand saw as expressing this music, then we can draw only one conclusion: chaotic processes and forms are at the heart of the Randian aesthetic.

This possibility is completely overlooked by Bissell. While his article refers to the famous fictional Fifth Concerto by Richard Halley in *Atlas Shrugged*, it mentions neither the Monadnock connection to the very real compositions of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff nor Halley’s Fourth Concerto. Here is how Rand described the Fourth Concerto:

The crash of its opening chords swept the sights of the streets away from her mind. The Concerto was a great cry of rebellion. It was a “No” flung at some vast process of torture, a denial of suffering, a denial that held the agony of the struggle to break free. . . . The sounds of torture became defiance, the statement of agony became a hymn to a distant vision for whose sake anything was worth enduring, even this. It was the song of rebellion—and of a desperate quest. (Rand 1957, 67)

Rather than express the chaotic processes in nature, the Fourth Concerto expresses the chaotic and turbulent processes in cultural or personal revolution, which contains both pain and pleasure. Similarly, the Fifth Concerto by Halley expresses the processes of triumphant revolution, of the emergence of a new freedom:

It was a symphony of triumph. The notes flowed up, they spoke of rising and they were the rising itself, they were the essence and the form of upward motion, they seemed to embody every human act and thought that has ascent as its motive. It was a sunburst of sound, breaking out of hiding and spreading open. It had the freedom of release and the tension of purpose. It swept space clean, and left nothing

but the joy of unobstructed effort. . . . It was the song of an immense deliverance. (13)

Certainly, one can see linearity in this passage. However, in the full context of Randian art and aesthetics, there is much more than merely the progression of musical plot or the expression of linear purpose. In fact, the “unobstructed” effort freed in Halley’s Fifth is similar to the “unrestrained” force unleashed at Monadnock, and both are consistent with the concept of “free growth” that appears in some descriptions of nonlinear chaotic processes (see Turner 1995).

Virtually all utopian philosophers and theorists, from Plato to Le Corbusier, have envisioned society in terms of works of art. In fact, utopia is the social work of art where political subject ends as aesthetic object. Harmony, like order, is usually claimed to be the result of utopia, yet both terms are rarely, if ever, defined. As detailed in my forthcoming book, both harmony and order usually end up meaning uniformity and control, which necessarily result in banality and totalitarianism.

In virtually every utopian vision, social harmony usually means a single conductor for the social orchestra, in which the individual is subsumed within the totality of a “harmonious” and timeless social mass. Harmony also comes to mean stability, standardization, conformity, community, collective purpose, and uniform social order. Such “order” and destiny was necessary to trump the “chaos” presented by individual desire. All of this has roots in Plato’s vision of Royal Artists “cleaning the canvas” in remaking the world as a single work of art.

In contrast, Rand believed that individualism was at the heart of utopia, in which each person should be their own conductor, and from the cacophonous play of competing symphonies rises the truly great forms, such as Roark’s buildings and Halley’s concertos. This is consistent with her vision of a chaotic nature from which individuals rise through turbulent processes. Rand’s art expresses such chaotic forms in what may be called a “turbulent harmony” (Vacker 1999, 146), as opposed to a static or uniform harmony. In this sense, Rand is not merely a linear thinker, though certainly the characters in

her novels can seemingly pursue linear paths, as Johnson suggests. However, we should not construe human "purpose" as merely linear. For Rand, purpose usually is associated with forces of nature that emerge or complete themselves in a chaotic dance of destiny and desire, chance and choice. Consider the design of the Heller House:

The house on the sketches had been designed not by Roark, but by the cliff on which it stood. It was as if the cliff had grown and completed itself and proclaimed the purpose for which it had been waiting. The house was broken into many levels, following the ledges of the rock, rising as it rose, in gradual masses, on planes flowing together up into one consummate harmony. The walls, of the same granite as the rock, continued its vertical lines upward; the wide, projecting terraces of concrete, silver as the sea, followed the line of the waves, of the straight horizon. (Rand [1943] 1968, 119)

and the Enright Building:

He did not grasp it as a building, at first glance, but as a rising mass of rock crystal. There was the same severe, mathematical order, holding together a free, fantastic growth; straight lines and clean angles, space slashed with a knife, yet in a harmony of formation as delicate as the work of a jeweler; an incredible variety of shapes, each separate unit unrepeated, but leading inevitably to the next one and to the whole; so that the future inhabitants were to have, not a square cage out of a pile of square cages, but each a single house held to the other houses like a single crystal to the side of a rock. (237-38)

In *The Fountainhead*, nature is highly complex and chaotic, and Rand places Roark at the center of the chaos, seeking not to dominate or be dominated, but instead to embrace the chaotic patterns of nature and society. Roark's buildings are able to translate these processes, patterns, and forms of "free growth" into architectural works of great

beauty and sublimity, metaphors for the destiny of the great individualists who rise from the turbulent natural forces to make utopia possible. As detailed in my essay, numerous fractal forms and strange attractors are clearly visible in these buildings.¹

Rand's New York City—A Utopian Strange Attractor

Rand revered New York City. To her, it was the symbol of all that was possible. *The Fountainhead* ends with Roark atop the Wynand Building, the tallest structure in the world. While Rand (the philosopher) denied being a utopian, Rand (the artist) was inherently utopian. *The Fountainhead* is one of the most unique of utopian novels in Western literature, while *Atlas Shrugged* is one of the most unique of dystopian novels. After the collapse of the world in the latter work, the great artists and industrialists naturally return to New York City.

For Rand, New York City was a giant strange attractor, the ultimate chaotic social environment, the global center for the turbulent marketplace of ideas and marketplace of goods. Here is how Rand described Dominique's late night trips on the Staten Island Ferry:

Once, she took the Staten Island Ferry at two o'clock in the morning; she rode to the Island, standing alone at the rail of an empty deck. She watched the city moving away from her. In the vast emptiness of sky and ocean, the city was only a small, jagged solid. It seemed condensed, pressed tight together, not a place of streets and separate buildings, but a single sculptured form. A form of irregular steps that rose and dropped without ordered continuity, long ascensions and sudden drops, like the graph of a stubborn struggle. But it went on mounting—toward a few points, toward the triumphant masts of skyscrapers raised out of the struggle. (317)

This is a pure description of a strange attractor, expressing the Darwinian struggle of individuals rising from the chaos of nature to

express the chaotic forms of nature in their surrounding social environment.

Rand is almost postmodern in her overall utopian vision, for she does not see utopia as the product of a total central plan. Today, few theorists imagine gargantuan planned utopian visions, for the focus is now more on smaller projects (even if the architecture can still be really bad). Slowly, but surely, the utopian revitalization of cities is now being imagined on scales much smaller and more natural. Obviously, there exist numerous exceptions, such as the dystopian kitsch of Celebration, Florida, the famed theme park worker's town owned and designed by Disney. If anything, Celebration proves that privatization is no guarantor of great design or artistic imagination, for it is merely a reactionary city of simulation, recreating the architecture of "Father Knows Best" as a cultural and utopian reality.

If we want to experience a truly Roarkian building, we should visit Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. This is a building that embraces truly chaotic and postmodern forms as described by Rand in *The Fountainhead*, while creating an architectural vortex for the experience of art. The significance here is that the Guggenheim Museum has become a major force in the postindustrial revitalization of Bilbao, a decaying industrial shipping town. Millions journey to visit the museum, and such a blend of high art and practical commerce is fueling a renaissance in the city. Gehry's Guggenheim illustrates the major utopian theme of *The Fountainhead*, that art and commerce can create a better world, completely devoid of a total plan, when great artists create great art, meant to exist as unique and singular expressions of beauty and sublimity.

My expertise is utopian theory, not Objectivism. However, if Objectivism ever wants to have a significant influence on the culture, then it would do well to embrace the aesthetic spirit of *The Fountainhead*. Beneath every cultural revolution lies a utopian aesthetic vision, one that then produces the economic or political systems necessary to realize the cultural work of art in creating a more beautiful world. Endless rationalization of epistemology and economics, seeking or expressing the linear convergence toward a narrow conclusion of uniform agreement, will never change the world. In fact, it will

simply reinforce the failure of the modern utopian project, with its perpetual trajectory toward a single state of final perfection. Abandoning utopia is not the solution, for aesthetics is at the core of human reasoning and utopia is at the core of human social imagination. Objectivism will remain irrelevant to culture at large, unless it is situated within a unique utopian vision that will enhance the real aesthetics of human living. In Roark's buildings, Rand suggests such a cultural vision, and it is one of chaotic and turbulent harmonies in which the real is the ideal.

Notes

1. One paradox in Rand's theory of art is her dismissal of modern painting (such as some cubism or Russian constructivism), which often expresses the same chaotic or turbulent forms described in Roark's buildings and in her descriptions of New York City.

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