



Still from the movie *The Fountainhead* (King Vidor, 1949), showing architect Howard Roark (Gary Cooper) removing a classical facade from his Modernistic building proposal. © *The Fountainhead* 1949 Turner Entertainment Co. An AOL Time Warner Company.

Desecrating Roark's Office

A Rereading of Ayn Rand's

The Fountainhead (1943) as a Parable
of the Author Cult in Architecture

Howard Roark, Ayn Rand's protagonist in *The Fountainhead*, is self-determined and non-conformist. His office protects him from the 'vulgar' outside world. Drawing upon theories advanced in both art history and literary criticism, Griffioen argues it is time to abandon this outmoded model of the author-architect.

'You are a builder, I believe?'

'No, sir; I am not a builder; I am an architect.'

'Ah, well, builder or architect, architect or builder – they are pretty much the same, I suppose?'

'I beg your pardon; they are totally different.'

'Oh, indeed! Perhaps you will state wherein this difference consists.'

'An architect, sir, conceives the design, prepares the plan, draws out the specification – in short, supplies the mind. The builder is merely the machine; the architect the power that puts the machine together and sets it going.'

'Oh, very well, Mr. Architect, that will do. A very ingenious distinction with a difference. Do you happen to know who was the architect of the Tower of Babel?'

'There was no architect, sir. Hence the confusion.'

— Dialogue between barrister Sir J. Scarlett and architect D. A. Alexander, 1817.¹

‘Roark sat at the desk in his office, waiting.’²

More than anything else, the first office Howard Roark, the famous architect-protagonist of Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead* (1943), occupies, is a waiting room. In this large studio in an old building, with a broad window high above the neighboring roofs, Roark waits for his future to unfold.

The room is scarcely furnished: a desk, two chairs, and a huge drafting table. The drafting table reminds the reader that the architectural studio is a place of creation, a place where architectural ideas take shape. Yet not much drawing goes on in the studio of Howard Roark. No commissions come in, and Roark has no intention of pursuing any. The rent is long overdue; bills pile up on the desk. Still, the architect sits down every morning, ‘because he knew he had to sit there, looking at the door that never opened, his fingers forgotten on a telephone that never rang.’³

The kind of waiting that Roark does in his office, is purgative rather than defeatist. Roark himself desires this situation. After a short apprenticeship at an established architecture firm, the young architect decides to start on his own, ignoring everyone’s advice and defying the conventions of the profession. Working for a big firm means constantly being forced into making compromises, to ‘consult, cooperate and collaborate’.⁴ Roark refuses to do so. He prefers waiting to negotiation, and poverty to easy triumphs: ‘I don’t intend to build in order to have clients, I intend to have clients in order to build.’⁵

In Rand’s extremely didactic novels, people are not simply people, interiors never merely interiors, and buildings more than just buildings; they are in fact all vehicles for philosophical or ideological positions, some of which are noble, others repulsive. Ultimately, every literary description, every

detail, is partisan, mobilized in order to communicate Rand’s doctrine of Objectivism. In short, Objectivism teaches radical egotism: every individual should aspire to live by his or her own values and ethics; every compromise, however small, is a capitulation. Howard Roark, obviously, embodies this doctrine; he is the Hero, the Ego.

If Roark is the personification of radical egotism, then his office is the architectonic shell that facilitates it, conveyed as a space that simultaneously reflects and safeguards his integrity. On the day he opened his first office, we read, Roark performed a sort of sacrament. He stood in the hall for a long time, glancing at the words on the glass entry: ‘Howard Roark, Architect.’ After this pause Roark went in, slammed the door behind him, picked up a T-square from the table and flung it down again, ‘as if throwing an anchor’.⁶ Thereby the room was consecrated.

The entranceways to Roark’s subsequent offices – the glass doors, the letters spelling Roark’s name and profession, the thresholds – have been asserted a special function in *The Fountainhead*. Roark’s office is in opposition to the world, and the text ‘Howard Roark, Architect.’ on the door is ‘like those mottoes men carved over the entrance of a castle and died for,’ as a character in the book remarks.⁷ The office is fortified, with only a few openings to the outside world remaining: ‘The slot in the door and the telephone – there was nothing else left to him of the world.’⁸

Roark’s office is not only the operational base of the architect’s ideology, it is also the structure that protects it from contamination – from ‘the contagion of vulgar modes of thought and feeling’, to echo the words of John Stuart Mill.⁹ Roark, who himself is said to be ‘so healthy that [he] can’t conceive of a disease’, needs this sterile environment to protect his most precious gift, his unspoiled talent, from the problems, pressures, and

1 Cited in: H. Golvin, ‘Biographical Dictionary’ (1954/1995), in: D. Arnold (ed.), *Reading Architectural History*, London/ New York 2002, pp. 50-70 (61).

2 A. Rand, *The Fountainhead* (1934), London 2007, p. 188.

3 Op. cit. (note 2), p. 157.

4 ‘I don’t consult, I don’t co-operate, I don’t collaborate.’ Ibid. p. 537.

5 Ibid. p. 14.

6 Ibid. p. 124.

7 Statement by the architect Henry Cameron. Ibid. p. 129.

8 Ibid. p. 189.

9 Cited in: K.A. Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, New Jersey 2005, p. 1.

agencies of the outside world.¹⁰ In this sense, the office space is an egosphere; an inoculated and insulated cell that functions as a sort of externalized, architectonic immune system.¹¹ 'One must know how to conserve oneself – the best test of independence,' stated Nietzsche, an author both admired and hated by Rand.¹² And what is the most efficient way of self-conservation? Locking yourself in, waiting.

Apart from the clinical connotations of the office as a sterilized space marked out to prevent contagion from the ills that plague society (collectivism, mediocrity), and the military connotations of the office as the castle from which to counter these tribulations, the isolation of Roark's office also has a spiritual subtext. According to Rand, who once described egoism as 'a new faith', the sense of life dramatized in *The Fountainhead* can be identified as 'man-worship'.¹³ Religion has hijacked the 'emotional realm of man's dedication to a moral ideal', writes Rand, a virulent defender of atheism, in her 1968 introduction to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the book. 'It is this highest level of man's emotions that has to be redeemed from the murk of mysticism and redirected at its proper object: man.' Man-worshippers are 'those who see man's highest potential and strive to actualize it', and who are 'dedicated to the *exaltation* of man's self-esteem and the *sacredness* of his happiness on earth'.¹⁴ In an early draft of *The Fountainhead*, Rand has Roark declare: 'Christ proclaimed the untouchable integrity of Man's spirit, stating the first rights of the Ego. He placed the salvation of one's own soul above all other concerns. But men distorted it into altruism.'¹⁵ From this perspective, the office-as-egosphere is a holy space, a temple for self-devotion, sanctified for the worship of the I, the Ego. Even in hard times, Roark is able to maintain his self-belief by performing daily sacraments in this space – going to the office despite the lack of projects, sitting, waiting, smoking, pacing up and down the room, waiting, smoking, waiting.

II

Howard Roark is an island. At the beginning of the book he is presented as if he arose out of

nothing. Contrary to the rest of us, who came into the world 'mewling and puking in the nurse's arms', Roark is not rooted in a social world.¹⁶ He has no relatives and never made an effort to make friends. Although Roark is not entirely an autodidact, Rand is adamant to prove that the professional infrastructure had little if any influence on Roark's character and work. He enrolled in architecture school but was expelled after three years; not due to incompetence – his genius is recognized by teachers and fellow-students alike –, but because he was not pliable and stubbornly stuck to the directions he set out for himself.

'We wanted to give you a chance – in view of your brilliant record in all other subjects. But when you turn in this –' the Dean slammed his fist down on a sheet spread before him – 'this as a Renaissance villa for your final project of the year – really, my boy, it was too much!'

The sheet bore a drawing – a house of glass and concrete. In the corner was a sharp, angular signature: Howard Roark.¹⁷

Education for Howard Roark is not so much about being instructed or trained by superiors – Roark refutes the idea that others can be superior –, but rather a necessary step in the fulfillment of his own potential, in 'achieving the full reality of [his] proper stature', to state it in a Randian manner. Roark is only interested in mastering the engineering skills that enable him to build buildings, not in envisioning and sketching them in a smart and stylish manner. Already his first building designs supposedly bear testimony of a striking originality, and are in no way contaminated by fashionable whims of his time. 'They were sketches of buildings such as never stood on the face of the earth. They were as the first houses built by the first man born, who had never heard of others building before him. [...] It was as if the building had sprung from the earth and from some living force, complete, unalterably right. [...] The buildings were not Classical, they were not Gothic, they were not Renaissance. They were only Howard Roark.'¹⁸

Howard Roark. In the book, the name is repeated over and over again, often as

a short and forceful proclamation: Howard Roark comma Architect period. Woman gazing at the name on the door: Howard Roark, Architect. Signature in the bottom corner of a sketch: Howard Roark, Architect. The letterhead on his correspondence: Howard Roark, Architect. A sign on the fence of a construction site: Howard Roark, Architect. It is an annoyingly repetitive sign of Roark's solipsism, his independence, and his originality, of the premise of *creation ex nihilo*.¹⁹

The Fountainhead serves as a perfect metaphor for the extremely narrow view on architecture that is still omnipresent today, in architectural history as well as in architectural criticism. As an extrapolative model of a sphere of absolute autonomy, Roark's office illustrates a persistent myth that haunts the architectural discourse: 'Roarkism', as Mary Woods has fittingly termed the obsession to perceive the architect as the omniscient creator of the built world.²⁰ This belief echoes Le Corbusier's conviction that architecture, or at least good architecture, is a pure creation of the mind. A building, in this view, is not the result of a long, and sometimes painful process

of deliberation, negotiation, trial and error, et cetera – it originates from a miracle, it is an immaculate conception.

The representation in *The Fountainhead* of Roark's office – or rather, offices, because the protagonist switches workplace several times throughout the book – reflects this idea of solipsistic originality. As such it calls to mind the romantic trope of the artist's studio as the place where the Genius-Artist resides, his – always *his* – sacred retreat from the world, a place of contemplation and unfettered creativity. Since the late 1960s the modernist dogmas connected to this trope, such as as autonomy, authorship, authenticity, and originality, have been heavily contested, and with it the trope itself.²¹ In his seminal 1971 essay 'The Function of the Studio', Daniel Buren charts out the different functions and operations of the artist's studio, identifies and challenges its position within the cultural field, and ultimately calls for its fall. 'The art of yesterday and today is not only marked by the studio as an essential, often unique, place of production; it proceeds from it. All my work proceeds from its extinction.'²²

10 'You're so healthy that you can't conceive of a disease,' remarks the sculptor Steven Mallory. Op. cit. (note 2) p. 340.
 11 The term egosphere is borrowed from Peter Sloterdijk. See: P. Sloterdijk, 'Cell-building, Egospheres, Self-Containers: The Explication of Co-isolated Existence via the Apartment', in: K. Christiaanse, T. Rieniets, J. Sigler (eds.), *Open City: Designing Coexistence*, Nijmegen 2009, pp. 115-130.
 12 F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, translated H. Zimmern, e-resource Gutenberg Project, <http://www.readeasily.com/friedrich-nietzsche/00172/contents.php>, p. 22. Cited in: S. Milgram, 'The Fountainhead from Notebook to Novel' in: R. Mayhew etc. ...2007 En voor pp. 3-40, 25. Milgram brilliantly analyses the influence of Nietzsche on *The Fountainhead*.
 13 See for egoism as a 'new faith': op. cit. (note 11), p. 32. See for 'man-worship': op. cit. (note 2), p. xi.
 14 *Ibid.* p. xii.
 15 Later, when Roark moved to a bigger office (the locations and sizes of his subsequent offices operate as signifiers for the stage that his career is in), Dominique Francon lingers in front of his entrance in a similar manner as Roark himself did at the preceding location. 'She stops in the hall and stands looking at the door, at the inscription: 'HOWARD ROARK, ARCHITECT.' She had never seen his office. She had fought against coming here for a long time. But she had to see the place where he worked.' (Idem, p. 332.) Note the capitals. By going here, Francon gives in to a desire that is erotic (she comes here to sleep with Roark) and spiritual and devotional (she comes here to worship Roark). The office is Roark's most intimate place – more intimate than

his body. The more successful Roark becomes, the bigger the congregation of Roark-worshippers grows. At a certain point in the book, Roark returns to his office after a long trip and is welcomed back with an almost religious commitment. 'His staff shook hands with him and he saw the strain of smiles self-consciously repressed, until a young boy burst out: 'What the hell! Why can't we say how glad we are to see you back, boss?' Roark laughed. 'Go ahead. I can't tell you how damn glad I am to be back.' (Idem, p. 637.)
 16 From the 'All the world's a stage' monologue in Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*. See Appiah's *The Ethics of Identity* for a discussion of the influence of social worlds on our identities. Appiah summarizes the romantic idea of authenticity as follows: '[I]t is a matter of being true to who you already really are, or would be if it weren't for distorting influences.' In other words: essence precedes existence (op. cit. (note 4), p. 17).
 17 Op. cit. (note 2), p. 10.
 18 *Ibid.* p. 7.
 19 Also note that the title, *The Fountainhead*, seems to refer to a source, to the beginning of something new, to a *creation ex nihilo*.
 20 Cited in: D. Arnold, *Reading Architectural History*, London/ New York 2002, p. 43.
 21 W. Davidts' introduction to *The Fall of the Studio* gives a good overview of publications dealing with the trope of the artist's studio. See: W. Davidts, K. Paice (ed.), *The Fall of the Studio*, Amsterdam 2009.
 22 D. Buren, 'The Function of the Studio' (trans. T. Repensek), *October* (1979) 10, pp. 51-58 (58).

In the argument Buren advances in 'The Function of the Studio', he first reiterates the Romantic (and, for that matter, Roarkian) commonplaces about the studio. The studio is an 'ivory tower'; 'the place where the work originates'; 'a private place [...] presided over by the artist-resident, since only that work which he desires and allows to leave his studio will do so.'²³ Then, without explicitly denouncing these clichés, Buren demonstrates that the studio is not simply a retreat or a refuge, a space of contemplation and silent production, but a site that is firmly anchored in the economical infrastructure that is called the Art World. In reality, Buren argues, the studio functions as a 'boutique for ready-to-wear art' (when curators and museum directors cherry-pick their way through an artist's studio for an exhibition) and a 'commercial depot' (when critics and other specialists are invited to the studio in the hope that their visits will lead to either good press, heightened sales, or both).²⁴ In other words, the studio does not function as a trench that protects the artist from intrusion of the market, criticism, or other external influences; on the contrary, it is a site that absorbs and facilitates these dynamics.

Buren was not the first to express his distrust of the artist's studio, but his essay remains one of the clearest focalizations of a discourse that developed throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Compared to the artist's studio, the architecture office is a theoretical *terra incognita*. Approaching the office in a way similar as to how Buren explored the studio, may allow us to broach some of the same issues, such as originality and authorship. Roark's office – in its incarnations as waiting room, fortress, incubator, sanctuary – is a fiction. What it stands for – the workplace as enclosed environment, the architect as author, architecture *sui generis* – is perhaps not fictional, but most definitely deeply problematic.

The dean responsible for Roark's expulsion from architecture school was right when he stated: 'An architect is not an end in himself. He is only a small part of a great social whole.'²⁵ This is true in at least two ways. Architecture is, even more so than visual art, a deeply synthetic practice in which multiple participants from different disciplines with different agendas together shape the final output – *obviously*, one could add. Design firms are dense milieus characterized by complicated topographies of tasks, responsibilities,

23 Ibid. pp. 51, 52.

24 Ibid. pp. 52, 53.

25 Op. cit. (note 2), p. 14.

26 'Immense dictionary' is borrowed from Barthes, see: R. Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in: R. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (trans. S. Heath), London 1977, pp. 142-148 (147). See for an equally influential assault on authorship: M. Foucault, 'What is an author?' in: D. Arnold (ed.), *Reading Architectural History*, London/New York 2002, pp. 71-81. Interestingly, the narrator in *The Fountainhead* would regard this immense dictionary as a curse. This can be seen in the many attacks on architectural revivalism that regards history as an endless reservoir of possible citations, freely accessible to the architect who is trained in stringing them together in a sensible fashion. In the words of the narrator: 'The architect with the best library was the best architect' (op. cit. (note 2), p. 35). Henry Cameron, the only architect of an earlier generation that Roark respects, wished to have no part in this game of aestheticist word-play; he had 'nobody to quote' (Ibid.). Quoting nobody is seen as a virtue, which implies that influence is conceived of as negative – as a signifier of creative impotence.

27 For the expression 'tissue of quotations', see Barthes in op. cit. (note 26), p. 146. See his essay 'From Work to Text' for the statement that *any* text is 'woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (and what language is not?) antecedent or contemporary, which cut

across it through and through in a vast stereophony. The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the "sources", the "influences" of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas'. R. Barthes, 'From Work to Text', in: R. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (trans. S. Heath), London 1977, pp. 155-164 (160).

28 The desk from which I am working on this article overlooks a stunning example of this trend to synchronize the architect's name with a building: the Zuidas business district in Amsterdam, where some of the high-rise office buildings are named after their authors, such as Ito, Viñoly, SOM, Graves. One of the towers was designed by the firm led by Erick van Egeraat, a firm that recently changed its name into *designed by erick van egeraat*.

29 After H. Steyerl, 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy', *e-flux journal* (2010) 21, retrieved from: http://workero1.e-flux.com/pdf/article_181.pdf on 10 July 2012. Steyerl writes: 'A standard way of relating politics to art assumes that art represents political issues in one way or another. But there is a much more interesting perspective: the politics of the field of art as a place of work. Simply look at what it does not what it shows.'

and skills. And even if a project is taken on by one single-minded individual – a Roark, so to speak –, the originality of his or her design remains questionable. Every designer bears within him an ‘immense dictionary’, assembled during his life through training, studying, casual reading, talking, looking around, in short: existing.²⁶ Buildings do not just come about – they are ‘tissues of quotations’, even whilst often these marks are ‘anonymous, untraceable and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas’.²⁷

The fact is, however, that Major League architecture – the architecture you will find in coffee table books – is still perceived as a world dominated by Roarks, by self-determining, non-conformist, and highly creative author-architects. Reviews in architecture magazines are by and large focused on how architect such-and-such handled certain design problems. The historical canon is constructed as a sequence of important names; consequently, handbooks of architectural history are often hybrids between chronologies and lexicons. The densely illustrated salon table monograph, the most common type of publication with which to address a non-specialist audience, often bears a title following the Randian formula ‘Name comma Architect period’. The profession itself does little to contradict this narrow approach. Names are peddled as trademarks, and architects – or rather, the large firms that are tucked away behind the leading architect’s name – develop a signature style that is easy to brand. Project developers, excited by the radius of the name of a *starchitect*, do everything that is within their reach to make a contraction of the designer and the building, for instance by christening the building after the designer.²⁸

Despite some recent attempts in academia to overcome this tendency, many of the people working within the architectural field cling to an almost fetishistic obsession with author-architects. Let’s try to ignore our name-fixation and shift our attention to the *mise en scène* of architecture (to borrow another metaphor from Mary Woods): to the minor figures in the field, to the way architects are educated, to the programs that place restrictions on design freedom, to the way architectural firms

work as complicated production environments, to the way in which architectural ideas and designs are mediated – in other words: to the ‘politics of the field of architecture as a place of work’.²⁹ The time has come to break in to Roark’s holy realm of autonomy, to desecrate his studio with the vital furnishings of social history and critical theory. ●

Personalia

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