

AYN RAND: A SENSE OF LIFE

Story of a once-in-a-millennium spirit __ 10/10

Written by Michael Paxton

Directed by Michael Paxton

Sharon Gless ... Narrator

Michael S. Berliner ... Himself

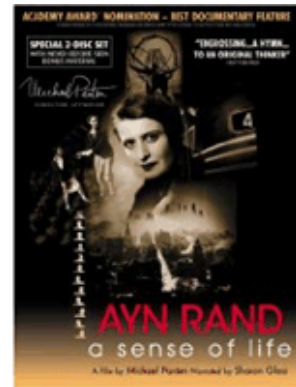
Harry Binswanger ... Himself

Sylvia Bokor ... Herself (artist)

Daniel E. Greene ... Himself (artist)

Cynthia Peikoff ... Herself

Leonard Peikoff ... Himself



Ayn Rand: If a life could have a theme song, and I believe every worthwhile one has, mine is a religion, an obsession, or mania, or all of these expressed in one word: individualism. I was born with that obsession and have never seen and do not know now a cause more worthy, more misunderstood, more seemingly hopeless, and more tragically needed.

... as the camera approaches the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor at night with crisp, pensive piano chords accentuated with a couple of low drum rolls penetrating the quiet space. Then Sharon Gless's soft, pleasantly firm voice narration continues to identify the source of that quotation: Ayn Rand. Calling it fate or irony that she was born in a country least suited to a fanatic of individualism, Ayn Rand (born Alice Rosenbaum) herself provides most of eloquent verbiage that Gless and others use to document her exceptional life.

Michael Paxton's Sense of Life, a splendid achievement in its own right, is as thorough and objective a treatment of novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand— from her coming to America from the bowels of collectivism, to her perseverance and accomplishments as a writer, to the succinct description of her writing artistry and her philosophy of Objectivism, to the chronicling of Ayn Rand's "presence" as a public figure—as one will probably ever see. His film is also dramatically compelling... at least for those of us who care about the progress of individualism.

In my own version of individualism, Brian Wrightism, one could say that Rand's arguments and her beautifully executed vision of "man as a heroic being" came along at the exact time my own philosophy and sense of life needed to gel. It was during the ordinary collectivism of my high school years—our family inhabited the middle-class suburban world surrounding Kansas City then Oklahoma City—when I was looking for another stepping stone toward the river bank following the Barry Goldwater phenomenon. [Goldwater in 1968 was much like Ron Paul in 2008 for true (individual-rights-focused) conservatives.]

So my familiarity with Rand and her ideas/literature developed during my teen years, then led to a fairly early transition into my own, distinct intellectual orbit via humanistic libertarianism. That gives you some context then for my comments on this documentary movie; and I try to put myself in the shoes of the average curious DVD viewer. I don't believe the film was distributed to the big screen movie houses, nor was it produced for cable networks like HBO or Showtime. Yet it did receive an Academy Award nomination

for best documentary in 1998 (and won the Golden Satellite Award for best documentary in 1999).

Actually, the fact that this film about a novelist/philosopher—celebrated, yes, but still obscure in the modern mind-control academedias[1]—by such a new producer/writer/director speaks volumes about the virtue of the work. Even someone not inclined to be sympathetic to Rand is drawn skillfully, technically, engagingly into her journey.

The story does start with Alisa Rosenbaum's birth in St. Petersburg, Russia, February 2, 1905. It tells us how Alice/Ayn as a girl not yet 10 was forming her sense of life, her literary heroes from the pages of Western "escape" novellas, and beginning to write her own stories. Her father was a self-made man who ran a small dry goods store and pharmacy, creating a middle class life for his family. His business was expropriated by the Bolsheviks in 1917. Sense of Life proceeds in a straight line narrative, but with snippets of modern-day public presentations and interviews with Rand woven in. Headings of the DVD are as follows:

Growing Up in Russia
First Heroes
"What Can We Know about the Universe?"
Discovering the Cinema
Coming to America
Working with DeMille
Meeting Frank O'Connor
"What is Romantic Love?"
Woman on Trial: Night of January 16th
We the Living (first major book)
"Under What Social System is it Proper for a Man to Live?"
The Fountainhead
Textbook of Americanism
Filming Fountainhead
Nathaniel Branden
Frank (O'Connor) the Artist
Back to New York
Atlas Shrugged
Public Speaking
Writing Philosophy
Other Works
Ayn's Family
Losing Frank
Enjoying Life until the End

At 145 minutes Paxton's film does an excellent job of supplying the many significant details of Ayn Rand's life: her family, her youthful influences and loves, her early career—I was impressed by how into movies and screenplays Ayn had been... even receiving a storybook intro to the production methods of Hollywood, courtesy Cecil B. DeMille himself—, her love of husband Frank O'Connor, and the day-to-day struggle to maintain the artistic integrity of her creations as she became successful. One item I recall specifically is a discussion by Leonard Peikoff and others of her "tiddly wink music," which was the lighter, playful band music coming from Europe and America toward the end of the 19th century.

As for describing the content and meaning of Rand's philosophy and writing, the director has a vast pool of information to choose from. [That's the advantage of doing a biography of an author; you don't have to guess what he or she means because it's all laid out for you in the books.] But then the art of the biographer is to choose the right excerpts that make for an integrated, tight documentary. Paxton is good. For example, we tend to fail to appreciate how abjectly collectivist Hollywood and academia[1] were in the 1930s when Rand wrote *We the Living* and tried to get it published. The director adroitly conveys the entire ideological/commercial context for Rand's struggle, while at the same time giving the essentials of one of the most passionate and moving novels in history.

Sense of Life is also special in providing perhaps the best available popular synopsis of Rand's ideas... by following her progress through the novels: *We the Living*, *Anthem* (novelette), *The Fountainhead*[3], and *Atlas Shrugged*. Paxton's is certainly the best video synopsis of those ideas. What's more, if those ideas mean as much to you as they mean to me, you'll exceed your ration of goosebumps for the month. What a heroic person she was... supremely so for her determination to raise the standard of heroism to such a pinnacle: the union of practical and ideal. Powerful stuff. Every book and movie. To live for.

Finally, *Sense of Life* is quite a fun view, for anyone with an active mind wanting to know all the tidbits. It ends with reference to Nathaniel Branden, the writing of her magnum opus, *Atlas Shrugged*, and the prosecution of her "movement" of Objectivism. The film even refers to the schism between Branden and Rand that occurred in the late 1960s and its effects. [Since Ayn Rand's death in 1982, more schisms have emerged within big tent of those who identify with her spiritually, artistically, and/or philosophically. The movie I review next week provides a perspective of the persona of Ayn Rand—especially the darker autocratic elements—as the head of the iconographic world Rand had created: Barbara Branden's *The Passion of Ayn Rand*. I think both films are critical to get the gestalt of her.]

Paxton performs an almost impossible feat in producing a comprehensive understanding of the best of Ayn Rand, the stuff that lasts and matters. Considering her books still sell millions of copies annually, and considering the uplifting ideas in those books, there is no doubt in my mind humanity will soon shake off its long collectivist nightmare(s)... but we'd better step it up, because the forces of tyranny are becoming caged (by exposure) and desperate. Can the movie *Atlas Shrugged* be far behind? Charlize Theron as Dagny Taggart?! Hmmm. Here come the goosebumps again.

Parting Quote: When asked by a colleague whether she was afraid of dying, Ayn replied, "No, death is insignificant and unimportant. Eternity is important... and eternity is now."

[1] I use the term academia—a combination of academia and media—to suggest the gatekeeping system for what the intelligentsia[2] regards as worthy of letting out to the public. Sort of a "certified by the best professional minds among us" filter. The problem today, of course, is that academia (except for the Internet... so far) is thoroughly dominated by the corporate-statist <central dominating authority>. [Ref. Operation Mockingbird.]

[2] Intelligentsia is a term borrowed from Russian that means the class of people who concern themselves with important concepts and ideas from all realms of human knowledge, but particularly in regard to political matters. It's an important issue in

society whither the intelligentsia: do they come from a) imperial power, b) state sinecure, c) corporate-shill machinery, or d) the ranks of self-made men and women. Human freedom depends on the stature of those who deal with ideas.

[3] The documentary is especially informative on the only movie thus far made based on a Randian novel, that is, *The Fountainhead*, starring Gary Cooper and Patricia Neal. For Rand's individualist fans, the story of the fight to keep Howard Roark's speech intact is worth the price of the DVD.

###

2010 January 07

Copyright © Brian Wright | The Coffee Coaster™

Ayn Rand a Sense of Life | Sharon Gless | Michael Paxton | We the Living

http://www.brianrwright.com/Coffee_Coaster/02_Movie_Reviews/2010/100107_AR_Sense_Life.htm