

# Mickey Shrugged

*Norman Eschenfelder*

A piece of performance art on randian objectivist philosophy

Rundgang #19 / Kunsthochschule Mainz

[www.kunsthochschule-mainz.de](http://www.kunsthochschule-mainz.de)

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## Part I. The concept

### Development

This project has begotten to form itself as a political spot in 2018.

At first it was meant to become a 3-5 minute short film. Black and white with harsh lighting and harsh imagery. I had written a script, you'll find in Part III.

Then it was called *#alteweisseheten* and should have reflected my thoughts on the state of play. The state of the world we have to live in. I put a bit of work into the research and forced myself to read a lot of news I wasn't very fond of.

Not that I wouldn't have read the news anyway, but knowing I wanted to have to say something, made me question things differently.

*#alteweisseheten* I choose as a working title as I thought to have found somekind of root of evil in old white, heterosexuals - generally male, but not exclusively.

If you think of someone in power, someone in charge, at least seven times out of ten it is some wealthy, weak pigmented man with racist/homophobic/misogynistic tendencies.

As a heterosexual male and father of a boy myself, who is statistically about to become a heterosexual, weak pigmented man also, I thought a lot about toxic masculinity. Which is something I have encountered all my life.

My paternal grandfather - who had five sons to whip - told me as a young boy never to back down: "Eschenfelder-Blut ist keine Buttermilch"<sup>1</sup> and "Hau drauf bis Haare bluten"<sup>2</sup>.

Sure this were things his grandfather had or would have told him. This line of thought is what's responsible for the first and second World War. But instead of me now, he wasn't in the mindset to question this upbringing of martial tough-love and rather unchristian aggression.

I started to question a lot of things I haven't thought about for my whole adolescence.

I actually tried to adapt myself to a vegetarian lifestyle (and succeeded only in part). I tried to wrap my head around all the stuff that happens today and the dark and piercing peak of the iceberg that happens in the media.

There was just too much happening all of the time, everytime I thought about focussing on one topic, another came up and took my attention.

There were earthquakes and tsunamis. Widespread deaths of insect species caused by manmade climate change.

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<sup>1</sup> "Eschenfelder blood is no buttermilk." Okay, this really didn't need a translation.

<sup>2</sup> "Whack till hair bleeds."

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There are other horrible things like reality tv and nationalism, nepotism and many other -isms.

Sometimes I felt like having the world end tomorrow would be a good idea.

I realised: I needed more hope.

I was going to become father again in January 2019 and having a baby girl made me think about gender, gender equality in work and private life, about toxic femininity. Which off I had experienced my share also.

I read James Bridle's *NEW DARK AGE* [1] and it truly felt like a dark age, so I stopped.

The world needs more hope and art should give us hope. What I was about to do, was only exhilarating and despairing, it didn't interest me anymore.

So I started over.

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## The latest iteration

I started writing a more optimistic essay short film dedicated to my daughter and if it'll be done soon, it's going to be a companion piece to this performance, which embodies the sinister, misanthropic side of the necessary - but still damnable - economic contraptions, which are constantly abused and brought us hatemongering multimillionaires and multibillionaires and their undemocratic political powers.<sup>3</sup>

Based on Ayn Rand's *ATLAS SHRUGGED*[2] I call the project *MICKEY SHRUGGED*. In the following I'll exemplify my thoughts and how the global entertainment monopoly *DISNEY* and Rand's philosophy of *OBJECTIVISM* are intertwined.

Ayn Rands family fled communist Russia, they were expropriated and had to start as refugees, in a country that said back then: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."[3] and now it's more "Let them starve at our borders."

She came from a wealthy family that lost their worldly goods in an political mislead attempt to better the world of a few million russians.

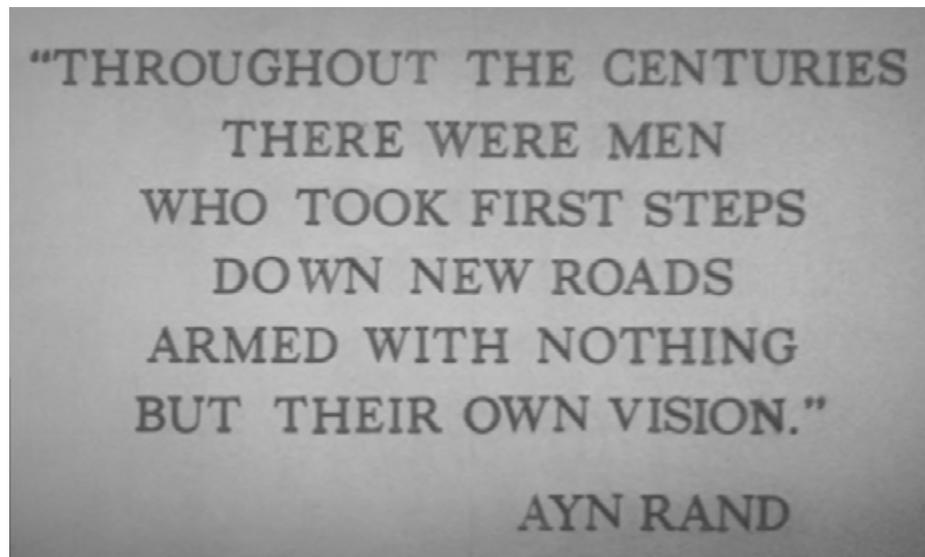
That's why she hated socialism, communism, and thought of altruism as a sin. She despised the poor and preached egoism and predatorial turbo capitalism without borders and reason. When everyone thinks only of himself, everyone is thought of.

As always someone is cherrypicking in old books and to some she is a patron saint of capitalism. To billionaires like Mark Cuban, who even named his multimillion dollar yacht after Rand's *THE FOUNTAINHEAD* [4], she gives justification for being filthy rich and utterly useless to humanity. In an 2006 interview with *C-SPAN*, he said he had read it "three complete times and an untold number of little snippets and segments." It encouraged him to think as an individual, he says, to "take risks to reach my goals, and responsibility for my successes and failures." [5]

People born (or risen) into other spheres of publicity and prosperity, like Angelina Jolie, flatter themselves with reading Rand.[6] It gives them "inspiration" and maybe somekind of "piece of mind" if they are conscious enough to question their own place in the world.

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<sup>3</sup> I just looked up who funded the propagandistic "VOTE LEAVE"-campaign which bought the Brexit-demise of the UK and weakens the EU for some million pound. It was almost exclusively randian-egoistic white bastards with nine-figure capital and not more than up to 20 years of residual live span.



Photography by novelist, Disney enthusiast and journalist Cory Doctorow.

This THE FOUNTAINHEAD[4] quote by Ayn Rand emblazones the EPCOT CENTER at the WALT DISNEY WORLD, Orlando, Florida. Passerbys might mistake it for any futurist optimistic stand. But said by Rand, it brings it's megalomaniac aftertaste to an otherwise bland platter of consumerist fast food.

Walt Disney was letter pal with Rand and she wanted him to produce movies from her novels.[7] Of course. How did Walt react? I can't find the answer to her letter, but obviously those movies never happened. At least in this universe.

She loved to be the center of attention and a true pain in the ass, as anyone can convince themself with any interview on YOUTUBE. She revelled in being a contrarian. She obviously wasn't easy to be around and live with. She died poor and alone and in an irony on historic propotions, received social security payouts, which were against anything she believed in and preached for.[8]

Speaking of universes... DISNEY today is in the superhero business and superheroes are a totally randian thing! You can find her misanthropic, antidemocratic philosophy in many comic books and films of the MARVEL brand (and it's arch enemy DC, also).[9, 10]

In MARVEL'S THE AVENGERS (2012) we have to relive 9/11 through a comic book prism where randian heroes[11] like TONY STARK / IRON MAN (which is just a flashy BATMAN-ripoff anyway) have to avenge something against nonsense alien forces as the democratic systems are failing. It's wild west frontier justice acted out by selfimportant individualists, who have to unite, at least for a few scenes.

The randian conspiracy goes even deeper. Wealthy, white, culture-blind and outright-racist superhero IRON FIST is even called DANNY RAND.

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Right-wing, libertarian propaganda targetting the same demographic which they ridicule.

Fuck those MARVEL movies! Fuck corporate DISNEY and it's striving for a conformist human mono-culture!

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## The costume

Starting with the image of MICKEY MOUSE as a stereotype bible-belt John Doe, watching TV and drinking piss beer, I had the idea to crank it up a bit. Kukluxklan-hooded miKKKImauSS with swastika in his eyes.

I'm glad I found another direction, more subtle and a tad more intellectual.

The MICKEY head I built over the later part of 2018. Out of paper, glue and tape.

I imported the blackest black acrylic color available to humankind.<sup>4</sup> BLACK 2.0 by the british artist Stuart Semple gave the mask an almost otherworldly matt finish and contrast to the semi-glossy white snout.

I couldn't see anything under that mask as I am short sighted (-3), so I took my old glasses and sawed off the sides and taped it inside the eye holes.

I had cut out a gap for my mouth and till the last few days I thought I could actually read the texts which I would have printed on cards I would have had to shuffle with thick gloved fingers.vlt just wouldn't have worked.

The mask was topped off with store-bought carnival four-finger gloves and a fitted three-part HUGO BOSS suit with matching coat, which I bought in an earlier life, hustling for big pharma<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> If you are not Anish Kapoor. Kapoor exclusively licensed the actual blackest black, Vantablack.

<sup>5</sup> Notice how it rhymes with pig farmer. Funny.



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## The texts

To restrict myself to only use citations from *THE FOUNTAINHEAD*, which is the only Rand I have, would be insufficient.

Her magnum opus is the eponymous *ATLAS SHRUGGED* anyway.

My edition of *THE FOUNTAINHEAD* I bought at an peddlers market near Seattle, Washington State. Back then I knew nothing about Rand and her philosophy. The title struck me and I just had to have it, I couldn't resist. I only knew it was an important book, not knowing, it would eventually become important to my work.

I wanted to find passages of text that could give the audience glimpses of her worldview and philosophy. I skimmed many websites and flipped through *THE FOUNTAINHEAD*, which I will never read in full. After just a few sentences, her prose felt like a wasting of my time and attention and I have to choose wisely how I spend those.

I worked my way through dozens of websites on her objectivist philosophy. Many of them unabashedly revelling in her bigot legacy.

I compiled my favourite passages and recorded them with my ZOOM H4 in one session. I had to drink a litre of water, while recording, as pitching my voice to MICKEY MOUSE levels was tiring for my voice cords and throat. I had to do it by myself. Walt Disney had been the original MICKEY voice himself. Every MICKEY iteration was voiced by a man distorting his voice, a voice synthesizer or artificial pitching just was no option for this concept.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I actually pitched the recordings 3 percent. It sounded better to me then.

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## Part II. The performance

The performance went down on Saturday evening, February 9th 2019. I started at 8 o'clock, one hour before the large party, which represents the pinnacle of the *Rundgang*, the bi-annual exhibition of the last semesters works of art students at the KUNSTHOCHSCHULE MAINZ.

I enjoyed performing very much. It was a kind of rare felt feeling of doing the right thing in the right moment, of expressing and suggesting my thoughts and opinion in an organic manner. It came very natural to me and I was just a bit excited, not very much.

I had a good ten minutes of text, read by myself in a pitched MICKEY MOUSE interpretation on my smartphone, connected via BLUETOOTH to a small speaker in my jacket's chest pocket. I am very glad that I didn't actually try to read the quotes on site, with no lights and no amplification of my voice.

The performance wasn't taking a huge toll on me physically. I had done just a few pieces before, but they were much more stressful. The mask wasn't too heavy, and as told above, I had put in old glasses to sharpen my view. But the changing climate from outside to inside the building made me sweat and fogged the glasses.

I had to take some breaks, where I just put the mask down and interacted with the guests and explained my intentions, if asked.

There were moments where I stumbled, one time on a staircase and had to grab for the handrail.

The other guests were amused and as I didn't interrupt or disturb them, made way and there was almost no interaction. A few were looking for the book I read and that was my objective fulfilled. I chose not to patronize and preach. The conclusion, which I thought, the spectators would draw, is common sense to me. The performance was meant as a hint, to point at a harmful philosophy, that has a very unhealthy impact on capitalism and thus all of us.

Two friends accompanied me, one of them Julian Weinert, also-filmmaker, shot handheld documentary footage of the performance, I am still editing.

The performance was not bound in time or place and could be repeated by anyone.

I liked how my performance connected to the other works, walking around the *Rundgang*, it contrasted and enriched some works, I think.

Especially the presentation of the film class I was attending as a guest student at this time, which was called "*Tomorrow can be a wonderful age.*"

The title, itself a quote by Walt Disney, gave my performance an anchor of the subjects I was referring to. The work of the film class was a pictorial, moody,

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walkable and accessible projection of impressions of theme parks, fairy tales and all of that involved DISNEY very much.

After one hour my friends and I were booted as the party started and we left. I drove home to my family, my friends went to another party they were invited to or they just stayed out late boozing. I don't know. I was pumped and full of drive and already writing this documentation in mind.

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## Part III. Appendix

Excerpt of “Ruined by Design” by Mike Monteiro[12]. The chapter’s title is:

### **AYN RAND IS A DICK**

Let’s talk about ride-sharing.

At an abstract level, ride-sharing is the idea that people who have cars and a little extra time can provide a service to people who need rides and are willing to pay for them. At an abstract level, it takes an underused resource and puts it to use. It benefits both sides of the equation. The driver gets to make a little extra cash, the passenger gets the ride they need. Sounds okay so far. In fact ride-sharing even has the potential to reduce the number of cars on the road. Win-win. All you have to do is figure out how to get the two sides to connect.

It turns out that’s not so hard. In 2009, Travis Kalanick figured out how to do it. (You can argue about his role in inventing this all you want, I really don’t care. It’s not important to the story and truth is, he made the most noise at the table, so he’s the one who gets the bill.) Travis and his small team of white boys (an important detail, wait for it) developed an app that connected the drivers with the riders. That app was, of course, Uber.

At an abstract level, this was great. Every party involved in the equation did well, including Travis and his team, which is fair. They did the job of connecting everyone. At this point in our story, we have total balance. The drivers are making a little cash, the rider is getting where they need to get for a fair amount, and Uber and the team are skimming a little off the top for making the connection. Theoretically, this story could continue like this for a while, with the incremental improvement here and there, the occasional hurdle to jump (gotta deal with those taxi unions, Travis!), and eventual attempts at slow and steady growth. At some point, conditions in the marketplace would change and Uber would either collapse (think Blockbuster) or adapt (think Netflix).

If that were the beginning and end of the Uber story, I wouldn’t be writing about it. Small successes built incrementally over time don’t make for dramatic stories or good ethical lessons. So it’s time to introduce a villain. Oh! You thought Travis was the villain and that’s fair, but we hadn’t fully fleshed him out yet. He’s like James Franco at the beginning of Spider-Man. You know he’s eventually gonna fuck someone over, but he hasn’t gotten his motivation yet. He’s about to. Let’s give this story a location.

Welcome to Silicon Valley. A libertarian stronghold at the very end of America. (Literally.) Silicon Valley, and specifically the venture capital firms of Silicon Valley,

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are mostly run by old white men who read Ayn Rand in high school, thought it was great, and never changed their minds. (This is where I need to be fair and let you know that not all venture capitalists are monsters. In fact, I'm friends with a few who are lovely people. They are very much the exceptions. Also, every VC who reads this book will think this parenthetical is about them.) In the words of the late great Ann Richards, they were, "born on third base and think they hit a triple."

For those of you not familiar with Ayn Rand, she wrote crappy books about the power of individual achievement while she collected social security and started some pseudo-philosophy called "objectivism", which can be summed up in five words: I got mine, fuck you. The old white men of Silicon Valley all have giant Ayn Rand back tattoos. (Look, it's a chapter about venture capitalism inside an ethics book. I gotta tell a joke once in a while, for all our benefit.)

Venture capital firms invest in new companies. Like Uber. In fact, it's not unheard of that they'd invest in Uber and also a company that Uber considers a competitor. They're not loyal. They're placing bets. They invest a small amount in exchange for a percentage of the company and if that company does well, they'll invest more in exchange for another percentage of the company. If the company doesn't do well, well, that's fine. Venture capitalists place a lot of bets and they don't expect the majority of them to pan out. But when those bets do pan out, the goal becomes what venture capitalists call a liquidity event. The exit involves taking the startup public, or more likely, selling it to a bigger company for a ton more money than initially invested (10x being the rule of thumb). The companies that don't make it are sold off for parts.

Again, in the abstract, like ride sharing, the venture capital model isn't unethical. New companies are risky. New companies need capital. It's how people behave within these models that's messed up.

Let's go back to Uber. Once a company gets funding, it's goal changes from building a successful business to reaching a liquidation event. Because once you get funding, your investors are pushing you to grow faster and faster, and to get there you're going to need another round or two or three of funding. Venture capital is like startup cocaine. Once you get a taste, your job changes from connecting drivers and riders to getting another hit.

All of a sudden, your tiny little startup needs to hire 5000 drivers a week, so background checks get a little streamlined. You need to hire 500 engineers a week and no way those are all top-notch. You need to hire 300 designers a month, so you just start strip-mining design schools and picking up a lot of inexperienced people. You need to expand into more cities, so you skip the delicate political negotiations that it takes to ensure there's an ecological balance there. Keep in mind these decisions are often being made by young people who, while possibly being extremely skilled, have little-to-no management experience. It's at this point

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the quality that once made you good enough to attract attention in the first place takes a nosedive. Now the company's job isn't to show quality, it's to show growth.

It's at this point where Uber started charging riders higher fares, including notoriously implementing surge pricing during disasters, such as during the 2015 terrorist attack in Paris. They also started skimming more off the top from their drivers, leading up to an infamous incident where a driver asked Travis Kalanick why this was happening, and Travis proceeded to dress down a person attempting to make a living off his service. (The driver was good enough to record it for all of us.) It's also at this point where complaints about drivers being abusive to riders started to rise, for which Uber had an interesting solution: they implemented a harassment campaign against Sarah Lacy, the journalist bringing these stories to the public's attention. (Uber Senior Vice President Emil Michael, told BuzzFeed reporter Ben Smith the company was contemplating doing opposition research into Sarah Lacy's private life. He later apologized.)

Hold on, we're not done. Somewhere in 2017, that Uber designed a tool called Greyball, which they used to flag riders they believed were associated with cities officials or regulatory bodies Uber had labeled as enemies. (NY Times reporter Mike Isaac did an excellent job exposing this. He's currently writing a book about Uber. Read it when it comes out.) Greyball tracked phone numbers associated with those "enemies", who were then told there were no cars available when they used the app. This was fraud. Everyone involved in the conception, design, execution, and maintenance of that tool acted unethically.

Once Uber's goal moved from providing a car-sharing service to using a car-sharing service to make themselves and their investors rich, the delicate balance between drivers, riders, and Uber was destroyed. Only one of those parties was going to benefit from Uber's future success. There's nothing wrong with making money, but there is something inherently wrong with profiting from the labor of others without giving them a piece of the success they've earned.

Uber set out to build a tool that democratized access to cars. It ended up building a tool that further impoverished the poor. The service model was fine, but the financial model it used for growth could only ever be as ethical as the people who strove to benefit the most.

Sadly, Uber is not an exception, but the rule and aspiration in Silicon Valley. Take a bunch of entitled white boys, give them a ton of money, fill them with the fear of the money running out, and you've created a perfect recipe for inexperienced people making really bad short-term decisions that have a tendency to fuck everything up. (To be fair, in Travis' defense, he did have the experience. He's just a dick.)

Short-term decisions are all Silicon Valley seems to care about. We don't build businesses for the long haul anymore, at least not the venture-backed ones. Those

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only need to last long enough to make it to their liquidity event so the investors can get their payday. So if Uber can show growth by squeezing drivers and riders, and Twitter can increase their engagement numbers by relying on white supremacists and outrage, and Facebook can rake in some extra cash from Russian fake news sites—they will do it. And we know they'll do it, because they did it. Silicon Valley has exhibited total comfort with destroying the social fabric of humanity to make a profit.

I got mine. Fuck you.

**Following a script to an older version on the next pages.**

#ALTEWEISSEHETEN

Kunstfilm

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Ver. 2

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2018-10-10

1. INT. - KARGES ZIMMER - FERNSEHER - NACHT

Getränkedosen, Chipstüten, Pizzakartons, es ist ein schmutziges, karges Zimmer. Fahles Licht fällt vom Fernseher auf die nackten Wände.

Auf dem Boden steht ein Röhrenfernseher.

Der Fernseher zeigt ein Testbild und dann wird gezappt.

Die Motive beginnen harmlos und werden schnell verstörender.

Die genaue Schnittfolge und Motivwahl ergibt sich bei der Zusammenstellung des Footage, das auf dem Röhrenfernseher per Raspberry Pi abgespielt werden wird.

Markus Söder und Bavaria One.

Zapp.

Kälbchen auf einer Wiese.

Milka-Kuh.

Hackfleisch, das aus dem Wolf kommt.

Leise vernehmen wir ein Kichern.

Alles was in der Welt schief läuft, sehen wir im Fernseher. Und mehr.

Reality-TV.

Zapp.

Donald Trump verarscht den Scheiß-Spasti-Journo.

Zapp.

Erdbeben, Tsunami, Hurricane. Macarena.

MIKKKIMAUSS (OFF)

(aufgeregt)

Oh Junge!

Zapp.

Sonny und Cher. I got you Babe.

Eine Frau spuckt Blut.

Justitia. Ein Regenwaldriese wird gefällt.

Zapp.

Zuckerberg im Verhör. Bilder von der Börse, Graphen von Aktien (Monsanto, Gazprom)

MIKKKIMAUSS in einem Ohrensessel, kichert über die Bilder,

die sie sieht. Sie lehnt sich vor.

Die Augen zeigen Dollarzeichen.

Ihre Augen zeigen Herzen.

Ihr Lachen wird begeisterter, sie keucht erregt.

Zapp.

Zapp. Zapp.

MIKKKIMAUSS

Junge, Oh Junge.

## 2. TITELKARTE

#patriarchyroolz

## 3. INT. - KARGES ZIMMER

Der Fernseher zeigt eine Montage maskuliner Geselligkeit.

Männergesangsverein.

Dackelzüchterverein.

Männer auf der Jagd.

Männer Ku-Klux-Klan.

## 4. TITELKARTE

#alteweisseheten

## 5. EXT. - WALDRAND - NACHT

Mikkimauss tanzt Macarena vor einem brennenden Kreuz und hat anschließend symbolischen Verkehr mit ihren Schusswaffen.

Auf dem Kopf trägt sie eine MakeAmericaGreatAgain-Cap.

Ihre Pupillen sind Hakenkreuze.

Abblende.

Abspann und Macarena läuft aus.

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**The poster to the performance at the Rundgang #19,  
Kunsthochschule Mainz. 09. February 2019**

# “MICKEY SHRUGGED”



SATURDAY  
2018/09/02  
20:00

A PERFORMANCE BY  
NORMAN  
ESCHENFELDER

**MICKEY READS „THE FOUNTAINHEAD“  
& OTHER WORKS BY AYN RAND**

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- Mark O’Connell, *The New Yorker*
- [2] Rand, Ayn: *Atlas Shrugged*, Publisher Random House, 1957
- [3] Lazarus, Emma: *The New Colossus*, sonnet, written 1883, in 1903 cast onto a bronze plaque and mounted in the Statue of Liberty’s pedestal lower level. [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_New\\_Colossus](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_New_Colossus)
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- [11] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Randian\\_hero](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Randian_hero)
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- “This book is about how our responsibility to society outweighs everything else we do. It’s about how we need to work ethically, responsibly, and with care. It contains examples of how the current environment is designed so that a few select people can succeed in the short-term, while screwing many people in the long terms. It’s not pretty.”
- Mike Monteiro, <https://www.ruinedby.design>