

(Un)Making it in Rapture: The Critique of the Myth of the Self-Made Man, of Ayn Rand, and of Objectivism in *BioShock* (2007) and in *BioShock: Rapture* (2011)

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Citation: Teresa Pereira. “(Un)Making it in Rapture: The Critique of the Myth of the Self-Made Man, of Ayn Rand, and of Objectivism in *BioShock* (2007) and in *BioShock: Rapture* (2011).” *Via Panoramica: Revista de Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, série 3, vol. 12, n.º 1, 2023, pp. 130-158. ISSN: 2182-9934. Web: <http://ojs.letras.up.pt/>. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/2182-9934/via12_1a10.

Abstract

This paper attempts to prove that *BioShock* (2007), a science fiction video game set in 1960, and *BioShock: Rapture* (2011), the novel published in its wake which starts in 1945, present a powerful critique of the myth of the self-made man, conveyed via the depiction of the fall of Rapture. Rapture is the dystopian, underwater city created by Andrew Ryan in which both the video game and the novel take place. The city is built in an art deco style reminiscent of the 1927 movie *Metropolis*. A Russian-born American tycoon, Ryan believed that nuclear annihilation was at hand and despised anything resembling socialist-like policies, which is why he decided to seclude himself and a few chosen ones somewhere underneath the Atlantic Ocean. The place he selected, Rapture, was based on Objectivism and closely related to Ayn Rand, an American-Russian writer who promoted an extreme version of individualism and laissez-faire capitalism, namely on one of her novels, entitled *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), in which she presents the capitalist utopia called Galt’s Gulch. Although they are never explicitly mentioned in the texts analysed here, both Rand and Galt’s Gulch provide Ryan and Rapture with their ethos, given that Ryan clearly resembles Rand and Rapture is strikingly similar to Galt’s Gulch. Despite promising that those willing to work hard enough would be able to fulfil the promises of the myth of the self-made man, Rapture ends up falling, largely because of its defence of Rand and Objectivist-inspired capitalist ideals, with the myth of the self-made man failing to be fulfilled. As a result, both the myth and, by extension, Rand and Objectivism, are called into question by *BioShock* and *BioShock: Rapture*, clearly located within the context of Cold War era and American culture and history.

Keywords: *BioShock*; Self-made Man; Cold War; Ayn Rand; Objectivism

Resumo

O presente ensaio procura demonstrar que *BioShock* (2007), um jogo digital de ficção científica cuja ação decorre em 1960, e *BioShock: Rapture* (2011), o romance que se lhe seguiu e que começa em 1945, esboçam uma clara crítica ao mito norte-americano do “self-made man”, apresentada através da descrição da queda de Rapture, uma cidade distópica localizada debaixo do Oceano Atlântico, na qual tanto o jogo como o romance se desenrolam. Construída através do recurso a um estilo Art Déco que lembra o filme *Metropolis* de 1927, Rapture foi imaginada e concebida por Andrew Ryan, um magnata norte-americano nascido no Império Russo que acreditava numa catástrofe nuclear eminente e que desprezava qualquer política remotamente conectada com o socialismo. Como tal, Ryan decidiu refugiar-se em Rapture, levando consigo algumas pessoas que ele mesmo havia selecionado criteriosamente. Rapture baseava-se na filosofia objetivista desenvolvida por Ayn Rand, também ela uma norte-americana nascida na Rússia que apoiava versões extremas do individualismo e do capitalismo, nomeadamente num dos seus romances, intitulado *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), no qual Rand apresenta a utopia capitalista Galt’s Gulch. Ainda que nunca sejam explicitamente mencionados nos textos aqui analisados, tanto Rand como Galt’s Gulch são fundamentais para Ryan e para Rapture, já que a personagem de Ryan se baseia na figura de Rand e que Rapture possui múltiplos pontos em comum com Galt’s Gulch. Ainda que Rapture prometa a todos aqueles dispostos a trabalhar arduamente que poderão converter-se em “self-made men”, tal acaba por não ocorrer, já que Rapture falha estrondosamente, em larga medida devido à adoção dos ideais objetivistas de Rand. Como resultado, tanto o mito do “self-made man” como a visão objetivista de Rand são postos em causa por *BioShock* e *BioShock: Rapture*, claramente localizados no contexto da Guerra Fria na cultura e história norte-americanas.

Palavras-chave: *BioShock*; Mito do Self-Made Man; Guerra Fria; Ayn Rand; Objetivismo

Introduction¹

In the opening scene of *BioShock* (a first-person shooter published in 2007), which takes place in 1960, the protagonist of the video game, Jack, is aboard a plane headed for San Francisco that ends up crashing somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean. When he manages to come to the surface and take a much-needed breath of air, he finds himself surrounded by burning pieces of the airplane he had just been on and must swim to a nearby lighthouse reminiscent of Verne’s *The Lighthouse at the End of the World* (Gibbons n. pag.). There, he comes across an open door awaiting his entry (and that same door conveniently closes once he’s inside the building) and is welcomed by the menacing, giant gold bust of a stern-looking man, as well as by the ironically pleasant tune of the instrumental of “La Mer”, popularized by Darin in 1959 as “Beyond the Sea”. Underneath the bust, there is a red banner with the puzzling sentence “NO GODS OR KINGS. ONLY MAN.” spelled out in golden letters. In what follows, Jack comes face to face with an underwater fallen city called Rapture,

resembling Fritz Lang's (1890-1976) *Metropolis* (1927), but instead of motor vehicles and aircrafts driving and flying around, there are fish everywhere. The art deco city Jack has apparently stumbled upon, as the main character quickly discovers, is a utopian capitalist paradise largely based on American-Russian Ayn Rand's (1905-1982) Objectivist philosophy, created by the Russian-born American tycoon Andrew Ryan, whose bust was at the entrance of the lighthouse. This dilapidated city, clearly indebted to utopian and dystopian literatures and to science fiction, has turned into a dystopian cautionary tale which questions Rand and her Objectivist views and the myth of the self-made man.

Since its release, *BioShock* has become one of the most critically acclaimed and best-selling video games of all time, with several other digital games, downloadable content, viral games, novels (namely *BioShock: Rapture*, from 2011), board games, and a live-action cinematic adaptation (yet to be released by Netflix) being produced in its wake. *BioShock*'s critical acclaim and high sales were followed by the publication of several studies, such as the articles written by William Gibbons (2010) and Jessica Aldred and Brian Greenspan (2011) and the book by Felan Parker and Aldred (2018), and the numerous theses published over the years in different countries. Even though a lot has been said about *BioShock* and its relation to game studies, utopian and dystopian literatures, and science fiction, the way *BioShock* and *BioShock: Rapture* alongside it relate to Cold War era in America and call into question some of "the myths that made America" (Paul 11) has not received enough or even much attention. This paper sets out to accomplish just that, analysing *BioShock*, and the novel that followed it, as a powerful critique of the myth of the self-made man, and, by extension, of Rand and her Objectivist beliefs, conveyed via the utter collapse of Rapture from a Rand and Objectivist-based capitalist utopia to a dystopian nightmare devoid of a way out.

According to Heike Paul, the myth² of the self-made man appears under the arc of the ideological paradigm of American exceptionalism (14), an expression that can be traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), a French aristocrat who remarked that "the position of the Americans was quite exceptional" (36; Paul 14). Tocqueville was referring to the uniqueness of the American political system, with the American democracy contrasting sharply with the French instability sparked by social and political discontent that had led to violent revolutions, counterrevolutions, and the restoration of monarchical rule (Paul 14). American exceptionalism was quickly decontextualized and used to describe the genesis of the American nation in a much more comprehensive way, as Paul argues (14). Byron E. Shafer, for example, declares

that “American exceptionalism . . . is the notion that the United States was created differently, developed differently, and thus has to be understood differently - essentially on its own terms and within its own context” (v; Paul 14). As Paul explains, the expression began being applied in an unspecific manner “to claim American superiority vis-à-vis non-Americans and to legitimate American hegemony outside the US”, while also conveying the notions of uniqueness and predestination (14). Among other things, American exceptionalism is responsible for informing and structuring American self-representations, fashioning internal coherence, and projecting American hegemony outside the United States (Paul 17). The myths located under the arc of the ideological paradigm of American exceptionalism, such as that of the self-made man, play a crucial role in building plausible and self-evident discursive constructions of the nation, creating internal solidarity and commitment to the nation state and what it stands up for, and representing the United States to outsiders (Paul 17). As a result, this myth, encompassed by what Paul described as the “umbrella myth” of the American dream,³ reinforces the main tenets of American exceptionalism.

In order to analyse *BioShock's* and *BioShock: Rapture's* criticism of the myth of the self-made man (and, as a result, of Rand and Objectivism) by depicting the fall of Rapture, this paper performs a close reading of the video game directed by Ken Levine and of the novel written by John Shirley, adopting an approach clearly located within the field of cultural studies. While doing so, this study also embraces the interdisciplinary nature of cultural studies, establishing a parallel between game studies, Cold War era American history and culture, utopian and dystopian literatures, and American narratives that address the myth of the self-made man. Looking at *BioShock* and *BioShock: Rapture* as cultural texts⁴ laden with meaning at all levels, this study starts by taking a close look at the figure of Ryan, Rapture's creator, so that the reader can understand the events and the set of beliefs that led to the establishment of a city based on Rand and her Objectivist ideals. Then, the paper establishes a parallel between the capitalist utopia the Russian-born writer envisioned in *Atlas Shrugged*, entitled Galt's Gulch, and Ryan's own capitalist utopia, Rapture. Afterwards, this article presents the myth of the self-made man, placing it within the context of American literature and culture and showing how those that moved to Rapture believed they could go from rags to riches through their talents and sheer hard work. Finally, this analysis finishes off by arguing that the texts studied here criticize the myth mentioned above by depicting the fall of Rapture, and, as a result, paint a dire picture of Rand and her Objectivist views. All the while, this paper will refrain from giving *BioShock's* and *BioShock: Rapture's* endings away, mostly for a lack

of space to do so, but also partially for the sake of those who still haven't played the game or read the novel.

1. Andrew Ryan: The New Deal, the Atomic Bombings, and Anticommunism

BioShock and *BioShock: Rapture*, which begins in 1945, during the presidency of Harry S. Truman (1884-1972), give us some cues as to why the city of Rapture was created. As the game's prequel and as the game itself make clear, Ryan, the founder of Rapture and one of its most important individuals, fled from the Russian Empire in either 1918 or 1919,⁵ after the Russian Revolution of 1917 that overthrew the imperial government and that placed the Bolsheviks in power. Born in a village located somewhere near Minsk (the capital of modern-day Belarus), the then Andrei Rianofski witnessed the Revolution and the resulting destruction of his family's business, as well as the execution of some of his family members at the hands of the Bolsheviks for speaking out against Communism. Accompanied by his father, Rianofski eventually got to America, where he believed he was free to "own his own work" and "benefit from the brilliance of his own mind, the strength of his own muscles, the MIGHT of his own will" (*BioShock* n. pag.).

In the US, he anglicized his name, changing it to Andrew Ryan, and made a fortune, becoming one of America's wealthiest men, owning Ryan Oil, most of America's coal, and its second largest railroad. However, after President Franklin D. Roosevelt's (1882-1945) New Deal, Ryan become disillusioned with America. He started believing that what he considered to be "the devastation of socialism" (Shirley 20) had finally reached American shores and that the United States had begun drinking from what he described as "the Bolshevik poison, spoon-fed to [the Americans] by Roosevelt and his New Dealers" (*BioShock* n. pag.).

Central to Ryan's criticism of the New Deal is his conception of "parasite", which basically referred to anyone who the American-Russian magnate believed to be profiting undeservingly from someone else's work or to be stomping on someone else's freedoms. In an attempt to differentiate between a man and a parasite, Ryan declares in one of his audio diaries the following: "What is the difference between a Man and a Parasite? A Man builds. A Parasite asks, 'Where is my share?' A Man creates. A Parasite says, 'What will the neighbors think?' A Man invents. A Parasite says, 'Watch out, or you might tread on the toes of God. . .'" (*BioShock* n. pag.). Among those considered to be parasites by the Russian-born tycoon are Bolsheviks, Roosevelt, and Truman, as Ryan suggests while speaking to Sullivan, the Head of Security of his Private Forces, specifically when he calls them "little men", who, like leeches, are on the backs of

“great ones”: “I despise what this civilization is becoming, Sullivan. First the Bolsheviks and then - Roosevelt. Truman, carrying on much of what Roosevelt began. Little men on the backs of great ones” (Shirley 14).

Ryan’s stance on the New Deal mirrors some of the criticism it received during the 1930’s. Following the economic meltdown that took place on October 29, 1929, or on what became known as “Black Tuesday”, America’s markets lost billions of dollars, prices fell by some 40 percent, and unemployment rose to around 14 million (Grant 300). President Herbert Hoover’s (1874-1964) response to this monetary crisis was to follow “the Republican’s party creed that America’s strength lay in what he termed the ‘rugged individualism’” of the American people (Grant 301). Hoover believed that Americans were “in an extraordinary degree self-sustaining” and would soon be able to “lead the march of prosperity” once again. As a result, there was no need to heed the reasonable Democratic calls for federal intervention, given that, according to Hoover, the depression could not be “cured by legislative action or executive pronouncement”. Instead, “economic wounds must be healed by the action of the cells of the economic body - the producers and consumers themselves” (Grant 301). Federal intervention was, to Hoover, completely at odds with the American way of life (Grant 301).

Despite Hoover’s words, there eventually was federal relief to corporations, under the auspices of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), and it was believed that American citizens would benefit, albeit indirectly, from this financial aid. Yet, direct federal support for American individuals was still perceived as “a dangerous step towards socialism” (Grant 302). Soon after, Roosevelt was elected President of the US in a landslide victory and promised the American people a New Deal. This New Deal came in the shape of a domestic program which took action to bring about short-term economic relief and longer-term economic and social reforms in industry, agriculture, finance, waterpower, labour, and housing. Notwithstanding its achievements, the New Deal failed to rescue the American economy, and, in 1938, the Depression reached its nadir, with new layoffs and further economic instability (Chafe 5). With the 1942 congressional election, the conservative withdrawal from New Deal programs began, and when the 78th Congress arrived in Washington in 1943, a round of assaults against these same programs started, with several relief agencies being abolished. Other agencies also suffered, such as the National Resources Planning Board (NRPB), which was accused of working in the name of socialism (Chafe 22). Unsurprisingly, the New Deal was depicted as “a new incarnation of the Red Menace”, and indistinguishable from communism (Chafe 91), as Ryan also suggests in *BioShock* by pairing the Bolsheviks with Roosevelt and Truman.

Even though Ryan clearly despised Roosevelt's New Deal and what he perceived to be its resemblance to socialist policies and Bolshevik ideals, it was only after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945) that the American-Russian businessman decided that something had to be done before it was too late. While talking to Sullivan about the devastation of both Japanese cities, the long-term effects of exposure to radiation, and what they both believed to be "*the inevitability of Atomic war*" (Shirley 15), Ryan made the decision of building Rapture. He grandiloquently reveals his intention, telling Sullivan that they both "can escape . . . and certain others. We can escape from the mutual destruction of the mad little men who scuttle about the halls of government power. We are going to build a *new world* in the one place these madmen cannot touch. . ." (Shirley 13-5)

Ryan's repulsion regarding the atomic bombs echoes the disgust of some Americans who spoke out against using them at the time that they were deployed. In August, 1945, the United States ended World War II (1939-1945) with what Susan-Mary Grant called "a devastating show of strength" (328), after dropping the atomic bombs developed in Los Alamos Laboratory, New Mexico, as part of the Manhattan Project. As Melvyn P. Leffler put it, the use of these weapons "vividly demonstrated American power; they confirmed that enemies of America would pay for their transgressions" (26). However, the deployment of the atomic bombs proved controversial, and not just because of the loss of life and material devastation that followed, as Grant argues (328). After all, scientific research had ceased to be, in political and public perception, what Hoover described as "one of the most potent impulses to progress" (Grant 328). Instead, it became "a deadly and dangerous threat not just to life but to national security" (Grant 328), especially after America lost the atomic monopoly in 1949 (Grant 330), when the Soviet Union tested a fission weapon of its own. Besides, many doubted the need of dropping the atomic bombs at all, as can be seen by a US intelligence survey that states that "Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped" (Chafe 53). Henry Stimson (1867-1950), Roosevelt's Secretary of War, thought so too, asserting that America could have ended the war by telling the Japanese that they could keep their emperor, as did the President Dwight Eisenhower (1890-1969), who noted that "the Japanese were ready to surrender, and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing" (Chafe 53).

As soon as the decision of building Rapture had been made, secrecy about it had to be kept at all costs, to stop the American "leftist" government or the communist Russian state from ruining it by infiltrating into it. The same is asserted during a conversation between Sullivan and Ruben Greavy, one of Rapture's head

engineers, in which Greavy alludes to Ryan's fear of external interference, as well as to the need to keep Rapture a secret:

Mr. Ryan doesn't want any outsiders going down there to report on what he's building. . . . He figures if governments know about it, they'll infiltrate. And then there's the union types, Communist organizers. . . suppose *they* were to worm their way in? The best way to keep people like that out is to keep it completely secret from them. (Shirley 39)

In a further effort to preserve secrecy about Rapture, Ryan forbade any sort of contact with what he termed the "surface world", which meant that people who moved to Rapture were not allowed to leave it, just like they were not free to communicate with anyone on the outside.

Ryan's fears of "leftist" or Communist interference mirror the wave of anticommunism that swept through America in the 1940's and 50's. There had previously been a Red Scare following the Russian Revolution of 1917 (the same revolution that forced Ryan and his father to flee Russia), and, in the mid-1920's, women's groups devoted to social welfare were accused of being "part of a 'spider web' conspiracy emanating from Moscow and determined to subvert the American family" (Chafe 91). A decade later, during Roosevelt's presidency, the New Deal was perceived by many as a new form of the Red Menace, as was argued above. However, it was only in the years following World War II, as the Cold War deepened, that anticommunism reached unprecedented levels of hysteria (Grant 332). Created in 1938 to investigate anti-American propaganda, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) was made a permanent standing committee, and the Smith Act (passed in 1940) was used as a vehicle to prosecute anyone who supported communism (Chafe 91-92). The Truman administration also issued Executive Order 9835 just nine days after the Truman Doctrine⁶ had been proclaimed, creating a Federal Employee Loyalty Program, giving government security officials clearance to screen over 2 million employees of the federal government, and allowing the Attorney General to draw up a list of "totalitarian, fascist, or subversive organizations" (Chafe 93). Anyone even remotely connected to such groups could then be accused of being disloyal (Chafe 93).

After the election of 1948 (which Truman surprisingly won), anticommunism dominated American political life, with increasing evidence suggesting that there was indeed a real threat of communist subversion (Chafe 99; Schrecker 39) and with suspicions that the communist conspiracy was being aided by thousands of disloyal

American citizens multiplying (Chafe 99). Taking advantage of this context, Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin announced in 1950 that he had in his possession “a list of 205 [card-carrying communists] . . . who are still working and shaping policy in the State Department” (Chafe 99), thus inaugurating the period that came to be known as McCarthyism, which produced several investigations and hearings in an effort to expose alleged communist infiltration in the American government. Ultimately, this wave of anticommunism made “suspect any politician, group, or cause that could be described as ‘leftist’” (Chafe 100) and led to the definition of advocacy of essential social reforms as “perilous, unsafe, and out of bounds” (Chafe 102). As a result, many important reforms were struck from the agenda of acceptable discussion (Chafe 103), as *BioShock: Rapture* depicts when Roland Wallace, senior maintenance engineer at Rapture, mentions the need for a minimum wage at Rapture and is accused by Ryan of having communist ideas:

Wallace gulped but went bravely on. “. . . [P]eople working for most merchants here aren’t getting paid much. There’s no minimum wage so it’s kind of hard to earn enough to save and, uh. . . .” “The resourceful will earn! . . . And I must say, Wallace, I’m surprised to hear these Communist ideas from you. . . .” (Shirley 247)

Despising the New Deal, atomic warfare, and communism, Ryan was able to build his city, a capitalist utopia clearly indebted to Rand and Objectivism, as the next part attempts to prove.

2. Capitalist Utopias: Andrew Ryan’s Rapture and Ayn Rand’s Galt’s Gulch

Within the aquarium-like walls of Rapture, Ryan was determined that the answer to the over-simplistic question “is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow?” (*BioShock* n. pag.) would be no other than a resounding yes. Despising anything resembling socialism, he also established that property rights were inviolate and that everything was privately owned, including healthcare and sanitation and the police and fire departments, in spite of common sense. Eventually, Ryan decided that even the public park Arcadia would also become closed to all but paying customers, as Julie Langford, the scientist who created and maintained Arcadia, tells Bill McDonagh, the general contractor in Rapture:

“[N]ow he wants to turn this place into a paying tourist attraction - for residents of Rapture, I mean.” “What? But I thought this was a public park.” “So it was to be, but he doesn’t really believe in *public* ownership of anything.” . . . “Should a farmer not

be able to sell his food? Is a potter not entitled to a profit from his pots?” (Shirley 235)

Langford’s and McDonagh’s dismay only increases once the scientist reveals that Ryan is entertaining the idea of charging people for the air they breathe: “Yeah well - it doesn’t end there. He’s even talking about a *surcharge for oxygen*! He says the air in Rapture is only there to breathe because Ryan Industries provided it!” (Shirley 235).

Inside Ryan’s Rapture, markets and their evolution would be guided by “*a Great Chain of industry*” (Shirley 119), supposedly a reference to Adam Smith’s (1723-1790) invisible hand of the market. According to the ideal of the Great Chain of industry, the economy is influenced by each individual’s self-interest to produce, buy and sell, and the combined actions of all of these people together create a unified movement, with every individual representing a link in the chain (*BioShock Wiki* n. pag.). The Great Chain of industry then obeys the laws of exchange, establishing pricing and distribution, as well as supply and demand (*BioShock Wiki* n. pag.). As a result, there allegedly is no need for government control, which would only hinder economic freedoms and deprive people of the fruits of their labor, or for divine intervention, which some would attempt to signal as the reason behind the movement of the Great Chain of industry (*BioShock Wiki* n. pag.). Instead, only “men” (meaning both women and men, one would hope) are needed at Rapture, as can be read in the banner displayed in front of the bust of Ryan, located at the top of the stairs of the lighthouse, where it is written “NO GODS OR KINGS. ONLY MAN” (*BioShock* n. pag.). The entrepreneur’s description of the Great Chain of industry can be read in the following quote, where Ryan reiterates the assertion presented in the banner:

True cooperation is enlightened self-interest, not grubbing parasitism! True cooperation is not based on the bloodsucking that the parasites call ‘taxation’! True cooperation is people working together - each for their own profit! A man’s self-interest is at the root of all that he accomplishes! But there is something more powerful than each of us: a combination of our efforts, *a Great Chain of industry* that unites us. It is only when we struggle in our own interest that the chain pulls society in the right direction. The chain is too powerful and too mysterious for any government to guide. The Great Chain may sound mystical. It is not! Some would imagine the hand of their so-called God behind every mystery! The best of human nature, the laws of natural selection - such is the power behind the Great Chain, not God! We need no gods or kings in Rapture! Only man! (Shirley 119)

Of course, the ideal of the Great Chain of industry completely disregards what can transpire if employers, looking out for their self-interest, decide to take advantage of their employees or if workplaces, wishing to cut costs, do not provide their workers with safe and healthy working conditions. It also does not even remotely take into account employers' rights if they fall ill, especially as a result of their professional activity, and must stay home from work or if corporations decide that they do not care about the environment, as long as they are filling their pockets.

Up-holding property rights, lacking public services, and rejecting any type of government interference whatsoever, *BioShock's* Rapture surely attempts to present itself as a capitalist utopia, with striking similarities to another capitalist utopia, specifically the one envisioned by Rand in *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), entitled Galt's Gulch. With its name serving as the inspiration for the name of the revolutionary Atlas, a mysterious man who has revolted against Ryan and who guides Jack through Rapture via radio messages, *Atlas Shrugged* is set in an industrial America in decline. Several of its entrepreneurs are struggling to run their businesses in "the face of collectivist inefficiency and a widespread mood of fatalism" (Allitt 256). Ragner Danneskjold, or what Patrick Allitt described as "the anti-Robin Hood" (256), actually begins seizing ships on the high seas and giving the proceeds to these people, who had allegedly been unjustly taxed. Simultaneously, the nation's business leaders begin disappearing one by one, and the interrogative sentence "Who is John Galt?" starts appearing everywhere, similarly to the sentence "Who is Atlas?", printed out in posters spread across Rapture. Finally, the reader discovers that America's entrepreneurs have gone on strike, secluding themselves in a Colorado hideaway named Galt's Gulch and led by Galt himself, who is supposed to be the greatest of them all.

Galt's Gulch is a capitalist utopia based on Rand's Objectivist philosophy. Among other things, Objectivism upholds ethical egoism, according to which "an action is morally right if it promotes the self-interest of the agent" (Duignan, "Objectivism" n. pag.), and individualism, which states that "a political system is just if it properly respects the rights and interests of the individual" (Duignan, "Objectivism" n. pag.). It also endorses laissez-faire capitalism, which combines minimal governmental interference with an economic system in which "most means of production are privately owned and production is guided and income distributed largely through the operation of markets" (Heilbroner and Boettke n. pag.). Just like Galt's Gulch, Rapture is also modelled on Objectivist ideals, clearly embraced by Ryan, despite the fact that forbidding any sort of economic exchanges with the "surface world" is the exact opposite of what a laissez-faire economy should be about.

As was seen above, in Rapture all is owned by specific individuals whose property rights are inalienable, and the government does not interfere in the economy, given that it is up to the Great Chain of industry to guide markets and their development. Additionally, self-interest is not only desirable but also essential, because, according to Ryan, it “oils the wheels of business” (Shirley 62), or, more precisely, of the Great Chain itself. Furthermore, Objectivism defends that altruism is a “destructive force, since it encourage[s] individuals to live for the benefit of others rather than for themselves: it corrupt[s] givers and receivers alike” (Allitt 255). Unsurprisingly, Ryan expresses a similar view, when he declares that altruism leads to the lightning of “the torch of destruction” (*BioShock* n. pag.).

Both Galt’s Gulch and Rapture share the same goal as other utopias, “namely, that of criticizing the negative features of a certain society by comparing it to another, fictional one” (Vieira 25), just like Thomas More (1478-1535) did over 500 years ago. In 1516, More published the book *Utopia* (in Latin), whose main audience was a small, intellectual elite who could not only read but also understand that the neologism that gave the work its title played on the prefixes *eu* (meaning good) and *ou* (which means no). By doing so, More’s text implied that the island of Utopia was the good place that was no place, just like it suggested that the philosopher and traveller Raphael Hythloday was the “purveyor of nonsense” (Marks, Wagner-Lawlor and Vieira 1). Throughout More’s book, Hythloday describes his fictional voyage alongside Amerigo Vespucci (1454-1512) and how he came across Utopia, while also declaring that the island’s organization, customs, and philosophy are far superior to those of sixteenth century Europe. In Utopia, however, a section of its population is enslaved, and the doors of each house open automatically, so that “there is nothing private anywhere” (More 42; Marks, Wagner-Lawlor and Vieira 2), among other aspects that one would hardly find utopian. What is certain is that, as Marks, Wagner-Lawlor and Vieira underline, “[b]uilt into *Utopia*’s DNA is the comparison of one world with another”, specifically the one “conjured up by Hythloday” and the one the text’s first readers inhabited (2). In the case of Galt’s Gulch and Rapture, a comparison is being established between Rand’s and Ryan’s capitalist utopias and Cold War era America, which, in the case of at least Ryan’s, is believed to be too in line with socialist ideals.

The similarities established between *BioShock* and *Atlas Shrugged* are not restricted to Rapture and Galt’s Gulch, however. Ryan himself and part of his life story clearly resemble Rand and her own personal life. Much like the creator of Rapture, the American-Russian writer was born in the Russian Empire, to a prosperous Jewish shopkeeper in St Petersburg who named her Alissa Rosenbaum. Nevertheless, following

the Russian Revolution, and just like what had happened to Ryan, Rand's family lost everything, which probably contributed to her utter hatred for the Bolsheviks and what they stood for, another feature that she shares with Ryan. By contrast, she loved the West, and, in 1926, managed to escape to America, where, like the Russian-born entrepreneur, she changed her name to the one she is now known by, which curiously is a partial anagram of the American-Russian tycoon's name. In the following years, she developed an extreme aversion for the New Deal (Burns 38) and wrote anti-communist novels, which reveals that Rand and Ryan would probably have sat on the same side of the political aisle.

Within the confines of Ryan's utopian Rapture, all of those who repudiated Bolshevik-like ideals, who were talented individuals, and who exhibited a hard work ethic were told that they could fulfil the promises of the myth of the self-made man, or so they hoped.

3. The Myth of the Self-Made Man: The Protestant Work Ethic, American Economic Exceptionalism, Upward Mobility, and Social Darwinism

To populate Rapture, Ryan handpicked a very "special" group of people himself. These supposedly "were a unique people in a unique place - each one of them with a chance to make their own destiny within the walls of Rapture", which acquired the character of a promised land of sorts, as its very name suggests.⁷ Consisting of "the moneyed patricians, eccentrics, and pioneering professionals Ryan had recruited" and "[t]he determined blue-collar types" (Shirley 117), all of these people were required to reject what the Russian-born tycoon deemed to be the socialist "evils" of a surface world which seemed about to blow itself to smithereens. They additionally had to be talented and industrious individuals, and to trade their homeland for Rapture, as the letter of recruitment discretely disseminated by Ryan highlights:

Tired of taxes? Tired of bullying governments, business regulations, unions, people expecting a handout from you? Want a new start? Do you have a skill, an ambition to be a pioneer? If you're receiving this notice, you've already been considered and selected to fill out an application for a life in Rapture. This amazing new enterprise will require emigration. But it will cost you nothing except sweat and determination to come and take part in a new world. (Shirley 110)

Rejecting big government (or, in other words, an excessively interventionist state), resorting to their own individual talents and hard work, and immigrating to a brave

new world, these people were completely sold on the idea that they could make their own luck and, as a result, become self-made individuals.

The term “Self-Made Man” can be traced back to Henry Clay, who wrote, in 1832, that “In Kentucky, almost every manufactory known to me is in the hands of enterprising self-made men, who have whatever wealth they possess by patient and diligent labor” (39; Paul 369). Like Clay’s statement highlights, the concept of the self-made man, frequently connected to immigrant narratives and to the promise of a better life for all of those that move to the United States, is typically used to describe talented people who, by resorting to a hard work ethic, are able to achieve unlimited prosperity, especially of the economic kind. This hard work ethic is very much related to the Protestant work ethic, a concept developed by Max Weber (1864-1920) and defined as “the value attached to hard work, thrift, and efficiency in one’s worldly calling, which, especially in the Calvinist view, were deemed signs of an individual’s election, or eternal salvation” (*Britannica*, “Protestant Ethic” n. pag.). The Protestant work ethic played an important role in the economic success of Protestant groups in the early stages of European capitalism, according to Weber, who argued that “because worldly success could be interpreted as a sign of eternal salvation, it was vigorously pursued” (*Britannica*, “Protestant Ethic” n. pag.). As a result, “a direct link between a ‘Protestant Ethic’, the ‘Spirit of Capitalism’ and the consequent propensity of certain Protestant groups to see the accumulation of wealth as a moral duty and an end in itself, thereby giving a major stimulus to the origins of modern capitalism” (Dickson and McLachlan 81), was established.

Closely associated both with the myth of the self-made man and with the Protestant work ethic (although not in an uncontroversial way)⁸ is Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), an autodidact who has often been described as “the *homo americanus* par excellence” (Paul 370-1), “a model representative of the American Dream” (Huang and Mulford 147; Paul 371), and “a liberal capitalist hero” (Newman 173; Paul 371). Among Franklin’s writings is his *Autobiography*, which was published after his death in 1793 and where Franklin provides guidance on how to rise from “Obscurity” to “some Degree of Reputation in the World” (Franklin 1; Paul 371). The *Autobiography* is divided in four parts, composed at different times in Franklin’s life, and recounts the success story of “a printer’s apprentice who becomes an internationally recognized statesman due to his ‘industry’ and ‘frugality’” (Paul 371). Additionally, it presents the humble origins of its author as contributing to his virtue, instead of choosing to hide them, and, in so doing, questions “old-world” prejudices against those described as “social upstarts and ‘parvenus’”, while also underlining the “greater liberty,

equality, and social justice in America” (Paul 371). Moreover, it implies that individualism and free will are invaluable tools against the inflexible social orders that characterized European societies, while also suggesting that everyone is responsible for their own fortune, with “self-improvement and self-perfectibility loom[ing] large in his texts” (Paul 372). However, it should be noted that, as Ormond Seavey argues, Franklin’s meteoric rise to prosperity is, to a large extent, the result of “risk-taking, partnership, and currying favour at the right time” (Seavey xviii), and not simply the outcome of industry and frugality, as is suggested in his *Autobiography*.

Another author clearly related to the myth of the self-made man and to the Protestant work ethic is Horatio Alger (1832-1899), who wrote numerous pieces of popular fiction about “impoverished boys who through hard work and virtue achieve great wealth and respect” (Paul 373). As Paul argues, Alger’s protagonists usually live with their single mothers, who they must support, and come across well-to-do gentlemen, who, seeing the moral integrity and hard work of the boys, decide to mentor them. The protagonists are then able to comfortably enter middle-class America and to become established in “a secure white-collar position, either as a clerk with the promise of a junior partnership or as a junior member of a successful mercantile establishment” (Paul 373). Extremely popular, Alger’s stories propelled and reinforced the myth of the self-made man in the nineteenth century, as Paul argues, structuring national discourse as “a narrative of personal initiative, enterprise, financial responsibility, thrift, equal opportunity, hard-work ethic, education and self-education, and other similar values of Puritan-Calvinist and liberal extraction” (Moraru 57; Paul 374). After the success of Alger’s narratives diminished towards the end of the author’s life, they became truly iconic in the twentieth century, when they were used to identify the “American way of life”, in contrast to the “un-American” ideas surrounding socialism and communism (Paul 374). During the Cold War era, Alger even came to be perceived as “a patriotic defender of the social and political status quo and erstwhile advocate of laissez-faire capitalism” (Scharnhorst and Bales 152; Paul 374), which probably was very much related to the fact that “the defense of capitalism is, time and again, the tacit subtext of the narratives of self-made men” (Paul 372). However, Alger’s stories cannot unquestionably be considered rags to riches narratives, given that their protagonists never achieve success by their own means, but thanks to the fortunate help of gentlemen that they conveniently bump into. They also never become spectacularly rich, but only rise to a comfortable middle-class position, without ever managing to go beyond that.

Among Rapture's self-made individuals seems to be Ryan himself, who, as was previously argued, left the Russian Empire in search of a life that was not defined by socialist ideals and Bolshevik beliefs, which he despised and associated with what he called "parasites". When he reached America, he was extremely lucky, striking oil on his property, and then proceeded to make smart investments that helped him acquire the fortune with which he built Rapture. As a result, Ryan's success, much like the achievements of Franklin and, although at a more moderate level, of Alger's protagonists, is a consequence of luck, which was then coupled with inventiveness. The same is suggested by Sullivan in the prologue of *BioShock: Rapture*, in which he quietly listens to Ryan aggressively condemn the union strikes going on at some Kentucky mines and a Mississippi refinery. Ryan finishes off by saying that he never had the need of unions, choosing, instead, to make his "own way", to which Sullivan mentally responds by thinking to himself "that the Great Man [Ryan] had the benefit of luck - he'd struck oil, as a young man - but it was true he'd invested brilliantly" (Shirley 12-3). In this way, the myth of the self-made man seems to be called into question right from the very start, and Ryan looks as if he is making his own truth, to fit his Randian and Objectivist-like views.

The idea of the self-made man is closely related to the economic dimension of American exceptionalism, which is often connected to individualism, a political and social philosophy that places a great deal of value on individual freedom and for which the individual is of supreme importance (Lukes n. pag.). Developed in Britain with the ideas of Smith and Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and described by Tocqueville as essential to the American temper, individualism cherishes self-reliance, privacy, and respect, while opposing authority and any form of control over the individual (Lukes n. pag.). Individualism defends that people's interests are best served when they are given maximum freedom and responsibility for choosing their own objectives and the means of attaining them (Lukes n. pag.). As a result, individualists think that government interference should be kept at a minimum, confining itself to maintaining law and order, among other aspects (Lukes n. pag.). They also believe that each person should have the maximum of opportunity to acquire all the property that they see fit, managing and disposing of it as they wish (Lukes n. pag.). Individualism is, within the context of the economic character of American exceptionalism, depicted as essential for individual success, which is mainly understood in economic terms. In relation to the notion of the self-made man, individualism clearly relates to its inclusion of aspects of self-realization "based on an ethic of self-interest that aims at the sheer accumulation of property, recognition, prestige, and personal gain without

any concern for others” (Paul 369-70), something that also evidently resonates with Rand’s and Objectivism’s capitalist ideals, their defence of self-interest and their rejection of altruism.

One cannot help but to hear the echoes of the alleged economic exceptionality of America in *BioShock* and *BioShock: Rapture*, where individualism is supposed to be a key feature of Ryan and of the Rand and Objectivism-inspired capitalist utopia he set up somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean. In fact, Rapture, the city created by the Russian-born tycoon, is, on the one hand, the clearest demonstration of Ryan’s individuality - something that he himself had “ordained”, “the manifestation of *his will*” (Shirley 106) - and, on the other hand, a monument dedicated to individualism, where “free markets, free will, and free men” can purportedly find a safe haven (*BioShock* n. pag.). However, the truth is that no one is allowed to leave Rapture, to worship a divinity of their own choosing, or to have a different political view from Ryan. If they do, they are locked up in Persephone Correctional Facility, as was the case of the psychiatrist Sofia Lamb, who expressed socialist-like opinions which began to gain too much traction among Rapture’s population. Also in this hidden gulag, inmates can be and often are rented out as test subjects against their will, in a clear violation of their freedom. Apart from this, and as was seen earlier, people’s property rights are allegedly respected above all else, while the self-interest of every individual is said to be defended and any sort of government interference is repudiated, so that the Great Chain of industry can follow its own course. In this way, each person, and, as a result, society itself, is believed to be on the road to riches and to be about to attain “unstinting prosperity” (Shirley 62), thus fulfilling the promises of the myth of the self-made man. Ryan suggests so in the following quote, in which he mentions Rapture to McDonagh (by referring to a “great social experiment”) and talks of its potential, even before Rapture has finished being built:

I intend to prove that self-interest oils the wheels of business - and that freedom from the . . . the *tentacles* of government, from the usual social shackles on science and technology and growth, will produce unstinting prosperity. I have envisioned a great social experiment. (Shirley 62)

Nevertheless, the truth is, once again, much more complicated than that, given that not only are property rights not inviolate (e.g. Ryan takes hold of businesses when he feels threatened by them), but also only the self-interest of the rich is protected, while the poor are exploited, unable to earn a decent wage that will allow them to

feed themselves and their children or to live in a place that houses only one family instead of multiple (Shirley 165-6).

Those same echoes of the supposed exceptionality of America, both in relation to its economic and to its other dimensions (namely religious and political),⁹ can be perceived in Ryan's assurance that Rapture would one day be revealed to what was left of humankind, following the atomic war that he believed to be at hand. Once it became known to the world, Rapture's Rand and Objectivism-inspired capitalist ideals would be proven right, and the city would become a glimmering example that everyone else would strive to mimic, or what the Russian-born entrepreneur described as "the capital city of all civilization" (Shirley 109). The idea encapsulated in Ryan's description of Rapture as a beacon for all humankind bears a striking resemblance to the idea expressed in John Winthrop's (1588-1649) sermon *A Model of Christian Charity*. In his lay sermon, Winthrop, supposedly addressing those (of which not all were Puritans) that were to embark or that had already embarked the *Arbella* in 1630, proclaims that "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us" (Levine 188). As Abram c. Van Engen explains, the sermon and the expression "the city upon a hill" were largely lost, forgotten, and ignored until the 1960's, amid the Cold War, when John F. Kennedy (1917-1963), and, later on, Lyndon B. Johnson (1908-1973) and Ronald Reagan (1911-2004), used it in their presidential speeches. From that moment onwards, it witnessed its own "rags-to-riches rise", as Van Engen puts it (295), becoming inexorably intertwined with the idea of American exceptionalism and popping up in various forms and moments in different texts, such as, for example, the ones under analysis. Through it, Winthrop, a reformist who hoped that the Puritans' "New Jerusalem" in America would set an example that would be replicated in England (Paul 151), attempts to induce the settlers to prove that the path chosen by the Puritans is the righteous one and that the Puritans, by choosing it, are right, while those that persecuted them are wrong (Grant 53). However, just like the idea of America as a glimmering example for the rest of the world raises ever more question marks, the hope that Rapture would become the "capital city of all civilization" (Shirley 109) failed to be fulfilled, becoming instead a cautionary tale.

The figure of the self-made man has often been identified with the utopian ideal of a classless society, or, at the very least, with the notion of social mobility, regularly described by the expression "from rags to riches" or by Crèvecoeur's statement "from a servant to the rank of a master" (60; Paul 16, 368). This alleged upward mobility illustrates the often-unrealistic promise of economic success in

America, and it has historically been deceptively depicted as unlimited, regardless of the social and financial context in which one is born. It has also been described as a direct consequence of the purported freedom and equality, specifically equality of opportunity, that characterize America, and it has been used to contrast American and European societies. While America and the American economic system lead to “a higher standard of living in general as well as to a higher degree of individual agency and economic opportunity” (Paul 367), Europe and its societies are defined by “rigidly stratified social hierarchies” (Paul 367).

The idea of classlessness and of social mobility is also mentioned during another conversation between Ryan and McDonagh, in which McDonagh refers that he traded Britain for America because he believes that in the latter anyone can rise straight to the top:

“A man must make of his life a ladder that he never ceases to climb - if you’re not rising, you are slipping down the rungs, my friend.” “But by ascending,” Ryan went on, . . . “one makes one’s own class, do you see? Eh? One classes oneself!” . . . “Couldn’t agree more, sir!” Bill blurted. “That’s why I’ve come to the USA. Anyone can rise up, here. Right to the top!” (Shirley 33)

McDonagh did not stick around the United States enough time to see whether or not he was right about anyone being able to rise up there, given that not long after this conversation he was hired by Ryan to be Rapture’s building engineer, and, afterwards, general contractor. However, and as the positions he occupied within Rapture prove, he was able to climb the social ladder quite successfully within the confines of the city built by Ryan. Yet, perhaps that wasn’t exclusively the result of his talent for plumbing and hard work, but also of chance, which allowed him to meet Ryan when he was still living in America, share some or most of his views, and make a profound impression on him, which motivated Ryan to lend him a helping hand. In this way, McDonagh clearly resembles Alger’s protagonists, who, as was said above, rise to a comfortable middle-class position due to fortunate encounters with helper figures such as gentlemen who decide to mentor them when they see their moral integrity and hard work ethic (Paul 373). So, once again, the validity of the myth of the self-made man seems to be questioned by the creators of the texts under analysis, whose alleged self-made individuals benefit from luck, instead of profiting exclusively from their talents and hard work.

The “formula” of the self-made man is based on the illusion that the exception is the rule, as Paul points out, and follows a social Darwinist logic grounded on the

belief that those fit enough to compete and succeed shall be selected in the supposedly “post-stratificatory [American] society” (Helmstetter 709; Paul 368). This logic places little or no responsibility for the well-being of the average Jane and Joe on society, given that it departs from the convenient belief on the illusion of equality of opportunity, already inscribed in the fallacious American creed of social mobility. Both deceptively purport, just like the myth of the self-made man, that there is “parity in competition” (Potter 92; Paul 368) and “an endless race open to all” (Thernstrom 63; Paul 368), despite that not being the case at all, given that “not all start out even or compete on equal footing” (Paul 368).

Consider, for example, the case of the immigrant experience of the Lithuanian family described by Upton Sinclair (1878-1968) in *The Jungle* (1906), working in the Chicago meat packing industry and filled with hope about moving to America. When it gets there, however, it is taken advantage of, scammed into living in an appalling house, and forced to work in dangerous conditions, which ultimately results in the alienation and death of several family members. This muckraking novel¹⁰ shows that, for many immigrants that arrive in America, the myth of the self-made man fails to live up to its promises and “shrugs off the fact that it is not success and self-making but sheer survival that is at stake for many immigrants in a society that is characterized by gross class inequities” (Paul 388). The same might be said of Ryan, who chooses to celebrate the social Darwinist logic that paves the way for some to succeed and some to fail in the profoundly unequal Rapture, not understanding, or, more accurately, not caring whether some people perish in the process, especially given that they cannot leave Rapture to look for greener pastures elsewhere. As the American-Russian magnate argues, Rapture was meant to be “[a] new world - where men and women will stand up on their own two feet in the glory of competition. They will empower themselves with struggle!” (Shirley 110), when, in reality, most of them simply ended up with empty stomachs.

Despite believing that they could make their own fortune and, as a result, become self-made individuals in the fashion of Franklin or Alger’s protagonists, those that arrived in Rapture quickly met with unforgiving disappointment.

4. Rapture: Immigration and Self-(Un)Making

It quickly became apparent that Rapture could not live up to its utopian promises, becoming, instead, a dystopian nightmare from which there was no escape. Not long after it was built and it welcomed a large number of immigrants, Rapture witnessed the widening of the social gap between those that were already rich and powerful

when they got there and those that had nothing besides their determination to climb the social ladder. This was very much the consequence of the Randian absence of government interference at any level of society, which stipulated that markets were largely left to their own devices. It was also the outcome of the fundamentalistic defence of each individuals' self-interest with no regard for the well-being of others, which allowed the rich to exploit the poor, and of the Objectivist-like rejection of altruism, which meant that there was nothing resembling labour laws, unions, social programmes, charities, or even orphanages.¹¹ As a result, if one were to find oneself in a disadvantageous situation, it would be very hard to get out of it, as the story of Margie shows.

Talking to Lamb, Margie reveals how she moved to Rapture “fulla hopes and dreams” (Shirley 174), only to end up working in some “strip joint” (Shirley 174), from where she was fired after rejecting the sexual advances of her manager (Shirley 174). As there were no laws regarding workplace harassment or employee termination, Margie could do nothing but walk out empty-handed and humiliated, and, after she failed to secure a job waitressing, she had to resort to selling her clothes, but her money quickly ran out, as did her food. “Living on stuff cadged outta trashcans” (Shirley 174) and with her requests to go back to the surface denied, Margie was forced into prostitution, much like Marija, Ona's cousin in Sinclair's *The Jungle* who has to support whatever family she has left after the Chicago meat packing industry is done with it.

Both Margie's and Marija's stories address the myth of the self-made man from an immigrant perspective and end up showing that it does not stand up to its promises, neither in Rapture nor in America. These, as it turns out, are not classless societies, but highly stratified ones, as it is profoundly difficult to avoid rising further down, let alone rise up. Also, they are unequivocally based on a social Darwinist logic that does not care whether or not a fair race is assured from the beginning, but that time and again forces those less well positioned to fight for their survival, and not for their success. Ryan is well aware of this and could not care less, as can be seen in the case of a grocer that is telling him that he is being bullied by a competing grocer that is trying to put him out of business. Even though the grocer, called Gravenstein, hopes that Ryan will intervene on his behalf, the American-Russian businessman declares the following instead:

the great marketplace is like a thriving jungle, where some survive and become king of their territory - and some don't. It's the way of nature! Survival of the fittest

weans out the weaklings, Gravenstein! I advise you to find some means of competing - or move out.” (Shirley 172)

So, while Ryan had promised that “[t]heoretically everyone in Rapture started on an equal footing - and anyone could rise to the top with hard work, enterprise, talent, ruthless dedication to the simple, liberating power of free enterprise” (Shirley 161), that was not the case at all. People that had moved to Rapture hoping to become self-made individuals quickly realized that “[t]hey [had gone] to Rapture thinking they [were going to] be captains of industry, but they all [forgot] that somebody [had to] scrub the toilets” (*BioShock* n. pag.). The Randian and Objectivist-like capitalist ideals on which the foundations of the city had been built, which completely repudiated anything slightly resembling socialist beliefs, assured that the rich, looking out for their self-interest, only got richer, and that the poor, no matter how many toilets they scrubbed, only became poorer. All of these people were trapped in Ryan’s “fortress dedicated to freedom” (Shirley 20), which, in reality, was an underwater, art deco prison, as Peach Wilkins, a blue collar worker that ends up becoming a smuggler, suggests when he states the following, while also revealing how disillusioned he has become with the promises of Rapture and, by extension, of the myth of the self-made man: “We all come down here, figured we’d all be part of Ryan’s Great Chain. Turns out Ryan’s chain is made of gold, and ours are the sort with the big iron ball around your ankle” (*BioShock* n. pag.).

Despite Rapture’s inability to live up to its promises, at least one person was able to make it straight to the top, namely Frank Fontaine, a conman that became Ryan’s nemesis. Fontaine, whose real last name is never revealed, escaped from an orphanage at an early age and worked in various places throughout his life, while also adopting numerous names. When he got to Rapture, he created a highly successful (as well as illegal) smuggling operation to provide items from the surface world (with which people were to have no contact whatsoever) which had been forbidden by Ryan (such as bibles or luxury products) to the people of Rapture. With the money he acquired smuggling goods into Rapture, he funded an extremely lucrative business which commercialized ADAM, a green substance harvested from sea slugs that basically gave its users, also called splicers, what might appropriately be called superpowers. ADAM, one of *BioShock*’s nova (according to the terminology proposed by Darko Suvin), was remarkably addictive, which means that it was in great demand within the confines of Rapture and that it had an unlimited business potential, despite the fact that it drove its users to insanity and that it permanently disfigured them. After discovering that little girls could mass-produce ADAM, Fontaine built the Little Sister’s

Orphanage, where he, with the help of two scientists, Dr. Brigid Tenenbaum and Dr. Yi Suchong, had them genetically altered and mentally conditioned to do his bidding. The little girls, or little sisters, were nightmarish creatures who come out of vent holes carrying a syringe so that they could harvest ADAM from corpses, while under the protection of Frankenstein-like men (called Big Daddies) who had been genetically enhanced and who had their skin and organs grafted into armoured diving suits, as awful as that sounds.¹² Simultaneously, Fontaine created a Home for the Poor, supposedly a charity program meant to help those that had fallen in hard times, but which, in reality, was intended to get people to trust Fontaine, who gave them as much ADAM as they wanted, so that they would turn against Ryan. Eventually, after a civil war (during which Ryan pumped Rapture's citizens with pheromones so that they would be susceptible to mental suggestion, which again goes to show that there wasn't much freedom or value of individuality around Rapture) and following the events depicted in *BioShock*, which by no means can be described here, Fontaine ended up taking control of Rapture, with Jack's involuntary help.

Fontaine's story of self-made manhood bears a striking resemblance to narratives of self-making such as the ones told throughout the *Godfather* saga, *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), or *Gangs of New York* (2002), whose characters, in one way or another, transgress the limits of legality (Paul 389-90). These stories of self-made men of both Italian-American and Irish-American lineage acknowledge how hard it is to make it in mainstream America, especially if one is an immigrant facing discrimination every step of the way. Instead, success is sought via criminal organizations, which are glamorized, but which also resemble "the kind of ruthless business enterprise which successful Americans have always carried on" (Bell 347; Paul 390). As a result, "[t]he drama of the criminal gang has become a kind of allegory of the corporation and the corporate society", conveying "the dark message that America is a society of criminals" (Bell 353, 355; Paul 390). In these narratives and in the one surrounding Fontaine, it seems as if one can only go from rags to riches in America and in Rapture if the rules of the game are broken, with crime indeed paying exceedingly well, at least for a while.

Initially envisioned as a utopian capitalist paradise, Rapture ended up becoming a dystopian cautionary tale that conveys a powerful critique to the myth of the self-made man and, as a result, to Rand and her Objectivist views, as was seen above.

Conclusion

Because Rapture is a dystopia, it not only critiques the myth of the self-made man and, by extension, Rand and her Objectivist beliefs, but it also comments on the America that the first players of *BioShock* lived in. It should be noted that it is not easy to distinguish dystopia from utopia, for both share the same goal, “namely, that of criticizing the negative features of a certain society by comparing it to another, fictional one” (Vieira 25), just like More did over 500 years ago and just like Rand and Ryan respectively did in relation to the utopias they themselves created, as was seen above. *BioShock*, which began being produced around the turn of the century and was released in 2007, isn’t any different, criticizing the America of the early 2000s, marked by George W. Bush’s presidency and his commitment to Old Right¹³ economic conservatism. In fact, during his time in power, Bush cut taxes far beyond Reagan’s wildest dreams - who until 2001 had seemed the epitome of the Old Right (Chafe 545) -, rolled back environmental regulations, and even attempted to privatize Social Security (Chafe, 2022, p. 580). Among many other problems (such as the almost unprecedented degree of indebtedness that the United States reached), this contributed to the dramatic increase of the discrepancy between the wealthy, who were able to save millions of dollars in taxes, and the common folks, who received close to nothing (Chafe 544-546). While an America with this type of economic policies would likely have made Ryan’s (and Rand’s, for that matter) heart beat faster with excitement, *BioShock* comments on it by showing a science fictional and dystopian version of what could happen if those measures were taken even further. As a result, Rapture is a sort of funhouse mirror, showing America where it could be headed, and, in fact, with Donald Trump’s presidency, who is said to enjoy a Rand novel every now and then¹⁴ and who enlisted the help of Newt Gingrich,¹⁵ it did not seem too far away from it.

BioShock finishes with a glint of hope (at least in one of its endings), with those that had been born in Rapture (e.g., the little sisters) being able to leave it and being excused for their parents’ mistakes, which means that the game acquires the characteristics of a critical dystopia.¹⁶ Likewise, despite Americans’ growing division along ideological and political lines, Trump’s maddening new bid for presidency, the renewed threat of nuclear annihilation, and all the other dizzying issues going on in the United States today, surely there is still hope in America, for “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers -/ That perches in the soul” and which can be heard “in the chilliest land -/ And on the strangest Sea” (Dickinson n. pag.), as Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) so beautifully put it.

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¹ Whenever a quotation contains a word or several words in italics it is because it already contained them in its original form, which means that no emphasis was added.

² Paul points out that, in its everyday use, the concept of myth is often contrasted with truth or scientific thought and equated with falsehood, fiction, and primitivity, among other aspects. Critics such as Roland Barthes (1915-1980), however, conceptualize myth as "a system of communication" (109) and a "metalanguage" (115). For more on Barthes' take on myth, see Hall's analysis of it. Cf. Hall 20-6.

³ The American dream was defined by James Truslow Adams as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (Campbell and Kean 11), meaning that it is very much related to the myth of the self-made man, as well as to the myth of the promised land.

⁴ Remember that, within the context of cultural studies, the concept of text refers to all practices that signify, and not simply to the written word. As a result, a cultural text may be an image, a sound, an object (e.g., clothes), and an activity (for example, dance), for all of these are sign systems which signify with the same mechanism as a language (Barker and Jane 13).

⁵ The book and the game present conflicting information regarding the date in which Ryan fled for America. Right at the beginning of the book, it is mentioned that he left in 1918 (Shirley 16), but later on, in both the book and the novel, the date of 1919 is mentioned instead (Shirley 335; *BioShock* n. pag.).

⁶ Truman's commitment to provide immediate economic and military aid to the Greek and Turkish governments, threatened by communism and the Soviet Union (*Britannica*, "Truman Doctrine" n. pag.).

⁷ Put simply, the Rapture, in Christianity, refers to the eschatological belief that all of those who are faithful will ascend into heaven, the prototypical promised land, to meet Jesus Christ at the Second Coming (Stefon n. pag.).

⁸ The parallel established between Franklin and the Protestant work ethic has raised some question marks. Cf. Dickson and McLachlan 81-89.

⁹ Cf. Paul 14-16.

¹⁰ The works produced by a group of American writers related to pre-World War I reform which "provided detailed, accurate journalistic accounts of the political and economic corruption and social hardships caused by the power of big business in a rapidly industrializing United States" (*Britannica*, "Muckraker" n. pag.).

¹¹ Many of *BioShock's* fans will argue that Rapture became a dystopia for various reasons (which will not be outlined here for a lack of space) not necessarily related to Rand and Objectivism. However, while those things exponentially accelerated the fall of Rapture, the city already was a dystopia for a large spectrum of the population, even while it still seemed utopian to Ryan and his closest allies, such as McDonagh. After all, one should bear in mind that someone's utopia might very well be somebody else's dystopia, especially if that somebody else is living in substandard conditions, as the blue collar workers

and their families, for example, were. These substandard conditions were indeed the result of Rand and Objectivist inspired ideas, which completely neglected the more fragile sections of Rapture's population.

¹² Once again violating people's individuality, despite claiming to be the champion of individualism, Ryan orders his minions to kidnap little girls from their parents, so that they too can be turned into little sisters, in an attempt to fulfill the increasing need for ADAM.

¹³ The Old Right typically refers to a movement within American conservatism that seeks, among other aspects, to limit the powers of the federal government, to promote respect for traditional regional cultures such as that of the Old South, to scale back the welfare state initiated in the 1930s by Roosevelt, and to maintain free market capitalism at home and protectionism abroad (Duignan, "Paleoconservatism" n. pag.).

¹⁴ Cf. Freedland n. pag.

¹⁵ It should be noted that, in the 1990s, Gingrich, serving as speaker of the United States' House of Representatives, announced a "Contract with America" which consisted of 10 items, including measures promoting tax cuts, the reduction of government size, radical welfare reforms, and the dismantling of the New Deal state (Chafe 511-2).

¹⁶ Cf. Baccolini and Moylan 1-8.