BEYOND *RAPTURE*: A HISTORIC-ARTISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE VIDEOGAME *BIOSHOCK*

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HART 4242: An Investigation on Art History

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May 2020

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Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank Dra. Laura Bravo for being open to risky topics like mine and giving us the opportunity to explore new areas within Art History. Also, I would like to thank my sister for playing the game and helping me take the screenshots of the it while I was telling her how to position the camera, and my mother for being my Spanish proofreader. Thanks to both for having the patience necessary to bear with me and giving me that little push that helped me finish successfully this investigation.

Introduction

Art, and what we consider art, constantly evolves over the course of time. The digital era is no longer something we only see in science fiction stories, as we are already immersed in technology. Therefore, digital art should be considered as valid as the art that is displayed at museums. Ernest Adams, in his essay "Will computer games ever be a legitimate art form?", contained in the book *Videogames and Art* argues: "What is the computer game equivalent of Impressionism? We do not yet know. But the only way to find out is to experiment with the medium, as the Impressionists did with theirs." (261). Videogames, in recent years, have gone from being a simple way of entertainment to an outlet where creativity is in full bloom. Nowadays, videogame designers take time and finesse to create characters, cities and whole worlds just like a literary author would do. For this reason, I have come to wonder: have videogame designers studied Art History? The references they used were not by chance, and it is remarkable that their interaction with art was not only cultural, as they address these themes fully aware of what they are doing, making it clear that their intentions are to reinterpret the ideas of artists from the past to acclimate their story and transmit it in a coherent way. As Walter Benjamin mentions in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction:* "…for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the through going permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art". (14)

BioShock is a series of videogames in first person perspective (what in videogame lingo is known as a "First-person shooter") that not only uses guns, but it combines them with genetic modifications to help you move forward, which separates it from the rest providing a new and

unique experience. Also, it is the first "First-Person Shooter" videogame to be considered art, both for its aesthetics and soundtrack, and for their encompassing plot. The first installment won a BAFTA in the category of Best Videogame and was nominated in the category of Artistic Achievement in 2007 (Creeber 86). Since 2004, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts started to award videogames with their own ceremony and, as of today, there have been sixteen galas. *BioShock* was the precursor of the recent debate between art and videogames. For this reason, all the artistic, cultural, political and religious references of the first installment of the *BioShock* videogame franchise can be analyzed from a historic-artistic perspective.

This installment is located in the sixties, after de fall of the dystopic city named *Rapture*, which was built, according to the story, underwater during the 1920's. The main character arrives unexpectedly to the city, so he begins to investigate the place to understand what happened there and why everyone that enters the city does not come back to the surface. During his journey, he finds out that everyone is addicted to substances called *Adam* and *Eve*, which can aid with aesthetic modification in a simpler manner than a surgery. Also, to acclimate the place according to the age period, the designers used Art Deco's style as a starting point, from architecture to the clothes the characters where wearing. Taking into consideration the architectural style chosen by the designers and the fact that the videogame can be considered Science Fiction, it can be compared to the films *Blade Runner, Metropolis* and *Citizen Kane.* Just as our environment, *Rapture* is plagued with advertisements of products that are sold throughout the story that is being told, and given that the city was in its glory days during the 1920's, these ads can be compared to the first formal advertisements that forged during that time period, but of our reality.

The consideration of videogames as an artistic manifestation is a fairly contemporary topic, which is why there are almost daily publications. The debate started with the acceptance of

videogames as art and it has evolved by leaps and bounds, but it remains a controversial subject for some art historians and art conservators. In 2012, the Smithsonian American Art Museum held an exhibition titled *The Art of Video Games*, and with it, the focus of the debate between videogames and its role in art shifted. Displaying a digital clip of *BioShock* in between a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe and one of Thomas Hart Benton ("2K Games: BioShock Video Game") makes one instantaneously think of it as a work of art worthy of admiration, just as Duchamp did with his ready-mades, because the TV goes from being in a house's living room to an installation inside a museum. From this moment on, other museums have followed suit and slowly began to make more exhibitions showcasing videogames, the most recent on being held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in England (*How Video Games Have Grown Up*). In 2009, the book titled *Digital Cultures: Understanding New Media* was published, and it contains a case study of the videogame *BioShock* authored by Gérard Kraus. In it, Kraus explains how the videogame can be considered art using Computer Science as the base of his analysis. On December 8, 2019, the most recent article of the subject was published, and it announces the videogame exhibition that will be held soon at the Akron Art Museum. On the other hand, the most recent academic writing of the subject, and, specifically, of the *BioShock* franchise is an essay written by Grant Tavinor titled *BioShock and the Art of Rapture* which was published in the Journal *Philosophy and Literature.* In it, Tavinor talks about the artistic aspects of the videogame, both aesthetic and philosophical, where the designers might have taken inspiration from.

Even if the essay written by Tavinor has very similar themes to those that will be addressed, his approach used philosophy as the basis of thought and he only analyzed some of the main characters. Instead, the iconographic analysis of the videogame will use Art History as its base, comparing visual and textual references that appear throughout the videogame with its respective

artistic, cultural and religious allusions. However, it is important to mention that there are web pages, like *BioShock Wiki,* that contain articles where they have already made comparisons as the ones that will be exposed, but none have been done in a formal and organized manner using the necessary academic references.

The first installment of the *BioShock* franchise incorporates various relevant topics to Art History, which range from architecture to advertisements and each of these topics will be addressed in its own chapter. The first chapter will focus on reviewing the architecture, the sculptures and the objects inspired by the Art Deco movement, a modern decorative style that is characterized by representing opulence, glamour and an interest in technology. As it was mentioned before, the videogame is set in the 1920's, reason why the use of this decorative style, that marked the era, should not take us by surprise. Furthermore, the interpretation of this style in the videogame will be compared to various science fiction films, to understand if the use of Art Deco comes from direct (sculptures, buildings, etc.) or indirect (the films) exposure. Nevertheless, it will be taken into consideration whether the style is linked to the greed of the human beings, which eventually, leads to its fall.

In the second chapter, Surrealism and its influence on what we know as Science Fiction will be analyzed. In the context of this videogame, surrealism is very inherent since, being of the horror genre, it can be considered a tad grotesque for some people, just as the artistic movement was. A perfect example of it is the character of Sander Cohen, which has similar physical and character aspects with the Spanish painter Salvador Dalí. He has a few *performances* through the plot and one of them is with dancers that look like mannequins, which are very similar to those at Dalí's ballet. In addition, there are several references of the Vaudeville theater, specifically to Harry

Houdini. Also, the humanoids will be mentioned and how these are an important part of the aesthetics of this videogame.

The third chapter will feature an iconographic analysis of several religious references, specifically from Christianity and of Greek mythology. However, in the fourth chapter the historic-political references that are mentioned and represented in the plot will be analyzed. For example: the First World War, the Soviet Union and the movement denominated as Objectivism. Furthermore, the Civil War that was raging on in *Rapture* will be taken into consideration. Nonetheless, the fifth chapter will concentrate on the role of Dr. Steinman and the obsession with physical beauty that the people in the city had. Surgical interventions to get corporal modifications were the norm and Dr. Steinman had the last word. He was the one that decided what was aesthetically pleasing to the eye, so just like Dr. Frankenstein and its creature, he changed people as he wished. Hence, as it happens in the majority of cases in actuality, plastic surgeries leave intervened people unrecognizable or like monsters.

Lastly, the sixth chapter will focus on the different types of advertisements inside the videogame. The banners and ads that we can find throughout the story are very similar to those that opened the path to the advertising campaigns that we know today during the 1920's. Not only will the artistic aspect be taken into consideration, but also the intention behind the ads and their effectivity in the society of *Rapture.* To analyze them, the ideas of authors like Marshall McLuhan, Nicholas Mirzoeff and W.J.T. Mitchell will be considered.

The methodologies that will be used are historiography of art, visual culture, structuralism or semiotics, formalism, sociology of art, and iconography and iconology. Since a videogame is the starting point, the methodologies of visual culture, iconography and iconology will be applied to all chapters. The analysis will be mostly visual; therefore, it lends itself to comparisons between

artistic elements that already exist or the analysis of images as objects of study. The images that will be presented can be analyzed both in the context in which they happen or outside of it, just like when stills from films or TV series are analyzed. Structuralism or semiotics will also be among the main methodologies because I will consider the elements that were used to acclimate, from the utilization of Art Deco to the darkness provided by the depth of the sea. Nonetheless, sociology of art and gender studies will be taken into consideration to explain the behavior of the people of *Rapture* and the role of each one of them. Lastly, historiography of art and formalism will be used to analyze and understand the excessive worship of beauty that came from the habitants of *Rapture* and how that got them to the edge of extinction.

1. Art Deco, more than a decorative artistic style?

Art Deco is an artistic style that arose in France before World War I in rejection to Art Nouveau, but it became relevant after the war. Influenced by the lines of Cubism, the colors of Fauvism and the exotic styles of Asia, Egypt and Mayan Culture, it positioned itself as the style that defined the aesthetic of the 1920's, providing an air of modernity with functionality and opulence. The perfect elements to construct new cities in a crucial moment in the history of humanity focused in industrial progress, like New York and Miami. The buildings that distinguish these iconic cities were built with resistant material, like stainless steel, and lines with glass, mirrors and bright colored varnish (Benton, Benton. & Wood 2003). The most iconic skyscrapers from New York are the best examples of this style, like the *Chrysler Building* **(Fig. 1)**, because they show the use of metal and glass to highlight the designed patters that give the distinct style as the crown of the building has.

1. Leena Hietanen, *Chrysler Building, New York*, 2005.

The idea of using this decorative style to give a new breath to a city not only occurred and occurs in our everyday, but it also has a place in fictional worlds. Therefore, films like *Blade Runner* and *Metropolis*, and the videogame *BioShock* use it with the intention of beautifying spaces and hiding a few realities in which they live in. The movie *Blade Runner* is located in Los Angeles, California during the future and they decided to recover Art Deco style, with clear Asian influences **(Fig.2)**, to give new life to a decadent city. It is similar to *Rapture* **(Fig. 3)** as it is always raining because of contamination. In the case of *Metropolis* **(Fig. 4)**, they use a mix of the Art Deco and
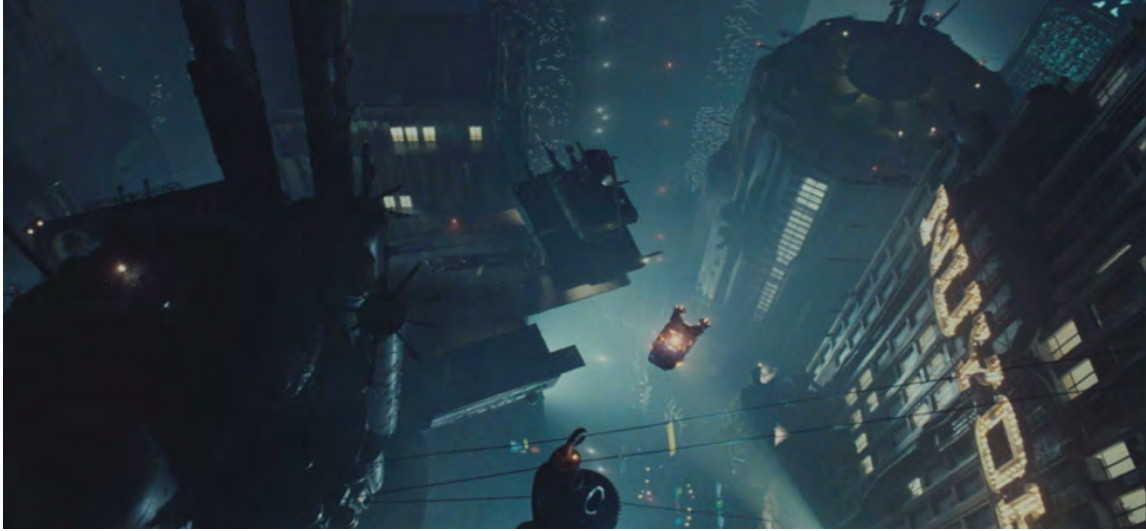
2. Ridley Scott, *Los Angeles, Blade Runner*, 1982. Film.

3. Irrational Games, *View of Rapture from the Bathosphere*, 2007. Digital art.

4. Fritz Lang, *Metrópolis,*1927. Film.

Gothic aesthetics since Art Deco as we know it was born from this film. What *Rapture* and this city have in common is that both are subterranean cities (one underground and the other under water). All the mentioned cities are populated with people that are looking for a better quality of life, but with the peculiarity that the rich live on the top (in *Blade Runner* inside the tallest and most imposing building). The creative director of *BioShock*, Jordan Thomas, argues that: "Utopian fiction seldom uplifting; a dream is defined by the ending of it. For the characters of BioShock and BioShock 2, the city of Rapture was about the seductive potential of a world without questions- and the great loss that inevitably follows. In each of their stories, "escape" is the only word for hope." (2). Therefore, it can be assumed that Art Deco was an artistic style that signified, not only in the videogame, but for our society, the escape or the liberty of believing to be in a better social position just because you live in a place that is aesthetically pleasing and plagued with opulence. This is why, Art Deco, was considered and extremely contradictory style. It promulgated the complacency of its bright colors and excessive decorations, when in reality, society was deteriorating. Having just come out of a world war, they did it to try to overcome the ravages of war and hide a reality that overwhelmed them, like Dada and Surrealism did.

BioShock is a visually pleasing videogame, despite being of the horror genre, and much of it is due to the architecture that frames it. Throughout the game we can see all the elements that were mentioned before, from the geometric forms to the Asian influences **(Fig. 5)**, so we can assume that the creators and designers had vast knowledge of what they were emulating. It is not a casualty that many of the elements and references of this videogame are very similar to the movies that were mentioned, because they are considered iconic in the world of science fiction. The videogame has its own museum, called the Museum of Orphaned Concepts where, besides finding abandoned ideas, the aesthetic that appears across the videogame can be appreciated. In **figure 6**, the interior

5. Irrational Games, *Arcadia Glens,* 2007. Digital art.

of the museum is shown from one of the entrances and, in it, we can see the use of geometric figure patterns on the tiles, the rug and some of the column shafts. In the central column's capital, we can appreciate the use of glass to make it functional in the form of a lamp. Also, materials like stainless steel can be seen in the stair's railings. However, the Asian influence on Art Deco can be noted in the level named *Arcadia*. This place is the heart and the lungs of the city of *Rapture*, because the food, water and air the citizens breathe come from it. The gardens seem like stamps taken from Japan, as appreciated in **figure 7** compared to **figure 8**. Garden landscape art is very characteristic of Asia, and it is thought that they arose in China and Korea to then get imported by Japan, who saw it and made it their staple. The principal attributes of these gardens are a waterfall, a spring and a water current that levels it, a lake, hills, islands, rocks, and a bridge (Sanderson). These gardens were used for tea parties, relaxation and meditation, and as a meeting place for families and friends. In *Rapture*, the gardens fulfilled all these purposes, but they were seen as recreation and vacation parks, just like amusement parks for us, as it was the only place where you could catch a glimpse of the outside world.

Besides architecture and the Asian inspiration, in this case Japanese gardens, sculptures were an important artistic medium for the Art Deco movement. As it was mentioned before, the materials were more accessible, and

8. Lesly/Fotolia, *Japanese garden*. Photography.

6. Irrational Games, *Museum of Orphaned Concepts,* 2007. Digital art.

7. Irrational Games, *Tea Garden,* 2007. Digital art.

9. Paul Feher, *'Art Deco' Screen,* 1930. Steel and forged copper with a gold and silver bath, 156.2 x 156.2 cm, Cleveland Art Museum.

10. Irrational Games, *Circle Logo,* 2007. Digital art.

in the case of sculptures, it was easier to work with metal than with marble, therefore, architects designed the decorative elements of the building in the fences, doors and plazas. In **figure 9**, we can see a fence or screen that was made during the Art Deco era. Furthermore, the material mentioned has Egyptian and Greek elements, lines inspired by cubism, and surrealistic elements since the woman portrayed in it is playing a violin in a shower. The screen dates to 1930, thus surrealism had been present for a few years so, it can be taken into consideration as an influence and inspiration in its creation. *BioShock*'s designers were very meticulous and had these elements present when it came the time to create one of the official logos, which can be seen in **figure 10**. Another example of sculptures created in this art period is the Atlas that can be found at the Rockefeller Center, in front of the *International Buildings'* courtyard in New York **(Fig. 11)**. The representation of Atlas is holding the celestial vault in its shoulders, it is standing with one leg in a pedestal and it gazes towards the Fifth Avenue. It is made with a bronze casting technique and has Greek elements, that are noticeable in its hair. This sculpture has been re-appropriated as a symbol of the philosophic and political movement denominated Objectivism, which will be

11. Lee Lawrie & Rene Paul Chambellan, *Atlas,* 1937. Bronze and stone, 14 m, Rockefeller Center.

12. Irrational Games, *Atlas Statue in front of Kashmir Restaurant,* 2007. Digital art.

explained later on as it is the philosophy that the antagonist Andrew Ryan, the leader of *Rapture*, employs. In the videogame, we can find a representation of the same stature in front of a restaurant **(Fig. 12)**. In this case, the statue is half-length, and the cubism influence is more evident, since its body is not as well defined because it looks like a stone that is emerging from the ground. Moreover, it carries the globe in its shoulders, as the NY one, which has an inscription that reads "Welcome to *Rapture*".

It is evident that the creators of this videogame did not take the decision of designing a city with an Art Deco style by chance. They took into consideration every factor that could affect the way they wanted to transmit their message. Clearly, the fact that this game locates the creation of the city of *Rapture* during the 1920's is a compelling reason, but, as I already mentioned, Art Deco

is a contradicting style and with it they were seeking to tell the absurdity of thinking that moving human beings from the surface of the Earth to the depths of the sea would change their nature. Hence, as the saying goes, "Human, smoke and vain. What are you bragging about? Of what you lack"[1]. [translated from Spanish]

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[1] "Humano, humo y vano. ¿De qué alardeas? De lo que escaseas"

2. Sander Cohen: Surrealism made man

In 1924, the poet and writer André Breton proclaimed itself a surrealist and wrote the first Manifesto of this movement. In it, Breton, indicates among other ideas that, that he believes "…in the future fusion of these two states, apparently very contradicting: which are dreaming and reality, in a species of absolute reality, of *superreality*" (31). He established with this the bases of surrealism. Furthermore, he defines the movement as follows: "Surrealism: noun, masculine. Pure psychic automatism, from which medium one can try to express, verbal, by writing or any other way, the real functionality of thought. Dictated from thought, with exclusion from all control exercised by reason and at the edge of any aesthetic or moral preoccupation." (44). Surrealism is one of the most recognized avant-garde art movements which is inspired by its predecessor (Dada), psychoanalysis and non-western art. The art from Oceania and Africa was very popular at the time, so the galleries in Europe were filled with this type of art. Surrealists considered it magical and even primitive, since many of these cultures had not changed their ways for nothing or nobody. Additionally, to create their art, they avoided using any type of rationality, which made them do works that could be considered absurd or even grotesque. Surrealism was one of the avant-garde movements that was extremely important to science fiction, because the contemporary notion of it comes from the movement (Parkinson 2015).

Science fiction is a difficult term to define, as it depends of who and in which contexts it defines. It can be said that it is a flexible genre, that changes with the times, and is open to ideas that can be considered absurd. Therefore, it constantly challenges the public with its positions inside controversial issues in sciences, just like the creation of life. Hereby, the author James Gunn, in his book *The Road to Science Fiction: From Gilgamesh to Wells,* he defines it as: "Science fiction is the branch of literature that deals with the effects of change on people in the real world

as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places. It often concerns itself with scientific or technological change, and it usually involves matters whose importance is greater than the individual or the community; often civilization or the race itself is in danger." (vii). Using this definition as the starting point, we can say that science fiction has always existed since human beings tend to naturally imagine what can happen in the future. Thus, thanks to science fiction, a lot of technological advancements have emerged from ideas created by writers of this genre. One of those technological advancements are videogames. However, these use science fiction as a base for the creation of their stories. *BioShock* is a science fiction game because it contains topics of scientific nature like genetic modification, but the way it is presented in the videogame and how the plot unfolds can be considered extremely surrealist. There are clear references to surrealism inside the science fiction of the videogame as the fact that they live underwater, they are apprehended by machines, but the most direct one is the character of Sander Cohen, which has a great resemblance with Salvador Dalí.

One of the most important and influential figures of the surrealist movement was the Spanish Salvador Dalí. He was a character in itself, his life was a *performance*, he and his wife lived in a very eccentric and megalomaniac way, which is why surrealism suited him. In fact, he was expelled from the movement when a "surrealist trial" was held, however, he said goodbye saying: "I am surrealism". Dalí's main medium was painting, but he was versatile, he stood out in different spheres of art, from sculpture and photography to theater and fashion. Therefore, there is no doubt that Cohen's character **(Fig. 14)** was inspired by the Spanish painter and it can be considered an homage. As **figures 13 and 14** present, both have an undeniable resemblance, and beyond the physical appearance, their personalities are also very similar.

13. Jack Mitchell, *Salvador Dalí,* 1966.
Photography.

14. Irrational Games, *Sander Cohen,* 2007.
Digital art.

Cohen is a vital character in the plot of the videogame, because he is the one in charge of level called *Fort Frolic* **(Fig. 15 & 16)**. It has several floors, and, besides housing Cohen's home and museum/store, it is filled with adult entertainment establishments. Which range from a theater and various strip clubs. He is very picturesque, and the level is finished once the player helps him finish his Masterpiece **(Fig. 17)** which at the same time is a *performance*. Cohen starts his *performance* with the following line: "I know why you've come, little moth. You've your own canvas, one you'll point with the blood of a man I once loved. Yes, I'll send you to Ryan, but first you must be part of my masterpiece. Go to the atrium. Hurry now, my muse is a fickle bitch a very short attention span!" (Irrational Games). He sends you to kill all those that once where his apprentices, because he thinks that they betrayed him when they decided to become independent artists, to then hang the pictures of their corpses inside the frames of his quadtych. Besides his

15. Irrational Games, *Fort Frolic's Bathysphere Station, BioShock,* 2007. Digital art.

16. Irrational Games, *Fort Frolic's Entrance, BioShock,* 2007. Digital art.

17. Irrational Games, *Sander Cohen's Masterpiece, BioShock,* 2007. Digital art.

18. Irrational Games, *Fleet Hall Final Performance, BioShock,* 2007. Digital art.

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there is another performance from one of the people he wants to annihilate. He is playing the piano on the stage of the theater, but he is clad by dynamite **(Fig. 18)**. There are also some dancers threatening him behind the curtain and Cohen is waiting the right moment to blow him up. **Figure 19** shows a photography of the ballet Dalí choreographed and it's clear that the designers were conscious of it as the similarities between the dancers that appear in **figure 19** and the ones in **figures 18 and 20** is evident.

The people that appear in the videogame are known as *Splicers*, which is defined as joining two ends together. These two ends are human beings with the genetic modifications to which they were exposed. The modifications ranged from creating fire by the snap a finger to teleportation. The dancers and sculptures that can be seen in different parts of *Fort Frolic* are known as *Plastered Splicers* **(Figs. 20 & 21)**. These are people that Cohen covered in plaster so they could become sculptures once it dried, and, in most occasions, dying suffocated. He also got covered in plaster to make sculptures that recreated scenes of his life, since he is a *Houdini Splicer*, he could teleport and get out of the plaster once it dried, which is why it is common to see few scenes thought his theater. There are three different scenes presented in **figure 22**: the first one is he getting ready in front of a mirror; the second one is him with a woman on his lap, and the third one is a family dinner, but the girl and the woman are there against their will, which is why they are tied to their chairs. These scenes can be compared to scripts from Vaudeville Theater's comedies. Vaudeville parodies were famous for being scenes of one act, united without any relation being highly comic and dramatic (Caffin 115). For Dada, these comedies were very important, and they became the main attraction of the Cabaret Voltaire, so the fact that the designers added this type of theater to their story of the videogame should not take us by surprise. Surrealism is one of the avant-garde movements that has been able to change with the times and ingrain itself in culture, so it's not rare

19. Horst P. Horst, *Vogue,* 1939. Photgraphy.
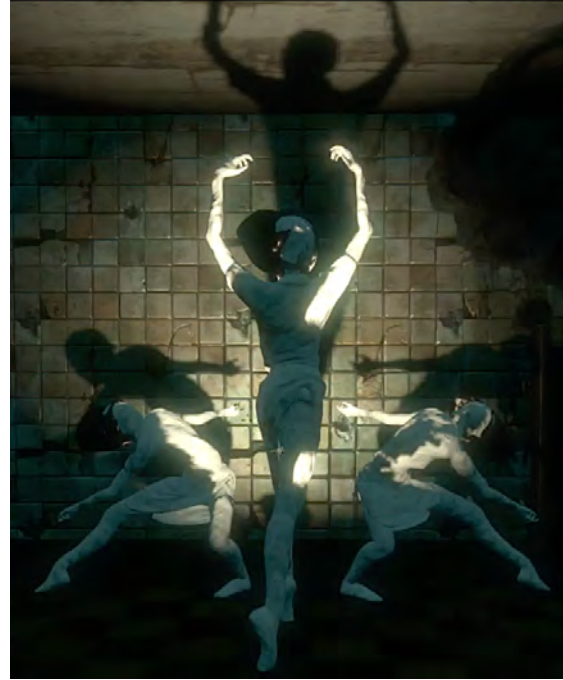
20. Irrational Games, *Pastered Splicers,* 2007. Digital art.

21. Irrational Games, *Pastered Splicers examples inFort Frolic,* 2007. Digital art.

22. Irrational Games, *Different scenes created by Sander Cohen to represent his life after the dall of Rapture,* 2007. Digital art.

23. Irrational Games, *Cohen's Collection promo and gallery,* 2007. Digital art.

to see surrealist expressions in different spheres of art. As Dalí, Sander Cohen was versatile artist. Which is why, besides making sculptures, Cohen stood out in other spheres of art like theater, music and painting. Inside *Fort Frolic*, he has his art gallery, which is promoted at the entrance of the fort **(Fig. 23)**. All the art found in the videogame was made by him, from the mosaic that appears in some bathysphere stations **(Fig. 26)** and the paintings that decorate the apartments of

Rapture, to the propaganda that Andrew Ryan used. Sander was extremely controversial because he was very liberal in a lot of aspects, except the political one, as he always supported Ryan even if he was turning into an authoritarian leader, something that is also very similar to Dalí. Politically, Dalí, was very conservative, he inclined to right ideals and it is said that he supported Hitler. One of the activities that Cohen did before the fall of *Rapture* was paint and the evidence is materials (brushes, paints and easels), showed in **figure 24**, found abandoned in
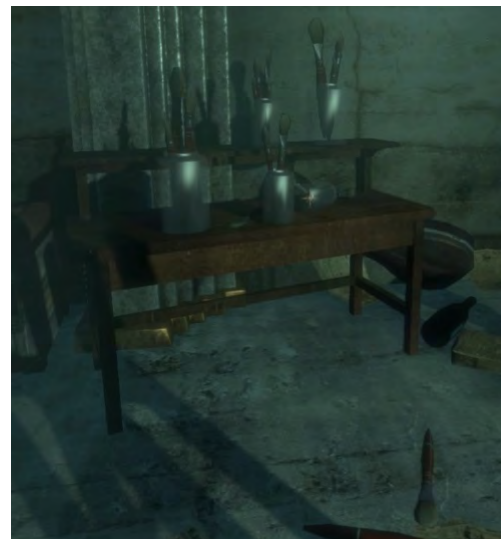
24. Irrational Games. *Some of Cohen's materials,* 2007. Digital art.
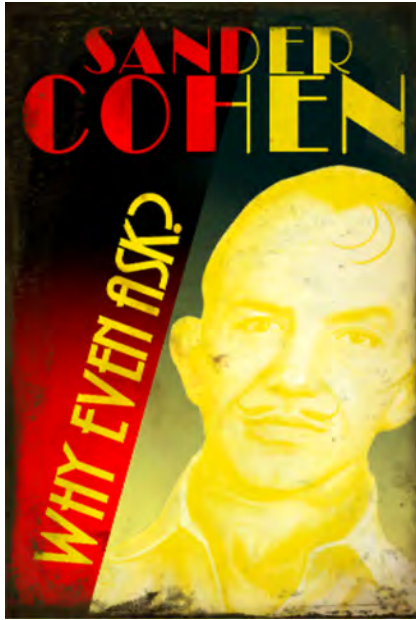
25. Irrational Games, *Promotion poster of Cohen's most recent musical album musical,* 2007. Digital art.

practically all of the rooms of his fort. Also, in the majority of the rooms and offices around the fictional world, his works can be found.

The only characteristic that distances Cohen from Dalí is their style. Cohen was an impressionist artist, with a minimalistic touch and a strong color palette, very similar to the Futurists'. Some of his pictorial works that appear throughout *Rapture* can be seen in **figure 26**. Another activity that Cohen did was composing music, to be heard and to be performed in a musical. Some of the ads that can be seen around *Rapture* are of Cohen's most recent record **(Fig. 25)** and of his musicals **(Fig. 27)**. However, what he adored doing the most was acting, because he enjoyed making drama out of any situation. The principal theater of *Rapture* was inside his fort, so it should not be a surprise that he decided to start writing musical plays to become the main actor. He says that he dreamt of becoming one of the most recognized in Hollywood and Broadway but going to *Rapture* was much more important (Irrational Games).

Sander Cohen's character is the only one that tackles art or one of its movements directly. He is one of the principal antagonists and one of the most studied characters. *BioShock* without Cohen would not have been as successful, since his occurrences and the way he expresses himself are very difficult to forget. With this example, it is more than evident that the designers of the videogame were not lashing out the dark, but, in full consciousness, they decided to create a character that summarized their knowledge of art and emulates it in a satisfactory way.

26. Irrational Games, *Some of Sander Cohen's art works,* 2007. Digital art.
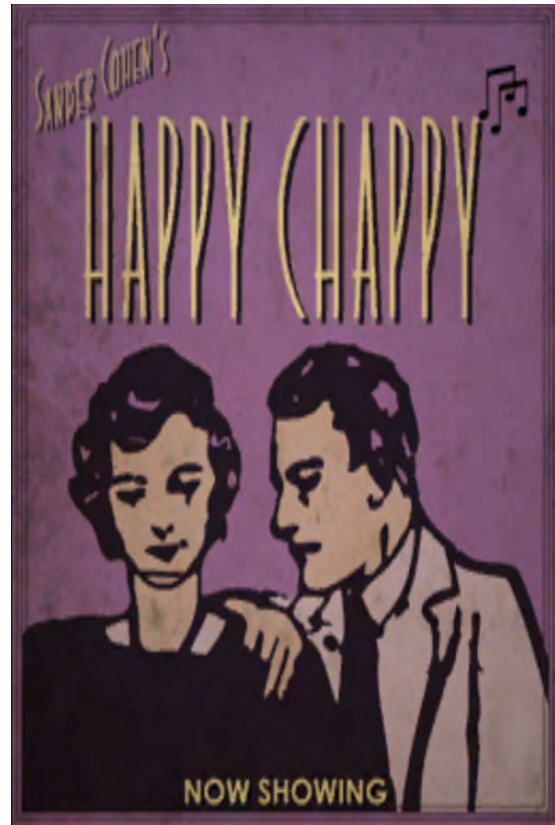
27. Irrational Games, *Some of the musical theater plays witten and interpreted by Sander Cohen,* 2007. Digital art.

3. Religious and mythological iconography in a city proclaimed atheist

Religion and art have always gone hand in hand, as many of the of the works made throughout history are a product of human adoration towards its gods. Also, Catholicism along with some Greek doctrines that were adopted by the Romans were the ones that helped shape the world that we know today, as they are the base of many of the laws that govern and influence the way we think. So, as much as we try to separate religion from what is denominated as secular, there will always be some type of influence since religion goes beyond a group of people and is part of popular culture (Goff 2012). The main problem with this fact is that leaders and people of power can take advantage of person's sensibility to any type of doctrine and use it in their favor, both to gain more followers or condemn those that do not think the same as them, just like what happens in *Rapture*. Even though the leader of *Rapture*, Andrew Ryan, said that under his command there was no place for religion, he used Greek and Roman mythology to name the different places found in the city. Also, the leader of the resistance, Atlas, who in the last moments of the story reveals his true identity, used Catholicism to gain followers making himself look like the savior of the disadvantaged. As Stephen Bronner in essay titled "Mythological Thinking", contained in the book *The Bigot: Why Prejudice Persists*: "There is thus a deeply self-referential quality to mythological thinking when used by the bigot. It demands agreement not merely on the abstract character of belief (God, race, nature), but also on the bigot's particular view of the phenomenon in question." (57).

The first mythological reference that the player runs into is the name of the underwater city, which can also be considered a reference to Catholicism. The meaning of this word is "to snatch away" or "to seize", which is why the city can be considered as a place where people were taken away from the life that did them no good, according to their leader's belief and Greek thought. The

second mythological reference is in the name of the person with whom you first have contact and who tells you that he will help you clarify all the doubts the character has of the city, Atlas **(Fig. 28)**. In Greek mythology, Atlas was the son of a titan that was forced by Zeus to hold the celestial vault as a punishment for not wanting to go along with him to the war with the Titans (Jay 48). For this reason, it makes sense that the character of Frank Fontaine chose the pseudonym Atlas when becoming Andrew Ryan's political adversary. He was the owner of the company named *Fontaine Futuristics*, where the substances that were injected to the citizens of *Rapture* were made, which means that he was really the one that was carrying the city. There's another reference of the titan Atlas and it has been already mentioned and shown in **figure 12**. The other mythological references are found during the player's journey through the city, as they are the names of the regions, counties and streets **(Figs. 28 & 29)**. One of the most characteristic places, where the forest that provides oxygen to *Rapture* lies, has the name *Arcadia.* Arcadia is the name of one of the cities of Greece at the present time, but in ancient times it was the central region of Peloponnese the place where Pan lived, the god of fields (49). Another important place in the videogame with

28. Irrational Games, *Some of the signs showing the roads and streets in Rapture's suburbs,* 2007. Digital art.
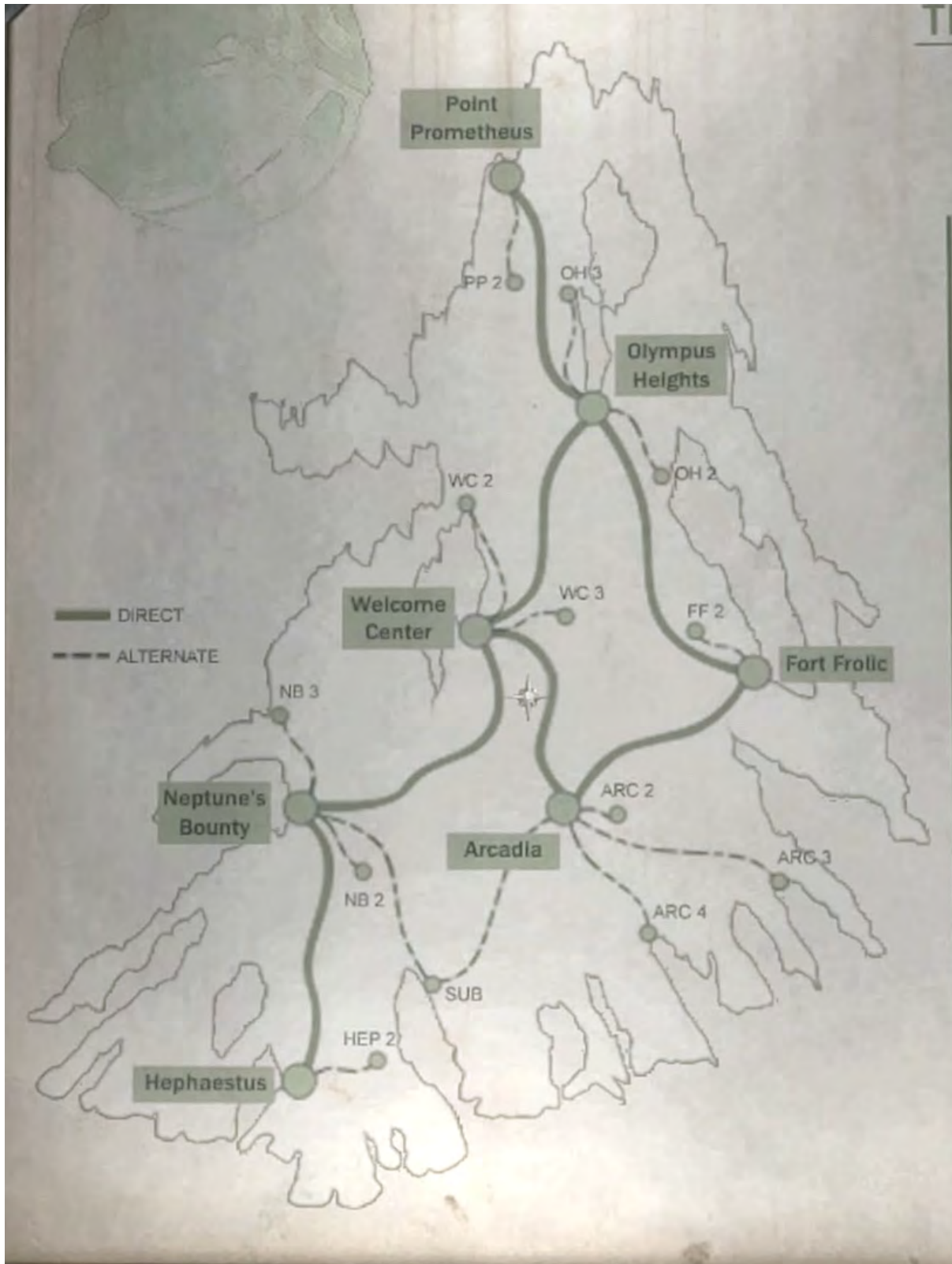
29. Irrational Games, *Map of Rapture,* 2007. Digital art.
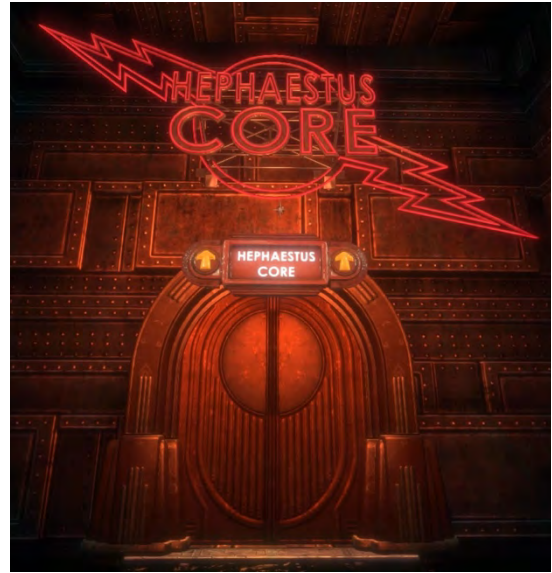
30. Irrational Games, *Exterior e interior de Hephaestus,* 2007. Arte digital.

name of a Greek god is *Hephaestus*. He was the god of metallurgy and fire, son of Zeus and Hera (48). The place that bears the name is the heart of *Rapture* as it is the place where energy is generated using the submarine magma that they managed to find **(Fig. 30)**. Also, it is the place where the office of the leader of *Rapture* is. The last place that the player visits has as a name *Point Prometheus* since the building is the tallest and where Frank Fontaine's lair is. Prometheus was Atlas' brother and considered the most intelligent of the gods and an artisan. Furthermore, he is the one that created mad and gave it fire (48). Hence, that his pseudonym is Atlas and that he is also an artisan of the machinery and substances that are most used by the people that lived in *Rapture*, make the fact that his lair is named after Prometheus was not by chance. There are various mentions to both Poseidon and Neptune **(Fig. 31)**, however it was expected as one is the Roman version of the other and both are gods of the sea (58).
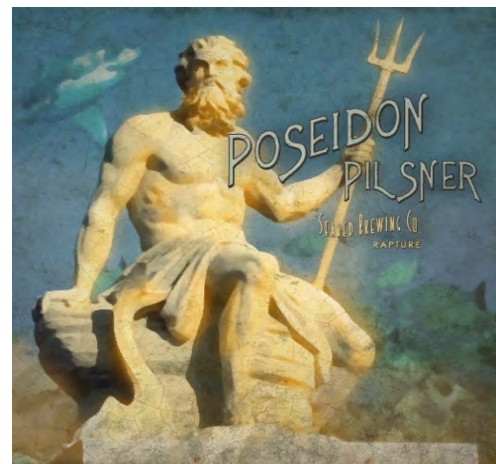
31. Irrational Games, *Poseidon Pilsner Beer,* 2007. Digital art.

The references to catholic religion start with the mention of the substances *Adam* and *Eve*, clear allusion to the first two humans of the Bible. *Adam* is a chemical substance created by Dr. Brigid Tenenbaum that can rewrite DNA to alter bodies, genetical composition and the abilities of people without limits. This makes that super powerful stem cells form from any type of cell, as if it were a tumor. For this reason, the people that abused the substances became deformed and had all sorts of abscesses grow on their bodies. As *Adam* permits cellular modification, it was easier to change their genetic composition using *plasmids* together, but if you did not have *Eve* in your system, they were not worth it. *Eve* was also a chemical substance, but its only function was making the *plasmids* or "superpowers" work. The moment this substance runs out, all of these "superpowers" stop working. Another reference to Eve can be found in Sander Cohen's Fort, an adult club named *Eve's Garden* **(Fig. 32)**. The second religious reference that is presented is by Dr. Steinman in his operating room **(Fig. 33)**. On the upper part of his surgery bed are three crucified bodies that closely resemble how the crucifixion of Jesus is described in the Bible. Also, the image on its own looks as if it was taken out of Baroque and painted by Caravaggio, as it is a

32. Irrational Games, *Exterior of Eve's Garden XXX,* 2007. Digital art.

33. Irrational Games, *Dr. Steinman's Surgery Room,* 2007. Digital art.

sinister image with bright tones of red for the blood. After dealing with Dr. Steinman, the player

has to go to the next level called *Neptune's Bounty*. A fresh fish market can be found there, but the

first thing the player encounters is a crucified man with an inscription on the top of its head that

reads *Smuggler* **(Fig. 34)**. This is because the place is the only one with a port for submarines that

bring supplies from the surface of the earth and it lends itself to smuggling all kinds of objects, but

specifically, bibles and crucifixes **(Fig. 35)** by one of Fontaine's companies, *Fontaine Fisheries.*

Later, in this place, there is a man that died electrocuted in a pose that seems to make a visual

reference to crucifixion, that also has a crucifix and a bible nearby **(Fig. 36)**, in addition to a tape

recorder. When the recorded message is reproduced, the player learns that the man is named

Timmy H. and he was tortured by Ryan's men so he would spill what he knew of Fontaine's

whereabouts. As he did not tell, they killed him. Ryan did not want to lose control of *Rapture*,

however, he never had control. He wanted to give the impression that all of his citizens were free

34. Irrational Games, *Smuggler,* 2007. Digital art.

35. Irrational Games, *Smuggler's Crate,* 2007. Digital art.

36. Irrational Games, *Timmy H. Interrogation,* 2007. Digital art.

to do as they pleased, but he did not allow them to continue with their religious or political beliefs. Contradictions that Atlas took advantage of to make him see how tyrannical he was acting, which bothered Ryan way too much.

Frank Fontaine wanted to be the new leader of *Rapture* because he considered that Andrew Ryan was only thinking of those who brought capital to a city that was in decay. As I mentioned before, Fontaine wanted to project itself as a savior of the people of *Rapture*, which is why he built a housing complex for the poor **(Fig. 37)** and an orphanage for girls **(Fig. 38)**. What people did not know is that he did it with the intention of using them, specifically the girls, as lab rats to test the effects of *Adam* and the *plasmids* on human beings. Throughout the suburbs, different advertising posters that tried to sell the idea of the savior can be found, however, he already had people rising up against him. These placed photos of missing people, that had contact with him or his experimenters, on top of his posters as a way of protest **(Fig. 39)**. Reason why he decided to adopt a new identity and impersonate a guy named Atlas, who no one has ever seen, but that helps the citizens of *Rapture* rise up against Ryan until they provoke a Civil War. At first, the player knows very little about Fontaine, and Atlas is the one that guides you, nevertheless, in the peak moments of the story, the player learns that Ryan is the father of the protagonist and that he had brainwashed him as a child so that he would get controlled by the phrase "Would you kindly?"; assertion that Atlas says all the time. In that moment, it is also revealed that Fontaine was always Atlas and that he only used the player to achieve his main goal, the death of Ryan. Now, messages that questioned Atlas' intentions started to make sense. Therefore, the last person run into before finishing the game is Fontaine who transformed into a mutant because of the abuse he had with *Adam* **(Fig. 40)**. He is the last religious reference that the player encounters, as he is tied to a machine that provides

37. Irrational Games, *Fontaine's Center for the Poor,* 2007. Digital art.

38. Irrational Games, *Little Sisters Orphanage,* 2007. Digital art.

39. Irrational Games, *Frank Fontaine ads,* 2007. Digital art.

40. Irrational Games, *Final Boss: Atlas/Fontaine,* 2007. Digital art.

him *Adam* in a pose that suggests a crucifixion. Also, the pseudonym, Atlas, that he has adopted takes a new meaning as he turned into a titan.

What religion, as many other issues of our society, tries to do is explain that doubt or fill that existential void that some people can have just for being rational. The problem is when people of power try to take advantage of the vulnerability that religion creates in a human being to deceive them for their convenience. It is something we see every day and that will not change until human beings leave that kind of habit behind. Likewise, we have to take into consideration that religion is engrained in popular culture that even an atheist will have demeanors or will use phrases that come from religion to express themselves. There will always be people that will get upset or surprised when their religion is used for some type of publicity and, at the same time, there will be those who will find it to be the cleverest thing possible. Therefore, the fact that the designers of the videogame included a few religious references throughout the game was to add that spark that was missing. Since it is a horror videogame, we can say, that these references, specifically the catholic ones, give it a sinister touch, as, the mere fact of hurting some feelings can evoke conflicting emotions that give a sense of uncertainty in the one behind the remote control. A good videogame does this and more, something that the designers of *BioShock* did successfully.

4. Objectivism: Control of the Population Through Images

This videogame is based on the novel *Atlas Shrugged* by Russian writer and philosopher Ayn Rand. She was one of the inspirations for the *BioShock* videogame, therefore it should not be surprising that one of the philosophical and political foundations they used to delimit the story of the game was created by her. This philosophical movement is known as Objectivism and Rand describes it as: "… in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute." (1504). Manuel Martín Rodríguez made a review of the book *Ayn Rand and the World She Made* by Anne Heller, where he breaks down the basics of Objectivism in the following way:

> "i) reality is what it is and thingd are how they are, regardless of feelings, judgements and opinions, or as she [Ayn Rand] liked to say, A is A, an idea that she took from Aristotle in opposition to Plato's idealism; ii) reason is capable of understanding what things that are, also an Aristotelian idea; iii) any form of irrational, supernatural or mystic knowledge should be dismissed; iv) it is possible to create a rational ethic code from a proper judgement of human nature and the nature of things; v) the boss of what it is considered good is not God, nor the necessities of society, but «man's life», that is, everything that is objectively required for the life of men, for their well-being; vi) a human being is an end in its self, therefore it has the full right to live for itself, without having to sacrifice itself for others and without others sacrificing themselves for it; vii) the principle of justice and respect of individual autonomy should substitute the sacrifice in social relationships; viii) no individual, nor group, has the right to start the use of violence against others, but they can do it in front of whoever starts it; ix) the principle of every social organization should be the respect of individual rights and the only function of the government should be to act as a guardian so that they are respected." (520-521) [translated from Spanish]

Thus, objectivism is similar to totalitarianism and supremacism, both resumed in fascism, assumption that really bothered her. Besides, Rand, thought that capitalism was the only ideal where her ideas could make some sense since it was the only way that the extreme individualism that she defended could work. She was an intransigent person and did not want to modify her ideas or accept that they were very much like the ones she wanted to criticize. Element that lead the designers to create the character of Andrew Ryan, the supreme leader of *Rapture*. His name is an anagram of Rand's name and their life stories are very similar. Both are Russian, were raised during the transition of the Russian Empire to the USSR and they wanted to end all socialist ideals. He was ultra-capitalist and thought that establishing his own city was the only way to get rid of "parasites" (that's how he called the people from his country). He lived in the United States for a while during 1919 and 1922 and there he discovered the aesthetics that would decorate his city.

Art Deco is not only an architectual style with a merely artistic or aesthetic load, but it also has a very defined political background. The fact that it appealed to glamour and excess is not only to seem progressive, but it is due to the fact that it is linked to the capitalist ideal. It emerged in Paris as a decorative style, but the USA adapted it to the architecture that will define their most iconic cities, which are the epitomes of capitalism. In the essay "Decline and Revival" contained in the book *Art Deco 1910-1939*, Charlotte and Time Benton argue that: "The ability of Art Deco to act effectively as a 'Corporation Style' was one of its great strengths, but it also provided the basis for a new critical analysis of capitalism..." (428). This style transcends architecture and the decoration of interiors, which is why it was used to design all type of objects, from automobiles to home appliances. Also, the fact the they used materials that were more cost-effective, made it a much more attractive style for emerging businesses and so that those already established would save money. Hence, it is not a casualty, like I have said before, that the designers chose Art Deco

as the style that would dominate the aesthetic of the videogame. It represents all the story that *Rapture* wants to tell, how the ambition for a better world can take lead to misfortune.

41. Orson Wells, *Charles Foster Kane, Citizen Kane,* 1941. Film.

42. Irrational Games, *Still from Greetings Video,* 2007. Digital art.

Andrew Ryan is the mirror image of Ayn Rand, but his mannerisms and physical characteristics are very similar to Charles Foster Kane from the film *Citizen Kane* **(Figs. 41 & 42)**. Also, both are politicians, are anti-war and they think that the more you have, the happier you can be. The extreme expending of money they entailed led to disgrace and the abandonment of everyone around them. They also wanted to control the press, but Kane was bit less rigorous than Ryan. Their political views were opposite poles, as Kane was being linked to Hitler and Francisco Franco, but he denied agreeing with their positions. On the other hand, in the videogame, it is never mentioned with what political leader of that time Ryan was linked, but it is clear that he agreed with totalitarianism and the supremacy that fascism and some views of communism covered. In the case of *BioShock*, these allusions are reflected since the start of the videogame, as the welcoming video that Ryan plays to everyone that enters *Rapture* displayed the scenes shown in **figure 43**. In his utopic city, according to him, politics, labor exploitation or religion would not
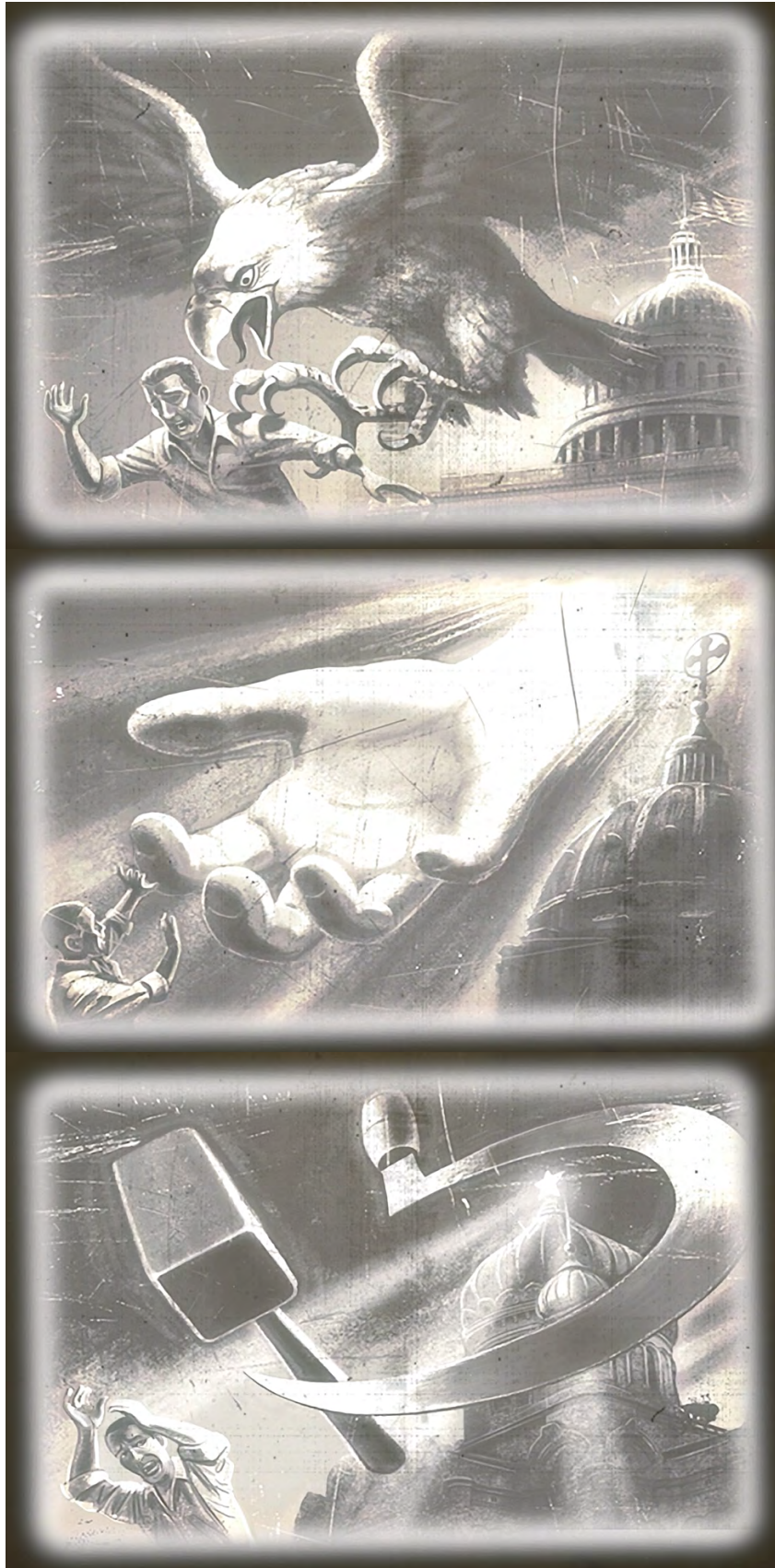
43. Irrational Games, *Stills from Greetings Video,* 2007. Digital art.

exist. As the images in **figures 42 and 43** are shown, he says: "I am Andrew Ryan and I'm here to ask you a question: is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? No, says the man in Washington. It belongs to the poor. No, says the man in the Vatican. It belongs to God. No, says the man in Moscow. It belongs to everyone. I rejected those answers. Instead, I choose something different. I choose the impossible. I choose... *Rapture*." (Irrational Games). And he finishes the video saying: "A city where the artist would not fear the censor. Where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality. There the great would not be constrained by the small. And with the sweat of your brow, Rapture can become your city as well." (Irrational Games). In his mind, he was the best leader because he gave the people that agreed to move to *Rapture* the liberty that they wanted, when in reality it was just the opposite. He makes it clear in his message when he says

44. Irrational Games, *Bust*, 2007. Digital art.
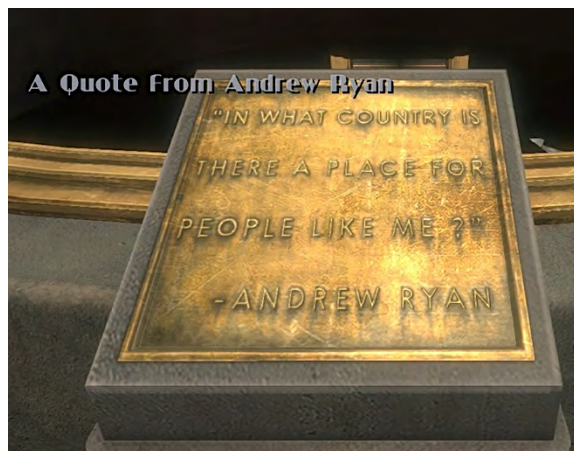
45. Irrational Games, *Plate,* 2007. Digital art.

that "they will do it with the sweat of their brow". His grandeur was such, that the first thing that greets the player, before using the bathysphere to go down to the city for the first time, is a huge bust of Ryan with a quote that reads: "No gods or kings. Only men." **(Fig. 44)**. It has a metal plate at the bottom that says: "In what country is there a place for people like me?" **(Fig. 45)**. *Rapture* is fraught with propaganda, both political and commercial. Commercial advertisements are a clear

reflection of the excessive way money was spent in the city and how they only led a superficial life. However, the political propaganda clearly demonstrates the arrogance of its leader. Another proof of this is found at the main atrium, where there are a few banners with messages that allude progressive ideals **(Fig. 46)** that Ryan uses to manipulate the people that enter the city for the first time. The banners with political messages can be found anywhere imaginable, emulating all those dictators that he criticized **(Fig. 47)**. Even though he seems like a good leader, his restrictions made that most of the citizens of *Rapture* rose against him. The evidence of both acts is captured through the city, as posters of the notices to reports non-modified citizens, transportation restrictions **(Fig. 48)** and the answer to those restrictions, picket fences made by the Atlas' led resistance to protest Ryan's austerity **(Fig. 48 & 50)**. The Civil War they were dealing with is only because of the arrogance of their leader versus the one that says that will help them. As I already mentioned, Atlas

46. Irrational Games, *Principal Atrium*, 2007. Digital art.

47. Irrational Games, *Banners with totalitarianistic messaged found through the videogame,*
2007. Digital art.
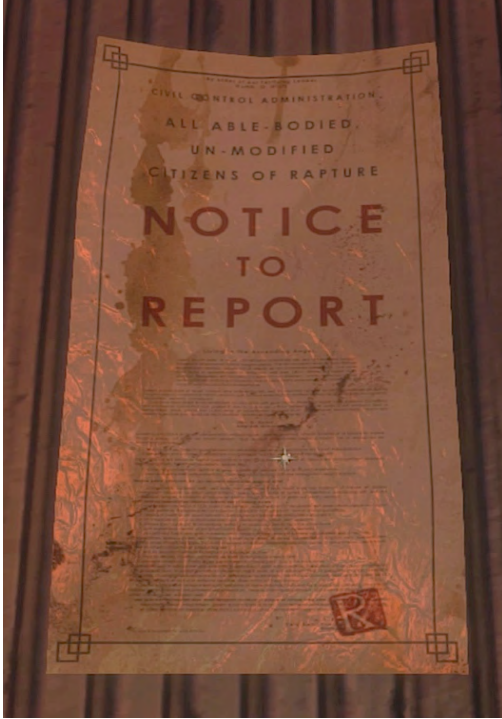
48. Irrational Games, *Notivce to report unmodified citizens and phrohibition of travel* , 2007. Digital art.

50. Irrational Games, *Picket fences against Ryan,* 2007. Digital art.

49. Irrational Games, *The resistance's propaganda,* 2007. Digital art.

is a controversial figure, because, as Ryan, he deceives the ones he is leading, and his only goal is

to end Ryan so he can take control of the city and continue being equally controlling or more

tyrannical.

Ryan was a man with good intentions but did not have the slightest idea of how to be a

leader. When trying to not be like the ones he was fleeing from, the more he acted like them. In

fact, he thought that the character the player controls was a spy from the CIA, same argument that

totalitarian leaders used when felt persecuted. However, as I mentioned before, Jack (the character

the player controls) is Ryan's son so he could never be a spy, simply his brain was programed to

react with different phrases, and he did it so he would not go against him. Ultimately, everything

he planned was what ended him. It is becoming more evident that the designers of this videogame

not only wanted to tell a story that helped people get by, but they took their time to achieve a story

that encompassed all the aspects that affect us in order to show their criticism of society in a more

subtle and entertaining way. Like a good fable, they fool us to give us a lesson in human behavior.

Rapture can seem like a dystopian city, but it is very similar to us in a lot of aspects.

5. Cult of beauty: Corporal Modification as the Key to *Rapture*

Beauty has always been a subject of analysis for human beings. It is a criterion that constantly changes (almost daily) and is considered a superficial scale to measure the human race to this day. As visual beings, we unconsciously judge the way that a person projects itself to determine if we interact with them or not, but this criterion was created by those that were here before us. Thanks to what the Greek wrote, we know that, since their time, there exists the debate of what is considered beautiful. This does not mean that civilizations before them did not have these debates, but that they were the first ones to theorize about it and dedicate schools of thoughts to it. The Greek ideal of beauty is not too far from that which has been sought for centuries, and it is still the same today. The only difference is that this pressure is greater for women today, something that is much more noticeable after the First World War.

During the 1920s, women went from being simple housewives to the ones that ventured into the workplace, as many of them were left alone and, in most cases, with kids after the war. Somehow, they had to bring sustenance to their homes, but the pressure to find it was the way they looked. Makeup lines that we know today were starting and the made a lot of advertisements that showed the beauty ideal of the time **(Fig. 51)**. Having the false freedom to do as they liked, all the advertisements of the age used women to appeal to both sexes. In the case of men, to provoke lust and invite them to use a specific product **(Fig. 52)**, though women were bombarded all the time with how they should look physically **(Fig. 53, 54 & 55)**. During this era, plastic surgery began to emerge, and it became the norm until today. Kelsey Lamkin in her article "The

51. *Maybelline ad*, Circa 1920.

52. *Listerine ad*, Circa 1920.

53. *Cigarrette ad*, Circa 1920.

54. *Medicine ad*, Circa 1920.

55. *Soap ad*, Circa 1920.

Desperate Drive for Perfection: Changing Beauty Ideals and Women's Fashion in the 1920s",
argues that:

> "The turn of the century was also notable for the end to the Victorian mores against
> vanity and narcissism. Generations of the nineteenth century grew up believing that
> self-improvement was a task for the soul and that inner beauty was the only beauty
> that mattered. Anyone paying too much attention to his or her appearance was judged
> to be ostentatious and frivolous. By the 1920s, however, it was considered careless and
> unseemly to neglect your appearance. Physical beauty had become the responsibility
> of every woman that expected to gain success in this new world. The world had become
> so fast-paced and competitive that there was no room for women unable to meet these
> raised standards." (1)

In our world, even though it is so ingrained in our psyche, it is not mandatory to comply with the
beauty standards that are established. However, in *Rapture* it was.

In *Rapture* being modified was compulsory, as **figure 48** presents in the previous chapter. If
they were not, at least, genetically modified they would have to face the law. The genetic
modifications were made using *plasmids*, which are serums made of processed *Adam* and that are
capable of giving "superpowers" to the ones that administered them. On the other hand, physical
modifications were in charge of Dr. J.S. Steinman **(Fig. 56)**, a surgeon that lost his mind because
of *Adam* abuse. He thought that everyone
that lived in *Rapture* had to go through him
as it was the only way they could be
beautiful and could be seen. His clinic, *Dr.*
Steinman's Aesthetic Ideals **(Fig. 60)**, can
be found at the Medical Pavilion **(Fig. 59)**,
one of the first levels the player encounters.

56. Irrational Games, *Dr. Steinman admiring one of*
his creations, 2007. Digital art.

Since there are not many people to
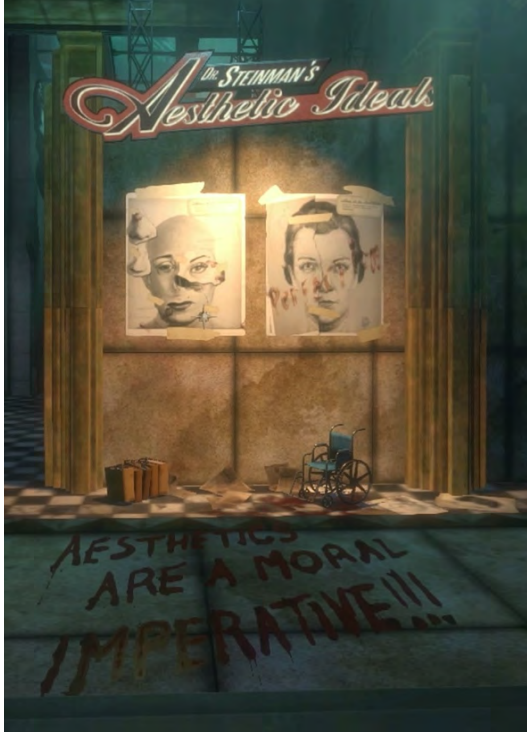
57. Irrational Games, *Lobby of Dr. Steinman's Clinic,* 2007. Digital art.

intervene, as he has either killed them or they do not want to go to him, Steinman leaves his mark in every corner. His clinic houses a few of his works. One of them is shown in **figure 57**, where he signs it with a message that reads "Aesthetics are a moral imperative". Another of the works is titled *Symmetry* **(Fig. 58)**, which is close to his office and has a recorded message where he mentions he has lunch with the "Goddess" (his imaginary friend). He lets us know that she told him that she would free him form the tyranny of the common place and that she would introduce him to a new kind of beauty. He asks what she is referring to and she answers: "Symmetry, dear Steinman. It's time we did something about symmetry…" (Irrational Games). On the other hand, the first work that the player has contact with is shown in **figure 61**. It is situated at the entrance of the Medical Pavilion and reads: "Above all, do no harm". According to Dr. Steinman, he does not want to harm anyone, but, with his surgeries, he is only looking for the complete happiness of his patients, which is also proven in his advertisements **(Fig. 63)**. As I mentioned in a previous chapter, the substance *Adam* made genetical modification easier and it was what Steinman used as an argument **(Fig. 62)** to convince those that did not want to get
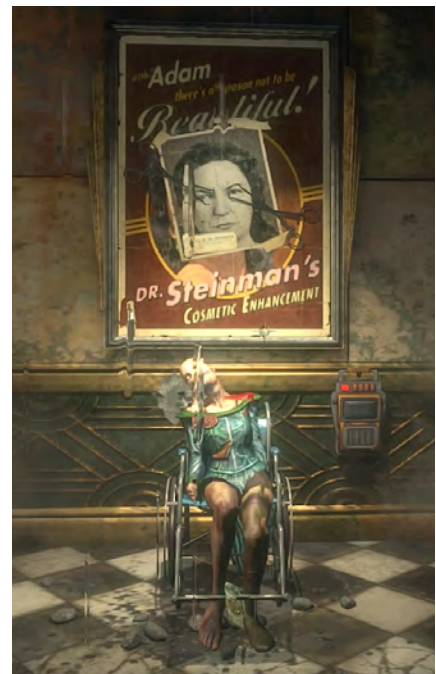
58. Irrational Games, *Symmetry*, 2007. Digital art.

59. Irrational Games, *Medical Pavilion*, 2007. Digital art.

60. Irrational Games, *Dr. Steinman's Clinis in the Medical Pavilion*, 2007. Digital art.

61. Irrational Games, *Above all, do no harm*, 2007. Digital art.

62. Irrational Games, *ADAM denies us any excuse for not being beautiful*, 2007. Digital art.

63. Irrational Games, *Dr. Steinman ads in the Medical Pavilion* , 2007. Arte digital.

any invasive surgery. The thoughts that Steinman had were very similar to those of Plato, the ones

Nicholas Mirzoeff, in his book *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, describes as:

> "Plato believed that the objects encountered in everyday life, including people, are
> simply bad copies of the perfect ideal of those objects. He compared this reproduction
> as being like the shadows cast by a fire on a cave wall—you can see who or what cast
> the shadow, but the image is inevitably distorted from the original's appearance. In
> other words, everything we see in the "real" world is already a copy. For an artist to
> make a representation of what is seen would be to make a copy of a copy, increasing
> the chance of distortion. Furthermore, the ideal state Plato imagined required tough,
> disciplined individuals, but the arts appeal to our emotions and desires" (9)

Therefore, the constant unsatisfaction that the doctor had with the results of his surgeries on his

patients is better understood. His ideal of beauty could never be created or replicated in the real

world, as it would, simply, stay in his mind as the original and everything else will be mere copies.

As Mario Perniola says in his book *Sociedad de los simulacros*: "Today, stylistic, formal and

cultural heritage of humanity can be an object of a simulation that presents itself as such, a fiction

that, in addition to offering itself, also gives the signs of its own unreality"[2]. (162) [translated from Spanish]

Rapture's leader claimed to have absolute control and used people's insecurities to achieve it. He was a very skillful person and knew how to play with the psyche of people using any possible aspect since, if they were not convinced by his religious or political views, he used the excuse that in his city everyone would be beautiful. Paul Duncum in his essay "Holding Aesthetics and Ideology in Tension" published in the journal *Studies in Art Education,* reviews the form in which the governors and persons of power can use the insecurities of people around their physical appearance to control them. However, he argues that the role of aesthetics was anti-capitalist at first but over time, capitalism transformed itself to become more dependant on image and both began to unite until becoming stimulators of desire (130-131). Accordingly, as *Rapture* was an extremely capitalist society because of Ryan's objectivistic views, his use of physical beauty was to be expected.

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[2] "Hoy, el patrimonio estilístico, formal y cultural de la humanidad puede ser objeto de una simulación que se presenta como tal, una ficción que, además de ofrecerse a sí misma, también da las señales de su propia irrealidad"

6. Advertisements as a historic footprint

We humans are visual and communicative beings, so there is no better way to attract our attention than with commercial advertisements. We live in world plagued with images, ones created for our visual pleasure and other to appeal to that visual pleasure and make us believe that we need something. Social media uses this as their base, even though they do not state it publicly, and we can spend hours and hours just looking at images of everything imaginable. The exposure to images is so much that sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish which of these are more important than others. Besides, we tend to think that all of this started with social media or television, but reality is that it has existed our whole lives, the only thing different is that now the line between what can be considered an advertisement or a work of art is much more blurred. This does not mean that what painters like Velázquez performed did not blur the lines, but in our case the line drawn at commercial advertisements and not a politics line (even though it exist like explained in Chapter 4).

As McLuhan said, "the medium is the massage or message", therefore, seeing a framed image made with paint tells us "art" and if it is seen in a screen, a public place or printed on paper, we assume that they do not communicate the same message. As Nicholas Mirzoeff mentions in his book *An Introduction to Visual Culture*: "This hostility to the image has had a lasting influence on Western thought to the present day. Some images have been deemed too dangerous to exist, leading iconoclasts to seek their destruction or removal from public view. In such campaigns, distinctions between high art and popular culture have carried little weight with the incensed righteous" (9). But, W. J. T. Mitchell, in his book *What do Pictures Want?*, argues that: "we must recognize that images, not language, are their main currency. Speech and writing are of course crucial to articulating and deciphering the messages conveyed by media, but the medium itself is

the embodied messenger, not the message. McLuhan had it half right: the medium is "the massage", not the message. Speech and writing, moreover, are themselves simply two kinds of media, the one embodied in acoustic images, the other in graphic images." (216). Something we have to be extremely aware of is that all of this exists by human beings for human beings, no other living creature uses imagery as we do.

In the case of *BioShock*, the designers adopted the same aesthetic they had used to acclimate the videogame and took into account the ads created during 1920s to recreate them with their products. In addition, the usage of the way paintings were exhibited in the first museums to do the same with their ads is remarkable **(Figs. 64, 65, 70 & 71)**. Most of the ads that are found throughout the videogame are to promote *plasmids* and tonics that people used to achieve genetic modifications. Other graphic publications are from events that would take place like movies, plays and shows in one of the cabarets of *Fort Frolic* **(Figs. 27 & 66)**, in addition to the classic ads of alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, doctors, funeral services and vacation spots. If it was evident that the designers and creators of the videogame were conscious of all the artistic styles they were using, it is much more noticeable and undeniable that they have a vast knowledge of the advertisements of the age period they chose as the setting. Maybe it was because they once had some sort of approach to this type of ads but the exposure to them could not be just a shallow one.

Advertisements are a good way to mark the history of a country, as in them you can see the goods people are buying, the technological advancements of the moment and the art of that period. Advertisements exist since the Egyptian civilization, but it is not until the sixteenth century that ads with some kind of humor or bait that evokes emotions were made. Like that, the world slowly started becoming more consumerist and in the twentieth century ads as we know them were born,

64. Part of the permanent exhibition at the Jewish Museum in Berlin, 2013. Photography.

65. Irrational Games, *Rapture Metro Entrance*, 2007. Digital art.

specifically during the 1920s. Advertising spaces of the time were more risqué as only promoting a product with their price and specifications did not work as it had before and people were not drawn towards them. Additionally, the world had just finished World War I and it was complicated to convince people to spend the little money they had in things they probably would not use. For this reason, the majority of the advertisements of this era used women in a suggestive way with a

specific beauty ideal: white skin, long hair, usually curled, and a thin body **(Fig. 67)**. These ads could have had men, but they were dressed in etiquette and, most of the time, being pampered or provoked by a woman. Furthermore, cigarettes were the most advertised product because of the boom they got thanks to the military men that came back home from the war. As Art Deco, the creators of the ads of this time period used references of other cultures to promote them **(Fig. 67)**. In the city of *Rapture,* we can see exact references of cigarette ads, for example, the comparison made in **figures 68 & 69**. Native Americans were the protagonists of these cigarettes adverstisements and this could be due to the association of the rituals that their shamans did with smoke. Almost all of the ads found through the videogame allude to activities that could be considered pleasurable. These go from vices (alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, etc.) to entertainment (vacation spots and night clubs) **(Figs. 70-74)**.

66. Irrational Games*, Fleet Hall Waiting Room*, 2007. Digital art.

67. Ads from the 1920s.

68. *Malboro ad.* Circa 1920.

69. Irrational Games, *Incinerate ad,* 2007. Digital art.

As I mentioned before, with advertisements you can know about the history of a city or country without going into details in dense texts filled with events that occurred, but you can also know about the attitude of the people and their world vision at the time. The creative director of the videogame, Jordan Thomas, describes it perfectly in the book *DecoDevolution: The Art of BioShock 2*, the following way:

> "In its heyday, Rapture was teemed with entrepreneurs. If you could make it, someone would be willing to buy it. Long after the fall of Rapture, the ads of Rapture's grand commercial enterprise still paper the walls of the city, hawking goods and service that ranged from harmless to severely sinister. These tattered and dirty relics show not only what the city once aspired to be, but also what it became." (149)

For this, both the political and the commercial propaganda take an important turn in the acclimation of the city. They go from being the simple way to market progress and technological advancements to the thing that lead them to their decay. The pronounced consumerism, the unsatisfaction with who they were and the bad habits they had are the footprints these ads leave behind in every corner.

As I mentioned before, they came from a world that has just finished a world war and the only thing they wanted was to run away from the reality that overwhelmed them. In a moment of weakness, any offer to change the way you live from a person of power can seem very tempting. If one decides it hastily, without thinking of the consequences, places like *Rapture* will not succeed.

This is a fictional place, but the videogame can be considered an extension of our reality. The designers got inspired by a lot of aspects of the past, but this does not mean that our reality was not one of their biggest inspirations. We live like the people of *Rapture* most of the time, only thinking of buying the latest tech or live in the most expensive places just to say we have some sort of status. The message of *BioShock* is clear, if we continue living like we do, we can end up drowning in our greed and it manages to transmit it with the use of advertisements.

70. Irrational Games, *Central Atrium in Fort Frolic*, 2007. Digital art.

71. Irrational Games, *Alley at the Medicall Pavilion*, 2007. Digital art.
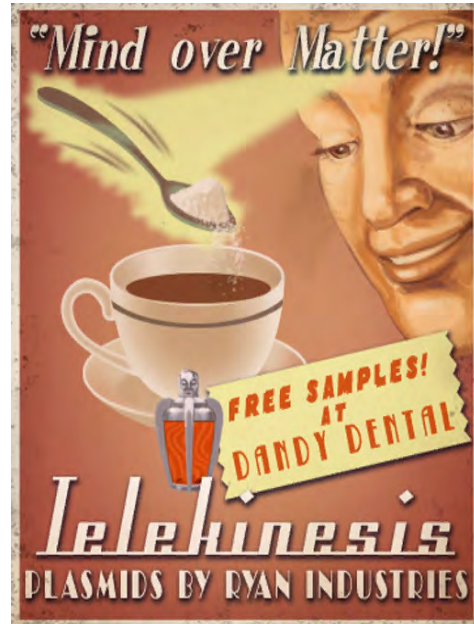
72. Irrational Games, *Plasmid ads*, 2007. Digital art.

73. Irrational Games, *Arcadia Gardens ads*, 2007. Digital art.

74. Irrational Games, *Different adverts of goods and services that were offered in Rapture*, 2007.
Digital art.

Conclusion:

The debate between videogames and art has evolved rapidly. They have gone from being underestimated for being objects of entertainment to being categorized as art. A lot of the people that work in their design are formed in Fine Art as the artist whose principal medium is a canvas or a wall. The only difference between these is that they decide to take their creativity beyond individual interpretations, since videogames give the freedom to complete the narrative the artist wants to address. In the case of the videogame *BioShock*, its creators went beyond that and gave themselves the task of studying a whole era to represent it the best way possible. They did not limit themselves to looking at the aesthetics, but they also got into the politics and the society of the time period so that their message was transmitted satisfactorily. Therefore, we need to start taking them into consideration as they have lessons to learn from.

Videogames, as any artistic medium, want to transmit a message. It is true that many just are to have fun or pass the time, however, for about fifteen years videogames have been made to stimulate the thoughts of those that choose to have the experience of playing them. The first installment of the *BioShock* franchise is one of those, as it is visually stunning and what helps this impact is the meticulous use of various aspects from the 1920s. The creators and designers of the videogame show a vast knowledge of Art History, because the elements used to portray their message are very well thought out and it is clear that their exposure goes beyond a study of the time period. The first element that we should take into account, and the most important one, is the utilization of Art Deco in the architecture and the acclimation of all the spaces in the videogame. This decorative style resumes all the ideas the leader of the city had, by its way of making it seem that all is order and controlled even though it is the opposite. Additionally, together with the obsession for physical beauty, advertisements and propaganda, show the opulence of the extreme

capitalism they lived in and the superficiality of their way of life. Another element of that time was Surrealism, which is resumed in the character of Sander Cohen as a reflection of Salvador Dalí. However, Dada is found implicitly, in the irrational behaviors of some of the characters and the use of Vaudeville Theater by Cohen. Also, cubism and futurism can be seen in some of the paintings and sculptures that decorate spaces throughout the story of the videogame. Mythological and religious references are also part if the videogame's narrative. Even though it is not something distinctive from the era, and the city was proclaimed atheist, they are a remarkable element as religions are linked to human nature and culture. Lastly, the control through imagery was the order of business in *Rapture*, it went from the propagandistic messages of their leader to the advertisements that forced people to get plastic surgeries to change their appearance to a more beautiful one, according to Dr. Steinman.

Thirteen years after the publication of their first installment, it is still considered as the best videogame of all time for its way of embracing people with their narrative and its cinematic visuals, so its interpretation is still relevant. Likewise, the other installments of the *BioShock* franchise can be analyzed because each one of them were created using elements to which the designers where exposed, that is, during their formation as artists or in their daily life. For an art historian, the connections of this videogame and their field of study can seem obvious, but the people that do not form part of their academic circle could consider that the likeness with the era in which is located will just be coincidental. As Andrew Ryan said: "They're two ways to deal with a mystery… uncover it or eliminate it." (Irrational Games) and I chose to uncover it.

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