

Titanic

David M. Lubin



BFI Modern Classics

Rob White

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Titanic

Who's Seen It, Why?

For a movie that sold more tickets in its first year of release than any other motion picture in history, a movie that was the first ever to gross one billion dollars in worldwide sales, *Titanic* has been seen by few people I know. When I began telling my friends, colleagues and students that I was writing a detailed analysis of the blockbuster, I was surprised at how few of them had seen it – or at least were willing to admit they had. Eventually this response proved so predictable that I eventually switched gears – or, to use a metaphor from the film – reversed engines and now have come to be surprised when someone I know actually says, ‘Oh, yes, I’ve seen that film.’ The greatest surprise of all is when he or she adds, ‘And I loved it.’

As the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu details in *Distinction*, the consumption or non-consumption of popular culture artefacts is a means by which individuals in a society define for themselves and others their social position, their status.¹ To consume an artefact that most everyone else in your peer group has been consuming, and to relish it along with them, is to strengthen your affiliation. To make a choice *not* to consume an artefact that you perceive to be distasteful to your own class faction is likewise a means of affirming your legitimate place within that faction. Consuming or not consuming the artefact in question can even be a tactic for dissociating yourself from your present peer group in order to associate yourself with another.

Something of this sort goes on all the time as we make decisions, first, what movies to see or not see and, second, whether to be enthralled by them or instead turn up our noses and loudly protest having wasted our time. I think it has something to do with why so few of my acquaintances in the professional managerial middle class made a point of viewing *Titanic* and why, in fact, so many of them made it a point of pride to stay away from a film that was hyped almost beyond belief in the first months of its release. Refusing to see *Titanic*, or, if seeing it, refusing to be taken in by it (in a key phrase from the film dialogue, ‘to let it in’), became a way of asserting one’s



independence from all the journalistic gush surrounding James Cameron's film and all the highly suspect emotional manipulation within it.

This is not to say that critics of *Titanic* are unjustified in finding it a crude, tawdry, manipulative example of cinematic art. There are, indeed, sound aesthetic reasons for considering the film closer in kinship and kitsch to *Ship of Fools*, *The Poseidon Adventure* and even *The Love Boat* than to *Battleship Potemkin*. But, still, the critical backlash against *Titanic* in some of the popular and trade press was so excessive that one can only wonder if the bombardment against Cameron's 'ship of dreams' wasn't really aimed at a larger target than the particular film in question.

Leading the onslaught was the influential senior film reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times*, Kenneth Turan, who availed himself of every opportunity to pepper *Titanic* with grapeshot from the moment of its US première in late December 1997 to its film-industry apotheosis the following March when at the Academy Awards ceremony it tied the illustrious record set in 1959 by *Ben-Hur* for the most Oscars (11) ever

True love or true hype?

won by a single film.² When irate readers defended *Titanic* from Turan's ridicule by proclaiming that 'proof [of the film's capacity for moving viewers] is in the box-office', Turan replied, 'Film critics, general opinion notwithstanding, are not intended to be applause meters. After all, restaurant critics don't send [consumers] straight to McDonald's on the "everybody goes there, it must be the best" theory.' Quite to the contrary, the role of critics 'must be to point out the existence and importance of other criteria for judgment besides popularity'.³

The enemy here appears to be contemporary popular taste, mass culture, the McDonaldization of sensibility with regard to hamburgers and blockbusters alike. Not that Turan assigns the blame for this degradation of standards to the masses themselves, but rather to the culture industry that has seduced or otherwise commandeered their attention: '*Titanic*'s ability to attract a crowd,' he continues, 'shows how desperate the mainstream audience – alienated by studio reliance on the kind of mindless violence that can be counted on to sell overseas – has become for anything even resembling old-fashioned entertainment. ... Deadened by exposure to nonstop trash ... audiences have been sadly eager to embrace a film that, putting the best face on it, is a witless counterfeit of Hollywood's Golden Age, a compendium of clichés that add up to a reasonable facsimile of a film.'

Film studies professor José Arroyo concurs not only with Turan's assessment of *Titanic*'s flaws but his conviction that these flaws are endemic to the current state of market-driven film-making: 'It is because of its lack of story-telling skills and its execrable character delineation that *Titanic* is emblematic of contemporary Hollywood action / spectacle – it is also because of this that it is not a good film.'⁴ Critic Laura Miller is less measured in tone: 'That everything about *Titanic* – from its stereotyped characters to its bright, even lighting – feels ersatz and obvious may only trouble the kind of people who dislike the immaculate, synthetic recreations of real places in Disney theme parks.' Alas, most people are not Disney-proof: 'The movie works as a simple-minded entertainment that provides a setting for spectacular visual effects, and many audiences will find it adequately enjoyable,' Miller concedes with a sigh.⁵

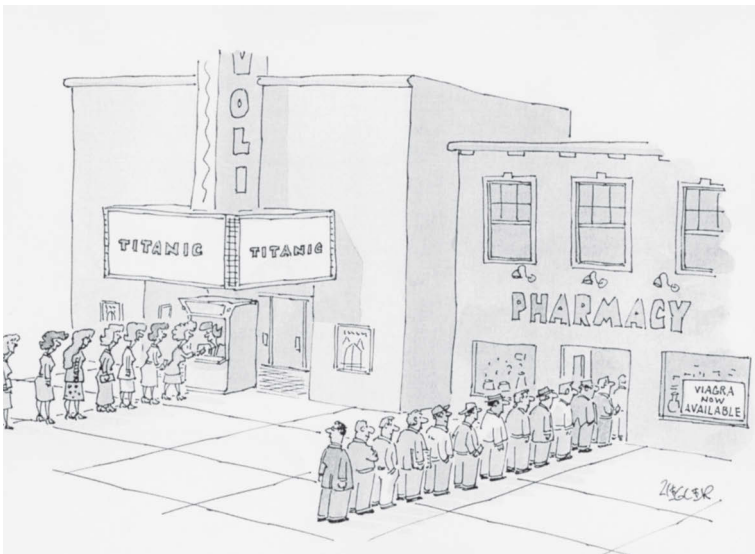
Adequately enjoyable? Is that all? As is by now well known, audiences across the planet found *Titanic* something more than merely adequate in the pleasure – and, indeed, pain – it stimulated. In an effort to make sense of the film’s staggeringly unexpected audience appeal, a *Newsweek* story in February 1998 told of an 18-year-old US college student named Gina Latta who wears blue nail polish, has her ears triple pierced, favours David Lynch movies, and even regards the dialogue in *Titanic* as ‘incredibly cheesy’. Nonetheless, in the two months since the film’s US première, Latta had seen it four times: ‘The first time I saw it, I got out of the theater and I was having a cigarette with a friend and we couldn’t stop crying. I was so overwhelmed at how sad it was.’⁶

The *Newsweek* piece drew upon a variety of media producers and pundits to suggest that the movie was tapping into widespread public desires to move beyond, in Camille Paglia’s words, ‘shallow post-modernist irony and cynicism’ toward a cynicism-free product that celebrates themes of selflessness, self-sacrifice and cross-class bonding. Feminist author Mary Pipher (*Reviving Orphelia*) contended that the movie was ‘really about [Jack] helping [Rose] become an authentic whole person’, while 29-year-old male Japanese magazine editor Naoshi Kayashima valued it as an examination of male cowardice and courage (‘a movie about how men choose their endings’), and 63-year-old theatre director André Gregory explained that, for him, ‘the movie was really about that old woman. I was moved that she could fight her way out of a life that was imposed on her by her family, and by society.’⁷

The thrust of the *Newsweek* coverage was to designate *Titanic* as a women’s film with crossover appeal to men who want more from a movie than simply colossal effects and brutal physical action. Yet despite *Newsweek*’s acknowledgment of the film’s emotional appeal to male as well as female filmgoers, it characterized *Titanic*’s typical viewer – particularly its repeat viewer – as a female under the age of 25. Polls cited by the article found that 60 per cent of *Titanic*’s audiences were female, 63 per cent of its viewers were under 25, and 45 per cent of all women under 25 who had seen the movie had seen it at least twice. No surprise then that press accounts of the movie’s unprecedented box-office success took

it upon themselves to explain it as the revenge of the ‘chick flick’ against the more typical ‘dick flick’ that Cameron and other high-testosterone action directors had previously turned into box-office megahits. A cartoon in *Time* drolly advanced this point of view by depicting a city block with two queues of consumers: the all-female queue stands in front of a cinema with the name *Titanic* blazoned across its marquee; the all-male queue lines up before a pharmacy with a sign in the window announcing ‘Viagra Now Available’.⁸

Throughout the spring of 1998, reports of *Titanic* hysteria seemed determined to resurrect the old cultural stereotype of tear-streaked, weak-kneed female idolators constitutionally incapable of withstanding the obsessive impulses programmed into them by the merchants of shlock. Elvis, the early Beatles, and now *Titanic*. In March the Associated Press carried an item about a 12-year-old Italian girl who had devotedly attended the movie every single day since December. In May the teen magazine *Sugar* told of a 14-year-old English girl and her mum who had



sat through a total of 84 screenings of the epic since its UK release at the end of January.⁹ In June an Associated Press news brief reported that an unidentified Norwegian woman, mid- to late thirties in age, had plunged to her death from the bow railing of a Scandinavian cruise ship, where she had positioned herself at sunset in imitation of Rose's 'flying' scene. A rash of similar, if non-fatal, incidents on other cruise ships in other seas led transportation safety boards to issue stern warnings that passengers must not be permitted to climb onto ship railings.¹⁰

It's my contention, though, that the appeal of Cameron's film extends well beyond female moviegoers looking for a good cry, stolid males hoping to provide a manly shoulder to cry on, and untold legions of 'Titaniacs' who have long constituted a guaranteed audience for any movie or book (possibly even this book) that takes the doomed ocean liner as its topic. What the following analysis suggests is that *Titanic* offers its audiences a way to *think about* relevant modern issues of culture and class. While not by any means an intellectual film (and far less an intellectual's film), *Titanic* nevertheless prompts viewers to pose to themselves questions about our society's divide between rich and poor, the nature of love, the meaning of sacrifice, and modernity's faith in, even obsession with, technological prowess and mastery over nature.

Indeed, these same questions were raised in the minds of the general public from the very first reports of *Titanic*'s collision with the iceberg on the night of 14 April 1912.¹¹ In the immediate aftermath of the sinking, Joseph Conrad used it as an occasion to blame the steamship lines for fetishizing size, speed and profits, while Thomas Hardy, in a poem penned for a memorial service one month after the disaster, expressed anew his naturalist creed that fate rules human destiny and, in this instance, ordained for the great ship and the even greater iceberg an unavoidable 'Convergence of the Twain'.¹² On Sunday, 21 April 1912, the prominent New York Presbyterian minister Charles H. Parkurst declared the sinking a 'terrific and ghastly illustration of what things come to when men throw God out at the door', while in Washington, DC, on the same Sunday the Archbishop of Baltimore announced that 'the remote cause of this unspeakable disaster is the excessive pursuit of luxury'. To a



Universalist minister in Indianapolis, ‘The underlying cause of it all is our social allegiance to the twin gods of Mammon, *speed* and *greed*.’¹³

But it wasn’t only the high and mighty who strove to decipher the deeper meanings of the catastrophe. Advocates for women’s rights saw the sinking as a warning of what happens to society when male hubris goes unchecked by female influence (women, supposedly, would have ensured there were enough lifeboats on board), whereas their opponents, many of them women themselves, believed that the much-touted rescue of women and children testified, if not to male superiority, then at least to male nobility and selflessness. ‘Let the suffragists remember this,’ advised the author of a letter to the *Baltimore Sun*. ‘When the Lord created woman and placed her under the protection of man he had her well provided for. The Titanic disaster proves it very plainly.’¹⁴ The radical labour agitator

The search for meaning begins (Cultural Services, Southampton City Council)