

Titanic: An exchange of letters between David Walsh and a reader

David Walsh
25 February 1998

David Walsh's review of *Titanic* generated a large number of letters as well as the following exchange.

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Regarding your review of *Titanic*. You went way overboard on panning *Titanic*. I avoided every advertisement and review of the movie so that it wouldn't ruin some of the best parts of the movie, so I was completely unbiased. I loved it, and I am one of the people that think it's the best movie of the year. After I saw the movie, I read every review on the movie I could find. After I got past about 150 reviews, I came to yours. I did find some critics that didn't like the movie, but none of them took the time to destroy the film in their reviews such as you did. I plan to become a screenplay writer, so right now I'm doing research on the do's and don'ts of movies, that's why I read so many reviews of the movie. There are some points that I agree with you on, the love story seems a bit recycled, but it was done well enough to like the characters. But "poorly directed!?" Not at all. The movie was terrifically directed, I know that that is my opinion, but I know that it was directed well.

The point is: about 95% of the people who saw the movie liked it a lot; you don't become a very respected or popular critic by disagreeing with almost everyone.

Good luck with your reviews in the future,

AR

15 February 1998

David Walsh replies:

Dear AR,

Thank you for your letter. When I say poorly directed I'm not referring to technical merit—the ability, for example, to place one piece of film coherently next to another. I believe Cameron can do that. I'm speaking about the ability to express emotional depth and intellectual breadth. I felt very little for the people in

Titanic. I was constantly being told that their situation was a tragic one, but I didn't feel it.

I think that the best films challenge one's perceptions about the world. *Titanic*, to me, reinforced relatively clichéd and banal conceptions. I don't blame contemporary audiences for the success of the film. What do they see? Massive, bombastic, bland blockbusters without, in my opinion, much personality or authentic feeling. I think if you watch, on video, the best films of Hollywood directors of another day—Hawks, Ford, Hitchcock, Welles, Raoul Walsh, Michael Curtiz, Anthony Mann, Chaplin, Keaton—or certain European directors, you are left with a very different set of responses.

As far as popularity goes, well, one can never tell. One has to tell the truth as one sees it, and let the chips fall where they may. My comment was harsher in regard to certain critics whom I believe should have known better than it was on the film itself. I simply thought the film was mediocre.

I've received a number of letters agreeing with my piece, incidentally.

Could you explain to me, in more detail, what it was that you liked about the film? This is not a loaded question. I am genuinely interested.

Sincerely,

David Walsh

15 February 1998

AR replies:

Dear Mr. Walsh,

There are many things that I liked about the movie, most of the best are the ones that are too often overlooked. One of the first things that came to mind were the supporting characters, the way they were played by the actors and the way that they all dealt with the disaster. Victor Garbor as the Ship's designer,

Jonathon Hyde as the ship's builder, Bernard Hill as Captain Smith, Gloria Stuart as the elderly Rose, and Ewan Stewart as the captain's first officer, Murdock. The look in their eyes as the ship was going down, most of them thinking it was their fault, were terrific pieces of physical acting. The expression of pure disbelief as their confidence was swept away was just fabulous.

Another thing that I liked about the movie were the short, touching scenes as the ship was sinking and after it went down. The mother telling her children a story when she knew that they would all die, the elderly couple lying in bed, Garber's character, Andrews, resetting the clock as he waited for death. There were two scenes that I really loved after the ship went down. The first was the camera shot where it started out on just one person swinging his arms in the water, then expanded to show hundreds of people doing the same. The other was after the lifeboat came back to find all of the people motionless and frozen in the water.

Some of the other parts that I liked are liked by just about everyone, most of them are intense parts. From a technical standpoint, it's matched by no other movie (and it should be for how much money they spent on it). Watching the boat sink was terrific, people sliding down the deck and bouncing off railings like toys was amazing.

The movie just had so many little things that were so good that after they added up, they made it one of the best movies I've seen in a long time.

Well that's just what I think. I'm also interested in reading some of your other reviews, is there a site or some other place that I might find them?

Sincerely,

AR

16 February 1998

David Walsh replies:

Dear AR,

Trying to convince someone to like or dislike a particular piece of work is fairly futile. I simply think that life, love and society are far more complicated than Cameron would have us believe. The theme of forbidden love is a potent one, but I don't think it is explored seriously here. (As possible alternatives see *Gun Crazy* (1949), directed by Joseph H. Lewis, or *They Live by Night* (also 1949), directed by Nicholas Ray.) The implication of the film is that, the sinking of

the *Titanic* aside, Jack and Rose face no serious obstacles to happiness. The entire class structure proves to be a minor annoyance.

We are led to believe that this girl's upbringing can simply be thrown off as you would change a shirt. I think this is a ludicrous notion. The Dawson character is no more convincing. Look at the real lives of bohemian artists—Jack London, for example. A great deal of pain, defeat, frustration.

Society represents a real problem to love and art. Cameron simply sidesteps all the difficult issues; his film feeds into existing illusions and banalities: "You can do anything you want," "The only thing holding you back is yourself," "Everything is up to the individual," etc. I think these conceptions are misleading and wrong.

Even truly to 'be yourself' requires a titanic (if you'll pardon the usage of the word) struggle against traditions and social relationships which exist independently of the individual and have to be more or less consciously grasped. Cameron, who has a successful career and made lots of money, inevitably avoids these problems. He is essentially pleased with life and himself. Society has rewarded his shallow, pragmatic approach to things, so he projects that into a general principle. But does the message of the film hold true?

These are just a few thoughts.

You can find some of my film reviews and other comments on artistic problems at www.wsws.org. Let me know what you think.

Sincerely,

David Walsh

16 February 1998



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