Titanic as a social phenomenon

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James Cameron's *Titanic* is a massive global success. The film is taking in millions of dollars a week, on its way apparently to the one billion dollar mark. Even Cameron claims to be "a little bit mystified." What is behind this remarkable phenomenon?

The first possibility that suggests itself is that the film possesses that relatively rare combination of artistic merit and mass popular appeal. One thinks, for example, of many of Chaplin's films, or perhaps certain of Alfred Hitchcock's. A critical viewing of *Titanic*, however, is enough to dispel that notion. Cameron's film is, in this writer's view, a mediocre and predictable work, with caricatures instead of characters, and dialogue worthy of television soap operas.

The following exchange between the two central protagonists—the supposedly devil-may-care artist, Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio), and the unhappy socialite, Rose DeWitt Bukater (Kate Winslet)—is fairly typical:

"JACK: Rose, you're no picnic... you're a spoiled little brat even, but under that you're a strong, pure heart, and you're the most amazingly astounding girl I've ever known and—

ROSE: Jack, I—

JACK: No wait. Let me try to get this out. You're amazing... and I know I have nothing to offer you, Rose. I know that. But I'm involved now. You jump, I jump, remember? I can't turn away without knowin' that you're goin' to be alright.

[Rose feels the tears coming to her eyes. Jack is so open and real... not like anyone she has ever known.]

ROSE: You're making this very hard. I'll be fine. Really.

JACK: I don't think so. They've got you in a glass jar like some butterfly, and you're goin' to die if you don't break out. Maybe not right away, 'cause you're strong. But sooner or later the fire in you is goin' to go out.

ROSE: It's not up to you to save me, Jack.

JACK: You're right. Only you can do that."

Naturally, dialogue and plot are not everything in the cinema. There is a definite tradition in Hollywood film-making of directors transcending second-rate screenplays or worse (even sometimes their own) through either irony, visual audacity or the suggestion of emotional and intellectual depths going far beyond the limits of the immediate story-line.

This is not the case here. Cameron does nothing to overcome his own trite script, displays no remarkable visual sense and hints at nothing beyond the banalities we see and hear. In fact, he is apparently quite proud of the lack of contradictions in his film and its characters. David Ansen in *Newsweek* writes: "The thing about Jack Dawson ... is that he doesn't have a dark side. DiCaprio had never played a character without demons. 'How do you do that?' DiCaprio says. 'I was asking Jim [Cameron]: "Can't we add some dark things to this character?" And he was like, "No, Leo, you can't."'"

Cameron is, we have suggested before, a competent craftsman, not a significant artist. His own account, in an interview, of his initial interest in film-making is revealing: "I used to go down to the USC [University of Southern California] library and read everything. I'd Xerox stuff. I made my own reference library of doctoral dissertations on optical printing and all that. I really studied technical stuff formally."

The director's taste in films is also revelatory. "A film that affected me a lot when I was eighteen or nineteen was [British director David Lean's] *Dr. Zhivago*." At a time—the early 1970s—when many film students or young people interested in the field would have been studying and discussing the work of, say, Jean-Luc Godard, Luis Buñuel, Joseph Losey or Erich Rohmer, Cameron admired one of the most stolid and least challenging directors of the day. *Dr. Zhivago*, in particular, was described by one critic as "a work with more commercial than critical success, a work also of the most impeccable impersonality." (Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema*).

If *Titanic*'s success cannot be explained by artistic excellence, then what does account for it?

What has the public seen?

A significant factor is no doubt the general decline in the level of Hollywood film-making and, inevitably, popular taste. When individuals between the ages of fifteen and thirty declare that *Titanic* is the 'best film they have ever seen,' to what are they comparing it: *Jurassic Park, Forrest Gump, Return of the Jedi, Home Alone, Batman, Independence Day, Ghost* or *Men in Black*? All these films, made within the last decade and a half, can be found on the list of the top twenty all-time box-office successes.

The problem is not simply that bombastic market-driven films have been reaching large audiences (although they have become, it seems, blander and more bombastic than ever); to a certain extent that has always been the case. But the world's cinemas have never before been so monopolized by these would-be blockbusters, to the exclusion of more interesting American and international films. The artistic judgments of the general public, through no fault of its own, are inevitably circumscribed and stunted under these conditions. Movie audiences have been increasingly deprived of

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intelligent entertainment by an industry, dominated by a few conglomerates, that has run out of nearly every idea except how to turn a profit.

This elementary understanding provides a framework within which one can begin to make sense of the *Titanic* phenomenon—but only a framework.

The response to *Titanic* is so great and so out of proportion to the quality of the film itself that one is forced to view its success as a social phenomenon worthy of analysis. This is not simply a film—it is virtually *a cause*. Its admirers defend it with fervor and admit no challenges and no criticisms—it is not simply a 'good' film, or a 'wonderful' film, it must be acknowledged as 'the greatest film of all time.'

(If the film were truly 'great,' as its admirers claim, it would be impossible for *anyone*, of any age, to see it five, ten or even more times. A great film, by definition, is a demanding film. One cannot rush back to see such a work; one needs to recover from the experience and assimilate its contents.)

To account for the *Titanic* phenomenon the media suggest several factors, above all, the increased buying power of young women and, especially, teenage girls. This does not explain very much. In the first place, girls do not by any means make up the film's entire audience (nearly forty percent of the audience, male and female, is *over 25*), although they may make up a disproportionate percentage of those who are seeing it repeatedly and in groups. And even if it were true that only one segment of the population was flocking to the film in massive numbers, one would still have to look for answers as to why. The attractive features of Leonardo DiCaprio can only go so far by way of explanation.

Social circumstances

Even many of the film's admirers admit that *Titanic* is dramatically inept—so why can't they help themselves? What set of social circumstances would impel broad layers of the population to identify *so strongly* with such a *weak* piece of work, and invest it, as their many comments have demonstrated, with qualities that it does not begin to possess?

One of the predominant characteristics of the present day is the sense of the general worthlessness of the old institutions and the beliefs or shibboleths bound up with them, institutions and beliefs that many *feel*, even if they are not conscious of it, to be merely left over, by some kind of inertia, from a previous epoch when they may have had meaning. It is a widespread and unstated assumption that nothing is to be expected from the existing political parties, parliaments, business groups, the mass media, churches, trade unions—only corruption and lies.

New perspectives and new causes, however, have not to this point gripped masses of people. The population remains largely uncommitted, politically and intellectually. Young people in particular are restless, uncertain, aquiver. They don't even ask yet, in large numbers, "Which way?"—to ask that one must already know that a worthy destination exists.

Yet there is a widely-felt yearning for commitment, for purpose. One sees this in many distorted and even reactionary forms, from the Promise Keepers to the Million Man March.

Under these conditions the very fact of its initial popularity (aided by media manipulation) helps a film like *Titanic* to become *immensely* popular. 'It is attractive to me precisely because it is attractive to others; I have to see something extraordinary and tragic in the film because others have seen it.' This is not so much conformism, although that enters into it, as the desire for affiliation, for some unifying element, when the new social affiliation and the new basis for unifying humanity have not appeared to the vast majority.

In voicing their support for the film, young people are responding to what they perceive to be *Titanic*'s theme: the need to break from conventions and experience, at no matter what cost, freedom and love. This is no doubt in part a response to the prevailing climate of conformism and cynicism. But this genuine, if confused, sentiment is being directed toward a work that is fundamentally false and shallow.

There is no trace of genuine revolt in Cameron's film. It is a thoroughly self-satisfied piece of work. There is not, after all, anything necessary, anything that flows from the conflict between Winslet's character and her family and fiancé, in the ultimate tragedy. Jack and Rose find happiness together relatively easily; they simply happen to be on board a sinking ship. Presumably, had the *Titanic* not struck an iceberg, they would have lived happily ever after.

One of the difficulties in the situation is that the same low cultural level that has produced the film has, to a large extent, produced the public reaction to it.

It might be best perhaps to describe *Titanic* as a sort of lowest common denominator. The film contains certain minimums necessary to draw an audience—attractive leading actors, a 'tragic love story,' expensive special effects, a mild dose of social criticism, a fascinating historical event, media support—but its very blandness, in combination with these elements, accounts for its great success. *Titanic* is, in effect, a blank screen onto which a great many people are projecting vague, *but very powerful*, longings—about life, love, society—which they cannot yet formulate in more concrete and focused terms.

There is nothing 'mystifying' about such a relatively vacuous film winning tremendous popularity. On the contrary, no other film would fill this particular bill. It is *Titanic*'s emptiness that allows the audience to invent a film, and a world, for itself in the course of those three-and-a-quarter hours or as many viewings as it takes.

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