

Readers exchange opinions with David Walsh on *Titanic*

15 April 1998

I agree with your thoughts on *Titanic*. I've seen the movie and to me it was an enjoyable film, but I wouldn't see it again. I hadn't read any of the reviews prior to seeing it, so my expectations weren't that high, but I walked out wondering why are so many people hailing this as the greatest movie they've ever seen. I found the story incredibly lacking, which is ironic since the movie had three hours to develop one.

The whole story seems like a fairy tale. There's the beautiful princess who wants to be with the young, handsome prince, but in between them is the villainous fiancée along with his henchman and the girl's mother in the role of the wicked stepmother. But the young prince has a fairy godmother in the form of Molly Brown to help him. When I look at this movie, I get the impression Jim Cameron and his team thought about what ingredients were needed for this to appeal to everyone and then developed the story. *Titanic* has something for everybody. A disaster for people who like disaster movies such as *Twister*, a love story for couples looking for a good date movie, Leonardo DiCaprio to guarantee the young teenage girl crowd will want to see it, a nude scene to get teenage boys to want to come, great special effects to get a good chunk of the male audience who weren't enticed by the items listed so far, and a story about a famous historical event to get whoever's left over. This is not a movie. It's a marketing campaign designed to get every type of moviegoer to hand over \$6.50. It's no wonder Cameron waived his directing fee. He knew this movie had everything to guarantee a hit. As for the script, the story could be collapsed into two sentences and the dialogue is cartoonish. That's what happens when you let someone who's never written a script before write his own movie and there's some comfort in knowing that the script wasn't nominated for an Academy Award. The best part of the movie was the score by James Horner and I think the real emotional impact of the film comes from the music, not the story or the acting.

Filmmaking used to be a craft where the writer had a polished script and everyone else worked hard to bring that story to life without worrying about whether there was an audience for it. There's no artistry anymore in film. This movie was hailed for not only its story but its art direction. But where was the artistry? They had the blueprints for the ship, hired historians to advise them, used photographs of the ship, and even obtained footage of the ship at the bottom of the ocean. Where's the artistry in following someone else's instructions? In the end, this movie and others like it will always be made. They'll always have an audience and unfortunately today's moviegoers have been deprived of good films for so long, that movies like *Titanic* will always seem great in comparison.

AK

7 April 1998

Mr. Walsh,

At a first glance, Mr. Walsh, you appear deft in your usage of words to convey your belief package against the movie *Titanic*. Yet as I read further into this piece, I find an angry little bird writing a lot of bitter hoopla. (I guess I have to admit that here and there you make a relatively valid point.)

In my opinion, *Titanic* brought us back out of the woods of the GenX

misery pics (*Pulp Fiction*, *Chasing Amy*, etc. -- good movies but so utterly full of negativity that we found ourselves laughing). I don't have time or the desire to sit around trying to figure out why so many people have such a fascination with the sinking of a big ship in 1912. Maybe someday I'll sit down and give it some thought. For now, I can say that I saw the film and was quite moved by it. Perhaps, it doesn't deserve all this attention and money. But the storyline could have been MUCH WORSE.

Cameron incorporated a story about a young woman who is brought into her own light with the help of a young man. During that era women weren't very empowered and men, in general, didn't want them to be empowered. A thematically unique twist occurs as Rose runs through the sinking soaking ship with the ax to save Jack (you usually see the woman saving the man's soul and/or the man saving the woman's life -- here you see the direct opposite). Anyway, in regards to your attack on the fact that there was a sub-plot, the fact remains that no one would have sat through that movie had there not been a storyline other than that of the ship sinking. Cameron brought out a story that could possibly have occurred on that ship (So what!). No, the characters aren't quite as developed as they would be had the story been solely based on the characters' plight rather than on the sinking of the ship. But I found them relatively genuine characters.

Because the movie was paraded around as some big Hollywood blockbuster hit, I was extremely wary about seeing it. Hollywood movies depress me in the utterly absurd way in which they depict human nature. So, I instinctively took a few steps back before reserving my ticket to see this one. But then that little tug and tingle and spark of curiosity tinged me as it has tinged the majority of us. Oh my, maybe I AM part of that 'intellectually impoverished' mainstream society. HUH? Or maybe I just liked *Titanic*. I just liked the whole big expensive water-wasting, fake iceberging, beautiful thing. It was entertaining and different -- not the same old 'I-am-trying-to-be-so-GenX-cool' type of flick we are getting used to seeing these days. It showed a woman rising out of the wreckage of a society that was (and still is) hell-bent on being the fastest, the best, the biggest, the most technologically advanced. It was nice to see the 89 year old Rose just sitting there at her little pottery wheel working in peace with her sweet old hands. Maybe it wasn't realistic (if movies WERE realistic, no one would want to see them), but movies are suppose to entertain and maybe give a little lesson. *Titanic* did that, I do believe.

NF

25 March 1998

Dear NF,

Thank you for your letter. It's fairly futile to try and convince someone about a film, a book or anything of that sort. I suspect, and of course have no way of proving this, that the vast majority of those who like *Titanic* would have a different view if they were exposed consistently to better films. I wasn't at all moved by the film. I understand your feelings about *Pulp Fiction* et al, but I don't think *Titanic* represents a real alternative--it is simply the other side of the cynical coin. It's mostly about marketing.

'Movies are supposed to entertain and maybe give a little lesson.' I don't think you ask nearly enough.

Sincerely,
D. Walsh
25 March 1998

Mr. Walsh:

Thanks for the response. I am exposed consistently to better films than that one. I'm not trying to win your approval as to what movies I should be watching. I do a lot more reading than film-watching, however, so maybe I haven't seen the wide array of films that you have. I watch movies to be entertained. I really do. The vast majority of society is not a film critic (take a poll and you will see, that most of us go to the movies to be entertained -- could be why it's called the 'entertainment industry'), but that doesn't mean they are intellectually impoverished either (GEEZ!). If I said, 'UGH! You like John Grisham. He sucks. He is totally unstimulating, and writes a bunch of best-selling mainstream crap,' simply because I am a literary critic and read a lot of alternative literature and won't touch a Grisham novel, I would sound like such a stuck up brat. I just save it (but to make a point, I am sharing this with you). Some people read Danielle Steel, John Grisham, etc. to be entertained -- they read to be entertained, not to analyze the world. I read for many reasons other than simple entertainment. Every book I read, I criticize. Perhaps in the way you criticize films. But I don't run around telling people they are a bunch of idiots because they don't read what I read.

I have read your article a second time and do find it well-written, and it does perpetuate a good deal of well-thought criticism. Perhaps, it was written for a film-critic's eyes rather than someone who goes to the movies to be entertained. But I stumbled upon it and had to get my 2-cents in. I still don't think you can coin our society 'intellectually impoverished' simply because a lot of women (yes, mostly women saw that movie 2, 3, 4, 5 times -- it wasn't a 'male-oriented' film in the least) liked a certain movie. I don't run around writing essays stating that the majority of our society reads the best-sellers and therefore we live in an intellectually impoverished society.

Thanks for the opportunity to argue with you!

NF
25 March 1998

Dear NF,

I think the problem is that people are asking very little in the way of entertainment, or, rather, they are so easily entertained (or imagine themselves to be entertained). That, to me, is a social and historical issue, not an individual one. Shakespeare had a considerable popular following, so did Dickens and Hugo. One could even speak about Hollywood's own past: films by Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Howard Hawks, etc., attracted mass audiences. Why are we stuck with John Grisham and James Cameron?

One of the difficulties is that you take as a personal affront what is meant to be a characterization of a society and an epoch. I'm not telling anyone that he or she is an idiot for liking *Titanic*. I have the right to express my opinion that it is a bad film and try to explain, working backwards from the fact of its obvious popularity, the source of its success. I believe that the discussion of art is not entirely subjective. I think Theodore Dreiser and Henry James are superior to Danielle Steel and Grisham. I believe, I hope, I can express that view without everyone who likes the latter taking offense. Otherwise, what's the point...? I might as well simply look at the ten most popular films of the week and draw my aesthetic conclusions from that. Which, I think, is what a great many critics do, in one fashion or another.

I don't view society as composed of free-floating atoms, with absolute freedom to choose their likes and dislikes. People have a culture largely

imposed upon them. That's why there is nothing sneering, however you may perceive it, in my attitude toward popular taste. When I say I don't blame people for their tastes, I'm not being patronizing, it is meant as a simple statement of sociological fact. In my opinion, one cannot discuss these issues without having a grasp of the circumstances and social, political and ideological climate within which we live. We live in a society which values the market, money, power, greed. Human lives and human personalities are continually devalued. You referred to it yourself in regard to *Pulp Fiction* et al. The response to *Titanic* may very well be a reaction to that, but I think Cameron's film is a false solution. In the guise of a film about love and freedom, in my view, it reinforces the same old banalities; it is entirely conformist in its essential outlook. I don't see why it's not possible to be entertained and, at the same time, moved, challenged, delighted, aroused and so on.

Thanks for the opportunity to polemicize with you.

D. Walsh
26 March 1998

Mr Walsh:

Thank you for your thoughtful and incisive commentary on the *Titanic* phenomenon. It is truly bewildering and disturbing to find so many people (especially otherwise tasteful and intelligent ones) rolling over for this sham of a film. Admittedly an incredible amount of work went into bringing Cameron's vision to the screen and such a Herculean effort is to be commended. However, if one were to judge the film's merits on whether or not such a film should have been produced, then the answer would have to be a resounding: 'No!'.

GK
24 March 1998

Dear GK:

Thanks for your note. I have received a great deal of mail over this, and it is heartening to know that there are many critically-minded people seeing films. I hope you will follow our web site.

Sincerely,
D. Walsh
25 March 1998

Mr Walsh:

I know your publication has more important issues to examine, but I have always believed that art (and by extension cinema) has a valid place in people's lives. The overwhelming response by the targeted audience (the lowest common denominator) is truly disheartening when there is much more art in the world that is worth patronizing. Thank you for your courteous and prompt response.

GK
26 March 1998

GK:

Thanks again.

We think that a revival of artistic life is a critical element in the more general revival of social and political culture. It is very difficult to effect significant social change in a country where *Titanic* attracts a mass following. We've just posted a talk I gave in Australia in January that addresses some of those issues. It's in the exhibits section of the web site: *The Aesthetic Component of Socialism*.

I'm curious, since you mention it, what do you think of some of the political issues we raise, for example, the Jonesboro murders, or our analysis of the Clinton crisis?

D. Walsh
28 March 1998

Mr. Walsh:

I haven't had a chance to study your paper's take on the Clinton issue, but regards the Jonesboro incident... Unfortunately, I find myself becoming more misanthropic every day. The overall mentality, especially in this country seems to lean toward the superficial, the momentary and the insubstantial. When one perceives their life to be little more than a series of injustices aimed specifically at them or their significant others, it has become all too easy in this country to push a button (or pull a trigger) and to believe that this is the solution to one's problems. America in particular has always been reactionary to the problems of humankind and constantly reasserts its mentality of denial for the responsibility it has incurred regarding the championing of the material over what is of true human value. As long as that trend continues, there can be no true fulfillment of human potential.

GK
30 March 1998

To the editor:
Before the question of *Titanic's* artistic worth can be addressed, it is necessary to point out that the history of the ship indeed encapsulates a great deal of important themes. Beyond the general question of human tragedy, the history of the ship's sinking raises a number of issues that are related with social struggle and its historical development. As a broad metaphor, in fact, the story provides any artist that chooses to confront it, with a wealth of social and historical themes in this regard: the division of the passengers in 'classes', their different conditions and outlook on the transatlantic voyage lead quite naturally to the question of class struggle; the ship's journey itself could point the passage of the torch of world capitalism from the old world to the new; the question of the ship's demise and of the fate of its passengers raises the contradiction between profits and human welfare and development; indeed the very fact that an allegedly unsinkable ship now rests at the bottom of the ocean could allow one to explore the idea that social systems that are portrayed to be just as mighty and eternal as the *Titanic*, might actually be headed toward similar catastrophes.

Cameron's film is clearly, in spite of its enormous budget, a shallow little flick, and David Walsh does an excellent job in detailing its flaws. I wanted to point out, however, that, to be fair to Cameron, many of these themes are touched upon by baroque film-makers. The question of class IS after all at the center of the two protagonists' plight. The viewer IS confronted with the haunting, infernal landscape of the ship's engine rooms, populated by hordes of toiling workers, buried deep underneath the ship's luxury and glamour. The ship's owner and his lust for fame and dollars, IS after all presented as one of the film's bad guys. We are even presented with the problem of 'old' and 'new' money, which does in fact lead us back to the theme of European and American capitalism and the transition in terms of global hegemony that was taking place precisely during the historical period in which the naval disaster occurred.

This of course does not mean that these important themes are developed adequately in *Titanic*, or even that they are developed at all. In many respects, one would think that it is by mere accident that Cameron happened to stumble upon them. Nevertheless, and this is the point I wanted to make, one could also conceivably narrate the history of the ship's sinking in a way that would COMPLETELY ignore the very question of class, as well as all the other aforementioned themes. Far from me to congratulate James Cameron for any sort of artistic achievement, I would simply suggest that the movie ought not to be painted as an utter cinematic disgrace, but should instead be attacked for what it really is: an overcooked, graphically vain and self-indulgent Hollywood film that has a few merits and moments, but that, all in all, ought to be left rusting in the shallow sea of its own mediocrity.

I do, however, absolutely agree with Walsh's opinion that the real disgrace and tragedy is that this movie was elevated by critics and by the viewing public as a masterpiece. I would also like to quickly point out for

those who might be interested, that the song *Titanic* written and performed by Francesco De Gregori, an Italian songwriter, fully captures in an artistically complete sense all of the important themes I mentioned. Ironically, the song's three and a half minutes constitute an artistic eternity when compared to Cameron's three and a half hours of mediocre, fast-food cinema.

Sincerely,
ES
Detroit, MI, USA
24 March 1998

Mr. Walsh:

Thank you very much for your article 'A *Titanic* Controversy.' In short, you have saved me from the sinking feeling that all of critical America have been lobotomized. This was undoubtedly the worst film I saw last year, and it is a national disgrace that it was chosen as the best picture (*In The Company of Men?*, *The Sweet Hereafter?*). Thank you for improving my all-is-right-with-the-world stance, and for your refreshing and daring view on critical ineptitude (what is wrong with Janet Maslin? Is she really employed by the *New York Times*?).

RD
26 March 1998

Dear Mr. Walsh:
May I start off with 'AMEN' and 'THANK YOU!?' Finally, someone else on this planet who sees this sham of a movie for what it is--a three hour cliché. I found the first two hours of the movie boring me almost to tears. Absolutely no surprises in Mr. Cameron's story here, just as you pointed out. At that two hour mark, I was shifting about in my seat, asking the person next to me, 'Is this the part where they bring out the iceberg?' And when the iceberg did appear, and the collision did take place, the horror above decks, and below, were overshadowed by the 'Jack And Rose Antics' below decks. Really, 15 minutes of Rose and Jack gallivanting around in the flooded passageways of *Titanic*?

What really upset me when Cameron DID focus on the chaos above decks, he took RUMORS and made them truths. Case in point, First Officer Murdoch. So many conflicting 'eyewitnesses' say he did shoot himself, other passengers, etc., but absolutely no PROOF of this. And may I add in here, some 'eyewitnesses' even claimed the Second Officer had shot himself. We all know *that* was false since the man came through the ordeal very much alive. Since Cameron claims, 'Everything not dealing with Jack and Rose is fact', people will leave the theatre, remembering Murdoch as 'the officer who killed passengers' or 'the one who committed suicide'. How can he claim this is fact when there is no PROOF?

I'll give Cameron this: he created a beautiful set with luscious costuming. He made *Titanic* sail again with the aid of computers and a multi-million dollar budget. But as for creating an EPIC story? Mr. Cameron, you would have better spent your time rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*.

TO
29 March 1998



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