



*Titanic*. 20th Century Fox.

Reviewed by Richard Howells

Published on (June, 1998)

## Titanic

There are three remarkable things about James Cameron's *Titanic*: it is expensive, it is predictable, and it is historically schizophrenic. It is these last two features which are, in fact, the most remarkable of the three. At 200 million dollars, Cameron's three-hour epic is the most expensive movie ever made. This may seem remarkable now, but as it will inevitably be succeeded by a continuing string of other "most expensive movies ever made"—the cost of the picture will ultimately become one of its less distinguishing features. One does not have to be an accountant nor a film historian to know that not all good films are expensive and that, consequently, not all expensive films are good. It is not the aim of this review to consider whether or not *Titanic* is a "good" film—although the remarkable commercial success of the picture already would suggest that, as far as the majority of the movie-going public is concerned, *Titanic* must be a very "good" film indeed. Of much greater interest to us, though, is the fact that it is *Titanic*'s predictability which (unusually) provides one of its most remarkable facets, for this a drama in which surely every man, woman, and child lining up to see it already knows exactly how the story is going to end. This is not normally the case with popular feature films. Here, however, not only is the fact that *Titanic* sank on its maiden voyage one of the best known events in popular history, but the *Titanic* has also obligingly sunk in every other film that has ever been made about it—including two previous films which have borne exactly the same title: Herbert Selpin and Werner Klingner's *Titanic* (Germany, 1943), and Jean Negulescu's *Titanic* (USA, 1954). At

face value, then, it would seem unlikely that audiences would be sitting on the edges of their seats. And yet that is exactly what they have been doing and, if the media are to be believed, some have even been returning for repeat screenings. Why? The reason is that the story of the *Titanic* is a modern myth. As a myth, the repetition of the story is part of the mythical process, and the awful inevitability of its outcome serves only to add to its awesome power. We know (for example) that King Arthur, Joan of Arc and John F. Kennedy are going to die, but does not stop us being drawn deep into the story once again as the Presidential motorcade snakes its way through Dallas .... Of course, a good myth exists in many versions, and as Claude Levi Strauss has shown, the differences between them are an important part of the mythic process. What *Titanic* films all have in common is the bare bones of a recorded historical episode. Where they differ is how this story is fleshed out into a human drama. It is in this "fleshing out" process that Cameron's *Titanic* displays its remarkable and deeply schizophrenic relationship with the historical record. It is faithful to the detail, but promiscuous with the facts. To those of us who have seen pretty well every plan, drawing, photograph and film clip of the *Titanic* in existence (actually, there are surprisingly few), Cameron's film is truly remarkable in its visual authenticity. Not just the structure but also the design, decor and detail of the entire ship has been assiduously researched and looks authentic down to the layout of the bridge and the carving on the first class staircase. With the additional help of computer animation, Cameron gives us views of the *Titanic* which were never recorded on film aboard the

actual ship. Indeed, such is the degree of visual accuracy that many of the details will be lost on others than Titanic aficionados. A brief shot on deck of a boy spinning a top, for example, is in fact a reference to an actual photograph taken on board the real Titanic by Father F.M. Browne, S.J., an enthusiastic amateur photographer, who disembarked at Queenstown. Cameron expertly animates the scene and incorporates it into the narrative. <p> Cameron's <cite>Titanic</cite> is not a documentary, however. For, despite its almost obsessive accuracy in terms of visual detail, this Titanic is in fact a dramatic love story in which the leading characters are all entirely fictitious. The settings may be authentic down to the last tea-cup, but the central story-line—that is to say the one which holds the audience's attention—is complete fabrication. <p> This is the story of forbidden love between the social classes. Third class passenger Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio) saves Philadelphia socialite Rose DeWitt Bukater (Kate Winslet) from suicide as she threatens to leap to her death from the ship's rails. Rose has been coerced into a loveless engagement by her scheming mother, but Jack, a starving artist, helps Rose discover her lust for life. Inevitably, they fall in love, despite the very best efforts of both mother and boorish fiancée, Cal Hockley (Billy Zane), to forbid the liaison. As the drama unfolds, the fictitious young lovers enter the coterie of people known to have been aboard the actual Titanic: J.J. Astor, Benjamin Guggenheim, J. Bruce Ismay, Captain Smith and Margaret (the "Unsinkable Molly") Brown, who is seen sympathetically instructing the nervous young Jack on the finer points of etiquette in the first class dining room. <p> Historians know a fair amount about the actual Titanic, especially who was and who was not aboard.

We even know, in many cases, which cabins they occupied and how much they paid for their tickets. So while we recognise the Astors, the Guggenheims and even the Mrs. Browns, we also know that there were no DeWitt Bukaters, Hockleys or even Jack Dawsons aboard. The state rooms occupied by Hockley and his party in the film are exquisitely rendered, but were in actuality occupied by J. Bruce Ismay, Managing Director of the White Star Line. <p> There are other questionable episodes, large and small. Winslet seems to be sporting a small and deeply anachronistic tattoo on her left shoulder, and appears also to have bought two paintings by Picasso (the careful viewer may recognise what very much appear to be "Violin and Grapes" and the celebrated "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O) (Les Femmes d'Alger, O. J. R. Version O)") neither of which was transported (let alone lost) on the Titanic. More importantly, third class passengers are shown being forcibly and systematically held below as the ship begins to founder. This was not the case. First Officer William Murdoch is depicted shooting several passengers dead before turning his revolver upon himself. There is no historical evidence to support this allegation: no shot corpses were ever found. <p> It goes without saying, of course, that not all historically accurate films are good films, and that not all good films are historically accurate. What is so tantalising about <cite>Titanic</cite>, though, is this schizophrenic convergence of accuracy and invention. Ultimately, though, it is invention which carries the day. In the final sequences, Cameron succeeds in moving his audience with an emotional conclusion. We weep, though, not for the horrid deaths of 1,500 real people, but for the fate of two fictitious characters and the bittersweet memory of lost love. That's Hollywood.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

**Citation:** Richard Howells. Review of , *Titanic*. H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14874>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).