

A black and white photograph of a man and a woman in period clothing. The man is on the right, looking down at the woman on the left. The woman is looking up at the man. The background is dark and out of focus.

*'THIS SHIP'S  
UNSINKABLE!'*

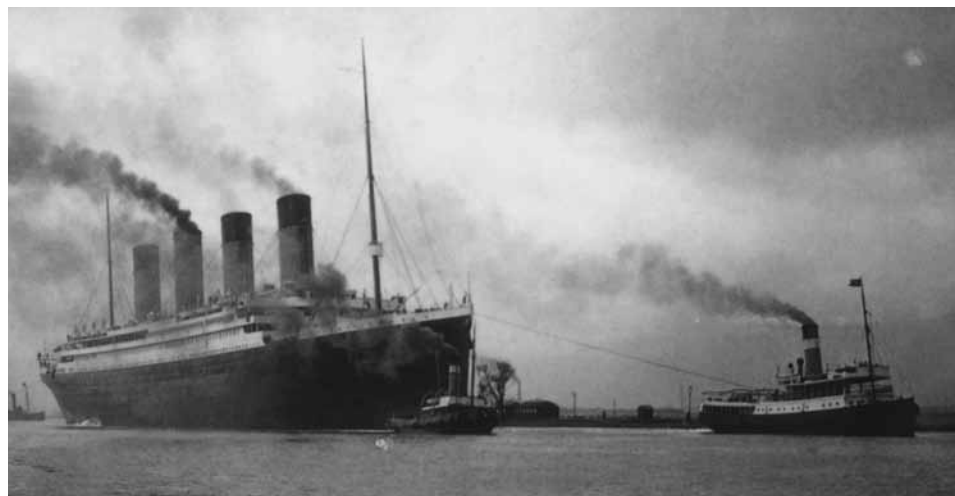
THE *TITANIC* ON FILM

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***Brian McFarlane considers the enduring fascination with this maritime disaster and reflects on some of its finest and not-so-fine cinematic renderings.***

**T**HERE is a breathtaking moment in Noël Coward's play *Cavalcade* when a young couple, on the deck of an Atlantic liner, are talking about the prospect of their lives together: 'This is our moment – complete and heavenly,' says the young woman. As they make to move inside, she picks up her shawl, which has been hanging over a rail. It has been covering a lifebelt and when they walk away the ship's name on it is revealed: S.S. *Titanic*.<sup>1</sup> Frank Lloyd's 1933 Oscar-winning film version of the same name reproduced this moment without comment; no comment was needed because the awful implications would have been obvious to all viewers. And the moment had not lost its power to move in a 1995 revival of the play in London.

This year's exhibition of artefacts from the ship at the Melbourne Museum proved hugely popular, with viewing queues assembled every quarter of an hour to maintain some sort of order and to avoid overcrowding. Vast numbers of people made their slow way past recreations of the ship's departure, through the grandeur of the recreated first-class hallway, the grand staircase and a first-class cabin, through the comparative austerities of the third-class hallway and a third-class cabin, and through galleries displaying an extraordinary range of surviving artefacts, from silver serving dishes to a child's marbles.<sup>2</sup> Most moving of all was the memorial gallery where the names of the passengers were listed on wall charts, making abundantly clear the stark difference in survival rates between those in first, second and third class. The long queues snaking their way to admission made me ponder the significance of the *Titanic* disaster in twentieth-century his-



**OPPOSITE PAGE:** MR AND MRS CLARKE (RONALD ALLEN AND JILL DIXON) IN *A NIGHT TO REMEMBER* **ABOVE:** THE *TITANIC* SETS SAIL IN 1912

tory and, more specifically, its repeated surfacings (perhaps an unfortunate metaphor) in popular cinema.

In spite of the two devastating world wars that have occurred since the *Titanic* went down in the North Atlantic on its maiden voyage in 1912, as well as numerous other tales of horror, few stories can still chill the blood, in my case at least, the way that of the *Titanic* does. In this study, I want to pursue some of the recurring features of the films that grapple with the story of the unsinkable floating palace: the appallingly smug confidence in material achievement; the blatant class distinctions underlined in the contrasting treatment of those who'd paid fabulous sums for staterooms and those who were herded together in steerage; the collapse of a whole era and its complacencies in a few hours. As Second Officer Lightoller (Kenneth More) says in *A Night to Remember* (Roy Ward Baker, 1958): 'I don't think I'll ever feel sure again – about anything', a remark that pinpoints the symbolic significance of this tragedy. Never again would anyone be certain that wealth and name

would be *enough*; rich man and humble Irish immigrant died together with degrees of heroism and cowardice that had nothing to do with the rigidly separated classes to which they belonged.

How far do the film versions of the *Titanic*'s last hours go towards finding explanations for the ongoing fascination with this nearly 100-year-old disaster? It is, of course, not just films: there are dozens of other responses to the *Titanic* in historical accounts, novels, books for children, a book based on the recipes of its first-class dining room,<sup>3</sup> sheet music memorialising the numbers played by the band<sup>4</sup> and plays such as Coward's and Ernest Raymond's *The Berg*.<sup>5</sup> In introducing the video version of *Atlantic*, E.A. Dupont's 1929 version of Raymond's play, David McCallum (who played wireless operator Harold Bride in Baker's 1958 film) claimed: 'No other historical event would inspire so many books and films.'<sup>6</sup> This may be an extravagant claim, but certainly the *Titanic* disaster has had a remarkable afterlife, suggesting that its significance does resonate well beyond the details of the particular occasion.



**LEFT:** ROSE (KATE WINSLET) AND JACK (LEONARDO DICAPRIO) IN *TITANIC*

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** LIZ LUCAS (HONOR BLACKMAN), ROBERT LUCAS (JOHN MERIVALE) AND CHILDREN IN *A NIGHT TO REMEMBER*

natural hazard; man has not effectively brought nature under full submission and the awareness of this accounts for Lightoller's remark quoted above.

## ATLANTIC

Dupont, a major émigré figure in British film history with a background in German expressionist filmmaking in the 1920s, had scored a success with his last silent film in Britain, *Piccadilly* (1929), and *Atlantic* was his first sound film. As Tim Bergfelder writes, 'although obviously modelled on the fate of the *Titanic*, the name of the ship was changed for legal reasons'.<sup>8</sup> One of the most expensive films of its time, it opens on a forward tracking shot of the ocean liner ploughing its way through the sea, then cutting to brief shots of life on board, first of the crew and then of passengers at the bar or playing cards. 'What a lovely night,' says one passenger, just before Captain Collins (Gordon James) is heard to say, 'I don't want my passengers needlessly worried.' The sense of nature's ominous potential and the cheerful pleasure-loving qualities of the passengers, signified in the cheerful music of the ship's band, are hinted at from the film's start.

Watching/re-watching four of these films – Dupont's *Atlantic*, Jean Negulesco's *Titanic* (1953), Baker's *A Night to Remember* and James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) – led me to wonder, perhaps not very originally, about the effect of a widely known tragic ending on their narrative procedures. It presumably means that the filmmaker has to keep the audience's interest in other matters, aware that there is no possibility of the maritime cavalry's coming to the rescue at the last minute; that the outcome is inescapably dreadful. I'm not referring here to purely documentary films that, through arrangement and selection of facts, are aiming at an authentic account of the events they chronicle, but to fiction films that take a real-life event as a starting point. In classical tragedy we tend to expect and to be moved by what has befallen individuals rather than by mass catastrophe. It is not surprising, then, that filmmakers have tended either to invent or to focus on personal stories, on relationships, as a means of captur-

ing viewer interest until the catastrophe strikes, and the four films I am concentrating on all do so to varying degrees and with varying success.

The central narrative fact of all these films is – and must be – that this supposedly unsinkable ship hit an iceberg on its maiden voyage and more than 1500 lives were lost as a consequence. There are some recurring elements in the films' treatment of this basic scenario: the build-up to the appearance of the iceberg; the inadequacy of the lifeboats (their numbers absurdly determined by the ship's capacity in cubic feet, not by numbers of passengers<sup>7</sup>), the 'women-and-children-first' mantra, couples both old and newly married refusing to be parted, card players still at the table as the ship starts to sink, the band's playing 'Nearer, My God, to Thee' as the ship goes down – and many more such touches. Underpinning them all is the incredulity at the idea of the floating palace's vulnerability to a

There are three couples at the film's narrative centre: wheelchair-bound John Rool (Franklin Dyall) and wife Alice (Ellaline Terriss), who go down with the ship together, she refusing to leave him; the philandering Freddie Tate-Hughes (D.A. Clarke-Smith) and resentful wife Clara (Helen Haye), who are reconciled at the end; and the young couple Monica (Madeleine Carroll) and Larry (John Stuart), who are on their honeymoon. These three couples will find echoes in the character patterns and outcomes of the later films. Tension is built up in these pairs, but more crucially between the crew's increasing knowledge of imminent disaster and the need to maintain the passengers' sense of security as long as possible.

Dupont, a director not much heard of today, doesn't shy away from melodrama in his treatment of what is plainly based on a real-life catastrophe. But while the disaster elements such as the collapse of the great ship's hull are well

enough staged, there is something curiously under-populated about the film at large. Its dramatic action seems, for much of its length, little more than a series of discrete scenes, highlighting first this, then that couple or individual, and the effect is somewhat as if we were watching episodes from a play, with each of the 'moments' admittedly making its impact, but rather as if in a vacuum. However, as the news of impending disaster spreads and the first intimations of fear are felt, the tension does grow, and Dupont's direction acquires a mounting rhythm in which the personal and the huge power of the elements are caught in inescapable tandem. Charles Rosher's camera, now favouring tilted and unexpected angles, moves inexorably to the extended montage that enacts the mass panic that ushers in the film's last third: the film cuts from the effort of lowering the boats to crowds of shouting crew and passengers, to women being dragged into the boats, close-ups intercut with overhead 'placing' shots, and over this sharply edited fever of activity the band plays on.

The film looks somewhat creaky and stagy now but some of that stagginess still pays off as characters stake their claims on our attention, both as individuals and as representatives of their classes. As the crew rush into the bar near the end, one of them shouts, 'We're



the hymn played as the ship sank<sup>9</sup>) but also with the words of The Lord's Prayer over the series of shots and fades of the film's last minutes, as the camera picks

the time he came to direct 20th Century Fox's version of the story.<sup>10</sup> He is on record about the 'tremendous technical problems' in making *Titanic* and as hav-

*Never again would anyone be certain that wealth and name would be enough; rich man and humble Irish immigrant died together with degrees of heroism and cowardice that had nothing to do with the rigidly separated classes to which they belonged.*

all one class now.' Well, of course they are not, as plenty of subsequent behaviour would attest, but this issue of class haunts all the films that draw on the *Titanic* catastrophe. There is, however, a quite potent sense of the end of an era about this version that is missing from the Hollywood films. *Atlantic* ends on an explicitly religious note: not merely the band's playing of 'Nearer, My God, to Thee' (reputedly, but not conclusively,

out various groups, the crash of waves in the dark and, after a slow fade, the long shot of the sky with a hint of sun about to appear from behind the clouds.

### **TITANIC**

Romanian-born Negulesco had been in Hollywood since the early 1930s and had earned a reputation for turning out attractively glossy entertainments by

ing wanted to make it in colour.<sup>11</sup> The relationships at the centre of the film are developed more amply than those in either *Atlantic* or *A Night to Remember*, and Negulesco commented that 'since the audience would be anticipating a catastrophic climax right from the beginning of the picture, I wanted to make the build-up, the preliminaries, as gay and light as possible, without hints of darkness',<sup>12</sup> a remark that overlaps my



LEFT: *A NIGHT TO REMEMBER* ABOVE: JOHN PHILLIPS (KENNETH GRIFFITH) IN *A NIGHT TO REMEMBER* OPPOSITE PAGE TOP DOWN: *TITANIC*; ROSE AND JACK

comment above on how filmmakers deal with a well-known tragic outcome.

The class commentary that informs the previous film discussed is less clearly foregrounded here. To some extent it is replaced by a sense of conflict between wholesome American values and dilet-

al plots to suggest an overall sense of busyness, and in the interests of making the US-European cultural clash largely replace the viciousness of the class differences that Baker's film would highlight five years later. Vestiges of class matters are felt only in the different sorts of pleasure that obtain in

would question the priority of children.

Negulesco's *Titanic* is not the great film such a subject might call for, but it does convey a persuasive sense of the luxurious, beautiful ship and the build-up to its impending destruction. The complacency about the ship's unsinkability and

*Dupont's direction acquires a mounting rhythm in which the personal and the huge power of the elements are caught in inescapable tandem.*

tantish European high life. Julia Sturges (played with a compelling sense of dissatisfaction at the deal life has dealt her by Barbara Stanwyck) is decamping with her two children, Norman (Harper Carter), a young boy, and Annette (Audrey Dalton), already a beautiful young woman. Julia's aim is to get them away from the shallow international life favoured by her estranged husband, Richard (Clifton Webb), who has bribed a poor passenger for his ticket and his identity. Annette adores her father but falls for a handsome American college boy and, because this is a Hollywood film of the 1950s, a way must be found to keep them both alive at the end. (The Winslet-DiCaprio outcome forty-odd years later was hardly an option in 1953.) The strength of the film is in the marshalling of these (and other) person-

various levels of the ship: those in third class are just a bit more uninhibited, a bit more unruly.

The film is more centrally concerned with the personal, particularly in the drama of Richard Sturges' moral reclamation as he goes bravely to his death accompanied by Norman, whom he accepts proudly as his son despite the fact that Julia, playing her trump card in the repatriation game, has told him otherwise.<sup>13</sup> As if to strengthen our grasp of Sturges' sloughing off of his trivial persona, he is contrasted with the 'cowardly' Meeker (Allyn Joslyn), who tries to escape dressed as a woman, a recurring incident in these films. In these days of greater gender equality, the woman-and-children-first axiom is perhaps open to question, though presumably no one

its capacity to deal with any damage an iceberg might inflict is caught in a remarkable and chilling shot of the ship trying to pass the lethal iceberg and contrasted with the horrifying detail of the shots of watertight doors shutting below and their potential for trapping humans frantically trying to escape. The *Monthly Film Bulletin* wrote: 'Perhaps deferring to survivors' susceptibilities, the film's climax admits of little panic.'<sup>14</sup> Maybe, but in Stanwyck's face bleak with loss and grief, the band's playing of 'Nearer, My God, to Thee', the genuinely awe-inspiring shot of the great ship sinking 'hard by the bows' and Michael Rennie's voice-over uttering the appalling statistics of lives lost, this is a moving conclusion to an account of a terrible event.



## A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

In 1990, director Roy Ward Baker claimed that 'the whole purpose of making the film was to show a society which had persuaded itself into a view that you could make a ship which could never be sunk'.<sup>15</sup> He was also concerned that the

Cameron's film nearly forty years on. In Baker's film, the documentary approach tends to play down the personal so that the film's star emerges as the ship itself. Baker's producer was William MacQuitty, who, Baker recalls, was 'emotionally involved because he is an Ulsterman and the ship was built in the Ulster ship-

to signify Baker's concern for telling the story with regard for the actuality. There is, indeed, a title immediately after the film's credits that reads: 'The producers gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Captain Gratridge, OBE, ex-commandore of the Cunard Line, of Commander Boxhall, who was Fourth Officer of the

*Though there is little scope for extended performance, there are some vivid sketches of vanity, panic, courage, devotion, self-preservation – and more.*

film should be in the mode of drama-documentary, and this intention places his film at several removes from the previous two discussed here, let alone from



yards. He remembers being held in his father's arm, as a very small child, to see the *Titanic* as it went down the river.<sup>16</sup>

The screenplay by Eric Ambler, who had written two previous Baker films (1947's *The October Man* and *Highly Dangerous* from 1950), draws heavily on Walter Lord's book of the same name, not merely for its factual recording of the events leading up to the ship's destruction, but also in the detail of incidents and characters. For instance, there is a brief moment in which bellboys, in the disruption and mounting unease, are 'at ease – they seemed pleased that nobody cared any longer whether they smoked' and elsewhere a passenger's hysterical protests: 'I don't want to go into the boat! I've never been in an open boat in my life.'<sup>17</sup> These two details, chosen almost at random, are cited here

*Titanic*, and of many survivors of the disaster who recalled their personal experiences.' No doubt this research helps to account for this film's striking degree of realism, and producer MacQuitty described Lord's book as 'the first full and true account of the sinking of the *Titanic*, cross-checked and verified by its author ... over a period of twenty years'.<sup>18</sup>

My point in adducing this reliance on such factual information is to draw attention to the qualitative difference between Baker's film and the other versions that made so much more melodramatic capital of the private lives of the (largely) fictional characters. In *A Night to Remember*, personal lives are briefly sketched: Second Officer Lightoller (Kenneth More, the only 'name' in the film), the complacent aristocrats (Patrick Waddington and Harriette Johns) taking



leave of their servants, the bridal party from which the young couple (Jill Dixon and Ronald Allen) emerge, the gambler Yates (Ralph Michael) and so on. These are given a few moments to establish a sense of their characters and background, but the ship is the film's real star. Consequently, Captain Smith (Laurence Naismith), designer Thomas Andrews (Michael Goodliffe) and White Star Line chairman J. Bruce Ismay (Frank Lawton) are given more screen time to establish their stake in its maiden voyage, and their responses to its catastrophic ending are neatly differentiated.

Early attention is also paid to mundane matters like the checking of supplies and passenger lists: all this is no doubt intended to persuade us of the authenticity of what we are to see. This is a film neither presenting itself as a fiction as *Atlantic* does nor as a solidly crafted melodrama as Negulesco's *Titanic*



does, but rather as a sober exposition of a tragic event, and it is arguable that this approach results in the most moving account to date. In the film's first third, there is ongoing contrast articulated between the luxury and elegance of the first-class accommodation and the convivial knees-up in third, and these glimpses of the passengers' lives are interspersed with shots of work on the ship: the radio room and its operators, the boiler room, the kitchens, the sailors on duty. Shots of Lightoller adjusting a photo of his wife and of an officer who has earned his rest preparing to sleep encapsulate the personal and the professional aspects of the ship's life.

The serene beauty of shots of the lighted ship at sea by night gives way to a series of vignettes of life on board for both passengers and crew, all unaware of the imminent disaster, and these are shattered by the ringing of the ship's bell and the cry of 'iceberg straight ahead'. When the alarming news breaks, the film establishes clear (and appalling) contrasts between the ways the various classes of passenger were treated. Stewards knock deferentially at the first- and second-class cabin doors to sound the alert, while the steward in steerage simply shouts 'Everybody up!' in the corridors. The class issue, one of the shocking aspects of the *Titanic* story, is succinctly but potently raised in this terse way. There are other contrasts too, between the phlegmatic and the hysterical reactions, between the cheery music played

by the ship's band before it succumbs to 'Nearer, My God, to Thee', between the officers' attempts to be orderly and the mounting panic of those they are trying to reassure. Though there is little scope for extended performance, there are some vivid sketches of vanity, panic, courage, devotion, self-preservation – and more.

Baker's direction keeps in mind that the ship is the central character, and there are images of water crashing through the ship's hull, flooding its lower depths, of the holding back of third-class passengers desperate to make their way to the decks where the inadequate boats are held, of the collapse of a funnel and the final image of the great liner almost vertical before it finally sinks. And this film pays attention to the post-sinking: not just to Lightoller's remark about never feeling sure about anything again, but to the captain of the *SS California* entering the sinking of the *Titanic* in his ship's log, to the camera panning over the survivors on board *RMS Carpathia* as a clergyman repeats on the soundtrack the words of the General Thanksgiving from *The Book of Common Prayer* and to a final title that suggests the 'sacrifice was not in vain' in view of ensuing precautions, especially the provision of 'lifeboats for all'. This is soberly enough done, but it does suggest that Baker wanted to make sure that the viewer took something positive from the disaster.

The film had a mixed reception at the time of release, which I haven't the



**OPPOSITE PAGE:** JAMES CAMERON'S *TITANIC*; ROSE AND JACK TRY TO ESCAPE THE RISING WATERS **LEFT:** CHAIRMAN J. BRUCE ISMAY (FRANK LAWTON) ESCAPES IN *A NIGHT TO REMEMBER* **BELOW:** STEERAGE PASSENGERS LOCKED BELOW DECKS IN *A NIGHT TO REMEMBER*

Rose, who boards the ship with her socially aspirant mother Ruth (Frances Fisher) and caddish fiancé Cal (Billy Zane). The other star turn is provided by Leonardo DiCaprio as Jack Dawson who, in a card game, wins a ticket for the ship, which he boards with minutes to spare. Credibility is already under siege. The contrast between the luxurious appointments of first class and the workaday facilities of third are briefly made and the class issue, so crucial to the whole catastrophe, is in general crudely articulated. Rose's posh mother, on being introduced reluctantly to Jack, gives out with 'Charmed I'm sure', suggesting Cameron's tin ear when it comes to nuances, as does her treatment of the 'unsinkable' Molly Brown (Kathy Bates),<sup>22</sup> who represents 'new money' to Ruth. There are early shots of the engine room, whose design recalls Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) and the brief glimpses of the boiler rooms look like something out of Dante's *Inferno*.

But all this is pretty perfunctorily done. This *Titanic* is not so much a film about the great ship and its tragic destruction but a bloated, foolish romance between sulky, bored Rose, at odds with her upper-class connections, and free-spirited Jack, with Cal as a conventional stage villain, sneering and leering his way through to a predictably venal dis-



space to deal with here. But, as two very good accounts of the critical responses to the film, those of Geoff Mayer and Jeffrey Richards, suggest, the prevailing divide was between those who saw it as primarily an exercise in 'realism' with 'documentary' aspirations and those who considered it either as too likely to 'descend' into melodrama as distinct from those who wished it had been bolder in this respect.<sup>19</sup> Mayer is particularly interesting on the contrasting elements of melodrama in this film and James Cameron's, concluding that 'the later film is shaped by the demands of Hollywood in this era of the blockbuster. Baker's film, on the other hand, reflects the distinctive qualities of the British cinema in the late 1950s, qualities that are characterised by "good taste", restraint and reticence, or what Jeffrey Richards calls "sober realism", but which Mayer sees as belonging "to the tradition of the "modified melodrama" with its "well-made" qualities'.<sup>20</sup> More than any of the other films, and without sensationalism, it understands that the true story is horrific enough not to need embroidery or ex-

aggeration. The villain is a society (given an individual face perhaps in the person of the managing director of the White Star Line<sup>21</sup>) that has hubristically presumed to have nature under its control; and the very name – *Titanic* – seems to epitomise just this kind of presumption.

## TITANIC

James Cameron's film (he is responsible for the screenplay as well as direction) interrelates the recollections of the *Titanic*'s voyage by 101-year-old survivor Rose DeWitt Bukater (Gloria Stuart) with the present-day search by Brock Lovett's (Bill Paxton) team for a famous diamond, 'le coeur de la mer', in the sunken wreck on the ocean floor. Lovett finds a sketch of a young woman in a safe among the wreckage; it is shown on television, and the old woman makes contact with him and begins her story with 'It's been eighty-four years ...'

The film then cuts to the loading of people and cars onto the ship, in the process providing opportunity for a star entrance from Kate Winslet as the young





**LEFT AND OPPOSITE PAGE (BOTTOM):** THE SINKING SHIP IN JAMES CAMERON'S *TITANIC*  
**OPPOSITE PAGE:** THE BAND PLAYS ITS FINAL HYMN IN *A NIGHT TO REMEMBER*; SECOND OFFICER LIGHTOLLER (KENNETH MORE) IN *A NIGHT TO REMEMBER*

play when the ship hits the iceberg. The Rose-Jack affair recalls any number of New Deal comedies and dramas in which the exigencies of true love win out over the barriers of class, except that it is much crasser than those films of the would-be egalitarian 1930s. As a romance, it is full of preposterous images like that in which the two fool about at the ship's prow, as if posing for the film's publicity, and their dialogue is of ear-searing banality. It is all utterly conventional and puerile, then outrageous in the way Jack ends up handcuffed to a pipe only to be rescued by Rose with an axe, then ... But it is not worth going on.

I should come clean and say at this point that I think this is a big, stupid, vulgar trivialisation of a real disaster of truly epic proportions. Cameron takes this terrible event and overshadows it with one of the dumbest love stories in recent – in *any* – cinema. Even when he is forced to acknowledge that the sinking of this floating palace and the consequent loss of life was a grim business, he still wants us to focus on fictional Jack and Rose jumping overboard and clinging to a bit of debris and the boulderish Cal trying to lie and bribe his way into the inadequate boats. Its concentration on the fictional characters and their improbable antics (e.g. Rose about to fling herself overboard early on, tormented creature that she is, only to be pulled to safety by Jack, who in turn is accused of molesting her, etc., etc.) makes you wonder why Cameron didn't turn his attention to some of the interesting real-life people on board. I expect that wouldn't have

given enough scope to his overheated but undernourished imagination when it comes to human behaviour. Just compare his cartoon-like approach to characterisation with Baker's way of vivifying passengers and crew in a few succinct shots but, then, he had the advantage of a screenplay by an actual writer.

To be fair, there are predictably some spectacular moments (such as those of the funnel falling, the ship breaking in two), and some recurring elements (the difference in how the first- and third-class passengers are summoned to the lifeboats; the band playing 'Nearer, My God, to Thee'; the steerage passengers held back at locked grilles; the reactions of the captain and the designer to the unthinkable), but nothing can justify the film's preposterous length (194 minutes) and the disproportionate uses to which this length is put, most of it to the display of Winslet and DiCaprio's star personas. The vapidness of the final shot, when the revenant Rose and Jack appear on the stairs in first class to receive a standing ovation from those gathered below, is characteristic of the film's thought processes (to use that term loosely). Popular as the film was, the *Sight & Sound* reviewer seemed to me to have a finger on the film's pulse when she wrote: 'Not everyone who sees *Titanic* will yearn for the movie it might have been had it been made by a filmmaker with imagination, and intelligence, rather than just raw ambition, but those who do will find it littered with missed opportunities as well as demonstrations of conspicuous spending.'<sup>23</sup>

The one true thing about this *Titanic* is the eloquence of the old Rose's delivery of her recollections. Gloria Stuart imbues her brief scenes with the authority of a lifetime's experience and her statement about the loss of life – '1500 went into the sea when the *Titanic* sank beneath us. Only six were saved from the water' – provides the film's only moments of genuine feeling.

The four films discussed here derive from markedly different production circumstances. *Atlantic* was director Dupont's first sound film, 'one of the most expensive productions of its time, and also the first ever multilingual production, shot in three languages'.<sup>24</sup> Negulesco's *Titanic* was the product of a highly efficient studio system, with all the gloss and expertise that this implies. Baker's 1958 film belongs in a context of British filmmaking restraint, and is imbued with documentary notions of realism. And Cameron's context is that of hugely expensive (and commercially lucrative) Hollywood blockbusters.

The sinking of the *Titanic* was an event of major significance. If filmmakers are going to address themselves to such matters, the least we have a right to expect is a proper seriousness of approach. Among the four films discussed here, it is arguable that only *A Night to Remember* satisfies such a requirement. Its restraint doesn't undermine the terribleness of what happened but, rather, leaves the viewer with some emotional work to do. *Atlantic*, by not naming the *Titanic*, allows itself some licence; the 1953 Hollywood film at least avoids the cinematic elephantiasis of Cameron's 1997 job. Being serious about such an event is not the same as being solemn and portentous, but it does require a sense of proportion, a point of view that knows and seizes on what was truly important about the event.



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#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Noël Coward, *Cavalcade*, Part II, Scene 5, in *Play Parade*, Heinemann, London, 1934, p.54.
- <sup>2</sup> For a profusely illustrated guide to the exhibition, see Judith B. Geller, *Titanic: The Artefact Exhibition*, published by RMS Titanic, Inc., Atlanta, 2001 (latest reprint 2009).
- <sup>3</sup> For titles, see <[www.sff.net/people/tsr/titanic.html](http://www.sff.net/people/tsr/titanic.html)>. Also see the selected bibliography on the inside back cover of Geller, op. cit. In her recently released novel *Good as Gold*, Lady Louise Patten, granddaughter of Second Officer Lightoller, puts forward another theory accounting for the tragedy of the *Titanic*, based, she claims, on information her grandfather suppressed in the shipping company's interests.
- <sup>4</sup> 'The Wreck of the *Titanic*', an eight-page sheet music publication by Haydon Augarde, was recently sold by Australian Book Auctions for \$186.40.
- <sup>5</sup> Ernest Raymond, *The Berg*, Benn Publishing, London, 1929.
- <sup>6</sup> Introduction to 'The *Titanic*: Disaster in the Atlantic', digitally remastered version of Dupont's film.
- <sup>7</sup> See Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1956, p.91.

- <sup>8</sup> Tim Bergfelder 'Life Is a Variety Theatre: E.A. Dupont's Career in German and British Cinema', in *Destination London: German-speaking Emigrés and British Cinema, 1925–1950*, Tim Bergfelder & Christian Cargnelli (eds), Berghan Books, New York & Oxford, 2008, p.32.
- <sup>9</sup> Lord, op. cit., p.81.
- <sup>10</sup> There had been a German film also called *Titanic* made in 1941 and released two years later, but not in Britain as it was banned by the Allied High Command.
- <sup>11</sup> 'Jean Negulesco' in *The Celluloid Muse: Hollywood Directors Speak*, Charles Higham & Joel Greenberg (eds), Angus & Robertson, London, 1969, p.195.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> However, D.P. in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* (July 1953, p.104) felt that Webb 'fails to convince in his final regeneration'.
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> 'Roy Ward Baker' in *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, Brian

McFarlane (ed.), Methuen/BFI, London, 1977, p.51.

- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Lord, op. cit., pp.76, 55.
- <sup>18</sup> William MacQuitty, *A Life to Remember*, Quartet Books, London, 1991, p.322.
- <sup>19</sup> Geoff Mayer, *Roy Ward Baker*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2004, pp.78–91; Jeffrey Richards, *A Night to Remember: The Definitive 'Titanic' Film*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2003.
- <sup>20</sup> Mayer, op. cit., pp.91, 90
- <sup>21</sup> Baker calls him 'the villain of the piece' in a 1994 interview, in Wheeler Winston Dixon, 'Twilight of the Empire: The Films of Roy Ward Baker', *Classic Images*, vol. 235, January 1995.
- <sup>22</sup> The MGM film *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (Charles Walters, 1964) placed this character, played by Debbie Reynolds, at its centre.
- <sup>23</sup> Laura Miller, 'Titanic', *Sight & Sound*, February 1998, p.52.
- <sup>24</sup> Bergfelder & Cargnelli, op. cit., p.32.

