

Neoliberal and Social Democratic Versions of History, Class and Ideology in James Cameron's *Titanic* and Roy Baker's *A Night to Remember*

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In cultural terms, representations of the foundering of the *Titanic* have, in over a century since the event, assumed the proportions of a socio-economic myth. Within academic circles the disaster has widely been seen as paving the way for the onset of literary modernism, shattering the myth of Victorian/Edwardian technological progress and challenging the hierarchical grand narratives of a golden age of mechanical achievement. As Tim Bergfelder and Sarah Street observe:

Since its fateful maiden voyage and sinking in April 1912, the *Titanic* has become a monumental icon of the 20th century, and perhaps more generally of the aspirations and anxieties of modernity. The name of the ship itself has entered vernacular language to become a byword of both human hubris and heroism, and of misguided trust in the securities of modern technology. The *Titanic*'s sinking has been interpreted as signalling the end of the imperial, 20th century world order and as a premonition of World War.²

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² Tim Bergfelder & Sarah Street (eds), *The Titanic in Myth and Memory* (London: IB Tauris, 2004), p.1.

The loss of the *Titanic* is often seen as prefiguring the First World War as the final act in the slow demise of the technologised utilitarian vision of speed and mechanical efficiency which characterised world economic growth since the late 18th century.³

What also emerged from the disaster, and its subsequent inquiries, reportage and survivor accounts, was the inescapable issue of class. The hierarchical nature of the loss of life, with vastly disproportionate mortality among steerage passengers of the working or lower-middle classes, by comparison to the wealthy first class and comfortably-off second class passengers, has been inescapably inscribed upon many accounts of the loss of the liner. In the medium of film, however, little was made of this tragic disparity until a half-century after the *Titanic* sank.

Of the pre-1939 feature film versions of the disaster, the first, *Saved From the Titanic* (Etienne Arnaud, 1912), amounted to a short promotional film for its star Dorothy Gibson, who had survived the sinking a few weeks before the film was made. *Atlantic* (Ewald André Dupont, 1929) incorporated several references to the tragedy, but was subject to threats of legal action from the *Titanic*'s line, White Star,⁴ which prevented too close a parallel to the historical events in question. Melodrama was substituted for historical accuracy.

The 1943 'Nazi' *Titanic* (Herbert Selpin, Werner Klingler) which saw the death of its original director, Selpin, in Gestapo custody before the film was completed, centred on the moral decrepitude of the upper-crust group of stock-market speculators occupying first class. These characters are condemned by a very Aryan German First Officer implausibly included in the crew of the *Titanic* as a last-minute replacement for a missing British officer. The experience of steerage passengers, who barely appear in the film, is neglected. In *Titanic* (1953, Jean Negulesco), the post-war US version of the story, we see the class narrative enacted mainly between first class passengers. At the centre of the story, which incorporates the subtextual moral and sexual anxieties of the American melodrama of this era, are an estranged couple (Clifton Webb and Barbara Stanwyck) contesting custody of their children. The essential source of tension and marital breakdown between the two is class conflict, where the blue-blooded anglophile Webb's

³ Enda Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), pp.25-26, p.66.

⁴ Jeffrey Richards, *The Definitive Titanic Film: A Night to Remember* (London: IB Tauris, 2003), pp.12-13.

character can no longer tolerate Stanwyck's solidly middle class American manners. Class, here, is transformed into a kind of national conflict, speaking to affluent post-war America by making the central issue less about poverty than snobbery.

Of the many cinematic accounts of the vessel's loss, only Roy Baker's⁵ *A Night to Remember* (1958) and James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) seem to approach the issue in some depth. Each of these films claimed the right to do so by citing their historical fidelity (established through extensive research) to the events of the last voyage of the vessel and, in particular, to its last hours. On the face of it, these claims to historical accuracy are justified. Earlier versions of the story had made tokenistic claims to 'authenticity', with perhaps the strongest being the 1953 version, which in its opening titles claimed that 'all navigational details and conversations are taken verbatim from inquiries held by the US Congress and the British Board of Trade.'⁶ But this was, given the general storyline, little more than tokenism.

By contrast, each of the two films under discussion here were insistent on their historical accuracy. As Jeffrey Richards comments of *A Night to Remember*:

From the outset, the watchword of Baker and [producer William] MacQuitty was 'authenticity'. The poster promoting the film was to proclaim in capital letters 'As it really happened'. Unlike the previous sound film versions, this was not to be a romantic melodrama; it would be a docu-drama.⁷

MacQuitty added that even the film's chief source, Walter Lord's book,⁸ from which the film took its title (a tome that remains an authoritative source on the disaster), did not remain entirely unchallenged. Further extensive research was required of Baker and the author of the screenplay, Eric Ambler, in pre-production.⁹

Cameron's film seems to escalate the stakes in the meticulousness of his recreation. He even reconstructs one of the few surviving photographs from Titanic, that taken by the Irish Priest, Father Frank Browne, of a young

⁵ Later, Roy Ward Baker.

⁶ Richards, op.cit., p.24.

⁷ Ibid., p.31.

⁸ Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember* (New York: Holt, 2005 revised edition).

⁹ Richards, op.cit. p.32.

boy playing with a spinning top on the first class boat deck of Titanic,¹⁰ before inserting the entirely fictional Jack Dawson (Leonardo Di Caprio) into the sequence. This was doubtless a wink to any amateur *Titanic* historians, the so-called 'titaniacs', watching the film. Cameron would, indeed, endlessly assert his fidelity to the events of the disaster both before and after the release of the film:

I made it a sacred goal of the production, a goal that came to be shared by everyone involved, to honor the facts without compromise...I wanted to be able to say to an audience, without the slightest pang of guilt: This is real. This is what happened. Exactly like this. If you went back in a time machine and stood on the deck, this is what you would have seen.¹¹

This, of course, raises the vexed question what might be meant by historical fidelity, and how it is enacted in film. There is certainly an element of Fredric Jameson's 'nostalgia for the present' in Cameron's film, while Baker's might equally be seen to conjure Walter Benjamin's observation that 'history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.'¹²

Cameron, having made his declaration of historical accuracy, rows back a little with his subsequent concession:

Where the facts are clear we have been absolutely rigorous in restaging events. Where they are unclear, I have made my own choices, a few of which may be controversial to students of Titanic history. Though I may not always have made a traditional interpretation, I can assure the reader and viewer that these are conscious and well-informed decisions and not casual Hollywood mistakes.¹³

This somewhat self-conscious caveat is no doubt part of Cameron's game with the multitude of titaniacs, of recreating, in very precise detail, the artefacts and architecture of the original ship. This tactic facilitates not so

¹⁰ Richard Howells, 'One Hundred Years of the Titanic on Film,' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* Vol. 32, No. 1, March 2012, 73.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.74.

¹² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 2007, revised edition), p.261.

¹³ Howells, *op.cit.*, p.74.

much a usurping of the 'traditional interpretation', as the imposing of an unconsciously ideological one. Cameron's very sincere interest in the disaster is attested to by his own extensive research, first in fact inspired by *A Night to Remember*, and demonstrated by his personal participation in submersible dives to the wreck¹⁴ which would furnish the first underwater shots of the ship in his film.¹⁵ But he, like Baker before him, tells us more about his own time than about the Spring of 1912.

Baker's film speaks resoundingly of the post-Second World War social democratic consensus within the United Kingdom, where egalitarianism, social responsibility and equality were watchwords for a new society. Under Labour and Conservative governments alike, pre-Thatcher Britain saw higher and lower incomes moving slowly closer together and the new-found disposable income of the poor from the 1950s onwards, making significant changes to lifestyles. Underpinned by Keynesian economic consensus, conditions for both wage earners and welfare recipients improved, bringing, for all the flaws of post-war social democracy, a greater sense of inclusion and a greater emphasis on social responsibility.

Aesthetically, Cameron's film declares a certain attitude to history as something reclaimed for a contemporary consumer audience. In her analysis of the politics of *Titanic*, Alexandra Kellner comments:

Titanic, emerging as it did under the conditions of full-blown, even late-stage postmodernism, also frames its epic story in the generic framework of the historical romance. The difference is the enthusiastic nostalgia of *Titanic*'s generic attachment—nostalgia symptomatic of a strong and significant current in postmodern cultural production. The ease with which *Titanic* presented history, via nostalgia as an eminently consumable commodity, goes a long way to explaining its popularity.¹⁶

The particular flavour of the film's imagery, piling luxury upon luxury, culminates in the final wasteful gesture of the old Rose Dewitt Bukater (Gloria Stuart) dropping the world's most valuable gem, 'The Heart of the Ocean', off the modern research ship at the film's climax. 'Luxury', Kellner

¹⁴ James Clarke, *The Cinema of James Cameron* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p.31.

¹⁵ James S Hurley, 'Titanic Allegories: The Blockbuster as Art Film,' *Strategies: Journal of Theory, Culture & Politics*, Vol 14, No 1, 2001, 110-11.

¹⁶ Alexandra Kellner, *James Cameron* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.32.

adds, 'is nothing if not about waste.'¹⁷ Rose's gesture perhaps indicates the commodity fetishism at the centre of the film. James Hurley makes the link here to the 'heritage' film, seeing in *Titanic* the last word of the cycle of Merchant Ivory films¹⁸ which through the 1980s and 90s so successfully captured the Thatcherite ethos of 'Victorian values' through the filter of nostalgia.

Given all this, it is surprising that some newspaper critics, perhaps inflamed by Cameron's claim that his film fell 'just short of Marxist dogma',¹⁹ condemned the film in such phrases as 'an exercise in class hatred' and 'leftist propaganda.'²⁰ Even academic criticism seems to have fallen for Cameron's claim, with James Kendrick somewhat bowdlerising Marx in order to make his case.²¹ David Lubin admits the populist and somewhat rudimentary nature of Cameron's politics, but defends these as sincere and effective, in a more extravagant moment comparing the film's ideological stance to that of Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*.²²

At this point, Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of Cameron's film seems relevant, addressing as it does interconnected issues of class and gender. Žižek notes that:

while Winslet is safely floating on a large piece of wood; aware that she is losing him, she cries: 'I'll never let you go!', all the while pushing him away with her hands — why? Because he has served his purpose. For, beneath the love story, *Titanic* tells another tale, that of a spoiled high-society girl in an identity crisis: she is confused, does not know what to do with herself, and, much more than her lover, Di Caprio, is a kind of 'vanishing mediator' whose function is to restore her sense of identity and purpose in life, her self-image (quite literally, also: he sketches her image); once his job is done, he can disappear. This is why his last words, before he disappears into the freezing North Atlantic, are not the words of a departing lover, but, rather, the last message of a preacher, telling her how to lead her life, to be

¹⁷ Ibid., p34.

¹⁸ Hurley, op.cit., 95.

¹⁹ Ibid., 101

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ James Kendrick, 'Marxist Overtones in Three Films by James Cameron', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Fall 1999, Vol 27, No 3, 36-44.

²² David M Lubin, *Titanic* (London: BFI, Palgrave, 1999), pp.49-50.

honest and faithful to herself, and so on and so forth. What this means is that Cameron's superficial Hollywood Marxism (his all too obvious privileging of the lower classes and caricatural depiction of the cruel egotism and opportunism of the rich) should not deceive us: beneath this sympathy for the poor, there is another narrative, the profoundly reactionary myth, first fully deployed by Kipling's *Captains Courageous*, of a young rich kid in crisis whose vitality is restored by a brief intimate contact with the full-blooded life of the poor. What lurks behind the compassion for the poor is their vampiric exploitation.²³

In a more specific context, neoliberalism at its apotheosis of the 1990s is manifested in Cameron's film. With the end of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama had declared (as might be apparent today, prematurely) the end of history, with liberal democracy on the verge of exercising a worldwide ideological monopoly. The seeming logic of this position led to an embracing of the neoliberal consensus in most western cultures as a ready explanation of the exhaustion of the left, rather than an historical moment fraught with its own dialectical paradoxes. The struggles and division over such issues as market deregulation, and rollbacks in the welfare state that had occurred throughout the 1980s ended with such parties of the nominal left as Clinton's Democrats and Blair's Labour Party embracing what was, without irony, called the free market. This logic elevated multinational corporations to leaders in globalised capitalism, with politicians and nation states reduced to handmaidens in facilitating this business-based model of expansion as the only practical means of taking advantage of new technologies.

These developments advanced an increasingly Hayekian model of the self-interested individualist as somehow representing the organic paradigm of humankind. The hegemonic growth of this belief is attested to by the broader acceptance of a rigid and stratified social hierarchy, where social mobility came almost entirely to a halt, but the promotion of meritocratic myth to compensate its loss was pushed harder than ever. In the US and UK, poverty became endemic, while the notion of a particular and mythic 'right kind' of poor was promoted; those with sufficient entrepreneurial drive could still 'make it', while the qualities of 'decision makers' were contrasted with a supposed passivity which rendered most of the working class deserving of their perilous existence.

²³ Slavoj Žižek, *Defence of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), p.58.

In *Titanic*, Jack Dawson becomes the embodiment of this myth of the ideologically appropriate poor. We are introduced to the character in an act of colossal risk-taking entrepreneurship, gambling everything that he and his Italian travelling companion Fabrizio (Danny Nucci) have on a hand of cards to win his passage on the *Titanic*. Interestingly, this kind of gambling is explicitly condemned in *A Night to Remember*.²⁴ Jack's cross-class ambitions are manifested when he first sees the young Rose (Kate Winslet), gazing at her longingly from the steerage recreation area as she appears at the rail of First-Class above. His companion Tommy Ryan (Jason Barry) catches the gaze, and comments 'Forget it boyo, you'd as like have angels fly out of yer arse as get next to the likes o' her.' (p.60.)²⁵ Ryan, incidentally, is introduced as '*a scowling young Irish immigrant*' in Cameron's script, and his first remark, 'That's typical, first class dogs come down here to take a shit,' (pp59-60) marks him out for the grim fate that awaits him. Those who scowl at the class structure are not the right kind of poor in Cameron's universe.

Jack, by contrast, is active in determining his fate. He shows an implausible level of social mobility in his travelling the world as an impoverished orphan, and an unlikely level of ability as an artist, impressing the art-educated Rose with his drawings, produced entirely without education or training. Perhaps most important of all, he is class-blind. Rose, after she has been saved from plunging over the stern of the ship by Jack, explains her dilemma to him, rounding off with:

Rose: Look, I know what you're thinking! Poor little rich girl. What does she know about misery?
Jack: That's not what I was thinking. What I was thinking was ... what could have happened to hurt this girl so much she thought she had no way out. (pp.44-45.)

Jack further demonstrates his classless vision of the world when, in a borrowed tuxedo, he appears at dinner among the first class passengers, and impresses all but Rose's monstrous snobbish mother (Frances Fisher) with his relaxed and unpretentious chat. He comes across here as some distant

²⁴ In one scene Lightoller spots a professional gambler fleecing first class passengers at poker in the smoking saloon, and sternly warns the head waiter to discreetly intervene.

²⁵ James Cameron, *Titanic*. All page references are to the PDF version available online at Daily Script: http://www.dailyscript.com/movie_n-z.html.

relative of Barbara Stanwyck's Julia Sturgess in Negulesco's 1953 version. Yet there is far more evidence for a classless, socially mobile vision of America (however mythic the notion was) at that time than in 1997. Jack's characterisation is also, as Kristen Whissel has pointed out, accompanied by recurrent imagery of verticality and upward trajectory.²⁶

Attitudes to class in *A Night to Remember* could hardly be more different. Class there is presented as an intractable barrier to both individual and collective progress. Our introduction to Kenneth More's First Officer Lightoller occurs on a railway carriage where he will be joining the *Titanic*. His first words in the film, immediately after a short prologue reconstructing the launch of the ship, along with the credits, are read aloud from a newspaper advertisement to his wife (Jane Downs). This attracts the attention of an upper class couple (Julian Somers, Ann Lancaster), who share their compartment:

Lightholler: Listen to this Sylvia: 'The new White Star liner RMS *Titanic* is the largest vessel in the world. It is not only in its size, but the luxuriousness of its appointments that *Titanic* takes first place among the big steamers of the world. By the provision of Vinolia Otto toilet soap for her first class passengers, the *Titanic* also leads in offering a higher standard of toilet luxury and comfort at sea.'

Sylvia: Let me see!

Lightholler: For the first class passengers mind you, the rest don't wash, of course.

[*Mrs Bull indignantly nudges her spouse.*]

Mr Bull: Excuse me sir, but are you a foreigner?

Lightholler: Eh?

Mr Bull: Or a radical perhaps? I ask because my wife and I find your sneering remarks in bad taste.

Lightholler: What's that?

Mr Bull: Let those who wish to belittle their country's achievements do so in private. Every Britisher is proud of the unsinkable *Titanic*.²⁷

²⁶ Kristen Whissel, 'Tales of Upward Mobility The New Verticality and Digital Special Effects,' *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Summer 2006), 23-34.

²⁷ All quotations from *A Night to Remember* are transcribed verbatim from the Criterion Collection DVD, the most complete version of the film commonly available.

Much of the thematic content of the film is encapsulated in this interchange. Far from the endless focus on opulence and luxury of Cameron's film, the social democratic suspicion of ostentatious wealth in a situation of inequality is raised in the film's earliest dialogue. The class-bound culture, which sees any notion of class equality as radicalism, was a recent enough memory to be recognisable to a contemporary audience, while the trumpeting of national achievement ill-accorded with post-Suez Britain.

The scene is followed by the departure of an aristocratic couple from their family seat. At the gate of their home their carriage passes an assembled group of children who wave an enthusiastic goodbye. 'Workhouse kids,' remarks a servant, explaining that they are hoping for Christmas charity. There follows shortly a scene in which a group of Irish agricultural labourers prepare for their journey to the *Titanic's* steerage accommodation. Throughout, the film divides its time very evenly between the classes. In contrast to the poor of Cameron's *Titanic*, whose very occasional appearance merely acts to frame Rose's romance with Jack, working people in *A Night To Remember* are given separate storylines that intertwine with those of the wealthier passengers at the moment of catastrophe. The scene in which, close to this finale, a group of steerage passengers, attempting to escape from their entrapment below decks, burst inadvertently into the first class dining room cogently makes its point almost entirely without dialogue; as the sudden sight of the room, the characters freeze in a tableaux of intimidation and fear that speaks more articulately of the hegemonic muscle of the British class system than the single, terrified whisper of a woman among them: 'First Class.'

A Night to Remember never glamorises, as Cameron does, the effect of the lack of space and Spartan accommodation for the steerage passengers. It represents the space, as Richards points out, in the style of Italian neorealism.²⁸ In Baker's film, the scene of singing and dancing among the steerage passengers, which Cameron will imitate later, is a slightly desperate, mend-and-make-do affair, fraught with ethnic conflict and tension, with an attempt by an Irish passenger to flirt with an Eastern European girl creating ill spirit. Cameron's version, almost an up-market tribute to its forerunner, creates a joyous celebration in which Rose shows off her ballet skills to suitably impressed working people. The later film implies a certain contentedness with their lot among the poor, which, as

²⁸ Richards, op.cit., pp.38-39.

Kellner puts it, 'chillingly implies that the poor have an almost genetic will to poverty.'²⁹

The ethnic makeup of the steerage passengers of the *Titanic* is, in *A Night to Remember*, exemplified at the moment of the ship's final plunge into the Atlantic through a sequence in which prayers are said by the poor in a bewildering series of languages, the camera cutting from face to face, illustrating the variety of peoples who make up steerage, and the capacity of the catastrophe to affect all in the same manner. *Titanic* scholarship contains many contemporary accounts of the sinking drawn from both the American and British enquiries and newspapers, which would shock any modern reader. From the endless casual references to 'dagoes' (usually prefixed with 'cowardly') to the very frequent jibes at 'Chinamen', contemporary documentation is flooded with repulsive terms. The soon to be notorious J. Bruce Ismay, chairman of the White Star line, complained, in *The Daily Sketch*, that after his own lifeboat was launched 'it was discovered that there were four Chinamen concealed under the thwarts at the bottom of the boat.'³⁰ That these were in fact two Lebanese men³¹ and (probably) two from the Philippines³² did not save them from all-encompassing Orientalism. The survival of Rose in Cameron's film, is of course secured by a floating door, but in the historical event, the person rescued from this object was a Japanese man, Masabumi Hosono. As Fifth Officer Lowe, skipping a rescue boat into the wreck site passed Hosono floating on the door, he was quoted by a passenger as remarking 'there's others better worth saving than a Jap'³³ and was only persuaded to return to him after passing his near-dead body.

Cameron deals with the wide mix of ethnicities aboard the *Titanic* by simply eliminating most of them from his story. Although 'third class passengers boarding at Cherbourg were Syrian, Croatian, Armenian and other Middle Eastern nationals,'³⁴ none of this mix is evident in *Titanic*. Nor are any of its Asian passengers. A particularly sharp-eyed viewer might spot

²⁹ Kellner, op.cit., p.33.

³⁰ Dave Bryceson, *The Titanic Disaster as Reported in the British National Press April-July 1912* (London: Norton, 1997), p.106.

³¹ Frances Wilson, *How to Survive the Titanic: or The Sinking of J Bruce Ismay* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), p.8.

³² Tim Maltin (ed), *Titanic: First Accounts* (London: Penguin, 2012), p.205.

³³ Jack Winocour (Ed), *The Story of the Titanic as Told by its Survivors* (Dover: New York, 1960), p.195.

³⁴ John P Eaton & Charles A Haas, *Titanic: Destination Disaster* (New York: Norton, 1987), p.87.

a tall man in a rather composite Eastern European costume in the background of two shots in the below decks party sequence, but beyond this, emigrants to America are portrayed as exclusively Irish, Italian or Scandinavian. For some viewers of the film, this narrow mix reassuringly fulfils the myth of contemporary bourgeois America, incorporating the most familiar elements of the racial makeup of the American Dream. Old Rose, recollecting the voyage, covers another aspect of American racial composition: 'It was the ship of dreams ... to everyone else. To me it was a slave ship, taking me to America in chains.' (p20) Precisely how African-American audiences responded to this conceit is yet to be recorded. What is clear, though, is that Rose's new-found poverty after the disaster has been quickly replaced with upward mobility. The series of photographs and mementoes in Old Rose's cabin that the camera tracks through late in the film show her on safaris, as a pioneering aviator and a world traveller. These confirm, as does her comfortable home early in the film, a life of unusual affluence for its era, achieved by means unknown, given that she has spent her career as an actress whose name no one remembers.

If there is a superficial attitude to class in the film, so too, its pretensions to gender equality seem facile. While Cameron makes it easy to sympathise with Rose, beset as she is by a rapacious and controlling mother and a cardboard cut-out villain of a fiancé (Billy Zane), she requires the appearance of Jack in her life to rebel against her restraints. *Titanic*, of course, is purely Rose's story, built as it is around the metanarrational frame of century-old Rose's voice-over recollections of her shipboard romance, but her liberation from the oppressions of patriarchy (most memorably symbolised by her being painfully strapped into a girdle by her mother) comes in the shape of her 'rescue' by a man: 'I've never spoken of him until now, not to anyone (*to Lizzie*) not even your grandfather. A woman's heart is a deep ocean of secrets. But now you all know that there was a man named Jack Dawson, and that he saved me, in every way that a person can be saved.' (p151) Rose's 'deep ocean of secrets' renders her radically other, the exotic subaltern in her own story.

Baker's film, although it contains the stolid 'family values' characteristic of mainstream British films of the 1950s, finds time to ironise the traditional spousal relationship when, as Liz Lucas (Honor Blackman) refuses to enter a lifeboat with her three children unless her husband (John Merivale) accompanies her, he responds 'My dear, I never expected to ask you to obey me.' In a marriage which has been demonstrated as one of equals

thus far, this quiet undermining of the traditional marriage vows seems ahead of its time.

Perhaps the greatest difference between the two films can be illustrated by what Hughes-Warrington cites as Jameson's notion of the 'holes' or 'perforations' in history films, 'leaving us to navigate through gaps and to work at meaning making.'³⁵ In this sense, both of our films are historical, although Cameron's moments where 'I have made my own choices' seem constantly to cohere around a particular view of the individual as atomised, alienated and self-interested, wherever there seems to be ambivalence in the historical accounts, and at times where there is none. Jameson himself provides a picture of this alienated state within capitalism in *The Political Unconscious*:

The concept of reification which has been developed in these pages conveys the historical situation in which the emergence of the ego or centered subject can be understood: the dissolution of the older organic or hierarchical social groups, the universal commodification of the labor-power of individuals and their confrontation as equivalent units within the framework of the market, the anomie of these now 'free' and isolated individual subjects to which the protective development of a monadic armature alone comes as something of a compensation.³⁶

Thus, in *Titanic*, all opportunities are taken to represent the characters as essentially self-interested, even where the director seems to be stretching the historical records beyond credibility. Perhaps this is most obviously illustrated by his representation of First Officer Murdoch (Ewan Stewart) who is seen to shoot himself with his revolver as disorder begins to break out on the sinking ship. Beyond a few sensationalised newspaper accounts in the days after the sinking, there is little credible evidence of this among witness accounts. Lawrence Beesley, the schoolteacher and second class passenger who was close to Murdoch in the last moments of the ship's life, and who subsequently produced perhaps the most highly regarded and level headed witness account of the tragedy, was especially indignant about these early versions of events.³⁷ Cameron was required to formally apologise to

³⁵ Marnie Hughes-Warrington (ed), *The History of Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009), p.4.

³⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (New York: Cornell, 1981), pp.153-54.

³⁷ Winocour, op.cit., p.105.

the Murdoch family for this fanciful representation—the first of a flurry of complaints made against the historical accuracy of the film, particularly from the families of survivors.³⁸

A more significant character infused with Cameron's world view is White Star Line Chairman J Bruce Ismay, played with ebullient villainy by Jonathan Hyde as a boastful, egocentric coward. The scene in which, half dictator and half Mephistopheles, he bullies and cajoles Captain Smith (Bernard Hill) to increase the speed of the *Titanic*, is characteristic:

Ismay: So you've not lit the last four boilers then?

Smith: No, but we're making excellent time.

Ismay: [*Impatiently*] Captain, the press knows the size of *Titanic*, let them marvel at her speed, too. We must give them something new to print. And the maiden voyage of *Titanic* must make headlines!

Smith: I prefer not to push the engines until they've been properly run in.

Ismay: Of course I leave it to your good offices to decide what's best,³⁹ but what a glorious end to your last crossing if we were to get to New York on Tuesday night and surprise them all. (*Ismay slams his hand down on the table*) Retire with a bang, eh EJ?

[*A beat. Then Smith nods stiffly.*] (pp.48-49.)

What is important about this, and other interchanges about the causes of the disaster throughout *Titanic*, is that it places the blame squarely upon individuals and the choices that they make. In creating a villain secondary only to Rose's fiancé Cal and his odious manservant (David Warner), Cameron shifts responsibility from the systemic structures that prevailed at the time to free individuals making poor decisions, be they Ismay's quest for publicity or Smith's personal weakness in not standing up to him.

The truth about the disaster, and the speed of the *Titanic* in moving through the ice field, is far more disturbing. What emerged from testimony to both the US and British tribunals was that despite international regulations travelling at, or close to, full speed at night through ice was standard practice

³⁸ Robert von Dassanowsky, 'A Mountain of a Ship: Locating the Bergfilm in James Cameron's *Titanic*', *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Summer, 2001), 21, 33-34.

³⁹

across the industry, where the larger and more prosperous lines were concerned. Only ships such as the much maligned nearby vessel *Californian*, of the low-budget, slower and less comfortable Leyland Line, which stopped and floated with the ice, observed the convention because, as Captain Lord (Russell Napier) in *A Night to Remember* puts it: 'Well, our passengers aren't in any hurry. They wouldn't be with us if they were.'

Among the prestige passenger lines such as Hamburg-America, Cunard and White Star, the commercial advantage given by speed in crossing the Atlantic was far too important to be hamstrung by safety regulations.⁴⁰ At the British inquiry, 11 captains of the larger lines attested to this practice as commonly observed, leading the inquiry chairman Lord Mersey to exonerate Captain Smith.⁴¹ The *Titanic* was not attempting to break the speed record for an Atlantic crossing because the liner's top speed, although fast by most standards, was inferior to that of several competing liners. So too, the idea, broached in Cameron's version of Ismay, that the *Titanic* was attempting to arrive earlier than scheduled is apocryphal, as no berth would have been available, and this would this would, in any case, have occasioned inconvenience to passengers' transport arrangements.

If Cameron applies the simplistic moralism of Hollywood to Ismay, this character fares only a little better in Baker's film. There, Frank Lawton's Ismay is a rather socially awkward, slightly officious little man (Ismay in fact was quite tall) who interferes with the crew only in so far as his presence puts all who encounter him ill at ease. If Baker falls into the error of the race to New York theory (this time blaming Smith), his picture of Ismay has more of a ring of truth. Wilson's biography of Ismay⁴² reconstructs an essentially shy man, forced into the limelight by his inheritance of White Star Line from his ruthless father, a self-made man. Equally uncomfortable among his higher-born aristocratic circle of business acquaintances (who regarded him as an insufferable *nouveau riche*) and more ordinary people, the socially brittle Ismay's famous reclusiveness after the tragedy, was not, in fact, very different from his life beforehand. Both films represent the incident (widely reported in *Titanic* scholarship) where Ismay attempts to assist in the lowering of lifeboats, and is scalded for impeding the professionals engaged in the job. The moment at which Ismay steps into a lifeboat to save his life over others aboard is also included by both films. Cameron turns this into a simple act of cowardice, again emphasising individual responsibility.

⁴⁰ Richard Davenport-Hines, *Titanic Lives* (London: Harper, 2012), p.330.

⁴¹ Walter Lord, *The Night Lives On* (New York: Viking, 1986), p.205.

⁴² Frances Wilson, *op.cit.*

Baker's attitude was more complex, remarking of Frank Lawton's performance:

He got the character—the panic, the shame and the guilt [...] but both Lawton and I felt that he knew that he had to go back and face the music. I couldn't believe that a man in his position with his responsibility would not have known that and would want to face his responsibility.⁴³

The sense that capitalism needed to be made responsible for its excesses, and subjected to interrogation at its failures, pervades the post-Depression ideological matrix of *A Night to Remember*, with every act having both an individual and corporate dimension.

Cameron's world of isolated and atomised individuals, each engaged in self-interested pursuit of empowerment, is, where he echoes scenes from *A Night to Remember*, always apparent. In Baker's film, there is a memorable incident where an elderly waiter finds a child wandering alone and in tears at the loss of his parents amidst the crowds thronging the decks. He lifts up the child and comforts him. Later, he is seen to make a final dying effort to bring the child to Lightoller's upturned lifeboat. In the unsentimental documentary style of the film, the child does not survive and is gently returned to the sea. The parallel incident in *Titanic* sees Cal, having failed to bribe an officer for a place in one boat, pick up a stray and distressed child in order to pose as its parent and save himself, forgetting the child as he takes his seat in the boat. (pp129-30)

It is, though, perhaps the events in Lifeboat 6, incorporated into both films, that best illustrates this disparity of ideological subtext. This is the boat in which the 'Unsinkable Molly Brown' departed the *Titanic*. The extensive witness testimony which exists on this boat was used to quite different purposes in the two accounts examined here. In *Titanic* Kathy Bates' plain speaking middle class Molly, one of the 'good rich' in Cameron's version, confronts seaman Hitchins (Paul Brightwell) about returning to the wreck site to pick up survivors:

Molly: Come on girls, grab your oars. Let's go [*nobody moves*].
Well, come on!

⁴³ Richards, op.cit., p.79.

[The women won't meet her eyes. They huddle into their ermine wraps.]

Molly: I don't understand a one of you. What's the matter with you? It's your men back there! We got plenty a' room for more.

Hitchins: If you don't shut that hole in yer face there'll be one less in this boat. (p.142.)

Ultimately, Molly, looks down in shame as those in the water cry for help, illustrating Cameron's emphasis on self-preservation as the only organic human response to the crisis. In the cinematic version of the film, the scene is longer, but is preserved in the 'extras' section of the video package. Here, there is added a sequence where Captain Smith, armed with a megaphone, calls on the boat to return, but is ignored by those on boat 6. There was, in fact, a reported 'voice from a megaphone' (whether or not this was Smith is unknown) which ordered a boat to stay close to the ship for survivors shortly before it sank, but it addressed Boat 2, under 4th officer Boxhall. This boat stayed close to the *Titanic* until suction forced it away from the ship very shortly before its final plunge.⁴⁴ This hazard was well-known, and might have been expected to be significant, for no ship the size of the *Titanic* had ever foundered before. So, too, large crowds of survivors around a boat had been known to sink boats in shipwreck.

In Baker's film, the same incident is central, but here Molly (Tucker McGuire) and Hitchins (uncredited) have a similar interchange as above, to quite different effect:

Molly: Well, what the hell are we waiting for? Those people are drowning. This boat isn't full, we can go and pick some of them up.

Hitchins: Are you mad? We get among that lot and they'll swamp the boat—they'll capsize us.

Molly: We can't just sit here and do nothing. Come on girls, row!

Hitchins: I give the orders round here.

Mal Passenger: Don't you know you're speaking to a lady?

Hitchins: I know who I'm speaking to and I'm in command of this boat.

Molly: You get fresh with me son and I'll throw you overboard. Now come on, row!

[they all do so]

⁴⁴ Maltin, op.cit., p.127.

Hitchins: Now look here, I tell you you'll drown the lot of us ...

Molly: Bah!

Here, all but one in the boat are in favour of the rescue, and the self-centred dissenter is threatened with being thrown overboard. Baker's film represents the precise opposite in human behaviour, as might be expected in an era where shared values involved the sacrifice of individual comfort for the greater good. The lack of lifeboats was a major issue in the investigations of the tragedy, a problem that had been reluctantly addressed after a great public outcry in 1894. The British Board of Trade, responsible for shipping safety for the mercantile marine of the nation, as it began to engage with the issue, was flooded by correspondence from the (at that time) immensely powerful multinational shipping corporations on the question of lifeboats. Seeking to avoid the extra expense of more lifeboats, these companies deployed a language of striking modernity: overregulation would lead to jobs being shifted overseas, the prosperity of the nation threatened, and a loss of talent to other nations less hamstrung by red tape were the familiar rejoinders. The Board of Trade, acting on the word of advisory bodies stuffed with employees of the shipping lines, introduced regulations so lax that they required no change in behaviour, and no change of any substance to numbers of lifeboats.⁴⁵ That the *Titanic*'s lifeboat provision was no different than the standard is illustrated by the fact that the vessel fared well against her major competitors in terms of the number of places provided on the boats.⁴⁶ Later calls to change the regulations fell upon the deaf ears of Sir Alfred Chalmers, who, Lord explains, 'was, in short, an owner's dream: a regulator who didn't believe in regulations.'⁴⁷

The other great mystery of the *Titanic*, the failure of the marconigram ice warnings to have any impact on the behaviour of the crew, might also be explained by its corporate governance. The two radio officers, Phillips and Bride were not employees of the White Star Line, but of the Marconi Corporation. They were paid poorly, receiving piece work fees for the number of private marconigrams they sent, and remained unpaid for safety messages and other ship's business.⁴⁸ Thus of 18⁴⁹ ice warnings received

⁴⁵ Lord (1986), op.cit., pp.83-91.

⁴⁶ Davenport-Hines, op.cit., p.71.

⁴⁷ Lord (1986), op.cit., p.201.

⁴⁸ Davenport-Hines, op.cit., p.262.

⁴⁹ Frances Wilson, op.cit., p.248.

over the *Titanic*'s last weekend, only one, or at best two,⁵⁰ arrived on the ship's bridge. Fraternal greetings or stock market transactions were of greater importance, and more than two safety messages a day would lead to White Star being charged for the service by Marconi. The last ice warning received by the *Titanic*, less than a half hour before its collision with ice, came from the nearby *Californian*. It was sharply rebuked by Phillips, who snapped back that he was working Cape Race, the relay station for private messages. Evans, the lone radio man on the *Californian*, switched off his apparatus and took to his bed, missing the subsequent distress signals from the *Titanic*.

I detail this action because much of it is recreated in *A Night to Remember*. The two radio men, utterly mired in the vast volume of private traffic brought up to them from the Purser's office, are seen to miss an ice message through overwork. Much of the subsequent drama occurs in Phillips' (Kenneth Griffith) and Bride's (David McCallum) desperate correspondence with other ships, particularly the *Carpathia*, steaming at full speed to the rescue, but too late. Indeed, the film switches its focus frequently, and for substantial periods between the *Carpathia* and the *Californian*. The latter is tragically ignorant of the *Titanic*'s plight, her watch interpreting the distress rockets of the liner as company signals. As Evans sleeps on, and the *Titanic* sends distress signals, a junior officer enters his cabin to practice with the wireless equipment, then thinks better of it, fearing awaking his colleague. In Baker's film, the possibility of rescue becomes the driving force of the narrative. So too, the film clearly signals the regulatory failures that lead to the disaster. Thus, when Captain Smith breaks the news to Ismay that the *Titanic* will sink, he adds dryly: 'I don't think the Board of Trade regulations visualised this situation, do you?'

It is worth contrasting Cameron's version of the catastrophe, where the Marconi apparatus plays a minimal role, and we see no response from other ships until the *Carpathia*'s arrival after the sinking. In two short scenes, Smith visits Bride (Craig Kelly) and Phillips (Gregory Cooke) in the transmission room to order distress signals, (p95) and then is visited by Bride on the bridge and told that the *Carpathia* 'is the only one close.' (p98) This was not strictly true, and while Smith remarks upon the even nearer *Californian*, as little is made of the imminence of possible rescue as can be

⁵⁰ There is some debate about this among Titanic historians, centred around whether the ice warning Smith handed to Ismay at lunch on *Titanic*'s last day and received back at dinner was the same warning seen by some witnesses on the bridge later. As only Smith could know, there is no possibility of resolution.

called historically accurate. In Cameron's world, we are ultimately on our own.

In the year of *Titanic*'s release, the widely-rumoured cause of the ship becoming holed seemed to be confirmed. In the years after the discovery of the wreck in two halves on the seabed in 1985, the large number of broken rivets scattered across the wreck site had been gathered by submersibles and analysed. In this time, the case for corporate manslaughter against White Star Line was confirmed in the minds of most *Titanic* historians. The rivets were analysed by metallurgists, and confirmed as an inferior form of iron containing slag, which greatly weakened the riveting.⁵¹ The original *Titanic* design required Grade 4 Iron for its rivets, but these were quietly altered to Grade 3 as a probable economy measure as the vessel was built. It is now widely believed that on collision with the ice, the steel of the *Titanic* was not pierced in what was a mere glancing collision, but rather, that the exterior steel plating of the ship was prised apart at its fragile, substandard riveting. In the same year as the release of *Titanic*, the documentary *Titanic: Anatomy of a Disaster* (Stephen Burns, 1997) brought widespread publicity to the research over the preceding years. It seems unlikely that Cameron, who had been close to the Wood's Hole Oceanographic Institute since he began researching *The Abyss* (1989)⁵², would have been unaware of this research, but beyond a possible reference to it when Andrews ruefully quips that he knows 'all three million' (p58) of the rivets on the *Titanic*, nothing in Cameron's film emerges on the subject.

Perhaps something of Cameron's 'private good, public bad' neoliberal economics emerge here. While the original discovery of the wreck by Dr Robert Ballard's party was almost exclusively funded by public finance, from the French government to the National Science Foundation and the US Navy,⁵³ Cameron's fictional expedition under the buccaneering free enterprise advocate Brock Lovett (Bill Paxton) is quite different. His anxiety to please the private financiers funding the project leads to him flying Old Rose to his ship, and discovering the 'truth' of the *Titanic*'s sinking. Ultimately, the simplistic logic of the evil rich in Cameron's film (though some, such as J.J. Astor, Benjamin Guggenheim and Molly Brown, are quite benign) becomes a spectacle which obfuscates the true economic causes of the disaster. For the historical sinking is difficult to see as anything but

⁵¹ Dan Deitz, 'How Did the Titanic Sink?' *Mechanical Engineering*, Vol 120, No 8, August 1998, 54-58.

⁵² Clarke, op.cit., p.116.

⁵³ Lord (1986), op.cit., p.238.

market failure on multiple levels. As with Hollywood films about corrupt, racist and sexually abusive sheriffs in backwater towns that are less about the legislative failures of the state than lawmen born evil, much is done to avoid the subject of systemic failure.

Both *Titanic* and *A Night to Remember* made substantial claims to historical truth, yet each is coloured by the ideological hegemonies of their periods. Tellingly, *Titanic* set records in both cost and profit, its Celine Dion theme song a meticulously integrated marketing tool⁵⁴ to a franchise operation. It has been praised for its capacity to meld several disparate genres, Steve Neale singling the film out as showing a capacity to 'abolish the hitherto established hierarchy between the contemporary blockbuster's romance and action/disaster plots.'⁵⁵ It is certainly a film that succeeds on its own terms. Yet nothing changes in the film beyond Rose's discovery of middle-class aspiration, replacing Cal's more 'European' view of he and Rose as 'royalty'.(p39) There is little sense of the continuity of history itself being disrupted.

A Night to Remember stands in stark contrast, aggregating personal and political history to its sense of tragedy. It was broadly well received among British audiences and critics, but though it was reported 'in the money' in the British trade press, it did not rank among the top takers of its year.⁵⁶ In the key market of the USA, it was a relative failure for both critics and audiences.⁵⁷ Yet its greater appreciation of historical forces reflects Alain Badiou's observation that, 'a disaster, in philosophical thought, is in the making whenever philosophy presents itself as being not a seizing of truths but a situation of truth.'⁵⁸ The sense, built since the early scene on the train to the *Titanic*, of a society reliant upon absolute philosophical, ideological and economic conviction, is built into the film by the continual assertions of the 'progress' that the *Titanic* represents. The sense of the void beyond this philosophy, of Badiou's assertion that 'every real disaster, particularly historical ones, contains a philosopheme that knots together ecstasy, sacredness and terror'⁵⁹ is explored in the latter moments of *A Night to*

⁵⁴ Jeff Smith, 'Selling My Heart', in Hughes Warrington, op.cit., pp.272-86.

⁵⁵ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (Routledge: London, 2000), p.218.

⁵⁶ James Chapman, *National Identity and British Historical Film* (London: IB Taurus, 2005), p.184.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.190.

⁵⁸ Alain Badiou, *Conditions* (London: Continuum, 2008), p.15.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.17.

Remember. Lightoller, ice clinging to his face as he shivers in a lifeboat with Colonel Gracie (James Dyrenforth), encapsulates the sense of philosophical freefall the disaster brought about:

Lightholler: If we'd carried enough lifeboats for the size of the ship instead of enough to meet the regulations things would've been different again, wouldn't they?

Gracie: Maybe. But you have nothing to reproach yourself with, you've done all any man could and more. You're not [pause] I was going to say, you're not God, Mister Lightoller.

Lightholler: No seaman ever thinks he is. I've been at sea since I was a boy, I've been in sail, I've even been shipwrecked before. I know what the sea can do ... *but this is different!*

Gracie: Because we hit an iceberg?

Lightholler: No. Because we were so sure. Because even though it's happened, it's still unbelievable. I don't think I'll ever feel sure again ... about anything.

Perhaps the constant quest for what William McQuitty called 'authenticity', is brought out in *A Night to Remember*, less through its attention to historical detail (though this, by itself, is admirable) than by its encapsulation of this sense of philosophical and ideological catastrophe. The implication that not only Lightoller, but all who had invested in the certainties of this historical moment are changed by the tragedy is pervasive in the film. *A Night to Remember* offers no simplistic redemption at its conclusion (perhaps a reason for its relative failure with US audiences) but instead the possibility of change through the interrogation of existent ethical structures. In Cameron's film, by contrast, there is little change to the implied world beyond the film, only an acquisition by Rose of the individualist ethic of a free market culture. This is illustrated by the finale of the film, in which the older Rose dreams of a reunion of all of the benevolent characters of the film at the ship's grand staircase. Here, the only change to the pre-disaster ship is that aberrant characters such as Ismay, Cal and Rose's mother have been purged. Cameron's climax implies that there are no systematic issues or philosophical failures to address. Instead, individuals who have made the wrong choices are obliterated, and the 'good' separated from the 'evil' by a purified version of the spontaneous order of the free market. It is perhaps

this, in spite of the admirable accumulation of detail, that robs Cameron's film of the authenticity sought.

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