

LORRIE MOORE

## TITANIC

DIRECTED BY JAMES CAMERON

sometimes think of female adolescence as the most powerful life force human nature has to offer, and male adolescence as its most powerful death force, albeit a romantic one. For those of you who thought rationality and women's studies courses got rid of such broad and narratively grotesque ways of thinking, welcome. Coffee is available at the back of the room.


I will admit up front that I have often had a hard time getting people to go to the movies with me. My taste in movies is not a completely inex-

plicable thing, though perhaps I should insist preemptively that it is, so as not to tempt someone's brutally analytical eye. I am interested in the cinematic grappings of Eros and Thanatos as performed, attractively, by young people. Such dramas comprise a kind of middle-aged pornography, which is usually made by middle-aged American men such as John Hughes (that "Chekhov of high school," to quote one critic). But I have been afflicted with a taste for this sort of film for decades, and for several years dated someone who refused to go with me to those "stupid teenage girl movies you like so much." So I grew accustomed to going alone, which made my experience of each one all that much more intense, overwhelming, and perhaps even sick. Passion in isolation is passion indeed.


So, without further ado, let me say this: By the third time one sees James Cameron's *Titanic*, believe me, its terrible writing is hardly even noticeable! The appalling dialogue no longer appalls. The irritating and obtrusive framework that surrounds the central narrative and that gives the viewer long lingering gazes at a minor actress with whom the director is having an affair tumbles away, inessentially. By this time too, one clearly no longer cares that not one adult one knows and respects doesn't despise the film; nor does one any longer care what any of these respectable adults might think about anything. Love misunderstood—the heart societally, perhaps cosmically, rebuked—is one's theme.

What is to be most appreciated about *Titanic* has little to do with its poster boy, Leonardo DiCaprio, though he is a brilliant actor for someone carrying on with Mariel Hemingway's face and such a thin, awkwardly pitched voice. What is to be appreciated about this film is that supported—and not overpowered—by a stunningly executed visual spectacle (surely unsurpassed in moviemaking) is an ephemeral little love story—part *Wild Kingdom*, part *Lady Chatterley's Lover*—in which we are allowed to see something very compelling that, in real life, can be awful and dispiriting to see: what young women in love are willing to do. Certainly, at the end, Leonardo DiCaprio as Jack gives Kate Winslet as Rose the best seat on their bit of flotsam, and upon his apparent death she does pluck him too precipitously from his post; still, it is Rose who surprises not just her mother but surely love itself and leaps from the safety of a lifeboat, through water, through air, to save her man, madly swimming upstream,

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through the corridors of a *sinking ship* (oh, girls, don't we know it) like a salmon to spawn. The hormonal conviction of it is exhilarating to watch, and much more reminiscent of walruses than of Edwardians. It is an athletic enactment of grace (unanticipated, unearned, as grace always is). It is love that exceeds the deserts of the beloved. (The Germans got this down wonderfully, too, in *Run, Lola, Run*.) Writers from Shakespeare on have adored this idea of a young woman's macho cupidity, and why wouldn't they? Who wouldn't? It flatters ryone. It is, shall we say, fantastic. Juliet, dagger plunged to chest, was pure machismo compared to Romeo and his delicate, mishandled poison drinking. **A young woman in love is a titanic force—at least it is time-honored theater to think so.**

And so we—or I—go to the movies.

The successful communication of feeling is dependent on timing. Timing is dependent on editorial instinct. The dramatic last hour of *Titanic* is glorious editing. Has there been a movie that so rhythmically and succinctly joins the smashing up of a great groaning ship with the astonishing range of brutish panic and altruistic courtesy with which our species greets catastrophe? **The frenzied rush to the ropes and lifeboats, the demented elegance of Mister Guggenheim, the small moments of fellowship and concern among the ship's musicians, the helplessness of the terrified crew, the gentle words between mother and child are not imagined in any original fashion;** yet, perfectly spliced, their heart aking accuracy cannot be doubted. This is, after all, a movie with more than just a mechanical interest in maritime disaster on its movie mind. It is interested (even if ham-handedly) in the human animal, social class and injustice, grief, death, and shipboard romance as existential truth. As in every steerage-meets-first-class love story, the movie traffics in clichés, but it does so fluently; the clichés here are sturdy to the point of eloquence. From the sexually explicit names of the lovers, to the wicked fiancé (Billy Zane's moustache-twirling performance is something that improves on additional viewing; one can see he understood exactly the movie he was in), to Jack's dying, Gipperesque quip ("I don't know about you, but I intend to write a strongly worded letter to the White Star Line about all this") to the blithe repudiation of financial thinking (cutting corners to save money is what weakened the ship to begin with!), Cameron loves all the familiar stuff. It

is amusing to watch the number of times that characters simply throw money away into the air—in a film that, while shooting, went extravagantly over budget. It is hypocrisy, of course, that wealthy people make films saluting the poor, but let them benignly pretend. Even *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a novel that sympathetically portrays and endorses a noblewoman's renunciation of her wealth for love, concludes with an afterword by Lawrence that is a multipaged fury about not having made a dime from foreign sales and pirated copies. One can toss it into the air, but money doesn't really go away that sweetly. One can, nonetheless, dream.

One can also admire *Titanic's* Victor Garber, the Sondheim tenor, who, although he has no songs, plays the ship's architect almost musically, his spoken voice (here in a Belfastian lilt) as lovely and precise as his sung one. The intrepid can even admire the movie's pseudo hymn, "My Heart Will Go On," sung by Celine Dion, accompanied by a baleful Irish fiddle. Part folk song, part cola anthem, the song struggles valiantly to do operatic work. Its harmonic progression ascends the scale not unlike Wagner—though not really like it either. A cheesy *Liebestod* may not be more beautiful than a great one, but it can sometimes, given its subject and context, be truer.

One can also admire Cameron's curtain call of the dead, who, arranged along the ship's mezzanine and sweeping staircase at the end, make a moving tableau when the aged heroine finally revisits them; the camera races, searches, swims like an eager mermaid through the ship until light bursts forth, doors swing open, and it finds them. DiCaprio, a physical actor, turns, in a subtle blend of surprise and expectation, but he does not rush forward. He is now pure spirit. He smiles soulfully, extends a hand, and is mercifully quiet. At the end life has provided and preserved only one golden memory, one great emotional adventure, as random as a lottery ticket: It is both too meager and too rich. Possession and loss at life's close are irrevocably knotted. The ghosts bearing witness applaud. The audience weeps.

Only hopeless romantics need to be told yet again that love is an illusion, that it dies, that it is for lunatics and addicts and fools. The rest of us may just occasionally like—even love—a little respite from what we know. This is what Hollywood movies, so humanely, have always been for. 