

Women First

TITANIC, ACTION-ADVENTURE FILMS,
AND HOLLYWOOD'S FEMALE AUDIENCE



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An important aspect of Hollywood's hold on the public imagination is its ability to generate, from within the films themselves, the very terms in which its major releases are going to be discussed. For James Cameron's long-delayed disaster movie *Titanic*, which was announced to be the biggest and most expensive film ever, critics' tendency to use the title and story of a film to describe and judge its qualities and meanings as well as its performance at the box office did not bode well. One could already see the headlines in the industry's "bible," *Variety*: "Cameron's Latest Sinks without a Trace" (in case of a complete box office disaster, without even the obligatory big opening weekend generated by the hype surrounding the film), or "*Titanic* Makes a Big Splash—and Then Goes Under" (in case of a big opening weekend, followed by a drastic drop in attendance caused by negative word of mouth).¹ The explanations for poor box office performance would be given by the film itself. In the same way that the *Titanic*'s builders were obsessed with size and technology when constructing the largest man-made vehicle, contemporary Hollywood could be accused, especially but not only when making *Titanic*, of valuing quantity (more money, more spectacle) over quality, technology (special effects and the mechanics of large-scale filmmaking) over humanity. And in the same way that the ship's very size led to its doom (because it was too slow in turning away from the iceberg) and the disregard of its owners for the dangers of seafaring and for human lives (failing to provide enough lifeboats) led to numerous deaths, the film's bloated spectacle and the filmmaker's disregard for characters and their experiences could be seen as the reasons for its death at the box office after having hit the iceberg of public rejection. The film thus provides its critics with a ready-made discourse ideally

sued for a devastating critique both of the film itself and of contemporary Hollywood in general.

Instead, however, on 23 February 1998, eight weeks after the film's release, the cover of *Newsweek* activated a different set of meanings from the film to tell a success story that is without precedent: "The *Titanic* Love Affair: Steaming toward \$1 Billion at the Box Office." By using the film's title as an adjective, this line suggested (and the cover story inside the magazine confirmed this)² that what is so spectacular and majestic about *Titanic* is not the ship itself or the sophisticated technology used to bring it and its demise to the screen, but the love that the film portrays in its story and generates in its audience. The *Newsweek* cover shows Kate Winslet holding on to Leonardo DiCaprio, with the *Titanic* barely visible in the background, which implies that it is precisely because of the film's foregrounding of the romantic couple that audiences have started their love affair with it (rather than being simply awed or exhilarated by the disaster); this love affair, moreover, is going to last a long time, making sure that, unlike the ship, the movie is never going to sink but will steam on to become the highest-grossing film of all time. Indeed, five weeks later, *Variety* reported that on 14 March *Titanic* had overtaken *Star Wars* (1977) as the all-time top-grossing movie at the U.S. box office.³ While the *Star Wars* total of \$461 million included revenues generated by several rereleases between 1978 and 1997, in the fourteenth week of its first release *Titanic*, boosted by a record win of eleven Oscars at the Academy Awards ceremony on 23 March 1998, sailed past the \$500-million mark, with no end to its steady box office performance in sight.⁴ Even more impressive was the film's performance in foreign markets, where already by the beginning of March, it had topped the \$556-million foreign earnings of the previous international top grosser, *Jurassic Park* (1993), to become, just as *Newsweek* had predicted, the first movie to have a combined gross in domestic and foreign markets of \$1 billion.⁵

However, industry observers also noted that these figures fail to take rising ticket prices into account, and, if domestic gross were adjusted for inflation, the undisputed champion at the American box office remains *Gone With the Wind* (1939), which happens to be another epic love story centering on one woman's emotional experience in catastrophic historical circumstances.⁶ *Newsweek* linked the two films by declaring that "*Titanic* is the *Gone With the Wind* of its generation," and it further noted that, not unlike the story of Scarlett O'Hara, the narrative of *Titanic* focused on "a woman's liberation," appealing primarily (but not exclusively) to a female audience.⁷ In doing so, the magazine confirmed that, like *Gone With the Wind* in 1939, not only is *Titanic* the movie event of the year and the decade, it may in fact be an event of such magnitude that it could change the course of American film history,⁸ by returning female characters and romantic love to the center of the industry's big releases and also by returning female audiences to the central place in Hollywood's thinking that they had once occupied in its golden age but which they lost to the young male audience in the late 1960s.⁹

In this essay, I will explore some of the textual and contextual determinations of this potential historical turning point. First, I discuss production trends in contemporary Hollywood leading up to *Titanic*, with particular reference to the

previous work of James Cameron and to the cycle of female-centered action-adventure films that the success of his earlier films initiated. Second, I analyze the ways in which the marketing of *Titanic* and the film itself have tried to engage audiences, with an emphasis on the role played in this process by love, the act of storytelling, and female subjectivity. Finally, I take a closer look at the film's performance at the box office and at its audience, concentrating on female cinemagoers and linking the success of *Titanic* to the female appeal of Hollywood's blockbusters of the past. I argue that *Titanic* is the culmination of the recent cycle of female-centered action-adventure films as well as a long overdue return to the big-budget romantic epics of Hollywood's past, and that the film's marketing and its story self-consciously set out to woo female cinemagoers without alienating Hollywood's main target audience of young males in the process. Furthermore, like many of the most successful products of popular culture, the film (supported by the surrounding publicity) explains itself to its audiences, offering them guidance on how to understand and enjoy *Titanic*.

Action-Adventure Films

The poster for *Titanic* declares it to be "A James Cameron Film," adding, so as to be sure that everybody knows what this means, that Cameron is "the director of *Aliens* [1986], *T2* [1991] and *True Lies* [1994]." Cameron is one of the few filmmakers working in contemporary Hollywood whose name may be recognized by more than a few critics and film buffs.¹⁰ For those who do recognize the name (and even for those who do not, the films listed on the poster will evoke a similar response), it stands for some of the most spectacular and most expensive action-adventure films of all time, usually made with a more or less pronounced science fiction slant, including a heavy emphasis on futuristic technology and special effects. Not only does Cameron's work include some enormous box office hits, but, unusually for action films, it has also received considerable critical acclaim.¹¹ For example, Cameron's sequel to Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) was the seventh-highest-grossing film of 1986 (with U.S. revenues of \$81.8 million); it was written and directed by Cameron and produced by his then wife, Gale Anne Hurd; and it earned the female lead, Sigourney Weaver, an Academy Award nomination for best actress and won in the visual effects category.¹² Following the disappointing performance of *The Abyss* in 1989 (earning \$54 million, against a budget of \$45 million, which was one of the highest in that year),¹³ Cameron, in 1991, broke records with the sequel to his 1984 film *The Terminator*. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* was the biggest hit of the year, and its gross of \$204 million made it the twelfth most successful film of all time, while its \$95-million budget was the highest ever.¹⁴ In 1994, Cameron easily topped this record with the \$120-million budget for *True Lies*, which was the third-highest-grossing film of the year in the United States with \$146 million.¹⁵

Thus Cameron is perhaps the outstanding representative of the most important production trend in contemporary Hollywood—the action-adventure film.¹⁶ Since the success of *Jaws* (1975) and *Rocky* (1976), action-adventure films have

consistently received the biggest budgets and the widest releases of all Hollywood films; they have generated the highest star salaries (for performers such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger) and accounted for about half of the Top Ten films listed in the annual box office charts during the last twenty years.¹⁷

Like most classificatory terms in contemporary Hollywood, "action movie" or "action-adventure" is a label that can be applied to a wide variety of films, ranging from films featuring a superhero or a mismatched pair of cops, to movies about a man and a woman falling in love during an exciting adventure, and even comedies featuring an apparent loser who eventually asserts himself; these films can be set in a mythical or historical past, in the present, or in the future.

Within the action category, there are also a number of basic requirements that audiences would expect to be fulfilled. The story typically revolves around a series of physically threatening tests and trials for the protagonists, in which they quite frequently get hurt, even seriously injured, often losing control over their situation for extended periods, before they finally manage to triumph over their adversaries by beating or killing them. Most important, these tests and trials and the final triumph are staged as largely self-contained spectacles. The actors engage in an outstandingly athletic, acrobatic, or simply violent performance, presenting a series of amazing stunts, in which they (apparently) inflict damage on each other and/or the set, or in which they narrowly escape such damage. At the same time, in these sequences the filmmakers self-consciously display the tricks of their trade with rapid editing, fancy camerawork, collapsing sets, and all manner of special effects (from back projection to computer-generated images). The intended effect of this spectacle on audiences is amazement and excitement about the magical possibilities of the cinema and about the potential of the human body. At the same time, the audience is meant to be drawn both into the fear and suffering of the protagonists in the early stages of the narrative and later into their triumphant violence and its attendant satisfaction (which may verge on outright sadistic pleasure at seeing the bad guys suffer and die). The films' iconography centers on weapons and the human body, indeed the human body as a weapon and the weapon as an extension of the human body. The key image usually is that of a seminaked muscular human body, tense and about to explode into action.¹⁸

Audience research has confirmed the commonsense view that action-adventure films primarily appeal to young males, looking for physical action on the screen and excitement in the theater, and they are largely disliked by women, who tend to prefer films dealing with characters and emotions such as romantic comedies, dramas (e.g., melodrama and costume drama), and musicals.¹⁹ Contemporary Hollywood has generally marginalized these traditional female-oriented genres by limiting their production and marketing budgets (often only a fraction of the budget for major action-adventure films) and by giving these films a comparatively narrow release outside the main cinemagoing seasons (whereas action-adventure films typically hit vast numbers of screens during, or in the period leading up to, the Christmas and summer holidays).

At the same time, however, Hollywood has made a concerted effort to attract female viewers to action-adventure films. Beginning with *Star Wars*,²⁰ the

industry has produced a steady stream of films that combine some of the qualities and concerns of the action-adventure movie with those of the traditional children's or family film, so as to reach a more broadly based audience, including both regular moviegoers (teenagers and young adults, especially males) and infrequent moviegoers (parents and children, especially females). Since the late 1970s, almost every year one or two family-adventure movies have actually achieved this feat, and these films have consistently topped the end-of-year box office charts as well as the list of all-time top grossers, easily outperforming youth-oriented action-adventure films. Family-adventure movies indirectly appeal to women through their children, who will often be accompanied to the cinema by their mothers or other female caretakers, and the films also directly aim to address women through a highly emotional concern with familial relationships on the screen (which mirror those in the movie theater).²¹

In sharp contrast to the family-adventure films, which are still almost exclusively focused on young males, the second main strategy for attracting women to action-adventure films is to promote a female character to the status of main protagonist. Arguably, it was the success of Cameron's *Aliens* in 1986, featuring Sigourney Weaver as a reluctant warrior who eventually turns into a supreme fighting machine, which first signaled to the industry that female-centered big-budget action-adventure films were a viable option, and this signal was confirmed by another Cameron film in 1991.

While *Terminator 2* features the biggest of all action heroes (Schwarzenegger) and replicates some of the main thematic concerns of the most successful family-adventure movies,²² it is also a woman's story.²³ Not only does Sarah Connor fully participate in the action, skillfully handling weapons and other machinery, displaying her muscular and sweaty body, suffering extreme pain, and triumphing in the end; she also mediates all of this action for the viewer with her voice-over commenting on the action from a superior vantage point throughout the film, communicating her thoughts and feelings and also drawing conclusions about the significance of events. Furthermore, it is her subjective vision of judgment day (the imminent nuclear devastation of the planet) that is presented to the audience during the credit sequence and later on in the film, quite literally making the viewer enter Sarah Connor's mind to share her most traumatic experiences.

This also happens at the beginning of *Aliens*, when without being aware of it, the viewer inhabits Ripley's mind; it is only after she has replayed the trauma of the first film, with an alien bursting out of her own stomach, that the events on the screen are revealed as her nightmare. With its references to childbirth, moreover, this nightmare has clearly gendered overtones. The rest of the film is effectively the story of a woman who suffers from a trauma that she can only overcome by restaging it in real life; she must confront the alien creature at the root of the terror that haunts her, who turns out to be a mother protecting her offspring. But the film is also the story of a woman who wakes up from a long sleep to find that everyone she has ever known is dead, and who in the course of her subsequent adventure forges an emotional bond with a child, for whom she is willing to die (much like the alien mother she confronts).

Aliens and *Terminator 2*, then, do not simply move a woman to the center of their narrative; they also deal with what are traditionally perceived as female issues (childbirth and mother love), and they explicitly set up the world and action of the film as an extension of the female protagonist's subjectivity.²⁴

This is true of several subsequent action-adventure films, which in the wake of the success of Cameron's films have strengthened the role of the female lead, even if they do not go as far as displacing the male protagonist. For example, the rise of Sandra Bullock to superstardom is, arguably, closely tied to the way in which her character in *Demolition Man* (1993) or *Speed* (1994), while apparently merely serving as a sidekick to the action hero, is in fact also positioned as the one whose wish the film fulfills, and thus as the very source of the action presented on the screen. At the beginning of the main story of *Demolition Man*, Bullock's character, in a tight close-up, wishes for some action, just before violence erupts into her otherwise totally pacified world, and toward the beginning of *Speed* she declares that she loves and misses her car, asks the bus driver to drive all over the vehicles blocking the way, and later, when she finally sits in the driver's seat again, admits that she has had her driver's license revoked for speeding, which is exactly what she is forced to do from then on.²⁵

Furthermore, the runaway hit of 1996, *Twister*, earning \$241 million in the United States (with a \$91-million budget), which only *Independence Day* managed to top in that year, not only is a kind of remake of the classic comedy of remarriage *His Girl Friday* (1940), but also sets up and thus motivates the whole action story by first depicting the traumatic experience of a young girl who sees her father being carried away by a tornado, a trauma which she has to replay endlessly in her later life so as to master it.²⁶

The significance of this childhood scene becomes more obvious when compared with a similar scene at the beginning of *Contact* (1997), in which the girl, who is first shown trying to contact other radio amateurs with her CB radio, asks her father whether the radio will ever allow her to reach her dead mother; the film answers this question (somewhat ambiguously) by allowing her later on in life to meet a vision of her by-then-dead father as a result of her total professional dedication to radio astronomy and her belief in alien life forms. Furthermore, the film's opening shot (the camera pulls back from earth into the farthest reaches of the universe and then emerges, without a discernible cut, out of the girl's eye) specifically locates the whole universe in her mind.²⁷

Thus both *Twister* and *Contact* declare their stories to arise from, and to be an exploration of, the minds of young girls. With numerous explicit and implicit references to their literary predecessors, these films connect up with the great and immensely popular tradition of turn-of-the-century girl adventurer stories such as *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (L. Frank Baum, 1900) and *Peter Pan* (J. M. Barrie, 1904 play, 1911 novel), which is, after all, the story of Wendy's adventure told from her perspective, as well as the slightly earlier *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Lewis Carroll, 1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872). What all of these classic stories have in common is that, by fantastic means, they realize the girl's (implicit or explicit) wish to escape the limitations of her everyday domestic life

and to participate in adventures usually reserved for boys, while also, among many other things, exploring her relationship with her parents and other authority figures as well as her own future role as a parent. By drawing on these girl adventurer stories as well as on closely related female-centered fairy tales and classic romantic comedies, then, in recent years several successful action-adventure and science fiction movies have provided an antidote to the boys' stories that otherwise dominate the output of contemporary Hollywood, capturing the imagination and the admissions fees of female audiences.²⁸ In doing so, these films, especially the previous work of Hollywood's foremost action director, James Cameron, have prepared both male and female moviegoers for the biggest adventure of them all.

Titanic

During its long gestation period, which was characterized by reports about an escalating budget (worse even than the \$160 million spent on that other notoriously overbudget ocean-based spectacle *Waterworld* in 1995) and by several delays of the planned release date from summer 1997 toward the end of the year, *Titanic* appeared to be an extension of Cameron's previous concern with super-expensive action spectacles. Only this time, it seemed, Cameron had gone too far, giving in to megalomania, going crazy, losing control of the project, which some sources insisted would eventually cost a totally unprecedented \$250 million.²⁹ Cameron's project came to be seen as the movie equivalent of the all-too-big, overexpensive, and disaster-bound vehicle that was its subject. Indeed, when the film finally came out in the United States on 19 December 1997, the accompanying publicity highlighted the fact that Cameron had gone to the bottom of the ocean to film the real wreck (footage of which is included in the opening section of the film); that he had meticulously re-created the original ship and had then effectively sunk it all over again; that he was a crazy, dictatorial, and supermacho guy obsessed with realism, pushing his technical crew and his actors to the limit, making them suffer almost as if they were going under with the real *Titanic*.³⁰

The film delivers on the publicity's promise of spectacular physical action after about 100 of its 194 minutes, when the *Titanic* hits the iceberg and slowly begins to sink, with people on the ship only gradually becoming aware of this fact.³¹ The remainder of the film operates almost as a self-contained one-and-a-half-hour action movie, in which two protagonists (the young lovers Rose Bukater and Jack Dawson) have to deal with a human antagonist (Rose's fiancé, Cal Hockley, supported by his sinister henchman, Spicer Lovejoy), while also having to fight with the elemental forces unleashed by the collision with the iceberg (rising water levels, increasing social chaos, a collapsing man-made structure, the icy cold). The antagonist's actions start out as being merely deceptive (framing Jack for the theft of a diamond) but soon become physically threatening. Spicer leaves Jack handcuffed to a pipe on a lower deck of the sinking ship facing certain death, and after he has been freed, Cal tries to shoot him and Rose. Yet unlike other action-adventure films, in *Titanic* the actions of the antagonist do not serve as a primary focus of the film, and they do not culminate in a climactic showdown with the

protagonists; instead they form a subplot to the much grander confrontation between the lovers and the elements.³²

This confrontation, however, has many of the characteristics of the action film. For long periods, first Jack alone and then Jack and Rose together are placed in extremely dangerous situations, having little or no control over what is going on, while the spectacular sets of the film are systematically destroyed all around them. However, through intelligent, skillful, and courageous physical action (Rose getting an ax and cutting Jack loose; Jack diving for a key and opening a gate while the water rises to their necks; Jack always knowing exactly where to run and Rose being able to keep up with him), the couple not only escape imminent death but also regain a measure of control. When the ship finally turns upright, they lie safely and relatively calmly on the railing at its stern, while others below them are falling to their deaths. In fact, in this most self-conscious display of the power of special effects to (re)create what appear to be impossible images (the aft section of an ocean liner standing upright and then smoothly sinking into the water), the protagonists are placed not so much as participants in the action, but as spectators of it, much like the film's viewers in the movie theater. From fear and suffering and the excitement of physical action, the film here shifts registers to sheer amazement about, and perverse delight in, the magic of cinema.

The next scene, after the ship has finally disappeared into the ocean, again focuses on the plight of the protagonists and in particular on their physical vulnerability as they float in the water (Jack fully submerged, Rose on a piece of debris), slowly freezing to death without, apparently, any options for decisive action being left. However, after Jack's death, Rose, in a final move combining intelligence, determination, and courage, dives back into the water to get to a nearby corpse whose whistle she uses to attract the attention of the only lifeboat that has returned to the scene of the disaster looking for survivors—and thus she saves herself.

This conclusion is in line with the emphasis on strong female characters in the previous work of Cameron and in the cycle of female-centered action-adventure films initiated by it.³³ In fact, throughout the last ninety minutes of *Titanic*, Rose fully participates in the physical action, shedding clothes to be able to use (and also to display) her body to greater effect, skillfully employing an ax, even hitting people, and running, wading, and swimming in a most unladylike fashion. Moreover, much like Ripley in *Aliens*, Rose is not satisfied with saving herself. She twice gets the chance to leave the sinking ship, and on both occasions, she goes back into the bowels of the *Titanic* to save her loved one (or to die with him), just as Ripley goes back, immediately after having narrowly escaped the clutches of the alien brood, to save Newt, the little girl she has adopted.³⁴

What drives Rose, Ripley, and the other heroic women in Cameron's films is not professionalism, nor the desire for public recognition, nor a general selflessness (although all of these might play a part at one point or another), but primarily, it would seem, the intense emotional bond they have established with one particular person. *The Terminator* culminates in Sarah Connor's loss and commemoration of her beloved protector from the future who is the father of the child she is

pregnant with, while in *Terminator 2* his death in the past is a concrete reminder of the imminent destruction of most of mankind in the near future, the knowledge of which Sarah Connor has to live with, while she tries to reconcile her responsibility for the future with her love for her son. In *Aliens*, as we have seen, Ripley forges an intense emotional bond with a child, whom she is not prepared to lose under any circumstances. On a different note, both *The Abyss* and *True Lies* are stories about marital discord, in which the couple's involvement in spectacular action finally brings them back together again. In all of these films, then, romantic or mother love are at the center of the narrative, providing an emotional counterpoint to the thrill of spectacle. What makes *Titanic* different is that the first one hundred minutes of the film are given over to the love story without any violent action in sight, and that the publicity and advertising for the film highlight romance as a major attraction.

The trailer that played in movie theaters for months in advance of the release clearly indicated that there would be more to *Titanic* than the spectacle of disaster and heroic action.³⁵ The audience is presented with one of the survivors of the disaster in a contemporary setting, and together with her, they are asked: "Are you ready to go back to *Titanic*?" The motivation for this question is the quest for a priceless diamond, which is depicted in a nude drawing of that same woman made during her journey on the *Titanic*. However, the past story that the trailer begins to unfold is not so much about material goods (although the splendor and luxury of the ocean liner are displayed in rich, sensuous detail), but about a woman torn between two men, a rich fiancé and a poor artist, and about her desire for freedom and a different way of life. When the trailer finally gets to the spectacular images of the sinking of the *Titanic*, it has already established that this spectacle is intimately connected with, and needs to be understood in relation to, the fate of the young lovers.

In interviews at the time of the film's release, Cameron explained the connection between the love story and the spectacular disaster further. For example, he told the readers of *Cinefex*, presumably made up of people whose interest lies first and foremost with the technical aspects of filmmaking: "I thought it was not artistically interesting to just follow a bunch of historical characters, never really getting involved in the event at an emotional level. I figured the best way to get in touch with the emotion of the event would be to take one set of characters and tell the story as a love story—because only by telling it as a love story can you appreciate the loss of separation and the loss caused by death."³⁶ Elsewhere, he stated, "I like using hard-core technological means to explore an emotion."³⁷ Thus Cameron emphasized that for him technological spectacle is not an end in itself, to be appreciated in its own right, but a means to the end of character-based storytelling and of engaging the audience's emotions; and the staging of a disaster in which 1,500 people died does not merely provide a good context for heroic individual action, but it is an occasion for the vicarious experience of tremendous loss and for the mourning of that loss.

Such expositions of Cameron's view of filmmaking were a central feature of the marketing of the film as a different kind of action movie. Cameron's most

comprehensive statement is his foreword for the book about the making of *Titanic*. On the one hand, he writes about his extensive research on the topic, which culminated in several dives to see and film the actual wreck; on the other hand, he emphasizes his personal response to this encounter: "I was overwhelmed by emotion. I had known the event so intimately from my research, and now I had been on the deck of the ship itself, and it just flooded over me. I wept for the innocents who died there. That night I realized that my project, my film, was doomed to failure if it could not convey the emotion of that night rather than the fact of it."³⁸

Since "the deaths of 1,500 innocents is too abstract for our hearts to grasp," Cameron argues, it was necessary "to create an emotional lightning rod for the audience by giving them two main characters they care about and then taking those characters into hell." By making them lovers and having one of them die, he could make more tangible the sense of loss experienced by everyone who lost a loved one on the *Titanic*. In turn, the "terrible majesty" of the sinking of the *Titanic* would move the couple's love to a higher level: "The greatest of loves can only be measured against the greatest of adversities, and the greatest of sacrifices thus defined," writes Cameron.³⁹ While the love story translates the disaster into human terms, the disaster gives the couple's love a mythical dimension.

This mutually reinforcing relationship between the *Titanic* legend and the love story is nicely captured by the poster for the film. It shows a young couple, the woman looking down thoughtfully with half-closed eyes, the man standing behind her, nestling his head on her shoulder and neck, eyes closed and lost in his embrace of her body. The image indicates both the intimacy and the distance between them, the ecstasy of romantic union and the melancholy of loss. Their disembodied heads float above the bow of a giant ship, which seems both to support their union, holding them together, and to push through between them, cutting them apart. "Nothing on Earth Could Come Between Them" reads the tag line, a phrase with multiple meanings and complex ironies. At first sight, it would seem the statement is simply wrong, because the whole point of the film is that an iceberg and the ship's sinking will come between them. However, a closer examination of the statement reveals that, strictly speaking, these young people meet and fall in love not on earth but on water. And while their class differences are likely to have kept them apart if they had stayed on solid earth or, indeed, if they had returned to it (after their meeting on the ship), these differences are magically overcome on the floating microcosm of the *Titanic* and are erased forever precisely by the young man's death. While disaster and death appear to come between them, they actually are that which makes their love eternal, keeps them together forever, at least in the woman's heart.

Following a twenty-minute modern-day prologue, the film dedicates the next eighty minutes (until the ship hits the iceberg) to the telling of Rose and Jack's love story, with a few more or less casual references to the imminent disaster inserted to keep up an overall sense of anticipation. This part of the film operates, much like the later action part, almost as a self-contained movie, a melodramatic costume drama about young lovers kept apart by a hierarchically organized social order, with elements of romantic comedy (in the often playful interaction between

Rose and Jack, and in their lighthearted transgression of social norms) and even of the musical (in one memorable dance sequence). The focus of this melodrama is clearly on Rose, whose present-day voice-over occasionally comments on the action, explaining the state of mind of the young woman on the ship who is so desperate about the social role she is trapped in (a respectable lady, a future wife and mother, a man's prized possession) that she contemplates jumping overboard to escape it.

It is her dramatic gesture of climbing over the ship's railing, ready to jump, that allows, and indeed forces, Jack to enter into a conversation with her, bridging the social gap that had previously been pointed out to him as being unbridgeable. Jack convinces Rose to come back on the deck by linking his own fate to hers; if she jumps, he will have to jump after her, and they will probably both die. This pact establishes a powerful bond between them, which transcends the difference in their social status that the members of her class then immediately want to reestablish.

After a brief misunderstanding (his rescue is interpreted as a rape attempt), Jack is rewarded for his good deed with an invitation to the upper-class, upper-deck world Rose inhabits, and while he makes a good impression with his new clothes and his spirited declaration about the joys of life, it is the invitation he extends to Rose to join him in turn for a party on the lower deck that provides a glimpse of the life Rose seems to be longing for—unrestrained, full of energy, fun, and excitement. These excursions into each other's world continue, with barriers being erected by her fiancé to be overcome first by Jack's decisive action (he adopts a disguise to get close to her) and then by Rose's. She joins him in the evening at the bow of the ship, puts her fate into his hands (he holds her so that she can have the experience of flying) and takes it back into her own hands, by first posing nude for him in her fiancé's cabin, and then escaping with him to the very bottom of the ship, past the engines, to the holding deck where she drags him onto the backseat of a car (which may be her fiancé's) to make love. This is certainly a fitting conclusion to their socially transgressive affair, but it leaves open how they will present themselves to the world around them and how they will be able to live together in a sharply divided society with powerful enemies and without any obvious source of income.

This issue does not, however, have to be addressed, because soon afterward, the ship hits the iceberg and the film's focus on the love triangle is gradually displaced, as already discussed, by a basic concern for survival and commitment in the face of overwhelming elemental forces. In the process, Rose is willing and able to keep her end of the bargain Jack struck with her during their first meeting: if one jumps, the other jumps as well. First, it is Rose's turn to go to Jack and save him, and then, when she is in the safety of a lifeboat and he lies to her about his own chances of getting away, she returns to die with him, strictly adhering to the terms of their original agreement.

In the end, however, when Jack has saved her a second time by getting her off the ship and onto a piece of debris, he manages to dissolve their pact and convince her that she has to live while he is going to die. When she saves herself in the end, it is a somewhat ambiguous conclusion to their love story, because it is

her love for Jack that made her want to die with him (if they can't both live)—and it is her love of life (a life of adventure that she had mapped out in her previous conversations with Jack) that eventually allows her to pull away from Jack's corpse and certain death. Thus romantic love is shown to be a force potentially as deadly as the icy water, but it is also portrayed as a life-giving force, which gives back to Rose the will to live (which she had abandoned when the two lovers first met) and, more precisely, the will and confidence to live her own life, unrestrained by the social conventions of the day. When Rose decides to save herself, the potentially deadly selflessness of a woman's romantic love is transformed into the selfishness of her love of life. Perhaps there is a price to pay for this salvation. When the present-day Rose talks about the guilt of the survivors looking for redemption without ever finding it, she may also be referring to herself (although she never admits to it). After all, Jack has had to die and their romantic pact had to be broken for Rose to be able to live.

The ambiguities of Rose and Jack's love story on the *Titanic* can be seen as the driving force behind the present-day framing story, which takes up the first twenty minutes and the last seven minutes of the film and is also present in the main body of the film (its love and action parts) through the voice-over and several inserts. Picking up on, and going beyond, the various narrative devices (such as dream sequences, voice-overs, and childhood prologues) used by the female-centered action-adventure films discussed above to present the action as a part or extension of the female protagonist's subjectivity, *Titanic* squarely presents most of its action as a story told by a woman who invites her audience on the screen and in the theater to share her memory and thus to enter her mind.⁴⁰

While the setting of the story on the *Titanic* gives it historical solidity, its bare outlines sound more like the stuff of adolescent female fantasy: a hopeless young woman is saved by an attractive young man, who miraculously appears out of the darkness just when she is about to kill herself;⁴¹ after many adventures, he heroically dies so that she can live and be free. Behind this romantic tale, however, lies a more sinister wish-fulfillment fantasy. Right from the start, the *Titanic* is presented as the very emblem of the society that so restricts Rose's life that she does not want to go on living. Her voice-over declares that while for others it was "the ship of dreams," for her it was "a slave ship taking me back to America in chains"—unless, of course, something would happen to this ship along the way. Furthermore, in one scene she explicitly identifies the ship with oppressive phallic power, telling its owner, J. Bruce Ismay, that Freud's "ideas about the male preoccupation with size may be of interest to you." Whether she admits to it or not, Rose does want this power, this society, and thus this ship to be destroyed so that she can be free—and in a roundabout way this is exactly what happens.⁴² Behind the romantic dream of an adolescent girl lurks the nightmare of suppressed female rage. Rose's story is also a cautionary tale about the destructive power women may unleash on an oppressive patriarchal order.⁴³

However, this is not at all what Rose's on-screen audience want to hear. Indeed, Rose is only asked to tell her story because treasure hunter Brock Lovett is looking for clues as to the whereabouts of the priceless diamond (called the Heart

of the Ocean) she was wearing in the drawing he found while scavenging the wreck of the *Titanic*, expecting to find the diamond itself. While the motivations of the 101-year-old Rose for telling her story are not initially made clear, the film contrasts her very self-consciously with Brock and his male crew, against whom she has to assert her right to tell the story the way she wants it to be heard. When she is shown a computer simulation of the sinking of the *Titanic* by Brock's assistant, she appreciates his technological and scientific effort yet states that for a participant "it was a somewhat different experience." And when Brock interrupts her after the first half-sentence of her tale ("It's been eighty-four years . . ."), she asks sharply whether he wants to hear the story or not. She then concludes the sentence, "but I can still smell the fresh paint." She claims the authority of the traditional storyteller who talks of things in the past with precision and insight and commands absolute attention.

Interestingly, Brock, who here is reduced to being part of her audience, not only had previously been in control of the action (the investigation of the wreck and the subsequent television appearance which Rose responds to) but also had started out as a kind of storyteller himself, a filmic storyteller at that. When his submersible approaches the wreck at the very beginning of the film, he films the approach and himself with a video camera, commenting pretentiously on what is happening, his pretentiousness being highlighted by his assistant with a hearty "you're so full of shit, boss." Brock can be seen as a stand-in for director James Cameron, another man obsessed with the *Titanic* who did go down to see and film the wreck, and a filmic storyteller who takes command of complex technology to achieve his goal. What happens in the prologue is the undercutting of Cameron's position, first by the comments of Brock's assistant and then, more importantly, by his reluctant handing over of the role of storyteller to Rose. It is as if Cameron declared that this story and this film belonged to the woman on the screen, and also, by implication, to the women in the audience.

Throughout the prologue, Brock is presented as a problematic figure, willing to spout platitudes for the video or television camera, so as to disguise his true intentions, which are purely materialistic. He is a treasure hunter, and the diamond is the treasure he is hunting. However, while he listens to Rose's story for clues about the diamond, during the few cutbacks to the present in the main body of the film, he seems to lose interest in his initial objective, getting involved in the human drama instead. In the end he fails to ask Rose the crucial question (which would have been: what happened to the diamond?), because he has realized that the wreck of the *Titanic* he has been scavenging and the story Rose tells him are not to be seen in terms of the wealth that can be gained from them, but have to be engaged with on a different level altogether. After having heard out Rose's story, he turns to her granddaughter and states that he has been dealing with the *Titanic* for three years, but, he says: "I didn't get it. I never let it in."

What exactly he is referring to is not explained, but there are a number of candidates the audience might fill into the blank spots provided by the word "it," especially if they have read Cameron's widely circulated statements about the film (as discussed above) and know that he gave up his profit participation so as to be

able to finish his labor of love the way he wanted. Obsessed with money and technology, Brock Lovett/James Cameron had initially refused to acknowledge that the disaster of the *Titanic* was about people, about their death or suffering or sense of loss; he never let in the emotions attached to catastrophic and extreme experiences (and, one might add, after hearing Rose's story, he never let in the love that can blossom even, and especially, in the midst of disaster). Brock's statement is mapping out the very process Cameron underwent from first getting fascinated with the disaster of the *Titanic* to ultimately realizing that it had to be told as an intimate story about love and loss. It is also a self-reflexive declaration to the audience that *Titanic*, the movie, should be seen not as technological spectacle put on for material gain, but as an exploration of human experience and the power of love, and a sharing of this experience and of this power between filmmaker and audience. Thus the film itself replicates the publicity discourse surrounding it, identifying *Titanic* as a different kind of blockbuster.

This is all very well, but what is in it for Rose? Despite a long life, which could be expected to have muted the memory of her brief affair, Rose, at the age of 101, still is at one with her dead lover. This is because, as she says, he "saved me in every conceivable way," and she owes her rich and varied life, which she so carefully documents with the photographs she takes everywhere (recording the things she discussed with Jack, like riding a horse and flying), to him. Jack himself, however, is dead; moreover, his role in her life has never been acknowledged. It is not only that Rose might feel guilty for having survived when Jack had to die, but it is also that to the outside world she pretended that he never existed in the first place, and hence she has reason to feel doubly guilty. Therefore, nearing the time of her own death, Rose returns to the ocean and for the first time tells Jack's story, thus bringing him back to life for herself, while also giving him life for the first time in the eyes of the outside world. Perhaps it is her way of looking for redemption.

After telling Jack's story, she returns the diamond (named the Heart of the Ocean), the search for which gave rise to the film, to the heart of the ocean, where she last saw her lover. What had started out as an object of material value in the opening sequence and acquired a series of shifting meanings in the course of the film (her fiancé gives it to her to remind her of the right he has over her body; she reclaims her body wearing only the diamond when she asks Jack to do a drawing of her; she denies her status as a man's possession by returning the diamond to her fiancé's safe) finally has been transformed into a token of this woman's eternal love. By letting the diamond drop into the ocean, she confirms that she has given her own heart to the very ocean in which her lover rests. With the diamond sinking to the ground as her lover once did and as she had originally promised to do, she can now die herself, as if belatedly fulfilling her part of the death pact, yet she does so at peace in a warm bed, as Jack had promised her at the time of his own death.

Before she dies, in her mind Rose projects a union that never could take place in reality: the two lovers uniting, across the class divide, on the grand staircase of the *Titanic*, in front of an audience that is socially integrated, including

passengers from all decks, and that applauds their union. While this celebration of love and social integration could never have taken place in reality, in her dream, which is yet another version of the film she has made possible for the audience, they can.

The movie audience is addressed in a complex way here. Throughout the film they have been presented with mirror images of themselves on the screen, which guided their responses: the research ship's crew so deeply moved by the tale, the treasure hunter who learns an important lesson about material and emotional values, and the applauding crowd at the end of Rose's dream. But they have also been closely identified with Rose herself, the teller of the tale. When Rose dies, having made her peace with the past, the image fades to white, which is the white of the paper on which Jack drew her picture and also the white of the screen onto which the film is projected. By sharing in Rose's transition from dream to death, the movie audience dissolves its connection with her and begins to awaken from the dream of the film to the reality of the movie theater and of the blank screen in front of it. Like Rose, who dreams of love and social harmony to the very end, the audience is encouraged to take the memory of love away from the film, not the recollection of a spectacular disaster. And like Rose, the audience will perhaps be redeemed by this memory of love for their guilty desire to see and enjoy the disaster and the death of 1,500 people.

The Female Audience

The world premiere of *Titanic* took place on the opening night of the Tokyo International Film Festival on 1 November 1997, which signaled right from the outset that, even more so than regular Hollywood productions, *Titanic* was aimed at the world market and that it was a prestige production as well as a superexpensive blockbuster.⁴⁴ *Variety* reviewed the film two days later, with the American release still, quite unusually, more than one and a half months away.⁴⁵ The review, which rose to the occasion by being itself of epic length, was generally optimistic about the commercial prospects of the film, predicting that it would reach "the largest possible public" and was "certain to do exceptionally well at the box office." Yet it was also concerned about some inconsistencies (the marginalization of British characters in favor of American ones, "vulgarity and colloquialisms that seem inappropriate to the period and place"), which "seem aimed directly to the sensibilities of young American viewers," thus potentially alienating older and non-American audiences. This again signaled that *Titanic* was not like other Hollywood blockbusters, whose primary address of young Americans does not normally raise concern in the trade press; *Titanic*'s audience, however, was to be truly international and mature.

The film's long delayed American release on 19 December 1997 confirmed its exceptional status. The first weekend, which is considered all important for Hollywood's major releases as a reliable predictor of overall box office performance, generated a good, but by no means record-breaking, gross of \$28.6 million.⁴⁶ In fact, this figure would appear to be all too small when compared with

the \$50 million for the opening weekend of *Independence Day* (1996), the \$56 million for *Mission: Impossible* (1996), or the \$53 million for *Batman Forever* (1995).⁴⁷ Furthermore, while *Titanic* received a wide release playing in 2,674 theaters, this was less than the circa 3,000 theaters for *Independence Day*, *Mission: Impossible*, and *Batman Forever*, and much less than the record of 3,500 set by *The Lost World* only a few months earlier.⁴⁸ However, unlike the typical steep decline in revenues for these and other blockbusters, the box office receipts for *Titanic* did not drop off significantly after the weekend, and the film ended its first week with a gross of \$53 million. Then, quite astonishingly, the box office figure for the second weekend improved on that for the first one by 24 percent, whereas the figures for *Independence Day*, *Mission: Impossible*, and *Batman Forever* had shown a drop of 30 to 60 percent.⁴⁹ While the third and fourth weekend saw a slight drop in *Titanic*'s revenues, the results were still higher than on the opening weekend, and the film also continued to perform strongly during the week (not just on weekends).⁵⁰ Amazingly, the four-day fifth weekend then saw a significant increase to over \$30 million, which is unprecedented in Hollywood history.⁵¹

By this time, it was perfectly clear that *Titanic* had managed to combine the performance characteristics of two production trends in contemporary Hollywood: the big splash of the action-adventure movie aimed primarily at young males rushing to see the film on the opening weekend, and the ability to make waves of the " sleeper " hit, usually a romantic comedy, serious drama, or weepie aimed primarily at women, who tend to wait for recommendations from their girlfriends and whose attendance several weeks into the release give the film what the industry calls " legs . " ⁵² By starting out at a high level and staying there for many weeks, *Titanic*'s box office receipts were bound to break all existing records in the United States. Furthermore, the film's foreign release early on confirmed predictions about its international reach, and its status as a prestige film also was soon cemented with a record eight Golden Globe nominations only a few weeks after its American release (the film went on to win four awards, including best drama and best director) and with a record fourteen Academy Award nominations in February.⁵³

The scale of *Titanic*'s success, and the exceptional way in which it was achieved, provoked a strong response both in the trade press and the general press, culminating in the *Newsweek* cover story. Early attempts to explain the *Titanic* phenomenon pointed out the importance of older audiences, especially those " who rarely leave home to see a film , " and of repeat attendance: " unusually, older viewers are going back to see *Titanic* for a second time, in the same way teen viewers return to see action blockbusters . " ⁵⁴ In part, this attendance pattern could be explained with reference to *Titanic*'s status as a prestige film, because older cinemagoers are known to value critical reputation much more than younger ones. *Newsweek*, however, argued more specifically that women were the audience that was turning *Titanic* into the biggest movie hit ever. Calling the film " a shipboard weepie , " " a chick-flick period piece , " " a tragic romance , " a " passionate love story framed by the epic sweep of a true historical event , " the article pointed out that the film was

unique in the industry's chart of all-time domestic top grossers for being first and foremost about romantic love.

Before *Titanic* broke into the Top Ten, the group included: *Star Wars* at number one with \$461 million, followed by *E.T.* (1982), *Jurassic Park*, *Forrest Gump* (1994), *The Lion King* (1994), *Return of the Jedi* (1983), *Independence Day*, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), *Home Alone* (1990), and *Jaws* (1975) at number ten with \$260 million.⁵⁵ While most of these films (especially *Forrest Gump*) contain an element of romantic love, not one of them was marketed or perceived primarily as a love story.⁵⁶ The reason for this may be male prejudice against, and dislike of, love stories, which is another commonsense view held by Hollywood executives and confirmed by audience research. With Hollywood's overall output geared toward a primary target audience of young males, it is not surprising that love has been marginalized in the narratives and the marketing of most of the industry's major releases and biggest hits. It is against this backdrop that the success of *Titanic* is so remarkable, yet this backdrop also helps to explain the film's success.

For thirty years now, Hollywood's major releases have addressed themselves primarily to a young male audience, and with comparatively few and mostly only modestly successful exceptions, women have not been given films in their preferred genres, but have largely been expected to accompany their male partners or their children to the movies, going along with the film choices of others rather than making their own. Since the early 1970s, industry observers have persistently criticized Hollywood for its neglect of the female audience; at the same time, changing demographics have created an important mature female audience for the movies (especially important because among older couples, unlike young couples, women are perceived to be the ones who select the film when going to the movies). Yet even when this large and growing female audience, in the exceptional year of 1990, created two of the biggest hits of all time, *Pretty Woman* and *Ghost*, Hollywood refused to reconsider its basic conception of the female audience as either a niche market or an adjunct to the young male audience. Consequently, the industry's output of romantic comedies, dramas, and musicals, and especially of high-profile releases in these genres, has failed to meet the considerable demand of women for such films.⁵⁷ This failure meant that a ready-made audience of women for a major new women's film came into existence, waiting for the one movie that could meet their demands and send a signal to the industry as a whole. Marketed as an epic love story and concerned with the complex narrative exploration of female subjectivity, of romantic and other feelings, *Titanic* was that film.

Newsweek's research on the film's audiences confirms that *Titanic* has attracted a predominantly female audience, with 60 percent of all tickets sold to women, many of whom (especially younger ones) have seen the film more than once and keep coming back for more.⁵⁸ The film would indeed seem, and is certainly perceived, to belong first and foremost to women: Rose on the screen and the female majority in the theater. And since *Titanic* is not one of the modestly budgeted romantic comedies or dramas that contemporary Hollywood usually produces for its female audiences, but the industry's major release of the year written

and directed by one of its most distinguished filmmakers, the success of the film also has wider implications. The film not only returns women to the cinema but, in a way, also returns the cinema to women, declaring them to be the most important audience, and expecting males to go along with their female partners, rather than the other way round.

This is indeed a "return," not a historical innovation. Until the mid-1960s, Hollywood had viewed women, especially mature women in charge of regular movie outings with their husbands and children, as the key audience for the cinema, and it had serviced this female audience with a range of films, including the industry's most important releases.⁵⁹ For example, the biggest hits of the 1930s, which also were among the most expensive and most highly acclaimed films, were *Gone With the Wind* and the animated fairy tale *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937); in the 1940s, the top hits were the male-centered topical melodrama *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) and the female-centered Western melodrama *Duel in the Sun* (1946); in the 1950s, the sentimental religious epics *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Ben-Hur* (1959); and the top films of the first half of the 1960s were the musical *The Sound of Music* (1965) and the epic melodrama *Doctor Zhivago* (1965).⁶⁰ Indeed, in 1965, the list of all-time top-grossing movies (not adjusted for inflation) looked like this: *The Sound of Music* at number one, followed by *Doctor Zhivago*, *Ben-Hur*, *The Ten Commandments*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Mary Poppins* (1964), *Thunderball* (1965), *Cleopatra* (1963), *Goldfinger* (1964), and *Around the World in 80 Days* (1956) at number ten.⁶¹

While the two James Bond films heralded the future emphasis on action-adventure movies addressed primarily to young males, the top positions were held by great love stories, dealing with romantic and/or religious love (the love of God), often centered on a strong female protagonist and set in times of great political and social upheaval. It is this tradition that Cameron explicitly tried to link *Titanic* with, by listing it in interviews as one of his most important inspirations and by evoking it in the film itself: "I'd been looking for an opportunity to do an epic romance in the traditional vein of *Gone With the Wind* and *Doctor Zhivago*, where you're telling an intimate story on a very big canvas."⁶² Thus *Titanic* is not just an evocation of the true story of the *Titanic* and of its times, but also an evocation of Hollywood's past, of a neglected tradition of filmmaking that clearly subordinated spectacle to emotion and put women (and, one might add, children) first—much like the crew of the sinking ship.

The question remains, however, whether the film's success will indeed change the course of American film history, leading to a full-scale reorientation of Hollywood away from its focus on the young male audience and toward women. Early indications are that, as with the *Titanic*, Hollywood's inertia may well be too big for the industry to be able to change course. Already executives say that the film's success will only lead to ever more expensive action-adventure movies, not to more female-oriented films.⁶³ Even Cameron himself has stated that he sees *Titanic* as a one-off, "a singular picture," after which everyone is likely to return to business as usual.⁶⁴ To paraphrase Brock Lovett, it is possible that they simply won't get it, that they will never let it in.

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1. For a systematic and historically wide-ranging introduction to the blockbuster phenomenon and the patterns of release and box office performance in contemporary Hollywood, see Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 8–36.
2. David Ansen, "Our *Titanic* Love Affair," *Newsweek*, 23 February 1998, 44–50.
3. Leonard Klady, "Titanic Wins Domestic B.O. Crown," *Variety*, 23 March 1998, 8. For the American trade press, the domestic market includes Canada. All subsequent references in this essay to the American or domestic market therefore also refer to Canada.
4. Timothy M. Gray, "Ship's Oscars Come In," *Variety*, 30 March 1998, 24; Leonard Klady, "Oscar Adds to *Titanic* Treasure," *Variety*, 30 March 1998, 9. *Titanic*'s Oscar tally ties with the eleven awards won by *Ben-Hur*. At the time of the last revisions for this essay, *Titanic*'s domestic gross was over \$600 million. *Variety*, 21 September 1998, 10.
5. Leonard Klady, "Cameron's Billion-\$ Baby," *Variety*, 9 March 1998, 26. What is perhaps even more astonishing is that by the end of the film's theatrical run, the film's foreign gross of over \$1.2 billion topped the total of \$913 million that *Jurassic Park* had grossed in foreign and domestic markets. As reported in *Variety* on 21 September 1998, *Titanic*'s worldwide box office cumulative was \$1,807,259,583.
6. Leonard Klady, "Tara Torpedoes *Titanic* as the Real B.O. Champ," *Variety*, 2 March 1998, 1, 105. The adjusted domestic gross of *Gone With the Wind* is listed as \$1.3 billion (in 1998 dollars). Even if the earnings of various rereleases of the film were deducted, the film's gross would still dwarf that of *Titanic*.
7. Ansen, "Our *Titanic* Love Affair," 47; Karen Schoemer, "A Woman's Liberation," *Newsweek*, 23 February 1998, 50.
8. For a discussion of the crucial role of the cinematic "event" throughout film history, see Peter Krämer, "The Lure of the Big Picture: Film, Television, and Hollywood," in *Big Picture, Small Screen: The Relations between Film and Television*, ed. John Hill and Martin McLoone (Luton, England: John Libbey Media, 1996), 9–46.
9. For a historical survey and critical discussion of the marginal status of the female audience in contemporary American cinema, which takes into account research on audience preferences and habits, production trends, and debates within the industry, see Peter Krämer, "A Powerful Cinema-going Force? Hollywood and Female Audiences since the 1960s," in *Hollywood Audiences and Cultural Identity* (working title), ed. Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes (London: British Film Institute, 1999).
10. Cameron's status is confirmed, and problematized, by the fact that the poster for the Kathryn Bigelow-directed *Strange Days* (1995) implied that it was in fact a James Cameron movie so as to generate more interest in the film. This strategy did not work, however, and the film was a disastrous flop (earning \$8 million in the United States against a budget of \$39 million). Information on box office revenues and budgets is taken from the German magazine *steadycam*, which derives its figures from the American trade press; see "In Zahlen," *steadycam* 31 (spring 1996): 12.
11. For selected critical responses to, and basic credits for, the films discussed below, see Christopher Tookey, *The Critics' Film Guide* (London: Bantam, 1994). There is also considerable academic literature on Cameron's films.
12. Box office information is taken from "The 1980s: A Reference Guide to Motion Pictures, Television, VCR, and Cable," *The Velvet Light Trap* 27 (spring 1991): 81; information on the Academy Awards is from John Harkness, *The Academy Awards Handbook* (New York: Pinnacle, 1994), 266–267. A brief sketch of Cameron's career is provided in Robyn Karney, ed., *Who's Who in Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 70.
13. "In Zahlen," *steadycam* 15 (spring 1990): 10. *The Abyss* was again written and directed by Cameron and produced by Gale Anne Hurd, whom he did, however, split up with during the production of the film.
14. Budgets and box office revenues for 1991 are from "In Zahlen," *steadycam* 21 (spring 1992): 15–16. Information about all-time domestic top grossers (not adjusted for inflation) is from Leonard Klady, "Tara Torpedoes *Titanic* as the Real B.O. Champ," 105; *Terminator 2* is number twenty-three on this list, but eleven of the films above it were released after 1991. Cameron cowrote and directed the film.
15. "In Zahlen," *steadycam* 29 (spring 1995): 8–9. Cameron again directed and adapted the screenplay from the 1992 French film *La Totale!*
16. By using the term "production trend" rather than "genre" for the classification of films, I follow Tino Balio's example. Production trends can be identified both by textual features (such as story, iconography, and forms of spectacle) and extratextual features (such as target audience, release pattern, budget, cultural status, and key personnel). See Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939* (New York: Scribners, 1993), 179–312.
17. For a more detailed analysis of the budgets, release patterns, and box office success of action-adventure films, which compares this production trend with various kinds of films addressed to women, see Krämer, "A Powerful Cinema-going Force?"
18. For extensive discussions of the action film, see, for example, Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993) and Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994).
19. See, for example, various surveys from the 1970s and early 1980s discussed in Krämer, "A Powerful Cinema-going Force?"
20. On the marketing of *Star Wars* to a diversified audience (including older people and women) rather than to a limited audience of young males, see Olen J. Earnest, "Star Wars: A Case Study of Motion Picture Marketing," *Current Research in Film: Audiences, Economics, and Law*, vol. 1, ed. Bruce A. Austin (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing, 1985), 1–18.
21. For an extensive discussion of this production trend, see Peter Krämer, "Would You Take Your Child to See This Film? The Cultural and Social Work of the Family-Adventure Movie," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 294–311.
22. The film is a kind of wish-fulfillment fantasy of a boy from an incomplete and dysfunctional family, who almost gets to save the universe and almost finds a new father, yet has to say good-bye to him in the end, which leaves him with the single mother with whom he is now reconciled. The parallels to, for example, *E.T.* and *Star Wars* are striking.
23. In fact, *Terminator 2* can be seen as a reworking of one of the key female stories in Western culture: what is Sarah Connor, who has given birth to the future savior of humankind (after having become pregnant under rather mysterious circumstances), if not a modern version of the Holy Mary; except that in this version of the story, the mother

- meriters with destiny, saves humankind herself (with a little help from her friends), and thus takes the role of savior away from her son.
24. Interestingly, both *Aliens* and *Terminator 2* are sequels to films that can be seen as sci-fi variants of the slasher movie, as discussed in Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). Slasher films, such as *Halloween* (1978), revolve around a monstrous figure who goes around systematically killing people, usually teenagers, until a somewhat androgynous, strong young woman, the "final girl" in Clover's terminology, finally manages to stand up to the monster and kill it (albeit only temporarily; the monster is invariably revived). Ripley and Sarah Connor (the heroines of *Aliens* and *Terminator 2*, respectively) are the big-budget action-movie versions of the slasher's "final girl." While slasher films were originally addressed very specifically to a young male audience, there is considerable anecdotal evidence that they found a secondary audience in young females, watching these films in groups during slumber parties and similar social occasions. These viewing habits may well have prepared the way for a later female demand for action heroines.
 25. While the Sylvester Stallone vehicle *Demolition Man* barely made it into the Top Twenty for 1993, with United States revenues of \$56 million (against a budget of \$58 million), *Speed* was the seventh-highest-grossing film of 1994 with a \$121 million gross (and a moderate budget of \$31 million); "In Zahlen," *steadycam* 26 (spring 1994): 9–10; *steadycam* 29 (spring 1995): 8–9.
 26. "In Zahlen," *steadycam* 33 (spring 1997): 19–20. At the end of its domestic release, *Twister* was the twelfth-highest-grossing film of all time in the United States, according to *Screen International*, 7 February 1997, 42.
 27. With a \$100-million domestic gross, *Contact* was number eleven in the end-of-year box office chart for 1997; *Variety*, 5 January 1998, 96.
 28. It also has to be noted, however, that most of the female-centered action-adventure movies in recent years have flopped. The Geena Davis vehicle *Cutthroat Island* (1995) about a female pirate, for example, cost about \$100 million and grossed only \$10 million in the United States. The results for the equally expensive action-adventure films *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), another Geena Davis vehicle, and for the Sandra Bullock vehicle *Speed 2* (1997) were not much better. Recent family-adventure films centered on girl protagonists such as *Matilda*, *Harriet the Spy*, and *Fly Away Home* (all 1996) performed moderately at best; "In Zahlen," *steadycam* 31 (spring 1996): 12; *steadycam* 33 (spring 1997): 21. There is a particularly strong resistance in the industry to make films centered on the exploits of young females. As one shocked film producer recently reported: "Somebody at one of the studios once said to me 'Don't bring me any girl protagonists.' . . . I asked if I brought *Wizard of Oz* would they reject it. And they said yes." Quoted in Dan Cox, "Family Fare, Adult Price," *Variety*, 7 April 1997, 9.
 29. These comments are based on a wide range of press materials encountered throughout 1997. The figure for the budget has been inflated; it is probably close to \$200 million.
 30. See, for example, the following reports in the British press, which are based on interviews with Cameron and/or publicity material: Sarah Gristwood, "Sink or Swim," *Guardian* (London), 2 January 1998, sec. 2, pp. 2–3; "Jim'll Fix It: The World's Biggest Liner's Hit an Iceberg. Cut to Demented Director," *Observer* (London), 11 January 1998; Simon Hattenstone, "A Screaming Director, Freezing Water, a Cast Driven Crazy, and Danger on All Sides. Who'd be the Chief Stuntman on *Titanic*?" *Guardian* (London), 23 January 1998, sec. 2, p. 4. See also the issue of the special effects magazine *Cinefex* dedicated to *Titanic*, the first article of which is summarized as follows on the contents page: "*Titanic* is an apt title for the latest film from director James Cameron, denoting not only the subject matter of the picture, but the scope of the endeavor, as well. On his odyssey to bring the story of the 1912 maritime disaster to the screen, Cameron went to the bottom of the North Atlantic to photograph the actual *Titanic* wreck, then reconstructed the celebrated ship, almost full-size—and sank it!—at a studio built expressly to house the massive production." Don Shay, "Back to *Titanic*," *Cinefex* 72 (December 1997).
 31. The following analysis is based on several viewings and the detailed synopsis of the film in Todd McCarthy, "Spectacular *Titanic* a Night to Remember," *Variety*, 3 November 1997, 7, 106; compare with Richard Williams, "Waving Not Drowning," *Guardian* (London), 23 January 1998, sec. 2, p. 7, and José Arroyo, "Massive Attack," *Sight and Sound*, February 1998, 16–19.
 32. By focussing on elemental forces, the film harks back to the disaster movie cycle of the 1970s, although there are also important differences (mainly having to do with the centrality of the couple rather than of a larger group of people), which would be worth exploring further. Compare with Nick Roddick, "Only the Stars Survive: Disaster Movies in the Seventies," in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*, ed. David Bradby, Louis James, and Bernard Sharratt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 243–269.
 33. While the critical response to *Titanic* does not seem to pick up on this defining theme of Cameron's work, some of the publicity did highlight his liking of strong women, referring, however, not so much to his films as to the women he married: Gale Anne Hurd, Kathryn Bigelow, and Linda Hamilton. See Gristwood, "Sink or Swim," and "Jim'll Fix It."
 34. No doubt, this theme can be found in most of Cameron's work, including his script for *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), in which Rambo, just after he has narrowly escaped the bad guys, returns to the POW camp to save its inmates. Structurally, the similarities between *Rambo II* and the rest of Cameron's oeuvre are striking, although ideologically they would appear to be at opposite ends of the spectrum.
 35. The following comments are based on the trailer shown in movie theaters in Britain and The Netherlands, which I presume to be the same as the one shown in the United States.
 36. Quoted in Shay, "Back to *Titanic*," 16.
 37. Gristwood, "Sink or Swim," 3. Compare with similar statements in "Jim'll Fix It" and "Captain of the Ship," *Preview*, November–December 1997, 16–21.
 38. Ed W. Marsh, *James Cameron's Titanic* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1997), ix.
 39. *Ibid.*, vi.
 40. However, in typical Hollywood flashback fashion, the film actually shows several events that Rose neither attended nor knew anything about.
 41. In fact, Jack is first seen immediately after the voice-over has declared that Rose was screaming inside, but no one could hear her, at which point the ship's horn "screams" and the film cuts to Jack, as if the ship was calling him on her behalf, as if her relayed internal scream brought him into existence even.
 42. There is yet another way of looking at this. Throughout the film, Rose is closely identified with the ship, which "screams" on her behalf and is, just like Rose, a prized possession of powerful males; in one scene Rose is also presented as the ship's figurehead. The sinking of the *Titanic*, then, would appear to be an extension of Rose's earlier death wish. Furthermore, the two are linked through the motif of virginity: The *Titanic* is on her maiden voyage, and Rose is still a virgin; the *Titanic*'s voyage comes to an end

- shortly after Rose has lost her virginity. Thus the story of the film moves from Rose's sexual objectification and her suicidal frame of mind (in which she turns her anger against herself) to her sexual liberation and the externalization of her aggressive impulses in the spectacle of the ship's destruction. The connection between her sexual liberation and death is also hinted at by the peculiar postcoital exchange in which she points out to Jack that he is shaking, and he replies, as if he had been severely wounded: "I'll be okay." Of course, in the end he won't.
43. While traditional girl adventurer stories prefer the construction of an alternative world to the destruction of the real one, contemporary female-centered action-adventure films revel in the destructive power of female forces (which may or may not be directed against an identifiable patriarchal order): the alien mother and her brood in *Aliens*, the nuclear devastation of the earth which is endlessly replaying in Sarah Connor's mind in *Terminator 2*, the devastating female-identified tornadoes in *Twister*.
 44. Jon Herskovitz and Chris Petrikin, "Titanic Preem a Sellout," *Variety*, 3 November 1997, 7, 11.
 45. McCarthy, "Spectacular Titanic a Night to Remember," 7, 106.
 46. *Variety*, 5 January 1998, 16.
 47. "In Zahlen," *steadycam* 30 (winter 1995): 15; *steadycam* 31 (spring 1996): 12; *steadycam* 32 (winter 1996): 25.
 48. That *Titanic* "has bucked the trend of ballooning playdates" was noted in *Variety*, 26 January 1998, 21.
 49. *Ibid.*, 5 January 1998, 13, 16.
 50. *Ibid.*, 12 January 1998, 13; and 19 January 1998, 13.
 51. *Ibid.*, 26 January 1998, 12. Statistics about the "highest weekend grosses after fourth week of wide release," which show *Titanic* way ahead of the competition, appear on 21.
 52. Compare with Schatz, "The New Hollywood," 25-36.
 53. See Paul Karon, "Titanic Steams on with 4 Globes," *Variety*, 26 January 1998, 20; and Ansen, "Our Titanic Love Affair," 47. While the release of *Titanic* was not supported by, and did not feed into, a merchandising craze typical of youth and child oriented blockbusters, Ansen points out that by February, 10 million units of the orchestral soundtrack album had been shipped worldwide and that the glossy paperback version of James Cameron's *Titanic* had been at the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list. Even the film's ancillary products had an air of prestige.
 54. *Screen International*, 16 January 1998, 37.
 55. Klady, "Tara Torpedoes Titanic as the real B.O. Champ," 105. There is considerable overlap with the list of international top grossers. The most up-to-date version that I could find is from June 1996, which is before the rerelease of the *Star Wars* trilogy in 1997 and before the release of the superhits *Independence Day*, *Twister*, *Men in Black* (1997), and *The Lost World* (1997). The list has *Jurassic Park* at number one with \$913 million, followed by *The Lion King*, *E.T.*, *Forrest Gump*, *Ghost* (1990), *Star Wars*, *Aladdin* (1992), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), *Terminator 2*, and *Home Alone* at number ten with \$454 million; *Variety*, 3 June 1996, 70.
 56. In fact, elsewhere I have argued that most of these films are family-adventure movies whose primary concern is with familial relationships, with a particular emphasis on parents' love for their children and children's love for their parents. See Krämer, "Would You Take Your Child to See This Film?"
 57. Compare with Krämer, "A Powerful Cinema-going Force?"
 58. Ansen, "Our Titanic Love Affair," 46-47. A striking statistic is that "45% of all the women under 25 who have seen the movie have seen it twice," and it is assumed that most of them were adolescents. Quoting experts on the development of adolescent girls, the article highlights the importance both of the design of Jack's character (as a vehicle for Rose's liberation) and of DiCaprio's performance for the movie's appeal to this audience segment. According to a poll cited in *Variety*, prior to the release of *Titanic* both Winslet and DiCaprio were actually relatively unknown to the general public, yet they were considered rising stars by those who recognized their names; *Variety*, 15 December 1997, 73. DiCaprio can be seen as a teen idol much like many pop stars. Yet his appeal goes beyond this, for even *Vanity Fair* could not help declaring him to be "simply the world's biggest heartthrob," quoting Winslet's statement that he is "probably the world's most beautiful-looking man." Cathy Horyn, "Leonardo Takes Wing," *Vanity Fair*, January 1998, 54-59, 112-114; quotes from title page and 112.
 59. Compare with Balio, *Grand Design*, 1-12, 179-312; Richard Maltby with Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1995), 10-11.
 60. Joel W. Finler, *The Hollywood Story* (New York: Crown, 1988), 276-277.
 61. *Ibid.* In inflation-adjusted charts, most of these films still hold top positions. See Klady, "Tara Torpedoes Titanic as Real B.O. Champ," 105.
 62. Cameron quoted in "Captain of the Ship," 18. Also see Gristwood, "Sink or Swim."
 63. Leonard Klady, "H'wood's B.O. Blast," *Variety*, 5 January 1998, 1, 96.
 64. Quoted in Shay, "Back to Titanic," 76.