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1998

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Publication Details

Buchanan, I. 1998, 'Misrecognition in Titanic', *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 10, pp. 1-5.

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Misrecognition in *Titanic*

by Ian Buchanan

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Something rather interesting is going on in Hollywood cinema today. Art is being used to deflect feminist inquiry; but more incredibly still, feminist self-assertion is being used to avert a critique of capitalism. I am thinking particularly of the nude scene in *Titanic*.¹ Kate Winslett appears nude, but because it is for an artist, not us, as it were, that nudity is contained, recuperated in other words, by being made to seem other than it is. And since the scene is a peripeteia in the Hollywood sense of the word, namely a moment of self-discovery, the resulting artwork is coded as existentially authentic.

In the process, our gaze, which according to Mulvey, among many others, is implicitly masculine, is insidiously transformed into its very opposite. Instead of an objectifying masculine gaze we have the subjectifying gaze of the artist. This scene is emblematic, I will argue, of the way *Titanic* manipulates feminist and other critical sympathies to compel us to misrecognize its endorsement of the status quo as criticism.

To begin with, while *Titanic* initially feels like a tragedy it turns out to be a quest narrative, a story of feminine self discovery. As such, the actual tragedy of the sinking of the ship is a motivation of the device of the romance around which the film revolves. Although it may only be a matter of emphasis, I would argue *Titanic* is not a romance in the strictest sense because neither of the two protagonists, Jack and Rose, is put to any test which redeems them in the eyes of the other. The classic pattern of the romance, as defined by Mills & Boon, involving six basic steps which may be summarised as follows, girl meets boy, girl resists boy, boy insults girl, boy redeems himself, girl takes boy back, they live happily ever after, is not to be found in *Titanic*. The impediments to their love do not come from within, as they always do in romances. Think of Darcy's pride and Elizabeth's prejudice (and vice versa). For Jack and Rose the obstacles to their love are purely external, forces beyond their control, not the least of which is the fact they happen to meet on a ship that is doomed to sink. In fact, their union is so swift as to hardly figure at all, narratively speaking, except as a distraction.

This is why I have suggested *Titanic* is a story of feminine self discovery, not a genuine love story. Two strangers meet on a boat, one is there by chance (he wins his ticket in a poker game), the other against her will (she is on her way to an arranged marriage). One travels steerage, the other first class. They seize upon each other then for quite different reasons -- one to escape a fate so unthinkable she contemplates suicide, the other because hauling her back from the brink has the hallmark of destiny -- but these are swept away in the name of a transcendent love.

Class difference too is swiftly eradicated. We learn that she is in actuality as poor as he is, despite appearances, so that there can be no suggestion of Jack being simply a bounder in desiring Rose. By the same token, the fact that Rose is willing to turn her back on such great wealth tells us that she really loves Jack, that she's willing to give up everything for him. The irony of this negation of wealth is that it mutes the class critique the film otherwise mobilises

by suggesting, in the end, money doesn't matter, doesn't decide things for us; willpower does, love does.

Once again, in classic Hollywood fashion, the problems of the social are turned around and made into problems of the individual. We see this in the fact that the greatest obstacle to Jack and Rose's love turns out not to be the quite awful fiancé, whom we rapidly learn to loathe, nor even the mother, who it hardly needs to be said is every bit as loathsome as the intended, but Rose's misguided sense of duty. This duty is coded as class loyalty, but actually figured as family loyalty, which although it is presumed to be the same thing, isn't. The fact that her mother is grafting and snobbish makes it easy for us to not only understand but actively support Rose's decision, however haphazardly it is articulated, to reject her fiancé's suit knowing full well that it will result in penury for her sole surviving parent. The lack of a clearly enunciated rejection is an important clue as to what type of narrative we are dealing with because it illustrates that the central struggle around which the narrative revolves is Rose's attempt to balance what she must do with what she wants to do.

Such a tension is typical of the quest narrative in general, in which a hero must set aside his fears and selfish cares and fight for the greater good of the community. What the hero usually wants at the outset of the story is to be left alone, left to live the quiet life he has chosen for himself. But external forces make this impossible. A drastic change of circumstances soon pressures him into action, but he deliberates long and hard before he takes any direct measures; indeed, his initial response to the changed situation is not a direct confrontation with the assailants at all, as is expected of him by the community that calls him to arms, our representatives in the film. That is to say, action does not immediately follow the decision to act. First the hero must confront and conquer his fears, and it is this battle that takes up the larger part of the film, though in terms of the relative scale of action it is always kept properly subordinated by the major battle which we know is being saved for the end. In Rose's case, this formula is preserved even as the outcome is reversed.

The situation she is faced with is an intolerable marriage. This leads her to contemplate suicide as a way out, which in narrative terms must be read as a strange peace she wants to be left to enjoy. Society, in the person of Jack, calls her back from the edge, and echoing our thoughts exactly calls her to take up arms against her situation, which in effect is a call for her to be true to herself. This is not a decision she can make lightly, we soon see, and she must wrestle with her conscience long and hard before she can resolve her self on a particular course of action.

Here the brash parvenu American functions as a kind of double for Rose by holding before her an image of a woman who does what *she* wants irrespective of the social consequences. She also acts as a surrogate mother to Jack, and thus endorses Rose and Jack's union from the perspective of someone who puts herself first. However, instead of deciding to act for the community, Rose acts for herself, such that what she wants is made to equal what she must do, and what she must do made to seem what she merely wanted. She thought she must look out for her mother, but she discovers that to be true to herself she mustn't. She thought she merely wanted Jack, but discovers she must have him.

Selfishness is thus turned into self-discovery, but this is soon transformed into heroism. Rose's quite uncanny conversation with the ship's captain and designer concerning the shortage of lifeboats on the *Titanic* obviously serves to develop narrative tension in general, but why must she of all passengers be the only one to know? When it becomes apparent the ship is going to go down, her knowledge that not everyone can survive forces her to choose between her family (and, it is implied, her fiancé) and Jack. It literally is a life and death decision and she knows it, thus it is this act which makes her a heroine in the true sense, though in fact she saves nobody but herself.

She is a heroine because she decides to throw in her lot with the common people, and in doing so turns her back on class privilege. Here, then, her selfishness in choosing Jack over her fiancé is redeemed by the utterly galling callousness of the upper class passengers who make no effort whatsoever to save the poor souls who wind up in the freezing water. Yet however vindicated it may be, her path is still a selfish one -- it is her own caprice that puts her in mortal danger. This needs to be borne in mind because her actions are in fact coded as class betrayal, which is to say a heroic solidarity with the downtrodden, when in reality they are motivated by entirely selfish considerations.

To my mind, the clincher for this argument is the fact that the story is told retrospectively. We know from the outset who survived and who didn't. But more importantly, the third act of the film is what Rose did with her life after the disaster. Its 'count your blessings' and 'seize the day' message instructs the viewer that whatever it is that stands in your way, even catastrophe, can be overcome with a bit of grit and determination -- not revolution. You may be underprivileged, it says, but at least you're alive. My point here is that the class criticism mobilised by *Titanic* serves only to intensify and valorise a narrative line devoted to self-discovery, which is the very antithesis of critique in the strong Marxist sense. In support of this, I will argue that the class criticism, such as it is, is aimed not so much at actual class privilege or discrepant wealth, but a comparative lack of modernity in the *fin de siècle* West.

The fantasy at the heart of *Titanic* is that a modern person such as ourselves, such as Jack and Rose who represent us, would not act so abominably as the rich did then, nor buy into the neo-feudalism the rich once commanded. The frame narrative supplies the mechanism for precisely this projection.

As we come to understand it, the disaster occurred because the men responsible for constructing and managing the ship were stupidly greedy. In order to establish a bit of notoriety for their ship and guarantee a return on their investment, they push the captain into exceeding a speed which his years at sea tell him is safe so as to arrive in New York ahead of schedule. It is the captain, though, not the owners, who is subject to our scorn; he is to be despised by the modern viewer because he isn't professional enough to stick to his guns and do what his expert knowledge tells him is right; he appears weak to us because he gives in to the vanity of the upper-class and accedes to their ill-considered request. So the cause of the disaster is a misguided loyalty to one's social betters, not culpable negligence on the part of avaricious, 'fat cat' owners.

Against this background, Rose's disinclination to join upper class society is interpretable as a choice of modernity over antiquity, rather than love over wealth, because the decisive juxtaposition is not between what the rich do and the poor don't, as it were, but between what the 'free-minded' poor don't do, and the dupes of class do. This juxtaposition is reinforced by the exuberant presence of Irish immigrants aboard the ship, who self-consciously extol an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist line. Confirmation of this reading is to be found in the fact that the colossal scale of the disaster is also attributed to what I am calling neo-feudalism.

As is well known, in order to cut costs fewer lifeboats than was actually required were built -- the infamous rationale and subsequent catchcry, that the ship was unsinkable is seen by us as laughably antiquated, vainglory. But, as we see, this wasn't the worst of it; the dire shortage of lifeboats was criminally compounded by the fact that when it came time to use them fewer persons were boarded on them than they could safely carry. And it was precisely neo-feudalism that is indicated as cause. Not only were first class passengers loaded first, and seated comfortably into the bargain, but third class passengers were held at bay by stewards and assorted other ship's officers, either by locking them below decks or by pointing a gun at them, in order to permit their orderly, and undeserved we consequently feel, escape.

These same stewards ludicrously continued to bring drinks and attend to the various other

minutiae of the continuous demands of the rich, all the while espousing unthinking confidence that there was really nothing to worry about, even as the ship visibly sank beneath them. Interestingly, the musicians who famously didn't stop playing even when it was too late to save themselves are depicted as music lovers, who willingly put art before life, rather than dupes. But they are the exception that proves the rule.

Rose's self-discovery is thus coeval with the advent of modernity, and such a coming to consciousness is depicted as its cause via Jack's art. Art is presented as an act of seeing things as they really are, something Rose doesn't fully manage to do until Jack intervenes in her life. Their first act of genuine intimacy is conducted as model posing for artist, but the situation is complicated by the fact that she wears her fiancé's extravagant gift 'the heart of the ocean' at her throat. As such, the scenario recalls at once two moments in art history: an earlier period of aristocratic patronage of the arts, when the rich commissioned works according to their own tastes, and the modern age of artists painting prostitutes (as Jack admits to having done) in order to be free to paint as they please, and because no lady would consent to a life painting.

Rose gives herself to Jack as a model to be drawn as he pleases, but at the same time has quite specific use for the painting in mind. She gives the drawing to her fiancé as a parting (shot) gift; and in so doing appropriates for herself, via a representation of herself, a new persona as modern woman in charge of her own affairs. Meanwhile, that representation of her, which would otherwise be an objectification of her *as* woman, is transformed into a mechanism of subjectification in the strong existential sense.

Her act states that she is not embarrassed or scared of her body, as her society instructs her to be (think of the corset scene, which as in *Gone with the Wind*, is a transparent figuration of the manifold ties that constrain women in society to seek security in marriage), so she can pose nude if she wants to. By posing for a modern artist, she at once patronises an artistic style we know she has a prior disposition for anyway, and antagonises her husband-to-be who both dislikes modern art and thinks women of her standing ought to show more decorum. Her patronage runs very deep indeed, because to support Jack's art she must in fact sacrifice the life of comfort a good marriage would secure for her.

In fact, then, it must be said that she not merely patronises modern art, she identifies with it: she is willing to give up everything in order to lead the life it promises, that is, one free of tradition, expectation, and prudish morality. This identification with modernity is consummated, deliberately anachronistically, in the back seat of a car (stored below decks in the cargo hold), which recalls films of the 50s and 60s when youth culture was in its first flush and the car stood for independence.

Final confirmation of this reading of *Titanic* as a story of female self discovery is to be found in the strange, but instructive fact that Jack is not a hero in the strictest sense. He is heroic, to be sure, but only insofar as he saves Rose's life; but this doesn't mean he is a hero from a narratological point of view. Quite simply he cannot be a hero because he doesn't have a quest. Sure he wants to get to America, sure he wants to be an artist, but neither of these ambitions are figured as situations he must prove himself adequate to, as Rose, for example, must prove she is strong enough to turn her back on her mother and do as her heart instructs. On the contrary, he is shown to be already strong enough to do both these things; so, he is not expected to change, which means he is not the main protagonist, and therefore not the hero.

But if he isn't a hero, what's his role? Well, let's look at what he does. Vlad' mir Propp's terminology (from *Morphology of the Folktale*) will provide a convenient shorthand for unravelling the rather complicated narrative function Jack performs.

First of all, he persuades Rose not to kill herself by persuading her life is really worth living,

so he is a sender in Propp's terms; then, more importantly, he provides her with the spirit and determination to *really* live (his painting in this sense is something of a gift of magical assistance), making him her donor; lastly, he sacrifices himself to save her, thus playing the part of helper. At no point does he act for himself; nor is there any point at which the narrative swings around to his point of view, which is not to say the narration doesn't linger on his predicament.

In other words, Jack's role as sender, donor and helper, combine to confirm Rose's position as hero. Yet this seems impossible, at first glance, because she doesn't save anyone. She does however inaugurate a new type of society by being a modern woman, to use the phrase of the period. Arguably, the third act shows not merely what Rose did after the disaster, but what womankind was able to accomplish thanks to women like her. But this simply distracts inquiry into the overdetermination of feminist tropes from its true objective -- it is, in short, a classic case of misrecognition.

So maybe it's nothing new after all. Hollywood has been doing this for years.

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Footnotes

1. A similarly structured scene can be found in *As Good as it Gets*.

In **Australian Humanities Review**, see also

- Ian Buchanan's "[Deleuze and Pop Music](#)"

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