The Nature of Titanic:
Film, Phenomenon and Inevitable Self-Betrayal

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Introduction

The environment of the 1990s is one of complexity and contradiction. As a political movement, environmentalism has grown increasingly organized and visible over the last three decades. Simultaneously, despite the best efforts to curb environmentally harmful practices, the pace of degradation increases daily. From a cultural standpoint, environmentalism itself is just as much a part of our environment as industry and what is, often puzzlingly, referred to as nature. In these issues and many others, we maintain the general conceit of the present held by most societies, a sense of "now more than ever," for better and/or for worse. Even this sentiment itself appears to be pervasive now more than ever as various sides argue, despite the risk of succumbing to the trap, that perhaps we are justified for the first time in feeling this way.

With a heightened sense of the environment and the future, there appears to be more on the line than at any point in history, and with daily increasing commitment to new technologies there is that much more to pose a threat. As we look around to explain and reconcile this bundle of contradictions and conflicts, one of the most prominent events of the 20th century — the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912 — continues to reassert its pertinence. According to Heyer, "As fin-de-siècle and end of millennium anxiety begins to grip us, it seems we cannot let the great ship rest in piece . . . nor she us" (Heyer, 1995:ix). Indeed, as we approach this anxious temporal crossroads, *Titanic* interest reached a fever pitch, culminating in the genuine phenomenon that was Titanic. The 1997 film, written, directed, co-produced and co-edited by James Cameron, swept the world off its feet in nearly every way a film can. But why Titanic, and why now?

First, extremely bad news has a tendency to bring people together like nothing else. For every moon landing, there are dozens of horrors: Hiroshima, the Holocaust, the assassinations of

John F. Kennedy and John Lennon, the *Challenger* explosion, the Oklahoma City bombing and, most recently, the Columbine High School murder spree. Herring suggests that this is because "Failure teaches with a clarity, a precision, and a sense of the immediate often missing in the lessons of success. Failures, and their more spectacular cousins, disasters, focus our attention on both our knowledge and the lapses in our knowledge, the strengths of our abilities and the weaknesses of our assumptions" (Herring, 1989:xv-xvi).

Indeed, the *Titanic* disaster itself was "our century's first collective nightmare" (Heyer, 1995:ix) and effectively kicked off the very concept of the media event. In terms of news dissemination, Heyer suggests it was, in fact, the beginning of McLuhan's Global Village (Heyer, 1995:64). News of the sinking circulated more quickly than with any prior event, setting a journalistic precedent for timely coverage. The story remained front-page news for weeks throughout North America and much of Europe and for several days in much of the rest of the world (Heyer, 1995:63).

In terms of cinema, disaster movies have long claimed their share of box office receipts. The 1970s peak of the form included both man-made and natural disasters as the basis for popular films, from The Poseidon Adventure (1972), The Towering Inferno (1974) and the Airport series (1970, 1975, 1977, 1979) to Earthquake (1974) and Meteor (1979). The genre has enjoyed a resurgence since the mid-1990s, with Twister (1996), dueling volcano films Dante's Peak (1997) and Volcano (1997), dueling space-debris-collision films Deep Impact (1998) and Armageddon (1998), and even those which overtly cross into other genres, such as Independence Day (1996), The Lost World (1997) and Godzilla (1998), all of which have fingers deep into the science-fiction and monster movie pies. Heyer argues that the public's fascination with the disaster film

actually began in 1958 with the first great *Titanic* film, A Night to Remember.

But why did the *Titanic*, and indeed Titanic, have such durability? The disaster itself spawned numerous poems, novels, films, non-fiction books and documentaries, even a Broadway musical, while Cameron's film and anticipation thereof led to not only a great deal of media and merchandise related to the film itself but also a resurgence of material on the disaster itself.

The answer lies behind the inspiration for a fake *Titanic* headline included in the satirical Our Dumb Century: The Onion Presents 100 Years of Headlines from America's Finest News Source: "World's Largest Metaphor Sinks" (The Onion, 1999). The ship and its sinking have entered the realm of myth — not in the sense of an inaccurate explanation but as "events that represent more than the 'facts' of history. It implies that the incidents referred to embody or help explain a wider set of values, beliefs, and aspirations" (Heyer, 1995:154). That the largest ship, indeed the largest moving object, ever built, moving near full speed in clear weather on her maiden voyage could sink was too rich with potential meaning to be relegated to the pages of history. Add to this the devout faith in technology and progress at the time in Western culture, particularly Victorian England, and classic lessons of hubris yearn to be pulled out of the event: "...we respond to technological failures with an immediate, almost visceral, sense of shock and betrayal. We place great faith in science and technology... and transfer our belief in their invulnerability to ourselves. The failure of these systems and processes strikes at our own sense of security and superiority. That was the deepest message of the loss of the unsinkable *Titanic*: our greatest technical accomplishment was shown to be a fraud. We felt that we had ventured into the future and had been cast back; we had elevated science to the status of the divine, and it was thrown down" (Herring, 1989:xviii).

In and of itself, it became "the 20th century's oldest and most powerful myth" (Hewison, 1998). With the sense that the sinking marked the "finale for one era and overture to the next" (Heyer, 1995:7), it set itself up for the continuous regeneration we have witnessed. In any culture short of a utopia, the conceit of the present is likely to always identify itself as turning point. The future will be better, the past can finally be left behind. The perfection of the falseness of the *Titanic*'s inevitable success thus led directly to the success of the *Titanic* as myth for the ever-changing present, a timeless lesson in antithesis, "an inclusive metaphor of technological hubris and cultural extravagance. What began as an accident of history has become a story of one of its enduring moral lessons — a real-life counterpart to high tragedy in literature. The works of Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Melville seem as appropriate to understanding what happened to the *Titanic* as do the conclusions of any purely historical study" (Heyer, 1995:103).

Heyer considers various traditions of myth interpretation with respect to the sinking of the *Titanic*. Glossing over a sociological approach, Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytical interpretations, as well as structuralism, themes of dominance and of the opposition of culture and nature appear common across the board. Given this, it seems appropriate to approach Titanic as a case study for an ecological critique. Inasmuch as it covers issues of nature, class, gender and race among others, ecological criticism is poised to become an all-inclusive, unifying approach (as opposed to an environmentalist critique which, by definition, splits environments off from whatever else one might study within and therefore can, again by definition, never be truly holistic -- a problem faced by environmentalist movements as well). With this in mind, the same approach should be illuminating not only in analyzing the film but also in looking at the public's response to the film — as media event and cultural phenomenon, like the 1912 sinking itself. As this paper is

a study of the film and phenomenon of Titanic, it will only deal with other treatments of the *Titanic* in fact and fiction as they relate to the Cameron film.

A thorough examination of the film and phenomenon will reveal Titanic to be as complex as the society that spawned it. While it first appears to be critical of dominance over nature, the film and especially the phenomenon betray such a stance. Indeed, Titanic will be shown to be the ultimate response to our situation even as it epitomizes the very situation it purports to condemn.

The Film

Non-Human Representations of Culture and Nature

The primary element of Titanic is, of course, the ship itself. It is the symbol of culture, or more specifically, civilization, in the culture-nature opposition. In narrating her story, old Rose Dawson Calvert (Gloria Stuart) refers to it as it was commonly called in 1912, the "Ship of Dreams." The question this moniker poses is to whom the dreams belong, and the answer is the builders of civilization. Whether robber-baron or construction worker, politician or housewife, all who participate without question in the dream of progress can point to the ship as a culmination of sorts. The inclusiveness of the dream is evident in the scene in which the ship is introduced, when an anonymous father and daughter appear on the dock. He says that it's a "big boat, right?" The daughter's response: "Daddy, it's a ship." Even a poor child has learned early on that only certain boats deserve to be referred to as a ship, that there is progress to be made.

The *Titanic* is filled with first-class suites with their own private promenade decks, steerage cabins that, while modest compared to their higher-deck cousins, boast much better

facilities than in the past, and opulence of appointment throughout to make even its most elite passengers feel at home. But what makes the *Titanic* so special is that it can boast all of this while at the same time being a vehicle. Indeed, all its intrinsic value would amount to little if it did not also have an instrumental value, the purpose for which it was built — to ship things, to move its contents from one place to another. As her owner, J. Bruce Ismay (Jonathan Hyde), points out, "She is the largest moving object ever made by the hand of man in all history... her supremacy would never be challenged." Echoing another common saying of the *Titanic*, Cal Hockley (Billy Zane), the fiancé of young Rose DeWitt Bukater (Kate Winslet), as she was named in her youth, claims upon first seeing the ship that "God himself could not sink it."

Just as civilization was built to reach continuously for progress, so was the *Titanic*. That the ship will travel West underscores this idea, paralleling the westward expansion from Old World to New World, from the original coastal states across North America to settle the frontier. Even once these lands were settled, the westward movement was a promise of progress for generations of immigrants, some of whom hoped to head to a better life in America via the *Titanic*. But the roots of this progress are even deeper, with the *Titanic*'s maiden voyage backed by centuries of seafaring, an endeavor key in the history of conquest of other lands. Indeed, this conquest could only be done by succeeding in the primary conquest, that of the ocean itself. The ocean was a wilderness in the classic, Biblical sense — threatening, useless, barren of the things necessary for human life. Only by making the uninhabitable safe for people, by conquering it, could it be put to use in conquering other people and lands. The ocean, not the iceberg, is thus the first symbol of nature, the element that completes the opposition of culture and nature opposition, or alternately of first nature and second nature.

As the ship leaves port, Cameron shows us two more foils for the ship as civilization. First, the ship can only move out to sea with the help of a tugboat — if even the great *Titanic* needs the help of a tiny tugboat, perhaps its great size is not the absolute good it is thought to be. Soon after, Cameron places a school of dolphins at the bow of the ship, racing to keep ahead. Posing a race between culture and nature, the inherent implication is that there will be a winner. Although the vessel appears huge and imposing next to the dolphins, Cameron never shows the ship overtake them, an omission as pregnant with meaning as any commission.

Rose refers to the Ship of Dreams as "a slave ship," bringing her back to Philadelphia's elite society, a place where her life will be chosen for her. Even for those who can most reap its benefits, civilization is suggested to be a prison, and the *Titanic* is thus a prison transport. The image of *Titanic* as slave ship and as ambiguous achievement in light of the tugboat and dolphins is solidified later in the film with a long aerial shot in which the ship is barely more than a dot in the frame. The great *Titanic* is only great when seen up close, tiny when seen from a distance. Perhaps the same will hold true of civilization. The shot is evocative of the famous Apollo photograph of the Earth filling up the frame, suggesting that Spaceship Earth is a single entity and the fates of its many inhabitants are inextricably linked — indeed, that we are all on the same boat together (Macnaghten & Urry, 1998:214). The same holds true for the passengers of the *Titanic* and for the fate that is about to ram itself into them just moments after this long shot.

This is, in fact, the point at which the iceberg is sighted. It is as if the ocean has marshaled its forces to meet an opponent — unable to prevent the *Titanic*'s progress as a liquid, it wills into existence a solid materialization of itself in the form of ice. Cameron chooses to depict the berg with multiple peaks, rather than in a more stereotypical, single-peak form. The berg, while

standing for monolithic nature, is thus also reminiscent of an urban skyline and even of the *Titanic*'s own steamstacks, as if to suggest that it is a worthy opponent for civilization and can meet it on its own terms, echoing Thomas Hardy's poem "The Convergence of the Twain" in which the ship and iceberg are portrayed as twins, complimentary players is a fated event (Heyer, 1995:111). The victory is assured by another of Cameron's omissions: below the water level, *Titanic*'s keel goes down several feet, but an iceberg only ever shows the smallest part of itself above the water, its full truth, like that of nature, vast and unknown.

The crew tries to avoid the iceberg, but the boat is too big and the rudder too small. The ship was built for size, not maneuverability, and the suggestion is that civilization may hold the same weakness — it may be too set in its ways to change course. After impact, the boat shakes for several seconds. The disaster is not sudden, but the vague rumbling indicates that something is on the horizon. Indeed, the ship sinks slowly at first, paralleling the idea of nature acting in glacial, or evolutionary, time yet causing great changes (Macnaghten & Urry, 1998:152). Even in disaster, nature does will not bow down to the ideal of speed prized by civilization.

During the sinking, a flare is lit and Cameron uses another long aerial shot. The disaster, great as it may seem to its victims and later on to the world, is as small as the ship was in the first long shot. Coupled with the earlier shot, Cameron gives a sense of natural cycles, in which life and death each play a part and neither is good nor bad. Both before the disaster and during, the ship has not changed in the big picture, i.e., the long shot and the grand scheme.

Even here, though, the distinction between civilization and culture overall must be emphasized, as the lifeboats keep nature's vengeance from being complete — perhaps even from the intention of completion. The lifeboats, like the tugboat before them, are much smaller than

the *Titanic*. They are closer to the water both in terms of height and hull thickness. Their proximity to the source of life suggests that, symbolically, they may be a viable refuge from civilization, perhaps evocative of tribal life in smaller groups. The disaster's legendary paucity of lifeboats can now be interpreted in two complimentary ways. The traditional approach is still valid — the ship's builders installed davits that could hold twice as many lifeboats as they put on the ship, but Ismay left half out for aesthetic purposes, because the *Titanic* was deemed unsinkable and therefore all the lifeboat that anyone would need. This suggests that civilization cannot be prepared for all that nature may throw at it and is therefore vulnerable, and thus the paucity is a problem. The complimentary interpretation involves looking at civilization's accompanying population explosion as something that simply cannot be sustained, making the paucity of lifeboats a veritable solution, a population control mechanism, nature's way of reducing the human biomass to a manageable level. Of course, the final layer is revealed by knowing that it was primarily the wealthy that were saved by lifeboats. Thus, the previous two interpretations combine, with the purposeful elimination of lifeboats before the voyage and the incomplete filling of lifeboats during evacuation seen as human-directed eugenic population reduction, a volatile issue contemporary to the sinking. Hockley even says, upon finding out that half the passengers will drown, "Not the better half."

To the victims of the event, the Ship of Dreams reveals itself to be one not of pleasant dreams but of nightmares as it sinks to the bottom of the ocean. The *Titanic* completes its destiny and parallels another famous ocean vessel, this one purely fictional. In Verne's Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, the *Nautilus* fulfilled a similar function to the *Titanic*, providing "a self-sufficient world borne in the womb of a ship" (Heyer, 1995:158) for Captain Nemo, who wanted

to avoid the evils of civilization. When he succumbs to some of the very traits he despised, the ensuing events lead to the *Nautilus*' destruction.

In the end, civilization's objects and inhabitants are returned to nature. The present day framing story depicts the wreckage as a quiet refuge, a place with swimming fish and crawling crabs, suggesting that the trappings of our present civilization, as unnatural as they may seem, may one day, through change in glacial time, be reclaimed by nature's cycles.

The framing story provides additional culture-nature symbols. The *Keldysh*, the vessel used to bring a crew to explore the wreckage, is on its own mission of hubris and domination, using state-of-the-art technology to visit the *Titanic*, with submersibles on hand to conquer the depths of the sea just as ships conquer the surface. The entire purpose of the mission is the retrieval of the Heart of the Ocean, the valuable diamond Hockley had given to Rose. The diamond is in more ways than one the link between the framing story and the sinking. In both eras, it is a prized symbol of wealth to be cherished and possessed by the powerful. When old Rose reveals at the very end of the film that she had it all along and drops it overboard, the symbolism is complete: the *Titanic* was brought back to the heart of the ocean, the seat of the origin of life, and now the last material treasure from the disaster has been returned to its rightful place as well. That the gem is valuable only because it is rare in nature underscores the moment and the fickle nature of what civilization determines to be valuable.

Human Representations of Culture and Nature

If the *Titanic* is the primary non-human symbol of civilization, then the wealthy men on board are the primary human symbol. With the presence of Astor, Guggenheim and Strauss

serving an essentially decorative function, Cameron elevates White Star Line owner Ismay to the embodiment of civilization, the torchbearer of progressivism. Having let the press marvel at *Titanic*'s size, he now wants to give them something new to write about, instructing Captain Edward John Smith (Bernard Hill) to push the speed envelope. While the *Titanic* is incapable of setting a record per se, Ismay wants to provide the world with an astonishing performance for a ship of its size. Knowledgeable of how ocean liners operate, the Captain would prefer not to push, but Ismay coaxes him to "retire with a bang," despite reports of ice. For Ismay, even an old man's retreat into retirement should be done explosively, violently.

When the ship hits the iceberg, Ismay refuses to believe its destiny, saying, "But the ship can't sink." Thomas Andrews (Victor Garber), the architect, counters that "It is a mathematical certainty." Here we see that, just as civilization and culture must be distinguished, so must technology and science. Andrews reveals science itself to be something which can work both for and against human wishes, depending on its application. When Ismay inconspicuously boards a lifeboat, his shamed face reveals that he knows it is wrong. Women and children are supposed to go first and, of all the men, by rights he should be the last to be given a chance to escape, instrumental as he was in the *Titanic*'s demise. His willingness to get on the lifeboat is the equivalent of the aerial long shots, showing him to be a very small man.

In the framing story, Brock Lovett (Bill Paxton) seems to be the modern parallel for Ismay. As he leads a team of salvagers in a submersible to find the Heart of the Ocean, he mourns "the sad ruin of the great ship," resting on the ocean floor after "her long fall." He overlooks the fact that people died during the sinking which has hidden the gem from his grasp, regretting only the loss of the boat. When he brings old Rose on board the *Keldysh*, he calls her his "new best

friend" upon learning that she knows something of the gem, exposing his ulterior motive with no compunction.

The character who most clearly demonstrates the distinction between culture and civilization is Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio), the steerage-traveling artist who romances Rose and drives the fictional plot. He freely admits to being a nomad, unsettled, evoking a literal meaning of civilization, to be settled. When he joins Rose and her first-class cohorts for dinner, Rose's mother, Ruth DeWitt Bukater (Frances Fisher) asks, "You find that sort of rootless existence appealing, do you?" Anything other than her own lifestyle is unthinkable, and even other lower class people are supposed to share this view — those who don't possess the trappings of civilization should aspire to it. All Jack needs, however, is air in his lungs and paper on which to draw.

Jack is not the only human foil for civilization. The symbolic nature of the lower class is revealed by the celebratory party in steerage that immediately follows the stuffy dinner Jack shares in first class. After dinner, first-class women retire for quiet conversation while first-class men go to the smoking room to discuss politics, including the Supreme Court. At the steerage party, music and dance are loud and lively. Two men are seen arm wrestling, drawing a sharp contrast with the discussion of the Supreme Court — these are two very different methods of settling disputes. Life in steerage seems simpler, more joyous and free.

But the poor are not only foils for civilization, they are also victims of it, no more clearly demonstrated than by the image of a mother telling a bedtime story to two sleepy children in a sterile-looking steerage cabin as the ship sinks. This conjures the idea of a cultural bedtime story, a myth to make people feel better even if it does not tell the truth. The story of civilization and

progress as superior and necessary is etched deep, even in the lower classes, even when they are faced with evidence of civilization's failure.

Throughout the story, though, the lower classes are not only dominated by the upper class but are equated with animals. By extension, the lower classes are seen as somehow more natural than the upper, and this is, in almost all cases, a negative association. Boarding the ship, steerage passengers go through mandatory lice inspections while Rose's mother and her dog are permitted on board without a fuss — poor people are lower than the pets of the rich. Just before Jack first sees Rose on the deck above him, dogs are being walked on his own deck and his friend comments, "Typical, first-class dogs come down here to take a shit."

After the *Titanic* hits the iceberg, steerage passengers witness a band of rats running up a hallway, inspiring one passenger to comment, "If this is the direction the rats are going, it's good enough for me." When survival is on the line, the equation of lower class to animal is a valuable one, and the lower class people are willing to trust the instincts of "lower" animals, for civilization has caused them to lose their own.

Beyond this, though, the animal equation is once again negative. As the ship sinks and first-class passengers get dibs on lifeboats, passengers in steerage are kept behind locked gates below decks. One shouts to a crew member, "You can't keep us locked in here like animals!" Later, as the crowd throngs the lifeboats and the ship's crew tries to manage the situation, an officer yells, "Get back, I say, or I'll shoot you all like dogs!" Now the first class has also been likened to dogs — during a disaster, during the fall of civilization, class distinctions lose their importance and everyone is equally natural and despicable, i.e., mortal and struggling to survive while rushing to the lifeboats at the expense of others.

A look at the actual lifeboat statistics puts to rest the myth of first-class men gallantly allowing women and children first, even if that meant second- and even third-class women and children. Over 90 percent of first-class women and children survived, compared with 31 percent of first-class men, but 60 percent of all first-class passengers survived, compared with 44 percent of second class and 25 percent of third class (Diski, 1997). Indeed, only one first-class child died (Chidley, 1997:93). Even after all have become dogs, it appears that some dogs remained more equal than others.

Ecofeminism

A special case of human representation of culture and nature in Titanic and of the overall ecological interpretation occurs when looking at the character of Rose and the role of women. The film appears to criticize all forms of domination, but Cameron has chosen as his focus a female, trapped by the role her society has imposed upon her and subsequently liberated. Involving as it does various approaches toward liberation and the transformation of roles (Gottlieb 1993:233), ecofeminism seems extremely pertinent to Rose's character arc.

A rose by any other name might smell as sweet, but Titanic's female lead receives a direct parallel to nature by being so named. When we first meet her, she is working on pottery, an earthy pursuit involving getting hands dirtied by clay. She is at home, surrounded by plants, living with her granddaughter, Lizzy Calvert (Suzy Amis), watching an old television. Technology and material wealth do not appear to be priorities for her. Her good health even in old age also attests to a sense of organic harmony. She is drawn to the *Keldysh* after seeing the drawing Jack made of her, a drawing found by what appears to be the only female member of Lovett's crew. When

she begins her story, she and her granddaughter are dressed in light green while her male audience wears shades of gray — again the female is associated with nature and the entire concept of being "green," while the men's clothes evoke metal or industrial smoke. One of the first things old Rose tells us is that she dreaded the idea of returning to home to Philadelphia in 1912 — she appears to be the only one who does not want to go on the trip, as if she knows that it will end badly, her female intuition in tune with what nature has in store.

When young Rose arrives in her stateroom, she unpacks several paintings. Hockley thinks they are awful and feels the artist will go nowhere, while Rose thinks that these works by someone named Picasso are beautiful, showing "truth but no logic." If logic can be equated with science, technology and materialism, the typical realms of men, beauty and truth must then be likened to the female. This is supported by the audience's knowledge that Picasso will become one of the great painters of the century. Later, Rose will express appreciation of Jack's drawings and again she must be right. Her instincts about art parallel her instincts about truth. Jack may be male, but we know that his nomadic lifestyle places him in opposition to the men who run civilization.

Despite her being able to express herself in a small way through her taste in art, and despite her being able to joke with Ismay about Freud's thoughts on the male preoccupation with size, the rest of Rose's life is simply unbearable to her. Indeed, perhaps she would have been better off without art and Freud, ignorant of ideas which point the way to a destination she cannot reach on her own. For her, it seems the only future she can choose is death, and she runs to the stern of the boat to kill herself. The location is telling. The stern suggests that she does not want to move in the direction of the boat, that she does not agree with what other people consider to

be progress. Standing at the rail, it appears she is behind bars, imprisoned by the civilization that is her life and the *Titanic*. She steps over to the other side of the rail, hoping to find freedom outside of the bars in death, in the ocean, expressing her femininity only by returning herself to nature. Jack, the nomad, is the only person on board who could coax her back to and show alternatives. When Hockley and some ship's officers find them and they concoct a story about her being interested in seeing the ship's propellers, the Master at Arms comments, "Women and machinery do not mix." On one hand, this kind of thinking is symbolically true, inasmuch as Titanic seems to criticize technology and promote feminism. On the other, it is indicative of the close-mindedness of a society which hopes to quash female freedom.

The limitations of female roles are most exemplified by Rose's mother — just as Jack proves that all men are not guilty, Rose's mother shows that all women are not innocent. Overheard in a conversation with a few of her cronies, she says, "The purpose of university is to find a suitable husband. Rose has already done that." Later, Jack is convincing Rose that she can embark on many activities that she never thought open to her, such as riding horses like a man (i.e., straddling instead of sidesaddle), riding the roller coaster at Coney Island, and spitting. Rose's mother comes across them as they practice spitting over the side of the ship. Rose narrates that her mother looked at Jack "like a dangerous insect... to be squashed." He is taking Rose out of the role that her mother taught her for years, and she is more than threatened by it.

The saddest moment for Rose's mother comes the morning after the steerage party, when she demands that Rose stay with Hockley and abandon any fantasies she may have of Jack. She reveals that her late husband lost their family fortune and that all they have left is their good name. As she helps Rose dress, tightening her girdle and thus reasserting society's restrictions, she notes

that it is a difficult position for women to be in, and that the match with Hockley "will ensure our survival." Rose's mother is just as closed in as Rose, thinking that Hockley is their only option, that they will literally fail to survive if Rose and Hockley do not wed.

Rose's liberation is a three-fold process, each part involving Rose becoming, metaphorically, closer to nature. First, Jack takes her to the bow of the ship. They stand on the rail and can see nothing but the sea, gaining a sense of flying while witnessing only the boundless expanse of nature, untainted yet by the boat's presence. The *Titanic* is at their rear — they have left civilization behind — and Jack is showing Rose that moving ahead can involve a destination other than the one everyone else pursues.

The second phase involves Rose asking Jack to draw her nude. She removes her clothes, becoming not vulnerable but natural. She is at ease with herself in this state and with Jack as her artist. In the final stage, she and Jack find themselves running below decks to get away from Hockley's assistant. They pass first class, second class, steerage, running even through the engine room to the cargo hold. The location is one of extremes — simultaneously the most indicative of civilization, as it contains all the trappings of the passengers, and the nearest to nature, being closest to the water and farthest from the people themselves. Here, they consummate their relationship. The sexual act is the most natural expression they could make to each other, the most life-affirming. She decides she will leave the ship with Jack, not Hockley, claiming that it's "crazy" but that she will do it anyway. Again, male logic is thrown to the wind in favor of feminine, natural truth.

After the sinking, Jack sacrifices himself so that Rose may live, allowing her to wait for rescue atop a plank of wood while he floats in the fatally cold water. Rose narrates that he saved

her “in every way that a person can be saved,” and indeed she is reborn from the sea, the source of life, in an optimistic statement that there may be salvation even from a disastrous split between culture and nature.

It is only now, having heard the entire story, that Lovett understands the lesson of the *Titanic*. He had obsessed over the ship for years but “never let it in.” He brought Rose to the ship to help him find the Heart of the Ocean, but she leads him instead to the heart of the ocean, the core truth of nature. He learns that wealth and power are fleeting and unimportant, that he does not need to find the jewel, that he can let go of something on which he’s counted for so long and thought so valuable. This is the precise symbolic lesson that the sinking offers about civilization. In the transformation, he reveals himself to be parallel not to Ismay, but to Rose herself. Lovett reports to investors and he will not help these modern Ismays gain their satisfaction. Jack, the male proto-feminist nomad, transforms civilized Rose into an ecofeminist, and decades later she transforms Lovett, the modern civilized capitalist, into a fellow ecofeminist, revealing ecofeminism to transcend barriers, becoming holism.

Only now can we appreciate Titanic’s parallel to another classic 19th century story, Shelley’s Frankenstein. A boat is on an expedition to be the first to reach the North Pole when a stranger enters the lives of the crew and tells a story about ambition, tampering with nature, technology gone wrong. The expedition seemed to be simply a frame for the main story, but in the end, the people on the mission realize that their ambition is not founded, and the frame is revealed to be as crucial to the story’s message as the core tale itself. Of course, the parallel would be greater if it was Ismay himself who learned the lesson and prevented others from making similar mistakes, but the symmetry is profound.

Infiltration as Disruption of a Status Quo

The ecofeminist analysis provides several examples of the key thematic device employed by Cameron, that of infiltration, always representing a disruption of a status quo. Loosely, Jack infiltrates Rose's life, despite her initial repugnance of him as a rude, low class boor. When she accepts him and undergoes her liberation, she becomes party to several infiltrations. She allows Jack into her stateroom, helping his radical ideas enter the upper echelons of civilized society. Soon after, they infiltrate the lowest quarters of the boat, the foundation of civilization, and the consummation that takes place there is the ultimate infiltration of Rose by Jack. When Lovett learns his own lesson at the end of the film, his language is telling: he "never let it in," but he finally has.

Infiltration is a repeated metaphor between the ship and nature as well. The boat itself infiltrates the water, first vertically with its hull resting beneath the surface. When the ship starts up, Cameron cuts to a propeller underneath the ship. As the engines start running, the propeller accelerates its spin, kicking up sand from the sea floor, churning it violently until it fills the screen in an ominous cloud. Above the surface, all is celebratory, but beneath the surface, nature has been disturbed by the very thing which allows the ship to move forward. In fulfilling its purpose as a ship, the *Titanic* now adds a second axis of infiltration, horizontally through the water in its westward, progressivist movement.

Infiltration makes the culture-nature opposition all the more clear as well. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction, and for all the invading that the ship does to nature, nature will do it right back. The iceberg infiltrates the boat, slicing its hull. At this point, water flows in, doing so naturally, passively, because there is a hole. As the boat starts to sink,

we see the rats scurrying and realize that nature had invaded the boat long before the iceberg, underscoring the unknowability and omnipresence of nature. Finally, as everything is damaged, from china breaking to the ship itself breaking in two, the very structure of civilization's material things is infiltrated. That which kept them together — be it rivets or the natural adhesion of solids — is rescinded by nature. Civilization breaks down, families are torn apart, and there is nothing nature cannot infiltrate.

Self-Betrayal

Titanic suggests various attitudes toward nature — opponent, objective truth, harmonious source of life. Running through these varying ideas, though, is the common thread of critique against domination and segregation. One can only dominate when one identifies the subordinate as "other," and this occurs in culture over nature, rich over poor, man over woman, all of which are to be condemned as they lead to disaster. While there is room for different approaches toward the concept of nature, Titanic does not appear to leave room for domination — until one looks deeper into its text.

The earliest clues to Titanic's self-betrayal come right when we are first introduced to old Rose. When she boards the *Keldysh*, she brings along with her a dog and a goldfish in a bowl. It seems that even Rose is not above having pets, a common motif subjugating nature. She also brings a set of photographs. At the end of the film, we see their contents: they are pictures of Rose doing the various activities she had discussed with Jack, activities which she had once thought banned to her. She rides on a plane, rides horseback without going sidesaddle, braves the rollercoaster, etc. The plane, however, is how man conquers the air. The rollercoaster is a way in

which even the relatively poor can conquer space and speed. Horseback riding for sport is yet another example of dominance over animals. Her life may have been spent achieving experiential rather than materialistic goals, but it was not free of dominance.

That Jack is not the right person to have taught her lessons of harmony is evident from what has become probably the film's most famous line, which Jack exclaims while standing at the bow as the ship begins its voyage: "I'm the king of the world!" There can be no clearer statement of man's domination over the planet and all it contains. Even Jack the nomad is no different from the other members of civilization, and we now see that Jack's main lesson to Rose, to "make it count," while opposing the restrictions of life, was not a lesson about nature. For Jack, life is a resource like any other, to be used up. He may teach Rose something; we may like him as a character and mourn his death; he may not have caused the boat to sink, but men like him did — he exhibits hubris and ambition, evident by his great desire to take the trip in the first place.

A seemingly small detail, that of smoking, helps support these arguments. The first-class men retire to the smoking room for cigars after dinner with Jack, but neither Rose nor Jack are interested in partaking. If that had been the extent of smoking in the film, one could argue about smoking being carcinogenic and therefore harmful to nature, a bad habit and therefore parallel to civilization. Indeed, Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged contains references to smoking as an absolute good, a joyous symbol of man's control of fire and therefore of industrialization. However, Rose also smokes at their first meal on board. Her mother does not like it and Hockley takes the liberty of extinguishing it. While this can be seen as a rebellious act and parallel to her feminist transformation, it is one of self-harm. At the steerage party, many people are smoking and drinking beer, showing themselves to be little different from the cigar smokers in first class who

imbibe liquor. Perhaps there are simply some things that all people have in common, and the class system should be critiqued for failing to acknowledge this, but smoking and drinking alcohol, while certainly not sinful per se, are surely not the best examples with which to make this point. In the end, smoking, Rand's pillar of industrialism and domination of nature, is shown in Titanic to be "sexy and social and sophisticated and genuine and rebellious" (Gladwell, 1998:32). Bruce Silverman, a California ad executive and director of that state's anti-smoking media campaign, said, "If I were the head of a tobacco company, I'd say, 'God bless "Titanic"'" (Gladwell, 1998:32).

The fate of the survivors deals the final blow to the anti-domination, anti-civilization interpretation. Rather than being spokes that radiate away from the *Titanic*, with survivors reverting to simpler forms of social organization which may be more in harmony with nature than civilization, the lifeboats follow parallel courses, unloading all their passengers onto the *Carpathia*. The people abandon one big boat for another, which takes them to New York City, arguably the greatest hub of civilization.

Instead of the more profound, disconcerting, cautionary, radical lessons inherent in the story of the *Titanic* and played out so well by Cameron in his film, the addition of these few elements causes inconsistencies which leave only simpler lessons in their wake: that freedom is good, that one must make the most of life, that perfect love is possible: "A love in which neither lover discovers, much less has to tolerate, anything seriously objectionable in the other. A love that gives everything and transforms lives. A love that requires only that one be willing to die for it... Rose is transfigured by fascination, not by surviving disaster" (Ventura, 1998).

This analysis of love is widened to greater implication: "Just as she begins to escape her

bonds, the ship starts sinking. This is an easy situation for people to identify with: in the deepest sense, it's a mythic situation for our era. We do not want to believe our ship is going down, but if it is we don't want to let that fact lessen our self importance. OK, let the ship sink, just so that I can get what I want!" (Ventura, 1998). In the end, the primary goal of Rose's life and the primary lesson of Titanic is self-fulfillment, consistent with the finding that many people will only consider environmentalism to be a valid concern only after their more basic goals and needs have been satisfied (Macnaghten & Urry, 1998:81). The suggestion that Titanic is just the latest example of "The myth-making property of Hollywood... employed... on behalf of a left-liberal agenda" (Bowman, 1998) is sunk.

The Phenomenon

The Phenomenon That Almost Wasn't

At a cost of over $200 million, excluding distribution and marketing (Parisi, 1997), Titanic is the most expensive film ever made. Most of this was due to James Cameron's perfectionist desire for realism, which would require production values the likes of which few films, if any, had ever provided. In light of various options for setting up the production, Cameron "chose perhaps the most impractical option of all — build a studio from the ground up" (Calhoun, 1998). Below are some figures relating to the construction of Fox Studios Baja (Calhoun, 1998):

- 40 acre beachfront location
- 17.5 million gallon, 7 acre exterior seawater tank — the largest shooting tank in the world
- 5 million gallon interior tank housed on a 32,000 square foot soundstage
- 3 additional soundstages

- Production offices, set/prop storage, a grip/electric building, welding/fabrication workshops, dressing rooms, support structures

Simultaneous with the building of the studio, crew constructed the *Titanic* superstructure itself, the largest scale model ever built (The Titanic Index, 1999). Information below is from *Theatre Craft International* (Calhoun, 1998):

- Original blueprints consulted to reconstruct the boat at 775 feet long, about 90% scale compared to the original
- Davits provided by the Wellan Davit Company, builder for the original *Titanic*
- Carpeting provided by BMK Stoddard of England, manufacturer of carpeting for the original *Titanic*'s first-class dining saloon and reception room, using the original pattern and remixing dyes to the original specifications
- 440 deck chairs made to the original specifications out of real wood
- Also reproduced: table lamps, leaded windows, luggage, life jackets, etc.
- All of the above transported 1,500 miles in 75 trucks
- Sides of the ship made from plywood and riveted to the superstructure with 33,000 rivets, then textured and waterproofed
- Three-story Grand Staircase built of oak, as per the original
- Weight of the ship set: 1.4 million pounds, able to tilt on hydraulic lifts to simulate sinking

And all of this was just the tip of the iceberg, a mere sampling of the detail that went into the set decoration, from wallpaper to flatware patterns. In addition to the attention to detail given to the visual design, Cameron worked with his engineer brother Michael to design a 35mm camera and lighting system on a remote submersible vehicle to explore and photograph the actual wreckage of the *Titanic* in the North Atlantic (Calhoun, 1998). The system was encased in titanium to withstand 10,000 pounds per inch of water pressure (Parisi, 1997), helping Titanic achieve the unlikely record of the commercial movie filmed at the greatest depth below sea level (The Titanic Index, 1999). This, along with the 500 state-of-the-art digital effects being created by Digital Domain and 17 other effects shops, Cameron's special effects company, would make Titanic arguably the most technically ambitious film ever made (Parisi, 1997).

Filmmaking in general is a high-cost endeavor and often involves a high degree of resource usage, little of which is reusable and, therefore, most of which is thrown out afterwards. In the case of Titanic, everything was pushed to the maximum. These factors are not just anti-environmentalist per se, but were so extreme that, Cameron's perfectionist reputation aside, the entertainment industry predicted a disaster on the scale of Heaven's Gate, one of Hollywood's costliest flops ever. That another of the biggest flops in Hollywood history was a previous big-budget *Titanic*-themed film, Raise the Titanic! (Heyer, 1995:143), provided extra foreboding for Cameron's production.

To keep the production going when budget overruns drove costs into record territory, Cameron sacrificed his percentage of the profits and gave up his directing fee (Parisi, 1997), accepting only a screenwriting fee. Nevertheless, it seemed that Titanic might go the way of the *Titanic*. Ironically, a year before Cameron's film opened, Frank Konigsberg said of the Titanic miniseries he had executive-produced for CBS that the story is so compelling because "It's like the opening night of the biggest movie in the world flopping" (Bellafante, 1996). Indeed, the above figures on the Titanic production bear an odd resemblance to the astounding lists of figures noted for the original ship's voyage: "... 60 chefs and sous-chefs serving 6,000 meals a day..., its cellars full of fine wines, its five tons of sugar, 800 bundles of asparagus and 1,221 quarts of oysters..." (Hewison, 1998). As an additional omen, while filming the framing the sequence in Nova Scotia, about 50 members of the cast and crew were rushed to the hospital after eating a meal of lobster chowder spiked with PCP (Cagle, 1996).

Putting the film's fate into further doubt was the decision to delay its opening from July 2, 1997, the coveted July 4th weekend, to just before Christmas of that year (Parisi, 1997). While

the move was a smart one that allowed Cameron to achieve his vision without compromise, it was taken as a sign that the production was in trouble. In the end, Titanic would have to earn over $400 million worldwide just to break even, and it would have to do so while being, as Cameron put it, a "chick flick... a three and a half hour romantic epic" (Parisi, 1997), not the most likely kind of film to enter blockbuster territory.

The Irony of Success

Had Titanic failed, the lesson of the film would have paralleled that of the doomed liner itself: bigness can lead to costly failure. But even with its fate questionable, there was so much hype for the movie before its opening, including unending speculations over its runaway production costs, that the film was a media event long before it opened. In a world of instantaneous time (Macnaghten & Urry, 1998:148), the public was able to have the film in a certain respect before it hit the screen. In addition, "Cameron's dedication and insider word-of-mouth of what he was getting on film gave a $200,000,000 motion picture the most unlikely of appellations -- that of underdog. People genuinely wanted it to succeed. Rooted for it to succeed" (Gehring, 1998).

When the film was finally released, it opened to unusually good reviews. While Cameron's script was criticized as cliche (ironic given that it was the only part of the film for which he was paid), the general consensus was that it was "the first disaster movie that can truly be called a work of art" (Gleiberman, 1997). But the reviews were only the smallest part of the story. In addition to the superlatives already mentioned before its release, the film set so many records that the Guinness Book of World Records planned to devote a special spread to it

(Thinking the Unsinkable, 1998). In the continued spirit of jaw-dropping figures generated by *Titanic*/Titanic, the film's success is most effectively summed up as follows (The Titanic Index, 1999):

Box Office

- The top grossing first run domestic movie of all time and the top grossing movie of all-time worldwide
- At 15 weeks, most consecutive weeks at #1
- At 24 weeks, most consecutive weeks in the top 10
- At 26 weeks, most non-consecutive weeks in the top 10
- Best Christmas Day gross: $9,178,529
- Best Valentine's Day gross: $13,048,711
- Only film to gross more than $20 million weekly for 10 weeks
- Only film to gross over $1 million for 101 consecutive days
- First film to earn $1 billion dollars (between 12/19/97 and 3/6/98)
- Fastest film to gross $250 million (36 days) & $300 million (44 days)
- Only film to gross $400 million in its initial release
- Top-grossing U.S. release in China
- All-time top-grossing movie in over 50 countries, including: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, Iceland, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, The United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom & the United States

Oscars

- Received 14 nominations, tying All About Eve (1950) for most nominations
- Won 11 awards, tying Ben Hur (1959) for most wins
- First time in Oscar history that two performers have been nominated for playing the same character in the same film (Gloria Stuart and Kate Winslet as Rose)
- At 87, Gloria Stuart becomes the oldest performer ever nominated
- At 22, Kate Winslet becomes the youngest performer ever to be nominated for two Academy Awards
- First movie since The Sound of Music (1965) to win Best Picture without its screenplay being nominated
- James Cameron ties for most Oscar wins in one year: three

Golden Globe Awards

- Most nominations for a single movie: eight

Soundtrack

- #1 on the Billboard charts for 16 weeks, the most consecutive weeks as the #1 soundtrack album
- Best selling instrumental movie score of all time
- Best selling movie soundtrack of all time
- First movie soundtrack to hit #1 since Chariots of Fire (1982)
- Fastest selling soundtrack of all time
- *My Heart Will Go On* is the first song to be performed at both the Grammy Awards and the Academy Awards in the same year
- More than 500,000 units sold in the U.S. for 6 consecutive weeks

Book

- James Cameron's Titanic: The first making-of-a-movie tie-in book to hit #1 on *The New York Times* best-seller list

The soundtrack stands as a particularly odd example of the film's success, "one of the most successful, and certainly one of the most confounding, pop-music phenomena of the 1990s" (Boehlert, 1998:30). Nearly three months after its release, the album logged its biggest one-week total — 848,000 copies during the week of Valentine's Day. A TV special on the music of the film was planned for summer 1998, as was an orchestral tour led by composer James Horner (Boehlert, 1998:30) — a most unlikely fanfare for a film score.

While the film itself did not having much merchandising, others capitalized on the film's success, including the J. Peterman company (Fierman & Quitkin, 1998), which auctioned props and costumes, and various jewelry companies, which marketed replicas of the Heart of the Ocean (Chang, 1998). In addition to the sundry books and documentaries that popped up surrounding the film and the renewed interest in the *Titanic* itself (Wu, 1998) (MacInnis, 1998), the currency of the film was co-opted in unrelated quarters, with the inclusion of the word "titanic" in many of the year's headlines, in articles on topics as wide-ranging as nuclear power (Cirincione, 1998), gamma ray bursts (Flamsteed, 1998), Irish reunification (Hitchens, 1998), stereo speakers (Ranada, 1998), camera equipment (Richards, 1998), international space stations (Seife, 1998)

and post-tenure reviews at universities (Sowell, 1998). But the big star remained the film, to such an extent that on April 26, 1998, the *New York Times* ran over a dozen articles under the banner "Why 'Titanic Conquered the World," with bylines from cities around the globe including Paris, Moscow, Warsaw, Istanbul, Cairo, New Delhi and Buenos Aires. The impact is summed up best by an anecdote from China: Despite a ticket costing about 10% of an average resident's monthly income, Titanic broke records after President Jiang Zemin urged people to see the film, citing its politically correct portrayal of the rich as villains (Parker, 1998).

What made Titanic such a phenomenon? Perhaps it was the potency of the myth that has captured the world's imagination since the boat sank. *USA Today* argued that it is simply the greatest epic film ever made — not that it is necessarily a better film than certain others but that it epitomizes the qualities that make epics great (Gehring, 1998). But just as the astronomical budget was ironic for a film based on the *Titanic* disaster, so was the astronomical success, demonstrating the polar opposite of the disaster's main lessons. Just as certain elements within the film belie the rest, the entire pop-culture phenomenon compounds the betrayal.

Some of the technology used in creating the special effects was, so to speak, environmentalist, inasmuch as it used computers to simulate what could not be built. The film would not have been possible without such advances. Nevertheless, this did not stop a huge amount of resources from being used in the production. Additionally, the high-tech development of the submersible camera system by the Cameron brothers contributed to the further conquering, indeed infiltration, of the ocean and the *Titanic* wreckage itself. The fan culture that built up around Leonard DiCaprio helped make teenage girls an important market for the entertainment industry, as they were the biggest buyers of the soundtrack (Boehlert, 1998:30) and the biggest

repeat theatregoers (Weinraub, 1998, February 23), but given the film's ecofeminist message, it is ironic that the women of the future should come out of the phenomenon as one of its greatest markets of exploitation.

The marketing in general, from cookbooks to memorabilia to videotape, allowed people to own a piece of the movie and the phenomenon, to dominate one of the great cultural dominators of our time. The public reveled in its obsession with Titanic in the same way that Rose revels in her infatuation with Jack. No deeper lesson is learned than that to have great feeling for something can be a source of pleasure, symptomatic of our general captivation with mass advertising (Ventura, 1998). In the end, the betrayal is so deep that Titanic caused not only a boom in bookings for the cruise industry but impelled a consortium of investors to plan a replica of the ship to be used for vacation cruises. Further, *Entertainment Weekly* posed that the two most important lessons Hollywood learned from Titanic were that size matters and greed is good (Svetkey, 1998). When the publication asked various industry insiders what would have happened if the film had flopped, the responses fell into two camps, epitomized by the following:

> "It would have called a halt to the insane spiraling of costs. It would have been a linchpin for everybody to say, 'You know what? This is totally out of control.' That would have been the plus. The minus is that it wouldn't have been any fun for us." — Bill Mechanic, chairman and CEO of Fox Filmed Entertainment, Titanic's co-studio

> "Nothing would have happened. Hollywood never learns. Remember the famous Katzenberg memo about spending less? Remember Heaven's Gate? Nobody remembers. Budgets are like taxes: Everybody talks about cutting them, but nobody ever does anything about it." — The Saint producer Mace Neufeld

Some have posed a revisionist look at the success of the film, claiming that it was buoyed by its own hype and by the misunderstanding of those who want to believe that hype. For

example, *Reason* magazine (Holland, 1998) pointed out the following:

- Adjusted for inflation, Gone With the Wind (1939) remains the box office champ with Titanic only the eighth highest grossing film as of June 1998
- Adjusted for inflation and given the secrecy around the actual final cost of Titanic, Cleopatra (1963) may remain the most expensive film
- All About Eve and Ben Hur were eligible in fewer Oscar categories than Titanic, making their Oscar statistics relatively more impressive even if Titanic tied their records absolutely

On one hand, pride against the dominance of Titanic could be taken in these observations. On the other, a cultural phenomenon is greatly about perception, and the perception of Titanic is one of superlativeness.

King of the World

The biggest betrayal of the film comes from Titanic's creator, James Cameron. Considered a genius who sacrificed his pay for the sake of his art, a thoughtful man telling a cautious tale, his actions after the opening of the film paint a more complete picture. Upon accepting the Golden Globe award for Best Dramatic Picture, Cameron asked the audience, "So does this prove once and for all that size does matter?" (Gehring, 1998). Weeks later, accepting one of his three Oscars, Cameron declared himself "king of the world!" (Weinraub, 1998, March 25). He is like Lovett at the beginning of the film, ignorant of the lessons of the *Titanic*. The difference is that Lovett had never learned the lessons, while Cameron has forgotten them.

In May 1998, Cameron announced his divorce to wife Linda Hamilton. He was now involved with Suzy Amis, who played the minor part of Rose's granddaughter (Man Overboard, 1998). This seemed to be the natural conclusion to a marriage that began with a honeymoon put on hold so that he could finish editing the film (Kilday, 1997). Just as the *Titanic* disaster caused

the deaths and breakups of families subordinate to an urban-industrial society, Titanic destroyed Cameron's marriage.

Cameron himself may have said that Titanic was "a story about faith in technology, and the failure of technology to fulfill its promise. It's a perfect microcosm of the 20th century" (Brown & Schoemer, 1996). But in the end, it is doubtful whether or not he truly believed that this was the most important thing to take away from the *Titanic*. In the end, Titanic was an opportunity like any other Hollywood film, and its runaway success was appreciated by Cameron, 20th Century Fox, Paramount Pictures, all involved in the film and its production, and all in a position to cash in on the latest and greatest wave of Titanimania.

One last way in which Cameron's betrayal is solidified is revealed by diving back into the film itself. Through a metacinematic interpretation, i.e., analyzing the film to see what it has to say about the cinema itself, it becomes clear how Cameron rationalizes the film's titanic nature despite the themes of anti-dominance. Through such an approach, Titanic stands as a legitimation of the cinematic endeavor.

First, cinema as art is justified in three ways, presented chronologically in an order that suggests increasing dependence on resource usage in art. First, we see old Rose with her pottery, an earthy and practical art, its materials coming directly from the ground and used to create, among other things, practical items such as containers. Next, we enter the realm of the visual arts through Rose and her collection of paintings and Jack and his talent for sketching, both of which involve greater resource usage, i.e., sketch pads and canvas, for less practical purposes. Finally, we learn that it is Rose's fate to become an actress. Thus all the arts, culminating in the performing arts and the cinema, are legitimated. The suggestion is that the cinema, the form most

wasteful and least personal, is the pinnacle and, by extension, that Titanic may be the peak of cinematic form.

Second, art as storytelling is supported, with the film's themes coming out solely through old Rose's telling of her story, indeed *the* story. That she is impelled to do so after seeing the drawing of herself further supports the concept of a hierarchy of art: storytelling is higher than drawing, and cinema as storytelling becomes the summit once again. Image capturing is the third legitimating factor. Jack drawing Rose nude is the pivotal moment for Rose's character arc, the center point on which her liberation revolves. Rose understands the power of the image, evident by her need to have her photographs with her even while traveling to the middle of the sea. Even Lovett's photographic exploration of the *Titanic* wreckage is legitimated inasmuch as it is not specifically condemned when he learns his lesson. The lesson, after all, is not to touch. To look, however, is necessary to learn, and to look at a film, image in motion over time, may be the best way according to Cameron.

In a film heralded for putting on celluloid visions that were heretofore impossible — through state-of-the-art special effects, newly invented methods of underwater photography and the construction of sets on a scale never before attempted — it only makes sense that the concept of image capturing would be supported rather than criticized. And though art, storytelling and image capturing are practiced in non-civilized societies, the context in which these ideas are metacinematically supported speaks to the pro-dominance aspects of the film rather than the dominance critique.

Conclusion — The Environmentalist Blockbuster

As of May 24, 1999, among the top twenty grossing films worldwide were the following, with ranking provided (The Internet Movie Database, 1999):

1. Titanic (1997)
2. Jurassic Park (1993)
3. Independence Day (1996)
4. Star Wars (1977)
5. The Lion King (1994)
6. E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (1982)
7. Forrest Gump (1994)
8. The Lost World: Jurassic Park (1997)
10. Armageddon (1998)
11. The Empire Strikes Back (1980)
14. Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1991)
16. Twister (1996)
19. Jaws (1975)
20. Return of the Jedi (1983)

While the ecological critique can be applied universally, it is extremely interesting to note that the films listed above, nearly three quarters of the top twenty, directly deal with issues of culture versus nature, technological hubris and/or dominance, lending themselves to an overt ecological, even a downright environmentalist, interpretation. As with the phenomenon of Titanic, though, this seems simultaneously a testament to the public's unease with the complex nature of modern society and an endorsement of the progressivist fruits of that society. Each blockbuster must be bigger than the last, and each blockbuster with anti-dominance themes must therefore be all the more contradictory than the last, making it no surprise that Titanic, the current box office champion, should be so riddled with self-betrayal.

But as this paper is being written, the first episode of George Lucas' Star Wars saga has just set the record for opening weekend gross and is deemed likely to overtake Titanic in final earnings. The mighty blockbuster spawned by the mighty ship seems destined, sooner or later, to

be toppled from its roost, fulfilling the anti-dominance lessons it preaches after all. But if Hollywood and the moviegoing public remain collaborators in a continued escalation of expectation, production and box office gross, this cannot be the lesson.

The very idea of an environmentalist blockbuster — one that consistently conveys themes against dominance, and for reconciliation, between nature and culture and any other opposition — seems like an impossibility, a contradiction in terms. The blockbuster film, apparently without exception, involves high production costs and vast resource usage before release. During release, thousands of prints of the film must be distributed, impelling millions to locomote to a theatre, accept a paper ticket from the cashier and purchase snacks in disposable containers. There will inevitably be ancillary marketing of one form or another, culminating in the film's video release, necessitating the use of plastic and magnetic tape. Millions will be able, in one form or other, to possess the blockbuster in their own homes.

Indeed, the paradigm can be extended to more than just the blockbuster film. Even Rachel Carson's Silent Spring required trees to be felled in order to spread its environmentalist message. In the mass-media-dependent, accumulative culture we inhabit, it appears necessary to be anti-environmentalist to convey any message — even an environmentalist one — to a wide audience. It would seem that only a paean to capitalism, industry, commodification and urbanism — perhaps Bill Gates' latest book or a film adaptation of Atlas Shrugged — would be appropriate as a blockbuster, consistent in every way from text to subtext to cultural experience.

Does the solution lie in increasingly complex technology? Cameron and Lucas have made great strives toward the digital backlot, the use of computers alone to create what was once done through the construction of sets. The absence of film in the editing process allows a "film" to

exist entirely as data. With the increasing popularity of the Internet, perhaps the grandest blockbuster may not bust a block at all in the future, instead being piped directly into individual homes, eliminating the need for prints, theatres and travel.

Of course, this may, in fact, be the antithesis of an environmentalist cinematic experience, involving only information and nothing tangible, eliminating the social aspect of filmgoing, requiring each individual to purchase their own equipment — computer, wide-screen display, surround-sound stereo system. Perhaps the current paradigm of the blockbuster is simply a necessary environmental evil, and any successful film which manages to smuggle in themes which deride dominance and promote reconciliation should be applauded, regardless of inconsistencies which are inherent to the situation and not necessarily the result of purposeful planning on the part of its creators. Perhaps even James Cameron understands this. The film as phenomenon remains as environmentally ambiguous as Titanic and, indeed, the rest of the society which spawned them.

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