

Titanic

Germany | 1943 | 85 minutes

Credits

Director Herbert Selpin/Werner Klingler
Screenplay Harald Bratt/Hansi Köck/Herbert Selpin/Walter Zerlett-Olfenius
Photography Friedl Behn-Grund
Music Werner Eisbrenner

Cast

Sigrd Olinsky Sybille Schmitz
1st Officer Petersen Hans Nielsen
Gloria Kirsten Heiberg
Sir Bruce Ismay Ernst Fritz Fürbringer

In Brief

Building the Titanic has been a huge financial effort, and White Star Line president Ismay wants her maiden voyage to hit the headlines. He urges Captain Smith to make the fastest possible crossing to New York. When iceberg warnings come in, the captain must ask himself if he is willing to risk the safety of his ship just to please Ismay.

Before James Cameron's 1997 blockbuster *Titanic*, the Hollywood *Titanic* of 1953, the 1958 British film *A Night to Remember*, and the 1997 Broadway musical *Titanic*, there was the Nazi German film *Titanic*. A Tobis production begun in 1942, this production nearly sank as decisively as the doomed ocean liner. The film's director, Herbert Selpin, infuriated with the slow second-unit shooting in the port of Gdynia, was overheard making remarks damning the German army. Reported to the Gestapo, Selpin was arrested and later found hanging in his prison cell, the victim of an arranged "suicide."

Forty-year-old Herbert Selpin, the beleaguered director of *Titanic*, stressed out from pressure to finish the million mark epic, unwisely criticized the German navy to the Nazi true believer who authored *Titanic*'s screenplay, and found himself arrested by the Gestapo, an ordeal he did not survive. When he was found hanged in his cell, the unfinished production was put in the hands of the unremarkable Werner Klingler.

This backstory seems even chillier than the icy depths of the Atlantic that swallowed the ship. Then, when Klingler finished work on the unstoppable production, an air raid destroyed one copy of the film the very night before its premiere. Despite the trailer's tag — "the film Germany has been waiting on for years" — the fatherland continued to wait as Goebbels, presumably reluctant to mount models of mass death, ordered the negative to be locked away and banned any showing of the film. Kino has raised this *Titanic*, thought lost until 1950 and never properly released, from its grave in history.

The money sequence for any *Titanic* narrative is always the maritime disaster itself, but apart from the film's elaborately detailed sets of the ship's salons and staterooms, Selpin's perfunctory deployment of miniatures pales next to its competition. This is true even compared to E. A. Dupont's *Atlantic* from 1929, a rather primitive talkie indoors but impressively poetic when it moved outdoors, let alone James Cameron's teen-targeted *Titanic* (1998), the king-of-the-world behemoth that methodically deconstructed the vessel as a spectacle of engineering.

Selpin steers *Titanic* through its course, goose-stepping through the plot at quite a clip. This is bread-and-butter filmmaking, full of slick visuals with a machine-tooled look, everything tidy and clean and evenly lit. The director's method takes an early stab at the moment-to-moment procedural approach taken by the British *A Night to Remember* (1958) — still the gold standard of this subgenre — but the Germans don't even match the more modest satisfactions of Jean Negulesco's rather plush *Titanic* (1953), where emotional relationships resolved themselves in the valedictory bravery of those who went down with the ship.



The flurries of cross-cutting here leave no time for reverie or poetry and no room for milking human sentiment. With few sympathetic characters, this is certainly no love boat. The most appealing romantic subplot (toothy Franzl, the first violinist of the ship's chamber orchestra, courts pretty Hedy the manicurist) gets treated like some cinematic stowaway, paraded before the cameras as if in a lineup, then locked away, ignored and unable to develop.

Any spare tenderness goes to melancholy Sybille Schmitz (right), understandably morose as a newly impoverished Baltic millionairess (a decade after the actress starred in Dreyer's *Vampyr*, but four decades before Fassbinder fashioned Veronika Voss on her unhappy life). When the character rallies to take charge in the crunch, directing traffic to load the lifeboats, she stands out for her gestures of nobility

Below decks, the proles huddle in babushkas and slurp their soup, entertained by the sultry Jolly Maree, apparently a Gypsy emigrating to New York, who wriggles through



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a habañera-like dance (set to Spanish rhythms that want to become a polka). If her performance keeps threatening to turn into a striptease, that is an obvious impossibility in the family values-heavy Reich, but at least it motivates a none-too-convincing knife fight by two lumpen rivals for her "hand."

A Cuban jewel thief, a musty professor, and an emblematic heartland couple who resemble Bavarian Gothic also report for duty, yet there's no real attempt to sketch a social microcosm on board the ship. Gradually, the central character proves to be the rigidly correct Herr Petersen, "the only German officer on board" and another exemplary Nazi type. Despite his tirelessly warning the crew, the passengers, and the greedy British speculators of impending danger, no one pays this Teutonic Cassandra much heed; so, while the plutocrats dicker over financial deals, the liner's staff is left to rearrange the deck chairs.

It's thirty minutes to the first iceberg warning, and once the collision strikes, the film attains a rare grotesquerie as Herr Petersen then gloats as he revisits them all to say, "I told you so": the Titanic may be sinking, but the script never runs out of fuel as long as this proto-stormtrooper sticks around, and a coda even finds him hectoring the survivors in a British lawcourt. (It comes as a surprise that Petersen once had an emotional relationship with the countess).

Greed rather than hubris steers the ship toward unsafe speeds and catastrophe, as capitalists attempt to manipulate the stock price of the White Star Line. Aboard the vessel are the president of the company, prominent investors, and Yankee mogul John Jacob Astor. (The latter, at once ruthless and heartless, explains that "I don't lend money; I'd rather give it away. But since I'm no great apostle of charity, I don't give it away either"). This well-earned critique of British and Yankee businessmen seems disingenuous since the fascists were as profit-mongering as any robber baron (but felt pushed out of the capitalist club by the punitive strictures imposed after World War One).

However, despite some self-sacrificing actions by the crew and the film's sole touching visual metaphor — the despairing telegraph operator frees a caged bird, able to fly away from the catastrophe, deepening the poignancy of the humans' predicament, who are unable to escape the twin forces of the cruel sea and gravity — the film lingers too long on far less sympathetic characters, leaving a feeling that the tragedy has been trivialized.

Though nowhere near as creepy as Kolberg (1945) — director Viet Harlan's epic of magnificent depression, where German patriots fight to the last drop of blood resisting Napoleon's army, filmed as the Thousand Year Reich crumbled around the production — nevertheless Titanic's tightly-coiffed ladies and thin-lipped men seem to carry more than one intimation of the Holocaust as well as the impending doom of the filmmakers. More than Kino's other titles, this one gives us the unique experience of pulling on the jackboots, as it were, to think like a Nazi. In the final moments, lest any viewers remain floundering in the water, grasping for meaning, Titanic raises its oar to bludgeon us with a parting restatement of the theme: "eternal condemnation of England's thirst for profit."

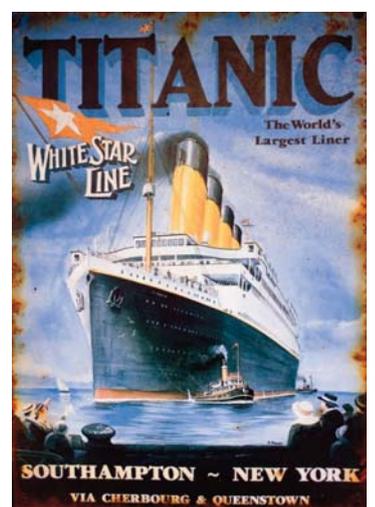
1912 A mostly bogus 10-minute newsreel circulated in movie theaters immediately following the disaster. Much of the footage is of the Titanic's sister ship Olympic which, having been completed a year earlier, had much more extensive photographic coverage. Unsophisticated movie audiences of the time were easily taken in by these deceptions.

Titanic on Film

1912 At least one primitive "animated" reconstruction of the disaster was released by the Sales Company's Animated Weekly to satisfy movie audiences' hunger for any kind of footage related to Titanic. It was common practice in this period to produce animated versions of news events that did not enjoy the benefit of coverage by real movie cameras. A similar animated version of the sinking of the Lusitania produced three years later still exists.

1912 The motion picture was a primitive entertainment medium in its infancy and there were a handful of individuals connected with the film industry on board the Titanic. Most did not survive. One who did was Dorothy Gibson, a part-time actress who was also a 1st class passenger. Within weeks of her rescue, her studio, Eclair Film Co., capitalized on the connection by releasing a ten-minute feature Saved from the Titanic. In the film, Ms. Gibson wore the same dress in which she had boarded a Titanic lifeboat. She was actually one of the first in a lifeboat, whereas in the film the heroine helps rescue several people and is one of the last to enter a boat. This film no longer exists and there were undoubtedly several other silent film versions of the Titanic disaster which did not survive. It is estimated that almost 90 percent of films made during the silent era are lost forever. An early German film about the disaster was assumed lost but was recently rediscovered weeks after the release of the Cameron film.

1929 British International Pictures released Atlantic in both silent and sound versions. The film was a then-rare example of what today has become a television staple, the international co-production with talking versions in English, French and German. For many European audiences, it was the first all-talking film that they had seen and, like most early talkies, the dialogue sequences are stultifyingly bad with most of the actors demonstrating a profound discomfort at having to emote into a then



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unfamiliar microphone. The film was based on Ernest Raymond's play, *The Berg*, and was shot at Elstree Studios in England. The shots of the lifeboats being lowered down the side of the ship was filmed on a real liner docked in the River Thames. The title *Atlantic* is also the name of the ship as the film's producers were threatened by a lawsuit from the White Star Line, one of many attempts by the shipping company to discourage filmmakers from dramatizing the Titanic disaster.

1933 The Fox production *Cavalcade*, based on a play by Noel Coward, featured a scene where a doomed honeymoon couple are discussing their plans for the future on the deck of an unidentified ship. As they move away from the railing, we see the name *Titanic* printed on a life ring. The film won an Academy Award as Best Picture of 1933.

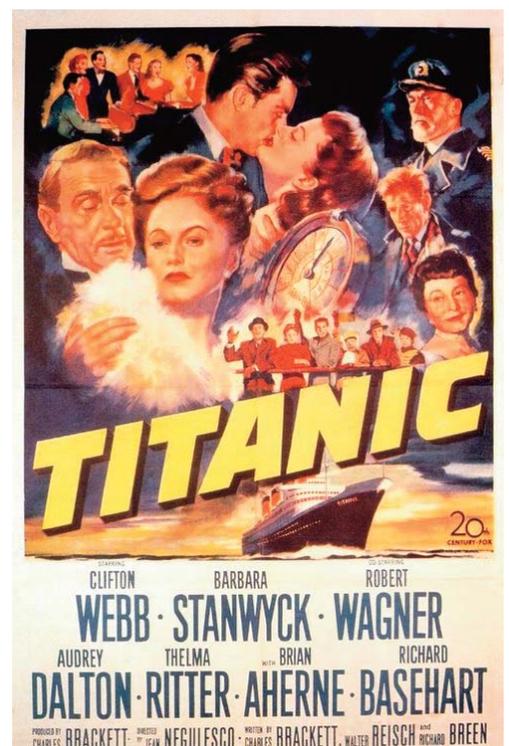
1937 *History is Made at Night* stars Charles Boyer and Jean Arthur and is billed as a "romantic comedy-drama." The climax of the film takes place on board a new luxury liner that collides with an iceberg in the North Atlantic after the captain is instructed by the owner to ignore the ice warnings and race for a record crossing. Other than this collision, the connection with *Titanic* is flimsy at best. In the film, the ship's bulkheads hold, the liner is saved and the passengers, who were earlier lowered in lifeboats, are able to get back on board.

1938 Hollywood film producer David O. Selznick felt that the *Titanic* story had the requisite epic historical quality that he found so attractive in film projects. Selznick decided that a British director was needed to handle the story properly and he imported Alfred Hitchcock, then one of Britain's best-known film directors. Selznick's initial plan called for purchasing the American liner *Leviathan*, then waiting on the scrap line in Hoboken, New Jersey and towing it to California through the Panama Canal. The studio would then overhaul the top decks to resemble *Titanic*, shooting the movie on it, then sinking the ship off Santa Monica while the cameras were running. There were numerous difficulties involved in preparing the script and the expense of purchasing and overhauling *Leviathan* proved to be prohibitive. Besides, by this time Selznick, was deeply involved in one of his other projects, *Gone With the Wind*.

1943 During World War 2, the German film industry, firmly under the control of the Nazis, made a propaganda version of the disaster called *Titanic*. It was one of the most expensive German films made until that time. By then, the war had turned against the Third Reich and average Germans were experiencing many deprivations in food, gasoline and other resources. Yet, the film was a pet project of Hitler confidant and powerful minister of propaganda Joseph Goebbels. The fact that the real disaster highlighted British incompetence and corruption appealed to Goebbels and there was considerable opportunity for dramatic license. *Titanic* was a flop when released. Regular bombing raids on German cities by the combined American and British Air Forces did not whet the public's appetite for a disaster. The Nazi censors yanked it from circulation when they discovered that German audiences were still far too sympathetic towards the British passengers despite the obvious propaganda quotient. The propaganda value also backfired as the *Titanic* in the film could easily have been interpreted as an allegory of the Third Reich itself. *Titanic* was, however, quite successful when shown in occupied France. Herbert Selpin was the director of *Titanic* and he had made several earlier distinguished films. Selpin resisted many efforts by the Nazis to exaggerate British cowardice even more than appeared in the final film. He openly displayed his contempt for his Nazi masters and was murdered in his prison cell on the orders of Goebbels, having never seen his last film. Perhaps he was the final victim of the *Titanic* disaster. The film was confiscated by the occupying American army in 1945 and attempts in 1950 to revive a theatrical release of the film in Germany failed as the film was still deemed by authorities to be too anti-British. In another stroke of irony, *Titanic* was shown in East Germany during the 1950's as the film's anti-British bias suited Communist ideology better than it had the Nazis. In a final touch of irony, portions of this film's special effect model shots were included in some early American television programs and in the British film *A Night to Remember*.

1953 20th Century Fox finally got around to realizing Selznick's plan of 15 years earlier and gave the *Titanic* story the full Hollywood treatment that it so richly deserved and which was long overdue. *Titanic* was a lavish docudrama that mixed fictional and real characters and opened in Hollywood on April 14, exactly 41 years after the disaster. The film starred Barbara Stanwyck, Clifton Webb, and Robert Wagner. Walter Lord, author of *A Night to Remember*, reported a comment once made to him that Clifton Webb's portrayal of snobbish fashion plate Richard Sturges was so vivid that, if he wasn't on the ship, he should have been. The director of *Titanic*, Jean Negulesco, used a dramatic device that characterized all the superior *Titanic* films by emphasizing the happiness and gaiety of life on board the ship prior to the collision and contrasting this with the chaos and despair that occurred afterwards. The sequence where Sturges and his son meet their deaths while singing "Nearer My God to Thee" has become a permanent part of *Titanic* mythology. This single scene may have eventually resulted in creating more *Titanic* aficionados than any other film in this chronology. Like most American films of the time, *Titanic* was entirely a studio production made on Hollywood soundstages. The film's witty and literate screenplay won an Oscar for the screenwriters. The model of the *Titanic* used in this film has been completely restored and is on display at the Marine Museum in Fall River, Massachusetts.

1956 In a time referred to today as the "Golden Age," television networks prided themselves on presenting live television dramas of high quality and the Kraft Television Theater was one of the best. Walter Lord had published his seminal work on the *Titanic*, *A Night to Remember*, a year earlier and Kraft presented a dramatization of the book,



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broadcast live from the NBC Studio in New York. This "spectacular," as such shows were then known, featured 107 actors, 31 sets; some designed to tilt with the increasing listing of the ship, dump tanks filled with water and narration by Hollywood star Claude Rains. The production was probably the most ambitious live show ever presented on TV and was directed by George Roy Hill who became a top movie director in the 70's with hit films such as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and The Sting.

1958 The enormous popularity of Lord's book and its television dramatization convinced Irish film producer William MacQuitty that the story deserved an even more lavish big screen treatment. As a boy, MacQuitty had witnessed the launch of Titanic in Belfast in 1911. The J. Arthur Rank production *A Night to Remember* is, without question, the best and most authentic of all Titanic movies. Expertly directed by Roy Baker, the film dramatically lays out the facts of the event, uncluttered with the fictional "star" turns and the maudlin sentimentality that had characterized the 1953 film, and to a lesser extent, the 1997 Cameron film. The interiors were filmed mostly at Pinewood Studios near London and the authenticity of this production included 30 interior sets constructed from actual blueprints of Titanic and actors who looked like the people that they portrayed. Exterior scenes were filmed on a giant outdoor set in mid-winter and on an old Harland & Wolff liner, *Asturias*, which was being scrapped at the time. The obsession for authentic detail stands up to repeated viewings. Only minor alterations were made to the historical record for dramatic purposes particularly the use of "composite characters," fictional characters who embodied the characteristics of several real people representing the three classes on board the ship. The gut-wrenching sequences portraying the alleged stupidity of the Californian's officers while Titanic is sinking have probably done more to stir up

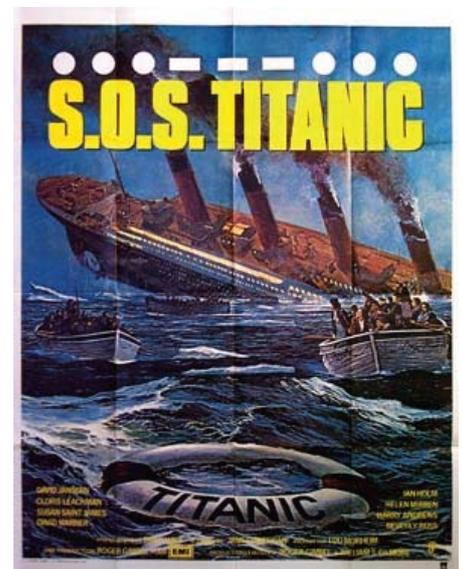
sympathy for the much-maligned Captain Stanley Lord than any other single factor.

The most serious flaws in the film are unconvincing special effect sequences involving the Titanic's collision with the iceberg, especially when compared with the Fox film made five years previously. British movie technology of the time simply couldn't compete with Hollywood in that regard. Despite unanimously positive reviews and a slew of various film award nominations, *A Night to Remember* did mediocre business at the box office when it was released. Perhaps the movie's strengths as a docudrama and Baker and MacQuitty's refusal to make token dramatic concessions weakened its box office appeal.

1964 The life of colorful real-life Titanic survivor Mrs. J.J. Brown was turned into a Broadway musical, *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* featuring music by Meredith Wilson. The film adaptation starred the ebullient Debbie Reynolds in the title role. Like most musical biographies, the film takes considerable liberties with the protagonist's real life. The real Maggie Brown was not nearly as attractive as the comely Ms. Reynolds, but the outline of the plot was true to life.

Maggie was a backwoods orphan who became one of the wealthiest women in Denver, Colorado when her husband struck it rich by discovering a silver mine. Considered a rube and snubbed by Denver socialites, Maggie frequently traveled to Europe and became a favorite of the titled international set. While returning to America on Titanic, Maggie ended up in lifeboat #6 where she took charge when the assigned crew member proved unequal to the task. This sequence was filmed but dropped from the release version of the Cameron film. Brown's exploits on Titanic were well publicized and she finally found social acceptance from those who had snubbed her. Hollywood could never ignore such an interesting and colorful personality and practically every Titanic movie features this character in a supporting role. Maggie was one of the key witnesses at the American inquiry and a well-known photograph reproduced in many books about Titanic shows her presenting a medal to Captain Rostron of the rescue ship *Carpathia* a few weeks after the disaster.

1979 The ABC Sunday Night Movie presented *S.O.S. Titanic*, a lavish made-for-TV movie starring David Janssen as John Jacob Astor, David Warner (who played the evil and sadistic gun-toting Lovejoy in the Cameron film) as Lawrence Beesley, a second class passenger, Ian Holm as J. Bruce Ismay and Cloris Leachman portrayed Molly Brown. Filmed off the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea; aboard the *Queen Mary* in Long Beach, California; in iceberg-infested waters near Greenland and in a gigantic "floodable" studio near London, this is an interesting version of the disaster written by Emmy-winner James Costigan. One of the most compelling sequences at the start of the film shows Titanic survivors, still in shock, boarding *Carpathia*. The script makes much of the class differences among the various passengers with Beesley extolling a Marxist analysis of the disaster after being rescued.



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1980 The movie *Raise the Titanic* was based on a mediocre novel by Clive Cussler that had enjoyed bestseller status a few years earlier. The action takes place in contemporary times, with the U.S. Navy spending hundreds of millions of dollars to raise the liner because, in its hold, is a rare mineral called Byzantium necessary for a new nuclear defense system. The film itself was a disaster and is one of the great money-losers in movie history. It cost \$40 million and the special effects alone cost more than it did to build the *Titanic* itself in 1911. *Raise the Titanic* was universally panned by critics and died a quick death at the box office bringing in revenues of less than 10 percent of its cost. British movie mogul, Lord Lew Grade, who lost his job over the debacle, is credited with the famous line "Raise the *Titanic*? My God, it would be cheaper to lower the Atlantic!"

Despite terrible acting, abominable dialogue, sloppy research and a ridiculous premise, portions of the film are quite interesting and make it worth renting for *Titanic* buffs. The underwater sequences where they try to locate the wreck are very similar to what transpired when the Ballard expedition found *Titanic* five years later. The special effects sequences of the *Titanic* being raised are also quite impressive and the film features a stirring musical score by John Barry. The model used for this sequence was fifty-five feet long and cost \$5 million. These scenes were filmed in a specially constructed ten million gallon tank on the island of Malta built at a further cost of \$3 million. Also impressive was set designer John DeCuir's visualization of the interior of *Titanic* after it was raised. From a special effects standpoint, the sequences of *Titanic* being towed into New York are technically disappointing and not very convincing. Unfortunately, the sequences in the book showing how the Byzantium came to be aboard *Titanic* in 1912 were not filmed. The film was rushed into release because the producers were concerned that the Grimm expedition, then searching for *Titanic*, would locate the actual wreck and, if the ship was found in pieces, the movie would have no credibility. They need not have worried.

1981 *Time Bandits*, a fantasy adventure produced by ex-Beatle George Harrison and written and directed by Monty Python alumnus Terry Gilliam concerned an English schoolboy and a collection of dwarves who travel in time meeting various historical figures. They end up on the deck of *Titanic* just before the collision, providing an opportunity for strained humour, "I'll have champagne with plenty of ice."

1989 In a brief sequence in *Ghostbusters II*, a ghostly apparition of *Titanic* arrives in New York and long-dead passengers are seen disembarking.

1996 Danielle Steeles' drugstore potboiler *No Greater Love* was filmed as a TV movie in Montreal. The plucky heroine, Edwina, is a passenger on *Titanic* but loses her parents and fiance in the disaster. Edwina undergoes a lifetime of melodrama, having to raise her five siblings by herself.

1996 *Titanic* was a two-part TV movie filmed in Vancouver and starring George C. Scott as Captain Smith, Marilu Henner as Molly Brown and Eva Marie Saint and Peter Gallagher as fictional characters. The CBS movie was clearly designed to exploit the hype swirling about the then uncompleted Cameron film. Most viewers were appalled by a scene with Tim Curry as an oversexed White Star steward raping a female third class passenger in the shower. The computer-generated special effects were pathetic. The movie was re-broadcast in May of 1998.

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1997 *Titanic* directed by James Cameron and starring Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio, the motion picture became popular among adolescent girls who became drawn to the movie due to crushes on the leading man and it being an "epic period" romance. Despite winning several Academy Awards - and raking in the highest box office gross of all time - it is an appallingly boring combination of an action movie and a chick flick romance. The sinking is merely used as the backdrop for a fictional love story, and the movie is perhaps the most historically inaccurate of any of the films made about the ocean liner. The performances of Billy Zane and Frances Fisher are the strongest aspect of a film which is otherwise all wet and soggy.

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