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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Life is a gift: Value cosmologies in Hollywood cinema

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Abstract

Is life "priceless," or can life be bought and sold like a commodity? Anthropological theory has not yet been able to integrate incommensurable value with commensurable value. But such an integrated theory of value exists—not explicitly in theory but implicitly in everyday ethics and fictional narratives. I analyze how the movie *Titanic*, one of the most commercially valuable artefacts of all time, reveals a comprehensive ideology of how life and material wealth should be valued. *Titanic* works through key themes in economic anthropology: social inequality, class struggle, gift/commodity distinctions, the meaning of money, and inalienable possessions. *Titanic* demonstrates that the tension between ethical values and economic value can be resolved when short-term individual gains are transcended by a mutuality of being that reaches beyond death. *Titanic* proposes that American capitalism can integrate core cultural values with economic freedom and self-realization.

KEYWORDS
capitalism, commensurability, everyday ethics, Hollywood cinema, ideology, incommensurability, value theory

BEYOND THE GREAT RIFT

Economic value is the measure of relative worth within exchanges. Ethical values express what makes life worth living. Can economic and ethical value be integrated into a single theory? There are two opposing answers to this question. One assumes an incommensurability between economic value and ethical values; the other holds that a general theory of value is possible. Arguing for incommensurability, Michael Lambek (2008, 134) finds a "great rift between ethical value and economic value." It would not just be futile but even "dangerous to produce a model of value that was overly unified" (134) as this would only expand market logics into all spheres of life. Others argue that economic value and ethical values can and should be integrated without subsuming either under the other. Arguing for commensurability, David Graeber (2001, 2005, 2013) wants anthropological theory to describe "some kind of symbolic system that defines the world in terms of what is important, meaningful, desirable, or worthwhile in it" (2005, 439). A theory that does not reduce value to either money, or labor, or shared ethos must "understand the workings of any system of exchange (including free-market capitalism) as part of a larger system of meaning, one containing conceptions of what the cosmos is ultimately about and what is worth pursuing in it" (Graeber, 2005, 443). In their coauthored introduction to *Value as Theory*, Ton Otto and Rane Willerslev (2013) also juxtapose these two positions: Otto maintains there can be an integrated value theory while Willerslev disagrees. Otto believes that a general theory can be reconstructed from ethnographic evidence. Willerslev asserts that anthropology is an ethnographic discipline and that ethnography is about discovering cultural incommensurabilities. I argue that anthropology can *discover* integrated value theories in everyday ethics and fictional narratives (see Sutton and Wogan, 2009). These implicit value theories succeed in defining the world by what has worth and what does not, in the way that Graeber (2005) envisions it.

Ludwig Wittgenstein ([1921] 1989) argues that ethical values cannot be accorded the same status as objective facts; values cannot be deemed true or false like statements about the material world. Wittgenstein posits that while people regularly apportion value to people and things, their values are only revealed in a nonpropositional form. Wittgenstein enjoyed going

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to the cinema to watch Western movies because they were so good at revealing values rather than stating them (Rennebohm, 2020). The idea of revealed ethics through everyday practice returned to anthropological theory as "ordinary ethics" (Lambek, 2010). Some of this work also analyzes fiction for the value theory that it reveals (Bateson, 1980; Das, 2012).

In this article I discuss the value theory, as revealed by James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997). *Titanic* deals with key anthropological concerns, such as rites of passage, the human life course, death and mortuary rituals, honor and shame, personhood, time and memory, tradition and modernity, gender, and kinship. It also contains elements of economic anthropology, such as social stratification and class struggle, the meaning of work, and tensions between gift and commodity exchanges. The plot is driven by the changing meaning attributed to an object—a "priceless" diamond. Key themes include the use and abuse of money, the changing perception of women as "goods of exchange" (Lévi-Strauss, 1969) to an acknowledgment of their agency and self-realization, and the awareness that rites of passage involving money transform people and things.

Titanic is also worthy of analysis as an exceptionally valuable Hollywood industry artefact. For more than a decade *Titanic* held the record as the most expensive movie ever produced. The exorbitant production cost of USD 200 million looked risky at the time, but the investment paid off: *Titanic* grossed USD 2.2 billion, making it the most profitable movie of all time. *Titanic's* financial success was matched by its critical success. In 1998, the American film industry awarded *Titanic* 11 Academy Awards, making it one of the three most decorated movies of all time.

Titanic's high production value explains some of its commercial success. But the most compelling reason for the movie's triumph lies in its narrative. The movie became so successful because it presents a theory of value where transcendent love triumphs over non-transcendent class. *Titanic* resolves the tension between economic value and ethical values. It presents an apotheosis of American capitalism as the best of all possible worlds. The value cosmology revealed in *Titanic* is that (1) "life" is a transcendent gift that must be honored and never be alienated; (2) alienating exchanges can be transformed by the inalienable power of love; and (3) authentic American capitalism is the only economic system that puts life over death, freedom over tutelage, authenticity over inauthenticity, and inalienability over alienation.

FAITHFUL REMEMBRANCE

In the 1900s, White Star Lines created a fleet of large, fast, and luxurious passenger ships. The RMS *Titanic* was the jewel in the crown. Able to carry more than 1,300 passengers and 900 crew, the *Titanic* was regarded as a triumph of modern engineering. All the ship's aspects were meant to be superlative, including that its safety features made it "unsinkable." On April 10, 1912, the RMS *Titanic* started her maiden voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. The majority of passengers (710) occupied the third-class areas; most of them were European emigrants on their way to a new life in America. The second class had 285 people. The first class had 329 passengers, among them the ultrarich such as the Astors and the Guggenheims. Despite iceberg warnings, the *Titanic* steamed ahead at full speed. On the night of April 14, 1912, the ship crashed into an iceberg east of Newfoundland. The damage was too severe for the ship's safety mechanisms. The evacuation took a catastrophic turn. Since there were not enough lifeboats, the captain decided to prioritize first-class passengers; many third-class passengers were locked up on the lower decks. After three hours of riotous struggles, the *Titanic* sank in the early hours of April 15, 1912. Only one lifeboat returned to take in additional people after the ship's sinking. Only six further passengers were rescued alive from the freezing water. The crew in charge of the lifeboats later said that going back would have been "suicide" because the boats would have capsized (Compton, 2012).

A staggering 1,517 people died in the disaster. The death count reveals deep socioeconomic inequalities. From among the 710 third-class passengers, 536 died. More than half of the second-class passengers (166) died. Chances of survival were best for the first-class passengers: 199 were saved, only 130 died. The crew suffered the heaviest losses: only 214 were saved, 685 died. The RMS *Titanic*'s sinking was a critical event that revealed that rich people's lives were regarded as more valuable than poor people's lives. The RMS *Titanic*'s sinking caused enduring trauma on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Official inquiries were held to determine who was responsible for the catastrophe, yet no one was ever charged with a crime. People in North America and Western Europe held large memorial services and erected many public monuments in commemoration of the victims.

As the filmmakers emphasize, *Titanic* (Cameron, 1998) is not mere fiction. Everything represented is meant to be historically accurate. Only the lead characters were invented. The film tries to re-create the ship's details and the historical events authentically. All artefacts shown were designed according to old models and photographs, and actors were trained to speak in contemporary accents. Cameron's principle was that it *could* have happened this way. The luxury suite occupied by Rose could have been occupied by someone like her—finance magnate J. P. Morgan (1837–1913) canceled his reservation one day before departure. The claim that the cinematic representation was *faithful* to historical events is an essential part of the movie's mission.

Faithful remembrance also structures the plot. The film's opening scenes take place in 1996. An American expedition team is searching the wreck of the RMS *Titanic* for a "priceless" 56-carat diamond necklace, the Heart of the Ocean. They retrieve the safe supposedly containing it, but the diamond necklace is not there. They find only the drawing of a nude woman

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wearing the necklace. Upon hearing about the find, 102-year-old Rose gets in touch with the expedition leader. The crew invite Rose to help recover the diamond. Surrounded by the crew, Rose begins recounting the events of that fateful night.

In 1912, Rose DeWitt Bukater and Cal Hockley return to America to get married. Both are members of Philadelphia's upper class; their marriage is a desirable match between two "good families." Yet, Rose despises Cal for his cynical and calculating ways and sees no prospect of the marriage succeeding. Rose's mother recognizes the lack of affection but insists on the wedding going ahead. The DeWitt Bukater family was bankrupt and had nothing left but their "good name." The alliance with the Hockleys was the only way the DeWitt Bukaters could avoid financial ruin. The mother warns: if Rose refuses to marry Cal, the family would fall. Her mother asks, "Do you want to see our fine things sold at auction, our memories scattered to the winds? My God, Rose, how can you be so selfish?" (Cameron, 1997). Rose is pressured to sacrifice authentic happiness for wealth and family honor.

On her first night on board the *Titanic*, Rose wants to kill herself. She climbs over the ship's rear to jump into the water. Jack Dawson, a third-class passenger, calms her down. Jack is an American artist without money or prestigious family name. Calling himself a "tumbleweed in the wind," Jack moves from place to place in search of adventure. He was in Paris to develop his craft. Unfettered by class distinctions, Jack embodies the American "frontier spirit."

Rose and Jack fall in love, and Rose decides to leave Cal. Rose's mother and Cal make several attempts to restore order. In a crucial scene, Cal presents Rose with the diamond necklace. He tries to give the diamond in exchange for Rose's love: "There's nothing I'd deny you if you would not deny me. Open your heart to me" (Cameron, 1997). Rose realizes that this is not an unconditional gift but a cold bargain: "Of course his gift was only to reflect light back onto himself. … It was a cold stone … a heart of ice" (Cameron, 1997).

During the *Titanic*'s sinking, Jack and Rose are prepared to give their lives for each other; finally, Jack sacrifices himself to save Rose on a float while he freezes to death. Jack makes Rose promise that she will live a good life: "Promise me you will survive. … Never let go of that promise!" (Cameron, 1997).

Rose reaches New York safely. Cal is also rescued by securing a place in a lifeboat under the false pretense of saving a child's life. Rose remains incognito among the other survivors of the steerage class. Upon arrival in New York, a US immigration officer asks Rose for her name. "Dawson," she replies, affirming her wedding vows with Jack. Cal and her mother believe that she had died. Disembedded like other third-class immigrants, Rose begins a new life as if she had reached America for the first time.

Rose's remembrance moves the whole crew to tears. The expedition leader realizes that his greedy hunt for the Heart had made him forget the emotional tragedy of the events: "Three years of searching. But I never got it. I never let it in." At night, Rose goes silently to the ship's rear. She moves up the railing, reenacting the suicide attempt that Jack had thwarted years earlier. Rose opens her hand to reveal that the diamond had been with her all along. In the confusion of the sinking, Cal had put his coat around her, and the coat had the Heart in its pocket. With a little "Ah!" she releases the diamond into the ocean.

The film's final scene is Rose's apotheosis. Old Rose sleeps in her cabin on the expedition ship. The camera pans across photos of her flying airplanes, driving automobiles, and riding horses, then fades into darkness. Out of the darkness the wreck of the *Titanic* emerges. The wreck transforms back to its original glory. The *Titanic* literally *re-members* itself—all parts come back together anew. The view moves through the *Titanic* until it arrives at the door to the grand staircase filled with the smiling faces of all the righteous souls who died in the sinking. Jack stands at the top of the staircase, waiting for Rose. The camera moves around him; it shows Rose, young again, falling into Jack's arms. They kiss, accompanied by the congregation's applause. The camera turns skyward, and the view dissolves into whiteness. Rose's soul has reached *Titanic* heaven.

RITES OF PASSAGE

The Atlantic crossing is not just a movement from one geographical point to another. The *Titanic* performs a rite of *passage* in the full sense of the term (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, [1909] 1977). *Titanic* is a liminal space where a passage from death to rebirth takes place. Europe represents the old structure, America the new structure. In between, the righteous passengers die and are resurrected in the afterlife. The transgressive love between Rose and Jack annihilates the old order (Caillois, [1939] 1988).

The time–space on the *Titanic* is one of carnivalesque inversion. For the ritual transition to begin, all the passengers' hands must rest. The good passengers laugh, dance, and play. While "heading to America flush with the hope of a new life and greater fortunes" (*Titanic* Facebook Page), they think of fun, not of labor. In a betrayal of the carnival spirit, only "the usual fatcats" (Cameron, 1998, 79) continue their dreary discussions of stock markets. The third-class passengers enjoy the journey as a passage from oppression to freedom, from poverty to wealth. Modernity has often been described as a great disembedding from traditional structures (Giddens, 1990). In the twentieth century's first decade, more than eight million Europeans emigrated to the United States. The emigrants who travel on the *Titanic* are glad to leave the Old World behind. Emigration becomes a ritual renewal.

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Like other rites of passage, *Titanic* portrays a pre-transitional order, the process of transition, and a post-transitional order. The pre-transitional order is the Old World with rigid structures of class and kinship. Classes are ranked according to wealth and reputation. As heir to one of the richest and most prestigious families, Cal ranks at the top. *Titanic* juxtaposes an old hierarchical with a new egalitarian world. Cal incarnates the Old World. When Cal presents Rose with the Heart, he describes how the diamond was once worn by the King of France: "It's for royalty. And we are royalty," he says to Rose (Cameron, 1997). As daughter of a patrician family, Rose has the same level of symbolic capital as Cal, but her father's death destroyed the family's economic capital. The alliance to Cal is the only way of maintaining a high position in the old hierarchy.

Titanic also portrays other social classes. One rank down is the "New Money"—rich people without prestigious pedigrees (Bourdieu, 1984). The movie shows a few middle-class people, but their position never becomes a theme. The third-class poor are the class antagonists of the Old-World rich. "Steerage" passengers have neither money nor family name. Their only capital is their hope for a better life in America. The hierarchy between upper and lower classes is inscribed in the ship's spatial order: the first class is on top, while the third class is hidden below deck: "That's so we know where we rank in the scheme of things," jokes Jack. The ship's spatial order prohibits mingling between members of the two social classes. Jack's "frontier spirit" is about authentic experience, not about material accumulation. Jack embodies the American Declaration of Independence's ethos, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The Old World does not share this belief that all are created equal.

In the pre-transitional order, romantic love is an irrelevant criterion for valuing matches (Illouz, 1997). Marriage is an alliance between two families; its goal is the reproduction of honor and wealth. Rose has to marry Cal—not for love but for family honor. *Titanic*'s Old World exemplifies Lévi-Strauss's (1969) theory that women are "goods for exchange." Lévi-Strauss's notion of "woman" has been challenged as misogynist (Sahlins, 1974, 181; Sperber, 1979, 23; Strathern, 1988, 313). But as far as the Old-World protagonists are concerned, Rose is indeed an example of "that most precious category of goods, women" (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, 60). Being treated like an item for exchange creates an inner conflict of value that drives her toward suicide.

Love liberates Rose and allows her to achieve a congruence between her inner disposition (creative, expressive, egalitarian) and the world she lives in. The philosopher Charles Taylor (1991) argues that the modern ethos of authenticity, as "being true to oneself," originates from the same period as the American Revolution. The right to pursue happiness required the liberation of individualized value orientations. True happiness could no longer be defined by outer norms; it had to be measured by its congruence with an inner ethos. Taylor (1991) argues that the rejection of a common measure made "being true to oneself" a core value of modern selfhood. What is right or wrong cannot be determined in an absolute way but depends on the inner truth in relation to an outer world. Every individual must find their own way to truth; there cannot be one truth for everyone:

> There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's life. But this notion gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life; I miss what being human is for me. (Taylor, 1991, 29)

Authentic "America" embodies the post-transitional order. Fairy-tale plots end with the heroes living "happily ever after." *Titanic* has the same ending, except that Jack lives in spirit and not in the flesh. Just before his death, he asks Rose to promise that she would go on living for both of them: "You must do me this honor … promise me you will survive … promise me now, and never let go of that promise" (Cameron, 1997). When Rose arrives in the New World, she looks up at the Statue of Liberty. From the many photographs that Rose carries with her, the viewer learns that she lived a fulfilled life. She keeps her promise of becoming the creative, free-spirited woman she was meant to be. She becomes who she truly is. The New World allows her to realize liberty, freedom, and self-determination.

MONEY SHAN'T BUY ME LIFE

In the pre-transitional order, economic capital is one of the primary means of exchange. In *Titanic*, Cal and his evil valet are the only protagonists seen using money. Exemplifying Old-World capitalism, Cal thinks he can buy anything he wants, including love and life. *Titanic* shows, however, that Cal's calculations only work in the Old World. Many scenes illustrate how money loses its power once the old order is left behind: (1) When Jack saves Rose from jumping into the sea, Cal orders his valet to pay Jack a bit of money, which the latter rejects. Upon Rose's intervention—"Is that the going rate for saving the woman you love?" (Cameron, 1997)—Cal grudgingly invites Jack to dinner in the first class. (2) The precious diamond cannot buy him Rose's love. (3) Cal's valet offers to pay Jack money in exchange for him never seeing Rose again. Jack rejects the bribe. (4) Cal attempts to secure a place in one of the lifeboats by stuffing banknotes into an officer's pockets. When he demands to get in the next lifeboat, the officer throws the banknotes into the air, then shoots himself in the head.

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The movie shows only one instance where paying money works: when Cal bribes a customs officer back in the Old World. On the *Titanic*, money has lost all its value. Cal says many times that he always gets what he wants, "whatever the cost" (Cameron, 1997). But on the *Titanic*, his money is worthless. *Titanic* shows that material wealth for its own sake is as pointless in the New World as on the ship. The only thing that matters is the realization of authentic happiness, which does not require excessive wealth. This moral rebukes both the Protestant ethic that Max Weber (1988) describes as the root of capitalism, which argues for the accumulation of capital through strict self-denial, and the kind of "bad capitalism" that Cal represents, which degenerates into materialistic selfishness. *Titanic* shows that in the New World, money is neither for self-denying accumulation nor for selfish goal achievement but a means for gaining rewarding life experiences. Furthermore, living a good life does not hinge on maximizing material possessions—Rose never tries to sell the diamond or derive any profit from it. Moreover, the movie shows that living a good life is not the same as amassing wealth, as expressed in the treasure hunters' changing attitudes. *Titanic*'s opening is focused on the crew's craving for material gains. When the expedition leader believes he found the safe containing the diamond, he shouts, "It's payday, boys!" (Cameron, 1997). Rose's narrative changes how the crew values life.

TRUE INALIENABILITY

Along with "woman" in kinship exchanges and money, the third item of exchange in *Titanic* is the precious diamond. This thing defies classification within the usual gift/commodity dichotomy. Economic anthropology usually assumes that a thing can assume only one of two identities: either it is an inalienable gift or it is an alienable commodity (Gregory, 1982, 100; Robbins, 2009). But the gift/commodity distinction clearly fails to capture the complexity of actual exchange relations (Gell, 1997; Strathern, 1988; Widlok, 2017). That not even things in Hollywood movies can be described as either gift or commodity does not bode well for a theory that claims to capture the entire cosmos of transactions between humans.

The Heart is neither gift nor commodity. The only moment when the Heart is a "commodity" is when Cal's father buys it (which is not shown, only briefly mentioned). When Cal presents the Heart to Rose, he does not give it to her as a gift, as it remains in his possession. He calls it "a reminder of my feelings for you" (Cameron, 1997) and proposes a deal: her love in return for the diamond. Both Cal and Rose know that the Heart is not a "free" or "pure" gift (Parry, 1986). To qualify as an American gift without obligations, the Heart would have to be unconstrained and unconstraining. Cal emphasizes that Rose will receive even more precious things in the future *on condition* that she stop rejecting him: "Open your heart to me" (Cameron, 1997). Rose knows that accepting the Heart would force her to accept Cal's repressive power over her. Putting the Heart necklace around Rose's neck fulfills none of the American ideology's criteria of the free gift (Carrier, 1990, 1995).

In the same vein, the Heart is not a "commodity." In a pivotal scene, the Heart undergoes a rite of passage from the Old to the New. While Cal is upstairs discussing the stock market, Rose asks Jack to draw her, wearing nothing but the diamond necklace. She hands him a ten-cent coin, saying that, "as a paying customer I expect to get what I want" (Cameron, 1997). But this is not a monetary transaction; instead, it parodies the power of money. After the drawing is done, they put both the Heart and the drawing into Cal's safe, along with a handwritten note that mocks both Cal's selfishness and the Heart's material value: "Darling, now you can keep us both locked in your safe." It derides Cal for trying to "keep" Rose and for trying to buy Rose's love.

The scene where Jack draws Rose naked contains many key elements of rites of passage (Turner, 1969). Rose's nakedness strips her of both her clothes and her former social identity. A hint of embarrassment and humiliation lends emotional tension. Rose's liminality makes her temporarily untouchable. The rite creates a *communitas* between the couple—a bond that would not be severed again. The drawing also transforms the Heart's meaning. When Cal presents it to Rose, the Heart is a symbol of Rose's oppression—it is "cold as ice." Jack drawing Rose with the Heart and then placing the drawing along with the Heart into Cal's safe turn the diamond into a symbol of love. Most theories of gift-giving—based on the work of French sociologist Marcel Mauss—presume that gifts establish a bond between giver and receiver (Robbins, 2009). *Titanic* shows how the opposite can be true. As a gift, the drawing alienates Rose from Cal, while transforming the Heart from a token of debt into a token of love. Cal remains the Heart's legal owner, but Rose and Jack gain its symbolic possession. Before the drawing scene, the Heart appears inalienable from Cal. After the drawing scene, the Heart-as-symbol becomes inalienable from Rose. A transition is achieved from an Old World order of negative reciprocity to a New World order of mutuality that knows neither giver nor taker.

Cal fights hard against these transvaluations. Cal's valet puts the Heart into Jack's pocket to frame him for theft. Cal accuses Jack of theft, in the Master of Arms's presence. They find the diamond and handcuff Jack on the ship's lower decks. Jack beseeches Rose not to believe that he betrayed her. If Jack were a petty thief, the mutuality would be a scam and the whole passage to the New World would be a lie. Fortunately, Rose soon realizes Cal's deceit and reunites with Jack.

In her narration of the historic events, Rose never reveals that she was in possession of the Heart all these years. She accidentally got the Heart back when Cal put his coat around her, with the Heart in the pocket. Rose only discovered she had the Heart after reaching New York. After 84 years, the treasure-hunting expedition allows Rose to take the Heart out of

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circulation. After completing her story, she walks alone to the ship's rear and drops the Heart into the ocean. Why does Rose discard such a valuable object? The Heart had acquired a multitude of symbolic meanings. Rose and Jack had been able to transform the Heart's meaning from a cold commodity into a symbol of enduring love. To preserve this meaning, she must stop the Heart's further circulation. When the Heart disappears in the ocean's depth—visually repeating Jack's final sacrifice—Rose creates a monument to love. For a spellbinding moment, all the Heart's contradicting symbolizations are both present *and* transcended: (1) Rose standing at the ship's rear alludes to Jack saving her from attempted suicide. The Heart sinking into the ocean enacts Rose's suicide by proxy. The Heart becomes a sacrificial offering that dies *instead* of Rose. (2) The Heart's sacrificial death twists the narrative demand that the "loose woman" must die in the end so that the patriarchal order is restored. Rose lives; the Heart dies. (3) In contrast to Rose's suicide attempt, the hour of her death is now a *good* hour. Old Rose has lived her life fully. Rose has to die eventually (her ripe age is the narrative's key feature). The best death is at the end of a good life with the freedom to choose the moment of passing. In a sense, Rose's death is a suicide because she chooses when to die. But unlike a suicide, which is usually a bad death, Rose's crossing-over is a good death. She lets her soul sink into the ocean, certain of resurrection in the afterlife. (4) Jack has restored Rose's life by saving her from suicide, drowning, a potential bad marriage, and the old order's oppression. In the final scene, Rose gives her life back to Jack, first through the diamond Heart, then through her own death. (5) When the Heart sinks down to the *Titanic*, Rose's heart will sink down to where Jack's heart lies. Through the magic of contagion, the Heart reunites Rose with Jack. (6) The Heart's legal ownership is still with Cal's family. To liberate herself from debt, Rose must let the Heart go. (7) The Heart is threatened with rediscovery by the treasure hunters. Rediscovery would render the Heart, yet again, an ice-cold commodity, devoid of all her loving memories. Rose must stop the Heart's further circulation; it must not be alienated. Rose has only one option: for the Heart to become a monument, it must be divested of all exchange value.

Once more, *Titanic* shows that things are ill-understood if they are forced into a gift/commodity dichotomy (Kopytoff, 1986). Several anthropological theories of exchange propose a simplistic notion that things are either given, received, or returned. For example, Lévi-Strauss (1969) regards exchange as the core of social life and declares that "keeping" is just wishful thinking. However, there are many things that humans can do with things other than exchanging them. Weiner (1992) posits that continuous exchange is not necessarily the ultimate destiny of things. Instead, as she argues in her reinterpretation of kula exchanges, the ultimate reason for giving is to *keep* inalienable possessions. The most precious things, such as family heirlooms, are meant to be kept within the kin group and out of circulation. The potlatch ceremonies discussed by Mauss (1997) represent another destiny for things: not further exchange but destruction, which prohibits the thing's return to the giver. When the Heart sinks to the ocean floor—never to be found, always to be remembered—one of humans' greatest dreams comes true: "To this very day, mankind has always dreamed of seizing and fixing that fleeting moment when it was permissible to believe that the law of exchange could be evaded, that one could gain without losing" (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, 496). Paradoxically, while Rose does not give, keep, or destroy the Heart, she realizes all these possibilities at once, thus creating a *monument* that transcends exchange.

MAKE IT COUNT

Having transformed her love into an inalienable possession—through her narrative and through the Heart's sinking—Rose is ready to die. *Titanic* shows that there is transcendent, everlasting life beyond this life. *Titanic* heaven has all the first-class comforts and luxuries, but its passengers (now at peace) are from all the worldly hierarchical levels. Right of entry into *Titanic* heaven is based on conduct in life, not on class. All the good souls who perished in the sinking are admitted into it; all the selfish characters are banned from it. Everlasting happiness comes with resurrection in the flesh. Rose *rose* by letting her heart and soul sink into the ocean. *Titanic* heaven resembles the historic ship but is a transcendent place. During the crossing, Rose and other first-class passengers celebrate mass, singing the hymn "Almighty Father Strong to Save." Moments before the *Titanic* sinks into the sea, the ship's stern is in a near-vertical position. A Christian priest, clutching a railing while holding the hands of a group of people prays: "Hail Mary! … There will be no more death, no more death!" The film cuts to the grand staircase, now flooded, revealing a dead woman dressed in white, floating in it like an angel. The prayer for "no more death" is realized in *Titanic* heaven, where there is neither death nor social class division (Troeltsch, 1965, 57–68).

Who are the righteous souls allowed to live forever? *Titanic* suggests that it is those who "honor the gift of life" (Cameron, 1997). While the Heart's circulation drives the movie's narrative, the circulation of another good drives the interpretation of events. The ultimate gift is not the Heart but life itself. Rose wants to commit suicide, but Jack saves her life in several ways. Old Rose concludes her narrative on board the expedition ship: "A woman's heart is a deep ocean of secrets. But now you all know there was a man named Jack Dawson, and that he saved me, in every way that a person can be saved" (Cameron, 1997). When Jack joins the first-class dinner table, Rose's mother tries to humiliate him by asking him about his unsteady life: "You find that sort of rootless existence appealing, do you?" Jack counters, "Life is a gift … take life as it comes to you … make each day count!" The first-class diners raise their glasses and toast, "To making it count!" In a later scene, Jack tells Rose that he has "nothing to offer" her, except his love. Out of love, however, he will give *everything*, including his

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own life. Jack saves Rose from the symbolic death-in-life that awaits her if she marries Cal. Jack's gift to Rose is her own authentic life. He gifts her to herself. Never does he ask for anything in return, except the promise that Rose will live: "You must do me this honor. … Promise me you will survive!" (Cameron, 1997).

Rose honors this promise in many ways. During the sinking, she threatens her own survival by freeing Jack from the handcuffs. She refuses to get into a lifeboat without him. She lives her life in the New World in accordance with Jack's dying wish. The invitation to the expedition ship gives Old Rose the opportunity to inscribe the memory of their love in the memories of her listeners. Her narrative of the events is a eulogy of love over Jack's grave in the sea. The entire movie is a monumental funerary rite (Bloch and Parry, 1982).

Rose's eulogy is, to some extent, a gift to Jack in return for his sacrifice. Jack gave his life; she immortalizes him through her story. But again, a Maussian notion of the gift does not capture what is transpiring. The mutuality of love is both an exchange and a transcendence of all exchanges. When "two are one," they are two *and* one at the same time. Anything given is given both to the other and to the self. *Titanic* shows how true love turns individuals into dividuals (Ecks, 2022; Marriott, 1976; Strathern 1988). Exchange among dividuals cannot "alienate" what is given, because the exchanging sides are of the same substance. Kinship is one of the key forms of dividuality (Carsten, 2013); love is another. Both establish a "mutuality of being" (Sahlins, 2013).

For Rose's eulogy to be a "return gift," she would have to give something that does not already belong to Jack. But because Jack has given *her life to her*, it makes it impossible for her to give him anything of equal value. The only gift of equal value would be Rose giving her own life. Yet the gift of life is inalienable. Life cannot be given back as a return gift. Something else must be given. Rose's only authentic option is to live her life *in honor* of Jack. She presents the eulogy in his honor. While performing a mortuary rite for the love of her life, she also narrates a eulogy over her own grave.

When Jack sacrifices his life for Rose's, he wants her to live, and to live in honor of him. The gift of life is too great to be reciprocated. The gift cannot be returned; it can only be honored. An indispensable element of bringing honor is commemoration. Before his sacrificial death, Jack utters words reminiscent of Jesus in the Lord's Supper: "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24). How love, salvation, and commemoration are interwoven in Abrahamic cosmologies is too complex to be examined here (see Assmann, 1997, 212–28; Milbank, 1995). *Titanic* demonstrates that the gift of life is the highest good. It is inalienable from the receiver, and it establishes a relationship of loving mutuality and commemoration between the giver and the receiver: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away" (Job 1:21). Humans cannot reciprocate the gift of life; however, they can live their lives in honor of the gift and of the gift Giver.

Jack's sacrifice lays—Christlike—the foundation for Rose's life, and Rose honors this sacrifice throughout her own life. But *Titanic* demonstrates that this is not merely the love story of two specific individuals on a specific passage. The movie is not only a meditation on the gift of life; it also perpetuates a foundational myth of America, the land where the post-transitional order of true love has become reality. The New World, like heaven, is egalitarian in terms of social class and gender. It rejects the fetishization of money and commodities as inauthentic attempts at pursuing happiness. The gift must not be merely "free," but giving and taking must be transcended through love. According to *Titanic*, this heavenly order has been established through Jack's sacrifice, as the embodiment of the frontier-spirited immigrant. Jack portrays an American of the New World because he honors the American founding fathers' mission of creating a country where "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" cannot be alienated. When the ultrarich passengers bought their seats on the lifeboats, they turned the gift of life into an alienable commodity (Parry, 1989, 88). Their sin is punished by never gaining eternal life, by never reaching *Titanic* heaven.

Rose is among the righteous souls because she honors the foundational sacrifice of life by making it count in this life and by speaking in remembrance of those who also honored the gift of life. The movie itself performs a memorial service in honor of both the souls who perished on the ship and the ancestral founders of the New World. The movie "makes history come alive" by ritually reenacting the founders' loving sacrifice. Rose's audience is not just the expedition crew; it is everyone in the audience.

Titanic proposes that not honoring the gift of life is a cosmic sin. Those who violate the New World's spirit represent the old, pre-transitional, class-based order. All the movie's villains prioritize status and material wealth over the gift of life. Whoever favors this—worldly gain—over transcendent value commits the ultimate sin (Parry and Bloch, 1989, 27). In the New World, those who regard themselves as worthier to live than others because of family name and fortune betray the founding fathers' values.

Titanic derives its compelling argument from linking love with goods exchange and the good life. Furthermore, the movie does not juxtapose true love with capitalism. Instead, it shows that a middle-class form of American capitalism has overcome a class-based form of capitalism. The Constitution of the United States clearly outlines the protection of property rights. *Titanic* is similar to other Hollywood movies that depict "a society that features a contradictory world without social constraints" (Lipset, 2021, 415). In the film, the "middle class" represents life and wealth shared equally. The American dream is that neither woman, nor gift, nor anyone's life can be turned into alienable commodities.

It has been argued that capitalism achieved a profound transvaluation of values by turning egotism into the basis of the common good. Capitalism lets the private evil of individual profit-maximization turn into the greatest public good of all

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(Macfarlane, 1985). Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch argue that, in capitalism, "it is *only* unalloyed private vice that can sustain the public benefit" (1989, 29; emphasis in the original). *Titanic* builds on this assertion to illustrate a general value theory: (1) Life is a transcendental gift that can neither be reciprocated nor exchanged for money—life is "priceless" because it cannot be alienated. (2) Life gives individuals unique opportunities to maximize rewarding experiences. Short-term private gains help in this regard: "You must live a good, productive life" (*Titanic* Facebook Page). (3) Short-term private gains can be righteous, on condition that private gains are shared with others, especially in the long term: "Be generous and open" (*Titanic* Facebook Page). (4) Death is certain to wipe out short-term private gains sooner or later: "The material things in the long run don't really pay off" (*Titanic* Facebook Page). (5) The only way of transcending death is to honor the "richness of your relationships with people" (*Titanic* Facebook Page). Short-term gains can be transformed into long-term gains through mutuality and loving commemoration. True love means sharing gains and sharing memories. (6) Private gains can only create public benefit when they are redistributed. Love and loving commemoration reward those who share. (7) Rigid class boundaries hinder the redistribution of short-term gains, while permeable boundaries enable it. The greatest public benefit comes from everyone belonging to the middle class. (8) Only in America are individuals, society, and cosmic order perfectly aligned. This land of opportunity is the best place to transform short-term gains into long-term loving commemoration. Middle-class America is the best of all worlds. *Titanic* shows how the rift between ethical and economic value can be transcended.

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