

Nights to Remember: Memory, Modernity & the Myth of the Titanic

Conference Report

The conference was attended by more than 70 delegates from around the world, who gathered at Southampton University's Avenue Campus to exchange ideas with scholars from diverse disciplines on the cultural meanings of the Titanic. Although the primary focus was on cinematic representations, the multidisciplinary emphasis was reflected in the range of papers, which covered topics such as music and song, literature, theatre, art history, poetry, newspapers, spectacle, audience reception, the Internet, science fiction, fakes, special effects and heritage narratives. There were 45 speakers organised into fifteen panels: Myths and Appropriations I and II; Modernity and Postmodernity; Realism and Fantasy; Space, Place, Music; Reception; Irish Experience; Historical and Heritage Narratives; Myths and Memories; Romancing Disaster; Spectacle; Mourning and Modernity; Subjectivity and Individualism; Literary Representations; and Space, Race, Gender. The keynote speakers, eminent authorities in their field, represented very different approaches: film historian Charles Barr's witty compilation of clips from Hitchcock's films conjured up a virtual Titanic, while cultural historian John Wilson Foster explored in fascinating detail the supernatural elements attendant on the Titanic's position at the forefront of the 'machine age', and cinema theorist Gaylyn Studlar gave a stimulating analysis, drawing on Gilles Deleuze, of cinematic presence in James Cameron's 1997 version of the Titanic story.

In setting up the event, the organisers intended to displace the globally successful Cameron Titanic, to uncover the rich history of multiple versions of the Titanic myth in order to understand its cultural power. The programme of film screenings supported this aim: a rare showing of the 1912 German film, *Titanic: In Nacht und Eis* in a reconstructed 35mm print was a highlight, but almost as exciting was the evening of archive newsreels from the National Film and Television Archive, including some fakes, followed by a 35mm version of the spectacular, stylish 1943 German propaganda film *Titanic*. The 1958 British film *A Night to Remember*, on which the Cameron version draws heavily, was shown on video. The Southampton context was well represented: a local theatre group performed cabaret at the opening night reception, which was held at Harbour Lights cinema, and also featured a photographic exhibition donated by the City Council. We were honoured and delighted that Titanic survivor Milvinia Dean was able to be at the reception. A very successful conference bookstall was organised by local co-operative October Books. Several papers addressed the local dimensions of the Titanic experience, in Southampton itself, but also further afield, in Ireland, for example, and in Finland.

The conference succeeded in creating a lively atmosphere of intellectual debate between scholars who would not normally meet one another, and who, by all accounts, found the experience extremely enjoyable and illuminating. We were able to secure sponsorship from various sources: Southern Arts, the Goethe Institut (London), W&G Baird Ltd (Belfast), and the British Academy, which meant that the event broke even. We hope to publish a selection of the papers in due course.