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## Searches for the Significant: Robert Zemeckis' Cast Away as a Late Twentieth Century Response to Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe

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## Searches for the Significant: Robert Zemeckis' *Cast Away* as a Late Twentieth Century Response to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

### Abstract

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* has over the centuries become one of the most mythologized characters of Western literature. In the most recent adaptation of this novel, the film *Cast Away* (directed by Robert Zemeckis), Defoe's treatment of Crusoe's spiritual awakening has been highlighted. Postmodern man, as represented by efficiency expert Chuck Noland, is faced with a search for Meaning similar to that which Defoe's "economic man" embarks upon when isolated from humanity 300 years earlier. This essay examines the way *Cast Away* deals with the ever present paradox of faith in a Divine Plan and belief in individualism and the free will.

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Daniel Defoe's early 18th century narrative *Robinson Crusoe* was one of the first novels produced in the English language, but still to this day its mythological castaway protagonist continues to resurface in one form or another in our cultural utterances. Indeed, the character of Robinson Crusoe is a survivor, both literally and fictionally speaking. Long before reality television, Ian Watt, identified Defoe's protagonist as a "culture hero." He is a character who has come to represent both the Protestant work ethic and a "back to nature" ideal. But what do most people in the 21st century really know of Defoe's novel? Mainly that it is about an Englishman, stranded on a desert island with only his faith in God and a few items from civilization to help him survive. Some may also recall that he encounters a native on this island, whom he names "Friday" and who becomes his slave because Crusoe saves his life. What is not common knowledge is that the original work was a trilogy and that in the subsequent novels Mr. Crusoe returns to the island years later and reflects upon his adventures from a political perspective. As Watt points out, it is common for us to extract from cultural narratives the "symbolic uses" that serve society's need for a mythology and forget the rest (Watt 290).

This statement is certainly borne out by one of the most recent adaptations of Defoe's work, *Cast Away*. The film, conceived of and produced in the U.S. during the economic boom of the 1990s, stars Tom Hanks, and is directed by Robert Zemeckis. Watching it, one finds intact the main theme involving an individual

man's spiritual journey as he struggles for survival, but little else of the original trilogy. The hero of *Cast Away* is an efficiency expert who works for the transnational overnight mail service FedEx. When his plane crashes, he is washed up on the shore of an uninhabited island. The sole survivor, he is forced to conquer the elements and his complete isolation from other human beings. But there is an aspect of the film that begins a dialogue with what has over the years become the consensus interpretation of Defoe's novel, namely that it is a celebration of individualism and the rise of capitalism as well as a demonstration of the therapeutic value of hard work. Crusoe's darker sides have often been ignored (Watt 295). As Ian Watt notes, there has been a need to "obscure the negative social and psychological corollaries of the rise of economic individualism," such as the "solitude of the soul" of economic man (Watt 304). *Cast Away* reopens this debate by situating the story in late 20th century America, a globalizing market economy at its frenetic height.

When a film like *Cast Away* is made on a different continent and in an era almost 300 years distant from the publication of the original text, it regenerates that text by responding to it from a new perspective and from within a different set of discourses. The most striking addition made by *Cast Away* to Defoe's narrative is the framing of the plot with a love story of ontological ramifications. Chuck, the Robinson-like protagonist, who has been so absorbed by his time-chasing career,

comes to the realization while isolated on a tropical island that he has neglected the one person who gave meaning to his life, his girlfriend Kelly. Chuck's insight provides a rupture in the dominant American discourse of pursuing the all-important career.

The addition of love stories is seen by Robert Mayer, editor of *18th Century Fiction on Screen*, as the result of a commercial need to tailor the film to contemporary audiences' expectations (35). Romantic plots have apparently become a universal, an emotion to which people around the globe can relate. Where love of God was important to Defoe's readers, love of one another is what strikes a chord with modern moviegoers. Thus we have the introduction of the character of Kelly. Although not actually present in the middle part of the film, Kelly is symbolically present throughout in the form of a photograph. In one of the final scenes of the film, after learning that Kelly has married someone else while he was gone, Chuck confides to a friend, "I'm so grateful that she was with me on that island." Her image seems to have represented for Chuck non-material values and a timeless "truth": the human capacity for love. Significantly, Kelly's photograph is encased in her grandfather's railroad watch, which she has given him just before he boarded the fated plane. Chuck sets this heirloom to what he calls "Kelly time," which turns out to be timelessness, as the watch is broken in the crash. Kelly has disappointed Chuck by losing hope and marrying someone else, but through Helen

Hunt's moving performance we are left with no doubt that her love is not subject to time, only her marital status is.

Needless to say, the addition of romance to the basic Robinson Crusoe plot should not surprise us. One study has revealed that of 24 film adaptations examined, 17 had increased the love emphasis (Bluestone 42). But test audience results did not seem to indicate that it was the love theme that attracted audiences to *Cast Away*. William Broyles, Jr., the screenwriter, notes in an interview that the main part of the movie is still about a man's struggle "to learn to survive first physically and then emotionally" (DVD, "Director's Commentary"). Indeed, *Cast Away* is a film that is mainly about a man who is forced to examine the existential Self. Was this what late 20th century audiences responded to?

Part of western audiences' ability to relate to Chuck may have to do with their living in the paradox of secularized, and yet fundamentally spiritually oriented societies. Anita Goldman has noted this phenomenon in the very secularized country of Sweden and recently wrote in an essay for the Stockholm paper *Dagens Nyheter*:

"Post-communist, postmodernist materialism has not provided an answer to the profound, human longing for affiliation and meaning. The civilization that has invested everything in speed, renewal, interchangeability and profit is finding that more and more people are suffering from mental collapses and are looking for alternatives to the lost and empty feeling that follows on the heels of soulless consumerism" (DN, Kultur 9).

Americans of course can relate to both Chuck the efficiency expert teaching a Russian child the "tick-tock-tick-tock" stress of capitalism, and the Chuck who returns after a life-changing experience to pursue love and less material goals. This seemingly contradictory mix of materialism and spirituality is very much in keeping with the original character of Robinson Crusoe, who reproaches himself for "the Breach of Duty to God and Father," having disobeyed the latter's exhortations to pursue a pious, middle class existence as a businessman. He has instead followed what he calls his "Inclinations" or "Propension of Nature" toward adventures of the sea. But his disobedient course of action ironically leads him to a faith in God and, what is more, he becomes a wealthy man in the process.

Spiritual and moral issues have long been associated with most adaptations of *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Cast Away* is no exception. Zemeckis' film deals with Chuck's quest for meaning, having lost all contact with other human beings. It also broaches the paradox of determinism vs. free will, and as Zemeckis himself puts it, "mysteries to be lived, not problems to be solved" ("Director's Commentary"). Judging from the positive response the film received, these themes apparently at least partially reflect the worldview and concerns of mainstream audiences. It is somehow comforting that everything seems to happen for a reason in *Cast Away*. Chuck learns to accept events and find guidance through reading and interpreting signs of Providence. Indeed, the transferal to "postmodernity" of Robinson Crusoe's

belief in Providence, in the form of signs sent to him by God, has not been especially problematic for filmmakers catering to a 20th century audience. Robinson Crusoe sees Providence as having provided him with "hints," like his opening of the Bible to what are for him meaningful passages : "Call on me and I will deliver you" or "I will never, never leave thee nor forsake thee." Similarly, Chuck maintains hope of survival and rescue-also a sort of faith-by interpreting signs provided by his surroundings. The wings drawn on the one package he refrains from opening (presumably hoping to be able to deliver it one day), serve as a symbol for his eventual flight and freedom. Accordingly, he paints them onto the flotsam that washes ashore and which subsequently becomes the sail for his raft. This symbol's significance is then redoubled when, at the end of the film, the woman who has sent the package encounters him at the crossroads in a truck decorated with those same wings of flight. Is this woman meant to help Chuck escape his existential isolation? One is reminded of Crusoe's advice: "not to slight such secret Intimations of Providence.they are a Proof of the Converse of Spirits."

Another interesting translation of novel to film occurs when Chuck has conversations with himself (or rather with the symbol of an ambivalent self: the volleyball he calls Wilson). He discusses the wisdom of trying to make an escape, which works well as a modern adaptation of Crusoe's "many secret disputes with himself" regarding his "Desire of Deliverance" from the island. But whereas



Crusoe's plan is a concrete measure: "to get one of those Savages into my Hands" to help him get off the island, Chuck's decision to set sail is a spiritual one. Talking to his friend back in Memphis, Chuck reveals that in his alienated state he had come to terms with his mortality. For Chuck, "Wilson" represents an alter ego, a part of him that wants to give up, who has lost hope. It is interesting to note that Chuck both nurtures and debates Wilson. This seeming lack of a unified self is, however, a representation of a basic tenet of individualism: the free will, the belief that one's fate is not predetermined (as per Puritan doctrine), but rather a matter of choosing from various options. In Chuck's case, it is a matter of analyzing and interpreting the world as provider of clues to meaning. Significantly, he has a new volleyball in his car when he stands at the very symbolic crossroads in the final shot of the film.

Chuck realizes that the ultimate act of free will, the decision to die, is something he can choose or postpone, depending on his ability to hope. On the island he has all the time in the world and "the sin of losing track of time," has taken on new meaning. Resigning himself to the mysteries of an unknown design, he says: "Tomorrow the sun will rise. Who knows what the tide will bring." There will be new signs, new choices, in other words, more life. The time we "live and die by" is no longer linear time, signified by a man-made clock. Signs of time are provided by cosmic forces that represent a timeless eternity: the sun rising and setting / the tide ebbing and flowing.

Robinson Crusoe has no such existential reflections, but rather fears that someone or something else will end his life. In his supposedly natural, pre-societal state he feels himself in danger and is always on his guard. In contrast, Zemeckis' interpretation of the Robinson Crusoe myth typically adapts it to late 20th century cultural ideals, which jibe better with what has always been an element of traditional American discourse: the frontier mentality, the mythology of new beginnings. The hope involved in the belief that one can start again from a state of innocence, the possibility of the reinvention of the self, these were ideas that were part of the Puritan colonial agenda and perpetuated by the pioneers. They do not appear to be unrelated to Chuck's transformation. The pre-Enlightenment Puritan faith in divine predestination that Defoe uses to change Robinson Crusoe from a godless adventurer into a devout believer in an omniscient God, has in late 20th century film art been converted into a modern belief in the power of hope, love and the celebration of a free will, but not necessarily in a world without design.

The United States at the turn of the millenium was, of course, a very different place from Defoe's early 18th century England. And yet *Cast Away's* opening scenes seem to participate in a similar discourse of a middle-class Protestant work ethic: the protagonist keeps up a grueling pace, comforted only by the material luxuries of a society in an economic growth spurt, and with all the

questionable value systems that go with it. Crusoe too is a man concerned with efficiency:

I was very seldom idle; but . regularly divided my Time, according to the several daily Employments that were before me (.)

To this short Time allow'd for Labour, I desire may be added the exceeding Laboriousness of my Work, the many Hours which for want of Tools, want of Help, and want of Skill; every Thing I did, took up out of my Time." (83-84)

But, whereas Chuck's obsession with clocks, time and efficiency is parodied as being almost phobic before he is stranded, Crusoe's efforts to keep himself busy while on the island are meant to be laudable. At the rise of capitalism in England, industry was deemed a virtue and associated with good deeds and an honest life; but by the time of late capitalism in the U.S. we have a discourse of the workaholic, "burn-out" and absentee parents, as well as a call for "family values" instead of more money. Individualism had taken its toll on the moral self and responsibility for the Other.

As Edward Said pointed out, *Robinson Crusoe* is the "prototypical modern realistic novel" about a "European who creates a fiefdom for himself on a distant, non-European island" (Said 84). It's a novel about power relations between European societies and those of Africa, the West Indies and the Americas of the late 17th century. *Cast Away* reflects a similar hegemony now being played out between the United States and the burgeoning market economies of former

communist countries. Part of both protagonists' development is learning what it is to labor for oneself directly, without exploitation of the Other, "where there is an absolute equivalence between individual effort and individual reward" (Watt 72). The corollary of this individualism as Watt also points out, is learning to take "primary responsibility for one's own spiritual direction" as well (74). I suggest that although Chuck's transformation is not overtly a religious one in the way Crusoe's is; he has, like Crusoe, had a spiritual awakening of great proportions. The man who steps off that airplane in Memphis is not the same one who called "I'll be right back!" as he rushed to catch a plane on Christmas Day. Indeed, the change that has come over Chuck seems much more profound than that which Crusoe claims to have experienced. Crusoe is a incorrigible colonial adventurer right up to old age, while Chuck's four years on a desert island with nothing but the contents of some Fed Ex packages have made a significant difference in his ability to "smell the roses," to quote Zemeckis. Standing in the middle of the empty crossroads in Texas, he fixes his gaze on the wings painted on the back of the pick-up truck that has just driven away, clearly contemplating their significance in his destiny.

Robinson Crusoe often ponders signs he believes to be sent by Divine Providence, including those that he has ignored, like his father's warning about the life of a sailor. In a way, Chuck is doing the same as he stares down the road where the pick-up truck disappeared, his brow furrowed in thought. As Michael McKeon

notes in his chapter "Defoe and the Naturalization of Desire," Defoe was writing at a time of increasing secularization, and was trying to come to terms with the need to take a moral stand. His novel is dedicated to the ideology of a guiding, divine spirit within us, but there is an inherent contradiction involved in that we do not always do what is "right": Crusoe says he has disobeyed his father and God and yet finds God and financial security through the iniquities of slavery. This irony has been circumvented in *Cast Away*. The secular, postmodern values that have been guiding Chuck through his hectic life collapse on his timeless island of isolation to reveal the hints of a more powerful system of signification. Directing his efforts toward interpretation instead of accumulation, Chuck finds hope and meaning to live by.

The mainstream discourse of hope, the one that provides ontological meaning and a cosmic connection, also allows for the narration of a free, coherent Self in what many see as an incoherent world. The paired beliefs in Design and a free will may be a paradox, but the hope of meaning is as strong as ever among the "postmodern" masses. This could be why a film like *Cast Away* can be so popular. It also demonstrates how renewal through adaptation keeps the myth of Robinson Crusoe's (and their own) innocent individualism alive.

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