

### Throwing off the shackles of colonialism?

Continuities and discontinuities from Daniel Defoe's literary work to Robert Zemeckis's *Cast Away*

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* has been widely discussed as a key example of 18<sup>th</sup> century British and – in the wider sense – European colonial writing that confirms the supremacy of Western culture while stressing transcultural desires and fears. Of particular interest is the relationship between Crusoe and Friday, which has been highlighted as a 'paradigmatic colonial encounter' (Said 1991). However, in some of the more contemporary 'Robinson stories' that follow in the footsteps of Defoe's novel, the traditional cultural encounter between the civilized Self and the primitive Other has been omitted, and Zemeckis's Hollywood movie *Cast Away* is a good example of this tendency.

Focusing on *Cast Away*, this study explores 1) how far the omission of this encounter leads to a break with colonial dichotomies, and 2) which aspects of colonial discourse continue to be widely disseminated via Hollywood productions. By linking psychological research with postcolonial and transcultural theory, it amends current film analysis and interpretations of contemporary "robinsonades" (e.g. Ingram 2001, Weaver-Hightower 2007 and 2006) while critically interrogating popular perspectives on transculturality and globalization (such as Welsch 1999). In particular, the essay reveals that, despite the loss of the encounter, a revision of traditional individualism and a certain dose of filmic parody, the neo-colonial capitalist identity promoted in the movie remains very much in line with Defoe's colonial paradigm.

#### 1. *Robinson Crusoe*, early 'robinsonades' and the teaching of colonial capitalism

Said argues that 'the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging' constitutes one of the main connections between culture and imperialism (1993: xiii), and one could argue that in this regard he draws quite significantly on links between military power and cultural exploitation in European colonialism that Fanon outlined well before him:

Expropriation, spoliation, raids, objective murder, are matched by the sacking of cultural patterns, or at least condition such sacking. The social panorama is destructured; values are flaunted, crushed, emptied (Fanon 1967: 33).

In this sense, Torres-Saillant summarises European literature as part of an 'intellectual industry of the West' (2006: 3) which has significantly contributed to the exclusion of other cultures, and Chow reminds us that for many colonized subjects 'to globalize' frequently means 'to subordinate, derogate, or extinguish one's native language, culture, and history, in order to accommodate those of the West' (2001: 69). In the context of this wider postcolonial discussion of Western literature, it is worth remembering that the popular narrative character Robinson Crusoe has been regarded by James Joyce in his Defoe lectures as the 'prototype' of the British colonist: 'The whole Anglo-Saxon spirit is in Crusoe: the manly independence, the unconscious cruelty; the persistence, the slow yet efficient

intelligence, the sexual apathy, the practical, well-balanced religiousness; the calculating taciturnity” (Joyce 1964: 24f.). Said regards him similarly as an expression of British eighteenth century bourgeois ideology (1993: 84), and Tiffin observes an attempt at “fixing” relations between Europe and its “others”, of establishing patterns of reading alterity’ that inscribe the essential, homogenous and separatist nature of that Otherness, therefore ‘naturalizing “difference” within its own cognitive codes’ (1987: 23). The story of the shipwrecked English Crusoe, who manages to cultivate a desert island, culminates in the relationship established between him and native Friday, which has been described as ‘the paradigmatic colonial encounter’ (Said 1991: 176), a view very much enhanced by Rousseau when he establishes a ‘natural’ link between childhood, education and colonialism when recommending *Robinson Crusoe* as the only book worth reading for a child (2007: 159). Friday is here presented as the innocent but ignorant and primitive savage who is in desperate need of patriarchal protection and guidance by the civilised European. Consequently, Crusoe teaches him ‘everything that was proper to make him useful, handy, and helpful’ (Defoe 2001: 222), and in so doing, imprisons him in colonial discourse, quite comparable to Prospero’s education of Caliban in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611) and the teaching of Friday in George Conquest and Henry Spry’s pantomime *Robinson Crusoe, the lad rather loose o’ and the black man called Friday, who kept his house tidy* (1885). Behind this idea, one has to imagine the construct of a progressive Europe as ‘maker of history’ versus a stagnating Other, which Blaut summarises as follows:

Europe eternally advances, progresses, modernises. The rest of the world advances more sluggishly, or stagnates: it is a “traditional society”. Therefore, the world has a permanent geographical centre and permanent periphery: an Inside and an Outside. Inside leads, Outside lags. Inside innovates, Outside imitates (1993: 1).

This nurtures the assumption of Western superiority within which differences between other cultures are reduced or negated in the image of one single inferior Other,<sup>1</sup> while the need for European leadership tends to be made explicit in images of a relationship between parents and children, men and women, or even master and slave – as in *Robinson Crusoe*.<sup>2</sup> Long before the European-native encounter, there are, however, also other aspects that legitimate Crusoe’s imperial ambitions and they seem to have survived even in those Robinson stories which abandon the construction of a ‘willing’ native slave who subjugates and annihilates his (or her) self. A key element is, right from the start of his life on the supposedly empty island, Robinson’s capability of filling that emptiness by cultivating its nature. Thanks to the ‘tools of civilization’ he has left on his ship, he is not only able to fabricate his

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<sup>1</sup> Fanon highlights such a strategy with regard to the European colonisation of Africa: ‘For the colonist, the Negro was neither an Angolan nor a Nigerian, for he simply spoke of “the Negro”. For colonialism, this vast continent was the haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism’ (1963: 170).

<sup>2</sup> This dialectic is indicated when the protagonist explains: ‘I taught him to say Master, and let him know this was to be my name’ (Defoe 2001: 218), yet it is in particular Friday’s voluntary acceptance of himself as Crusoe’s slave that stabilizes and ultimately justifies the coloniser’s claim as master.

own house, but he learns how to domesticate animals and grow plants that are of use to him. In other words, he can convert the seemingly useless island into a useful and meaningful resource by domesticating nature to serve (his) specific purposes. As such, the first encounter between civilization and savagery is not reported in the Crusoe-Friday episode but much earlier and more in detail, when supposedly civilised Crusoe sets foot on the 'wild' island. The favourable conditions of the island further enhance Crusoe's colonial desire: moved by the curiosity of discovering the unknown sides of the island he wants to fully possess, he organises several excursions and, eventually, builds other houses for a better control of the whole space.

This links back to Crusoe's past as a successful English landowner and businessman, which he as first person narrator outlines quite early in the novel:

My goods being all English manufacture, such as cloths, stuffs, baize, and things particularly valuable and desirable in that country, I found means to sell them to a very great advantage; so that I may say I had more than four times the value of my first cargo, and was now infinitely beyond my poor neighbour – I mean in the advancement of my plantation; for the first thing I did, I bought me a negro slave, and an European servant also (Defoe 2001: 47).

Key to success is, both in England and on the island, Crusoe's individualism, which reflects the values of 18th century English society and, probably even more, contemporary post-industrial cultures, a tendency that could be seen as a reason for Defoe's unbroken popularity. Watt describes the novel very explicitly in terms of economic individualism when arguing that Crusoe reduces everything to his financial advantage (1997: 152), and Hulme supports that link in his exploration of the capitalist 'adventurer' (1986: 184). Admittedly, Crusoe's individualism is not the same as the 21<sup>st</sup> century variations in contemporary Hollywood Robinson-style protagonists, and a major difference can be found in his religious attitude: unlike Noland in *Cast Away* and Richard in *The Beach*, Crusoe prays, reads the Bible and thanks God for the food he has cultivated. However, as Watt points out, his religion is certainly individualist in a Protestant sense in so far as it mirrors the believer's concentration on God's intentions: while the sacramental side of the church is non-existent (1997: 162), Crusoe asks for God's support in his everyday life, and the benefits he receives – supposedly thanks to his religiousness – encourage him to instruct Friday 'in the knowledge of the true God' (Defoe 2001: 229).

Since its first publication in 1719 *Robinson Crusoe* has been translated into most written languages and reedited in different forms to address a widest possible range of readers from early childhood to adulthood, but it has also triggered an enormous amount of narrative stories that reinvent Crusoe's adventure. As early as 1731, German novelist Johann Gottfried Schnabel coined the term 'robinsonade' in the preface to his own Robinson story, *The Island Felsenburg* (*Die Insel Felsenburg* 1828 [1731]), to summarise the heterogeneous group of castaway successors to Crusoe that 'not only reproduce the narrative elements of shipwreck/misadventure and survival in a remote location, but that reiterate, amplify, or contest the major ideological formation elaborated in the original' (O' Malley 2007). William Rufus Chetwood's *The voyage, dangerous adventures, and the imminent escapes of*

*Captain Richard Falconer* (1720) is probably the first example of such a robinsonade, followed by the more popular *The Hermit: or, the unparalleled sufferings and surprising adventures of Mr. Philip Quarll, an Englishman* (1727) by Peter Longueville. During the 18th century, the spread of the robinsonade was frequently linked to their presumed 'authenticity', but that aspect became less important in the 19th century (O' Malley 2007), which led to a much wider variety including work as diverse as Johann Wyss's *The Swiss family Robinson* (1800), Frederick Marryat's *The Children of the new forest* (1847), Robert Michael Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858), and Jules Verne's *The mysterious island* (1875). Outside the mainstream robinsonade, one can find female Crusoes like Charles Dibdin's *Hannah Hewitt* (1792), a novel which alongside its successors in Germany, Britain, France and the Netherlands has been a focus of feminist criticism, and there are also animal stories like Ballantyne's *Dog Crusoe: a Tale of the Western Prairies* (1862). The popularity of these works has been such that quite a number made their way into films: after the first cinematic versions of the original story (*Les aventures de Robinson Crusoe* by Méliès 1902, *Robinson Crusoe* by Blom 1910, followed by Turner 1913 and Marion 1916), Christy Cabanne draws on *Hannah Hewitt* for the production of *Miss Robinson Crusoe* (1917), and Marryat's *Little Savage* (1848) serves as inspiration for Carol Reed's *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (1935). Several other *Robinson Crusoe* films follow, and there are by now more than 20 filmic versions of the original story, never mind the robinsonades.

Despite all their differences, most of these Robinson stories share the over-arching theme of domesticity of the 'savage' and 'inferior' Other by an assumed civilised and superior Self. Whenever that Other is brought to life, be it via a native – like Friday in Defoe's work – or an animal like the orang-utan in *The mysterious island*, there is usually a teaching process involved. After all, as Blaut states: 'Non-Europeans [...] were seen [...] as more or less childlike [who] could be brought to adulthood, to rationality, to modernity, through a set of learning experiences, mainly colonial' (1993: 96). However, the Other can also simply consist of the uncultivated and 'pre-civilised' nature, which – in this perspective – only achieves significance with its conversion to cultivated land, meaning its value is predominantly measured in terms of its usefulness for the white and supposedly civilised European shipwrecked. The link to European colonialism is in all cases quite explicit, which can be related to the fact that most of them are from the 19th or early 20th century, when the British and French colonial empires reached their maximum expansion and, with it, comes a link to capitalist structures, because – as Mignolo convincingly elaborates<sup>3</sup> – colonialism and the capitalism of modern history have to be regarded as mutually supportive and interdependent rather than mutually exclusive. However, at the same time, *Robinson Crusoe* and many other early castaway stories include critical interrogations of the patterns of thought that support the colonial and capitalist enterprises of their time, and particularly these "subtexts" – which remain largely unexplored by Joyce and Said – are further developed in late 20th and early 21st century robinsonades, including *Cast Away*.

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<sup>3</sup> Mignolo explores 'coloniality' as 'the darker and hidden face of modernity' (2005: xiii).

## 2. Contemporary 'robinsonades'

Without any doubt, WW II marks an important watershed for narrative developments in the robinsonades, as now much darker Robinson stories emerge that emphasise the brutality of colonialism and Anglo-Saxon 'civilization'. A good example for that tendency is William Golding's novel *The Lord of the Flies* (1954), which can be regarded as an aggressive parody of *The Coral Island*. Unlike the traditional success story of civilization, Golding's work highlights the failures of a human order imposed on a deserted island by a group of British schoolboys. Written amidst fears of an impending nuclear conflict during Cold War times, the title's reference to the Hebrew name for Satan sums up very provocatively the process of human descent into savagery by exploring how well-educated children are perfectly capable of regressing to a primitive condition when left unsupervised and guided primarily by an individual will to power and emotional 'groupthink'. With some delay, the book became a bestseller by the early 1960s and then also formed the basis for Peter Brook's and Harry Hook's cinematic versions (in 1963 and 1990 respectively). More recent critical Robinson stories include Jane Gardam's *Crusoe's Daughter* (1985), in which Crusoe appears as a Native American medicine woman. Apart from such 'First World' responses to the traditional robinsonade, there is the 'writing back' by authors from the former colonial 'periphery', such as Caribbean Derek Walcott (*Pantomime* 1980), Afro-Martinican Aime Césaire (*A Tempest* 1985), South African John Maxwell Coetzee (*Foe* 1986) and Canadian-Cherokee Thomas King (*Green Grass, Running Water* 1993), to name just a few. They elaborate on key themes deriving from *Robinson Crusoe*, such as ethnic diversity (e.g. between Crusoe and Friday in *Pantomime*), racial conflict (between Prospero and his slaves Ariel and Caliban in *A Tempest*), language and power (via tongueless Friday and frustrated writers in *Foe*) and the native American search for identity (via tricksters like native American Crusoe in *Green Grass, Running Water*).

However, rather than entering into a detailed exploration of such works, to some of which there is already an ample bibliography available, it should here be sufficient to indicate that a lot of their criticism draws on the weaknesses of Defoe's protagonist that lead our attention to what I would call "subtexts" in *Robinson Crusoe*. Hulme is probably the first in elaborating in detail on the ambiguity of the decomposition mechanisms of Crusoe's identity, a process that highlights the subversive character of the protagonist's radical individualism vis-à-vis European colonial discourse. Clearly, Crusoe appears at the beginning of his island experience primarily as an individual 'lacking in self-understanding, full of guilt, self-contradictory, fearful, violent' (Hulme 1986: 215), who represents more the shipwreck of European modernity than the self-conscious colonizer he becomes under the pressure of actually facing cannibals. However, even that encounter, during which he rescues Friday, does not explain Crusoe's psychotic fear of cannibals throughout the entire island experience, nor does it justify his immunity to the information about Carib practices provided by Friday. A culmination point of irrational fantasies is reached when Crusoe constructs a death threat out of Friday's nostalgic look at his home island:

If Friday could get back to his own nation again, he would not only forget all his religion, but all his obligations to me; and would be forward enough to give his countrymen an account of me, and come back perhaps with a hundred or two of them, and make a feast upon me, at which he might be as merry as he used to be with those of his enemies, when they were taken in war (Defoe 2001: 236).

Considering that Friday has not given him any reason to fear disloyalty, never mind an assault, and that he has just explained to him the laws of Carib cannibalism ('they never eat any men but such as come to fight with them, and are taken in battle', id. 235), Crusoe's speculations have to be categorised as part of a European psychosis vis-à-vis native American culture (Hulme 1986: 194), and – in a wider sense - as an excess of Western causality and pseudo-rationality that has been at the forefront of popular cinematic criticism of capitalism (see Rings 2002). In this context, Hulme is right in categorising Crusoe's plans of a pre-emptive massacre of all natives as highly 'unethical' (1986: 195), which does not match up to the civilised self-image in British colonial discourse. In addition, one could add the protagonist's explicit scepticism as regards capitalist excesses, which he regards early in the book as a danger for himself:

Increasing in business and in wealth, my head began to be full of projects and undertakings beyond my reach; such as are, indeed, often the ruin of the best heads in business (Defoe 2001: 48).

Considering Defoe's personal condemnation of stock-jobbing (for this discussion see Hulme 1986: 181), there is clear evidence for a genuine interest in the establishment of a moral economy opposed to an unethical excess, which cannot be limited to the writer's epoch but should be seen in the wider context of numerous global crisis situations that – yet again during the so called credit crunch - highlight the contemporary relevance of *Robinson Crusoe*.

Despite the critical acclaim of most of the more recent castaway stories mentioned above, there can be no doubt that the most popular robinsonades of the last decade are Hollywood films like *Cast Away* (Zemeckis 2000), *The Beach* (Boyle 2000), *Swept Away* (Ritchie 2002) and *Six Days, Seven Nights* (Reitman 1998), as well as television series like *Lost* (Abrams et al. 2004f.) and *Survivor* (Parsons 2000f.). Considering their enormous impact and the dominant role of Hollywood cinema, the analysis of their discursive structures in the context of contemporary findings on robinsonades seems key for postcolonial research. In particular, it remains important to explore how far they follow the more recent critical trend outlined above or rather the colonial tendency discussed in the first section, which at the peak of the decolonization period even made its way into the realm of science fiction films (see *Crusoe on Mars* by Haskin 1964) and continues to inform school and university course books in contemporary Europe.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, there are only very few studies that investigate continuities and discontinuities

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<sup>4</sup> See Ortu (2009) for an analysis of Italian primary school learning materials, and Rings (2006: 141) for foreign language learning course books in which the traditional Robinson-style protagonist has survived.

of contemporary robinsonades in a comparative manner, but – in its focus on *Cast Away* – this paper would like to give a modest contribution towards reducing that gap in research.

### **3. *Cast Away*: throwing off the shackles of colonialism?**

#### **3.1 Preliminary remarks**

Robert Zemeckis, previously well known for comedies like *Used cars*, thrillers like *What lies beneath* and the blockbuster *Forrest Gump*, for which he already teamed up with Hollywood star Tom Hanks, directs with *Cast Away* an adventure story that – according to this study – contains key aspects of a 'bravura critique of the new world order' (Cooper 2001: 18) within its re-construction of a popular 'fantasy of the United States as an anticolonial world power' (Weaver-Hightower 2007: 212). In other words, it certainly offers more than a re-edition of contemporary US governmental discourse, which implies that Weaver-Hightowers statements regarding the reflection of US self-imagery in the film have to be revised with particular focus on the negative portrayal of capitalist time pressures in the film. For this purpose, a range of capitalist critics such as Weber (2003, 1991), Hall (1983) and Adam (2002) are brought into the debate. Also, Ingram's psychological perspective on volleyball Wilson, the new Robinson's companion, helps to amend Weaver-Hightower's overall excellent interpretation of *Cast Away*. On the other hand, Cooper's presentation of the film as a US world order critique needs to be interrogated by exposing the limits of a Hollywood film that – in its efforts to entertain – does not wish to break with contemporary principles of consumerism and/or alienate its target audience.

*Cast Away* returns to the three-fold structure of the original Robinson story, meaning the well known island experience which is framed by insights into the protagonist's life before his shipwreck and then, towards the end, his surprising rescue that brings him back 'home'. A key part of this narrative frame is taken up by the less original Hollywood romance between 'modern Crusoe' Chuck Noland (alias Hanks) and his girlfriend Kelly, a relationship that has led to a lot of negative critique – be it because of Helen Hunt's acting, which certainly does not reach Hanks's performance, or – maybe more importantly – due to the 'tedium and predictability of the love story' (Ingram 2001a: 625).

Like Defoe's Crusoe, Zemeckis's Noland could be regarded as a stereotypical business man of his time, but capitalism has developed from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, and so it is no surprise that there are significant differences between the two protagonists. If the exact quantification of goods, generated income and even people (cannibals) killed, was characteristic of Crusoe's note taking, FedEx engineer Noland seems to have gone a significant step further with his obsessive quantification of time. Not by coincidence Levy summarizes him as an individual whose pre-island life is 'run with the precision of a Swiss watch' (2000: 21), and Noland is indeed proud to efficiently deliver – as the FedEx slogan suggests: 'the world on time'. This symbolic culmination of Benjamin Franklin's famous slogan 'time is money' marks not only the protagonist's business life, in which he loves to give extra tuition to new FedEx employees in post-Soviet Russia, but also his private

affairs: there is simply not the time for a full Christmas dinner, never mind for getting engaged to his girlfriend Kelly.

In this context, it appears as some kind of higher justice that his plane crashes during the business trip which took him away from Kelly. Noland is - like Crusoe – the only survivor from that accident, and his landing on a deserted island means first and foremost the end of his business life that was so important to him. Symbolically, this is highlighted by the destiny of his pocket watch and his beeper: neither is working anymore, and the watch – his Christmas present from Kelly – serves from now on only one purpose which is reminding him of her. Instead of further adherence to Western-style monochronic time (see Hall 1983: 41), of which he seemed to be master and slave at the same time, his life on the island is now governed by spontaneously changing weather conditions, tides and seasons. Unlike Crusoe, he is not in the fortunate position of benefitting from the cargo of a whole ship, including tools and weapons, but has to rely on the content of some FedEx packages that the tides bring ashore, among them volleyball Wilson that has been highlighted as key partner for stabilizing the castaway's psyche (Ingram 2001b: 311). Between the fear of starving to death, fruitless attempts at an escape and total desperation about the senselessness of his new life, Noland comes close to suicide, but he finally manages to overcome the huge waves that stopped him from leaving the island and – after several days at sea – a cargo ship takes him on board.

When he finally comes 'home', it is primarily to realize that he cannot simply go back to his previous life and correct his mistakes: Kelly has in the meantime married another man and has had a daughter by him. The film ends with Noland standing on the same cross-road where the film began, just that this time the viewer is not confronted with a punctual FedEx delivery to a farm somewhere in Texas but with a man who has just returned a FedEx package to the sender with more than 1500 days delay (his time on the island). There is some hope that Noland will be able to start a new life with another girlfriend, possibly the woman from the very beginning of the movie who owns a nearby ranch and has just given him some orientation on the cross-road. It remains, however, unclear how far that new life will be different from his old one.

### **3.2 Breaking with the past**

A key difference between *Cast Away* and traditional Robinson stories can be seen in the fact that Noland neither 'civilises' any other human being (like Crusoe with his education of Friday), nor 'domesticates' any native animal (like the group around Cyrus Smith in Verne's *The mysterious island* by teaching an orang-utan). However, this aspect has to be assessed in the context of 'the hegemonic global dominance of a form of Western liberal democracy coded as American' (McCracken, Pepper 2005: 187) that has failed to achieve global stability, order and acceptance. More precisely, this study would argue that the production of *Cast Away* falls into a period that is marked by US reluctance to take a leading role in the solution of international conflicts. The lack of commitment when faced with the genocide in Rwanda (1994) and the massive human right abuses in Chechnya (1999-2001) are



just two prominent examples of a US-policy suffering from the traumatic experiences of Vietnam and, immediately before the Rwandan civil war, Somalia (1992-1994). It is in this context, that the rhetorics of the US as an anti-colonial world power gain momentum because the unwillingness to act as a global leader, even in cases of major international crime (albeit little economic or political interest), had to be ethically and morally justified. *Cast Away* contributes to this justification by supporting the non-colonial self-imagery through Noland's lack of settlement on the island: while most other castaways build houses, erect defence mechanisms, plant crops and keep animals, in short 'go to [...] extreme lengths to turn the island into a more "civilized" space' (Weaver-Hightower 2006: 297), Noland remains during his four years in a cage still living predominantly from fish, crabs and coconuts, as at the very beginning of his island experience. Weaver-Hightower is certainly right in claiming that he simply 'lacks feelings of ownership', as the island to him 'represents only danger, death and hardship' (id.). As an obstacle to his desperate desire to return 'home', meaning to Kelly and the United States, he shows no interest in converting the newly discovered 'wild' territory into some kind of US colony, like Verne's group of castaways. Instead, he limits himself to hunting for what he needs for his daily survival, and is content with the natural shelter he finds. One could conclude that his claims as regards the island are completely deterritorialized, and as such have to be seen in opposition to key concepts of traditional colonialism dominating 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Robinson stories. Interestingly enough, *Cast Away* is not alone in its critical distance as regards occupation and civilization of 'savage' land. Very similarly, in *The Beach*, *Swept Away* and *Six Days, Seven Nights*, the island is overall reduced to a – sometimes more and sometimes less hostile – background setting, in which American protagonists try to survive. In addition, these films feature romantic relationships between Westerners, thus replacing the inter-ethnic encounter of the original Crusoe story with a monocultural love affair and further reducing the island encounter, in particular in scenes in which the main threat to survival is not the undomesticated and isolated nature but representatives of modern global crime (e.g. drug smugglers in *Six Days, Seven Nights* and marijuana farmers in *The Beach*). Certainly, all this mirrors key hopes and fears of those parts of American society that lack any intercultural awareness whatsoever, and the fact that highly successful Hollywood movies continue to adapt such ethnocentric patterns seems to suggest their acceptance, if not popularity.

However, *Cast Away* remains quite original in its irony which deconstructs the scheduled efficiency of contemporary capitalism as portrayed by Noland before the shipwreck, an aspect that Weaver-Hightower (2007, 2006) does – unfortunately – not consider in any great detail. In an early scene, the FedEx engineer indicates his notion of time to Russian employees quite provocatively as follows: 'We live or die by the clock ... Never allow ourselves the sin of losing track of time'. This is very reminiscent of a statement with which German philosopher Weber summarizes the importance of time in the 'capitalist spirit' derived from Protestant ethics:

Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. The span of human life is infinitely short and precious to make sure of one's own election. Loss of time through sociability,

idle talk, luxury, even more sleep than is necessary for health – six to eight hours – is worthy of absolute moral condemnation (2003 [1904]: 157f.).

Of course, Noland at that time firmly believes in the universal value of scheduled efficiency stressed in the FedEx slogan 'The world on time'. However, a critical viewer will already pay at this stage attention to the fact that professional work has here become an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. Clearly, and that distinguishes the critique in *Cast Away* quite significantly from the subversive notes in Charles Chaplin's *Modern times* (1936), Noland's private life is fully subordinate to the nearly totalitarian FedEx demands, which do not even leave him the time to dine with family at Christmas Eve, never mind to propose engagement to his girlfriend Kelly. When Noland is trapped on the island, he has finally got the time to reflect on what is really important in his life, and that is in particular Kelly, the person he neglected so much. The fact that he has lost her in the meantime to another man highlights at the end of the film that the essential elements of life, which lead to personal happiness or misery, depend very much on taking the right decision at the right time. In order to address these new and sometimes unique opportunities, there is a need to break with the behaviorist patterns of every day professional life, marked by the stimulus-reaction schemes set via clocks and beepers. Beyond Noland's tragicomic experiences, *Cast Away* follows with a critique of human alienation under capitalist norms a contemporary tendency set by other films such as *Run Lola Run* (Tykwer 1998) and *Amélie* (Jeunet 2001),<sup>5</sup> but it does so even more explicitly. Noland himself indicates the problem very early, when arguing that 'time rules over us without mercy', but at that time he does not manage to see the contribution of human agency to the discursive phenomenon, and there is no attempt to critically interrogate the FedEx working ethos, and even less interest in searching for alternatives. Instead, his assimilation of the 'capitalist spirit' of his time makes him a role model of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, which – according to Ritzer – can be regarded as key concepts of so called contemporary 'McDonaldisation of society' (2008: 13f.), but it directs him also to the plane crash which marks the temporary end of an excess of causality in life that has reeled off without mercy. At the very end of the film, Noland gets another opportunity when he arrives at the same cross-roads at which the film began. Rather than running behind new schedules, it is obvious that he now takes his 'right to time'<sup>6</sup>, be it to return a FedEx package personally to a sender, or to make up his mind about future ways to take. There is no doubt that – after all his experiences – he would be well advised in placing his personal interests over business demands. What these interests might be (e.g. starting a new relationship with the woman he just met at the cross-roads), is for him – and not for FedEx or any other company – to decide.

In most Robinson stories, island life demands major adjustments from castaways, but in Noland's case it comes with a fundamental lack of orientation and a refreshing clumsiness that breaks with the Christian heroism of Crusoe and many of his successors. Admittedly, after the island-culture shock,

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<sup>5</sup> For a comparative analysis of these two films see Rings 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Adam (2002: 23) summarizes with this expression the importance to search for alternatives beyond the creation, commodification, control and colonization of industrial time.

Defoe's protagonist also needs a lot of time for his self-composure, but during this process he can always rely on his Christian beliefs as strong means of guidance, whereas Noland loses his belief in scheduled efficiency immediately on arrival: both the beeper and the clock are dead and with them the world ('on time') into which he had previously invested all his energy. In this context, it is not surprising that he, in turn, gives up on these elements of his former business identity and starts living according to the tides and weather conditions, only very loosely keeping track of linear time. Ingram summarises the psychological dimension as follows:

Time abandoned him. He would abandon time. Now, on the island, time was almost without relevance. In these circumstances, keeping the time and date could only be little more than an amusement. And Noland was not amused. Past and future had no meaning. Only the present mattered (2001a: 630).

While most children might laugh wholeheartedly about Noland's clumsiness when trying to open coconuts, hunt fish or make fire (the film has been released for viewers from age thirteen), many adults might perceive through the same scenes a glimpse of the helplessness and desperation of modern 'civilized' man vis-à-vis the power of nature, and parallels to the hardship and misery when people face floods, famine, global warming or swine flu are certainly not out of reach. In his desperation, Noland creates his own superior being out of volleyball Wilson, who becomes 'the fire-god' and – at the same time – 'the repository of a benign super-ego' (id. 627), an aspect worth adding to Weaver-Hightower's discussion of "castaways" (2007). A key scene in the development of the ball from unpaid advertising object (the brand name is Wilson) to a higher-up partner for 'dialogue' with the lonely castaway is the fire making effort: after numerous unsuccessful attempts, his question – 'You wouldn't have a match, would you?' – seems to receive a positive answer when finally smoke and fire come out of the sticks he was rubbing together. It is here where Wilson the fire-god is created, out of Noland's desperation, which implies – according to this study – an inversion of standard religious beliefs: rather than offering yet another celebration of God – never mind which one – as creator of the universe, to whom the castaway has to be thankful for sparing his life, Zemeckis presents human desperation at the beginning of religious cults, although he leaves ample escape routes for Christian viewers to ignore that parody of the original Crusoe and most of the nearly 20 film adaptations. Firstly, there is the possibility of categorizing the relation to Wilson as idolatry, and – secondly – *Cast Away* clearly concentrates on Wilson's function as super-ego, rather than elaborating further on the notion of fire-god.

Kaufman-Scarborough notes surprising similarities in Noland's and Wilson's development, e.g. 'as Noland's hair and beard grow to "mountain man" proportions, spiked "hair" made of leaves has been added to Wilson' (2003: 93). It is worth adding that, at the very beginning, Nelson paints Wilson's face – and thus creates him – with his own blood. However, these external parallels are matched by internal complementarity which Ingram summarizes as follows:

His [Wilson's] is the discourse of the reasonable, prudent, civilized man Noland once was. Although empathic and caring, Wilson is something of an authority. He is conservative and mildly ironic. His is the voice of concern about there not being enough time to build the raft leading to escape from the island. [...] He insists that Noland retrieve rope from the trail hanging of the year before. And it was he, at that earlier time, who suggested that Noland test the rope and noose with a log (2001a: 627).

Considering Noland's failure in private life, this study would suggest a slight rephrasing of the first statement, and lead us to argue that Wilson provides us with the discourse of the reasonable, prudent, civilized man Noland always wanted to be perceived as, because there is actually a high degree of irrationality in his behavior. The dehumanizing and partially self-destructive life he not only leads himself but at the same time preaches to the Russian FedEx employees reminds quite significantly of Ritzers comments on the 'irrationality of rationality' (2008: 26). Having said that, Ingram is certainly right when it comes to Noland's self-perception and search for acceptance as a rational model to follow, and – even more – in stressing Wilson's importance as his super-ego. The latter explains why Noland immediately retrieves the volleyball and apologizes to it after throwing it out of the cave, and why he is so desperate when the ball drifts away from the raft during his escape: 'There is nothing for Noland after Wilson's loss but loss of self, of life' (Ingram 2001a: 627), unless he manages to return 'home', and – in this sense – there are parallels to the integrative function of psychoanalysts for their patients: both, Wilson and the successful psychoanalyst are up to a certain degree 'a construction and substitution [...] for some imaginary and largely unconscious sector' of an individual's psyche, and they tend to have a similar function in stabilizing that psyche by acting as 'a device for effective dialogue, for dialogized consciousness, through which autobiographical narrative can be evolved, enriched and integrated' (Ingram 2001b: 311). Similar to the fantastic friends children frequently return to, e.g. Jess's football star role model Beckham in Chadha's *Bend it like Beckham*, Wilson seems 'a well-organized, affectively competent persona' for Noland to retreat to (Ingram 2001a: 627). The problem here is, however, that Noland is not supposed to be a child but a highly successful adult in contemporary capitalist society, who is in the middle of nature as helpless and clumsy as a child, or as a mentally disordered person in need of psychoanalyst treatment. Also, as a brand name for volleyballs, Wilson represents US consumer culture, and the fact that its preservation is key for Noland's psyche indicates the alienation and dehumanization of contemporary society, an aspect that Ingram does not take into account. Defoe's castaway might have significant problems in self-composure, but he does not need to talk to a ball to achieve it, and it would not be very convincing to characterize him as a child or a mentally ill person either. If anybody seems childlike or mentally disturbed in *Robinson Crusoe*, it is the naïve and cannibalistic Friday, who is brought to rational and morally acceptable adulthood thanks to his education by the British colonizing protagonist. In this sense, there is a partial inversion of colonialism in Zemeckis's film, when the well-heeled FedEx engineer Noland, who used to teach Russians and other naïve people the proper way to live, becomes more and more a savage – in his way of living (as a cave man), outside appearance (see comments on the 'mountain man' above) and instinctive outbursts of joy and fury (e.g. after making fire, and when

he smacks the ball out of his cave). Rather than him acting as colonizer of the island, the wild nature and isolation of the place has successively taken possession and control of him. In addition, if 'the religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling, [...] must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of [...] the spirit of capitalism', as Weber stresses (1991 [1904-05]: 172) and Crusoe's life confirms, then Noland's loss of Kelly, his relation with the volleyball and his suicide attempt on the island could be regarded as symbols of the failure of modern capitalist man. In other words, *Cast Away* bears the potential to severely destabilize the basic patterns of colonialism as the 'dark side of capitalism' in the way Mignolo has termed it (2005: xiii), an aspect worth adding to Weaver-Hightower's analysis (2007, 2006). However, Noland's reluctance to take possession of the island has to be read in a neo-colonial context, and his self-composition almost immediately after the return to the United States and the promising indications of a new beginning lead to a far less critical message at the end of the film.

### 3.3 Neo-colonial continuities

Just as capitalism has developed from Crusoe to Noland, so has colonialism. The numerous wars of independence fought against European colonizers, in particular Spain, Britain and France in their different epochs, led to the creation of many new nations and shattered the former empires between the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the 1960s. Although there are still territories that could be regarded as traditional colonies, most of them – like the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar – actually British (see UNO 2009), the globally more problematic and effective form of colonialism today works via 'economic subordination, cultural imperialism and psychological anxiety' (Shankar 2001: 137), in which multinational corporations, cartels and international monetary bodies play a leading role, and military intervention remains predominantly as ultimate threat. Pan-Africanist and former president of independent Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, coined the term 'neo-colonialism' (1965: 1) for this continuing force of authority implemented by former colonial powers and their successors, in particular the United States, and US FedEx engineer Noland is a good example of the new kind of colonizer: not only is he very actively involved in shaping 'self concepts, values [...] and personalities' (Robinson 1997: 22) of new FedEx employees in Russia, but he never shows – just like his company – any interest in settling down in the sense of converting places into a permanent 'home' and maximising the control within the boundaries of that new place. This study regards such strategy as a key feature which links Noland's involvement in Russia with his time on the island, and argues that this ultimately reflects the corporate identity, because FedEx stands for a high degree of mobility, not just in the global delivery of goods even far away from the headquarters, but in the readiness to move subsidiaries into any country or city at any time, and – at the same speed – out of it, if the profit margins do not appear to be good enough anymore. Consequently, US education of Russians in the film appears to be limited to some basic FedEx training on the job and, as such, to the area that is of immediate importance for a smooth running of the business. Similarly, unlike traditional colonizing castaways, Noland's interest in the island is confined by the desire to secure the basic conditions for his survival, which are met by his life

as a cave man and primitive hunter. This reluctance to invest more time into either Russia or the island could be seen as a gross rejection of both, after all they are unlikely to offer Noland the same cultural or economic advantages he finds in the US. Weaver-Hightower consequently regards contemporary castaway tales as reflections of 'a popular mythology of the United States as the metaphoric center of the world [...] where the water is cleaner, the roads wider, the technology more available, and the streets safer' (2006: 304). However, while the idea that everybody wants to 'flee' to the US 'in search for a better life' (id.) is certainly an interesting reflection of the cultural imperialism mentioned above, this study would like to stress the pragmatism behind such neo-colonial power structures: constant military presence in other countries is expensive, in an age of nuclear war threats neither very feasible nor extremely popular, and traditional colonial empires have all been broken into pieces by national independence movements over the last two centuries. So, why bother with it, if you can make your profits without it, and if you can this way possibly reduce the risk of following the destiny of the Spanish, British and French empires?<sup>7</sup>

While traditional notions of colonialism, understood as 'civilisation and Christianisation', official key tasks from the Spanish Conquest to Crusoe and beyond that require a permanent presence of the colonizer (Rings 2010: 35f.), do not reflect the FedEx mentality portrayed, neo-colonial features do apply, and a key element is here yet again the question of time, or – to be more precise – 'colonization with and of time', as Adam would phrase it in her theoretical discussion of key features of contemporary capitalism (2002: 21). Drawing on Adam, it could be argued that Noland is one of the missionaries of the new world order in so far as this is not only about exporting 'Western clock time and commodified time' across the globe and imposing it 'as the unquestioned and unquestionable standard' (e.g. in Russia), but it implies the deterritorialized control of global present, past and future, with time and money as potentially universal and 'exclusive measure of corporate value' and an ever-increasing borrowing from the future to finance the present (id.). All this is not directly new as Adam's example of the speculative stock market – already rejected by Defoe – indicates quite clearly, but the global dimension, interdependence and impact are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century much more distinctive than in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, as the numerous crises from 1929 to the contemporary credit crunch prove. Also, the need for permanent military presence in the economically subordinate 'periphery' is probably now much less important than in traditional colonial periods, as key principles of Western clock time and scheduled efficiency have been very well internalized by neo-liberal national elites in the so-called Third World. Unfortunately, Welsch seems to have ignored all these aspects in his discussion of the transcultural nature of contemporary globalization as an expression of cultural exchange and 'permeations' on more or less equal footing (1999: 211f.).

In this context, it is worth noting that *Cast Away* does not explicitly generalize Noland's exclusive interest in scheduled efficiency as key patterns of US everyday life or US corporate identity, which in turn helps to understand his desire to return to the US, and probably even to FedEx. Quite to the

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<sup>7</sup> See Weaver-Hightower for a discussion of 'fears about the United States' global role, specifically fears of the loss of [...] global hegemony' (2006: 302).

contrary, Noland receives a very generous money and time-consuming welcome by FedEx on his return from island life, which – while potentially helpful for the image of the company as the friendly side of capitalism – is still a bit surprising in so far as future job commitments are hardly mentioned at all. For virtually everybody, it seems clear that Noland needs now some time off to get himself into shape again and to decide what he wants to do next. In other words, he suddenly gets his 'right to time', and that without any fight, which re-constitutes and advocates the idea of personal freedom and individualism as corner stones of life in the US and a superior model to follow, yet another aspect of the ongoing enhancement of cultural hierarchies that helps to interrogate Welsch's extremely optimistic summary of balanced reciprocity in global interaction (1999: 212). This is amended by traditional concepts of family life, when – after mutual confirmations of their love for each other – Noland drops Kelly off in front of her new home so that she can go back to her family. Notions of friendship are even reconstructed between Noland and a colleague from work whose wife has died during his absence of cancer. At the same time, Noland shows signs of a development from a naïve 'servant' of scheduled efficiency to an adult who starts to take his future into his own hands. If this means partner and possibly family first (e.g. by starting a relation with the woman at the cross-roads), and business second (back at FedEx or somewhere else), he is not out of touch with standard Hollywood love stories, which tend to combine modern romance with supposedly more 'ethical' versions of the old 'capitalist spirit' (see *Pretty Woman* by Marshall 1990). In short, this study would argue that the total lack of conflict between Noland's new personal identity in the making, his company's old corporate identity and traditional concepts of family and friendship indicate that the critique in *Cast Away* is aimed more at personal obsessions with scheduled efficiency than at US capitalism as such. Retrospectively, it now looks as if Noland's originally excessive adherence to FedEx schedules and plans to further reduce delivery times were the key problem at the beginning of the film, and with it aberrations from the norm, rather than the norm itself.

This impression can be backed up by Noland's island life in so far as American consumer goods sent via FedEx become essential tools for his survival, as soon as the packages wash ashore and Noland learns how to make use of them: the at first seemingly useless pair of ice skates can be converted into an axe and a tool for extracting a tormenting tooth, the video tapes help to build the raft, parts of the dress reappear as a fishing net, and – as discussed – the volleyball turns into his best friend and super-ego. Much later he also finds broken plastic sheets on the beach, which will be essential for his escape from the island as he can use them to make a sail for the raft. In this context, Noland's inventive talent comes in as yet another useful tool: not only does it help him survive, but - in particular - it facilitates the escape, for which he also needs his original scheduled efficiency from FedEx times, since departure depends on favorable winds and tides in autumn and the raft needs to be ready by then. A meticulous calculation of basic material (e.g. the length of the robe) and production time is absolutely essential for this, and – as one would expect – Noland succeeds here in this respect as he did in his job before. In other words, the very same pattern that gets him into trouble finally gets him out of it – yet another ironic comment in the film, but one which weakens the colonial and capitalist critique from the first part quite considerably.

If Levy is right in stating that *Cast Away* is about 'realizing the true meaning of belonging, of finding "home" (2000: 22), then this is for contemporary Crusoes like Noland clearly US civilization, its values, self-concepts and little commodities – such as ice cubes for the drinks he has on his return flight. With it, the film's critique is reduced to a destabilization of traditional colonialism and capitalist excess, not US neo-colonialism or capitalism itself, which means the average viewer of Hollywood movies – who is unlikely to be a major critic of Western hegemony in general and US world leadership in particular – can sit back, relax and enjoy the movie, since his/her world order is at the very end not only still intact but has just been confirmed as the best model to follow.

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