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| タイトル | CAST AWAY : THE MACHINE IN THE SKY |
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| 引用 | 北海学園大学学園論集, 127: 53-70 |
| 発行日 | 2006-03-25 |

CAST AWAY: THE MACHINE IN THE SKY

Patrick O'BRIEN

ABSTRACT

Hollywood has shown an unending affection for the airplane for nearly one hundred years. From fantasy, to war, to salvation, to heroism, to romance, to adventure, airplanes have been and continue to be a powerful symbol in American film. Two intertwined themes based on flight are menace and hope, and the tension between them has successfully driven many flying films. This may explain why film has featured the airplane as the archetypal machine of the twentieth century, just as, according to Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*, the locomotive served as the archetypal machine in American literature of the nineteenth century. Specifically, this dissertation will focus on how cargo planes, bomber aircraft, commercial airliners, and all those aboard have been portrayed in film from 1950-2004. The current essay is chapter 8 of the dissertation.

CAST AWAY: THE MACHINE IN THE SKY

Ye Gods! annihilate but space and time...

Alexander Pope¹

Marx tells us that “No stock phrase in the entire lexicon of progress appears more often than the ‘annihilation of space and time...,’” a sentiment that perfectly fits the *Weltanschauung* inspiring the most literary of recent films, *Cast Away* (2000). For in this film the main character devotes his life to seeing that neither space nor time hamper the myriad parcels from going from one point on the globe to another. As a senior manager of FedEx, one of the world’s leading delivery companies, it is his job to see to it that man’s sophisticated use of computerized sorting equipment, elaborate timetables, and most of all high-speed

cargo jets will — for a fee — nearly “annihilate” space and time. At least that is the hope.

Just as “grand and terrific [sic]” machines of the nineteenth century left people “dumb-founded at the strange and unusual spectacle,” the modern jumbo jet does so today. The technology has progressed but the surprise and awe are familiar:

Steam is annihilating space.... Travelling is changed from an isolated pilgrimage to a kind of triumphal procession.... Caravans of voyagers are now winding as it were, on the wings of the wind, round the habitable globe. Here they glide over cultivated acres on rods of iron, and there they rise and fall on the bosom of the deep, leaving behind them a foaming wheel-track like the chariot-path of a sea-god....²

Today the “caravans” consist of miles of computerized conveyer belts sorting thousands upon thousands of packages per hour in cavernous buildings, linked by individual aircraft that are literally “wings of the wind.” While something as tangible as “rods of iron” that guided and supported the trains of their day are no longer our focus, nor is sea travel a marvel to behold, the link among railroads, ships, and airplanes is still strong, with each newer form of conveyance further “annihilating space and time.” *Cast Away* whittles away the time devoted to travel from days or weeks to mere hours and minutes, and the manner in which it does so is well worth our attention.

Cast Away

Cast Away features Hanks playing Chuck Noland, a hard-charging career man at Federal Express (FedEx). In this film he is stranded on a deserted Pacific island for some four years, the mirror opposite of his hectic life prior to that. The movie chronicles the changes in Noland’s character, ending with his return to civilization and normal life. Director Robert Zemeckis uses the airplane to great effect in this film, employing it as the machine *par excellence* of a complex, high-tech world that has seemingly overcome time, distance, and nature itself. Such hubris, of course, invites a fall, and that comes in a most dramatic way.

In *Cast Away* the plane is initially the antithesis of the garden; it is the hyper-machine requiring much more discipline to use than previous machines, which highlights Marx’s references to Freud on the matter. In *The Machine in the Garden*, Marx references *Civilization and Its Discontents*, where Freud has observed (ca. 1930) an “amazing” tendency of humans to simplistically idealize more primitive states of being. “How has it come about

that so many people have adopted this strange attitude of hostility to civilization?"³ In *Cast Away*, this sentiment is decidedly not the case, for Noland is not only a non-critical participant in modern (indeed global) society, he enthusiastically embraces its most advanced, most technologically sophisticated elements, signified by the ability to transport objects from one part of the globe to another in mere hours — and this at a moment's notice.

Noland is not party to the "puerile fantasies" Freud identified in so many moderns, signified by their desire to escape civilization. On the contrary, Noland is firmly rooted in his present circumstances and is highly motivated to perform to the highest standards of the time. The thought of him being consigned to a remote and primitive setting, freed of the constant demands of modern civilization, is absurd, which is exactly what drives the story in the first third of *Cast Away*. When Marx asks whether "our institutions and cultural standards are enforcing an increasingly painful, almost unbearable degree of privation of instinct," our answer during the opening twenty minutes of *Cast Away* would be "No." In fact, we are led to embrace progress and this "brave new world" (in its non-ironic, non-threatening sense) as the advanced American Noland teaches the backward — indeed primitive — Russians the value and meaning of time, immediately in the service of his and their employer FedEx, but more abstractly in the act of living in any highly advanced technological society. For not only is time money, it a fungible element that can be viewed and used efficiently, or it can be squandered.

As viewers, then, we see Noland's abrupt transfer from the bosom of technological civilization to primitive and solitary confinement on a Pacific island as banishment, an estrangement from the comfort, safety, and meaning of modern civilization. This is how the film treats Noland's ordeal and it sets the stage for a major transformation in both Noland himself but more generally in how the film accepts or critiques modern society. Though it is not clear what will become of Noland after the crash of his plane, in hindsight we can see that in fact the FedEx cargo DC-10 is the embodiment of the "inhuman" demands of modern life, an image enhanced on the screen when the sinking jet literally attempts to devour him just as an animal in the jungle would devour its prey. Though Noland's transformation into a more complex, feeling human being takes years of privation on the remote island, we can say upon later reflection that *Cast Away* is a superb example of regeneration through primitive ordeal, and Noland finds his "garden" precisely when he escapes from the airplane. Thus, this tale ultimately fits in nicely with a long line of "classic American fables," as Marx called them.⁴

To take this argument further, it is worth returning to Marx's introductory chapter of

The Machine in the Garden, in which he employs the trope of Nathaniel Hawthorne's summer of 1844 project to repose in the woods of Massachusetts to await, in Hawthorne's words, "such little events as may happen." As he fills his eight notebook pages with observations of the activities of nature, he begins to notice mild human interventions — the village clock, a cowbell, even "mowers whetting their scythes." Marx finds this subtle change in emphasis important, despite Hawthorne's own protestations that "these sounds of labor" do not "disturb the repose of the scene," nor do they "break our sabbath" (for this pastoral idyll is a sabbath itself).

Though many of these quotes from Marx are repeated from earlier chapters, they bear repetition because of the way we can now reinterpret them in an updated context. Marx shows how Hawthorne's observations of distant human activity set the stage for his crucial contrast of pastoral versus the machine:

But, hark! there is the whistle of the locomotive — the long shriek, harsh, above all other harshness, for the space of a mile cannot mollify it into harmony. It tells a story of busy men, citizens, from the hot street, who have come to spend a day in a country village, men of business; in short of all unquietness; and no wonder that it gives such a startling shriek, since it brings the noisy world into the midst of our slumbrous peace. As our thoughts repose again, after this interruption, we find ourselves gazing up at the leaves, and comparing their different aspect, the beautiful diversity of green....

The shriek of the whistle. This is no reference to a harmonious and pleasing sound; it is a "startling shriek" that wrenches us (modern humans) out of our "slumbrous peace." This is the exact experience and sentiment that is attached to Noland's own ordeal in *Cast Away*.

Recall that Noland has returned from a hectic business trip to Russia and is reunited with his girlfriend (Helen Hunt in a wonderfully understated role) in slow-paced Memphis, Tennessee, world headquarters of FedEx. He finds her in her quiet office, though ironically she is now the one pressed for time as she waits for the office copier to methodically reproduce the pages of her dissertation. This scene quickly segues to the counterpart of Hawthorne's "Sleepy Hollow." It is Christmas and Noland is at home, surrounded by extended family and his long-term girlfriend. The setting is "pastoral" insofar as it represents a harkening back to the past and to tradition, and to an emphasis on a primary need of man: food. The banter is lighthearted and nothing interrupts or threatens this "repose," nor is the "sabbath" broken.

Hawthorne claimed that aural evidence of human activity was not enough to disturb his

visit to the woods, so, perhaps, the buzzing of Noland's work beeper is not enough to disturb his mood either. As viewers initiated into the symbolism of modern society, however, we recognize the sounding of the beeper as an omen, just as Marx was able to recognize Hawthorne's subtle shift toward the world of man-made sounds as an important turning point. As expected, the message on Noland's beeper has in fact disturbed his repose, and he must immediately leave kith and kin in order to fly to the other side of the globe to deliver cargo.

“And Make Two Lovers Happy”

The change in setting here is abrupt. From the quiet of his family's kitchen, where he is able to explain and to apologize to his girlfriend, the two of them are thrown into the darkness of their Jeep as it approaches the gate to FedEx's headquarters. Here, “the long shriek, harsh, above all other harshness,” is no longer that of the locomotive, it is the spooling engines of a modern jetliner. The roar in this scene is deafening and thus it succeeds in informing us that this site is that of “busy men, citizens, from the hot street,... men of business; in short of all unquietness.” How the image of the airplane is manipulated is central to this entire turning point, as, of course, it is central to the film as a whole. A detailed examination of that imagery follows.

Initially, the airplane plays only a minor role in the film. After trying to impress his Russian employees with the importance of on-time delivery, Noland sits exhausted in a jumpseat on a FedEx flight returning from Moscow to its world headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee. Here is our first introduction to the setting of a FedEx cargo plane, with the pilots in the cockpit doing the flying, and any deadheading passengers in the seats just behind the cockpit door. As a dedicated cargo plane, it has no passenger windows, creating a cavernous interior space only dimly lit. With the various bulkheads, beams and strands of netting in place, it bears a resemblance — fittingly, as we shall see — to the belly of a whale. This introduction to the layout of the plane serves as a harbinger of things to come.

A further omen comes in the next scene with an airplane. Noland, who had been enjoying Christmas dinner with his family and girlfriend, is paged by his company and must leave immediately on a long Pacific flight. At the gates to the FedEx loading area, the nighttime scenes is unusually dark as he says his good-byes to his girlfriend. In the parting shot of them, he has given her a box that may well contain an engagement ring, but he does not stay long enough for her to find out. Instead, he turns toward his plane and says “I'll be right back.” But he will not. Thus, the poignancy of the second part of Pope's apt phrase:

“Ye Gods! annihilate but space and time,/And make two lovers happy.”⁵ In *Cast Away*, the power to annihilate these elements is taken away, and space and time become the insurmountable barriers that keep the two lovers apart.

In addition to the dark, a further ominous sign is the foreground roar of the jet engines, especially Noland's flight, which spools up as he leaves his girlfriend. Darkness and the roar of engines are to play a central role in the coming pivotal scene with the cargo jet. At approximately twenty minutes into the film, we find Noland dozing in the now-familiar jumpseat position just behind the cockpit bulkhead, facing rearward toward the belly of the beast. In contrast to his normally hectic schedule, he now has all the time in the world as the plane continues its long flight across the Pacific. To further emphasize the issue of time, he idly fingers the present his girlfriend has just given him — an old wind-up pocket watch that her grandfather had used during his days working on the railroad. The contrast between time and technology then and now is of course marked (and also serves nicely to tie together Marx's use of Hawthorne and the train with this analysis of the airplane).

Light turbulence wakes Noland from his fitful sleep and he engages in a little banter with one of the pilots who has come back to check on things. Noland then gets up and wanders to the cockpit door, asking “Hey, is all this turbulence from Santa and his eight tiny reindeer?” He barely notices that the crew is not listening because they are consumed with navigation and communication problems in the cockpit. The urgency of their voices, however, soon snaps Noland into an alert state. Meanwhile, lightning flashes outside the windshield and thunder splits the air.

In the right-hand seat, the co-pilot tries to raise Tahiti control on his radio, while the other three men in the cockpit try to plot their location over the Pacific. Being of no help to them, Noland casually goes back to the cargo area and brings his toiletry into the washroom to freshen up. The subdued tension that we as viewers feel is in contrast to Noland's naive sense of security. This contrast is heightened by Noland's gentle splashing of warm water on his face, but gradually his state of mind is made to converge with the viewer's own anxious state; Noland looks at his bandaged thumb with mild concern, then painfully pulls off the bandage. His grimace sets the stage for a much greater tragedy.

At the exact moment Noland has pulled away his bandage, the sealed fuselage of the DC-10 is breached and instant decompression follows. Noland is sucked out the door of the lavatory and hangs suspended horizontally in its doorway. One pilot rushes back to give him an emergency oxygen mask and yells “We may have to ditch!” then gives him a yellow inflatable raft. Confusion reigns as next we overhear a pilot say that a fire has broken out

in one of the three engines. Meanwhile, multiple alarms sound in the cockpit, adding to the already loud roar of the engines and the incessant cracks of thunder.

Now safely strapped in to his seat, Noland spots his girlfriend's watch just out of reach near the cargo net. Torn between prudence and a need to stay linked to his girlfriend, he unbuckles his seatbelt and moves toward the watch. Just as he picks it up and holds onto the net separating him from the aluminum cargo pallets, conditions worsen. Entranced, Noland watches and listens as time is both speeded up by the cascade of problems at hand and slowed down by Noland's impotent status as an observer. Then, to his rear, the beast begins to roar. The darkened cargo hold of the jumbo jet becomes the unknown jungle and from it the strains on metal give off a beastly groan.

A pilot sees Noland standing there, so he comes back to assist him. Suddenly, the plane is caught in a fierce downward motion and the pilot is slammed into the ceiling, opening a frightful cut that sends blood cascading down his face and body. He falls whimpering to the deck. Through the windscreen we again see intense lightning, which lights up the oncoming waves below. Though this cargo jet should be at 35,000 feet, it is now within range of the water below.

Seconds later the craft hits the water as the first torrents rush in. Clashing forces rip the skin of the plane, which we can hear again as beastly groans. In this crash, the plane is certainly alive and it is intent on taking all down with it in its fury. Noland briefly escapes the roar when he is pushed under the water's surface, but such an escape is merely a temporary respite; Noland must have air, so he kicks to the surface where the monster continues its rampage. Just as the hold is about to completely fill with water, a seam breaks in the ceiling above, giving Noland the chance to escape by inflating his life raft. But the beast is persistent. It reaches out and grabs the line hanging from the raft, keeping Noland submerged. Time goes by in micro-seconds as Noland's air runs out. The beast, it appears, will have its last victim.

Noland's luck, however, has not run out. He and his raft break free and they bob to the surface, where a hellish scene awaits him. Surrounded by a ring of fire from burning jet fuel, Noland finds himself disoriented by a deafening roar and the waves and the lightning. It sounds as though the very engines will engulf Noland, which turns out to be literally true: the tail-mounted number two turbine is spinning madly behind him and seems intent on digesting him after all. Just as he swims away from the engine, its massive compressor blades contact the water and the whole engine explodes in a fireball. Noland again finds temporary sanctuary under water. When he resurfaces, the engine has gone, and the tail, the last

vestige of the plane, slowly sinks beneath the surface just as Noland falls into his life raft. Now he has become the castaway.

These three short scenes are perfect: from comfort and happiness amidst his family and their Christmas dinner, to the abrupt transition to a dark airfield filled with the high-pitched shrieks of jet engines, and finally to the harrowing enactment of a crash at sea. This filmic rendition of the machine fits in perfectly with Marx's sequence of literary examples of the machine intruding with a roar into many gardens:

Our sense of its evocative power is borne out by the fact that variants of the Sleepy Hollow episode have appeared everywhere in American writing since the 1840's. We recall the scene in *Walden* where Thoreau is sitting rapt in a reverie and then, penetrating his woods like the scream of a hawk, the whistle of the locomotive is heard; or the eerie passage in *Moby-Dick* where Ishmael is exploring the innermost recesses of a beached whale and suddenly the image shifts and the leviathan's skeleton is a New England textile mill; or the dramatic moment in *Huckleberry Finn* when Huck and Jim are floating along peacefully and a monstrous steamboat suddenly bulges out of the night and smashes straight through their raft. *More often than not in these episodes, the machine is made to appear with startling suddenness* [emphasis added].⁶

The reference to the *Moby-Dick* juxtaposition of a beached whale's skeleton and a New England textile mill is apt, for the whale motif plays two roles in *Cast Away*, one visual and literary, the other literal/real. As mentioned, the windowless cargo hold of the aircraft resembles the internal structure of a whale, recalling first Jonah's biblical encounter with a whale. For current purposes, however, it is the whale in *Moby-Dick* that serves as a direct referent, given its human ability to hate and to attack. In the same way, the FedEx DC-10 on which Noland is a passenger becomes the enraged whale.

Later in the film, a whale returns when Nolan has committed himself to launching his homemade raft upon the vast Pacific waters in a rescue attempt. The whale now — like the airplanes that henceforth appear — has become an agent of deliverance. If it is not taking the analogy too far, I might add that there is one more scene tied to the whale motif: after most of Noland's physical and mental energy has been depleted in a seemingly hopeless attempt to secure rescue, an enormous cargo ship bursts onto the scene like a lumbering whale. It nearly capsizes Noland's raft, but at last he has been rescued.

Returning to the image of the aircraft, we had two aircraft scenes, one minor and one major, pieced together nicely to introduce, then to play out, the internal drama. Significant-

ly, each scene takes place at night, highlighting the danger of flight, real or potential. This is in contrast to scenes that come after Noland has undergone his ordeal of living alone on an island for years and is rescued. Then light becomes the focus, and the image of the plane shares in this. After a long segment showing Noland on a handmade raft, mere seconds go by from the time he is spotted by a passing container ship, to the call to his former girlfriend, to his flight back to civilization aboard — fittingly — a FedEx executive jet.

This time it is daylight, and Noland takes in the scene of the pastures and fields below. Noland is now in good hands, surrounded by co-workers and company paraphernalia emblazoned with the familiar purple and red-orange FedEx logo. Dramatic symmetry is in evidence in that Noland's close friend from four years ago is now with him on the business jet. This friend, Stan, lost his wife to cancer while Noland was undergoing his own ordeal, and there is a parallel between the two trials.

First, when Noland was returning from Russia in the beginning of the movie, he shared a ride with friend Stan, and we know about his wife's condition because a female pilot had come back to inquire about the wife's condition and to offer consolation. In his pre-exile state, Noland is paralyzed by the futility of battling this cancer (after all, he is a hands-on problem solver) and he is unable to articulate his feelings, opting instead to sit uncomfortably in silence. Later, after they have deplaned in Memphis, he takes a stab at helping Stan in the only way he knows how: frame Stan's wife's cancer as a solvable problem, then look for remedies. Of course, from a human standpoint, this is awkward at best, and the scene in which Noland offers to introduce a crack cancer specialist comes out as highly insensitive and hurtful. Apparently, Noland has yet to suffer enough himself to overcome his own mild self-centeredness or to realize how much human beings need each other.

The only way Noland's character is going to mature is by experiencing trial by fire, or, more accurately, trial by water: he is fated to endure exile on a deserted island. *Cast Away* does a fine job of constructing Noland's banishment and a believable job of transforming Noland into a man with a much richer interior life. Ironically, it is the four years of isolation that enable Noland to finally make meaningful contact with those closest to him. This is shown immediately upon return to civilization when, riding aboard the FedEx business jet, he offers sincere condolences to Stan and apologizes for missing Stan's wife's funeral. Stan was adrift when his wife was dying four years ago, and now Noland can certainly appreciate what it means to be alone and adrift.

This theme of light continues as Noland is taken back to FedEx headquarters and is feted by CEO Frederick W. Smith (who makes a cameo appearance). The prize of the

FedEx fleet, a DC-10F, is centered in the screen from nose almost to tail, the FedEx insignia clear to see. Since it is midday, the white fuselage gleams in the sun, reflecting its rays into a company building from which Noland looks out at his former girlfriend. Too distraught for a reunion, she has nearly collapsed outside, while her now-husband takes her home.

The image of the FedEx planes here is almost one of overkill, so there must be some significance to it. As seen above, there is a long center shot of a DC-10, then, when Noland peeks through the blinds, he sees two rows of purple and white DC-10s extending as far as the eye can see. Immediately, another DC-10 taxis slowly by, and upon leaving screen right is replaced by yet another DC-10 taxiing straight toward us. Clearly, the director felt the image of this cargo plane was important.

One question stands out: Why did FedEx allow its aircraft to play so visible a role in a movie in which one of its most modern freighters crashes in one of the most terrifying crash scenes ever filmed? Since the crash scene in *Cast Away* features one of their workhorse DC-10s, this would seem to create a negative image in the minds of viewers, both for this model and its newer derivative, the MD-11. Both FedEx and the DC-10/MD-11 have had a checkered safety history. After reviewing this history, it might become clearer why the crash scene in *Cast Away* becomes more problematic — but also why it might make sense.

FedEx and Its Freighters: the DC-10

Of the three jumbo jets that debuted at the beginning of the 1970s, McDonnell Douglas's DC-10 has garnered the most public criticism regarding its safety record. Well-publicized problems and crashes have been traced to design flaws, and this may have significantly hurt sales of the passenger airliner. Though both the DC-10 and its derivative, the MD-11, have been sought after as freighters — with FedEx being a primary customer — its history of problems is worth reviewing insofar as it may inform the background to the *Cast Away* crash.⁷

One of the first design problems with the DC-10 was the failure of a rear cargo hatch to remain tightly secure while in flight. This issue first surfaced on June 12, 1972, as an American Airlines DC-10 was leaving Detroit for Buffalo, NY. Shortly after takeoff there was an explosion at the rear of the plane, followed by decompression and the collapse of the floor at the rear of the cabin into the cargo hold. All three throttles slammed shut, and the pilots had trouble controlling the plane. Fortunately, they were able to make a safe landing back in Detroit. The problem was the cargo door. Its linking mechanism was faulty, so when pressure began to build up on the inside of the door, it finally popped open and was torn

loose by the fierce slipstream. The unequal rate of decompression between cabin and cargo hold caused the floor to collapse, stretching or severing many critical control cables. Despite a series of service bulletins from the FAA, an almost identical failure of the cargo latch occurred two years later.

Just after noon on March 3, 1974, a heavily loaded Turkish Airlines DC-10 took off from Paris's Orly Airport. Passing through 9,800 feet, there were signs of a serious problem:

Air traffic control received half a minute of garbled transmission in Turkish with a great deal of noise in the background. This included the cabin depressurization warning, and later the overspeed alarm. At the same moment the label on the DC-10's radar echo disappeared from the controllers' radar display, and the echo itself split into two. The larger one curved to the left... [while t]he smaller part remained almost stationary on the radar screen, before it too vanished. There were two more radio transmissions, each shorter than the previous one and completely unintelligible. Nothing more was heard from the aircraft.

Three hundred and forty-six people lost their lives in this crash.

Five years later, a DC-10 would be involved in a major air crash which resulted in the grounding of the model. American Airlines Flight 191 left Chicago's O'Hare International Airport with 258 passengers and a crew of thirteen aboard. Just before leaving the runway, it began shedding parts from under its port wing, and startled witnesses reported that "the entire port engine with its supporting pylon, still delivering take-off power, reared upwards and pivoted about the leading edge of the wing, wrenching itself free of the aircraft." For ten more seconds it continued what seemed to be a normal takeoff, then banked to port, rolled until its wings were vertical, and plowed into the ground, killing all aboard.

Investigators learned that improper maintenance procedures were to blame for the engine separation, but this alone should not have brought the plane down. What had happened was that hydraulic fluid had poured out of the left wing when the engine tore away, allowing the lift-producing slats to retract. This meant that the outer section of that wing now provided less lift than normal. That alone could have been dealt with, but unfortunately, sensors to that part of the wing were also lost, so the pilots had no idea what they were facing. In the event, the port wing stalled, and the plane crashed. What was determined to be a fatal design flaw resulted in the FAA grounding the fleet for five weeks.

Another major DC-10 crash was caused by damage related to the ones just reviewed. On July 19, 1989, flying high over Iowa on a sunny afternoon, a United Airlines DC-10 with

296 souls aboard experienced an explosion in the number two engine, the one mounted in the tail (this is the same engine that appears to want to consume Noland as he bobbed helplessly in the waves after his airplane has crashed). Flying debris severed hydraulic lines, and most of the hydraulic fluid drained away, resulting in a plane that could not be flown by conventional controls. The pilots used engine thrust control to reach Sioux City Airport, but their high approach speed and crude method of control resulted in a fiery crash on the runway and into an adjacent cornfield (a scene discussed in chapter two). Though 111 people died, an amazing 185 survived.

Given this spotty safety record, it is mildly surprising that FedEx allowed the use of the same model for the harrowing crash scene in *Cast Away*. In other ways, too, the DC-10 and FedEx are linked in scenes of terror. As mentioned above, when the DC-10 carrying Noland gets in trouble and experiences control problems, one of the cockpit crew sustains a serious wound to the head, resulting in heavy bleeding. One wonders if this scene is an homage to three real FedEx pilots who were bloodily attacked on April 7, 1994. This inflight incident should give pause to those who think some of the plots of flying films are too contrived.

The story begins when Auburn Calloway, a disgruntled employee, hatched a plan to kill the three-man crew of a DC-10, then crash the heavily-loaded plane, FedEx Flight 705, into FedEx's headquarters building at the hub in Memphis, Tennessee. Revenge was not the only thing on the mind of the attacker. Because he wanted to provide for his family, he purchased excessive insurance and sought to make the crash look like an accident. Toward this end, he brought aboard hammers, a knife, and a spear gun secreted in his guitar case, then took his place in the employee seat behind the cockpit. Thirty minutes into the flight, he launched his frenzied attack on pilots Sanders and Tucker, and flight engineer Peterson:

None of the three men heard Calloway enter the cockpit. Sanders suddenly became aware of a struggle, and heard the awful sound of hammer blows raining down upon his crewmates. He turned to see both men slumped in their chairs, injured terribly, and a blood-soaked Auburn Calloway moving toward him.

Calloway swung wildly at Sanders. Some of the blows landed, some were deflected. The plane lurched as Sanders desperately tried to defend himself. Then something happened that Calloway had not counted upon. Tucker and Peterson recovered and began fighting back. Calloway was surrounded; he flailed about with the hammer, still inflicting gruesome injuries. The men would not give up, though...⁸

The suddenness of the attack is evident in this cockpit voice recorder transcript as the pilots

chat:

DS=pilot Sanders

JT=co-pilot Tucker

P=flight engineer Peterson

AC=attacker Calloway

AW=autowarning

JT: Do you, uh, live over in Arkansas, Dave, or...?

DS: Naw, I live in Fisherville.

JT: Aw, Fisherville, great spot.

(Sounds of hammer blows striking pilots.)

AP: Ow!

JT: God! Oh, ah, shit.

DS: God almighty!

AP: Ow!

JT: What the fuck are you doing?

DS: God, (groan), (groan), God almighty! God, God, God....

JT: Get him, get him, get him

DS: He's going to kill us.

JT: Get him!

DS: Get up, get him!

AP: I can't, God!

UV: STOP! (unintelligible) Hold his goddamn...

AC: Sit down, sit down, get back in your seat, this is a real gun, I'll kill ya.

JT: Get him, get him, get him, get him, get him, get him!

AW: bank angle, bank angle...

JT: Get him, get him, get him!

AC: I'm gonna kill you! Hey, hey! I'll kill ya!

AW: bank angle, bank angle

DS: Get him, get him, get him!

AW: bank angle, bank angle

DS: Yeah, get him!

AW: bank angle, bank angle

JT: Get him, get him, get him, Andy, I got the airplane!

AW: bank angle, bank angle

JT: Get him, Andy, get him!

AW: bank angle, bank angle

As Sanders and Peterson fought their attacker in the cabin, copilot Tucker “swung the aircraft into dangerous flight maneuvers in an attempt to literally knock the man off his feet.” At nearly 400 miles per hour, the copilot executed a barrel-roll, “as the three struggling men were tossed about the galley area, alternately weightless and pressed upon by three times their weight in G forces. By now, the aircraft was inverted at 19,700 feet, and the alarmed air traffic controllers in Memphis were desperately calling for Flight 705.” Incredibly, after struggling with his attacker in the cabin, Sanders was able to return to his captain’s seat and land the plane, despite his near-fatal injuries and despite the fact that the DC-10 was grossly overweight for a landing.⁹ This incredible drama, I believe, is mirrored in the storyline of *Cast Away*. How this is done will be discussed after the list of DC-10/MD-11 crashes is completed.

Three years after this incident, another crew of a FedEx freighter experienced their own terrifying ride.¹⁰ On July 31, 1997 a FedEx cargo plane arriving from Anchorage International Airport in Alaska was destroyed in a non-fatal accident at Newark International Airport. With a crew of two, plus two passengers, this updated version of the DC-10 touched down at an excessive sinkrate, bounced, then rolled right, causing the right engine to drag along the ground. “The MD-11 skidded off the right side of the runway and ended up on its back 4800ft from the threshold and just short of Terminal B.” The probable cause was determined as follows: “The captain’s overcontrol of the airplane during the landing and his failure to execute a go-around from a destabilized flare. Contributing to the accident was the captain’s concern with touching down early to ensure adequate stopping distance.”

This 1997 MD-11 crash began a cycle of serious mishaps for the plane, though not only for FedEx. In all, three other carriers experienced fatal crashes, beginning with one the next year, the crash of Swissair Flight 111 on September 2, 1998. After leaving John F. Kennedy Airport in New York, this passenger plane experienced smoke in the cockpit. Though they attempted an emergency landing in Halifax, Nova Scotia, the fire burned too quickly, and the plane and its 229 passengers and crew perished at sea.¹¹

Taken alone, the Swissair crash would seem to have no bearing on either FedEx or the DC-10/MD-11 fleet as a whole. Thus, the choice to situate this plane from this company in

a role which could backfire was probably not a big worry to movie makers or company executives at the time. If, however, they had known that the MD-11 would have three total-write-off crashes the year prior to the film's release, they might have changed their minds. The year 1999 was not a good one for the MD-11. First, on April 15, a Korea Air freighter went down immediately after taking off from the airport in Shanghai. All three crewmen were killed, as well as four on the ground. Investigators determined that the crash was due to the pilot's misunderstanding of a controller's command.¹²

Then, on August 22, a China Airlines landing in heavy weather at Hong Kong's new Lap Tok Airport, flipped on its back after hitting the runway hard, recalling the FedEx crash in Newark two years before. Only three lives were lost in this crash, due to the prompt response from airport emergency personnel.¹³ Finally, on October 17, a FedEx plane was again involved in a non-fatal cargo crash, this one at Subic Bay in the Philippines when it made an approach at a high rate of speed and overran the runway, ending up in the bay just beyond the threshold.¹⁴

A Tribute to Fallen Warriors: Heroic FedEx Employees

A family atmosphere prevailed during the early days of Federal Express, in part due to the wishes of its founder, Fred Smith, whose "People-Service-Profit" philosophy created an unusually harmonious environment for employees. Smith was also given to holding pep rallies for the company and typically he would give a rousing speech.¹⁵ Unfortunately, he was unable to do this after the near-tragedy of Flight 705 because his company was involved in an acrimonious struggle with the Air Line Pilots Association, which hoped to unionize FedEx's pilots. A company-sponsored event to fete the injured pilots at such a time might have been seen as cynically manipulative, so nothing came of the impulse.¹⁶ In that sense, by appearing in *Cast Away*, Smith may have been able to vicariously honor the real hero pilots in his company.

Finally, there is the matter of wings in *Cast Away*, specifically a set of stylized wings on a FedEx package that serves to open and close the film. Out on the expanses of a Texas prairie, an artist works in a converted barn, welding some new piece of art. A FedEx courier has pulled up and receives a package on which the artist has stenciled a pair of golden wings. The courier accepts the package and sends it on its journey to open the movie.

Later, the package washes ashore on Noland's deserted island, yet another refugee from the wreck. Because of the wings on the box, however, Noland refrains from opening it, keeping it perhaps because of its talismanic properties to spirit him away from his isolation.

Though he opens many other packages in search of food and tools, he leaves this one package unopened for the four years of his exile. Once he has been rescued, he is determined to return the box to the artist, and sets out to do so. Unfortunately, no one is home when he returns the package, so he leaves it on the porch with a note. Leaving the property, however, he asks directions from an attractive woman driving a pick-up truck, and when she pulls away, he sees that stylized wings are painting on the truck's tailgate. And there the movie ends, ambiguously leaving the audience wondering if a chance for new romance had been missed, the chance to bring closure to the saga surrounding the winged box squandered.

Mixed with sense of missed opportunity is the hope held by a future now full of possibilities, possibilities as endless as the expanse of Texas territory around Noland. The look in Noland's eye at this point recalls his defeat of despair back on the island, as he recounts to a friend once he is rescued:

And I know what I have to do now
I gotta keep breathing
Because tomorrow the sun will rise
Who knows what the tide could bring?

Notes

1. Alexander Pope, *Martinus Scriblerus on the Art of Sinking in Poetry*. Chap. xi, cited in Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 194.
2. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 196.
3. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 8-9.
4. Marx mentions *Walden*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Huckleberry Finn* in this respect. This was in relation to his extended discussion of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in which the hero, Prospero, is taken from society and deposited in nature (69).
5. Discussed in Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 194.
6. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 15. Here, Marx is quite taken by this observation about 19th-century American, noting another Melville work ("The Tartarus of Maids") in which the narrator happens upon a winter scene of a paper mill hidden among the mountains. Naturally he mentions *Walden Pond*, along with *The Education of Henry Adams*, then moves to the last century where *The Great Gatsby*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and "The Bear" qualify. His explicit list of authors includes Walt Whitman, Sarah Orne Jewett, Henry James, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Eugene O'Neill, Robert Frost, Hart Crane, T.S. Eliot, John Dos Passos, and Ernest Hemingway. Indeed, he writes, "it is difficult to think of a major American writer upon whom the image of the machine's sudden appearance in the landscape has not exercised its fascination" (15-16). That film incorporates the same "metaphoric design," then, is hardly surprising.
7. For details on these DC-10 crashes, see David Owen, *Air Accident Investigation*, 159-173.

8. This chilling account of the attack, including the cockpit voice recorder transcript, can be read at: <http://www.tailstrike.com/070494.htm>.
9. For a more detailed discussion of this premeditated attack, see Dave Hirschman, *Hijacked: The True Story of the Heroes of Flight 705* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997).
10. For a synopsis of all MD-11 crashes to date, including the crashes that follow in the text, see <http://airlinesafety.com/faq/faq9.htm>.
11. Further details about the crash read: About 56 minutes after departure while at flight level 330, the flightcrew declared "PAN PAN PAN" and advised air traffic control (ATC) of smoke in the cockpit. The flightcrew requested to divert to a convenient airport and was cleared direct to Halifax International Airport in Nova Scotia, Canada. About 11 minutes after the report of smoke, the airplane's electrical systems began to deteriorate. The flightcrew then declared an emergency, and communications between ATC and the flightcrew ceased shortly thereafter. Approximately 6 minutes later, at 2231 Atlantic daylight time, the airplane crashed into the Atlantic Ocean near Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia, Canada. All 14 crewmembers and 215 passengers were killed, and the airplane was destroyed. The Transportation Safety Board of Canada (TSB) is in charge of the accident investigation, and the National Transportation Safety Board is participating in accordance with the provisions of Annex 13 to the Convention on International Civil Aviation. See <http://airlinesafety.com/faq/faq9.htm>.
12. A report on the Korean Air crash reads:

The Seoul-bound plane, carrying 68 tons of cargo, crashed into an industrial development zone 10 kilometers (6 miles) southwest of Hongqiao airport. The plane plunged to the ground, plowing into housing for migrant workers and exploded. Weather at Shanghai around 16.00hours was: temperature: 13deg C; dew point 13deg C; 1014mB; wind South at 11mph; light rain. A two-year investigation led by the CAAC found that the co-pilot mistook a control tower command to fly at 1,500m for 1,500 feet and so put the aircraft into a steep dive from which he could not recover.

See <http://aviation-safety.net/database/1999/990415-0.htm>.
13. A report on the China Airlines crash reads:

China Airlines flight 642 departed Bangkok for a flight to Taipei via Hong Kong. Weather in the Hong Kong area was very poor with a severe tropical storm ('Sam') 50km NE of the airport and gale force winds and thunderstorms. Extra fuel was carried, because the crew intended to continue to Taipei, depending on weather at Hong Kong on arrival. Before the arrival of flight 642 four flights carried out missed approaches, five planes diverted and 12 planes landed successfully. Weather information obtained by the crew at 18.06 reported a 300deg wind at 35 kts and an RVR of 650m in heavy rain. The flight crew then prepared for a runway 25L ILS approach. Landing reference speed was calculated to be 152kts and the captain (pilot-in-command) would fly the approach at 170kts and would continue to land depending on a wind check on finals. At 18.41h, while flying the runway 25L ILS approach, weather was reported to the crew being 1600m visibility in the touchdown zone, wind 320deg/25kts gusting to 33kts. The aircraft was then cleared to land. At an altitude of 700ft prior to touchdown a further wind check was passed to the crew: 320deg/28kts gusting to 36kts. Maximum crosswind limit for the aircraft was 24kts. The pilot-in-command continued with the approach, disconnected the autopilot but left auto throttle engaged. The MD-11, with a weight very close to the maximum landing weight permitted, stabilized slightly low on the glide slope. At 50ft above the runway, upon power reduction to flight idle, the airspeed

decreased from 170 to 152kts. An attempt was made to flare in a slightly right wing down (less than 4 deg) attitude. The aircraft landed hard on its right main gear and the no.3 engine touched the runway. The right main gear separated and the right wing separated. The MD-11 then rolled inverted as it skidded off the runway in flames. It came to rest on a grass area next to the runway, 1100m from the runway threshold. The right wing was found on a taxiway 90m from the nose of the plane. The crash sequence in this case bears similarities to the FedEx MD-11 which also flipped upside down on landing at Newark.

See <http://aviation-safety.net/database/1999/990822-0.htm>.

14. A report on this FedEx flight reads:

FedEx flight 87 departed Shanghai at 21.16 for a flight to Subic Bay. The MD-11, named "Joshua", touched down at Subic Bay runway 07 at 23.15h. The plane rolled onto runway 25, hitting a concrete post and slamming into a wire fence before plunging into the bay. All of the plane was submerged, 10m offshore, except for the cockpit. The cargo reportedly consisted mainly of electronic goods and garments. N581FE was also part of the US Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF).

PROBABLE CAUSE: "The failure of the flight crew to properly address an erroneous airspeed indication during descent and landing, their failure to verify and select the correct airspeed by checking the standby airspeed indicator, and their failure to execute a missed approach. These failures led to an excessive approach and landing speed that resulted in a runway overshoot. Contributing factors to the accident were clogged pitot tube drain holes, the MD-11's insufficient alerting system for airspeed anomalies, and the failure of the SEL ELEV FEEL MAN and SEL FLAP LIM OVR D checklists to refer the crew to the standby airspeed indicator."

See <http://aviation-safety.net/database/1999/991017-0.htm>.

15. Dave Hirschman, *Hijacked: The True Story of the Heroes of Flight 705*, 28-29.

16. Hirschman, *Hijacked*, 213-214.