This Island Asia: The Crusonian Theme in Asian Film

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Although *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is oceans and centuries removed from the Pacific Rim, Asian film pays continual homage to Defoe’s tale. Hiroshi Teshigahara’s *Woman in the Dunes* (1964; *Suna no onna 砂の女*), Hirokazu Koreeda’s 串木裕 and *Nobody Knows* (2004; *Dare mo shiranai 誰も知らない*), and Lee Hey-jun’s 이해준 *Castaway on the Moon* (2009; *Kimssi pyoryugi 김씨표류기*) exemplify this unlikely preoccupation. All three films reconceive *Robinson Crusoe* in response to contemporary social and philosophical considerations, transforming Crusoe’s unbridgeable physical exile into an equally unbridgeable existential exile.

Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* is the eternal allegory because solitude is the eternal condition. As there are a great many ways to be alone, so there are a great many ways to read and reconstruct *Robinson Crusoe*, and we have by no means exhausted them since the great book’s publication in 1719. Defoe’s novel stems from accounts of actual shipwreck and survival, but the tale endures as a mechanism of certain perennial questions. What varieties of loneliness does the bearded beachcomber embody? What truths of human nature does he reveal? Upon what shore is he stranded? A physical shore, to begin with, belonging to a world that had suddenly expanded far beyond the perimeter of Western civilization and once again come to include a vast wilderness in which it was possible to get lost; a religious shore as well, signaling the solitude of the Protestant conscience in its strict relation to God and rejection of communal professions and identities. As the Protestant soul was islanded, so poor Robinson Crusoe was islanded, his condition a commentary on the inappositeness of other people in the Protestant scheme. It was a brave thing to stand alone in the titanic glare of God; so Robinson Crusoe stood bravely alone, proffering thrift, industry, and steadfastness as his only possible apologia.

In the twentieth century, our solitude is existential. The world teems with people, but the logic of connection has broken down. Postmodern man
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May aggregate anthropologically, economically, politically, and sexually, but never without an ironic sense of accident and contingency, of non-inscription in the stars. Sacramental relations have become contractual; contractual relations have become temporary. In this context, the desert island scenario persists—indeed flourishes—but the literal island has become a figurative island and the ocean wastes have been ironized as impasses of a different sort. We are surrounded by others, and yet no less marooned than Crusoe: hermits of the high-rise apartment, the office cubicle, the baffled marriage. The mastermind of this new Crusonianism was the British novelist J.G. Ballard (1930–2009); the initiating work was Concrete Island (1974). Nodding to the dehumanized automotive universe of its predecessor Crash (1973), the novel concerns a traffic accident victim stranded in a grassy, refuse-strewn divide surrounded by impassable multilane superhighways. He is shipwrecked at the very center of the urban order, the passing cars as implacable and ceaseless as the pounding surf that imprisons Crusoe. With equal mordancy, Ballard returned to the desert island scenario in his 1975 novel High-Rise, which depicts the reversion to Lord of the Flies-style tribalism in a London apartment complex; in his 1994 novel Rushing to Paradise, about an analogous reversion on a Pacific island occupied by fanatical environmental activists; and in his 2006 novel Super-Cannes, about this same reversion in a gated community in post-everything France. Ballard’s implicit contentions are: 1) Postmodern man is a lonely Crusoe marooned on the island of his own alienation, 2) In the spirit of William Golding rather than Defoe, postmodern man revels in the rediscovery of ancient blood lusts, 3) For all its gleam of glass and steel, the postmodern age will be acutely savage.
Crusoe has particular resonance and currency in Asia. The marooned sailor is a readymade symbol, fittingly Western, for a pervasive sense of infra-social exile, of shipwreck amid the rebarbative and alien reality of the postmodern social order. Crusonian themes and allusions particularly crop up in discussions of the Japanese—and now apparently pan-Asian—phenomenon of the *hikikomori* ひきこもり. The *hikikomori* are, of course, young people who seclude themselves in their apartments and bedrooms for years on end, subsisting on a diet of whatever their parents leave at the foot of their locked doors, much as Crusoe initially subsists on whatever the surf washes up or whatever falls from the trees. In Asian film, Crusoe recurs as a haunting intimation, a kind of patron ghost, of the new social order. Hiroshi Teshigahara’s 勅使河原宏 *Woman in the Dunes* (1964; *Suna no onna* 砂の女), Hirokazu Koreeda’s 是枝裕和 *Nobody Knows* (2004; *Dare mo shiranai* 誰も知らない), and Lee Hey-jun’s 이해준 *Castaway on the Moon* (2009; *Kimssi pyoryugi* 김씨표류기) reinvent the Crusonian elements with particular ingenuity (suggestions of shipwreck aside, *Woman in the Dunes* and *Nobody Knows* are masterpieces of world cinema). The three films mark the tradition of Defoe but equally the sub-tradition of Ballard. These are not tales of literal shipwreck but of social and spiritual shipwreck amid an archipelago largely internal.

Based on the 1962 novel and subsequent screenplay by Kōbō Abe 安部公房 (1924–93), *Woman in the Dunes* may be the best Japanese film not directed by Akira Kurosawa. Jumpei Niki (played by Eiji Okada 岡田英次), a citified schoolteacher and amateur entomologist, has spent the day collecting bugs amid the shifting dunes of a seaside outpost. Needing a place to sleep, he accosts a passing rustic. The locals lower him into a craterous sandpit, at the bottom of which a nubile widow (played by Kyōko Kishida 岸田今日子) keeps an old shack. His hostess has conjugal plans, while the villagers scheme to replenish the local population and keep the ever-encroaching dunes at bay. Unable to climb the steep, friable walls, Jumpei, like one of his own jarred bugs, becomes a prisoner. He earns his daily rations by endlessly shoveling sand, which the villagers hoist by rope and sell to a cement factory. As the years pass, Jumpei, like Crusoe, resigns himself to imprisonment. His spirit is broken, but also remade. He sinks mentally and physically into the endless drudgery, but he sheds the guise of the urban ninny and becomes more elemental, rooted, and manly.

The Crusoe motif is plain enough. Its features are the sand, the heat, the lengthening beard, the tattered clothes, the long-nursed schemes of escape, the gradual mastery of the physical environment, and the descent into primal routine and animal stillness. Jumpei eventually takes up sexually with the widow. This development merely amplifies certain sub-
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It is not outrageous to notice that Crusoe calls Friday a “comely handsome fellow” (162), confesses that he “really began to love the creature” (168), and admits to pangs of “jealousy” at the thought of Friday returning to his own people (177). This warmth effloresces as heterosexual romance in later shipwreck narratives like Melville’s *Typee* (1846) and H.G. Wells’ *Time Machine* (1895) and climaxes (so to speak) in overtly erotic films like Lina Wertmüller’s *Swept Away* (1974), Enzo D’Ambrosio’s *Emmanuelle on Taboo Island* (1976), and Randa Ral Kleiser’s *Blue Lagoon* (1980). In his novel *Foe* (1986), a retelling of *Robinson Crusoe* in the rather dry spirit of post-structural theory, J.M. Coetzee evades the homoerotic problem by inserting a European woman into the ménage.

If it hews closely to the externals of the Crusonian parable, *Woman in the Dunes* introduces an unfamiliar social and political gist. Residing a mere bus ride from whatever city Jumpei occupies, the villagers have no share in the comforts of modernization. No hand is extended to them; no thought spared them in their war against nature. Jumpei himself exhibits the kind of condescension that is presumably the social default. During his first evening in the widow’s house, before the reality of his situation has become clear, he is imperative and self-impressed, his ego expanding at the

Hiroshi Teshigahara’s *Woman in the Dunes* (1964) exemplifies the Crusonian erotic.
opportunity to lord over an impoverished rustic. He exhibits neither sympathy nor gratitude. Having been marooned beyond the perimeter of civilization, Jumpei shares the collective blame that civilization extends no farther. He has created or has at least allowed to fester the savage order in which he is trapped, and his imprisonment therefore has an aspect of comeuppance. Abe makes this grievance against Jumpei and his class explicit: “But from the standpoint of the villagers, they themselves were the ones who had been abandoned. Naturally there was no reason why they should be under obligation to the outside world. So if it were he who caused them injury, their fangs should accordingly be bared to him” (223).

The film’s chief alignment, however, is with the romantic primitivism that pervaded the Crusonian tradition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and upended Defoe’s Augustan insistence on civility, productivity, and order. Following Abe, Teshigahara conceives the desert island as a corrective to the deracination of modernity. Like Ballard’s protagonists, Jumpei is emasculated, pedantic, and whiny: a “man of suburbanized soul” in the phrase of Ballard’s Super-Cannes (2000, 263). His self-important weekend bug collecting parodies true union with the earth. Unlike the villagers, he knows nothing of nature’s power and implacability. The film specifically accuses him of naivety and dulled survival instinct, the urbanite’s assumption that civilization has no perimeter and that there is nothing to fear even as cackling rustics lower one into the maw of a giant sandpit. Jumpei must learn that civilization is not the rule but the exception. In this respect, he is a version of the hapless weekend adventurers in James Dickey’s Deliverance (1970), who are likewise punished for the hubris of assuming that nature has become a toothless playground. Like Deliverance, Woman in the Dunes brings home the shocking thoroughness of this savagery in a scene of rape. The villagers don hideous masks and gather at the rim of the sandpit. Jeering and drunken, they call down that Jumpei can earn his freedom by raping the widow in plain view. There ensues a messy and inclusive tussle that leaves Jumpei sobbing pathetically. The devastating realization is not that he has betrayed his humanity, but that it was such a flimsy construct to begin with.

The film’s faith in the redemptive re-embrace of nature is conventionally romantic, but its conception of nature is eccentric. The renewal of the natural order typically involves either sensual abandon (e.g., Typee) or feral abandon (e.g., Lord of the Flies). In both cases, the desert island represents liberation from social constriction and the reflux of primal instinct. Woman in the Dunes conceives nature as a redemptive but unusually harsh mistress. Toward the end of the movie, the weather turns cold and the widow is endangered by a difficult pregnancy. The pregnancy signals Jumpei’s reintegration into the natural pattern, but also nature’s
pitilessness. The dunes are the antithesis of the “blue lagoon”: endless in their invasion, erosion, and desiccation, eternal in their monstrosity. Though Jumpei and the widow enjoy a steamy consummation, the lesson of the dunes is not ecstatic liberation. The dunes are to be endured in humility. The staggering inhumanity of their natural rhythm is to be wondered at and respected. In this divergence from romantic pattern, Woman in the Dunes seems very Japanese and perhaps very post-war Japanese: stoic rather than exuberant, willingly constrained rather than willfully free.

If Woman in the Dunes is darkly and intensely lyrical, Koreeda’s Nobody Knows is quizzical and light-saturated (a paradoxical element of its tragedy). It seems to ponder the physical world with the wide-eyed wonder of the children whom it depicts. Based on actual events, Nobody Knows tells the story of four siblings abandoned in a small Tokyo apartment and forced to fend for themselves in a grim parody of both the Crusonian scenario and the hikikomori phenomenon. Conditions gradually degenerate, and the children must hunt and scavenge amid the detritus of modern Tokyo. The children are shipwrecked on the rocks of adult indifference, and their apartment becomes an island no less feral than the real thing, replete with death and burial. In this sense, the film is a gentle and mournful response to Lord of the Flies. While Lord of the Flies insists that the feral is our natural condition, to which we return with a certain sense of primal liberation and general homecoming, Nobody Knows insists on the reverse: that our nature is civilized and social. The children struggle to maintain order but lack the wherewithal to keep house for themselves. The implication is that even children—those latent savages of Golding’s nightmare—are essentially creatures of the social contract. Bereaved of love and connection, they are lost and saddened. Their human nature is baffled. The children’s abandonment, then, has a terrible tragic force. We recognize that they suffer an irreparable and central damage, and that nothing—no wakened tribal instinct, no ecstatic Dionysian rite—compensates for this loss.

If Woman in the Dunes foreshadows Ballard’s Concrete Island by situating its “desert island” on a bus route, Nobody Knows intensifies this irony by situating its own desert island in the heart of Tokyo, the modern metropolis par excellence. Koreeda ref igures the oceanic gulf that imprisons Crusoe as the thinness of four apartment walls. Though the children’s rescue could be effected by a mere knock on the door or by a concerned call to the authorities, the impasse cannot be bridged, rescue is inconceivable: the children are as thoroughly castaway as the lads of Lord of the Flies. The potential for moral histrionics and political outrage is obviously immense. Handling the same script, Hollywood would have wallowed in moral self-approval, ending with a statistical placard reminding us that “more
needs to be done.” Koreeda is not interested in demonstrating his liberal *bona fides*. Resisting the temptation to lecture, he maintains an understated compassionate lucidity throughout. This is the work of a moralist who suffers all, condemns nothing, while Hollywood, especially in pursuit of Oscar, condemns all, suffers nothing.

*Castaway on the Moon*, written and directed by Korean newcomer Lee Hey-jun (b. 1973), is a comic-melancholic version of *Concrete Island*. The protagonist is Seung-Keun (played by Jung Jae-Young 정재영), a suicidal salaryman who has lost his girlfriend and run up $200,000 in debt. He throws himself from a Han River bridge, but even simple self-extinction is beyond him. He washes up on a wooded islet that supports one of the bridge’s concrete pylons, with the modern apartment towers of Seoul visible on the far side of the river. A second attempt at suicide (necktie, sudden diarrhea) is no more successful than the first. The film then shifts into Crusonian gear: Seung-Keun gathers utensils from the detritus of the shore, assembles a makeshift home in the carcass of a duck-shaped paddleboat, and tries his hand at fishing and hunting. He eventually graduates to farming, utilizing seeds extracted from bird dung. An unopened pouch of noodle flavoring initiates a life-reaffirming mission: to grow his own corn, produce his own cornmeal noodles, and scratch his infinite itch for a bowl of *jajangmyeon* 자장면. Shunning a steady procession of passing pleasure
boats, he embraces the life of the castaway and his emotional wounds begin to heal.

*Castaway on the Moon* would be a lightweight Ballard rehash (“Concrete Island meets *Tampopo*” as the Hollywood pitchmen might put it) but for the novelty that Seung-Keun is being watched through a telephoto lens by Jung-Yeon (played by Jung Ryeo-Won 정려원), a *hikikomori* who leads her own castaway life in one of the apartment towers across the river. The film’s depiction of *hikikomori* reclusion is genuinely disturbing. Far from being the kind of bedroom *philosophe* that the media likes to valorize, Jung-Yeon is an *agoraphobe* and obsessive-compulsive whose room is filled with bags of garbage (recalling Crusoe’s hoarding tendency) and whose days are divided between online shopping fantasies and a strict regimen of walking in place. She sleeps in a closet lined with bubble-wrap and will not venture from the house without a homemade hazmat suit. Spying through her camera—shades of Crusoe and his inseparable “prospective glass” (130)—she begins to keep a photographic record of Seung-Keun’s mock-heroic efforts to domesticate his island. This exercise in human sympathy thaws her frozen emotions (symbolized by her obsession with the desolate moon). She and Seung-Keun eventually breach their respective solitudes and begin to communicate in proverbial fashion: he scrapes words in the sand, while she places messages in bottles and drops them from the bridge. Having found its way back to conventionality, the film proceeds to its romantic denouement and the presumptive resolution of psychological problems that would normally require years of therapy.

*Castaway on the Moon* derives further novelty from the obstinacy of its social revulsion and rejection. Crusonian castaways conventionally flirt with this rejection, but always with a degree of moral anxiety, and in the end they tend to re-embrace the social instinct (the television show *Lost*—an epic encapsulation of the Crusonian tradition—tirelessly revolves this ambivalence). Initiating this dynamic, Crusoe entertains the notion that he “might be more happy in this solitary condition” than he would be amid “all the pleasures of the world,” but he immediately checks this dangerous drift into solipsism: “How canst thou be such a hypocrite, (said I, even audibly) to pretend to be thankful for a condition, which however thou may’st endeavour to be contented with, thou would’st rather pray heartily to be deliver’d from; so I stopp’d there . . .” (90–91). For Crusoe, the social bond is not ours to sever. We are duty-bound to the social order sanctified by God and nature. Later castaways likewise uphold the social principle, though the rationale is psychological (“Man needs man” in the formulation of Tarkovsky’s Crusonian classic *Solaris*) or subtly political. In *Castaways on the Moon*, this moral logic is reversed. Not abandonment, but return represents the irrational kink, the illicit temptation. This might seem to
restate the old romantic primitivism; in fact, it represents a rather novel dystopianism, a conceptualization of the Crusonian island as mediocre antidote to an even worse city.

Structurally, *Castaway on the Moon*, like *Woman in the Dunes*, belongs to the school of the Crusonian erotic. In *Castaway on the Moon*, the substitution of a tentative flirtation—really a mutually therapeutic sympathy—for the standard sexual idyll renders it demure in the extreme, but this is part of the point. Seung-Keun and Jung-Yeon are too damaged to entertain a higher order impulse like sexual desire; their mere willingness to sustain themselves and reengage the world represents a triumph of feeling and hope. Likewise, their psychological and emotional wounds entail a thorough infantilization (note Jung-Yeon’s Chuck Taylors, her cluttered kid’s room) that precludes adult sexuality. When Seung-Keun flaunts his member on the beach, Jung-Yeon recoils from her camera in bewilderment and comments, “This alien is crazy” (another sign of her infantilization is her initial assumption that Jumpei is a stranded extraterrestrial). At least in novelistic form, *Woman in the Dunes* likewise subverts its own erotic template by afflicting Jumpei with a lingering venereal disease that renders him intermittently impotent. Though he manages to impregnate the widow, their relations are not exactly torrid (the notoriously racy film takes a liberty in this regard). By contrast, the premodern villagers, as we have seen, demonstrate a perverse sexual interest, while the widow is eager enough to play a sexually subservient role. In Eliotic fashion, then, the Korean film and the Japanese novel associate the modern order with stunted sexuality, suggesting a crook in the order of things, an underlying ailment.

*Castaway on the Moon* seems to end on a note of uplift, but it subtly belies itself. A clean-up crew forcibly evicts Seung-Keun and deposits him...
In *Castaway on the Moon*, a hikikomori leads a marooned existence in a Seoul apartment tower.

on the sidewalk to fend for himself as a filthy vagabond. Having witnessed the scene from her apartment, Jung-Yeon races through the streets (shades of *Mrs. Robinson*) to find Seung-Keun before the urban bustle swallows him. She overtakes the bus he has boarded and the film ends with teary recognition. The film wants to suggest a resolution to its own problem, but it is intellectually honest enough to remind us that the lovers face every conceivable social and emotional obstacle. The horrified stares of the other passengers—the characters’ utter bedragglement, utter lack of social hold—underscores the insurmountable challenges ahead. Merely to ask “What next?” is to dissolve the film’s moment of euphoria. As it parodies the desert island scenario throughout, *Castaway on the Moon* seems to parody the convention of the happy ending, emphasizing the preposterous, delusional self-enclosure of the proverbial kiss that cues the credits. We are to understand that such kisses hold the world at bay for only a moment, especially in downtown Seoul.

**References**
