SHIPWRECKS AND DESERT ISLANDS: ECOLOGY AND NATURE –
A CASE STUDY OF HOW REALITY TV AND FICTIONAL FILMS
FRAME REPRESENTATIONS OF ISLANDS

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While fiction film remains more prescribed and predetermined, both in the ways the actors perform their lonely island roles and in terms of audience engagement with their troubles, reality television posits a more direct experience of being on a deserted island. Physical and mental games are used to test the mettle of the performers against a backdrop of an exotic isolated island, a space which remains a touristic nirvana for most audiences. Unlike the literary classic Robinson Crusoe, however, the island merely presents the illusion of isolation, with a film crew and sometimes “visiting natives” tempting the hungry inhabitants or playing some other games on them. Meanwhile, Hollywood films like Cast Away (2000), The Beach (2000) or even The Truman Show (1999) follow a similar if more self-contained formula, providing a deep if somewhat unsubtle ecological critique of conspicuous consumption.

In an episode of the reality television series Treasure Island (RTÉ 2002), one of the contestants speaks about “poor Tom Hanks” who endured a desert island alone for over four years. In contrast with the fictional scenario, he concluded: “It’s not so bad here on Treasure Island.” The formula for this highly commercialized docu-soap – riding on the success of “Reality TV” concepts like Big Brother, I’m a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here and other island-based series – is a psychological/voyeuristic exploration of how groups and individuals interact and compete in a controlled environment over a period of time. I will explore how fictional film remains more prescribed and predetermined, both in the ways the actors perform their lonely island roles and the audience engage with their troubles, while reality television posits a more direct experience of being on a deserted island. Physical and mental games are used to test the mettle of the

performers against a backdrop of an exotic isolated island, a space which remains a touristic nirvana for most audiences. Unlike the literary classic *Robinson Crusoe*, however, the island merely presents the illusion of isolation, with a film crew and sometimes “visiting natives” tempting the hungry inhabitants or playing some other games with them. Meanwhile, Hollywood films like *Cast Away* (2000), *The Beach* (2000) or even *The Truman Show* (1998) and their useful DVD bonus features follow a similar, if more self-contained, formula, providing a deep, if somewhat unsubtle, ecological critique of conspicuous consumption which can be measured against *Treasure Island’s* televisual game playing.

Reality TV programming has evolved as a product of, and has been fuelled by, what Biressi and Nunn call a “therapeutic culture” which consists in framing a subjective experience and in eroding any boundary between public and private evocation of identity and community. Such programmes, they argue, provide valuable insight into the desires, fears and aspirations of their contestants and, by extension, of their viewers. Meanwhile, the documentary pact with audiences is based on the false premise that documentary can tell the truth in the first place. Audiences thus apply a heuristic measure across a fact/fiction continuum in their engagement with factual programming and have developed varying viewing strategies for different types of genres within factual television.

Slavoj Žižek suggests that the wreck of the *Titanic* made a tremendous impact on public consciousness not just because of the immediate material dimensions of the catastrophe but because of its symbolic over-determination as an iconic embodiment of