

# The Use of Anthropomorphic Agent in Movie: Case study of *Cast Away* (2000)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of a Hollywood blockbuster movie called *Cast Away* (2000). The analysis is based on two anthropomorphism theories called *Familiar Thesis* and *Comfort Thesis*. Categorized under adventure drama, *Cast Away* (2000) depicts a story of a Federal Express executive named Chuck Noland who survives a plane crash and is stranded on an uninhabited island in the Pacific for four years. Cut off from the modern world, Chuck adapts to the harsh environment of the tropical island by salvaging FedEx packages washed up on the beach. One of the packages contains a Wilson volleyball which later in the plot becomes Chuck's companion. This study employs a scene-by-scene analysis approach to understand how anthropomorphism theories are exploited and presented in the plot. From this, several important scenes that promote the meaning of life and social relationships have been discovered. In this regard, the study concludes that the Wilson volleyball is not just an advertising gimmick but an anthropomorphic agent that helps provide companionship, care, comfort and motivation which are essential for human survival.

**Keywords:** *Anthropomorphism, Familiar Thesis, Comfort Thesis, Cast Away*

## INTRODUCTION

Why do we sometimes feel afraid particularly when entering a dark basement area? Why do we feel that a portrait of the deceased is staring at us? Why do children claim that there is a monster hiding under the bed? These are some of the horror scenes depicted in movies. For example, in *Psycho* (1960), the director; Alfred Hitchcock creates a chilling suspense by forcing audiences to feel suspicious and uneasy throughout the movie. According to Barnes (2003), being suspicious about someone or something is a natural tendency which can help humans learn how to survive and prosper. It may also be relevant as this tendency can be related to the anthropomorphism theory.



Figure 1 A scene in *Psycho* (1960) movie showing the mysterious killer

## ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Anthropomorphism can be explained as a natural perception which allows us to perceive or regard a nonhuman or inanimate object as a human being. However, this perception usually depends on specific traits and form as to whether or not the physical appearance of the object or form inclines towards humans, animals, insects or even non-living things. For example, some people would perceive human faces in unusual places like in clouds or would talk to a cat as if it can understand human language. This phenomenon can be attributed to the *Familiarity Thesis* and the *Comfort Thesis* which are introduced by Stewart Guthrie (1993).

The *Familiarity Thesis* states that no matter how hard we try to explain an unknown phenomenon, in the end we would relate it to ourselves because “these are the easiest or most reliable” sources (p.65). From this theory, it then leads to two outcomes; the *Confusion* state and *Analogy* state. The *Confusion* state assumes that anthropomorphism perception is spontaneous, accidental and indiscriminate. For example, when children draw the sun or the moon, usually they would add big eyes and a mouth because they thought that the two are living beings. Similarly, the *Confusion* state can also be seen in the daily lives of tribal people. According to Rajendra K. Sharma (2004, p.164), many tribal people believe that supernatural power exists behind “high mountains, big river, tall trees and epidemics”. For example, the Sherpas living in Nepal believe that there is a supernatural being that guards the mountain region of Himalaya. Hence, they would perform “Puja” which is a ritual ceremony to seek blessing from the guardian before they attempt to enter or climb the mountains. On the other hand, the *Analogy* state assumptions are intended, planned and discriminate. This view usually exists in ancient mythology which states that there is a powerful humanlike agent behind spectacular events such as thunder, lightning and storm. For example, in Greek Mythology, Zeus is regarded as the god of sky and thunder (Loewen, 1999). Some people also believe that natural disasters are forms of punishment for the sins created by humans. These perceptions hold a thought which many people are already familiar with.

The *Comfort Thesis* assumes that “discovering humanity around us necessarily makes us feel better than not discovering humanity” (Guthrie, 1993, p.72). Carl DiSalvo and Francine Gemperle (2003) state that humans will feel comfortable only around other human races. It is speculated to be the reason why it is comforting to be around friends or family members than being alone with strangers. For instance, robots with arms, legs and face are not created for mechanical reason only but also as a way to appeal and facilitate user interaction with the robot. However, if the robot’s appearance is too close to humans, then it will cause discomfort. Scholars refer to this cognitive effect as the “Uncanny valley” effect (Masahiro Mori, 2005)

## CASE STUDY OF THE WILSON VOLLEYBALL IN CAST AWAY (2000)

In order to further understand how anthropomorphism theories (Familiarity Thesis and Comfort Thesis) are put into effects, the researchers examined a blockbuster movie, *Cast Away* (2000). Directed by Robert Zemeckis, *Cast Away* (2000) is a drama which casts two of the famous Hollywood actors, Tom Hanks and Helen Hunt. The following text provides the summary of the movie.

### Scene-by-scene Analysis

In the first chapter, a scene shows a Federal Express system analyst named Chuck Noland (played by Tom Hanks) receives an urgent call on Christmas Eve. There is a problem at a depot in Malaysia and Chuck is summoned by his superior to solve the matter. This situation puts Chuck in a dilemma between his career and his relationship with Kelly Freyers (played by Helen Hunt). Reluctantly, Chuck decides to postpone his proposal to Kelly until New Years' Eve. In order not to disappoint Kelly, Chuck patiently waits for the right time to propose to her. In a scene at the airport, Chuck and Kelly exchange Christmas gifts. Chuck receives an old pocket watch with a picture of Kelly while Kelly receives a personal planner with a leather cover. Kelly accepts the planner although she is hoping for something more special. Chuck knows that Kelly is a bit frustrated but he has already set up a plan. Chuck gives Kelly a farewell hug, gets out of the car and walks towards the Federal Express cargo plane. Suddenly, Kelly points out that Chuck forgets to return the car key (which he has used to open the gift wrapper). Chuck turns around and returns the key. At this point he takes out a small package and hands it to Kelly. Kelly is excited because she can guess what is inside the small package. Chuck tells Kelly not to open the package until he returns home.

In the next chapter, a scene depicts the turning point of Chuck's life. On the trip, Chuck encounters a life-and-death situation when his cargo plane is blown off-course due to a severe storm and as a result crashes in the Pacific Ocean. Miraculously, Chuck manages to hold himself to a life raft. The next morning, he wakes up and finds himself on a beach in a tropical island. In his first day, Chuck attempts to look for other survivors but all of them are dead. He begins wandering around the island but soon realises that he is completely alone. Overwhelmed by the situation, Chuck strategizes a plan. At first, he draws a big 'Help' sign on the beach with his bare feet hoping that it will attract any passer-by. Unfortunately, because of the high tide, the 'Help' sign gets washed off. In his second attempt, Chuck tries to build a raft from the remnants of his life-raft. However, the surf is so powerful that it pushes the raft back to the beach. Chuck decides to pick FedEx packages washed up on the beach. He then opens the packages one by one and finds a broken pager, a pair of ice-skating boots, a Wilson volleyball and a dress. However, Chuck does not open the last package that has a wing symbol printed on it. With no means of communication, Chuck finally comes to realise that he has little chance of returning home. He calls off the day and begins improvising some of the items for survival, for instance he uses the blade of the ice-skating boots as a knife and the fabric from the dress as fishing net. In one of the scenes when he attempts to make fire, Chuck accidentally cuts himself. In anger, he picks up a volleyball (which happens to be near him), and palms it with his bleeding hand. Chuck then washes his wound and goes back to the place where he had accidentally cut his hand. At this point, he notices that the volleyball has a blood stain of his palm. He stares at the volleyball and notices that the shape of the blood stains looks like a human face. Chuck scrapes the blood stains to make eyes, a nose and a mouth, puts the volleyball on a tree stump and continues to make fire. At this point, Chuck looks at the volleyball (which now has a human face) and jokingly asks if it has a match by any chance. Suddenly, smoke starts to appear. Chuck gets excited and tries it for a second time and manages to set fire. On that night, Chuck celebrates his victory. While resting and eating, he begins talking to the volleyball. Chuck calls it Wilson since it is the brand name of the volleyball. From that day on, Chuck becomes 'friends' with the volleyball.

In the next chapter, a scene depicts Chuck's life after four years being stranded on the island. With darker skin tone, thin body, long hair and beard, Chuck is barely recognisable. In addition, Chuck can also catch fish easily with a spear and knows the island like the back of his hand. Despite his new appearance, Chuck has not forgotten about home. In his final attempt to leave the island, Chuck sets off

to the open sea on a raft which he builds from the wreckage of the Federal Express cargo plane. He brings along Wilson with him on the journey. While trying to stabilise his raft, a big wave appears and washes away Wilson. Chuck tries to retrieve the volleyball but the strong wave pushes it further away. Chuck weeps as if he has lost his own child. Later, a cargo ship spots Chuck lying on the raft, picks him up and returns him back to his hometown.

In the final chapter, Chuck returns to his hometown but is heartbroken after knowing that his almost fiancé is married with a child and has a new life. Despite the news, Chuck manages to overcome his depression and faces the reality. One night, Chuck calls Kelly to ask about his car which has been left at Kelly's house during the time he went missing. Kelly then tells him to pick it up himself. He then takes a taxi and arrives at Kelly's house. Kelly greets him and invites him inside. In the scene at the living room scene, they awkwardly exchange conversation asking about each other's life. Chuck asks about his car and Kelly tells him that it is at the garage. Then Kelly hands over the car key to Chuck. Realising that his relationship with Kelly is at the end, Chuck says thank and bids farewell to her. He then enters his car and drives away. Suddenly, Kelly runs out in the rain and shouts "Chuck" several times. Chuck immediately stops to reverse his car. He gets out and runs towards Kelly. They both unleash their feelings by hugging and kissing. After a while in the rain, Chuck ushers Kelly into his car and persuades her that she has to go home to her family. Kelly seems confused but later realises the truth and agrees with him. At that point, both Chuck and Kelly understand that they are not destined to be together and therefore should move on with their lives.

In the ending scene, Chuck travels to the South to deliver a package with a symbol that he has kept while he was stranded on the island. It belongs to a lovely woman. Chuck feels that perhaps the package is as a sign from Heaven and that the woman might be the one he has been waiting for all his life. The scene ends with Chuck standing in the middle of a crossroad, leaving a question about the choice he is going to take.

## DISCUSSION

In general, the plot of *Cast Away* (2000) centres on various themes. Vince Leo (2001) states that 'time matter' is one of the themes that the director Robert Zemeckis prioritises. He gives few examples that illustrate the importance of time. First, Federal Express is a courier company that promises every package to be delivered on time; Second, Chuck Noland is a Federal Express system analyst whose job is to measure how long a package takes to be delivered; Third, Chuck receives a pocket watch from his girlfriend on Christmas Eve; and Fourth, Chuck counts the days by scribing on a cave wall. In summary, these scenes stress the importance of time as represented in the film. Although Leo's review may yield some interesting findings, in this paper, the researchers offer a theme that is more relevant to the issue of anthropomorphism. In this case, the researchers are focusing on the two props that are used in the film; the pocket watch and the Wilson volleyball. They argue that these two items provide what have been stressed by scholars as sociality motivation. According to Epley et al (2007, p.875), sociality motivation "increases the tendency to anthropomorphize nonhuman agent by increasing the tendency to actively search for sources of social connection in one's environment." In this sense, the act of anthropomorphizing nonhuman things is an approach which lonely and deserted person often resorts to. This method may help alleviate social pain and allow the person to survive.

As mentioned earlier in the plot summary, Chuck receives a pocket watch as a gift from Kelly. Although it functions as a time indicator, it is also learned that Chuck anthropomorphizes the pocket watch to remember Kelly. There is a scene showing Chuck pointing a flashlight at the pocket watch. He keeps switching it on and off. In this scene, time does not really matter anymore since the watch is already broken. What Chuck has on his mind is Kelly. Kelly's picture is illuminated every time Chuck points the flash light towards the pocket watch. He switches on and off, just to check whether Kelly is still there. It is argued that this scene exemplifies how the *Comfort Thesis* actually works. When Kelly's picture is illuminated, Chuck feels comforted. When it is dimmed, Chuck feels uneasy. Next, the second object which has a profound role in the movie is the Wilson volleyball.

George David Swanson (2002) in his article *The Wilson Effect: A Case for Transpersonal Healing Properties of Placebo* interprets the role of Wilson the volleyball as a transpersonal placebo. A placebo, according to Swanson, is a kind of treatment for certain ailments. In the case of *Cast Away*, Wilson the volleyball helps Chuck to survive on a deserted island by providing companionship and comfort. In this regard, Wilson the volleyball is a metaphor which reflects Chuck's fate. In an earlier scene, Chuck ignores the volleyball because he sees it as pointless since he cannot play it by himself. However, this can also be interpreted as, "what good is Chuck if he is the only human being on the island?" In this case, the volleyball is seen as useless since it has no hands and legs to move. This is a strong metaphor which suggests that Chuck, like the volleyball, has no means to leave the island. However, Chuck is in a more pitiful state than Wilson the volleyball because as a real human being, he needs social companionship. As a modern man, Chuck finds it extremely difficult to adapt to the unfamiliar surroundings. Wilson, on the other hand, is just a figment of a real person. Having said this, Chuck eventually realises that Wilson the volleyball is the only motivation he needs to stay alive. Therefore, he pretends that Wilson the volleyball can listen and respond to whatever he says. This strange behaviour helps Chuck through the course of his survival. In other words, the tendency to anthropomorphize has in some ways saved Chuck's life.



Figure 2 A frame showing Chuck and Wilson the volleyball



Figure 3 A frame showing Chuck talking to Wilson



Figure 4 A frame showing Chuck drawing a human face using his blood stain

## CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the movie *Cast Away* (2000) has a very interesting plot which describes how the tendency to anthropomorphize emerges under critical circumstances such as in the absence of humanity, being lonely or deserted. In the analysis of *Cast Away* (2000), it is suggested that humans are social creatures, hence they require social connection (communication, companionship, attention and affection) to stay alive. As shown in the middle of the movie, Wilson the volleyball captures the audiences' attention for its role in supporting the lead actor. This depiction leads to the question of how a non-living thing can become a significant element in the storytelling. While some scholars state that the use of Wilson the volleyball is an unpaid advertisement (Maynard and Scala, 2006), it can also be argued that there is a powerful social message embedded in the movie. In short, the movie has successfully made audiences aware of the importance of anthropomorphism perception in relation to human life.

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