

Two Perspectives on the Tyranny of Time: Polychronicity and Monochronicity as Depicted in *Cast Away*

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When there's no tomorrow. (FedEx slogan)

Time. We try to manage it, control it, schedule it, save it, spend it, but one conclusion remains: most people say that they never have enough of it. Such pressures are thought to exact a significant toll on the quality of men's and women's lives in Western cultures. In order to address their needs, products such as day planners, palm organizers, calendars, and beepers for children are available in various low- and high-tech formats. Instant deliveries, overnight sales, online markets, and various means of communication never let us be out of touch. Such innovations can be called "the matter of time."

Theorists who examine modern American culture propose that social meanings are attached to and communicated through various aspects of daily consumption, through our products, our themes, our slogans, and our entertainment (Hirschman, "Ideology" 345). Novels, television programs, and motion pictures have been suggested as additional vehicles that transmit and reflect cultural values and patterns of behavior (Jowett and Linton 38; Hirschman, "Ideology" 345; Hirschman and Stern 576; Holbrook and Grayson 375; O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice 297). Such connections often involve the use of cultural ideologies as they act as cultural agents

in shaping our everyday lives as consumers (Levy 53; Mick 203).

Structural-syntactical analysis is suggested by Hirschman ("Ideology" 344) as an interpretive approach that can be used when analyzing a consumption ideology embedded within television programs, such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, in which signs and systems that relate them must be decoded. Structuralism considers the relationships between two or more signs that often take the form of binary oppositions, such as old and young, or rich and poor. Similar binary opposites, found in the motion picture *Cast Away* (2000), are polychronicity and monochronicity, and their entire schema of contrasting ways of approaching time. The primary structures in *Cast Away* are found in the binary opposition between the main character's time pressured life and first, his girlfriend's desire to spend time in a relationship, and secondly, his four years without time pressure on a tropical island.

The man-made time schedules, measurement devices, and time cultures are all created by the world; hence "The World on Time" slogan of FedEx is a secularly driven system whose goals are efficiency and progress, measured in real time, real movement, and the accounting of things to be done. The relationship-driven systems, in contrast, are based on meaningful relationships.

Things are often given meaning through the relationships that they embody and the secular world of work can be viewed as an intrusion.

Archetypes are concepts that anchor key meanings embedded in societies that are used to analyze, order, and explain events that happen in real life (Hirschman, "Consumers" 57). They are often images, figures, and forms that tend to occur over and over throughout various societies, giving meaning to processes that occur again and again. They can be helpful to consumers in forming "essential culturally-shared conceptual maps by setting-up oppositional categories of thought" (63).

Archetypal images related to time use are numerous, including clocks as tyrants, hourglasses depicting time running out, stopwatches conveying pressure, and sunsets depicting natural cycles of nature. Fables contrasting steadiness and deliberate effort depict the tortoise and the hare, children's books provide *The Little Engine That Could*, and movie directors provide *The Time Machine* and the *Back to the Future* series. Time-related phrases have deep meanings, such as "time is money," "time flies," and "time waits for no man." Markers of time are established in all societies that are causes for celebration, such as births, marriages, and anniversaries. Just which birthdays and anniversaries are given special meaning, however, are specific to the cultural value system. Time ideology is also translated into consumer images, products, and practices matching the underlying acceptable and standardized ways of using time.

Anthropologists have created an analytical framework based on the analysis of the time use bipolar oppositions of polychronicity and monochronicity. The movie *Cast Away* embodied those contrasts within the main characters, consumer icons within the story, and situations that are encountered. Following David Glenn Mick (199), I examine the semiotics in *Cast Away* through analyzing the words, slogans, gestures, and product icons as they are used to transmit the contrasting meanings of time in society. Such symbols illustrate the codes of meaning that communicate efficient use of time.

The Ideology of Time as Money

Time permeates every part of a person's social life and spans cultural, group, and individual levels of analysis (Lewis and Weigert 434). The experience and use of time are universal, but the ways in which time is experienced and used differ across individuals. Some traditional studies of time have tended to incorporate time in terms of amount available, assessing deficits or pressures which result from perceptions of having too little time (Arndt, Gronmo, and Hawes 4; Becker 494; Gronau 1104; Hill 149). Time is considered to be an objective quantity with similar attributes to money in that it is budgeted, saved, spent, and typically used for one purpose at a time. Numerous time budget and time diary studies utilize this assumption in their designs. They provide summary statistics of the hours and minutes that certain types of people are likely to spend in given activities (Juster and Stafford 9; Robinson 33).

Consistent with the "time is money" ideology, consumer-related time-keeping products, scheduling practices, and norms of punctuality emphasize the importance of "timeliness" in daily life. They effectively create and reinforce time and timekeeping as a code of efficiency and scheduling in industrialized society.

Studies in home economics and sociology have typically examined time as one of several economic resources (Arndt, Gronmo, and Hawes 11; Becker 493; Beutler and Owen 16), inherently adopting a perspective in which daily time must add to 24 hours of discrete activities (Juster and Stafford 5; Robinson 46). These studies laid a foundation for developing methods to examine the ways that people used their times in industrialized societies (see Juster and Stafford for a thorough review). Time was studied as a quantifiable resource that could be reported, measured, and analyzed, while some analysts did recognize the existence of "concurrent" activities (Jacoby, Szybillo, and Berning 333).

Anthropological Contrasts

In his studies of cultures in diverse societies, anthropologist Edward T. Hall (*Silent*, 2) identified patterns of behavior that were common to several cultures. He developed a framework for analysis unified around the notions of “high” and “low context” cultures within which a continuum of cultural characteristics could be described. Behavioral patterns were observed, identified, and summarized into sets of expectations for the use of time, space, friendship, material things, and social relationships. As part of that framework, time was conceptualized as a “silent language” communicating meaning and ordering activities. Within those cultural contexts, Hall subsequently (*Dance*, 41) contrasted two distinctive ways in which societies organize their time: monochronic time and polychronic time.

According to Hall (*Dance*, 41), North European and Western cultures are thought to concentrate on one activity at a time, with an emphasis on the development and adherence to schedules. Monochronic time is viewed as comparable to money in that it is saved, budgeted, and spent in a very similar fashion. Such a perspective appears to be consistent with the approach of home economics and sociology described above, although the term “monochronic” time is not specifically used in those disciplines. In contrast, polychronic time is found in high-context cultures such as Middle Eastern and Latino countries. Punctuality is less important, while flexibility and changes of activity are common and expected. In later work, a comparative chart, reproduced in Table 1, was proposed outlining ten specific differences between monochronic and polychronic people (Hall and Hall 18-19), emphasizing that polychronicity is based on change and flexibility, with attention being diverted among various possible activities.

Over the past several years, researchers have asserted the need to explore the possible connections between the objective and subjective aspects of time (Hirschman, “Theoretical” 55; Hornik 615; Jacoby, Sybillo, and Berning 320; Levine 44;

Settle, Alreck, and Glasheen 316). Some of the time dimensions studied were linked to time shortage and surplus. One example is that when societal, household, employment, and individual demands combine to create conflict, the person is thought to experience “role overload,” resulting in perception of time shortage (Reilly 408).

There have also been investigations whose objectives were to better understand the feelings, frustrations, and perceptions of time that appear to underlie the ways people allocate time to activities (Feldman and Hornik 409; Graham 335; Hornik 616; Leclerc, Schmitt, and Dube 112; McDonald 348). Time allocation is a concern for those with time shortage or surplus. Doing more than one thing at a time, polychronic behavior, has also been studied (Bluedorn, Kaufman, and Lane 17; Hall, *Silent* 41; Kaufman, Lane, and Lindquist 392). Kaufman-Scarborough and Lindquist (300) found that schedule changes upset “monochrons” (people who prefer to do one thing at a time) more than “polychrons” (persons who enjoy doing more than one thing at a time). Polychrons felt they were more likely to reach their daily goals than monochrons did; interestingly, monochrons reported that they have a harder time organizing tasks than polychrons do. Polychrons reported that they felt they worked better under pressure than was found among their monochronic peers. Polychrons also were more likely to change from one task to another, but were less likely to put activities off until a later time.

The contrasts between monochronicity and polychronicity provide a potential framework for analyzing the “tyranny of time” depicted in the motion picture *Cast Away*. The setting of the story centers on a series of events in the life of Chuck Noland, an employee of FedEx. The selection of FedEx itself is illustrative of the themes that the film is designed to convey.

FedEx as a Consumer Icon

Since it began operations in 1973, Federal Express (“FedEx”) has become an icon of American

business efficiency. Their 1979 ad campaign began a series of advertisements that promised deliveries that are “Absolutely, Positively Overnight.” FedEx is likely to conjure up images of a business that is measured by its ability to match the clock, second for second, tick for tock. The popular press heralded Federal Express for its abilities to establish and keep schedules, in 1984 publicizing the record that FedEx had sorted a half a million packages in a single night.

Much of the company’s symbolism continued to revolve around its mission, and in 1994 the company launched “FedEx” as its official brand name paired with the slogan, “The World on Time.” In FedEx advertising, the theme of scheduled efficiency is always at the forefront. A series of ads, developed on the “overnight” theme, is honored in the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC, fixing its place in the archives of consumer culture. Many overworked and speed-pressured characters featured in FedEx ads were able to solve their need for efficiencies and effectiveness through their use of FedEx.

Corporate statistics present an array of measurable, well-defined achievements, such as: (1) more than 500,000 calls daily, (2) an average package volume of more than 3.2 million daily worldwide, and (3) distance driven per day as more than 2.7 million miles (US only). Thus, as viewers encounter the icons of FedEx in a television show or movie, they are likely to understand that FedEx communicates a clear message regarding the benefits of efficient time use. When FedEx is used as an integral setting for the movie *Cast Away*, it is able to set the stage for the ironic time use fable to be told.

Discussion of the Movie

The motion picture *Cast Away*, directed by Robert Zemeckis and starring Tom Hanks, is rich in depicting the contrast between monochronicity and polychronicity as fundamental time themes in society. Symbolic irony is introduced early in the film. In many scenes, the

FedEx packages are carried so that the logo is upside down. The “World on Time” slogan tends to appear reversed, as if to say “Time on the World.” The viewer is cued to expect that the successful efficiencies of monochronic time will somehow be turned upside down in scenes to come.

A Monochronic Character in a Monochronic Company: Chuck Noland

Tom Hanks’s character, Chuck Noland, is portrayed as an accomplished FedEx systems engineer who lives his job. He is obsessed with punctuality and schedules to such a degree that he actually mails a clock to a new facility in Russia to “time” how long the delivery actually takes. He is a genuine personification of a time style that characterizes many Western cultures, that of monochronic time use. He’s going to show his co-workers, no matter what, no matter how they feel, how he can make that delivery on time. He’s a monochron in the strictest sense. His opening monologue begins: “Time rules over us without mercy.” After lecturing his Russian employees through an interpreter, he states: “We live or die by the clock... Never allow ourselves the sin of losing track of time.” These remarks provide a foreshadowing that time will play a critical role in some aspect of survival in the story to be told.

Such a contrast can be predicted by considering Table 1. Noland’s characteristics and behavior in the opening vignette classify him as a monochronic person, a “monochron.” He is focused on the “sort,” concentrates on the job, and focuses all his energies on meeting FedEx deadlines and schedules. He is committed to this philosophy, which he attempts to convey to the apparently confused Russian employees. He puts off various aspects of his own life, such as a toothache that plagues him through several subsequent scenes. His commitment to his job rises above his commitment even to take care of himself.

Table 1: Contrasts between Monochronicity and Polychronicity

Monochronic People	Polychronic people
Do one thing at a time	Do many things at once
Concentrate on the job	Are highly distractable and subject to interruptions
Take time commitments (deadlines, schedules) seriously	Consider an objective to be achieved, if possible
Are low-context and need information	Are high-context and already have information
Are committed to the job	Are committed to people and human relationships
Adhere religiously to plans	Change plans often and easily
Are concerned about not disturbing others; follow rules of privacy and consideration	Are more concerned with those who are closely related (family, friends, close business associates) than with privacy
Show great respect for private property; seldom borrow or lend	Borrow and lend things often and easily
Emphasize promptness	Base promptness on the relationship
Are accustomed to short-term relationships	Have strong tendency to build lifetime relationships

Source: Hall and Hall (18-19).

Viewers are likely to draw parallels with monochrons in their own lives, even though they are unaware of the theoretical label. Monochrons are the people who are always too busy to listen, too busy to go to lunch, too busy to have “real” relationships. A monochron at his or her best lives, breathes, eats, and sleeps on schedule. We all know people like that who “absolutely, positively” have to be on time no matter what. Time is really like money to them, and often times they forget about other important parts of life, like their families, friends, and even themselves. While they may be experts at time management on the job, they may fail miserably in human relationships.

The Polychronic Contrast: Kelly Fears

It’s no surprise that Noland’s girlfriend Kelly, played by Helen Hunt, wants more of his time. While she is finishing up her dissertation, she wants to spend Christmas and New Year’s Eve with him. She appears to be committed to the relationship, flexibly attempting to change her plans in order to match Noland’s schedule. Chuck and Kelly attend a large family Christmas dinner where much of the conversation centers on FedEx

deliveries. When the topic changes to when Chuck will propose to Kelly, he evades the question, contrasting his inability to commit to personal relationships when business schedules are at the forefront.

Noland’s character can remind viewers of the boyfriend, girlfriend, spouse, or family member who just doesn’t have time for us. He puts us off, and it hurts. No matter how dramatic the moment, no matter how important the ties between people, the job comes first. This theme is typified by two scenes, the first depicting Kelly and Chuck frantically attempting to match their day planners as they miss part of the Christmas festivities. The scene quickly switches to the FedEx facility, where Chuck must board an imminent flight. Kelly and Chuck quickly exchange gifts that again point out the contrast in the two approaches to time. Chuck gives Kelly a pager and hand towels, while Kelly presents Chuck with her grandfather’s pocket watch, a family heirloom. She has inserted his favorite picture of her and he is clearly touched. He states that he will set and maintain the clock on Memphis time, or “Kelly time.”

When running to check in at the FedEx gate, Chuck remembers that he has forgotten something. He runs back to the car and hastily gives Kelly a small box suggesting an engagement ring

is inside. He asks her not to open it, but to think about it for New Year's Eve when he returns.

The Dialectic in the Natural Island Environment

Noland, however, is not destined to return as expected. His plane encounters a violent storm while crossing the ocean and is ditched into the sea. Chuck manages to escape the downed craft, climb aboard an inflatable raft, and find himself much later beached on an uninhabited island.

A natural environment without man's created clocks and schedules provides a stark contrast to the highly scheduled world of FedEx. All cues suggest endless days and nights and a complete absence of schedules imposed by anyone but oneself. It seems like poetic justice that Chuck's plane crashes near a tropical island where all measures of time are directed by nature. There are no clocks or deadlines—just endless, unfilled, unscheduled time. His pager is useless and the pocket watch has stopped.

The FedEx Boxes

Several FedEx boxes subsequently wash up on the shore and Noland carefully retrieves them to his storage area near the water's edge. Many are

associated with man's time markers: a box of videos, divorce papers, a birthday card and gift package containing a volleyball, ice skates, a gaudy dress. All items can be associated with ways that man has chosen to commemorate and/or mark the passage of time. However, most are useless to Noland in their present form, apart from the calendars, schedules, and technologies that give them meaning. He instead must transform them into useful items to assist him on the island. The only unopened package depicts the winged symbol on the outside of the box. This symbol was shown at the story's outset as the apparent logo of the artist who lives on a farm in Texas. Table 2 summarizes the items and their linkages to specific icons of consumer time.

Wilson, the Volleyball

At one point on the island, nothing is going right for Noland. His attempts to create a fire have been futile and in the middle of one such attempt, he cuts his hand on a sharp stick. In great frustration, he throws several items onto the ground, including a white volleyball intended to be a birthday gift. Later on, after calming down, he notices that his bloody hand made an imprint on the "face" of the volleyball. Intrigued by this discovery, Noland proceeds to complete the face by adding eyes, nose, and mouth. The ball becomes a personification of Noland, who carries

Table 2: Contents of FedEx Packages Icons of Consumer Time

Package contents	Time-related interpretation
A box of videos	Used to record events in the past, storing that time in the future
Divorce papers	Used to signal the end of a specific time in which a marriage relationship existed
Birthday card and gift package containing a volleyball	Used to mark the passage of time with a ritualized gift and greeting
Ice skates	Only useful in specific seasons and climates having ice skating
A gaudy dress	Caricature of a prom dress, marking a "rite of passage" for teenaged girls

on conversations with his new friend “Wilson.” As Noland’s time on the island continues, Wilson begins to resemble Noland. For instance, as Noland’s hair and beard grow to “mountain man” proportions, spiked “hair” made of leaves has been added to Wilson for a native look.

While he tries to survive in such an unfamiliar atmosphere, he is supported by the memory of Kelly, whose picture is in the old family pocket watch that she gave him just before he left. It serves as a reminder that even though time has “stopped,” the love and affection may be long lasting, a polychronic trait.

The contrasting approaches to human relationships is humorously established through the role of “Wilson,” the volleyball. However, it is a deliberately distorted parallel. Wilson is a controllable companion. He “responds” when Chuck addresses him. He doesn’t interrupt. He can be put up on the shelf in the ideal monochronic sense of interaction. He can be “thrown away” and retrieved at will. Chuck talks to Wilson and tells him all his thoughts, especially his desire to return to Kelly. He carries Wilson and the watch through all his travels on the raft, until he is finally rescued.

In contrast to “monochrons,” there are people, especially in Latino and Middle Eastern cultures, who follow a polychronic approach to time. They tolerate interruptions. They listen to conversations. They make time for friends and family, all the while juggling many activities. Personal relationships tend to come before the demands of schedules, and Hanks is in a perfect setting to try to reestablish his priorities.

Marking Time

At several points, Noland attempts to create order by marking significant events using calendar time and plans for the future. When he finds the body of a member of the flight crew, he buries the victim, creating a “headstone” that says: Albert Miller, 1950-1995. He continues to preserve the remaining unopened FedEx box, linking its delivery to a promise of survival. When he

discovers a cave for shelter, he scratches a calendar on the walls of the cave, marking the days, months, and years that he has been gone. He uses these computations to calculate his departure time in terms of tides and winds. Four years later, when he plans to leave the island, he scratches a message on another rock, that he was “here” for 1,500 days. He adds: “Tell Kelly Frears I love her.” He launches his raft and drifts for days, losing Wilson and possibly losing his hope. He is finally found by the crew of a cargo ship and returns to Memphis.

The Resolution: Returning Home

The reuniting with Kelly, however, is a twist on the happy ending, since Kelly is now married with a small child. Irony again surfaces, since she married a dentist who had performed root canal surgery on Chuck that he does not recall. The dentist meets Chuck, tells him that Kelly is confused, and asks for more “time” on her behalf.

After a party celebrating his return, Chuck takes a taxi to Kelly’s home. They reestablish their love, but know that it is in the past. It’s just too late, and too much has changed. Kelly has kept Chuck’s car, and much of their conversation takes place in the car, as a reenactment of the gift giving as Chuck prepared to board his ill-fated flight.

In the final moments of the film, Chuck attempts to deliver the surviving package to a farm in Texas, to someone he does not know, in final completion of a scheduled FedEx task. He leaves a note saying, “This package saved my life.” The viewer, however, has already been acquainted with the female artist in an opening scene, as she FedExes a package to her husband in Russia.

In a parallel to Chuck’s breakup with Kelly, the viewer sees that the “Dick and Bettina” farm sign has been modified, since “Dick” has been removed. This revelation sets the stage for Noland’s chance meeting with Bettina as he asks for directions. As she drives away, he notices the same winged symbol that appeared on the package. The

closing scene suggests that there may be some relationship with her in Chuck's future.

Analysis

Table 3 presents a summary of symbolic contrasts that can be organized using Hall's method of distinguishing between polychronicity and monochronicity. Monochronic items and values measure, count, and never fail to remind us that "time is money." Polychronic items and values, in contrast, oppose such regimentation of life, attempting to live flexibly, emphasizing the importance of relationships over work-based demands. Even the monochronic rhetoric is somewhat challenging and oppressive, as if spoken by "Father Time" himself.

The movie is likely to resonate with people who feel that artificial schedules often rob them of genuine relationships. It's not too surprising that the "time expert" character is a man, since men are often empirically linked with a greater emphasis on time management.

Does it serve him "right" that he's lost her? Perhaps. But it does give us something to think about in terms of how life's priorities may make us efficient while we lose the joy of loving relationships.

Discussion

The present article has attempted to analyze polychronicity and monochronicity through a thematic analysis of the values, symbols, and stories used in the motion picture *Cast Away*. The film's characters, major themes, and product icons were used to unfold a story that is common to many cultures and many generations: that time used "incorrectly" may cause one to lose what is most important.

Time can be invested wisely or spent on trivial pursuits that can appear important under the guise of one's work culture. However, an imbalance in "relationship" time can have dire consequences. Just like the hero in stories across generations, Noland was given a life-threatening experience that provided an opportunity to examine his

Table 3: Symbolic Contrasts Throughout *Cast Away*

Monochronicity	Polychronicity
Clocks	Russian FedEx facility needing a clock
Public clock in assembly line	"Booted" truck stops delivery times
FedEx company	Delivery supplemented by child on bicycle
"The World on Time" slogan	Noland's world is on natural time on the island, not man-made schedules
"Time rules over us without mercy."	Time stops
"Never allow ourselves the sin of losing track of time."	Time can be tracked through the rhythms of nature
"We live or die by the clock."	Getting off the island depends on the seasons, winds, and tides
Interruption of holiday dinner; calendars	Kelly inquires about "their" Christmas.
Implied gift of engagement ring to be opened on New Year's Eve	Gift of an old family heirloom timepiece with Noland's favorite picture of Kelly
Time marches on	Keep the pocket watch on "Kelly time"
Pager is useless on island	Time can be marked by sunrise and sunset, plus cycles of the seasons
Pocket watch does not run on island	Time has shifted to flexible time.
Buried Albert Miller, 1950-1995, a time marker scratched into rock	FedEx package contents are transformed into useful items, e.g., net to catch fish

priorities, free from the demands of everyday life. While Noland appeared to refocus his attention on his relationship with Kelly, he seemed to ignore serious introspection regarding the mechanistic and relentless pace of his prior lifestyle at FedEx. The viewer is left to wonder whether Noland would hope to resume his relationship with Kelly under his own terms of monochronic behavior, or whether he would “take the time to smell the flowers.”

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