

PETER BROOK'S *LORD OF THE FLIES*:

Violence on Vieques

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ABSTRACT: The 1963 film adaptation of William Golding's 1954 novel of *Lord of the Flies* has become a classic of US Independent Cinema. By comparing the situation of the film shoot on the Caribbean island of Vieques (part of Puerto Rico) with Golding's parable about human violence, this article explores the ironic failure of the filmmakers to recognise the historical violence that continued to plague this particular island as a contested site. Peter Brook's approach to the novel demanded an attitude of innocence on the part of his novice actors and crew members to capture the authenticity that he sought. His so-called documentary approach to an island narrative was only achieved through the fiction of obfuscating the real violence taking place on and around Vieques.

Keywords: Cold War, non-professional actors, Caribbean history, situation, Robinsonade

William Golding wrote *Lord of the Flies* in 1954 as an allegory for the violent tendencies in human nature, which were brought into relief by his experiences in the Second World War. Golding's fictional tropical island was imagined as a blank slate where 'human nature' could be seen in its most raw state. When Peter Brook made his film version of the novel in 1961, he did so in the spirit of an avant-garde experiment, in search of an authenticity of performance by placing young boys in conditions such as those described in Golding's island dystopia. While many of the basic premises of Golding's thesis can and should be questioned, the filming of this story is a unique episode in film history. It is riddled with contradictions that speak to the role of child actors in independent cinema and the collision of avant-garde theatre with the lingering effects of Empire during the Cold War. Brook may have believed in theatrical authenticity, but by choosing to shoot his film on the island of Vieques, he had to actively disguise and obfuscate the culture of violence that surrounded him and his crew on the island.

Vieques at the time was a US military base with a small civilian population in the centre of the island and there was very little development aside from the military, on which the crew was reliant for various services. The shoot actually coincided with the abortive US backed Bay of Pigs Invasion of Cuba in 1961 and casualties were flown into the hospital on the island (*Lord of the Flies* DVD commentary, 2013). The US Navy had occupied Vieques since 1941 and because two-thirds of the 52 square mile island was used for training and bombing exercises, it was not open to tourism as most Caribbean islands were, especially following the Cuban revolution of 1959. Golding's novel was set on an imaginary Pacific island but Brook and his US producer Lewis Allen decided on Vieques as a cheap alternative. Its pristine sand beaches provided great locations for the story of a deserted island.'

The Navy officially withdrew from Vieques in 2003, after vigorous protesting by the local population that continued from the 1970s through the 1990s, peaking in 1999 following the accidental death of a Vieques civilian resident. Viequenses became radicalised in the 1970s after decades of being subjugated by the US military, who had expropriated land and transformed the island into what Katherine McCaffrey calls “a theatre of war.” (2002, p. 43) The island was literally a hostage of the Cold War, and the Navy resisted all attempts at developing a tourist industry. In 1978 a ‘fish in’ by local fishermen who were outraged by the devastation of reefs and the escalation of ocean manoeuvres that threatened their small industry, developed into a ‘David and Goliath’ incident of anti-military activism (McCaffrey, 2002, p. 167.). The formerly occupied areas remain hazardous waste sites that are still awaiting clean-up from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Limited access to beaches has enabled the island to survive with a limited tourist industry, and, so far, no resort hotels have been able to gain a footing.

Peter Brook was an avant-garde theatre director and *Lord of the Flies* (1963) was only his second film. It was a very experimental production influenced by the popular neorealist and direct cinema aesthetics of the period. Brook saw potential in Golding's story to create a film by way of creating a situation that would replicate the one in the book. Instead of using a screenplay, he selected scenes and lines of dialogue around which the untrained child actors were to improvise. Thirty-four boys between the ages of ten and fourteen were cast mainly through posting an advertisement in the *New York Times*. They also looked for British boys coming off inbound planes and ships, but they ended up with quite a few US boys, who had to fake British accents for their few lines in the film (Feil, 2013) (Figure 1).



Figure 1 - Production still from *Lord of the Flies* (Brook, 1963): Peter Brook with Sam (Simon Surtees) and Eric (David Surtees).

William Golding's notion of 'islandness' was highly literary, derived from the 'desert-island' trope of narrative fiction that originated with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in the 18th century. The idea of an 'empty' geographical place was in turn a seminal concept of colonial ideology in which sovereignty was ripe for the taking. 'Savagery' was to be annihilated, but also assumed by the coloniser sufficient to match the behaviour of the indigenous people whose own sovereignty was being challenged. Brook, for his part, understood theatre in

terms of 'empty space' to be filled with the presence of emotion and the experience of transience. He introduces his book on theatre theory, *Empty Space*, with the claim that, "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage." (1968, p. 9) The empty stage is a site of possibility for Brook, and we can speculate that he understood Vieques as a similarly 'empty' island, stripped of all modern accessories and conveniences, as if there were nobody there.

The 'emptiness' of Vieques for the US Navy implied an expendable population. The history of the Navy occupation of the island is missing from the Vieques archives and has mostly been appropriated by the military itself. The shooting of *Lord of the Flies* was an exceptional event in the island's history, driven by the eccentricities of a maverick director, and the popularity in the early 1960s of location shooting. Given the absence of a tourist industry, the film is one of the only photographic records accessible to the public of the Island landscape in the postwar period. Direct cinema (a.k.a. *cinéma vérité*), like neorealism, offered an alternative to commercial mainstream cinema, and Vieques offered Brook and his team the opportunity to experiment on its so-called emptiness. Golding's novel has become the go-to reference for desert island storytelling, a genre that persists in contemporary culture, and Brook's version has become the definitive cinematic adaptation, and thus it is opportune to examine its contradictory representation of islandness.¹ Brook himself more or less blinded himself to the military presence, stating in his autobiography that Vieques in 1961 was "owned by Woolworths" referring to a purchase that never actually transpired (2013, p.24).

In this essay I hope to 'fill in' the space of Vieques with discussion of the competing experiments of Brook, Golding, and the U.S. Navy. In so doing, Vieques should be better understood as a site of conflict, not only historically, but in its very 'islandness.' This term has been defined as an almost spiritual quality in which small island cultures are 'outside' the temporalities and structures of everyday continental life, (Conkling, 2007) although more recent scholars have identified the many variations within island cultures and histories, recognising that many islands are in fact contested sites, and not simply isolated and autonomous social formations (Foley et. al., 2023). I will lay out in more detail the two situations of the fiction of *Lord of the Flies* against the film shoot before analysing the effects and the reception of the finished film. From there, I will return to the desert-island trope, and the violent 20th century of Vieques as a military training site and conclude with some final thoughts on the fiction of island survival.

Two Situations/Two Stories

The best way of thinking about the 1963 film is as an overlaying of one situation on another. All films may be said to have onscreen and offscreen situations, but an island film tends to frame the offscreen situation more specifically as a story. As a narrative concept, situation pulls "attention in two and opposite directions: toward the general conditions and toward their specific features" (Frank, Pask & Shantz, 2024, p.659). The two situations of the castaway story and the film shoot are thus familiar in some respects and absolutely unique in others. Discussion of non-professional actors and locations is a critical means of situating

¹ Another feature film of *the Lord of the Flies* was released in 1990, directed by Harry Hook and shot in Hawai'i and Jamaica. This version received poor reviews and has dropped out of distribution, while Brook's version has been released by Criterion and is streaming, along with the supplements, on the Criterion channel.

a film shoot in its historical and geographical specificity, a specificity that is arguably enhanced by the island setting.

The fictional situation features a group of schoolboys who need to figure out how to survive without adult supervision, and without food and shelter. The other situation is that of thirty-four boys being shipped out for the summer to a remote island that is mostly occupied by the US Navy. In fact, these are two different stories, grounded in very different situations. Golding's story is mythic and imaginary, featuring children stranded on a 'tropical island' stripped of history along with 'civilisation,' even if his narrative is highly culturally determined by Christianity and British boarding school culture. The story of the film shoot may have been initiated by such a myth, but it takes place in a contested site of colonial and neo-colonial violence on an island in which resources are limited and experience is contingent on topography, financing and available technology (Figure 2).



Figure 2 - Frame enlargement: Vieques island in *Lord of the Flies* (Brook, 1963).

Golding's story about a group of boys who turn on each other, instead of cooperatively working toward survival, is an island myth that has had astonishing resiliency and the novel became required reading for generations of school children. By 1962 it had been singled out as "Lord of the campus," as so many young people were reading it (Fredericks, 2017, p. ix). *Lord of the Flies* is about a struggle between a handful of boys, led by Ralph and his side-kick Piggy, and Jack, who is the leader of a band of choir boys. The children have survived a plane crash and find themselves without food or shelter on an island during wartime. Ralph holds meetings and initiates a liberal-democratic collective in which building shelters and maintaining signal fires are priorities, but Jack challenges his leadership, persuading many of the boys to follow his lead as a hunter and killer of wild pigs. The boys gradually grow wilder and wilder until they accidentally kill one of their number, Simon, in a frenzy of nighttime dancing and hollering. Then they kill Piggy intentionally and Ralph is left with no support whatsoever and they turn on him. They chase him through the jungle and then try to smoke him out, until he emerges on a beach only to find that a naval officer has landed in a dinghy sent out from a naval cruiser in the bay. The boys are saved as the island burns behind them.

Brook's version of the story features all of the main protagonists and most of the main events of the novel, although only fragments of dialogue are used. The editing is somewhat elliptical, and the story is told mainly through action, with the boys moving through the landscape of beaches, jungles, rocky cliffs and hillsides. Following Golding's description, the rogue boys following Jack paint themselves with mud to look like ersatz 'savages.' At the heart of Golding's story is a 'beast' who the younger children imagine haunting them on the island, but who is revealed to be the corpse of a pilot who parachuted into a high rocky hillside and perished, although his parachute still wafts about him in a ghost-like manner. Brook shot some of the most dramatic scenes not on Vieques but in the El Yunque rainforest and in Aguasilla on the north coast of Puerto Rico where huge rocky cliffs descend to the ocean.

We know quite a bit about the situation of the filming of *Lord of the Flies* as the 2013 Criterion Collection DVD includes a host of interviews, commentary and essays by Brook, his two cameramen, the producer, and one of the actors (henceforth referred to as DVD features²). None of them have anything to say about the troubled history of Vieques, but the island is arguably a presence in the film that is as important as the performances of the young actors. Although some Brown people appear in the production stills, the Viequenses are largely absent even from the supplemental footage. We learn a lot, however, about the actors' experience of the film shoot. Child actors and non-professional actors in Italian neorealist films such as *Bicycle Thieves* (De Sica, 1948) and *Paisan* (Rossellini, 1946) were notoriously unsupported and usually abandoned after they served their purpose as icons of innocence, victimhood, and suffering in internationally renowned films (O'Rawe, 2024). The same cannot be said of the boys who performed in *Lord of the Flies*. The boys' parents released the children into Brook's care because they respected the project, which was pitched as a literary undertaking, and because it was like a three-month summer camp, with everything included (Brook, 2013a). Although a few women appear in production stills and in the film credits,³ and a few mothers are said to have been part of the dormitory crew, it was an otherwise all-male endeavour.

During their three months on Vieques, the actors were not only well taken care of, but they had unique, life-changing experiences. By all accounts, and there are many, the boys gained self-confidence, made friends, and learned new practical and leadership skills, including filmmaking. To keep them busy when they weren't performing, the boys were given tasks such as clapper boys, and they were loaned a 16 mm camera to make their own movie, which seems to be lost.⁴ Only one boy went on to become a professional actor, but many of them claimed that they 'found themselves' by being singled out as performers.⁵ In a reunion film made in 1996, six of the lead actors got together with Brook and some of the crew back in Vieques and asked themselves the question of the effect of the film on their lives. Brook

² These include *Behind the scenes*, *Living Lord of the Flies* and an item on the film and its director from the BBC TV *South Bank Show* originally broadcast on November 16th 1980.

³ The IMDb credits for *Lord of the Flies* include Stella Maude as script supervisor, Susan Fletcher as wardrobe supervisor, and Lydia Rodriguez as Makeup supervisor, all of whom were on set during the shoot on Vieques. Their names do not appear in the film credits.

⁴ The movie the boys made was reputedly called *Something Queer in the Warehouse*, possibly referring to the Pineapple cannery they were accommodated in (Wallace, 2013, p. 105) although Tom Gaman recalls that the film was called *Murder for Money* (*Living Lord of the Flies*).

⁵ In Lewis Allen's commentary on one of the commentary tracks, he says that "lives were changed" and claims that many parents thanked them for the opportunity the film afforded their sons. Jack Aubrey, who plays Ralph, pursued a career in television until 2016 and has 61 acting credits on IMDb.

himself says in the reunion film that he has lingering concerns over his experiment and wanted to make sure the boys were okay thirty-five years later (Dale, 1996).

When it was released in England in 1963, *Lord of the Flies* was restricted and the boys themselves could not go to the theatre, a stigma that touched them more than playing out the story itself (DVD feature, 2013). The censoring of the film is in keeping with the book's status as one of the most frequently banned books in the US (Bridge, 2015), due to the violence and bullying that wins out over democratic values. The discourse of racial primitivism and savagery has further contributed to its devalued cultural capital in the 21st century. The imagery of naked young boys has not overtly factored into the censorship of the film, but the underlying theme of 'boys will be boys' haunts the off-screen situation as vividly as the onscreen tale of innate human violence. The men in the reunion film all have fond memories of the shoot and have become successful grown-ups, but we don't really know the after-stories of all thirty-four boys. The ones who are 'missing in action' and who were not among the inner circle of actors with dialogue are perhaps the ones most likely to have been negatively affected by the shoot. One counsellor also left the island early because of the challenges of disciplining the boys (Wallace, 1963, p.105). A few allusions to the actor who plays Jack's side-kick Roger as being too wild and living his part too enthusiastically remain vague, and the actor, Roger Elwin, did not appear in the reunion film. Like the Vieques people who are missing from the story of the production, the boys who did not become leaders and who may not have survived Brooks' experiment are missing from the historical record.

The Violence of Editing

Filming on an island on a minimal budget meant that the filmmakers had to improvise a great deal. Many of Brook's crew were novices, as his desire for 'purity' meant excluding jaded professionals from the industry – who he couldn't afford in any case (Wilson, 1998, p. 221). From the many special features produced for the 2013 Criterion DVD release of the film, we learn that Brook and his small crew designed a contraption to shoot with a zoom lens on a mobile tracking apparatus, so the camera was always quite far away from the children and was able to capture them in close-up even while they were moving. They also used a second camera manned by Gerald Feil who had trained with Drew Associates and was well-versed in the aesthetics of direct cinema. (Producer Lewis Allen had previously worked with Shirley Clarke on *The Connection*, a drama about heroin addicts shot in a New York flat using direct cinema techniques). Filming out on the beaches, the crew relied mainly on the natural brilliance of the Caribbean sun and had very little lighting equipment. They did do some night photography, for which they used firelight and borrowed pyrotechnic flares from the Navy that helped create the demonic scenes of the boys going wild. The crew had a state-of-the-art Nagra sound recorder but the surf was always too loud, and all the dialogue had to be post synched. When the boys do speak, they seem to be quoting rather than delivering lines actually thought out by their characters (Figure 3).

A great deal of time was spent on each camera set-up as the crew met the various challenges of location shooting in the wild, leading to exquisite boredom on the part of the boys, some of which is caught on camera and integrated as cutaways. There was not a lot of room for improvisation as they had to incorporate lines devised by Brook and block out movements, so most of the spontaneity is captured by the second camera catching them unawares, when they are moving through the bush, climbing rocks, or splashing in the water. The result is a unique mix of highly controlled and blocked-out shots with more casual and contingent

footage that are cut together in a fairly violent and abrupt montage style. One critic described it as “jerkily constructed” (Crowther, 1963a). Far from improvisation, this was a film made in the editing room and it’s no surprise that the editing took two years. The island of Vieques is recognisable in the beach scenes, but because many of the action scenes are actually shot elsewhere, it can be profoundly disorienting for viewers familiar with the island. A few shots feature the boys at the top of the island’s highest hills surveying the coast and ascertaining that it is indeed an island on which they have been stranded, although the long serpent-like shape of Vieques makes such a total view impossible from any of the hill-tops outside the occupied areas. (Figure 4).



Figure 3 - Frame enlargement: Unnamed/ uncredited actors in *Lord of the Flies* (Brook, 1963).



Figure 4 - Frame enlargement: Simon (Tom Gaman), Jack (Tom Chapin) and Ralph (James Aubrey) on hilltop on Vieques island in *Lord of the Flies* (Brook, 1963).

When *Lord of the Flies* was released in New York in 1963, *Times* critic Bosley Crowther lambasted it not once but twice, complaining above all about the amateur acting. In fact, I think Crowther missed the point and refused to see the boys as boys trying to perform fictional characters. Tom Gaman who plays Simon, has said that although the boys were asked to “live our roles... adopt our screen names, and think in terms of those characters,” in fact, “the reality is that we did not live the story.” Besides the fact that they were tightly directed by Brook, they had to wear “smelly pancake makeup” and repeat most scenes over and over again (DVD feature, 2013). The boys who were cast to interpret the main characters were chosen for the ways that their faces and bodies approximated Golding’s descriptions, which can be thought of as a mode of typage or type-casting. As Pamela Wojcik argues, “rather than individual psychology, typage relates the character’s individual personality and problems to larger social forces” (Wojcik, 2003, p.232) Hugh Edwards, who plays Piggy was one of the few British boys in the cast, and he actually wrote to the producer after seeing an ad in a British paper, saying that he identified with the Piggy character and felt he was ideally suited to the part (DVD Commentary, 2013)⁶ (Figure 5).



Figure 5 - Piggy (Hugh Edwards) and Ralph (James Aubrey) in *Lord of the Flies* (Brook, 1963).

Critics such as Crowther, seemed to expect a realist narrative just because the film was made on a real island with real boys, but Brook was looking for something quite different from his cast. Because Brook gave the boys their lines in piecemeal fashion, and because the film features so little dialogue, the performances consist mainly of gestures and poses. The characters are far from being psychological and are more archetypal and iconic than anything else. They are frequently framed in silhouette against the sky or posed in tableaux in the dramatic landscape. The only scene featuring genuine improvisation on the part of the actors was Piggy (Hugh Edwards) telling a small group of the youngest boys the story of why his hometown of Camberley came by its name. It was Edwards’ own story, and was also one of the only scenes that did not have to be re-dubbed (DVD Commentary).

⁶ Another commentator, Edwin Wilson (1998), says that Hugh Edwards was ‘discovered’ at the top of the Empire State Building.

A consistent theme in the discourse on non-professional acting is the various ways that the untrained actor is seen to respond or react to a given situation created by the filmmaker. There can be many degrees of self-consciousness in the performer's body and voice as they create characters from the outside in, and not, as with conventional dramatic acting training, from the inside out (Gaggiotti, 2023, pp. 60-66). In *Lord of the Flies*, Brook has set up a situation for which and in which the boys are asked to respond, but what is the situation? I would argue that the physicality of the island itself with its tropical beaches, warm sun, and isolation overwhelms the dramatic situation that Golding has set up in his novel, and the actors are in a sense responding to the natural situation more so than the dramatic situation.

Brook was very much influenced by Antonin Artaud and his *Theatre of Cruelty*, which advocated a theatrical method in which situations could be created that enabled the generation of ideas and emotions (Artaud, 1958, pp. 26-27). Artaud's conception of the theatre as a practice of intense experience drew from modernist notions of primitivism, as if theatrical spectacle could awake in an audience some kind of spiritual awakening, and recognition of the base mundanity of everyday life. Where Artaud spoke about the stage as a potential site of weather conditions, Brook saw the potential of placing young boys in the natural setting of Vieques as a means to create an 'ecstatic' situation. Following Artaud, he chose a script of mythic and iconic figures with an allegorical significance to be dramatised, eschewing psychology for visceral staging effects. The wild night scene in which Simon is killed features the boys cavorting in the firelight painted with body paint to resemble indigenous people or fictitious natives. This dynamic scene, shot largely in hand-held verité shooting style, cut into short choppy shots, is the dramatic climax of the film. It was, however, described by the boys as the most fun they had during the shoot, and of course they were strictly prohibited from hurting each other with their pointy sticks (Figure 6).



Figure 6 - Frame enlargement: Boys performing as 'savages' in *Lord of the Flies* (Brook, 1963).

Island Trope/Island Geography

The strength of *Lord of the Flies* lies in the cinematography that combines expansive landscape shots with close-ups of the children in high contrast compositions. The film offers a photographic record of Vieques in 1961, albeit a distorted one in which the trappings of military occupation are invisible. However, the backstory of the film shoot offers a rare insight into the military culture of the island. In both scenes, the civilian Viequenses are completely invisible. The official Vieques archive contains no traces of the production, and only one local resident appears in the supplemental Criterion footage: an unnamed man seen wrangling pigs (domestic pigs had to perform as wild pigs, under the tutelage of this resident). One journalist claims that the local people thought the boys were “cute” (Wallace 1963, p. 100), but there is little evidence of any real interaction between the filmmakers and the people who had seen their island repeatedly used and abused by US personnel.

The challenge of shooting a film on an island is underscored by the cumbersome need to have the rushes (exposed film stock) flown to New York for processing before the filmmakers could see them. Because the Navy refused to cooperate, and wouldn't even let civilians use their airstrip, flights off the island were few and went only as far as San Juan. There were two main consequences of this delayed approach. According to Hollyman, the rushes kept coming back foggy until he finally flew back himself and discovered that an unsupervised man in the lab had been smoking while developing the negatives. He claims that it wasn't until the 2013 restoration that the film finally looked the way he had intended (DVD Commentary, 2013). Secondly, the boys themselves only saw the rushes after a month of shooting, after which they threatened to strike and made demands including becoming more involved in the production itself. They suddenly saw the ‘magic’ of the filmmaking process and wanted to be more like collaborators and less like experimental subjects (DVD Commentary, 2013).

Among the anecdotes told in the production history of shooting *Lord of the Flies* are the conditions of accessing locations on Vieques. Lewis Allen began negotiating with a certain unnamed Colonel who was extremely generous and offered the crew unlimited access and resources. On the DVD commentary track Allen tells a story of how the general was entertaining some of the marines at his palatial home when they threw him into his swimming pool before leaving the party. The next day they found him drowned. A new commanding officer was assigned to the island whose mandate was to clean up the disorderly conduct of the debauched company and that included little tolerance for arty film projects. (DVD Commentary, 2013) The filmmakers had to make do with much less support than they had originally hoped for. Evidence of the military action outside the camera frame appears in the boy's newspaper called *The Vieques Variety*. A drawing of a seascape with battleships and planes on the horizon is accompanied by text that is read in one of the special features:

Our illustrator Jack Aubrey has sketched the mysterious gatherings of old iron-sides and superjets which have puzzled the company on location... Our cameraman Tom Hollyman must find it hard to make sweeping panorama shots of the sea surrounding an uninhabited island. ('Behind the Scenes' 2013)

Even if the boys were not briefed on the Cuban missile crisis and the Bay of Pigs invasion, the filmmakers could not escape such knowledge of military aggression, but they nevertheless pressed on with their drama about the violence endemic to ‘human nature.’

Golding's message in *Lord of the Flies*, which he believed to be absolutely true and in no way a 'fable' (*South Bank Show* 2013) can be clearly seen decades later as a story of Empire and colonial culture in the Robinsonade genre of settler narratives. Golding was deliberately inverting the narrative of R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, a 19th century novel in the vein of *Treasure Island* youth literature. The promise and the threat of 'going native' and the iconography of primitivism is drawn from centuries of European narratives and 20th century media. The rescue scene on the beach at the end of the film is nothing if not an image of 'first contact' in which the children who have failed to civilise themselves are brought back to the safe world of grownups. One of the smallest boys is framed beside the knees of the Naval officer, before the camera pans up to capture the man's full height.

The Robinsonade label denotes an island trope in Anglophone literature that traces the theme back to Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe* and does not simply refer to fictional islands as prelapsarian geographies. The literary recycling which continues through to the contemporary reality TV series *Survivor*, among other texts, is also usually about male individualism and ego formation (Kinnane, 2016, p.105). The challenge of natural survival became the fiction of the modern individual, not simply due to Crusoe's status as an island castaway, but also through Defoe's text as an early form of the first-person novel. It was also a novel mode of docu-fiction, masquerading as an autobiography. In this vein, Brook's *Lord of the Flies* is an important postwar text, insofar as its 'desert island' realism is achieved by blending fiction and documentary film techniques. Golding's theme of social decadence spoke directly to the weapons of mass destruction deployed in the war, situating the existentialist trope of island literature within the context of political violence. Ironically, on the margins of Brook's film, one of the most prominent hills, Monte Pirata on Vieques, was called 'Magazine Mountain' by the Navy and it served as a secret armoury and communications site during the Cold War.

Ian Kinnane has described the "mind of islands" in the Robinsonade genre as a liminal space between the landscape of an island and the consciousness of the castaway (2016, 106). He further elaborates on the character of Simon in *Lord of the Flies* as the existential hero of the novel. Simon has also been described as 'Christlike' by other commentators, but Kinnane favours the character's communion with nature. He is the only boy to be drawn to the flora and fauna of the island, wandering off on his own through the dense forest. Simon is the only one who doesn't believe in 'the beast' and recognises its fiction as a weapon of intimidation and fear. His ritualistic death at the hands of the wild boys is his punishment for being alone (like an island), and for loving the island. Tom Gaman, the actor who plays Simon in the film, says that his experience on Vieques sparked a life-long interest in the natural world, and rather than pursuing an acting career, he chose to become a professional forester (DVD feature, 2013).

In their discussion of situation as a narrative concept, Marcie Frank, Kevin Pask, and Ned Schantz privilege the 'deserted island' trope as a canonical, generative, narrative situation premised on the fundamental misrecognition of an island's emptiness:

[The desert island] situation's immense appeal derives from its interlocking fantasies of danger and domination and the way the former serves as a pretext for the latter—a dynamic that flows directly from the contradictions inherent in the idea of a deserted island and its rehearsal of the English imperial uptake of terra nullius (2024, p. 672).

Robinson Crusoe is distinguished as a novel for these theorists not by its invention of the modernist hero, but because of its temporality “exclusive to the island situation” (2024, p. 675). Crusoe’s story takes the form of a journal written on the island, addressed to a reader who exists in the future and also beyond the island. He locates his self-recognition in the situation of the island as a world apart.

Unlike *Robinson Crusoe*, Golding’s prose takes the form of ‘free’ indirect discourse, in which no single character’s perspective is assumed. The narration shifts among the characters, although Simon’s perspective is, as I have suggested, notable in his refusal to fall into the group-think of fear. The book functions as a parable featuring character types, none of whom can be said to be terribly self-reflective. Brook’s translation to the screen necessarily introduces a temporal slippage between then and now, which is augmented by the paratexts that have separated the film from its off-screen situation. The documentary style of the film gives it the structure of an archive, and despite its obfuscations, it still functions as a valuable record of the landscape and topography of Vieques island. The boy actors are documented at the same time as they portray characters enhanced by costumes and make-up, through which the visual effect of increasing wildness and social decay is created, alongside a transformation into the iconography of primitivism. Instead of self-reflection, we are offered archetypes of class, colonialism, and imperial culture with all its tropes of dehumanising bigotry. (‘Piggy’ for example, is so named because of his girth; his murder aligns him with the wild pigs that are hunted for sport by Jack and his gang of warriors.) And yet, the duality of two different shooting styles carries over a slippage between fictional character and pseudo-documentary actors into the finished film.

Vieques in 1961

Despite the discrepancies between the boys’ experience and what Brook imagined it to be, he insisted that the cinema “introduces evidence,” at the expense of the “magic” (DVD Commentary). For some critics there was altogether too much evidence, as the boys were too obviously British schoolboys bringing their boarding school culture along with them, and not generic ‘human’ children. *New Yorker* critic Jonathan Miller (1963) singled out Hugh Edwards who plays Piggy, one of the only British actors with dialogue, as having a “dreary realism” that challenges the “Wagnerian heroism” of some of the other characters. Miller (1963) described Brooks’ version as “brilliant local satire” because it “never departs from the classroom idiom.” Edwards’ performance, including his storytelling captured in synch sound, of his hometown of Camberley, grounds the film in a world far from Vieques and its white sand beaches. Even if the boys are in fact mostly from the USA, Miller’s framing of the film as satire is a useful observation for separating the two registers on which the film is operating.

Brook himself says that the boys in his film were not acting at all, in a familiar denial of the labour of non-professional actors. In Brooks’ account, they performed a documentary truth about the idea of paradise, and its vulnerability to destruction (DVD Commentary). The destruction of paradise is most clearly evoked in the closing image of the island burning, and once the history of the island is brought into play, this image cannot help but reference the devastation of Vieques caused by the US Navy. Miller’s satire becomes a dark irony. Even at the time, the crew noted the garbage strewn everywhere, although environmental considerations were hardly a concern in 1961. (DVD Commentary, 2013 commentary), Brook’s analysis of the ending of his film departs significantly from Golding’s when he says that the moral is that paradise can be destroyed, as if the very experience of living on Vieques for three months had awakened him to the vulnerability of island life (Figures 7 & 8).



Figure 7 - Ralph (James Aubrey) in penultimate shot of *Lord of the Flies* (Brook, 1963).



Figure 8 - Vieques burning in final shot of *Lord of the Flies* (Brook, 1963).

Although Golding's novel also ends with a great fire, it is more symbolic than actual, and his characters are fearful only for their own lives, not for that of the island. Jack and his allies' attempt to smoke Ralph out becomes a raging fire that renders the rescue scene as a just-in-time deliverance. The natural beauty of the island captured on film is far more viscerally destroyed in the film version of *Lord of the Flies*, especially if we wonder how the shot of flames and smoke was captured. In the final shot of the film, Jack is framed against a scene of total devastation, a ruination of the island that is mostly invisible today, locked up in the

'wilderness reserve' that remains – aside from the beaches that have been cleaned up – off limits to the general public.

Brian Ireland notes that the parable of *Lord of the Flies* was written alongside the threat of nuclear warfare during the "Age of Anxiety" (2017, p. 27). Golding's warning about human violence is in this sense a specifically Cold-War anxiety around the existential threat of atomic weapons, and the plot is in fact triggered by the unexplained evacuation of the children from Britain (by plane) during a fictional war. The novel was even perceived by some of its first reviewers as being a science fiction narrative (Ireland, 2017, p.36). Spending three months on Vieques in 1961, Brook could not ignore the ravaged landscape that he had to shoot around. His final shots of the island on fire, likely set intentionally for the film, raise the stakes of the parable beyond a fictional story of bullying boys.

Paradise can be destroyed in many ways, and the destruction of Vieques, along with several other islands (e.g. Culebra, Vieques' 'sister island' near Puerto Rico and the Marshall Islands in the Central Pacific) have been especially contaminated by the US military, whose exercises in these islands are routinely carried out in the vicinity of civilian populations. Napalm, depleted uranium, and other toxic substances have been responsible for exceptionally high rates of cancer and other illnesses on Vieques (Aponte, 2004, p. 67); meanwhile, the live impact area of the west end of the island "contains more craters per square inch than the moon does," due to the dropping of 17,783 tons of bombs from 1983 to 1998 (Aponte, 2004, p. 67). It's hard to know what was going on militarily in 1961 besides the aid to forces in the failed invasion of Cuba. Very likely, the skies and seas were used for 'war games' involving ships, planes and troops. Because the military strongly resisted cooperation with the local community and prevented development, the island was effectively a "cold war hostage" at the time of the film shoot (McCaffrey, 2002, p.36).

If islandness implies vulnerability on a global scale, it can also lead to islanders becoming experimental subjects, deemed to be expendable (Foly et. al., 2023, p. 1803). While this was evidently the case for Viequenses, it is also true that the activism of the Vieques population, which eventually drove the US Navy out, is what brought the island to global attention. Their resistance to the military's abusive collusion with "toxic capitalism" is a model of grass-roots activism (Santana, 2002). Social justice rallies in defence of the islanders, supported by allies from the main island of Puerto Rico and from continental North America took place across the US in 2000 (Santana, 2002, p. 43; Aponte, 2004, p. 68). The closing of the base in 2003 was the direct result of community activism and non-violent protest that earned the respect of politicians alongside social-justice warriors. This story of survival through community stands in stark contrast to Golding's version of island survival through violence.

The desert-island literary trope is often treated as one of survival and *Lord of the Flies* might be compared to the many films about plane crashes in inaccessible mountainous regions. And yet, the island setting differs significantly from the mountain setting insofar as islands are sites of transit (Kallis et. al., 2022). The sea is a porous filter that allows interactions between islanders, visitors, invaders and saviours. Strategically located in the mid-Atlantic, Puerto Rico and its satellite islands provided crucial ports for Spanish, French, and British colonial settlers and in 1898 became a US military stronghold. The small population of Vieques in the 1960s were descendants of Spanish settlers and African slaves who remained on the island after the decline of the sugar industry in the 1920s and 1930s, and who turned to fishing and agriculture for subsistence (McCaffrey, 2002; Aponte, 2004). Since the 16th century, when the original Taino people were decimated by disease, Vieques has been a contested site. Philip Conkling's somewhat romantic notion of islandness as "metaphysical

sensation" (2007, p. 200) seems highly inappropriate to the struggles that have faced the people of Vieques.

Golding's vision of island culture as a battle of wills in which fear mongering and violence triumphs over communal co-operation and democratic leadership tends to contradict most theories of islandness that are grounded in solidarity and loyalty. Foley et. al. note that conflict can indeed characterise island life, although it can usually be traced to competing claims to limited resources (2023, p. 1806) – and not due to 'human nature' as Golding would have it. The boys in Brook's film do, however, arguably exhibit that metaphysical feeling that Conkling notes. Off-screen and in some of the footage that made it into the final film, the child actors are enjoying the pleasures of isolation, the slowness of island time (Cansano, 2012) and can be thought of as the first tourists on Vieques. Certainly, when the men returned for their reunion in 1995, they were part of a nascent tourist industry.

Conclusion

Raymond Leppard's original soundtrack for *Lord of the Flies*, based on a rendition of the Christian mass first introduced by Jack's small choir, overwhelms the film with a Christian liturgy and places its themes squarely within British cultural traditions. Along with the implicit class character of the two groups of boys that form on the island, Golding's version of 'human nature' is quite clearly one of British society. Brook's own background as an English schoolboy is equally significant in this respect and biographer Michael Kustow describes *Lord of the Flies* as Brook's "reckoning with England" (2005, p. 123) In fact, the film opens with grainy shots of boys in a British boarding school in a prologue that has no parallel in the book. Despite his crafting of 'empty space' on Vieques, Brook's characters are explicitly British, stranded on the island along with their very specific cultural baggage of divisive British culture.

Responding to Golding's original novel, in which the British cultural signs are perhaps more subtly inscribed, sociologist Rutger Bregman challenged Golding's 'thesis' in his book called *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, in which he provides the counter example of six boys from Tonga who were actually stranded on a tropical island and managed to survive by co-operatively learning how to live off the land and help each other. The story of the Tonga boys has also been filmed in a reenactment documentary that was produced by Australian TV in 1996 (*The Castaways*). These boys had acquired valuable skills to live in nature from their indigenous elders and were well-prepared to live five months without any modern implements. They landed on the island as kids playing hooky from a modern school, but once stranded they did not bully and murder each other. We don't know how the boys who were cast in *Lord of the Flies* might have behaved if they were actually stranded, as they were neither Indigenous nor from British Boarding schools for the most part. They were privileged children of arty parents whose experience in 1961 was life-changing in a mostly positive way. Hugh Edwards and Jack Aubrey even went to Cannes and met a bunch of celebrity movie stars.

The history of Vieques is one of colonial violence, slavery, military appropriation, and environmental devastation caused by decades of military manoeuvres. The fact that the filmmakers used that situation to create the imaginary situation of stranded schoolboys conflates one narrative with a quite different experience. The mapping of the 'theatre of cruelty' onto an actual theatre of war may have transpired out of wilful ignorance on the part of the filmmakers, but decades later, it stands as a remarkable collision of cultural aspirations

and modernist aesthetics with the 'toxic militarism' of US Cold War excess. Golding's thesis may have been better articulated if Brook had removed the fiction from his docufiction and looked more carefully at the island that he himself 'occupied' in the summer of 1961 with his film crew and child actors.

The boys scrambling up cliffs, splashing in the water, and running through the jungle are nothing if not entitled children, free to play within a new set of rules, that of the filmmaker. Cinematographer Tom Hollyman describes them as 'boys being boys,' and regrets that not enough of that footage made it into the final film (*Behind the Scenes* 2013), which is due of course to Brook's commitment to imposing one situation onto the other. Brook was explicitly aiming to displace the 'magic' of the novel by documentary truth, but his adaptation of *Lord of the Flies* transposes Golding's fantasy of an island to a false record of Vieques stripped of its record of violence.

In conclusion, we can see that, despite Peter Brook's efforts to resist the artifice of commercial cinema, his film carefully produced the artifice of an empty space. Moreover, the depiction of violence on screen masked the violence perpetuated by the U.S. Navy on the people and ecology of Vieques. The boys who were cast may have had life-changing experiences as islanders and experimental subjects, and yet just as their experience remained outside the film's storyline, so too did the local residents. The abstraction of violence became a mask for the actual violence of military occupation, a dark irony that is only obliquely recognised in the final image of apocalyptic conflagration.

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