

Locarno Festival  
Official selection

CLIMAGE présente

# INSULAIRE

un film de  
STÉPHANE GOËL

textes  
ANTOINE JACCOUD

narration  
MATHIEU AMALRIC

réalisation STÉPHANE GOËL image JOHANNICH UZONBIENS son CARLOS RAMÍREZ DJAZ montage NICOLAS HISLAIRE assistante de réalisation CÉLINE PERNET scénario ANTOINE JACCOUD, STÉPHANE GOËL  
narration MATHIEU AMALRIC musique SARA GOWAL D montage IANOMI CUENDE T étalonnage ROBIN ERARD production CLIMAGE coproduction RADIO TÉLÉVISION SUISSE / UNITÉ DES FILMS  
DOCUMENTAIRES - RENÉ CHALLAND, GASPARD LAMURE, STEVEN ARTO. Ce projet est soutenu de OFFICE FÉDÉRAL DE LA CULTURE (OFCL), FONDATION CULTURELLE SUISSOMAGNE, BURGERGEMEINDE BERN,  
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Climage presents

# ISLANDER

A film by

**STÉPHANE GOËL**

**PRODUCTION**

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Press Kit, Poster and still downloadable at:

**<https://climage.ch/films/insulaire/>**

Look,  
straight ahead.  
There is it.  
My little kingdom.  
An island, merely an island,  
tiny, compared with the immensity around it,  
but huge in the eyes of a man  
who had never seen the like,  
except maybe in his dreams.



## SYNOPSIS

In 1877, Alfred Von Rodt, a young aristocrat from Bern and former mercenary, became the governor of a tiny Chilean island, the very one that inspired the story of Robinson Crusoe. For twenty-eight years Von Rodt will multiply attempts to make this rock - populated by a few dozen islanders and thousands of goats – his utopic "little kingdom". Dropped by his wealthy family, vanquished by storms and shipwrecks, he fails and succeeds a hundred times. ISLANDER tells the story of the journey of this 'black sheep', decided to break with his origins and observes the everyday life of his descendants who inhabit today this lost paradise. The film investigates this romantic but ambivalent relationship that links the islanders to the very narrow limits of a territory set in the midst of the vastness of the ocean, like a small Switzerland lost in the middle of the Pacific.



## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Mixing the past and the present of a singular territory, ISLANDER aims to tell the destiny of Alfred Von Rodt, Bernese adventurer turned governor of a small island of the Pacific, while going to meet a community full of fears, aspirations and contradictions. A former mercenary, lame but optimistic, enterprising but benevolent colonist, young aristocrat in contradiction with his environment, Utopian at a point to be disturbed by his family, Von Rodt is an intriguing character whose complexity can be revealed only in fragments. While excavating in the archives of the Library of the Bourgeoisie of Berne, we were able to exhume some letters resulting from a correspondence which he maintained with certain members of his family. These pieces of life have nourished, under the pen of Antoine Jaccoud, the writing of a first-person story revealing the intimate face of his Robinson-style adventure. Interrupted by the memories told by his Chilean descendants, this voiceover gives life to the Bernese baron for the time of the film.

Starting from the path of his patriarch, the film also portrays a community that identifies itself only partially as Chilean, now wants to find concrete conditions - political, economic, environmental - to its existence. By following bribes of everyday life it shows how the descendants of a Swiss aristocrat and his followers build and assert their identity in an extremely sensitive relationship with a territory that is sublime, remote and threatening. Beyond the charm that emerges from the magnificent beauty of the landscapes and the strong presence of the islanders, remain some questions and worries. What is identity? Isn't it inevitably based on exclusion? Isn't any species not belonging to the original Eden "invasive"? Is the lack of resources an objective fact? Should walls be created to keep these resources to oneself? In a world where borders are always rising, the way in which Robinson Crusoe's residents express their identity and rights raises very contemporary moral issues. These distant cousins give us a mirror and perhaps remind us, more than others, that the island and its insularity are also cultural constructions.

Shot on the coast of Chile, this film may take us back to another island.

Ours.



## ALFRED VON RODT

Aristocrat and mercenary

When the Bernese Alfred Von Rodt landed on Más a Tierra (renamed Robinson Crusoe in 1966) in the morning of 19 May 1877, after 12 days of sailing, he immediately fell in love with the island.

Más a Tierra is a fabulous rock in the middle of the immensity of the Pacific. It is located 667 kilometers off Valparaiso and 187 kilometers from its neighbor, Más Afuera Island with which it forms the archipelago Juan Fernandez. Más a Tierra is a small mountainous island with exuberant vegetation. It is on this island that was abandoned the Scottish pirate who inspired Daniel Defoe the story of Robinson Crusoe.

When Von Rodt arrives, the island is inhabited by 56 people, 100 cows, 60 horses and about 7'000 wild goats. After years of drifting, the baron has the impression of finally finding a land where to take root.



Son of Carl Samuel Von Rodt, a strict theologian, cantonal officer and chancellor of the canton of Bern, Alfred Von Rodt is the inheritor of one of the largest and richest families in Switzerland. Unable to support the stifling atmosphere and narrow social straitjacket his family lives in Bern, he dreams of traveling and plans a military career. Being an undisciplined student, he intersects his studies with long periods of military service and becomes an artillery officer. Without a diploma and without the permission of his family, he leaves to engage in the Austrian imperial army. In 1866, Alfred was seriously wounded in a battle on the Austro-Prussian front. His leg being torn by shrapnel, he couldn't go back to battle and travels through Europe. In 1870, when the Franco-German war broke out Alfred Von Rodt did not hesitate and, despite his handicap in the leg, he joined the Foreign Legion. He fights alongside French troops and participates in the main battles of the war until the capitulation. He then goes to London to learn English. His half-brother, Gottfried picks him up and takes him back to Bern. After a few weeks in Switzerland, Alfred is recovered. He begins to think of a new adventure. Thousands of compatriots then emigrate to Latin America and he begins to dream about this new Eldorado. He moved to San Sebastian for some time to learn Spanish and in 1876 he crossed the Atlantic Ocean in a first-class cabin to try his luck in the new world. He passes through Brazil, Argentina and crosses the Andes Cordillera, looking for a place to settle. He ends up by arriving in Valparaiso, Chile, in early 1877.

There, an extraordinary advertisement in the local press caught his attention. The Chilean government offers to the highest bidder to rent the Juan Fernandez archipelago. Alfred Von Rodt won the auction by offering to pay \$ 1,500 a year. On April 17, 1877, he received the official title of Sub-Prefect, Judge and Minister of Customs and Post of Juan Fernandez Islands. He buys for \$ 2,000 a small vessel and embarks immediately to take possession of the territory on which he will reign until his death in 1905.

### « Robinson Crusoe II »

In an enthusiastic letter with the news he sent to a cousin in Bern, he wrote: "This island will be my homeland, my Switzerland, the ocean will replace the Alps" and he signs: "Robinson Crusoe II".

Having just landed, Alfred immediately goes to work so to lay the foundations of what must become his kingdom. He recruits families on the mainland, traces the streets of a village nestled in the bay and has a house built with a vast library, hundreds of classics he brings from Europe. Along with his development work, he begins the slaughter of hundreds of sea lions and transports the skins to Valparaiso aboard his small ship. February 22, 1878, first blow, the boat is caught in a storm and sinks with more than 700 skins of sea lions on board. Cutting down a large part of the endemic forests, introducing cows and sheeps, he also tries to take advantage of all the resources of the island. Without success. Alfred must face his first financial setbacks. He writes to his family in Switzerland and borrows enough money to buy a second boat, larger and more robust.

Over the years, the number of inhabitants of the island grows gradually while business restarts. He believes that the hardest is behind him and continues to hunt sea lions. Unfortunately, the bad luck seems to be on Alfred Von Rodt. His new ship is also shipwrecked, as well as a third, which he built on the island. Finally, in February 1879, Chile declared war on Peru and Bolivia. The Pacific War will last 5 years and takes place mainly at sea.

Despite the construction of a fourth boat, Von Rodt can no longer sell his goods. He is on the edge of bankruptcy and can no longer afford the price of renting the island. As a last resort, he writes to his family in Switzerland and asks them to liquidate all his fortune, to sell all his possessions and houses and to send him the money. Several residents leave the island, but a core of faithful decides to stay with Alfred Von Rodt. Until the end of the war, the economic conditions on the island will remain very precarious. Von Rodt survives by selling some fur to passing ships. His dream of fortune is dead, but he remains the sole ruler of his little kingdom, reigning order and justice, sometimes as chief, sometimes as a policeman, officer of civil status, judge, pastor and schoolmaster. He marries a resident of the island with whom he has 6 children, 5 boys and a girl who dies of fever. Occasionally, he still sends letters to his family in Switzerland, in which he shows an optimism and an unshakeable faith.

After the war the business starts again slightly. Von Rodt has a new boat with which he transports wood. He also associates with a chef, Eduard Schreiber, with whom he is developing a technique for canning lobster. They build a factory and thus give birth to an activity which, even today, represents the main source of income of the archipelago. The business is going well for a while, to the point that two other factories are then built before failing as the 1891 civil war breaks out. The island will therefore only experience a very relative development. At the turn of the century, it houses 22 families (of Chilean, Russian, Italian, German, Portuguese, French and Swiss origin), 40 wooden barracks, including a school and a post office. In 1905, when most of the time he retires to his big house in the middle of his books, Alfred Von Rodt fell ill. He died on July 4, at age 62. He lived 28 years on his island, the same duration as Robinson Crusoe in Daniel Defoe's novel.



## SUCCESSORS

After the death of the patriarch, the Von Rodt family - now called "De Rodt" - is spread. Some of Alfred's children went to the continent, but two of his sons remained on the island and continued to live in the baron's vast home until it was destroyed in a fire. With around 40 members, the De Rodt family is still one of the most important on the island. In fact, the living conditions of the islanders have not changed much for a century. The population still resides in the unique village of San Juan Bautista, nestled at the bottom of a bay at the base of the highest mountain on the island. Its economy is based mainly on fishing and a bit of farming, its daily rhythm punctuated by storms and a few passing ships.

On February 27, 2010, a magnitude 8.8 earthquake off the coast of Chile caused a huge tsunami that swept the island. Half of the village is destroyed, as well as the port facilities, the administrative buildings, the small museum and the municipal cemetery. Twenty victims are to be deplored.



Since this tragic event, the destiny of the island has changed considerably. The Chilean state has decided to dedicate significant funds to its reconstruction, the island has to deal with the reception of new residents. This increase in the population (estimated at 900 inhabitants today) has an impact on both the environment and the social structure of Robinson Crusoe.

In response to these changes, islanders - especially the new generation - are now dreaming of giving back to their territory the original purity that prevailed before the settlers settled there. Wild goats, rabbits and mulberries proliferate to the detriment of local species, and are the target of frantic and almost obsessive eradication. For some, other invasive species are threatening. Whether tourists attracted by the wild beauty of landscapes and the romantic idea of living as Robinson or the arrival of new residents (which the islanders call "Plásticos"), it is essentially a man whose islanders want to protect themselves today, and within this small community, the beginnings of a desire to assert identity and the utopia of political autonomy that allow its inhabitants to fully control their territory.



## **STÉPHANE GOËL – DIRECTOR/PRODUCER**

### **Stéphane Goël / Director - Producer**

Born in 1965 in Lausanne, Switzerland. Has worked as an editor and independent director since 1985. Lived and worked in New York between 1987 and 1993. Directed several artistic and experimental videos before moving on to full-fledged documentaries.

### **Partial Filmography**

#### AS A DIRECTOR:

2018 INSULAIRE – doc cinéma  
2015 FRAGMENTS DU PARADIS  
2012 DE LA CUISINE AU PARLEMENT  
2010 PRUD'HOMMES  
2008 LE CRÉPUSCULE DES CELTES  
2007 LE SECRET  
2006 QUE VIVA MAURICIO DEMIERRE  
2005 SUR LES TRACES DES PHARAONS NOIRS  
2005 ATELIERS DU NORD  
2003 LE POISON-LE CRIME DE MARACON  
2001 ARCHITECTOUR DE LA SUISSE  
1997 CAMPAGNE PERDUE  
1996 L'OR DE LA RESERVE  
1995 LE GARÇON S'APPELAIT APACHE  
1993 A L'OUËST DU PECOS  
1990 LA RÉPUBLIQUE DE L'UTOPIE

#### AS A PRODUCER :

2018 LES DAMES de Stéphanie Chuat et Véronique Reymond  
2015 ATTERRISSAGE FORCÉ de Daniel Wyss  
2014 LA BARQUE N'EST PAS PLEINE de Daniel Wyss  
2011 VOL SPÉCIAL de Fernand Melgar  
2008 LA FORTERESSE de Fernand Melgar  
2007 MONDES CONTRAIRES de Camille Cottagnoud  
2007 LE TRAIN LE PLUS DIFFICILE DU MONDE de Daniel Wyss

## CAST

Director and Producer	Stéphane GOËL
Script	Antoine JACCOUD
Narration	Mathieu AMALRIC
Director's assistant	Céline PERNET
DOP	Joakim CHARDONNENS
Sound	Carlos IBAÑEZ DIAZ
Editor	Nicolas HISLAIRE
Original music	Sara OSWALD
Scaling	Robin ERARD
Sound mix	Jérôme CUENDET
Stills	Anne GOLAZ
Production	CLIMAGE Audiovisuel
Coproduction	RTS – SSR, Irène CHALLAND Gaspard LAMUNIÈRE, Steven ARTELS
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