

BCF

for Susanna and BIMTAC

Passengers never see the island until they are near it. From the terminal it seems as if the boat will disappear into open water, towards the mountains in the distance. Terminal, indeed. After departure, the boat turns a corner, and there, either appearing through the mist or separating itself from the islands and mountains behind: the destination, where it always is. Never exactly anticipated, but on seeing it they always say "yes, of course that's how it is."

The passage was never free, of course, but everyone knew they were paying only for a one-way trip. The terminal situation was dire enough to inhibit return, in any case. The price kept increasing, though. There was a folk tradition of a time when a couple of coins were enough, but then it became a considerable sum. People waited, gathering in sizable groups, until the announcement that they could board, made by the head boatman, very tall and thin, dark-haired, apparently infinitely old, and with an unplaceable exotic accent. He clearly disapproved of the fact that many people appeared in cars, the cars that had meant so much to them. But he had to take them too, and he stood in the middle of the gangplank waving what looked like a battered carved cedar paddle while he beckoned the vehicles aboard, shouting "cars on, cars on, zis way to Bones Island". The foot passengers took it as his name. He was "Car-on" for them. Car-on looked benevolently at the foot passengers – he preferred their more straightforward attachment to the ground, and liked it when they were accompanied by dogs – and would usher them gently onto his boat.

We were going to make a movie. It was going to be a disaster movie

following a well-worn formula. Start with half a dozen character types, not real human types or even the types that real humans suppose to be the types of character, but the types found in other such movies. Then they will face some crisis together, and your plot will be made out of telling interactions between them. The disaster will occur on a ferry. Not this feeble little ferry going to this little island, so old and so creaky that one of us will refer to it as the BCF, The Before Christ Ferry, but a large smooth new ferry with thousands of passengers in enviable cars. Our plan will require that the passengers, besides the central half dozen, be filled in by digital repetition and variation of a few sampled actors. But, undecided what these few should look like, we will take a trip on the little ferry, much cheaper than hiring the big one we will need for the film itself, to film a number of representative passengers. Then the director and the casting people will see which work best as movie-typical ferry passengers. They will hire a few actors to represent these hundreds and the special effects people will do the rest.

We divided into two teams, each with an unobtrusive camera. One team mingled with the foot passengers and filmed them discreetly, while the other occupied a large SUV and filmed other cars and their occupants through the windows. There were so many characters! Each one individual and typical. We filmed them all. In fact, we started filming before the ferry had left the terminal. Then we went to the lounge and filmed the people there. Very discreetly, we thought.

We noticed something extremely strange: as the voyage progressed there seem to be fewer and fewer people. The effect was particularly noticeable as soon as the island became visible. We supposed that our filming had been noticed and that people had retreated to the car deck. So shortly before arrival we went as silently as we could down to

the car deck, to get some more footage of the people there, arriving just as the boat got to the island. But amazingly there was only one person waiting to depart, a woman with a dog on a leash, right at the bow. We took many pictures of the two of them as they walked over the ramp and off into the mist that had descended again, from many different angles and with many different filters. We made sure not to disembark ourselves, or to go anywhere near the ramp. We stayed on board and travelled back to the mainland in the otherwise empty ferry, puzzled and a little frightened. We wondered whether the digital team had got there before us, so that the only passengers on this non-peak sailing were this person and this dog, reproduced and varied a hundredfold by clever technology. When we had arrived at the terminal we took the elevator down to the car deck to depart. There were mirrors on two walls of the elevator, facing one another and reflecting one another's reflections. Someone looked me in her eye and wondered "Is that me? But there are a thousand of me, and of all of you, and we're all the same."