

The Videos of Guy Ben-Ner: Escape from the Movies, Escape from Home

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As children, cinema confronted us like a Titan, or a mythic landscape, bigger than life, overwhelming us like our dreams, sublime and often frightening, like a fantasy that had become separated from us and now confronts us as something both familiar and foreign. It was a world we entered through the darkness, coming into a foreign space, so different from home or school, surrounded by strangers whom we quickly forgot as we encountered characters on the screen that we soon felt we knew better than our family, or even ourselves. Taken to a matinee as a child I could never understand how it could still be day when we emerged from the theater, blinking at the daylight. How long had we been in there – days it seemed, sometimes a whole life time... The way home from the theater was suffused with the lingering tones and actions of the movie whose fading I anticipated with anxiety. If I was with other children, we played characters from the film and reenacted scenes, which would provide scenarios for playground activities for weeks. If alone, I recalled the images of the film in a reverie that seemed to merge with my dreams that night – as if they were all part of a continuous parallel life: movies, fantasies, dreams.

At some point this power of the movies becomes alien to us. The cracks in its calculation become clear. Our fascination becomes displaced from the world of the movies to their qualities, whether aesthetic, political or intellectual. The movies, we realize, have designs on us, on our money, on our ideas, on our emotions. As such they are no longer within us, but outside; their size, their grandeur, their budgets and power no longer seem like sublime gifts, but strike us as unfair competition. Their power in our lives, their very massiveness and omnipresence, begins to rub us the wrong way. Conscious of the control they exert, we begin to consume them critically. Perhaps most importantly we stop playing with them.

The delightful videos of Guy Ben-Ner seem on first viewing to preserve a childish participation in the movies, showing he has continued to play with their images and to conceive of his own video-making as a sort of play. But this first impression fools us with its simplicity. In some ways it does get it right. These videos are charming, they are deeply concerned with both childhood and play, and they offer profound perspectives about the realization of fantasy. But they are not childish or even child-like. Their charm is lined with resignation and more than a hint of tragedy. Crucially, these videos come from an adult viewpoint, and they measure, with humor, but also with sadness, the distance between adult and child, moving from play as fantasy to play as a demanding sort of work.

Guy Ben-Ner's videos could even be described as anti-movies, but anti-movies that evoke the movies and refashion them, as a child does when she takes a favorite film as the theme for her games and fantasies. But while the child simply wants to crawl inside the world of the film, Ben-Ner works out his distance from the movies, even liberates himself from their illusions and creates something very different from the overwhelming world of cinema. In contrast to the power of the movies to create an alternate universe, Ben-Ner's videos take place at home, in recognizable domestic spaces. But home is the center of movies too, the locus of all domestic drama, one of the most mythologized spaces in all cinema, so what's new? Quite a bit. Ben-Ner's videos are filmed at home and feel authentically "home-made." They show his living spaces and star himself, his children and sometimes his wife. But through play this domestic space becomes someplace else, a place for fantasy – albeit a fantasy that, unlike the power of the movies, never entirely transforms the place it actually is. Thus their charm comes largely from their irony, not naiveté.

In an era in which films are most often shown on television monitors, films in theaters are sometimes shot on video and usually edited on it (and may increasingly be projected in digital versions), the gap between film and video seems to be collapsing. But the concept that film or video must define their essence as media in terms of their technical differences depends on a rather narrow and somewhat outmoded modernism based in a self-reflexive materiality. While Sartre claimed existence precedes essence, I would claim that in art, practices and histories create and define essences (as well as transform them). In the last few decades video has taken over the role of recording home movies from the smaller film gages (16mm, 8mm and super-8). This homemade feel, as much as video's role as installation in art galleries, plays an important role in Ben-Ner's work. Video's lack of expense, its familiar inherence in our daily life, its appearance on monitors that form part of our domestic furniture, its general lack of the aura of celebrity and spectacle that film possesses, make it a perfect medium for staging Ben-Ner's home epics. Video stands close enough to film to recall it, far enough from it to place such a reference in quotations.

But cinema has a long history and includes many different practices. Although aspects of cinema (projected light in a dark theater, the portrayal of figures in motion) always made it a medium suitable for the projection of fantasy, it did not always possess the overwhelming scale and absorptive techniques that eventually made it so overpowering. Films from the first decade of film history could be described as "poor cinema" in contrast to today's films. Early cinema had a simple and direct impact, with images directed towards the viewer, rather than towards the creation of a realistic fictional world. Early films displayed gags, stunts, thrills and spectacular moments in an often discontinuous manner, presenting visual attractions, rather than

realistic, absorptive narration. In its second decade of history, films moved into story-telling, but initially it drew on the traditions and conventions of popular theater, using symbolic props and abbreviated actions to present ten-minute versions of works from well-known novels and the theater, often relying on the fact that the audience already knew these stories to fill in the gaps. Both these aspects of early cinema – the gags and attractions and a short-hand style of presenting stories, rather than psychological characters, realistic elaborate sets, or continuity editing – play a role in Ben-Ner's "poor cinema."

Ben-Ner's video re-stagings of Melville's *Moby Dick* and Truffaut's *L'enfant sauvage* recycle devices from early cinema. This sometimes includes direct references and quotations from early films. In *Wild Boy* the teacher (played by Ben-Ner) astonishes the feral child (played by his son Amir) by creating a flipbook showing Lumière's *The Arrival of a Train at the Station* (1895), one of the first films ever projected, which (in an uncorroborated legend) caused its audience to react in panic. In *Moby Dick*, Ben-Ner and his daughter Elia recreate a trick from Georges Méliès's *The Terrible Turkish Executioner* (1904) in which a severed pair of legs dance first independently from the rest of the body, and then, after being sliced in two, the body magically regains its unity. Besides these direct references to specific early films, Ben-Ner creates his own tricks, reviving the Méliès tradition of magic films. Some tricks involve visual substitutions or animation, such as the shark fin that swims around Ben-Ner's living-room in *Moby Dick*. Others manipulate props in front of the camera, such as *Moby Dick*'s rocking dinner table and mobile soup bowl devised to indicate a ship pitching on rough seas. Ben-Ner also performs a number of beautifully executed physical gags (such as the pratfalls around the refrigerator door in *Moby Dick*) that would be worthy of a Buster Keaton in training. Although the tricks of early cinema were the ancestors of contemporary special effects, they are also very different. Today's special effects employ complex technologies that audiences generally don't understand. Tricks, in contrast, seem homemade, and viewers are invited to speculate on how they are done. Thus in order to refer to – and in some sense digest and overcome – the power of Hollywood, Ben-Ner not only uses a more humble medium – video – but draws on the more spontaneous, do-it-yourself era of early cinema.

But just as describing Ben-Ner's works as childlike misses the true dynamics of his vision, posing early cinema as a "lost paradise" oversimplifies the dynamics of film history. The tricks, slapstick gags, and assorted attractions that pepper Ben-Ner's videos do more than provide nostalgia for silent cinema. They partly derive, as he explained to me, from video's current condition of exhibition as installations in an exhibition space rather than a theatrical setting, with an audience in transit, coming and going without necessarily watching the entire tape or getting the whole story, needing brief bits of self-contained attention-drawing attractions (like the lovely dance that Ben-Ner's daughter Elia performs in the middle of *Wild Boy* without otherwise appearing in the video). But the "poor cinema" aspect of Ben-Ner's epics cannot affect us in the same way early cinema affected its first audiences. Again, in spite of their charm, Ben-Ner's works are never naïve, but show a strong awareness of history, an awareness the first audience could not have had.

Wild Boy makes this explicit. Taking on the theme of education, discipline and the process of civilizing a child from Truffaut's 1970 film *L'enfant sauvage*, Ben-Ner extends, redefines, and possibly undercuts Truffaut's treatment. Truffaut's film creates a careful historical reconstruction based on a real case of a feral child discovered in rural France in 1798. The film pits the civilizing influence of Dr. Itard against Victor, the natural, even animal-like, child. It comments on the nature of French Enlightenment, the role of discipline in civilization, and even, perhaps (as some critics suggested), Truffaut's early filmmaking with child actor Jean-Pierre Léaud. Ben-Ner's video anchors the story within the techniques of a home-movie and transforms this story of a wild child and his teacher into a much more direct parable on parenting. The video simultaneously seems more artificial and more real than Truffaut's film. An expanse of green Astroturf, a dripping faucet, pet rabbits and a parakeet seem to parody rural France rather than attempting to recreate it. But, on the other hand, I have never watched *Wild Boy* without hearing someone gasp as Ben-Ner's son's beautiful black curls are shorn, recognizing that they are watching an important moment in the life of a real child.

While *Wild Boy* shares the ambivalence that Truffaut's film poses about the process of civilization – whether it opens a new world or simply closes off sources of delight and freedom – Ben-Ner's terms are different. Truffaut's scope takes in history and the conflict between nature and culture. Ben-Ner's canvas remains intimate: history becomes replaced by the immediacy of the interaction between father and son. Nature appears only through the most inadequate of substitutes. All action takes place within the confined space of an urban loft (as a beautiful image, filmed from outside the loft, looking in through a window showing Amir perched in his tree, makes absolutely clear) and the boundless expanse of imagination. Ben-Ner tackles Truffaut's larger issues by making them part of a home-movie, in which the conflict between wildness and discipline becomes hilariously redefined (in the end of the video) as the transformation of work into play (and perhaps vice versa).

A world of difference exists between the performance of Jean-Pierre Cargol as the wild child Victor and that of Amir, Ben-Ner's son. On the one hand, we no more believe that this happy, wide-eyed child has been living in the wild, than that his Astroturf upholstered playhouse could be a woodland lair. But on the other hand, the interaction between father and son in the film strikes us as almost documentary in its revelatory power. We are not watching a fiction; we are watching father and son play a game together. Thus when Amir looks into the camera in close-up, his eyes affect us with the intensity of a direct glance. This is not acting: rather, we catch the penetrating gaze of a growing child. The issues of having to tame a wild child, of the balancing of power and love, discipline and freedom that all parents undergo with their children, provide an authentic emotional energy that seeps through the obvious artificiality of this supposedly fictional world.

Thus the artificial sets and improvisations of props in both *Wild Boy* and *Moby Dick* play more than a comic role. First, they

mark a distance from the illusionism of a Hollywood production (or even a European art film). But they also take on a certain poignancy and even poetry from their poverty of means. In an extraordinary moment Ben-Ner conveys the coming of dawn in this loft-forest through the slow opening of a refrigerator door, letting its dim light gradually suffuse the artificial landscape. Hilarious, yet oddly moving, this technological Aube captures the distance of our urban environment from a primitive wilderness, but also celebrates the richness of the video-maker's imagination as everyday objects summon up unexpected associations. Thus Ben-Ner's lack of realistic sets detours around Hollywood's powers of illusion, and re-discovers the art of make-believe, of making something out of nothing.

The use of everyday props as unlikely, but strangely appropriate, stand-ins for fantasies of epic proportion especially propels Ben-Ner's kitchen sink adaptation of *Moby Dick*. Kitchen cabinets become the sleeping quarters of whaling ship, a refrigerator serves as its cargo hold, while the sink appears as both the deck and a dockside bar. Not only does this recall children transforming their limited environment into a domain of play, it also recalls the techniques of the silent comedians that obviously inspire much of Ben-Ner's work. For Chaplin, a shoe is not simply a shoe, but becomes, in a desperate act of alimentary imagination, a roast turkey with leather sauce, a filet of sole, a dish of shoe-string spaghetti. Keaton's pragmatism seems to inspire the method of Ben-Ner's work as well as individual gags, since Keaton also uses unlikely things as tools, and transforms inhospitable places (an abandoned ocean liner in *The Navigator*, a locomotive in *The General*) into home-like environments, although Ben-Ner usually performs the opposite magic, making home into a whaling ship or primeval forest. (Ben-Ner also frequently adopts Keaton's signature stance of scanning the horizon.)

But as I have claimed already, there is, if not exactly a dark side to these delightful games, at least a lining of regret. Why does someone imagine their home as someplace else, unless they feel a profound desire to escape? *Moby Dick* and *Wild Boy* transform these escape fantasies into an exploration of the imagination, but both contain as well a claustrophobic sense of the confinement of the domestic, the discontents brought on by civilization, and an errant desire for the savage, even the destructive. An earlier, not quite as successful, but equally fascinating, video, *House Hold* foregrounds the darker fantasies that underlie the games Ben-Ner plays. Working under a crib, attempting to repair it, Ben-Ner becomes trapped when its barred side is lowered. Ben-Ner uses this delightfully improbable imprisonment for a scenario of escape that recalls the methodical storytelling of Bresson's *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, as well as invoking a demented Keaton or Rube Goldberg in the ingenuously absurd manipulation of objects and his own body which he undertakes to achieve his escape. Ben-Ner mutilates himself to construct tools, urinates with distance and precision to dislodge objects, weaves the hairs from his armpit into strings, uses his semen as glue to hold together a hammer he fashions from a carrot and an empty water bottle as he makes his getaway. The painstaking detailing of the ridiculously complex procedures that Ben-Ner undertakes to liberate himself from his crib-prison possesses a Kafka-like logic and a suspense occasionally worth of Hitchcock. But although his children play nearby and presumably adults are present within the range of his voice, Ben-Ner never calls out to anyone for help or rescue. One can't help but see an allegory in the midst of this darkly absurdist comedy, of a masculine sense of exile and imprisonment within domestic space, of temptation to retreat into solitude and self-absorption.

I mentioned to Ben-Ner that his works reminded me of *Robinson Crusoe* and he confessed that one of his earliest works, *Berkeley's Island*, was an adaptation of the Crusoe story of island exile, but that he felt it was a pretentious and rather immature work. Viewing it, I would not dispute his judgment of it, but it is also revelatory and confessional. Crusoe's desert island consists of a pile of sand and an iconic palm tree stuck in the middle of Ben-Ner's kitchen. Here he seems less obsessed with escape than with a philosophical speculation on the nature of solitude introduced by the reference to Bishop Berkeley's doctrine of solipsism, and a quote from Sartre posted at the opening of the video about the masturbating child whose existence depends on being perceived by adults and whose secret life therefore does not exist without an adult's gaze. Ben-Ner here tackles, a bit too directly perhaps, the opposition between a solipsistic consciousness, that believes that all the world depends on his perception, and an existential consciousness such as Sartre's, that believes our sense of self derives from the gaze of the Other. Ben-Ner's handyman ingenuity in this piece primarily revolves around devising novel techniques of masturbation, the ultimate 'faute de mieux' (as he explains, quoting Crusoe "I made use of what the island gave me"), as well as using his penis for a variety of tasks, such as extinguishing two candles at once or performing a "lip-synched" rendition of the song *Lipstick on Your Collar* in a jejune (but hilarious) demonstration of penis puppetry.

While rather primitive, and a bit immature, these earlier works help us understand the achievements of *Moby Dick* and *Wild Boy*. While both these later works involve a sense of the home environment as a place of exile, a place to escape from, they envision that escape in an entirely different manner than the earlier videos. Self-reliance and self-abuse give way in the later videos to scenarios of interaction with his children and shared fantasies. Games, play and fantasy open a way out of confinements, an escape from the routines and regimes of everyday life. But they also become integrated with everyday life, as fantasy becomes part of learning and growing up. Through playing games together, Ben-Ner is able to see his children not simply as alien creatures, but as participants in fantasies he shares with them.

Ben-Ner's beautiful children project a spontaneous delight and grace that his gawky adult body no longer possesses. And he seems to observe them often with a sense of regret that they too will have to shoulder the routines of everyday life, indeed that, as a parent, this must be part of his job – to teach them to have control over their bodies, to do as they are told. The wistful wide-eyed looks into his camera of both Amir and Elia carry the poignancy of Brakhage's description of the infant's eye as "an eye which reflects the loss of innocence more eloquently than any human feature...".

Yet, at the same time, if these video works allude to a loss of innocence, to the experience of isolation, solitude and alienation that exists at core of becoming an adult, they primarily portray an alternative to that isolation through participation. One of the most beautiful lines in the narration Peter Handke wrote for Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire* says, "When the child was a child, he played with enthusiasm. Now he shows such involvement only when it concerns his work." The solution to this dilemma can never be, as all the romantics from Blake to Brakhage have taught, pure regression: one can never go back to a childhood realm. But as an artist, one can access something of that realm of imagination through a disciplined work that paradoxically takes play as its model. Such art invites us to play along with it.

Early filmmakers acted as 'bricoleurs', handymen transforming a new technical invention without tradition into a pragmatic mechanism for storytelling and displaying attractions. The slapstick comedians continued this tradition of improvisation and redefinition into the twenties. Watching their work today, we should not sentimentalize it as innocent or without alienation, but rather recognize its persistent power in getting us to play along with it, participating in the fun and imagination as we watch. Guy Ben-Ner uses video to keep this tradition alive, creating anti-movies in which childhood fantasies meet adult ironies.