GUY BEN-NER

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Berkeley's Island (1999)

Guy Ben-Ner's films are amusing reworkings of literature. But they are more than that. In *Berkeley's Island* the story of Robinson Crusoe and especially the presentation of his emotional state are not only interwoven with the epistemology of Enlightenment philosopher George Berkeley. The dramatic structure of the film draws its distinctive flavour, moreover, from the dichotomy between the artist assuming the role of adventurer and his function as a father and house-husband.

Ben-Ner portrays himself as Robinson Crusoe, marooned on an island after a shipwreck. Abandoned to himself, he is absorbed by matters of survival and he grows aware of his isolation. Matters, which - over the course of the film – hint towards both an analogy and a tension between the fictional "Robinson" and the real persona of the artist. Ultimately, both find themselves hamstrung by their situation and dream of being in another place: Robinson wants to get back to civilisation, while Guy Ben-Ner fantasises about daring travel exploits. In contrast to such dreams, the spectator sees him as a "domestic artist" without a studio, bound to the four walls of his home and yoked to a multitasking role as visual artist, father and home-maker. Fittingly, the setting for this film is a little sand pit in the kitchen.

This chasm is even made more explicit by the way Ben-Ner uses the text: while passages from the novel are spoken off, direct dialogue flags the moments when his daughter Elia interrupts her father's work.

But *Berkeley's Island* goes even further beyond the reference to the novel. There is a second layer where, by such ruses as a change of clothing, Ben-Ner playfully explores George Berkeley's philosophy. In his principal work, the Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge of 1710, Berkeley argues that there are no such things as material objects and that the things we perceive are nothing but ideas. When Ben-Ner uses the edge of a mirror to turn his left leg into a pair, or makes his penis "sing" Connie Francis' Lipstick on your Collar, it becomes quite clear how much he identifies with the hypothesis that the mind can generate active ideas. Ben-Ner plays with anything that comes to hand, from utensils to body parts, putting them to unusual effect in his theatre play. With this very personal technique he can turn just about anything into material for dialogue, a backcloth or a stage set.

Moby Dick (2000)

The film *Moby Dick*, completed the following year, also builds on the pleasure the artist takes in subjecting everyday objects to his imagination. Once again, the kitchen is the setting for a film, and again it is about a yearning for adventure, a voyage to fill the sail of the artist's fantasy. This time the kitchen is converted into a bar and a ship. Characters from Herman Melville's novel Moby Dick are depicted in distinctive ways – like the cannibal Queequeg with his all-body tattoos, vividly illustrated by washing pegs lined up on the artist's chest, arms and stomach.

The short film reduces the story of Captain Ahab, the crazed whale-hunter, to its highlights, mixing Herman Melville's classic with slapstick from films by Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. These references to silent film govern the aesthetic of this work: Ben-Ner's *Moby Dick* upholds the absence of sound and by using title cards it retains the aesthetic of early cinema. But the work is also a very particular blend of silent and colour film, and the absurd comedy of Elia's appearance as a chicken demonstrates that *Moby Dick* is far from a cinema version of the book. Rather, it illustrates the ludic instincts of Guy Ben-Ner. *Moby Dick*, then, is a wacky, exhilarating game with characters, costumes, props and camera techniques - not least the swaying camera evoking a choppy sea.

Second Nature (2008) und Spies (2011)

From 2007 Guy Ben-Ner's family are increasingly absent from his films. But he continues to work with literary material, whether in the form of a dialogue (Spies) or of a cinematic performance (Second Nature.

In *Second Nature* Ben-Ner leaves the space in front of the camera to a performing raven and fox and their two trainers. They are all actors and characters in this story, which combines insights into the labour of production with scenes from Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" and Jean de la Fontaine's reworking of Aesop's fable "The Raven and the Fox". The imagery has the look of a rehearsal, but in fact there is more to the film's construction than immediately meets the eye. While the trainers drill their animals for the scene, the essence of the fable is that the fox incites the raven to do something it does not want to do, and in turn all the characters are supervised and "trained" by Ben-Ner as the director.

Spies is structurally simple by comparison. Posing on first sight as a spontaneous dialogue, this film uses the logo of the Israeli Ministry of Tourism to address questions of increasing complexity. The logo depicts two abstract figures bearing a bunch of grapes – a reference to an episode from the Old Testament: when Moses

arrived in the promised land, he sent out twelve spies to scout the new terrain. They returned with bunches of enormous grapes, a clear indication that the soil was fertile. But why, asks Ben-Ner, does the Ministry of Tourism make use of this reference? Does the biblical story not explicitly point out that the citizens of Israel have no natural ties with the land on which they live? That they arrived like "tourists" in the place they then settled? So is there a connection between a tourist and a spy? All these questions are woven into a dialogue composed from literary quotations, with the speakers even marked as "tourists" by their pointedly English accents.