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PROFILE

TRANSCULTURAL EXPRESS

Beneath their gorgeous surfaces, the films of Gabriel Abrantes are knife-sharp, very funny satires of 21st-century privilege

By Nick Pinkerton

Privilege is the elephant in the room of contemporary cinema. While there has been much discussion in recent years of the yawning gaps in representation and opportunity between races and genders, class – a less visible marker – has attracted less comment, even in the supposedly more diverse experimental/art film world. Movie-making is like polo – anyone can learn to play in theory, but cash certainly helps your chances of winding up on the grounds.

I can only guess the class background of the young American-born, Europe-based filmmaker Gabriel Abrantes, and my guess would be that he doesn't come from dire poverty. But from the beginning of a career of frenetic productivity, Abrantes has interrogated the concept of privilege, cross-examined the privileged perspective and made it the prevailing subject of his fast-growing filmography. His bewitching movies deal in the imbalance hardwired into desire across lines of class

and culture and, as Gang of Four put it, “The problem of leisure / What to do for pleasure.”

Let's begin with *Olympia I & II*, a piece of deceptively sophisticated juvenilia. This diptych, co-directed by and co-starring Katie Widloski and finished in 2006, was produced when both Abrantes and Widloski were studying at Cooper Union college in Manhattan. Over nine and a half minutes the co-directors take turns posing reclined in the buff, in the attitude of Manet's *Olympia*. In the first half, a fey off-camera voice (Abrantes) abuses his big sister (Widloski), who has apparently run away from the family home to work as a courtesan (“Olympia,” he harangues, “men want to taste the exotic”). In the second, a primed and powdered Abrantes, tended to by a fawning ‘mammy’ in shiny greasypaint blackface (Widloski), strikes the same pose, bemoaning life in the gilded cage. “This way of life, these fine things,” he whinges, “it isn't what I'd hoped for” – well before the dawn of Twitter, Abrantes has fixed his focus on #FirstWorldProblems.

Olympia I & II is quintessential exhibitionistic art school piss-taking – and evidence that Abrantes's preoccupations and aesthetic preferences were set in place early. The blanched, affectless, halting line readings would become a feature of his films, as would the poor-little-rich-boy-or-girl histrionics, the idea of inheritance

as a scourge to be avoided (in vain, always), the exoticisation of the unknowable other, and the relationship between the affluenza-stricken West and the developing world.

Olympia I & II screened at the Film Society of Lincoln Center in early February as part of a week-long programme, *Friends with Benefits*, billed as ‘An Anthology of Four New American Filmmakers’ – a ‘career’ retrospective of the just-past-30 Abrantes along with works by Daniel Schmidt, Alexander Carver and Benjamin Crotty. They constitute a loose confederation of like-minded artists, with the most visible bonding agent the promiscuous, omnipresent Abrantes, who has co-directed films with both Crotty (*Visionary Iraq*, 2008; *Liberdade*, 2011) and Schmidt (*A History of Mutual Respect*, 2010; *Palácios de Pena*, 2011). They share a devotion to analogue film – almost all the work shown was shot on super 16 – a tendency to collide high and low production values, limpid, non-professional performances and location shooting in far-flung ports of call. (The attraction to throwback tech extends to a fondness for retro synths on the soundtracks.) They also eschew conventional feature runtimes: Crotty's *Fort Buchanan* (2014), whose theatrical release is the ostensible occasion for the programme, is a slim 65 minutes, most of Abrantes's shorts a fraction of that. (This may



To the Manet born: Gabriel Abrantes, aristocrat in a gilded cage, in *Olympia I & II* (2006) – ‘quintessential exhibitionistic art school piss-taking’

prompt accusations of dilettantism, but many of today's most interesting young filmmakers are throwing off the yoke of arbitrary feature length.)

Abrantes's *Olympia I & II*, *Visionary Iraq* (2009), and *Too Many Daddies, Mommies and Babies* (2009) belong to a distinct early period: taking place in stylised worlds created in studios, they were made before his ambitions, budgets or international fund-raising know-how allowed him to operate on a grander scale. The enclosed settings don't mean these films lack global ambition: in *Visionary Iraq*, Abrantes and Crotty (classmates at the Le Fresnoy art school in Tourcoing, France), the lone performers, take on multiple roles, including a brother and adopted Angolan sister who are introduced enjoying a last night of incest before their deployment to Iraq. *Too Many Daddies, Mommies and Babies* concerns a gay couple who doom the planet when they give up their global warming research to start a family, siring a baby with a poor Portuguese surrogate mother who dies in labour, unmourned and unknown.

The theme of the poor being used as breeding stock for their social betters also appears in *A History of Mutual Respect*, a pivotal work which furnished the name for Abrantes's production company, Mutual Respect; gave him his first high-profile festival win, at Locarno; and established the template for his work to date: opulent, deadpan, globe-trotting, culture-clash sicko comedy. Abrantes and Schmidt play vacationing first-worlders in Brasilia, about to plunge into the Amazon basin on a mission to taste the exotic – as Schmidt's character, Cookie, puts it: "I just want to sleep with a native woman without getting some ungodly disease." He seemingly fulfils his search for self-oblivion through "clean, true pussy" and "simple, direct, and unmolested" love, and decides to remain happily ever after in the jungle, only to discover via text message that his "bro" has transported the dusky girl to a manorial home in Portugal where she will carry future bearers of the family name.

'Mutual respect', for Abrantes, is inextricable from mutual incomprehension, and transcultural confusion is the common element to the startlingly eclectic films that follow. *Liberdade*, a story of star-crossed lovers, begins in *medias res*, as an Angolan boy (Wilson Teixeira) holds up a neighbourhood pharmacy for its Viagra supply. Pursued by the police, he is cornered on the rooftop of a shabby apartment building in Luanda, caressing the hair of his Chinese girlfriend (Betty Meixue). As the sun drops above the Atlantic and police helicopters circle, the soundtrack is overwhelmed by the beginning of 'Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes' from Paul Simon's *Graceland* album, whose history as a 'problematic' work of cultural appropriation is no coincidence. From here we flash back to an abridged history of their affair, tender, wistful – and unconsummated, because the poor boy from the slums can't get it up for his rich girl. The film concludes with heartbreaking images of youths swimming in an offshore graveyard for retired freighters – while working with a variety of DPs, Abrantes has retained a uniformly ravishing visual style. In *Fratelli* (2011), a pastoral Renaissance period piece co-directed with Alexandre Melo, a mincing aristocrat and his



Edith Scob in *Ennui Ennui* (2013)

gym-buff, bulging-codpiece retainers come across a peasant unconscious from drink in a meadow; the aristocrat proposes a plan to convince the boy on waking that he is a nobleman emerging from a coma, parading before him sexual opportunities and art treasures, including Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, a precursor of *Olympia*.

Abrantes is reportedly at work on two feature-length works: *The Hunchback*, a collaboration with Ben Rivers, and another film with Schmidt; but the 58-minute *Palácios de Pena* (2011) is his longest work to date. Highlighted by an ecstatic, voluptuous nightclub outing and a comedown car-ride set to a chopped-and-screwed version of Alphaville's 'Forever Young', the film follows a struggle between two adolescent female cousins vying to inherit their grandmother's fortune. Abrantes's own grandmother, Alcina, who also appears as the matriarch in *A History of Mutual Respect*, plays that role – a little self-indicting personal touch, perhaps. In the Haiti-shot *Ornithes* (*Birds*, 2012) Abrantes is explicitly the target of his own satire. The film revolves around a production of Aristophanes's comedy in the coastal city of Jacmel, performed by a rara carnival troupe and directed by 'Little Gabriel Abrantes', according to the bullhorn ballyhoo of the pick-up truck we see canvassing the countryside. Abrantes favours nesting structures: here Aristophanes's story of men seeking to infiltrate the company of birds is framed by the story of an interloping artist awkwardly trying to ingratiate himself to a foreign environment; the local girls care

Taken together, a portrait emerges from Abrantes's films of a glutton for beauty with a knotty moral and political vision



Visionary Iraq (2008)

only for *Twilight* movies, while his Haitian star grumbles about his director's "shitty theory": "[He] thinks we can still have a Dionysian collective trance induced by polyphonic hexameters..."

Abrantes has sole director credit on *Birds*, as on the recent *Ennui Ennui* (2013) and *Taprobana* (2014), two films that with their polished CG work and lush, alien landscapes feel like pocket-sized transgressive blockbusters. *Ennui Ennui*, like *Visionary Iraq*, imagines contemporary geopolitics as a network of smothering parent-child relationships – a husky Afghan teenager's tiger mother pressures him to kidnap and rape a princess (Esther Garrel) living alone with her over-familiar father, though he accidentally nabs a French Libraries Without Borders volunteer away from her *haute-couture*-clad diplomat mother (Edith Scob); all this is observed by a military drone named Hellfire Destroyer #503027, reporting to her "Daddy", Barack Obama. While this film deals in very contemporary East-West transactions, *Taprobana* looks back to an earlier colonial era, depicting episodes from the life and afterlife of the 16th-century Portuguese poet Luís Vaz de Camões, author of the epic *Os Lusíadas*. Abrantes gives us Philip II as a lisping queen of a piece with *Fratelli*'s aristocrat, and de Camões, the national hero, as a cranky hop-head who practises coprophagy with his Chinese lover Dinamene (Jani Zhao), abandons her drowned corpse to chase darting nymphs, and finally finds himself barred from Poet's Heaven. (De Camões is played by Natxo Checa, credited as producer and cameraman on a number of Abrantes's films, and a quietly essential partner in his creative endeavour.)

Abrantes has developed a unique combination of schoolyard low comedy and highbrow sources – *The Taming of the Shrew* in *Fratelli*, Aristophanes in *Birds*, de Camões here. His films revel in collisions, in class clashes, cultural confusion and polyglot babble, with dialogue in Brazilian and Iberian Portuguese, English, Attic Greek, Haitian Creole, Spanish, French, Chinese, Sinhalese, and probably a few others. Any one of his movies might be written off as the work of a know-somethingish smart-ass aesthete, but taken together a portrait emerges of a glutton for beauty with a knotty moral and political vision. We pretend to admire art that puts sacred cows to the knife, though the unspoken rule is that the sacred cows in question shouldn't be those worshipped by anyone in the inscribed audience. And while there's no telling what Gabriel Abrantes will do next, he most definitely has his knives out. ☺



Liberdade (2011)