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and in collaboration with Benjamin Crotty, Daniel Schmidt and Katie Widloski



# The Archaic Cinema of Gabriel Abrantes

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“The most sophisticated experiences and the most popular devices often come together in some places.  
(...) That is when one realises that the archaic and the postmodern have the air of a family.”

Serge Daney, *La Rampe*, Paris, *Petite bibliothèque des Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1996, p. 214

The concepts of “expanded cinema” and “exhibition cinema” have emerged over recent years referring to artistic practices that have reconsidered, within the context of galleries, arts spaces and museums, the cinematographic manner of producing and exhibiting images: multi-screen projections, alterations of speed, extension of running times, spatial and/or temporal displacement, discontinuous editing, underlining the material presence of the things represented... The numerous projects that now appear in these critique oriented categories mainly converge at one point: they are structured by the conception of cinema as a device, within which they develop an extensive and reflexive (and therefore potentially critical) relationship. But also, if one follows the discourse that accompanies them, an understanding of cinema as a medium whose history spans the entire XX century, and proposes a reservoir of forms from which fine artists have come to draw inspiration. This second quality is followed by two historiographic effects: it allows, on the contrary, a resurgence of works and explorations of modern cinema where one can here and there read the premises of contemporary production (Oh! *Napoléon* by Abel Gance and its so often referenced multi-screen projection!); and, from these forms of cinema (assisted by the value of examples) it is possible to establish new genealogies in which the cinema assumes the role of the father. In this way, the history of art can be re-read in light of the history of cinema, inverting the hitherto established academic movement in a construction where the latter occupies a structuring position.

At the end of the XX century, due to this inversion and after a hundred years of legitimization, the seventh art has become the first... The XXI century should question and jeopardize the realization of this operation, and young artists should disrupt it. *Too Many Daddies, Mommies and Babies*, the title of one of Gabriel Abrantes' first films reports this fact and announces the program. Given the abundance of affiliations and the abandonment of its fathers, a new territory for cinema has been established, where the forms will not be developed through new alliances or inheritances, but rather, through a new archaism.



*Olympia I* and *Olympia II* (2006), the first film directed by Gabriel Abrantes in collaboration with Katie Widloski, clearly confirms the considerations of this program, through a complex game of affiliations and inheritances, taking the painting by Manet as the starting point, a work which stands as an exemplary symbol of modernism and aesthetic scandal. The transition from the painting to film takes place through four

operations. The transition from one picture to another, from the painted canvas to the exposed film takes place through the reconstitution of Manet's painting, functioning as the setting and scene for a film. The second operation of staging consists in a re-framing of the picture, on the surface of this new painting, alternating close ups with general shots in order to use the camera to simulate the presence of a gaze. A third operation transforms the silent image into an audible one, in which words, music, noise and sounds fill the scene with supplementary information. Finally, the last operation, which follows the consideration of the technical reproducibility of images (a key concept in Modernism) takes place in a dual proposal: *Olympia I* and *Olympia II*, two versions taken from a common matrix that harks back to Manet, but, even further, to the place of this painting in aesthetic modernity and the commentary surrounding it. In relation to this aspect it is very likely that during his studies at the Cooper Union Gabriel Abrantes read the analyses, among the many that were dedicated to *Olympia*, that insist on the flattening of the "theatrical" perspective staged in the painting – we are thinking particularly about the theses developed by Michael Fried. The two small scenes in this "painting-transformed-into-setting" raise a contradictory echo in relation to this reading. The prosaic, shallow image of this scene returns the pictorial inheritance of modernist cinema to its source, while the insults, curses and gentle words exchanged by the various protagonists (through an explicit theatricality) seek to renew its scandal. Yet it is not here, but elsewhere, that this film produces a flattening of perspective.

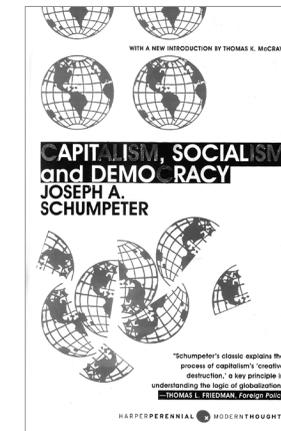
In *Olympia I*, Olympia and Duncan, brother and sister, meet. Duncan (through an off-screen voice-off) is suspected of visiting Olympia with the intent to sexually abuse her. *Olympia* insults him and sends him away. In *Olympia II*, a young man in the role of Olympia (sometimes called "baby" and at other times "sweetheart") and "Miss Strawberry", the black house maid, from Manet's painting (sometimes called "Mammy" and at other times "baby") are chatting about the inane nature of existence. He asks her for a coca-cola. He does not want to go back to Texas. He wants to do something good before he dies. They kiss and hug, as Miss Strawberry's makeup gradually covers the boy's face.

*Olympia I* and *Olympia II* jointly celebrate the prosaic side of various cultural referents, the abandonment of all hierarchy and the mixing of genres, whether they are cultural, racial or sexual: man-object and woman-object, avant-garde modernism and soda, soap operas and minstrel blackface, history or art and excessive trivializing of the banal... If there is scandal it is not in the (albeit reasonable) provocation generated by dialogues and situations that assist the general collapsing of references. It is rather in the absolutely prosaic effect created by that lack of distinction. Here reduction to the prosaic and the absence of perspective do not glorify any aesthetic or ethical position and do not bear witness to any completion – which would place them in the line of a certain post-modernism (in the sense Venturi's architectural manifesto gives the concept). More simply, they participate in a reality where figures and forms do not fit together and are interchangeable. We should doubtlessly give serious consideration to the adolescent

– and therefore indecisive – stance of our two Olympias, valid on the physical, linguistic and symbolic level: absent of themselves, continuing as signs among signs that nevertheless keep on signifying forms of sexual, ethnic or aesthetic conflicts.

In this “theatre” of the prosaic, where the effects of conflicts would have disappeared within the triumph of the conflictual as a dominant norm, the modern perspective (of art) is crushed. Staging this alteration, *Olympia I* and *Olympia II* is undoubtedly Gabriel Abrantes’s film that contains the strongest ironic potential. It was probably necessary to go through this in order to be able to progress. And even so it was necessary to carefully avoid the two paths that this type of discourse usually releases: the path of playfulness or the path of resentment. Yet the path followed by Gabriel Abrantes, in this first film, carries another promise: that of the renewal of the moving image through an intersection with the archaic forms of modern narrative. Not in relation to the return to early forms of cinema, as we may identify them in an artist like William Kentridge, but through the production of a new archaism for the cinema, where the points of reference would be announced through the present. A radical way of assuming the surplus of parents and the loss of their legitimacy.

After *Olympia I* and *II* it becomes possible to formulate a general hypothesis: the films directed by Gabriel Abrantes, alone or in collaboration with other artists, are full of problems of inheritance and affiliations, which are mainly brought up to date following three axes: cultural, relating artistic and non-artistic referents, mobilized by their different projects; human, through the relations set up among characters by stories where family issues are considered; political, mainly in the relationships set up between economic states or powers with past or contemporary forms of colonization, stated in numerous narratives. If all linear movement is absent from these relationships of inheritance and affiliation, it is because in their diversity and according to these three levels, they are subject to dynamics that restrain them, preventing any transmission without historical disturbances, cultural interferences or political conflicts. If *Olympia I* and *II* liquidates these problems with the adoption of an ironic stance – forcing the connections and correspondences between past and present, the equivalences between “high” culture and “common” culture – it is to allow these terms to be able to be equated in Gabriel Abrantes’ later films. By temporalising, locating and re-appropriating these questions through the strategic use of common grounds. By submitting them to the construction of a narrative based on a precise situation. *Too Many Daddies*, *Mommies and Babies* and *Visionary Iraq* (directed in collaboration with Benjamin Crotty) will mark out the new orientation of this program.



*Too Many Daddies, Mommies and Babies* shows three Portuguese protagonists with a scientific mission to safeguard the Amazon forest. Their mission seems doomed to fail. The story starts out with this inexorable fact. The feeling of disappointment that moves the characters reaches existential and metaphysical dimensions, as the survival of the whole planet depends on salvation of the Amazon forest. Our three Portuguese heroes, with American names (Ana, Ryan and Robbie – the first two are brother and sister) are acting in a post-colonial situation, in the factitious atmosphere of an Amazon forest studio set: their condescending attitude towards Ngetu, the last Indian alive in this tropical environment, clearly traces an inheritance. A second plot comes and overlaps with the first one, thanks to an event that leads to the abandonment of the scientific adventure for a melodrama. Robbie and Ryan are homosexuals and live together. Their pitiful failure in the Amazon could be resolved by adopting a child, which would represent their hope in the founding of a new world... A young mother, a rented womb, is contacted. She will have the baby in deplorable conditions... The drama becomes a tragedy: the young woman dies; Ryan, the adoptive father, also dies as a consequence of a car accident in which his sister Ana is implicated as well as the newborn Sasha ... Yet the film ends on a note of hope: Ana and Robbie, the only two survivors, will end up founding yet another family... Behind them, the Flood...

Divided into three sequences filmed in ‘homemade’ sets (an adolescents’ bedroom; an art gallery with neo-classical sculptures in aluminium foil and a great grey monochrome; a military camp in the desert, with sand, stakes and tents), *Visionary Iraq* shows two young Portuguese people, a boy and his stepsister, of African origin, who decide to depart from the family cocoon in order to go off to Iraq (sequence 1). They inform their family, which in turn inform those who have arrived (sequence 2), and they meet up on the war front (sequence 3). Gabriel Abrantes and Benjamin Crotty – in make-up, drag and bewigged – play all the roles in this drama with many twists, either as men, as women, children or adults.

*Too many Daddies, Mommies and Babies* and *Visionary Iraq* were entirely filmed in studios, and grant great importance to the props: colored illuminations, set elements in cardboard, make-up, tricks, sound effects... These effects, which are displayed rather than being dissimulated, bathe these two films in a powerful atmosphere of illusion – in which we would re-encounter an archaic quality of the cinema. And yet the words said by the different protagonists in these two films are all the more verisimilar because they are anchored in concrete and contemporary realities: the deforestation of the Amazon implies real ecological problems; the George Bush administration effectively declared war and sent troops to Iraq, and volunteers were allowed to join up. Yet nothing truly fits together: although they are Portuguese, the scientists Ryan, Ana and Robbie seem to be very American, as if this film were the dubbed and post-synchronised version of an invisible original; in the same way, the two young Portuguese adults who wish to join up and go to Iraq speak impeccable American English and their words are subtitled in Portuguese... In both cases the effect is that of being out of the setting and being doubled, allowing one to imagine that these films might be phantoms of others (an operation undertaken by *Olympia I* and *II*, unfolded in a discreet manner). There is a game between the relations established between the story, the characters, the language and context, and the fictional machine is disrupted at each point where its forms are commonly rigid. In these two films – although the whole of Gabriel Abrantes’s filmography could be subjected to the same observation – the situations fluctuate between two worlds: we are close to the universe of the short story or a type of daydream, constructions we are also referred to by the velocity of the chain of events and the short-cuts taken by the narrative. In this fluctuation the film questions rather than resolves the situations it presents.

Consequently the forms held by Gabriel Abrantes’ filmic narrations are not resolved in simple equations: on the contrary, they mark the contradictions within which both personal and artistic acts, as well as political actions, are led to be formulated in a contemporary context. In this respect, let us add an indication: if Gabriel Abrantes is a recurring character in his films (sometimes the leading actor, sometimes in a small supporting role), it is also because his interrogations are totally centered on and by the stories he tells, even though (or because) they are radically removed from biographical references and personal anecdotes. Gabriel Abrantes is in fact and fully the fragmented,

sentimental, sexual and political subject of his films. His multicultural belonging, located between Portugal and the USA, between the colonial history of old Europe and the economic domination of North America, his training between the European and American academic worlds, his relationship with Pop culture and the media (cf. the omnipresence of the mobile phone or the Internet in the most dramatic moments of the story) set the coordinates of a story that is questioned in his narratives when coming into contact with others, but, also, in collaboration with other individuals (among others, Benjamin Crotty and Daniel Schmidt, with whom he has directed several projects).

Both in *Visionary Iraq* and in *Too many Daddies, Mommies and Babies*, there is finally an operating mode for Gabriel Abrantes’ archaic cinema. In these two films a primary function is attributed to commonplaces, both in establishing a plot for the fiction and in choosing the cinematographic forms utilized. No character, whether in their acts or in the expression of their feelings, will escape this (they are figures and types), when the staging comes back, in a schematic manner, to situations and topics from adventure films, from melodramas or patriotic films, procedures from independent or “experimental” cinema, forms of dialogue and the triviality of shot/reverse shot alternation of soap operas. This recourse to commonplaces as filmic material has an overall strategy that subsumes the potentials of the cinema as editing to make it fit. Let us be clear: a commonplace is not attributable to any place in particular: all cultures, all forms of knowledge or of power have commonplaces and often even share them. Commonplaces are distinguished and distinguish places of different types and different types of the common. A common place is a cultural construction that contains plural recourses, which radically distinguishes it from a quotation: it is impersonal, plural, it certainly has a place all the while denying the possibility of granting it an origin from that same place.

It is not enough to direct one’s attention to the new situations provoked by the migratory movements of populations, by the new relations of power and knowledge that stand out on the scale of the globalised and multicultural world: it is necessary to understand and also anticipate the impact of redistribution and relocation of the commonplaces that accompany those movements. So, essential questions will thus be yet again brought up to date in stories. What are the new factors of difference between people and peoples? What is the basis for the symbolic regimes of contemporary singularities and communities? What type of narrative can we elaborate about them? The films that Gabriel Abrantes has directed until now deal with these issues in precise geographical contexts, as was recently the case with Angola, Luanda, in *Liberdade* (directed in collaboration with Benjamin Crotty), a film in which a young Chinese girl and a young African man live an impossible love story over the ruins of Communism.

Gabriel Abrantes' archaic cinema is a laboratory of (ethnic, social, political, cultural or artistic) commonplaces, and it shows, through its displacements and redistributions, how it is possible to weave new stories, set out new problems and delineate new truths. From the commonplaces he then develops a general plan for a cinematographic work where a possibility of imagining the definition of new identities is opened up, ones that are not unique but now common, beyond and before affiliations and inheritances. In this way we should positively understand the comment uttered about *Visionary Iraq* by a Portuguese film critic, who called it the "worst film of all time". In fact, this expressed a quality, no doubt a negative one, about the relationship this film has with the history of cinema. But, positively, that quality acknowledges the possibility archaic cinema has of producing films that do not obey any norm, thus providing the possibility of inventing a different cinema.

Thoroughly experimental.