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

Gabriel Abrantes in conversation with João Ribas

JOÃO RIBAS

I was reminded in going over your work for our conversation that your films have all been produced in the last four years. Yet while *Visionary Iraq* (2009) and *Too Many Daddies, Mommies and Babies* (2009) make use of a distinct theatricality and narrative voice, as well as an articulated attention to mise-en-scène and devices of narrative distance, more recent films like *Liberdade*, all made relatively one after another with the same group of collaborators, already mark a shift to a more cinematic focus. One might even say a certain historical and politicized focus...

GABRIEL ABRANTES

The films have stopped focusing on questions related to institutional critique of the art world; the function/economy of the art world, the form of art, questioning forms of representation as a subject. They are now more focused on the phenomena of globalization, particularly the phenomena that challenge the present regime of global power. *Liberdade*, filmed in Luanda, Angola is the closest to this that the work has come, being more focused on the new cultural identities that are being formed due to the mass migration of peoples and changing economic power structures, rather than focused on questions relating to the context of the art world. *Visionary Iraq* and *Too Many Daddies* were both filmed in constructed sets housed in commercial art galleries or institutional art spaces, and so have a direct relationship to how these spaces function. The structures of

the narratives, the theatricality of the sets, and the relationship to the exhibition space were elements that structured the dynamic of the work. They were works that were about talking about the war in Iraq and global warming within an art context.

JOÃO RIBAS

In the sense of having a politicized practice, or the role of cinema within such a model?

GABRIEL ABRANTES

These films both indicate the role that I thought cinema should have in my work as an artist, but paradoxically they have guided me to continue pursuing a practice that has continually distanced me from the exhibition spaces and their concerns. The films are now filmed on various sites that are directly related to the subject of the narratives, and in the particular case of *Liberdade*, have a dynamic that is beyond the realm of questioning and critique, and begins authentically incorporating the consideration of the work as a cultural production for a specific culture, rather than assimilating to the cultural sphere available. This shift comes from asking, “What is the utility of the work I am producing?” This question is something that has guided my interest in structuring the work around specific audiences, or specific cultural spheres. *Liberdade* and *Big Hug* are two films (both still unsuccessful in this ambition) that trace this interest in a specific audience. Both of them were produced with the intention of having their “target audience” be based where they were produced. *Big Hug* is a film for the village where it was filmed, and *Liberdade* is a film that is related to the forging of a yet uncreated consciousness of new global power structures. It is a shift from using art as a form of questioning the mechanisms of the art world, to using art as a mode of questioning the mechanisms of global politics.

JOÃO RIBAS

Does the use of non-actors drawn from this ‘target audience’ in these films, versus say the importance of your central presence as an actor in the previous work, have anything to do with the shift?

GABRIEL ABRANTES

As with any of the ideas in the films, choosing non-professionals to act is a situation I am still figuring out. I don’t have a clear grasp on all of the consequences, be they political, private, or practical. In the earlier films, *Visionary Iraq* or *Olympia I & II* for example, or even the films I made at Le Fresnoy, the narrative mechanisms pivoted around questions

pretaining to authorship or ‘artmaking’ as a subject. They are functioning less as “art about art” in such a direct sense, and have tried to establish their discourse on questions relating to the dynamics of global politics. This shift is clear in *Visionary Iraq*, where the middle chapter is still focused on the art world (set in an art gallery), but is only part of a broader narrative that is focused on some of the moral questions relating to Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The first project I used non-professional actors in was *Big Hug* (still incomplete after four years) that I made in Trás-os-Montes with Katie Widloski. The idea of doing this project in a small village, Anelhe, in an economically dying part of Portugal, had to do with the desire to work with the residents of this village. The film was made using them as actors as well as thinking of them as the primary audience for the film. It was produced with and for this group of people, which in Portugal stands out as one of the most economically and culturally censored populations.

With the more recent projects I am trying to work in sites and with people whom are living and dealing with the political situations that are confronted in the narratives. In the film *Liberdade*, the Chinese and Angolan actors were representing characters in situations very similar to their own. Through this the films are trying to go beyond an academic approach, or the tendency to be talking about situations and problems from an abstract point of view, and work with issues at the actual site and with the people who are in reality implicated in the situations being dramatized.

When Ben (Benjamin Crotty, *Visionary Iraq* and *Liberdade*), Dan (Daniel Schmidt, *A History of Mutual Respect* and *2002, 2003, 2004... 2002*), Katie (Katie Widloski, *Big Hug* and *Olympia I & II*) and I enter our films, we are dealing with a different subject. It is a form of self-analysis in relation to the subjects we are dealing with. When we represent characters involved in a contemporary political conflict, we are trying to work with the conception of our implication in the act of creating narratives in situations alien to our own...

JOÃO RIBAS

Such as working in Angola, making a film about the war in Iraq, or Portuguese historical guilt in *2002...*

GABRIEL ABRANTES

We are analysing our position as authors in relation to it, as well as our relation to it as human beings. So there is a shift. The earlier work is motored by questions relating to the self-consciousness of the role of the author, whereas the more recent films have preoccupations more related to the power dynamics of global political institutions, the mass migrations of people, and historical guilt.

JOÃO RIBAS

There seems to also be a sense of approaching cinema as a project of historical revision, explored through a sexual/intersubjective dimension?

GABRIEL ABRANTES

The interest in cinema comes from a number of factors, one of them being how Hollywood functions in relation to a collective consciousness, how it has shaped a collective vision of history and its relationship with U.S. values and lifestyles. Hollywood has grown and assisted the United States' economic, cultural, and political rise during the twentieth century.

I have started thinking, particularly with *Liberdade* about creating work in developing nations, especially those of rapid economic development, such as Angola, China or Brazil. These countries will increasingly shape the political, economic and natural landscape of the world. In this sense I am trying to work within these sites and the social and cultural phenomena that will shape the coming decades, much how Hollywood has worked for the United States. The intersection of this with the psycho-sexual perversions/reversals exhibited by the characters in the films points to two things. The first is the inability to make moral distinctions in between private and public conflicts. This is something reinforced by a mechanism much used in Hollywood films, forcing the viewer to digest whatever context (the bombing of Pearl harbor, the apocalypse, or the rise and fall of ancient Rome) through an adjacent love theme.

JOÃO RIBAS

The way television also often relies on heterosexual coupling for much of its narrative structure...

GABRIEL ABRANTES

When the characters in *Visionary Iraq* are shown as equally preoccupied with their sexual incapacities as they are with democracy, this displays the incapacity people have in judging the gravity of their preoccupations. The second reason for the intersection comes from the analysis and reversal of the first. It has to do with the idea that everyone is implicated, and that every part of ones life is implicated, in the public conflicts of today. The way we lead our lives, the context we come from, how we are educated, and our tendencies... they all relate to how the world is developing, how humans relate to each other and what is around them. It is the proposal of a particular vision of the world equating all moral imperatives and responsibilities, ranging from private conflicts to mass public conflicts. Rancière discusses this in terms of montage, which is something I want to start inserting in the films in a literal sense (transliterating this literary

montage to cinematic montage)... when he is discussing Flaubert's description as "democratically" intricate, in between the flea in someone's hair, the gleaming sun, the socio-economic housings of his characters and the political drama of his narrative. There is some sort of relationship as well, which I have not fully figured out, in between a vision of sexuality (or private conflicts) and its implication in politics, group dynamics, and public conflicts. *Liberdade* as a film started with the concept of impotence, and out of that grew a political scenario that housed this private physical condition, but to me the two are inseparable.

JOÃO RIBAS

Liberdade deals with a set of new economic forces and their sociological

dimensions within the confines of a love story... one in which socio-dynamic

dimensions are sexualized... *Visionary Iraq* is anti-war film that redirects the

politics of the war into a melodrama... seemingly stacking up the taboos...





GABRIEL ABRANTES

Visionary Iraq is a film that mixed a number of things: cross-dressed soldiers, black face, incest, etc... But the fundamental part of this project was the script, which is a sincere political melodrama (sincere in the sense that it proposes some of mine and Ben's beliefs), as it functioned beyond all of these devices. The script was written before we decided to make the film fulfilling all the roles of the characters, cameramen, crew and directors simultaneously. This aspect gives a contradictory and ambiguous aspect to the film that has a political effect, which I think is strongest in all the work; it constructs a dialectic that proposes a sincere political agenda and then goes about destroying its own discourse. These earlier films are commentaries on political situations that are already highly discussed (war in Iraq, colonial/postcolonialism/, global warming). So in these films the political context that forms the fulcrum of the narrative is one that is familiar. In this sense, *Liberdade* proposes another field of work for me, one that is based on the imagination of new identities that are being forged through globalization, rather than the commenting on identities or events already rendered cliché through their oversaturation in the media.

JOÃO RIBAS

In *2002, 2003, 2004... 2002* (2010), two historical moments are combined, constructed around a trans-historical narrative, from two young girls out clubbing, to their grandmother's dream about the medieval persecution of homosexuality... you mentioned José Gil's concept of non-inscription as central to Portuguese cultural identity, or an almost inherited sense of social norms, or normative behavior...

GABRIEL ABRANTES

The film came out of this concept of "non-inscription"; a culturally inherited fear in Portugal, linked to political and social oppression during the Inquisition and fascism in Portugal. The film uses a simple A/B structure. The first half of the film follows two young girls today going out to Lux, the biggest night club in Lisbon, and the second half is their grandmother's dream where she assumes the role of a judge during the Inquisition. The film displays the lack of consciousness that the young girls have of their culturally inherited guilt and juxtaposes their ambivalent adolescent desires and fears with the violent oppression of the Inquisition. When the grandmother gives them consciousness of their heritage, she does so through the mechanism of desire, where she dreams herself as one of the purveyors of Portuguese historical oppression.

The film is about inherited cultural guilt, but complicates this subject by the level of the girls' consciousness of their guilt as well as the grandmother's perverse desire for oppression.

JOÃO RIBAS

A dialectic of desire...

GABRIEL ABRANTES

These two relationships of guilt, girls and grandmother, are then complicated by their relationship to each other, that of family and love. As the young girls and the grandmother love each other; so does what they represent; ignorance and the will to violently oppress.

JOÃO RIBAS

In a sense, you've now made two "post-colonial" films: *A History of Mutual Respect* (2010) and *Liberdade* (2010). What interested you in these particular narratives, say the reconstructing and imagining of Portugal's colonial past, or as in the former, a kind of constructed imaginary that justified the colonial project?

GABRIEL ABRANTES

A History of Mutual Respect and *2002* both have to do with historical guilt, specifically that of Portugal. The former has to do with a reincarnation of colonial desires in Brazil; the latter with oppression during the Portuguese Inquisition. So *2002* revolves around two upper-middle class adolescent Portuguese girls. The film is trying to link their identities, as represented by a lifestyle composed of physical exercise and clubbing, to a trial condemning two Moorish homosexuals to burn at the stake. It's complicated by the fact that this link is made through their grandmother.

In *A History of Mutual Respect* the film also revolves around this imaginary identity, a perverse mix of extreme left and extreme right discourses, linking both anti-colonialist and colonialist discourses. This idea has something to do with the way that leftist anti-colonial ideas were adapted and in some cases commissioned to justify colonialist discourses.

JOÃO RIBAS

You mean the link between colonialism and anthropological discourse.

GABRIEL ABRANTES

Salazar used this as one of his tactics, contracting the sociologist Gilberto de Mello Freyre on an ambassadorial visit to the Portuguese colonies as a sort of justification for why Portuguese Colonialism was more valid than other countries colonial pursuits. His principal work is structured around the concept of the positive effects of new cultural identities constructed by racial mixing. *A History of Mutual Respect's* narrative is based on this idea, only to critique it as another form of re-establishing the colonial mentality of domination.

Liberdade is quite different for me since it is dealing with the construction of new identities, rather than dealing with historical trauma. Benjamin and I focused more on the dynamism of Angola as a rapidly developing nation and the new identities being created there, rather than its relationship to three hundred years of colonization and its half century of colonial and civil war. Angola as the site and subject of this film is specific because it is one of the few countries that, due to its vast natural resources, has been able to refuse the majority of western loans (World Bank, IMF). Most of the investment in Angola comes from China, which sets up a political situation that is independent from western loans. Due to this economic independence a new political, social and cultural identity is being forged. What interested Ben and I was that it was not only independent, but opposed to the cultural norms and standards of the west.

JOÃO RIBAS

What do you think is the place of cinema within negotiating such conditions at this point, as say its role in creating representations of the kinds of social reorganizations forced or provided by this "globalism"?

GABRIEL ABRANTES

It is a fundamental part of our work to conflate the private and public, to analyze their relationship, deconstruct it, and create fictions relating to it. Private individuals' relationship to group dynamics, political scenarios, and historical mechanisms is one of the main subjects of our work. We want to work with individuals and make work about individuals as well as work within public spheres and about public spheres. We are trying to forge a consciousness about situations and people that aren't yet fully understood. We want to work in the sites where the world is taking new forms, where contemporary forms of life are being invented. We are also trying to analyze and discover where the new pivotal centers for the economic, political and cultural dynamics of the world are, and work with the particularities and conflicts of those sites. We are interested in the shifting power structures in between a number of nations and exploring the prospective changes of dominant global culture due to shifts in economic power. We are not sure where our work is intent on being situated, in between trying to participate in this shifting culture, or criticizing it. We know that we want to make work that functions on more than a just a private level, and we know we want it to be about a range of human experience, that conjoins individual responsibility and sentiments with group responsibility and mentality. The films are about the people to come.