

# *senses of cinema*



📷 Taprobana

## **A Diaspora of Desire: Gabriel Abrantes, Daniel Schmidt, Benjamin Crotty and Alexander Carver**

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When Gabriel Abrantes' *Taprobana* (2014) screened at the Toronto International Film Festival as part of a three-film program of new Portuguese cinema, there was little to suggest what perverse wonder lay in store for the unsuspecting viewer. As one such Abrantes neophyte, the work of the prolific 31 year-old provocateur having somehow eluding me despite a half-decade of relatively high profile festival berths, I can certainly speak to the bewildering rush elicited throughout the film's brief 24-minute runtime. What transpired was at once beautiful and grotesque, quaint and indulgent, serene and surreal – a far cry from the program's other two films, *The Figures Carved into the Knife by the Sap of the Banana Trees*, by Joana Pimenta, and the late Manoel de Oliveira's last completed work, *The Old Man of Belem*, neither of which could otherwise reasonably be described as ordinary. No matter individual notions as to the film's artistic merit (or lack thereof), it's safe to say that what we witnessed from Abrantes that afternoon was genuinely original, a burst of cinematic ingenuity so unapologetically strange that one couldn't help but take notice.

A riff on the creative gauntlet faced by the Portuguese poet Luís Vaz Camões as he worked to complete his 16th century Homeric epic, *Os Lusíadas*, *Taprobana* mines the biographical surface of its source as a pretense to spin a yarn of ahistorical debauchery. In Abrantes' reimagining, Camões (played by Natxo Checa), after indulging in a bit of scene-setting scatophilia with his Asian lover, Dinamene (Jani Zhao), embarks on a quest to obtain opium in the guise of a monk, along the way encountering, amongst other abnormalities, a horde of naked, shipwrecked nymphs and a monkey with a man's face superimposed onto its head, manifestations of an inner turmoil stubbornly coalescing into useable stimuli. With its freewheeling lasciviousness and impetuous logic firmly established, it's unsurprising that the film eventually finds Camões on trial in purgatory, deliberating on a life of divinity versus damnation as crude visual effects ignite in a display of meta-cinematic immolation.



## Gabriel Abrantes

Come to find out, *Taprobana*, while certainly indicative of Abrantes' libertine wile, is, by his standards and if only spiritually (which is to say, secularly), something of a faithful rendering of its subject's tortured existence. But then not much of Abrantes' work, sensibility, sexuality, or even nationality is easily classified. Born in North Carolina of Portuguese ancestry, the filmmaker, who currently resides in Lisbon, has studied film at Cooper Union in New York, Le Fresnoy in Tourcoing and L'Ecole National des Beaux Arts in Paris. His filmography, which comprises dozens of short and medium-length works, bears out this transnational identity, with films produced across multiple continents and in various dialects (the dialogue in *Taprobana* alone is spoken in a combination of Sinhalese, Spanish and Portuguese). Further complicating matters is the director's longstanding collaborative spirit, a process of creative reciprocation that has crystallised a collective of like-minded aesthetes who, often working together in various pairings, have produced a singular body of work in complete opposition to prevailing trends in international cinema. That they seem so totally unconcerned with dominant modes of cinematic dissemination, to say nothing of decorum or decency, makes their combined efforts seem all the more vital.

As a multifarious and non-binary assemblage, this group of artists and filmmakers can appear at times to be in a state constant of reorientation, though a recurring combination of names have emerged as particularly fruitful bedfellows: Alongside de facto figurehead Abrantes, the trio of Daniel Schmidt, Benjamin Crotty and Alexander Carver have together formulated a unique filmic sensibility, at once informed by each individual's formal and theoretical voice yet indivisible from their combined creative energy and sensitivity. Though not nominally of a movement comparable to that of, say, the Leica Bank filmmakers, the Dziga Vertov Group, or any number of New Waves, this cohort of alarmingly young American filmmakers with art school ties and polymorphous conceptions of cinematic propagation are of an equally oppositional philosophy to that of their forebears. A recent retrospective of the group's work at Lincoln Center was titled "Friends with Benefits", and that's as accurate a summation as any, as emblematic of their communal filmmaking ethos as it is their genre/gender-bending approach to narrative. Still, that these filmmakers and their stylistic flights of fancy have yet to be christened with a definitive sobriquet is wholly appropriate given their shape-shifting nature.

The impetus behind the Lincoln Center retrospective was the Stateside release of the Paris-based Crotty's feature debut, *Fort Buchanan* (2014). Though not yet as prolific as Abrantes or Schmidt, Crotty, who studied with Abrantes at Le Fresnoy, embodies much of what makes the quartet stand out amongst their peers. Expanded from a short of the same name, *Fort Buchanan* follows a group of army spouses who, left behind at a remote military base as their partners attend to government-related work abroad, toil away the days with conversations of casual carnality and forlorn displays of melancholia. Newly arrived, Roger (Andy Gillet) and his adopted daughter Roxy (Iliana Zabeth), seem to inadvertently disrupt their deceptively idyllic surroundings: Roger with his androgynous sensuality, which appears to cast a spell over men and women alike, and Roxy with her teen angst and blunt rejoinders. Shooting on 16mm, Crotty matches the sexual tension and unrequited yearning with images of tactile warmth, rich textures, and vivid colour combinations, as dense and humid as the forests engulfing the camp. The casually liberated characterisations and loose narrative markers (it's cardboard dialogue adapted almost entirely from the reality television show, *Army Wives*) likewise find stylistic correlates through anachronistic pop cues and sequences of surreal visual enchantment. The result is as unclassifiable as any recent American indie, modest in means yet bursting with ingenuity.

In many ways *Fort Buchanan* is a distillation of Crotty and his comrades' many thematic and aesthetic tendencies, as well as a testament to their cinephilic integrity. If these are filmmakers unafraid of flaunting their desires, they're equally confident disclosing their influences. *Fort Buchanan* is divided into four chapters and arranged by season in a conceit lifted directly from Éric Rohmer, while also dealing in irony and triangulated desire in a manner not unlike the French master's "Comedies and Proverbs" series (lest these details be chalked up to mere coincidence, one may recall that Gillet previously starred in Rohmer's *Les Amours d'Astrée et de Céladon*, 2007). Abrantes' films, meanwhile, have continued to evince the unmistakable imprint of Pasolini, in both their penchant for lowbrow reimaginings of highbrow literary texts and their bi-curious sexual concerns (like his compatriots, Abrantes also continues to shoot almost exclusively on 16mm). These and other touchstones – encompassing allusions both offhand and deliberate to Straub, Kuchar, Anger, Warhol, Buñuel and Jack Smith – have commingled throughout Crotty and Abrantes' individual films; it's no wonder, considering their promiscuous creative methodology, that these too would infect their many collaborations, whether together as co-directors, or when Abrantes has teamed with Schmidt, whose own pair of co-directed films with Carver further reinforce this constellation of influence.



*The Island is Enchanted with You*

Schmidt and Carver's *The Unity of All Things* (2013), the group's only feature prior to *Fort Buchanan*, stands as perhaps the most ambitious work to emerge from the group. Set on the border of the US and Mexico, the film centres on a team of Asian-American research scientists as they break ground on a new particle accelerator. The science-fiction intimations that haunt many of the group's productions are here brought to the fore as the film's industrial locales (filmed at multiple real-life particle colliders) and neon abstractions frame a drama of gender-agnostic desire between the lead researcher's two teenage sons, each played by female actors in drag. In Schmidt and Carver's utopian vision, the ordinary is rendered extraordinary through simple yet radical gestures, the actors' ambiguous physiologies, the filmmakers' antiquated aesthetic presentation (shooting on a combination of Super-8 and Super-16mm), and the narrative's surreal conflation of the earthly and the cosmic suggesting a worldview, to paraphrase one character's astute observation, more vertical than lateral in its understanding. Much like Schmidt and Carver's follow up, *La isla está encantada con ustedes* (*The Island is Enchanted with You*, 2014), in which tales of Puerto Rico's colonial past are considered in futurist terms through a combination of lo-fi CGI, hypnotizing musical sequences, and pansexual cultural rites, *The Unity of All Things* reorients genre conventions through queer coordinates and emerges with something less strange than startling prescient.



*Palaces of Pity*

Schmidt's collaborations with Abrantes have often taken the form of character studies, allegorising issues of Portugal's past and present through deceptively intimate tales of desire, family and friendship. Their first film, the aptly titled *A History of Mutual Respect* (2010), which also lends Abrantes' production company its name, stars the directors themselves as a pair of horny best friends turned bitter rivals battling over the same aboriginal female. Appropriately, these displays of animal lust are set against the lush Portuguese jungle; as the two men stalk and attempt to seduce their prey, with Abrantes at one point pursuing the girl through the forest on foot and in the nude, the tenuousness of their bond is revealed and later betrayed when they're each forced to choose between their friendship and their libido. The teenage sisters at the centre of *Palácios de Pena* (*Palaces of Pity*, 2011), Abrantes and Schmidt's second pairing, are also at odds with one another, angling on their inheritance and jockeying for position as heirs to their grandmother's estate following her death. With its contemplative tone, exquisite architectural designs, and expansive countryside vistas, the film unfolds something like a modernist pastorate, albeit one with a great deal of historical weight tied up in its inter-generational and imperialist particulars. Subtly complex, these two films attempt to chart colonial trauma back to its roots by examining the lingering effects of its sublimation.

In an interview with Nick Pinkerton for *Film Comment*, Abrantes describes his mentality with matter of fact, self-aware pride – “a ‘Kill your idols’ kind of thing,” he calls it. “You take a genre and then you switch that code to make that genre either appear as offensive, reveal some offensive or politically incorrect aspect of the Hollywood model or auteur model.” These comments are in reference to one of his very first films, *Olympia I & II* (2006), which he co-directed with his Cooper Union classmate Kate Widloski, and they speak succinctly to how Abrantes approaches art, whether his own or that of an entire lineage of exalted or established rank. In this instance it’s Manet and his iconic painting, which Abrantes and Widloski proceed to simultaneously deify and defame by recasting themselves as, alternately, subject and servant amidst the artist’s grandiloquent decoupage. In the first part, Widloski assumes the role of the eponymous prostitute, lying on a satin sofa in the nude while berating her offscreen brother (voiced by Abrantes) for not acting on his incestual urges; in the second, Abrantes plays a less volatile, more despondent Olympia, and Widloski, made up in blackface, her humble servant. Similar liberties are taken with Shakespeare and Aristophanes in *Fratelli* (2011), which Abrantes made alongside Portuguese actor Alexandre Melo, and *Ἔρωτες* (2012), in which semi-sacred texts are reframed as multicultural farces. In each case what could play as sheer bastardization instead reinforces the material’s poetic probity, even as their cinematic translations likely resemble something far more belligerent than intended.

Rather than curb these juvenile impulses, Abrantes has in recent years simply reoriented his epistemological concerns while bolstering his comedic bonafides. In the same *Film Comment* interview he espouses a newfound embrace of unchecked comedy as an act of, if not maturation, than at the very least of evolution. “I’ve made so many of these shorts, at this point, that it’s gotten to the endpoint of criticizing myself and it’s like, ‘Okay, let’s move on,’” he says. “I think that’s why I’m into comedy now. Parody or satire, when it just stops at that, is extremely limiting as a form. Whereas actual humor is something far more complex.” However you classify them, Abrantes’ most recent films, which include, along with *Taprobana*, *Ennui Ennui* (2013) and *Freud und Friends* (2015), are working in an entirely different register to that of his previous work (though *Taprobana*’s obscenities are efficiently offset by its bio-historical referents). Indeed, compared with something as technically humble yet the matically ambitious as *Visionary Iraq* (2009), in which Abrantes and Crotty, in their first co-directed short, star as every character, male and female, in a cheeky send-up of the modern day soap opera (complete with wartime escapades), these recent works can seem almost outrageously overblown. Often playing like two or three films at once, both *Ennui Ennui*, a madcap espionage farce concerning the kidnapping of the promiscuous daughter of a French ambassadress in Afghanistan and the ruthless drone warfare tactics employed by an oversexed approximation of Barack Obama, and *Freud und Friends*, a self-lacerating spin on *Sleeper* (1973) in which Abrantes’ erogenous dreams are analysed by his real-life girlfriend, are nigh-on ludicrous concoctions that move through genres like partners in an orgy.

In addition to an untold number of projects in various stages of development and a recently completed medium-length feature co-directed with British experimentalist Ben Rivers, Abrantes is said to currently be working on a feature with Schmidt about a self-centered reality TV star who adopts a child while on vacation in Haiti. If nothing else, this tireless work ethic speaks to his insatiable need to create, as it does an undeniably infectious energy which animates all those in his orbit (or even his periphery; the similarities between Abrantes’ cinema and Miguel Gomes’ celebrated pillaging of *Arabian Nights*, 2015, is subject for another essay entirely). The cinema of Abrantes, Schmidt, Crotty and Carver, occasionally on their own but more often when working in tandem, is a globetrotting project of passion, of politics, and, most especially, of desire. At their best these films locate the focal point of these notions and reallocate their signifiers until all that remains is that intangible yet unmistakable feeling of ennui – a very human feeling that these filmmakers appear capable of locating in the most far flung of locales and articulating through the most atypical of scenarios. Above all, the desire these directors embody is one of experiential resolve: Uniting all things, theirs is an altruistic cinema of self-possession that embraces imagination, imperfection, and the irrational, positing desire as both humanity’s crucible and catalyst, reconditioning past transgressions even as it shapes future titillations.