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# REFLECTING ON *VANITAS*: ARCHIVES, AFFECTS, ETHICS

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## ABSTRACT

Vanitas *is a short film written by Glenn D'Cruz and co-directed by Glenn D'Cruz and Steven Andrew McIntyre with animation art by John Graham. The work premiered at the Revelation Perth International Film Festival and won awards for best director and best Melbourne short film at the Melbourne Documentary Film Festival. It also received a special mention at the Antenna Documentary Film Festival in Sydney in October 2022.* Vanitas *explores D'Cruz's often-fraught relationship with his Anglo-Indian father, Anto, who died in 1985 at the age of 53. This multi-layered work is, on one level, a belated eulogy to Anto D'Cruz, but it is also about the way some Anglo-Indians experienced the sting of racism and thwarted ambition as a consequence of historical and cultural forces that are not always easily apprehended during the messy bustle of everyday life. In this short article, D'Cruz reflects on the film's creative and collaborative processes. It is important to be aware that while Vanitas is not a work of fiction it is a creative work that uses literary, theatrical, filmic and painterly techniques to tell its story.*

## INTRODUCTION

It started with a letter. Realising it was the anniversary of his death, an occasion I rarely marked, I scratched and scribbled a barely legible, handwritten epistle to my Anglo-Indian father: Antoine Joseph 'Anto' D'Cruz, former goods clerk, bus conductor, post and telegraph officer and night watchman. Of course, it's not fair or accurate to define a person solely by their occupation, but Anto always seemed to be striving for an elusive professional status he believed would bestow him with a degree of social respectability and recognition. I never understood a lot of things about my father: his obsession with sartorial elegance, for one, but I was especially confused by his desire to obtain a clerical job. Surely, there were more exciting and fulfilling ambitions one could pursue, I often thought, as Anto lectured me on the importance of being a clerk.

The gap between Anto's ambitions and my own was a constant source of tension between us. My letter was a belated attempt to unpack the complexities of our relationship, which reached its nadir shortly before Anto's untimely death at the age of 53. Perhaps the letter was a form of penance, a retrospective reckoning for everything I took for granted as a 'fatted' child who was oblivious to the everyday existential struggles faced by people without inherited wealth. Suffice it to say, I generated around 2000 words of rambling prose suffused with passages of anger, apology and atonement. The experience was cathartic and when I was done, I typed the document into my computer where it remained, unread and almost forgotten for the next few years.

In 2013, I wrote and presented a performative lecture about Anglo-Indian identity, which I presented at the Walker Street Gallery in the Melbourne suburb of Dandenong. My original intention was to base the work on my academic book, *Midnight's Orphans* (2006). As I slowly ploughed my way through the book, I cringed at my clumsy locutions, barbarous omissions and pretentious invocations of in-vogue theory. It became clear to me that the anecdotal passages had weathered the passing of time the best. They were, in my view, the most compelling parts of the book. So, I decided to jettison the academic focus of my presentation in favour of a more personal and theatrical approach, which I then refined over subsequent performances, most notably at the *Performing Mobilities* conference at the RMIT gallery in 2016. By this time, the project's focus had changed. It was as much about my father's experience of migration and racism as it was about the historical and political currents that continue to batter and buffet and the Anglo-Indian community. I also became aware that the work was about my tempestuous relationship with my father. I attempted to document the performance on video, but the results were disappointing. I found it impossible to re-create the energy of the live performance for camera. Suffice it to say, I abandoned the casual and improvisational structure of the presentation for a more carefully scripted and self-consciously cinematic approach to the topic. What follows is a largely descriptive account of the creative processes used to make the film. I have mixed feelings about artists reflecting on their own work. Sometimes such reflections can be genuinely illuminating and there is clearly an appetite for such commentary—DVD box sets are filled with actors and directors talking about the minuatae of their craft. Divulging too much information about art risks losing some of the mystery that makes

creative work so compelling. So, in this article, I don't want to tell you what *Vanitas* means in any definitive sense. Rather, I will organise my reflections around three topics: archives, affects and ethics, a triptych of words borrowed from the subtitle of my last book, *Hauntological Dramaturgy* (Routledge, 2022) which includes a more expansive chapter on *Vanitas,* a 27-minute film named after a 17th-century genre of still-life painting that represents human mortality through symbols of death, transience, decay and the vanity of human achievement. For the record, the form flourished in the Netherlands and key exponents of this style include Dutch painters like David Bailly (1584–1657), Harmen van Steenwyck (1612–1656), and Willem Claesz Heda (1594–1681).

Hopefully, my thoughts on the making of *Vanitas* will inspire readers to seek out the film, which will be available on Vimeo once it has completed its time on the film festival circuit, and perhaps embark on their own creative projects.

## ARCHIVES

What happens to our possessions when we die? As I age, I become more conscious of the fact that have accumulated a lot of junk over the course of my life. I'm surrounded by things from different phases of my three score years on the planet. I can conjure key incidents and relationships from my past by scanning my bookshelf or record collection (yes, folks, I am old enough to have an over-sized collection of 12-inch vinyl discs, which I rarely play). Almost every item from these collections holds some kind of personal resonance, which is probably why I haven't delivered them all to my local thrift shop yet. However, I have started divesting myself of these 'things' whose materiality is obviously more durable than my mortal human body. My father did not live long enough to entertain such thoughts about his 'things'. He did not expect to die at a relatively young age, so he didn't have time to dispose of possessions that didn't 'spark joy' (to cop a phrase from Marie Kondo's best-selling book). He left behind a lot of stuff most of which I found stored in my mother's house in Perth: an old reel-to-reel tape recorder, a cine film projector, a tennis racquet, cameras, photographs, letters, job applications and other sundry items. In many ways these objects are the stars of *Vanitas*, for these objects were once embedded in the fabric of my family's everyday life and I use them to structure the film and tell a story about my perception of father's life and struggles. It is important to stress the fact that the film does not

claim to tell a definitive story. No doubt other members of my family will have their own stories to tell. Indeed, I could have told a very different story by unpacking the significance of a different set of objects, or by finding an entirely different organising principle for the film.

Some might see these 'things' as bits of archaic junk, but, for me, personal possessions have an archival dimension even when they exist outside formal archives or collecting institutions like libraries and museums. Traditionally, we associate archives with academic activities. For those interested I have written about the politics of archives elsewhere —once again, you can find a more detailed account of this topic in my book *Hauntological Dramaturgy* (2022). In the present context, I will share a few observations on the ways I used my father's personal archive creatively and with what we might call *anarchival* intent (a practice inspired by the work of Brian Massumi (2016). This phrase refers to the process of reactivating objects by not seeing them as mere documents, but as items that can release creative potential through our interactive engagement with them. To clarify further, the story I tell about my father is not locked inside the objects. It is my engagement with them that creates something novel. I will make a few remarks about this *anarchival* work with reference to an object that didn't make the final cut of the film for reasons I will outline in the ethics section of this paper.

My father owned a Royal Crown tennis racquet made by Slazenger. He invested in a wooden Dunlop racquet press to prevent the head of the racquet warping. His ornate signature is still visible on the press. I'm drawn to the signature as an expression of personality — my father's handwriting is characterised by bold cursive flourishes, which contrasts so markedly with my illegible scrawl, which is partly the result of indolence on my part, and my father's determination to change me from a 'demonic' left-hander to a 'proper' right-hander. The thought that my father held this object, that his sweat seeped into its handle as he huffed and puffed his way across the tennis court, generated the following piece of narration:

> Anto and Uncle were like oranges and apples.
> You might find them in the same fruit bowl, but they had very different tastes.

One was acidic and tangy; the other hard and sour.
Both were testy and tempestuous, and never destined to be great friends.
Yet, bound by familial duty and arcane cultural covenants, they made a go of it, and forged a fragile friendship that was never far away from dissolving in inchoate rage.

They once fell out over an argument about whether southern hemisphere toilets flush in a clockwise direction.
Uncle was a handsome chap with a taste for malt whiskey and cigarettes.
Anto was a portly fellow with a large appetite. He'd eat almost anything (including curried offal: pig's trotters, tongue, brains, and tripe).
Anto and Uncle were not particularly athletic.
Yet, these disparate personalities shared a passion for tennis: the whitest of white sports.

In the early 1970s, Anto met Uncle at the Valentines Park Tennis Courts near Perth Road, Ilford (a presciently named location).
Valentines Park is the biggest green space in East London, a short distance from where Uncle lived.
Here, they would huff and puff, and scream at each other over ambiguous line calls, double bounces and lets.
They were combatants and adjudicators: another volatile mix.
Sometimes, I'd watch them.
Mesmerized by the thwack of rubber against taut nylon, I saw two brown men, dressed in white, revel in faux combat.
For all the superficial hostility and mutual aggravation, tennis enabled Anto and Uncle to have a bit of fun.

In subsequent years both took the road to Perth, Western Australia, where they died premature deaths.
Anto's heart gave out at 53 and lung cancer took Uncle in his early 60s.

> As far as I knew they never resumed their tennis rivalry in the land where the toilet flush pushes piss and shit in clockwise motion.
> Anto's tennis whites are long gone, but his weapon of choice, in those long-gone battles with Uncle, The Royal Crown, Slazenger racquet remains.

I'll resist the temptation to explicate this passage. Suffice it say, that *Vanitas* condenses some of my observations about how history and racism shaped my father's life and our relationship. As previously noted, I'd rather leave matters of meaning alone. Readers (and viewers of the film will inevitably interpret the film in their own ways, needless to say). In any case, *Vanitas* does not claim to represent a universal Anglo-Indian experience. I've had conversations with members of the community whose experience of migration was significantly different from my own. These interlocuters found our film unnecessarily angry and depressing, which is fine with me. The work presents a particular point of view. Moreover, this perspective is filtered through the significant artistic, conceptual and technical contributions of my collaborators, Steve McIntyre and John Graham, both of whom are white Australians. While the theatrical forerunner to the film focused on my words (supplemented with projected images) the film needed a strong cinematic aesthetic that supported and complicated the narrative. We cut the tennis racquet sequence because our attempts to find a visual style for the words resulted in a curious muddle of animation, clumsy re-enactments and archival 8mm film, which, as we shall see, posed an ethical problem concerning the documentarian's perennial problem: the matter of consent. While the passage worked thematically, it didn't fit the structure of the film, which depended on marrying most of the text to fully animated sequences. We actually excised a little less than half the text I generated for the project. The final selection and combination of material emerged after we placed everything on our editing timeline and then eliminated sequences on the basis of what I will call affective resonance — that is, a sequence's ability to elicit an emotional response from the viewer while driving the narrative forward.

## AFFECTS

The term 'affect' has a specialised meaning for academics in the humanities. It is not synonymous with feeling or emotion. Rather, it is a term that is often used to describe

involuntary material processes in the human body that are stimulated by various kinds of encounters with other entities. Art generates affects in this sense, but we were not thinking in academic terms when we made the film, so my use of the term 'affect' in this paper has more to do with reflecting on the pitfalls of trying to generate visceral affects by telling a story that's informed by research, but one that eschews scholarly jargon. I am primarily an academic, and while I have attempted to make my writing as accessible as possible by using narrative strategies more commonly found in creative writing, academic protocols make it difficult to reach a general audience. This is not to say that creative writing is inherently better than other forms of expression. I don't believe in observing generic or stylistic boundaries. Academic writing can be as 'affective' as creative writing — for example, I was moved to tears by reading Roland Barthes' book *Camera Lucida* (1982), a complex mediation on photograph as both art and document. It is also a eulogy, of sorts, for Barthes' then recently deceased mother. That said, I have been frustrated by the fact that my academic work on Anglo-Indians is rarely read by members of the community (partly because of the prohibitive pricing of academic texts). Let's face it, academic work can be intimidating. Even a celebrated text like William Dalrymple's eminently readable, *White Mughals* (2003), can be too much for some readers. I hoped *Vanitas* might reach a wider audience and communicate some of my experiences growing up in an Anglo-Indian family in a manner that worked on a more emotional, visceral level.

Ironically, this goal requires some degree of artifice and calculation. This is as true of theatre as it is of film. A purely spontaneous, 'authentic' expression of emotion, in my view, is almost impossible to achieve. One of my family members criticised the film for being performative, and there is certainly a degree of deliberate artifice involved in the making any kind of artwork. There is no such thing as a zero-degree style. I appear on screen as the narrator of *Vanitas*, and while it's true my co-director Steve McIntyre shaped my 'performance' through his framing, *mise-en-scene* and feedback on my reading, I do not believe I was 'acting' (as one of the film's most vociferous critics suggested). I attempted to connect with the spirit of the letter I wrote to my father on the anniversary of his death, a detail, you will remember, mentioned at the start of this article. Of course, what I believe to be true is of little significance since it is the spectator that will ultimately determine whether the work succeeds or not, and that is how it should be, but the following point bears repeating: I am, like so many other

people, fascinated by the creative process. In many cases, I find an artist's self-reflexive commentary on their working practices informative and, on occasion, inspirational (mystery be damned). That said, I would much rather you see *Vanitas* before reading my reflections on the making of the film. I'd rather not shape your responses to the work by telling you about what I think *Vanitas* attempts to say about fathers and sons or Anglo-Indian identity. This is why I have tried to avoid saying too much about the film's specific content. The film will be available to see on Vimeo once it has completed its time on the film festival circuit. In the meantime, it's possible to get a glimpse of the work by looking at the film's trailer, which you can find at the following link: https://vimeo.com/738842498

Before concluding with a few remarks on the ethical dilemmas posed by making a film like *Vanitas*, a film that engages with the life of a deceased person who cannot consent to appearing in the work, I'd like to point out that creative work often generates powerful affects for those involved in the creative act. First, the technical and conceptual challenges involved in such a task can be frustrating and stressful. For example, I found it hard to cut the Tennis Racquet sequence from the film since, in my view, it conveyed crucial information about my father's character such as his desire to conform to the social norms of white society, his competitive spirit, his determination to succeed in the face of adversity. Tennis gave him an arena to express his 'gun-throat' volatility and fierce temper without 'falling out' with family and friends who were not 'up to the mark' in his view. These vexations pale in comparison with the emotional turbulence generated by personal disclosure. *Vanitas* demanded that I interrogate my relationship with my father in a sometimes brutally honest way. The realisation that I'm more like my father, temperamentally, than I had previously believed was especially confronting, which brings me to the final section of this reflective exercise.

## ETHICS

Nicholas Ridout suggests that the question 'How to Act?' provides a succinct account of ethics (2009, pp.5–6). Put more expansively, ethics involves interrogating and justifying the actions we perform with respect to questions of justice and moral responsibility. Ethics and art are uncomfortable bedfellows, though. And this coupling has generated complex debates throughout the ages —see Alasdair MacIntyre's book, *A Short History of Ethics* (1998), for a concise account of the major strands of ethical

thought. For the purposes of this article I will note that there are those, such as Oscar Wilde who believe, if one takes them at face value, that: “No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style” (1891). Salman Rushdie puts this sentiment differently when he claims that:

> Literature is self-validating. That is to say, a book is not justified by its author’s worthiness to write it, but by the quality of what has been written. There are terrible books that arise directly out of experience, and extraordinary imaginative feats dealing with themes which the author has been obliged to approach from the outside.
>
> Literature is not in the business of copywriting certain themes for certain groups. (1991, pp.14-15)

From this position, literature, or art in general, is a kind of ethical free zone, or a frame that gives the artist license to say anything they want to say without consequence, yet the work of both Wilde and Rushdie, writing a century apart, do appear to possess ethical sympathies expressed as forms of political critique. In Wilde’s case, it is tempting to read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) as a cautionary morality tale that warns against the consequences of adopting a purely aesthetic, self-serving disposition towards life. Dorian destroys himself and those in his close orbit through an amoral embrace of art for art’s sake. Rushdie’s work, especially his most celebrated novels, rails against authoritarian violence. As we all know, Rushdie has put his life in peril by calling out Indian nationalism and Islamic terrorism. The key point, though, is that, for Rushdie, the quality of art is more important than any ethical or political sympathy. Clearly, this position has its detractors in the present age of so-called ‘cancel culture.’ Today, it is, apparently, no longer possible to separate an artist’s moral character from their work. So much for fiction. What about a work like *Vanitas*? As I’ve already noted, this work uses creative techniques within what is essentially a documentary form. This raises even more complex ethical considerations.

What ethical responsibility do I have to my long-dead father? How should I pay tribute to his life? Do I have the right to tell his story without his permission? How might other members of my family feel about playing ‘bit-parts’ in a story told from my perspective? Obviously, these are not easy questions to answer, and I’m painfully aware that I risk sounding like a self-serving egotist by even attempting to respond to these fraught

queries. To say that all art, especially autobiographical art, involves a degree of violence also sounds like an ethical cop out despite being true, in my view. It is impossible to produce a wholly impartial or objective account of any event or human life, but I believe it's important to tell difficult stories in order to reckon with the past, understand it, and then move on with a richer sense of how inherited trauma along with inherited cultural and moral values shape our sense of self. I didn't seek permission to use my family archive as a resource for making a film about my father, and I don't think I fully engaged with the ethical questions I've raised in this paper while making the work. That said, I did let go of the Tennis Racquet sequence because I was unsure about how my dead uncle's family might feel about me using his image in *Vanitas*. Am I a hypocrite for not affording members of my immediate family the same ethical consideration? No doubt. All I can say in my defence is that I believe my father's story is important since people like him are rarely given their due. I hope our film goes some way towards honouring his memory. I can only hope that the film functions as both a *mea culpa* on my part and a tribute to a man who was more sinned against than sinning.

Finally, as the child of Anglo-Indian parents who rarely spoke about their experiences in India, I felt compelled, as an adult, to study Anglo-Indian history and culture. My academic work in Anglo-Indian studies, was, I believe, in part, a thinly veiled attempt to understand my father. Freed from the yoke of scholarly convention, *Vanitas* provides a direct, raw and emotionally charged engagement with the life and struggles of Antoine 'Anto' D'Cruz. Obviously, I will never know what he might have made of my letter or the film, but I'd like to think, he would see it as an act of love, a mark of long overdue respect.

***Glenn D'Cruz*** *is a Melbourne writer, filmmaker and former academic. He is currently Honorary Associate Professor in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University. His film,* Vanitas*, co-directed with Steven McIntyre, premiered at the* Revelation Perth Film Festival *in 2022 and won awards for best Melbourne film and best Australian director at the* Melbourne Documentary Film Festival*. His latest book,* Hauntological Dramaturgy*, was published by Routledge in March 2022.*

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