



THE ARTIST'S INTRODUCTION –
THREE SHORT FILMS ABOUT ANGLO-INDIANS:
RE-VIEWING COTTON MARY (2002), *A PASSAGE FROM INDIA*
(2004), *VANITAS* (2022)

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For the sake of clarity, I think it important to contextualise my Anglo-Indian videos, so let me begin with a confession: I'm a film school dropout. I began my undergraduate degree as a film major but found the rigours of working with celluloid very frustrating. Filmmaking in the pre-digital era was complex, messy and expensive. I switched to literature and later discovered the joys and perils of the performing arts, which gave me a long career as a theatre studies academic. I maintained an interest in film during my professional life and even taught courses in film theory and history. I also developed a hobbyist's interest in photography and video production during my time as a university lecturer (a lot of experimental theatre seemed to incorporate video, so I followed suit).

The advent of relatively inexpensive digital cameras in the early part of the century inspired me to apply my basic video production skills to other areas of my domestic and academic life. To cut to the chase, I began to document the activities of The East Indian Club of Melbourne (EIC) while writing my PhD thesis on the representation of Anglo-Indians in colonial and postcolonial fiction, which I later published as *Midnight's Orphans: Anglo-Indians in Postcolonial Literature* (Peter Lang, 2006). The relatively short lived EIC, named in honour of the East Indian Club of Calcutta (1825), sought to promote, debate and discuss the scholarly dimension of Anglo-Indian culture. These discussions helped me shape the argument I made (regarding the prevalence of

Anglo-Indian stereotypes) in my dissertation which I subsequently refined in *Midnight's Orphans*.

This book threatened to turn me into a professional Anglo-Indian, a role I felt I couldn't play with any degree of conviction or authority. While I felt confident writing about Anglo-Indian culture from the perspective of a literary scholar, I was painfully aware that I knew very little about the 'lived experience' of those Anglo-Indians who had been immersed in the culture, chaos and turbulence of the post-partition era in India. Suffice it to say, I felt like the stereotypical 'coconut' (brown on the outside, white within). The fact that my friends and colleagues in the EIC (Keith Butler, Richard Johnson, Keith Wilkins and Michael Ludgrove) possessed a formidable wealth of knowledge about all things Anglo-Indian, intensified my sense of being an imposter; they had actually grown up in India, after all. This feeling of inadequacy provided the impetus for my first video about Anglo-Indians. After writing about representations of Anglo-Indians as an academic, I thought it might be a good idea to talk to some actual Anglo-Indians.

In my PhD, *Representing Anglo-Indians* (1999), I argued that scholarly debate within the nascent field of Anglo-Indian studies had become overly obsessed with correcting derogatory stereotypes of the community, which appeared in books, films and even scholarly works. I proposed a different approach to the problem. Rather than attempting to classify representations as either true or false, I suggested that it might be productive to uncover the conditions of possibility that generated stock representations of Anglo-Indians. This, I believed, would provide a more nuanced account of Anglo-Indian history and a more inclusive and expansive sense of Anglo-Indian identity. For those readers who are interested, Debojoy Chanda provides an excellent account of this argument in his article, 'After 15 Years: A Look Back at Glenn D'Cruz's *Midnight's Orphans: Anglo-Indians in Post/Colonial Literature*' (IJAIS, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2021).

My videos, hopefully, provide a more accessible articulation of the key themes and topics I explore in my Academic writings about Anglo-Indian culture.

Re-Viewing Cotton Mary (2002)

View link: <https://vimeo.com/778819363>

The release of the Merchant-Ivory film, *Cotton Mary* (1999) re-ignited the debate about the persistence of derogatory Anglo-Indian stereotypes in popular culture. The film was a virtual compendium of stock character types: the sexually promiscuous seductress, the pompous Anglophile mimic and so on. In 2002, the East India Club (Melbourne), in partnership with the original editor of this journal, Dr Adrian Gilbert, convened a conference titled: *Who are the Anglo-Indians?* Instead of writing an academic paper for this event, I decided to make a video about what Anglo-Indians in Melbourne thought about *Cotton Mary*. While technically primitive, the work functions today as an interesting time capsule, which captures the emotional flavour of the debate generated by the film. The video shows the facial expressions, gestures, sighs, cries and whispers of a group of Anglo-Indians as they watch the film. I think their comments and criticism provide a valuable counterpoint to the academic writing on the topic of Anglo-Indian stereotypes in film.

A Passage from India (2004)

View link: <https://vimeo.com/778774676>

In 2004, the Immigration Museum of Victoria commissioned the EIC to develop an exhibition on Anglo-Indian migration to Australia. As part of this project, I made a short 20-minute film, *A Passage from India*, which consisted of interviews and archival material connected with the hazards and bureaucratic frustrations of immigrating to Australia during and shortly after the dismantling of the so-called White Australia Policy.

The video played on a loop through a specially modified 1970s era TV set located in a section of the museum's community gallery, which was made up to look like a typical Anglo-Indian Lounge room. Visitors to the exhibition could watch the entire film on the TV screen and listen to the voices of the work's participants as they moved through the space. By making this video I felt I was generating a more accessible account of some of the themes I'd explored in my scholarly publications. My sister, Dr Carolyn D'Cruz, along with Keith Butler and Richard Johnson provided me with invaluable

practical assistance and support (they all appear in *A Passage from India* as interviewers and interviewees).

***Vanitas* (2022)**

View link: <https://vimeo.com/693341958?share=copy> Password: Vanitas11

(available through February 2024)

Vanitas is a short film I wrote and co-directed with Steven Andrew McIntyre. It contains 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. The Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), one of the television channels primarily funded by the Australian government, has recently acquired the film, which it will screen and stream from March 2024).

The most technically ambitious work in this collection, the film explores my often-fraught relationship with my father, Anto, who died in 1985 at the age of 53. On one level, it's a belated eulogy to Anto D'Cruz, but it is also about my failure to understand his life and legacy. He 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. I provide a more extensive account of how and why I made this film in a recent volume of this journal: *IJAIS*, Special Issue: Anglo-Indian Writers Reflect on Writing (Vol. 22, No. 2, 2022).

Finally, I'd like to express my heartfelt thanks to Robyn Andrews and Brent Otto for featuring my non-academic work in this issue of the *IJAIS*. I feel humbled and honoured by your interest in my projects, and I look forward to reading the commentary generated by these audio-visual projects. Thanks also to the EIC (Keith Butler, Richard Johnson, Michael Ludgrove, Keith Wilkins) Dr. Carolyn D'Cruz, for her invaluable help with my original research project and her practical assistance with *A Passage from India*) and Dr Adrian Gilbert, the founder of the *IJAIS* and the co-convenor of the conference 'Who are the Anglo-Indians' (2002).