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SPECTRAL LIVES AND STORIES OF THINGS AND PLACES: A SEARCH FOR THE ANGLO-INDIAN FATHER IN GLENN D'CRUZ'S *VANITAS*

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to unravel D'Cruz's short film, Vanitas (2022), and locate the figure of a spectral Anglo-Indian father inside the cinematic apparatus. Focusing on the lucidity of this technical medium and the diverse genres and cross-references employed by D'Cruz, it states that sometimes in the process of representing generations of trauma and identity crises of individuals, vehicles of representation are themselves overwhelmed and found lacking. D'Cruz's desire to make a film on the volatile subject of memory and guilt with the support of photographs, recorded sounds, and animated fictional constructions is itself an invitation to a dangerously confessional territory that keeps provoking its audience. In my paper, I have tried to investigate these ghostly spaces that are in reality projections of a grieving mind.

VIEW LINK: https://vimeo.com/693341958?share=copy Password: Vanitas11
(available through February 2024)

Glenn D'Cruz and Steven Andrew McIntyre's short film, *Vanitas* (2022) is written and shot with the intention of paying homage to the late father of Glenn, Antoine Joseph D'Cruz, referred to as 'Anto', and by extension to all Anglo-Indians with fates and lives that were not so different from Anto's. Glenn keeps shifting between multiple roles, sometimes parodying his father's face or turning himself into a metaphor, and then hopping on to a cartoonish security guard. Things, images, sounds, found footage,

photographs, animated drawings haunt this twenty-seven-minute-long film. The film quite intriguingly unfolds with props that comprise the cinematic apparatus – cinema reel (with eyes and mouth agape and staring straight into the audience), a bowl of miniature candles acting as the light source, a sound recorder, family photographs, an old Cosina camera, and finally the voiceover. In D'Cruz's words, *Vanitas* is "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" (2022, p. 68). Similarly, the film focuses on the life and things of a quester that have finally come to symbolize the inevitability of change and death. If we push the limits of a film as a finished product, at the end of it we unearth spectral characteristics inside it. In a way, a film begins when it's dead, when after all the editing it is outside the hands of the director. The projector is the otherworldly light materializing ghosts on to the screen. Ironically, in this film, the voice makes us realize that there has been a collapse, a fusion where the film (a dead object itself) must speak about the "objects of a dead man". This paper interrogates the disintegration of film as a medium into numerous forms and modes in order to accommodate the weight of a history that is equally splintered and deeply subjective. Cinema of this kind is self-reflexive, self-conscious and simultaneously evaporative and explosive. Memories are extracted from the concreteness of things.

D'Cruz transmutes the film into a site for excavation and his father's past into an archaeological investigation. Interesting to note is how D'Cruz's racial/ethnic consciousness, or their relationship with family members/the past, or with history itself is revealed through the medium of technology— photographs, and other objects left behind by the dead. In an article written about the process D'Cruz states that,

> …cameras, a tennis racquet, a tape recorder, photographs, 8-mm cine films, an empty tub of Brylcreem, stamps, garden tools and so on … each object did indeed function as remnants of a life and a world that has now vanished. The objects also acted as a medium through which I felt I could communicate with my dead father, converse, if you will, with his ghost. (2021, p. 400)

In another article, Glenn D'Cruz opines that,

> 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. (2022, 68-69)

In a way, the entire film transmutes into a time shelter where refuge and comfort are served along with guilt and punishment. D'Cruz, as a writer of this film, is not only interested in constructing a veritable museum of valuable things left behind, but his primary objective appears to be to dive into the depths of death and philosophy. Simultaneously, it transforms into a mediation on the ontology of things. We are looking at the weight of objects, "tangible ghosts", mediated through decades of displacement and implicit violence.

Built on a confessional mode from the very beginning, the filmmaker-son personas overlap each other in attempts to break the fourth wall and speak directly into the camera, to the audience. D'Cruz prefers to speak directly into the camera/with the audience in order to maintain a connection that is both intimate and ethical. A uninhibited face tends to add accuracy and authenticity to the accounts exhibited. In the first few sequences, the father's camera keeps returning along with play-cards, post office stamps, bus tickets and speakers, establishing repeatedly that yesterday's garbage is today's evidence of a bygone civilization.

To echo Salisbury (2023), who writes extensively about slowness in the works of Samuel Beckett, and healthcare during the pandemic with focus on creation of tender time, the grey photographs evoke a grey time and grey sense of waiting for a dislodged person of Anglo-India heritage, for a disoriented son longing for his father. This kind of time doesn't expand; it deepens, intensifies, swallows. The film, designed as a eulogy to D'Cruz's father, begins a second time, as if, with a fade out and the switching on of the recorder and the father's voice emanating in the words of Cynthia Schloss's "Send Me the Pillow that You Dream on".

D'Cruz continuously creates significant moments for Anto to enter, speak his side of the story through recordings and photographs, and then vanish again. The film mirrors a feverish dream of love, dislocation and lost identities. One feels there is a constant Plath-like tussle in the son to exorcise the image of the father and simultaneously seek forgiveness for the exorcism. This expulsion-catharsis happens through the film apparatus. As a consequence, the film mutates into a violent struggle between the

remembering son and the dismembering filmmaker. A father's crime of affixing a borrowed identity on the body of the son is removed when weighed against the crimes of both the "mutually hating" English and Indians. To accommodate the palimpsestic nature of their Anglo-Indian identity, D'Cruz turns the film text into a series of intertextual reference points. D'Cruz mutes the song from Raj Kumar's 'scandalous' *Bobby* (1973) and over a joyful screen/scene overlays the slurs associated with Anglo-Indians ("Chi-Chis, Blackey-Whites, Half-Castes, Midnight's Orphans"). Perhaps, the unbearable question that the film poses is whether it is possible to reach an identity-balance, when wrenched by a 'shameful' legacy of colonial lust on the one hand, and loose representative allegations on the other.

Two minutes into the film, Glenn offers an intense critique of his father's fascination with suits. Suits for Anto were a symbol of "wealth, confidence, entitlement, superiority", a very English thing. A tailor in East London was paid by Anto to design suits for a seven-year-old unwilling child, an anomalous inclination of the father to turn Glenn into a "subcontinental version of Little Lord Fauntleroy". The father's desire for suits, therefore, has the purpose of ironing out the creases of Anglo-Indian stereotyping of men and women as sexually overactive, alcoholic, immoral sidekicks to the British. In an attempt to exonerate his father, Glenn's aggrieved face exclaims into the camera, "It wasn't his fault. I blame the British, and the Indians too. Both groups despised us, as much as they despised each other."

Elaborating on the issue of rampant stereotyping practised by the British, Chanda (2021), referring to the works of Ballhatchet and Hawes, writes that "These 'impure' bodies were inhabited by figures perpetually aspiring toward 'Britishness' because of a sense of insecurity and powerlessness inherent to them, born as they often were into poverty. In this way, scholars historiographically codified *how* the negative stereotypes of Anglo-Indians were generated" (p. 29). Borrowing from Jenny Sharpe's *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (1993), Chanda stresses that

> …the stereotyping of the 'mild Hindoo' as in fact the savage rapist of British women—sharpened its focus after the First War of Indian Independence. In concurrence with this honing of the stereotyping process, the British fashioned Eurasians/Anglo-Indians as having inherited the worst qualities of both the British and the Indians... This

> construct helped separate a biologically superior 'pure English race'… from 'Asiatics' whose inferiority and depravity had apparently manifested itself through Indians having raped numerous British women in 1857. (p. 29)

A slow fade out and few greyscale photographs later, we are hurled into the world of animation, perhaps to compliment the magical meeting between Anto and the old man once upon a time on a Coimbatore train. In the middle of collapsing identities, the son has become the father. We find D'Cruz's face over the body of both the old man and his Anglo-Indian goods clerk father. This Gandhian meeting metamorphoses the father into a quasi-philosophical being, who then transfers his alphabetically ordered teachings and structures to his children. The moving night train first converts into multiple running images of a uniformed Anto and then into Glenn's speeding mocking face.

To fully comprehend Anto, one must also call attention to the marginal personality syndromes that, some allege, have sprung up in children who were shunned. Gist writes "that marginal personality syndromes as suggested by Stonequist and others tended to be more pronounced among the children who identified with the white group but were not accepted by it, whereas Indian children who identified with the Indian group showed fewer of these traits" (1967, p. 364). The animated images help in revealing the internal damage and the great divisions in Anto's mind. We are compelled to look at Anto from multiple vantage points. With his railway commission snatched, Anto is reduced to a hand-drawn monochromatic image contemplating the ways of migrating to London with his pregnant wife. Anto is forced to leave India, the "nascent republic" with a measly amount of money and his "treasured signet ring". In one of the intriguingly crafted animated images by animation artist and D'Cruz's collaborator, John Graham, the fingers and the rose gold signet ring coinciding with Anto's cartoon face mimic some of Picasso's yellow Cubist paintings. Anto is conned by a rogue jeweller at the Port of Aden and loses his "last vestige of imperial prestige". In London, Anto acquired the job of a transport bus conductor, shuffling nocturnally between West Ham garage and West End. D'Cruz depicts the madness of the transport routine through delirious overlapping of Glenn's face and his brushing of teeth.

We can find similar accounts of the deplorable conditions of Anglo-Indians in Elmer L. Hedin's 1934 article where he maps the community's poverty and growth through the years following the first World War. The Anglo-Indian state of affairs worsened "by the efforts of its members to maintain European living standards" (p. 172). The Anglo-Indian situation sympathetically documented in the Simon Commission in 1928 points out that:

> The Poverty Commission appointed by the government of Bengal in 1891-92 to investigate European and Anglo-Indian poverty in Calcutta reported that 19 per cent of these people were in utter destitution and living on public or private charity. The Pickford Committee of 1918-19 estimated the percentage at 17...And yet they are bearing 65 per cent of the cost of their schools, leaving Government to meet only 35 per cent ..... To some, higher education is a luxury; to others it is an advantage; to Anglo-Indians it is life itself. (Hedin, p. 172)

Seamlessly parodying the caste factor existing among the Hindus and Muslims, the British colonizers, in Hedin's view, believed that "The mixed-blood may share with the British, if he will, their claim of superiority to pure-blood Indians, but he may not pretend to equality with the European-born Englishman" (1934, p. 176). The struggle by Anglo-Indians to associate with and reach out to their white counterparts seemed like a fiction with a foregone conclusion laced with inhumanity and disappointment. An illustration of this is seen in one harrowing frame of Anto's wife's flickering photographs on the UK visa applications trembling in the face of customary bribery of the Indian bureaucracy and government.

There are parts of the film where colours of a childhood in a faraway land are countered and cancelled by the black and white blurry motion of the present. Similarly, the stillness of photographs and freeze frames melt into each other. The screen is permanently overloaded by a kind of stirring stillness. Anto's silent struggle in an environment of racism in London is externalized by D'Cruz, primarily through pantomimic gesticulations exhibited through jarring camera movements, faces merging with faces, erratic shifting of the left eye retina.

Anto's fascination with the tape recorder is an ironic reminder of Willy's shocking reaction to the company owner's tape recorder in Miller's ode to the devastating effects of the American Dream in *The Death of a Salesman* (1949). The death of Anto's dream is one embedded in all of Anglo-Indian consciousness. While watching Anto's pursuit

of the great English identity, one must also consider the impossible plights of other Antos lost in the magnitude of unrecorded history. In the words of the son, Anto's sound and video recordings are an "archive born out of love". Elaborating on his use of archives, D'Cruz writes,

> 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. (2022, p. 69)

D'Cruz frequently uses the split screen to register the transformation between the misjudged idealism of the past and the emptiness of the present. Anto loved listening to the Des O'Connor show or the songs of Jim Reeves on the tape-recorder. There is also a mention of Engelbert Humperdinck, "the Anglo-Indian Elvis". The recorder itself was a suggestion from Anto's wife to compensate for his prosaic schedule. Glenn takes us back first to some video-recorded scenes of the neighbourhood by Anto, and then to Anto's passionate singing voice. On the left half of a split screen, the archival Popular 200 EAP tape recorder pours out the voice of/from an undead past; on the right, a son imitates his father's unrealized dream.

The second half of the film resumes with Anto's relocation to Australia and his job at Perth as a post and telegraph officer. However, we are suddenly deep into Anto's initial days in Australia as soon as a labyrinthine animated spiral rotates and turns into a figure of a clockwork man. To reflect the convoluted entanglement of their father-son relationship, the filmmaker employs an equally complicated Kafkaesque metaphor. D'Cruz is directly referring to Kafka's parable of the law in *Before the Law* (1925). Kafka's gateway of the law is D'Cruz's Post office gate, and the gatekeeper is the gigantic guard in the business district of Perth. In the parable, a man from the country arrives at the entry of law's open gates meant only for him; Anto, too, is an Anglo-Indian from a distant land (India) seeking admission into another culture, race, financial ecology. The gatekeeper (we find the trope of the son, taking one more role, repeated) now parodies a ventriloquist's puppet with frequent jaw-dropping and voiceovers. In Anto's quest for recognition in the West, he encounters gatekeepers, depicted as all different and all the same, who defer the present and promise a future of possibilities.

In that landscape of the law, society and culture, Anto fails and falls as a modern hubristic tragic hero in search of acceptance in a kingdom where he never belonged.

The factor of Anto's race, however, subverts the Kafkaesque parable here. The guard finally informs him that the gate was never meant for a "Paki bastard…for the likes of him". Following a stomping of the father by the guard, there is a shelling of rejection letters on the screen. Moreover, the reference to Kafka also implicitly highlights D'Cruz's strained relationship with his father — an authority swaying in absence-presence and perpetually in search of validation. Anto's accident (again an oblique, ironic reference to the accident in Miller's play) and his son's admitted indifference to the news, sheds light on the darkness that engulfed both of them. D'Cruz retrospectively reads his subconscious desire for the father's death being indirectly responsible for the accident and the subsequent modification of Anto's job description as a night watchman at a desolate Mirrabooka bus station. However, we simultaneously confront the filmmaker-son who is now aware of the historical tropes and repetitive mimic acts that shape our identities and the ways we think of others and ourselves. D'Cruz hopes that "Following Butler and Bhabha, we might consider how the deliberatively subversive repetition of Anglo-Indian tropes, representations and behaviours within the visual and performing arts might contribute to transforming everyday conceptions of Anglo-Indian identity by demonstrating that it is possible to act differently" (2021, p. 406).

In *Vanitas*, D'Cruz allows the ordinariness of a dead person's objects to acquire properties of assemblage and destruction. Anto's things populate and inundate the film apparatus. The film, as if with an auto-induced, self-reflexive act, explodes with a multiplicity of techniques and genres to make room for the presence of a ghost.

Documentary styled collage of newspapers, cutouts, photographs, handycam videos, recordings gives way to a montage of opposing colours — the bloom of nature at home, surviving adjacent to the rust and decay of neglected objects on the street. While debating the Anglo-Indian problems concerning home, identity and nationality, Alison Blunt puts forward the argument that,

> India was imagined as 'land of our mothers' by Anglo-Indians in symbolic, material and contested terms that revolved around images of

> India as motherland and the roles of Anglo-Indian mothers within and beyond the home. And yet, images of India as motherland coexisted with images of Britain as fatherland, shaping ideas of home, identity, and nationality for Anglo-Indians that were distinctive in their duality and echoed community claims not only for a legitimate heritage but also for a legitimate stake in national life. (2002, p. 67)

The role and domestication of the Anglo-Indian women, especially mothers and wives, in shaping the Anglo-Indian narrative of loyalty towards Indian nationalism and their allegiance to the freedom movement, is a topic that deserves special focus with respect to the glaring absence of women in *Vanitas*, who hardly appear as thinking beings beyond the old film footage. The viewer is left wondering about the participation and identity of Anto's wife in relation to Anto colossal conflict. Instead, memorial hauntings configure the architecture of both the home and the film. Drawing on the widening scope of Memory Studies, Raj and Parui cite that,

> …if memory may be considered as a representative category and an act of reconstruction that entails emplotment as well as configuration … at neural levels involving incomplete and selective encoding of experience as well as in broader cultural networks of codes, fiction becomes a powerful tool to depict and dramatize such activity. (2021, p. 344)

If memory presupposes "an entanglement of remembering and forgetting which emerge not as ontological opposites but as connected cognitive categories" (Raj, Parui, 2021, p. 345), then film, too, through its apparatus of editing, remembering, representing 'reality' through frames and metaphors could be interpreted as memory boxes that project and narrate stories of cultures and identities that are at the brink of vanishing.

D'Cruz's filmmaking in *Vanitas* undergoes a continuous process of reorganization and alteration to represent and contain the paroxysms of an individual (of a community) who keeps imploding inside with a sense of uprootedness and a search for the situated self. A spectre of a lost home plagues the figure of the father. In some ways, the father himself is the spectre torn between two imagined homelands: India, the insufficient and partial home; and the West, the impossible, ever-receding refuge.

D'Cruz's understanding of his father's crises as an Anglo-Indian in an alien land is itself an acknowledgement, approval and admittance of the Anglo-Indian condition over decades of mistreatment, xenophobia, and loss (of homeland, self, family). The

film becomes a letter, “a form of penance, a retrospective reckoning” (D’Cruz, 2022, p. 67) that is written for and that reaches (albeit a little late for his father) the Anglo-Indian community residing in lands that it yearns to call its own. The ending of the film expresses an almost incongruous volatility, an affect that overwhelms the machinic apparatus. We are ethically challenged against such a transparent discharging of emotions. D’Cruz’s divulgence related to his love for and misrecognition of his father overwrites all preceding images and introduces an unfamiliar vulnerability to the screen.

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