A View From The West: The Cinema Of Ana Kokkinos

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The cinema of Melbourne film-maker Ana Kokkinos is deeply imbued with understandings and vistas of Melbourne's western suburbs. These personal filmic landscapes of the place she grew up offer an insider’s view of place. Yet these insiders are also outsiders who are frequently ‘Othered’, painfully aware of their difference due to their sexuality (as gays or lesbians); their ethnicity (as Greek immigrants within a troubled multicultural Australia); their socio-economic status (as working class, and often disenfranchised youths); and their place as sons and daughters battling familial tensions (particularly as 2nd generation migrants). Indeed, all these dilemmas are arguably expositions of her own background, and inform her vision as a filmmaker who has achieved powerful insights into these worlds, creating a body of work that makes a significant contribution to representing Melbourne in the cinema.

Each of her films has something to offer an understanding of this place. Her first film, the 1991 black and white short, Antamasi, began her filmic preoccupation with exploring Greek-Australian migrant life in Melbourne, with its large and vibrant Greek population. It also establishes her exposition of psychological landscapes, the inside of her characters. In 1994 she moved from the interior spaces (houses and backyards) of the earlier film to make Only The Brave, the production that first inserted the motif of looking from the industrialised west at the city, which in this film is used to underline the idea that her characters feel cut off from communities, families, and the action. She expanded this in Head On (1998), where the central protagonist, Ari (Alex
Dimitriades), circles and approaches Melbourne across the mammoth West Gate Bridge, serving to signify the divide between the west and the centre. Through Ari’s journey, the spaces of Melbourne and the west are mapped, and the urban experience is offered through the lens of teenage mobility, desire and angst. The film demonstrated her talent as a visceral and kinetic filmmaker, a quality also evident in *The Book of Revelation* (2005), which has the most psychologically interior focus of all her films. In 2009, she directed *Blessed*, a collage of streetscapes, including views of the city from the west. Rachel Power describes it on the Australian Film Institute (AFI) website as ‘like all Kokkinos’s films’, fiercely refusing ‘to look away from the darkness that lurks in our cities and our hearts’.

*Head On* is arguably the Kokkinos film that has the most to say about Melbourne. Tracing Ari’s movements through Melbourne over a 24-hour period, takes the audience through his head and body spaces (Ari’s mind space, and the liminal, visceral space his body goes to); the physical spaces of the houses, the neighbourhood, the tram, the nightclub; and the migrant and diasporic spaces of the city through the ethnic locales, activities, sensibilities, and conflicts.

Ari, a young, gay Greek, queers space and place as he cruises through the city imposing meaning on the urban landscape – ordinary locales such as the Vietnamese market become a ‘gay beat’. Through referencing the Vietnamese diaspora, the market signifies Melbourne as a multicultural place,
achieved through many scenes, such as Ari’s arrival at the city centre. As he passes significant landmarks such as Flinders Street Station, he remarks that ‘the place is full of Arabs’. As he and his Greek friends pass the cake shops and foreign faces of the mise-en-scène that codes the inhabitants as ethnic ‘Others’, he yells racial abuse from the car window, a device used by Kokkinos to expose the city as a location for troubled multiculturalism.

In The Book of Revelation (2006) and Blessed (2009), Kokkinos has moved closer to the inner city, and these films are more centrally located there – as seen when Daniel (Tom Long) crosses the bridge over the Yarra into the midst of the city and then to the dim laneways of Melbourne in The Book of Revelation. This film sets up an opposition between gentrified Melbourne (signified by cafes and street performers), and the grunge of the west (contrasted by where the central character lives in each location). After his kidnap and rape, Daniel is dumped in the west like rubbish – signifying the west as a wasteland. In between the city and the west is Port Melbourne, a
place where Daniel has moments of solace as he gazes out to sea. The port is an important location for migrants: the site of arrival and hope. It is also seen in the finale of *Head On*. Set against a backdrop of Greek music, and inter-cut with stills of migrants arriving at a sea-port (evoked through the editing as Melbourne), Ari’s internal monologue allows the audience insights into what he has concluded from his journey: ‘... *I am not going to make a difference. I am not going to change a thing. No one’s going to remember me when I am dead*,’ which sounds bleak, but is an important concluding moment of self-acceptance.

*Blessed* tracks seven children roaming the streets of the city and suburbs over a 24-hour period (later recreating this time-frame from their mothers’ perspectives). That film, like her others, foregrounds character types who are generally invisible, for instance Rhonda (Francis O’Connor), whose children end up on the streets and in care, and who is subjected to a string of violent partners. This may appear to be another bleak perspective, but Kokkinos has two aspirations: firstly, to realistically represent what for her is a disadvantaged part of her city (lacking infrastructure, and the dilapidated home to the socially underprivileged), and secondly, to tell a story about mothers, and hope – all Rhonda has is the children she was ‘*blessed*’ with.

Kokkinos’ vision of Melbourne explores the characters’ lives from their ethnic, cultural, sexual and class difference, ultimately offering audiences an opportunity to also understand the city they see in her films from the inside as she takes them through the streets and suburbs, its landmarks, its interiors and its psyche.