

Head On: centring the other

Head On, Kokkinos's first feature film and the film for which she is best known, premiered at Cannes Film Festival in May 1998, three months before it premiered in Australia. Within Australia, it was released to frequently rapturous critical responses. For example, Paul Fischer (n.d.) wrote: 'It would be fair to say that with first-time director Ana Kokkinos' audacious work, Australian cinema has come of age.' Paul Byrnes (n.d.b), writing for the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, was similarly celebratory: 'In terms of iconoclast daring, *Head On* has no equal in Australian cinema.' The film, the third highest-grossing Australian film of the year at the national box office, was nominated for nine awards at the 1998 Australian Film Institute Awards, including Best Achievement in Direction and Best Film. Though *Head On* won only one of those nominations (Jill Bilcock for Best Achievement in Editing), it was nevertheless an emphatic debut onto the national stage for Kokkinos. The film went on to win at least twenty-nine awards nationally and internationally and was distributed relatively widely, securing limited distribution in the United States and, according to Kokkinos (in Krach 1999), fourteen other countries, too. Almost two decades later, the film is now firmly established as a queer classic (Shaw 2012) and continues to be screened around the world, most recently in 2017 at the 8th Kashish Mumbai International Queer Film Festival. *Head On* is perhaps unsurprisingly also the film on which most existing Kokkinos scholarship has focused, although there have

still long been questions about the ‘surprisingly little academic writing on it’, leading Collins and Davis (2004: 159) to speculate that it is ‘not only a film about a troubled teen but is itself the troubled teen of 1990s Australian cinema’.

As I noted in the Introduction, much of the existing scholarship on Kokkinos has been interested in the depiction of queerness (Hunn 2000; Jennings and Lominé 2004; Vernay 2006; McIntyre 2010) and/or ethnicity (Tziallas 2010; Papanikolaou 2009; Plunkett 2006; Aquilia 2001; Bennett 2007; Freiberg and Damousi 2002) in *Head On*. Papanikolaou (2009), for example, considers the film’s queering of Greek identity, while McIntyre (2010) examines the spatial mapping of queerness in the film’s mise en scène. Across this insightful literature and the varied foci within it, there is frequently an emphasis on the ‘interplay between ethnicity, sexuality and nationality’ (Tziallas 2010: n.p.). And, in some ways, it is a trend to which I will also contribute. In this chapter, then, I aim to build on existing scholarship by looking broadly at the ongoing development of Kokkinos’s style across her oeuvre, while tracking her increasingly bold and visceral focus on the outsider – or ‘centring the other’. Indeed, Ari shares key similarities with Kokkinos’s proto-outsiders in her early films, as with Ari’s social-realist siting in a Greek-Australian milieu in which he does not comfortably fit. But there are key differences from those proto-outsiders, too, among them a greater focus on the visceral, a bolder and less conventional depiction of queerness (including a recasting of the coming-of-age genre through the conventions of New Queer Cinema), and a foregrounded interest in the intersectionality of identity (and of the outsider’s in particular).

Head On

Head On is a 104-minute feature film directed by Kokkinos, and adapted for the screen from Tsiolkas’s novel by Kokkinos, Mira Robertson, and Andrew Bovell. Like *Only the Brave*, *Head On* is a stylised social-realist film that focuses on a queer Greek-Australian

youth coming of age in Melbourne. And as with *Only the Brave*, social realism sites this narrative within a working-class milieu and embodied by a socially marginalised protagonist. While the coming-of-age genre often focuses on a number of rites of passage associated with the symbolic transition to adulthood, from falling in love to having sex for the first time (Kitson 2008), Kokkinos focuses on the central rite of passage: namely, the formation and acceptance of an independent identity (Goldsmith 2010; Padva 2004; McFarlane 1987). McFarlane elaborates that in Australian coming-of-age films,

the issue of personal identity has taken centre stage [and often] emphasize[s] the painful aspects of growing up: the adjustment to Australian mores of children under the influence of other national backgrounds; the rebellion against repressive institutions; the difficulties of coming to terms with parental authority and expectations; the frustrating search for suitable adult models of ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving; and the challenges of adult sexuality. In their various ways, these aspects of growth constitute pressures, tensions, and obstacles that must be taken into account in the move towards self-realization, which is, in so many of the films in this category, the dominant narrative motif. (McFarlane 1987: 134)

Negotiating this rite of passage in *Head On* is Ari (played by Alex Dimitriades), an unemployed queer youth in his late teens who lives at home with his Greek-Australian family comprised of his mother, father, and younger sister. Ari's older brother Peter (played by Alex Papps) lives in a share house with girlfriend Janet (played by Maya Stange) and new housemate Sean (played by Julian Garner). Like *Antamosi* and *Only the Brave*, *Head On* depicts a fraught relationship between Greek-Australian parents and their children, this time between Ari and his father, with Ari's family depicted in 'conventional and stereotypical terms: oppressive father, weak mother, secretly transgressive but overtly compliant children' (Freiberg and Damousi 2003: 219). Indeed, one of the film's foci is Ari's frustration with increasing familial

pressure to fulfil hegemonic social and cultural expectations as a young Greek-Australian man:¹ as his Aunt Tasia (played by María Mercedes) puts it, 'Find a girl. Get married. Then it doesn't matter what you do.' But it is precisely this narrative, a narrative that offers Ari what Richard Howson (2006: 143) discusses as 'the process of hegemonic becoming' or 'aspirational hegemony', that Ari rejects and the film problematises.

The film traverses just over twenty-four hours in Ari's life in which his frustration and sense of containment within familial and socio-cultural expectations are contrasted with his mobility and pursuit of pleasures; in some ways, he is an outsider to these expectations precisely because of his privileging of pleasure. These pleasures – his drug-taking, sexual promiscuity (primarily with men), and even his dancing – are physical and reveal the film's visceral emphasis on embodiment. These pleasures are depicted in bolder and less conventional ways than in *Only the Brave*. Where Alex's queer desire was couched within conventional signifiers of romance, for example, Ari privileges the sexual over the romantic and the non-monogamous over the monogamous. This is most evident in his relationship with Sean. While Ari's other sexual encounters are with nameless men and occur around a brief sexual encounter, Sean is presented as a romantic option early in the film. The two talk and flirt, and Sean walks Ari home. The two later begin a sexual encounter at Sean's house. However, Ari becomes sexually and physically abusive at the precise moment Sean romanticises their encounter (Sean declares, 'I think I'm falling in love with you'). The scene concludes with a fist fight and Ari being thrown out into the hallway, naked and alone. For Dyer with Pidduck (2003: 283), here Ari 'chooses the dark pleasures of the sewer over a happy ending'. But it is less a rejection of 'a' happy ending, and more 'the' happy ending, namely the frequent resolution of the classical cinematic narrative in a monogamous romantic coupling.²

Head On is thus not simply the coming of age of a queer but a specifically *queered* coming of age, inasmuch as Ari rejects fixed identities and the hegemonic narratives and institutions

within which they are traditionally couched. Ari's eschewal of fixed identities in *Head On* is, as I noted of *Only the Brave*, quite unlike most queer coming-of-age films of the time which tended to depict a transition from one fixed identity (heterosexual) to another (gay or lesbian) (Padva 2014: 98) and were epitomised by the protagonist's coming out late in the film to claim their new identity (Padva 2004; Bronski 2000). However, Ari neither transitions from one identity to another nor comes out at any point, with his coming of age instead enunciated through the conventions of New Queer Cinema (Jennings and Lominé 2004; Tziallas 2010). 'New Queer Cinema' is a phrase coined by B. Ruby Rich to refer to a body of queer, independent film that emerged at the 1992 Toronto International Film Festival (Rich 1992; Aaron 2004). For Rich (1992: 31), the films shared less a specific style or genre and more an attitude: 'There, suddenly, was a flock of films that were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image'. These films explored much more challenging depictions of an increasingly diverse (though still predominantly male-focused) range of queerness than that offered in mainstream cinema, such as in *Poison* (dir. Todd Haynes, 1991), *Edward II* (dir. Derek Jarman, 1991), and *Swoon* (dir. Tom Kalin, 1992).³

Though New Queer Cinema is most associated with North American films in the early 1990s, *Head On* has been celebrated as the first Australian exponent of New Queer Cinema. Indeed, the film has been heralded as a 'landmark piece of Australian queer cinema' (McCann 2015: 43), a 'watershed' as the first Australian film to 'compris[e] the key features of New Queer Cinema in its formal inventiveness, its representations of sexualities and sexual desires, and its problematisation of identity politics' (Jennings and Lominé 2004: 147; see also Griffiths 2011). Certainly *Head On* features frequent and visceral depictions of queer sex and sexualities, most frequently casual sex between men, alongside Ari's half-hearted sexual encounter with a female friend. Jennings and Lominé (2004: 147–8) go so far as to argue that '*Head On* is about sex, about Ari's sexual life.' Sex is often a standard feature

of the coming-of-age genre: it is a rite of passage in which the male protagonist's first sexual experiences often symbolically correlate (however dubiously) to 'becoming a man' (McWilliam 2017b). In *Head On*, however, sex is not a rite of passage. Rather, Ari's promiscuity and privileging of sex over romance de-signifies sex from its role in hetero- (and homo-)normative romantic and coming-of-age narratives.

In a genre in which sex is not just a rite of passage but, for Gottschall (2010: 178), the 'central' rite of passage, *Head On* offers a significant queering of what it means to 'come of age' in Australian cinema through its emphatic privileging of fluidity over fixity. Certainly Ari eschews fixed identities and the hegemonic narratives and institutions within which they are traditionally couched, in which romance leads to sex leads to marriage leads to procreation – what Ahmed (2006: 173, 201) describes as the 'set points' on the 'straight line' of the heteronormative life narrative. Ari's deviance from this narrative is flagged from the very first scene, which quickly establishes the queer gaze and offers viewers a queer orientation to the film. In the first scene Ari leaves a Greek wedding (a scene I note later) to pursue queer sex in a public toilet. The public toilet scene is shot in a series of slow-motion extreme close-ups, slowing down time to focus desirously on, for example, an anonymous man removing his belt. In combination with an exaggerated use of sound – the heightened sound of a zip being opened, for instance – the scene viscerally enacts a sense of sexual anticipation which both establishes Ari's queer desire for the man, but also renders the audience complicit in that desire as we watch Ari's anticipation and pleasure. The latter is made explicit as Ari masturbates (in a full-frontal shot) the next morning, which also flags Kokkinos's much bolder and more explicit approach to the depiction of sex and sexualities in *Head On* than in her previous films. As Jennings and Lominé (2004: 149) note, '*Head On* as a whole then appears a cinematographic attempt (for the first time in Australia) to define or rather illustrate what queer means in practice, not as a concept but as an embodied experience.'

While her depiction of an embodied queer experience has been considerably less prominent in existing discussions of her work, Kokkinos's broader visceral approach has been much remarked upon. Critics and scholars alike have frequently described *Head On* in terms of its physical impact: it is 'exhilarating' (Pomeranz and Stratton 2016: n.p.), it 'enters the realm of the senses' (Buckmaster 2014: n.p.), it is a 'high-velocity assault' that, through '[t]echniques such as hand-held camera, tight, claustrophobic framing and rapid editing emphasise the visceral nature' of 'sex, drug-taking, music, dancing and violence' (Collins and Davis 2004: 158). To these techniques I would also add the use of intense colour and sound, and slow motion: techniques that collectively draw attention to and immerse the audience in the physicality of Ari's story. Kokkinos's visceral filmmaking does not construct just an embodied queer experience, though, but also a queer spectatorial orientation by contrasting an embodied queerness to a disembodied, problematised heterosexuality. For example, Ari's cousin (and hetero-foil) Joe (played by Damien Fotiou) becomes engaged early in the film – engagement being precisely the 'set point' on which Ari is currently being pressured. However, there is no flirting, desire, or intimacy – no embodied sexuality on display, as might be expected of a young couple celebrating their engagement – between Joe and new fiancée Dina (played by Dora Kaskanis). Rather, there is emotional and physical distance and, at times, overt resentment and frustration between the two. It is later revealed that Joe only became engaged because Dina's parents promised to buy them a house. By actively problematising a disembodied heteronormativity while centring the film around an embodied queer point-of-view, *Head On*, as Luke Mancuso (2010: 97) writes of *Brokeback Mountain*, positions viewers 'on a slanted line, an oblique sight line that disfigures the straight lines of dominant viewer identification.'

For Ahmed (2006: 177–8), such an orientation is queer and thus disorientating: 'queer lives are about the potentiality of not following certain conventional scripts of family, inheritance, and child rearing, whereby "not following" involves disorientation'. It is not insignificant, then, that Ari also spends much of



Figure 2.1 Ari disorientated on a drug high in *Head On*

the film disoriented: outside of his broader disorientation from heteronormativity, his disorientation is frequently underscored by disorientating uses of sound (Ross 2012), while he is also frequently disorientated under the influence of drugs. Late in the film, for example, Ari is coming down from a high: he is shown in a deep red hue as he hugs himself and stares blankly at the night-time cityscape he passes as he is roughly pulled forward by unseen forces (see Figure 2.1).

The scene conveys the disoriented state of Ari's drug high, as well as specifically associating it with queer culture: drag queens blow him kisses as he passes. Though Ari's disorientations are often self-destructive, the film's frequently visceral association between queerness and disorientation nevertheless invites the audience to take Ari's perspective: to take up the queer spectatorial position introduced in the first scene so as to experience the film (and the world?) aslant. The outsider in *Head On* is thus both queer and queerly disorienting.

Ari is first introduced as a queer outsider in the very first scene of the film. After the opening credits, which I discuss later, the film begins with Ari dancing at the reception of a Greek wedding – one of the standard tropes of 'Greekness' in Australian cinema (Freiberg and Damousi 2003). While Ari initially dances in the

middle of the frame and in the middle of a circle, he soon stops dancing and leaves the circle. Ari looks on from the periphery of the room towards the circle where Ari's father is pinning money to the bride and groom: a celebration of the heterosexual Greek-Australian couple. Tziallas (2010: n.p.) notes: 'He is now literally and figuratively on the margins with the heterosexual couple symbolizing the pinnacle of where his spiraling movements were supposed to lead him eventually: heterosexual marriage.' When the bride's garter is later thrown to the unmarried men in the room, Ari turns his back and leaves the building to instead pursue queer sex in a public toilet. He is outside the rituals, spaces, and expectations of his family and friends, having turned his back on the 'set points' of Ahmed's 'straight line'. And, as I note later in this chapter, Ari chooses to remain outside those set points when his coming of age culminates in his acceptance of an emphatically queer identity in the film's final scene.

As with Kokkinos's proto-outsiders in her earlier films (see Chapter 1), the outsider in *Head On* is also a witness to trauma, and this time a specifically queer trauma. Late in the film Ari and transgendered friend Toula/Johnny (played by Paul Capsis) goad the police while high. The police take immediate exception to Toula and the two are taken into custody, revealing how 'the state still punishes sexual transgression' (Tziallas 2010: n.p.; see also McIntyre 2009). Taken into a white room, Ari and Toula are told to remove their clothes by two male police officers, a senior Anglo officer and a young Greek-Australian officer. When Toula refuses to remove her underwear – removing her underwear would reveal her genitals and challenge her performance of 'Toula', forcing a 'conflict between [...] her feminine identification and a still masculine body' (Hunn 2000: 124) – she pleads in Greek with the young officer. However, Toula's address to him in Greek establishes a link between them that the senior officer uses to question his colleague's hetero-masculinity: 'You better help her along,' he says, 'Seems she knows you.' Admonished with the taint of queerness, the young officer roughly strips Toula before repeatedly beating and kicking her amid a stream of insults ('You're

a whore, you're a disgrace'). Ari briefly attempts to come to her aid, but is warned off and tearfully watches on, naked and cupping his penis in a sign of his sudden impotence, a stark contrast to his emphatic queer virility in preceding scenes. While Ari is a victim, he is also, and perhaps most emphatically, a witness: watching on as his friend is violently assaulted by transphobic police, in ways not dissimilar to Alex witnessing Vicki's abuse at the hands of her father in *Only the Brave*.

In *Head On*, then, the figure of the outsider is again used to explore the alienation, disaffection, and powerlessness of the socially marginalised, which culminates in a trauma caused by a figure of authority (fathers in *Antamosi* and *Only the Brave*, police officers in *Head On*). In this way, the outsider functions as a witness to, and critique of, the confronting failures of hegemonic institutions in the Australian cultural landscape. But here, more so than in Kokkinos's previous films, there is a foregrounded exploration of the intersectionality of identity within these themes. It is specifically Toula and the young officer's shared Greek heritage, for example, which triggers the brutal transphobic attack. Joanne Nagel writes:

Sexual depictions and denigrations of racial, ethnic, and national 'others' and the regulation of in-group sexual behavior are important mechanisms by which ethnic boundaries are constructed, maintained, and defended. Race, ethnicity, and the nation are sexualized, and sexuality is racialized, ethnicized, and nationalized. (Nagel 2001: 123)

But it is Ari's negotiation of the intersectionality of his own identity which receives the most attention in the film, including: his age and gender as a young man; his socio-economic status as an unemployed person from a working-class family; his cultural heritage and experience in a troubled, multi-cultural Australia; and his sexuality as a queer who pursues non-monogamous sex. For Dyer with Pidduck (2003: 280, 283), Kokkinos's key

contribution to New Queer Cinema is precisely that her films 'facilitate a much more complex understanding of the articulation of race and ethnicity to national identity, gender and sexuality' in such a way that 'unsettles normative social structures, tidy endings and stable identity formations alike'. Indeed, in many ways *Head On* epitomises Kokkinos's exploration of the outsider as the sum of complex, socio-culturally situated, and 'shifting configurations of inequality along various dimensions' (Atewologun et al. 2016: 224).

This foregrounded exploration of the intersections of identity is reflected in the film's structure, which in some way literally layers different 'sections' of identity against each other. The first and last scenes of the film, for example, are key queer moments: Ari begins the film by leaving a hetero wedding to walk into the night to secretly pursue queer sex, while Ari ends the film dancing in the morning light in an acceptance of his non-monogamous queer identity. But the film is also more broadly book-ended through its opening and closing credits that comprise black-and-white montages of immigrants at Melbourne Port, framing Ari's queer coming of age within a context of dislocation, change, and identity negotiation. Evangelos Tziallas writes:

Images of mothers, fathers and their children standing in front of a large ship poignantly communicate a feeling of displacement. From the opening montage, Kokkinos foregrounds the importance of family, and its relation to identity as a result of the immigrants' displacement. The use of black and white photos signifies history and memory, and when combined with the non-diegetic music and dissolves, creates a sense of nostalgia. (Tziallas 2010: n.p.)

But it is less 'a sense of nostalgia', which might imply a wistful or contained view of the past, and more a framing of Ari's queer coming of age within a broader context of cultural dislocation, troubled multiculturalism, and explicit identity negotiation. This is taken up in different scenes throughout the film, but perhaps

most explicitly in a scene in which Ari joins Peter's friends, who are chatting about race, racism, and immigration:

Ariadne: That's what's wrong with this country. Everyone hates everyone. The skips hate the wogs, the wogs hate the Asians ...

Ari: And everyone hates the blacks.

Ariadne: Yeah, exactly.

Ari: You don't even know any Kooris.

Ariadne: What's that got to do with it? I fight racism wherever I see it whether it's the Greeks, the Italians ...

Ari: Fuck the wogs.

Ariadne: ... the Vietnamese ...

Ari: Fuck the gooks.

Ariadne: ... or the Kooris.

Ari: And fuck the boongs.

Ariadne: What's your problem? What are you, Ari, some kind of wanker?

Ari: [chuckles]

Ariadne: So fuck everyone else. You're proud to be Greek.

Ari: Proud to be Greek? I had nothin' to do with it.

It is, of course, not insignificant that Kokkinos sites such an explicit problematisation of multiculturalism and identity at a Greek club in urban Australia. Here the story of migrants is, quite unusually, being told by migrants and their descendants, rather than by the white, Anglo-Irish everyman that Australian cinema has historically privileged. And, indeed, Sean – the only Anglo participant in the broader discussion – is also depicted as the most out of touch with multicultural reality: he begins the discussion by noting that 'there shouldn't be any barriers [to immigration]'. The idea of a nation-state's a thing of the past.' But Ariadne and Ari's exchange reveals Sean's liberal discourse to be naive and reflective of considerable social privilege.

For Bennett (2007), the exchange highlights a number of issues that collectively point to a much more complicated understanding of multiculturalism – and, by extension, intersectional identity – being offered than that offered in other popular Australian films of the time. Films like *Strictly Ballroom*, as noted

in the previous chapter for example, offer what Bennett (2007) terms a 'good multiculturalism' in that they offer positivist depictions based on a paternal 'tolerance' of difference, and are often told from the perspective of ethnically unmarked protagonists. In *Head On*, however, Kokkinos offers no such positivist depictions and instead positions ethnic subjects as the challenging and imperfect authors of their own histories. The exchange between Ariadne and Ari, for example, problematises the notion of multiculturalism by drawing attention to the frictions and fissures between and within ethnic groups, and concludes with Ari's refusal to celebrate an ethnocentric identity. In doing so, Ari reveals his 'own conflict of identity' around the boundaries and intersections of multicultural, second-generation, queer 'Australian-ness' (Bennett 2007: 71–2). For Bennett in his compelling discussion (2007: 71–2), this works to open up a more productive, even optimistic space for thinking about multiculturalism (and, I might argue, identity in general) in Australia:

Ari's rejection of political debate and his identity as either explicitly Australian or Greek consequently creates space for another way of conceiving identity. [...] Later [Ari] returns to the table and says to Ariabi [sic]: 'Fuck politics, let's dance!' Thus a Bakhtinian approach is enabled, allowing the film to present national identity from the margins as something that is not 'concrete' and well established but is discursive, multiple, even oppositional: something stood outside of. (Bennett 2007: 71–2)

Importantly, Kokkinos does not resolve this problematisation of identity at the end of the film, but rather foregrounds its 'multiple, even oppositional' strands. Indeed, the last scene of the film is interesting for a number of reasons. The scene occurs at a wharf at dawn and is intercut with black-and-white images of migrant arrivals at a wharf (book-ending the film's contextualisation within cultural displacement, but perhaps also the hope of transition). As Ari walks to the wharf, we see the cityscape behind him (see Figure 2.2).



Figure 2.2 The cityscape behind Ari on the wharf in *Head On*

French (2013: n.p.) has argued that ‘looking from the largely industrialised west at the city’ is a spatial motif that Kokkinos uses to underline how her ‘characters feel cut off from communities, families, and “the action”’ and, in *Head On* in particular, ‘signif[ies] the divide between the west and the centre’. While French’s argument is a convincing one, and indeed there are earlier scenes where Ari looks towards the city from the west,⁴ I think there is an additional reading in this scene in particular. While Ari has felt displaced from, and an outsider to, ‘communities’ and ‘families’ throughout the film, it is not insignificant that in this last scene of the film he is walking *away* from the city. He has, both literally and metaphorically, turned his back on ‘the centre’ and its hegemonic conventions and scripts. As Ari’s father may have arrived at that wharf for a new beginning, so too does Ari arrive at something like a new acceptance of himself as queer. For instance, where Ari’s opening monologue revealed his frustration with social and familial pressure to meet Ahmed’s ‘set points’ on the heteronormative ‘straight line’ – job, marriage, children – Ari’s final monologue concludes with: ‘I’m gonna live my life. I’m not going to make a difference. I’m not going to change a thing. No one’s going to remember me when I’m dead. I’m a sailor and a whore, and I will be until the end of the world.’ In his queered coming of

age, rather than transition through this liminal stage Ari instead chooses to stay in it: to live his life aslant.

The use of 'sailor' and 'whore', two figures associated with the wharf and that connote mobility and promiscuity, is reinforced while Ari drops to his knees during his voice-over to, it is implied, give oral sex to an anonymous man at the wharf (McIntyre 2009). The scene then cuts to Ari dancing a *zeibekiko* alone on the wharf as a crane-shot pulls away and up, our last image of him a slow-motion dance with his arm and face raised to the sky at the dawn of a new day. Where Ari snuck away into the dark in the first scene of the film to pursue queer sex, here he faces a new day perhaps not triumphantly, but certainly resolute in his acceptance of an independent, queer identity: Ari has, in short, come of age (Padva 2004: 355; McFarlane 1987). Berry tentatively agrees:

on the visual level, it invokes all the liberatory imagery of rite of passage films, with Ari standing alone on a dock, turning circles as the camera cranes above him. However, instead of a 'positive image' affirming his freedom and faith in the future now that he has 'found himself' and 'begun to come out', Ari's voice-over statement is a far more ambiguous assertion of self-determination. (Berry 1999: 37)

There is no 'coming out' because, as I argue at the beginning of this chapter, *Head On* is not simply the coming of age of a queer but a specifically *queered* coming of age. As Collins and Davis (2004: 162) note of the film's last scene, as 'a coming-of-age moment this is a wonderfully perverse image' precisely because it 'refuses to submit to the genre's tendency to look back, to reassure its audience, to satisfy the patriarchal, heterosexist fantasy of familial unity'. The scene also, to return to Bennett (2007), refuses to resolve the broader problematisations of identity that the film so frequently poses. In his earlier exchange with Ariadne, for example, Ari rejected the idea of being proud of his Greek heritage and yet he ends the film engaged in a traditional Greek folk dance. Certainly the scene (and film) offers a queering of Greek-Australian identity, diversifying what it means to 'come of

age' in Australian cinema (Papanikolaou 2009). But more than that, in choosing not to resolve the identity issues she raises – there is no neat resolution where the aspects of Ari's identity suddenly align unproblematically – Kokkinos insists on identity as multiple, overlapping, and discursively constructed, which is embodied by the first (and most) emphatically intersectional outsider of her oeuvre.

Head On towards Revelations

In many ways, Kokkinos's celebrated first feature film *Head On* (1998) builds directly upon the characteristics and preoccupations tentatively developed in her earlier films, namely her student short *Antamosi* (1991) and short feature *Only the Brave* (1994). Certainly *Head On* expands upon Kokkinos's earlier uses of stylised social realism and her focus on Greek-Australian migrant families in working-class Melbourne, which are explored through protagonists who are variously outsiders to their families, communities, and society more broadly. *Head On* also expands on the emergence of the queer outsider coming of age in these milieus, which she originally explored in *Only the Brave*. But in *Head On* Kokkinos takes a much bolder and more visceral approach in focusing on the promiscuous, drug-taking experiences of her protagonist Ari: *Head On* offers less the coming of age of a queer, then, and more a specifically *queered* coming of age. In doing so, Kokkinos offers the first Australian contributions to New Queer Cinema, positioning the outsider as both queer and queerly disorientating and offering viewers a queer spectatorial position from which to view the film (and the world?) aslant.

But it is sometimes a traumatic viewing: like Kokkinos's proto-outsiders in *Antamosi* and *Only the Brave*, Ari is also a witness to trauma, and this time a specifically queer trauma when he and friend Toula/Johnny are arrested and forced to strip naked by police, and Toula is viciously beaten by those police in a transphobic attack. The effect is that the figure of the

outsider again functions as a witness to the confronting failures of hegemonic institutions in the Australian cultural landscape: parents in *Antamosi* and *Only the Brave*, police officers in *Head On*. But unlike those earlier films, *Head On* also uses the outsider as a pretext to consider the failures of inclusion within those institutions by foregrounding the intersectionality of identity. One of the central foci of the film is precisely the frictions between the different elements of Ari's identity as a young, queer, Greek-Australian man expected to marry a woman and have children. This emphasis on intersectionality is also reflected in the film's very structure, which book-ends Ari's queer coming of age within the context of the film's opening and closing credits of migrant arrivals at Melbourne Port. But where Kokkinos has 'centred the other' in her first three films in ways that increasingly emphasise the intersectionality of the outsider – epitomised here in *Head On* – what then of Daniel in *The Book of Revelation*, who is a privileged, middle-class, heterosexual, Anglo-Australian man?

Notes

- 1 Because Ari is in his late teens, he is both a 'teen' and a 'young adult'. This does not impact my reading of the film as a 'coming-of-age' film. As Driscoll (2011: 22) notes, the 'lack of clear distinction between teenagers and young adults [...] is in fact a recurring feature of teen film'.
- 2 Hardwick (2009: 39) also notes that Sean represents the film's 'potential love story'.
- 3 These films arose out of a much longer 'tradition of lesbian and gay film-making within the history of independent, experimental and "outsider" cinema' (Rich 1992: 30), a filmmaking tradition that has been documented in texts like Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* (1981), Richard Dyer's *Now You See It* (1990), Andrea Weiss's *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film* (1993), and Dyer's edited collection *Gays and Film* (1977). See Aaron's (2004) *New Queer Cinema* for an extended discussion.
- 4 Tsolkias's book is divided spatially between different parts of Melbourne, each of which has a distinct character, though my interest here is exclusively in the film.