

Blessed: an ensemble of outsiders

Blessed, Kokkinos's fifth film and third feature, premiered in Australia at the Melbourne International Film Festival in July 2009 and was released nationally two months later. Though released only three years after *The Book of Revelation*, *Blessed* was in development for eight years (Mitchell 2017). As with *The Book of Revelation*, most of those years were spent securing funding and adapting the film from its literary source. Indeed, the film is based on the 1999 Australian play 'Who's Afraid of the Working Class?', written by Melbourne Workers' Theatre writers Andrew Bovell, Patricia Cornelius, Melissa Reeves, and Christos Tsiolkas with composer Irine Vela. The screenplay, initially developed by Bovell, Cornelius, Reeves, and Tsiolkas, was eventually finalised by Bovell who took over as lead writer (Cordaiy 2009). Where the play combines four distinct stories – 'Suit' by Tsiolkas, 'Money' by Cornelius, 'Dreamtown' by Reeves, and 'Trash' by Bovell, which collectively offer a 'portrait of working-class life in Australia' (Production Notes¹) – the screenplay was reorganised around the central theme of mothers and their children on Kokkinos's direction (with the film's title drawn from one mother's description of her children as her 'blessings') (Cordaiy 2009).

Unlike *The Book of Revelation*, however, *Blessed*'s lengthy development was overwhelmingly well received. With a rating of 85 per cent on rottentomatoes.com, *Blessed* was widely considered a 'return to form' for Kokkinos after the polarising and 'alienating' *The Book of Revelation* (Hopgood 2009: 17). Indeed, the film was popular on both the national and international film festival circuits (Gonzalez 2009), winning, for example, the Jury Prize at both the San Sebastián and Kosmorama Trondheim Film

Festivals. McFarlane (2010: 88) goes so far as to describe *Blessed* as ‘a great film, and it is not often one would risk that degree of praise.’ Kokkinos, too, considers it a ‘knock-out film’, the ‘best I’ve ever done’ (qtd in Buckmaster 2009: n.p.). Nationally, the film’s profile was likely helped by its casting of a number of high-profile Australian actors, including Frances O’Connor, Deborah Lee-Furness, Miranda Otto, and William McInness. The film was nominated for four awards at the 2009 Australian Film Institute Awards, including Best Film (although curiously not also ‘Best Director’), Best Lead Actress (Frances O’Connor), Best Adapted Screenplay, and Best Editing. The film ultimately won one of those awards (Best Lead Actress), but notably did so against larger and higher-profile films, including Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia* and Bruce Beresford’s *Mao’s Last Dancer*. Even so, *Blessed* has been, at least for Dominic Barlow (2015: n.p.), ‘all-but-forgotten’ by the film-going public in the intervening years.

Blessed is similarly yet to secure any substantial interest from scholars with only a handful of journal articles or book chapters focusing on the film (e.g. French 2012, 2013; Ross 2012) outside of the more numerous, though equally insightful, reviews, essays, and interviews with the director (e.g. Cordaiy 2009; Hopgood 2009; McFarlane 2009). I am informed by all of these writers as I attempt here to examine the characteristics and preoccupations of the film, as well as its significance within Kokkinos’s broader body of work. In doing so, I argue that the film offers a key shift from the patterns established in her previous films, but particularly *Antamosi*, *Only the Brave*, and *Head On*. Specifically, where these films focus on intersectional outsider protagonists, *Blessed* disperses these diversities across an ensemble of outsider characters. In this chapter, then, I am interested in both the features and implications of this expanded focus.

Blessed

Blessed is a 110-minute stylised social-realist melodrama. While Kokkinos employs social realism in most of her preceding films

(see Chapters 1 and 2), *Blessed* marks her first use of melodrama, a genre that has been employed by filmmakers – albeit in diverse and diversely discussed ways – since the beginning of cinema (Mayer 2018). Contemporary melodrama is best known for the employ of ‘excessive emotions’ and ‘equally excessive music’ in the domestic sphere of the family (Williams 2011: n.p.). While social realism and melodrama have historically been associated with different stylistic and thematic preoccupations (Neale 2004; Gledhill 1991), including in Australian cinema specifically (O’Regan 1987), scholars have increasingly pointed to the ways that these filmmaking traditions have been used in combination to tell particular kinds of stories. Laura Mulvey, for example, writes:

realism and melodrama are, in different ways, stylistically important for dramas of social oppression and injustice. Realism records the state of things, without stylistic intrusion into a representation of the norms of everyday life and its fragile survival strategies. These are conditions that lack buffer zones or safety valves; misfortune or error can quickly mutate into disaster leaving its victims struggling to comprehend, unable to articulate clearly their suffering or the strain that leaves close relationships fissured. It is here that melodrama serves its purpose and the cinema takes on an expressive function that responds to both the intensity of the crisis and its protagonists’ desperation. (Mulvey 2013: 1)

There are a number of influential examples of social-realist melodramas, among them the work of Ken Loach (Leigh 2002; Martin-Jones 2009). Loach, for example, employs this hybrid in his ‘melodramas of protest’ (Leigh 2002). Where social realism typically sites a marginalised protagonist within a realist aesthetic and working-class milieu (Hallam and Marshment 2000), melodramas of protest use heightened emotion to ‘invite viewers to experience, through their engagement with characters, [the] impossibly difficult situations and events’ of these characters (Martin-Jones 2009: 180). The purpose of this is to ‘rouse not just the people in the film, but those in the audience as well’

(Walker 1982: 14) to the plight of these characters and, in particular, the broader socio-cultural injustices to which they are subjected (Leigh 2002).

In *Blessed*, these 'plights' are embodied by intersectional outsiders, a focus Kokkinos returns to after forcibly marginalising the privileged in *The Book of Revelation* – although she does so here in less emphatic ways than in *Head On*. Certainly intersectionality is not consistently foregrounded as a narrative tension for every protagonist as it was for Ari in *Head On*, which is perhaps inevitable given the number of characters. Indeed, where *Antamosi*, *Only the Brave*, and *Head On* focus on an intersectional outsider, *Blessed* disperses this interest in identity across twelve characters: five mothers and their seven children. Rhonda (Frances O'Connor) is a pregnant mother of three on welfare, who has been in a series of abusive relationships with men. The eldest of her children (who does not appear in the film) is in foster care while her youngest children – teenager Orton (Reef Ireland) and younger sister Stacey (Eva Lazzaro) – live together on the streets so as to avoid Rhonda's current boyfriend. When Stacey gets her first period and does not know what to do, Orton calls his mother to angrily remind her that Stacey needs her and it is that call that triggers Rhonda's late-night search for them. Bianca (Miranda Otto) is an unemployed single mother who drinks and plays the 'pokies' (slot or fruit machines), despite the unpaid bills and adult responsibilities she ignores. She is a 'tragic figure, incapable of assuming the responsibilities of motherhood' and 'clearly mourning her own lost youth' (Hopgood 2009: 16). Bianca's daughter Katrina (Sophie Lowe) is a self-sufficient high-school student, although with friend Trisha (Anastasia Baboussouras) is quickly in trouble with the police after skipping school and shoplifting. Trisha's mother Gina (Victoria Haralabidou) is a hard-working Greek-Australian widow, who sews school uniforms for the private school to which she cannot afford to send her own children. Gina is mourning the loss of her husband and the absence of teenage son Arthur/'Roo' (Eamon Farren) who has run away from home. It is not revealed in the film why Roo ran away, though the Production Notes reveal

it was to escape his mother's 'cloying love'.² Roo, a queer teenager, is shown doing a video interview for what he thinks is a modelling assignment but is actually for an amateur pornographer. Tanya (Deborra-Lee Furness) is also a hard-working mother, working lengthy hours as a carer but still desperately struggling to pay the mortgage alongside unappreciative and unemployed husband Peter (William McInnes). Their teenaged son Daniel (Harrison Gilbertson) leaves the house angrily after being accused of stealing Tanya's next mortgage payment – it is later revealed to have been taken by Peter, who gives it away at a pub – and attempts to reactively rob elderly neighbour Laurel (Monica Maughan). Laurel, too, is a mother although to an adult son from whom she is estranged: James (Wayne Blair) is an Indigenous man whom Laurel adopted as a child. Both Laurel and James are haunted by Laurel's refusal decades earlier to allow James's Indigenous birth mother into his life.

This focus on parallel mother–child relationships in *Blessed* extends upon Kokkinos's broader interest in familial frustrations and particularly the mother–child relationships in *Antamasi* and *Only the Brave* (see Chapter 1). Collectively they reveal 'concerns central to her oeuvre, including an interest in female perspectives, trauma, identity, working-class life, and parental influence on relationships' (French 2013: n.p.). With James and Laurel the middle-class exceptions, other characters are shown either to have no money or to be in an intense struggle for it, which influences their actions over the course of the narrative. Hancock (2014: 35) writes that the 'characters in *Blessed* are represented as both victim of or reactive to their socio-economic situations'. These 'socio-economic situations' are initially reflected in setting. Characters mostly occupy grim, state-provided apartments and a series of run-down houses, alongside the liminal spaces of the 'streets of the city and suburbs' through which the children 'roam' (French 2013: n.p.). The latter emphasises not just the mobility of youth, a feature of *Only the Brave* and *Head On* too, but also that these children are all variously 'lost' and have to 'find their way home' (as per the film's promotion). Unlike Kokkinos's earlier protagonists

who rejected or moved away from family spaces, *Blessed* is thus centred in familial relationships and their return/resolution with all of the children beginning the film fleeing (or having fled) the family home, and all but two returning by the film's end.

These relationships are depicted over the course of a day and night and are told twice: the first part of the film is told from the perspective of the seven children (labelled on an intertitle as 'The Children'), and the second half from the perspective of the mothers (labelled on an intertitle as 'The Mothers'). One effect of this is that, where *Antamosi*, *Only the Brave*, and to a lesser extent *Head On* were all told from the perspective of a child, *Blessed* is structured around a symbolic dialogue between children and their mothers. This structure also reveals the unreliability of narration inasmuch as, as I note later, the children's accounts offer an initially limited perspective that depicts the mothers in consistently damning ways, while the mothers' accounts offer a fuller picture of the realities of motherhood and marginalisation. These stories are visually united through a motif presented in montages at the beginning and end of the day in both parts. At the beginning of each part, the featured characters are shown asleep (or ostensibly asleep) in morning sunlight, and at the end of the day, the featured characters are shown in the setting sunlight. Kokkinos has noted:

It was a structural device to unify all the characters' experiences but we wanted to do more than that – it's almost a meditation on their faces. [...] it's a moment of epiphany, realisation. For the kids, they are all, at that moment, in that day, in some form of jeopardy, in peril, and we are allowed into what the kids are sensing. There is something internal going on which is quite profound. Then when you experience it with the mothers, there's a level of wisdom or sadness for the women in terms of what is actually going on. (Kokkinos qtd in Cordaiy 2009: 20)

These sunlit close-ups of faces also presage the film's extended focus on intimacy and intimate relationships, which are embodied by the mother–child relationships of the film (Rhonda–Orton,

Rhonda–Stacey, Tanya–Daniel, Gina–Roo, Gina–Trisha, Bianca–Katrina, and Laurel–James, but perhaps also by the absent relationship of James and his unnamed biological mother). Also present in these montages are shots of the city, whether as a background and context for these characters’ stories or as the focus of the shot. These moments reflect not just that these characters are among the many, often invisible working-class stories in the city, but also the ever-present dangers such marginalised characters face. One way this is signalled is through setting: the areas of the city the characters occupy are ominous and dilapidated, such as dark alleyways of graffitied brick walls and damaged garage doors that stand amid deep shadows – areas of the city that forebode risk. Another way this is signalled is through the use of sound. As Ross (2012: 61) writes, ‘On the city streets, police sirens enunciate danger, urgency and emergency’ which ‘reflect the trauma of characters’ lives’. Kokkinos thus reinforces the ‘relationship between, and impact of, social environment and marginalisation on character and identity’, rendering these ‘socio-economic impacts emotionally intelligible, through the foregrounding of affective moments’ (Hancock 2014: 133).

For each of the families in the film, these ‘affective moments’ culminate in varying crises for the children that are triggered by an event with their mothers, demonstrating that it is ‘the mother characters’ who are actually ‘the nexus’ of the film (Hancock 2014: 132), and often of the melodrama more broadly (Parkinson 2010: 120). For example, in *Blessed* Daniel overdoses on drugs and is rushed to hospital after becoming angry at his mother, Tanya, and acting out with fatal consequences: Laurel dies from an accident when the reactive Daniel pushes her and she falls and hits her head. When James is asked to identify adopted-mother Laurel’s dead body, he rejects her (‘she’s not my mother’) and instead goes in an emotional search for connection with his biological mother. Katrina and Trisha are arrested by police for shoplifting and taunted as ‘trash’, after acting out against their seemingly disinterested (Bianca) or overcritical (Gina) mothers. After leaving home to escape Gina’s apparently overbearing love, Roo wanders drunkenly through the night after being deceived

into a videotaped performance by an amateur pornographer. Finally, Stacey reveals to Orton the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of Rhonda's boyfriends, for which Orton angrily blames his mother; refusing to go home, the two fall asleep beside a candle and ultimately burn to death in a goodwill clothing bin (poignantly labelled 'homeless').

These crises foreground and problematise constructions of motherhood within the heightened emotions of the melodrama, with each of the children's perspectives casting the women as ostensibly 'bad' mothers. The 'good' mother, for Arendell (1999: 3), is a white, married, heterosexual woman who is both financially dependent upon her husband and solely occupied with the task of mothering, although Goodwin and Huppatz (2010: 2–3) argue that there are in fact 'variations on' this theme, such as with the 'good working mother'. Key is that the good mother is 'self-sacrificing, devoted and passive' and her emphasis is on nurturing her family – the 'family unit' being the 'foundation of society' (Pascoe 1998: 6). Moreover, this focus must also fulfil her emotionally. A good mother is thus a happy one, whereas 'an unhappy mother is a failed mother' (Johnston and Swanson 2003: 23). In contrast, the mothers of *Blessed* are consistently marked by sites of difference (Greek-Australian and/or working-class and/or single); are responsible for financially providing for their family (even where there is a husband as with Tanya's unemployed husband); and are frequently unhappy, exhausted, and otherwise resigned to their variously challenging lives. Moreover, as working-class mothers trying to financially provide for their children, they are also unable to sustain a sole focus on their children – what Margaret Pomeranz (2011: 248) has described as 'loving neglect' – with perhaps the welfare-dependent Rhonda and elderly Laurel the exceptions.

These characteristics of the 'bad' mother are epitomised by Rhonda, who is the most vulnerable and most explicit outsider of all of the mothers. She is also the dramatic centre of the film: her story both concludes the film and frames it, with the film's title taken from her two descriptions of her children as her 'blessings'. Rhonda begins the film depicted in the least empathetic manner of

all of the mothers. We first meet Rhonda, who is heavily pregnant, waiting to see new social worker Gail (played by Tasma Walton), in a dingy government building. When the two meet, Rhonda is abrasive and hostile at the prospect of losing government payments with eldest child Mickey (who does not appear in the film) now in foster care. Though it is not revealed why Mickey was removed from Rhonda's care, it is an early sign that she is a 'bad' mother, reinforced when her younger children are shown sleeping under a pier. Mitchell (2017: n.p.) argues that Rhonda is 'reconciled to the fact that the streets are a safer environment for her children than her own home and compromised brand of care'. While Rhonda drops her defensive posturing briefly in their meeting to note that 'those kids are my blessings – every one of them a blessing', she bristles at the idea that her daughter could be 'assessed' for learning difficulties because 'my whole life is one big assessment'. Rhonda leaves soon after, lighting a cigarette as soon as she is outside, in another suggestion that she lacks genuine care (or skills in caring) for her unborn child. Of all the mothers, Rhonda is the stereotypical 'bad' mother – the 'epitome of the white trash stereotype' (Mitchell 2017: n.p.) – whom the audience is invited to judge in a provocative invocation of the mother-blame trope.

The first act of the film thus broadly recalls E. Ann Kaplan's comments on mothers as:

always in the margins, always not the topic per se under consideration. The mother, that is, was generally spoken, not speaking [...] She was a figure in the design, out-of-focus; or, if in focus, then the brunt of an attack, a criticism, a complaint, usually in the discourse of a child (male or female) or in that of an adult (male or female) concerned to attribute all ills to the mother. An absent presence, then. (Kaplan [1992] 2013: 3)

In *Blessed*, all of the mothers are initially offered in the first act of the film as 'the topic' under consideration and the cause of their children's 'ills'. For Kokkinos, however, offering the first act from the children's perspective is a strategy through which to problematise

the mother-blaming trope and broader patriarchal discourses on mothers and motherhood (Reimer and Sahagian 2015). In interviewing Kokkinos, Mitchell (2017: n.p.) writes that the 'first of the film's acts deliberately withholds information, cannily testing prejudices and judgement', to which Kokkinos adds:

That was deliberate. You make a whole lot of judgements about the mothers in the first part of the film, but then as you progress through the story, those judgements get turned on their head. These mothers are just as vulnerable as the children that they care for. (Kokkinos in Mitchell 2017: n.p.)

The second part of the film thus allows the mothers to 'speak' for themselves, which complicates the mother-child relationships initially set up by revealing the 'impossible demands of motherhood' (Hopgood 2009: 16) through the 'mother characters' subjective situations' (Hancock 2014: 133). The effect of this is that in revealing the mothers as as much marginalised outsiders as their children, Kokkinos undermines the mother-blaming trope set up in the first half of the film. For example, Tanya may have wrongly accused Daniel of stealing money, but she is an exhausted bread-winner working long hours to keep the family home, while her unkind, unemployed husband threatens to take the house away from her while stealing her money, blaming his son, and gifting it to strangers. These women are, by and large, doing the best they can with the skills and knowledge they have in the moment. But they are also very clearly 'on the social margins' and 'in the cracks of normative society' (Hancock 2014: 133). Even Laurel, who lives in what was obviously once a grand home, now shuffles barefoot through the run-down hallways in a nightgown: she is alone, rejected by her adopted son, and haunted by past deeds as she slips in and out of dementia. In many ways, the film's focus is precisely on the impact of this marginalisation, of being an outsider, on mothers, children, and the relationships they share. And as with Kokkinos's previous films, this culminates in a traumatic experience.

In *Blessed*, this is again epitomised by Rhonda and marks a shift in balance away from social-realist conventions and further towards melodrama: 'There is, of course, an implicit chronology in this dual [social-realist melodramatic] style: in the order of the narrative, the melodrama takes over from realism's depiction of a day-to-day state of things' to express the 'intensity of the crisis and its protagonists' desperation' (Mulvey 2013: 1). In the first half of the film, Rhonda's pubescent daughter Stacey reveals to brother Orton that she has been sexually abused by Rhonda's boyfriends, including her current boyfriend Nathan. Orton assumes that this, too, is his mother's fault. But in the second half of the film we see that Rhonda is likely a victim herself (she is fearful of Nathan when he becomes impatient) and had no knowledge of Stacey's abuse. Indeed, when Orton confronts her about it, she is horrified. Rhonda immediately goes searching for Orton and Stacey along dark streets, asking after them at shopfronts, and 'roaming' the streets like most of the children of the film who are 'lost' and have to find their 'way home'. In doing so, Rhonda walks past the large clothing bin in which her children reside without realising, indicating that these are 'character types who are generally invisible', even to each other (French 2013: n.p.).

Unsuccessful in finding her children, Rhonda returns home and throws her boyfriend's belongings out on the footpath. It is sometime during this expulsion that her social worker arrives with police to tell her that her children have died in an accidental fire in that clothing bin: in the moment Rhonda reorientates herself towards her children, and away from her abusive partner, she has lost them. Hopgood (2009: 17) notes that 'mothers are forever being punished by the loss of their children' in melodramas, including specifically in melodramas of protest in which the 'death of the "innocent", or indeed, innocents' (Walker 1982: 14) is a standard convention. In *Blessed*, it is the youngest children or the ostensibly most innocent that die. At the morgue we see a large, misshapen object under a sheet – the fire has 'fused the bodies together', the attendant explains – before it cuts to a close-up of Rhonda's face. During a brief conversation Rhonda

is adamant that the bodies are not to be separated, concluding with: 'they're my blessings, and you're not to touch them.' This is the second time she describes her children as 'blessings', with her descriptions effectively book-ending the film; it also signals a belated retaking of parental and personal agency. Rhonda lets out a series of grief-stricken wails, and Kokkinos offers a prolonged focus through extreme close-ups of Rhonda cross-cut with the reactions of those in an outside room who are horrified to hear her grief. The effect is a visceral emphasis on Rhonda's trauma, which 'calls upon us' to recognise her love for her children and 'to share her grief' (Hopgood 2009: 17): to empathise and look with, rather than at, the outsider.

In rousing us to empathise with Rhonda as the least empathetic and most explicit outsider of all of the mothers, Kokkinos employs a final melodramatic convention to the death of the innocents: namely, the redemptive death. The 'redemptive death' occurs when the 'death of the most virtuous character' has a ripple 'effect on surviving characters (often transforming or saving them somehow)' (Soltysik 2008: 167). In *Blessed*, it is Rhonda's children's death that redeems her in the final two scenes of the film: first at the morgue, and finally at a club on her way home. For one thing, when Rhonda wails in grief, it is arguably the first time she has been 'heard' in the film; Ross (2012: 53) argues that the film features 'characters struggling to be heard, and whose regular pathways of communication with others have been disrupted, obscured or ignored', often as a result of their various marginalisations. For Rhonda, we have seen her feel defensive and 'assessed' rather than productively enabled by the government institutions designed to support her, while she and her children fail to 'hear' each other for most of the film. But here she is seen and heard by numerous characters, retaking her agency (or 'voice'). For another, it is Rhonda's grief that unites brief cross-cuts that reveal the varying reconciliations across the remaining mother-child relationships of the film: Daniel recovers from his overdose and is reunited with Tanya and Peter; Trisha and Gina reconcile and Roo returns home; Katrina is brought home and reunited with Bianca;

and James recovers a cherished artefact from his birth mother. But it is the final scene that best signals Rhonda's redemption.

In the final scene, while being driven home, Rhonda insists on stopping at a dingy pool hall/club. While she has acted in self-destructive ways in previous scenes, that is not the case here. The lyrics of the song playing ('Elsie' by Australian rock band The Divinyls) narrate a tragic working-class life with lyrics such as 'She never had an education', 'Clinging to the edges', 'The world's a hard place to land on', 'In her squally little slum.' The song explicitly frames Rhonda as a poor and vulnerable outsider, as does her context in a gritty, run-down pool hall, collectively reflecting the 'politics' of the film of 'giving voice to those on the very margins of contemporary society' (Hancock 2014: 131). It is the first part of the chorus playing – 'Life can be lonely / Life can be very sad' – when grieving Rhonda walks towards the dance floor. Rhonda first dances energetically throwing her head and arms around in a seeming attempt at catharsis, 'obliterating the pain with bodies in movement' (Krauth 2009: 27), before slowly swaying and holding her heavily pregnant stomach. The light on her face in the club is not unlike the sunlight of the film's visual motif, revealing this moment as the conclusion to the larger narrative of mothers and children (Cordaiy 2009). As the music begins to fade out, the image shifts to an extreme close-up of Rhonda's face, mascara smudged and a tear rolling down it. The scene concludes with a brief silent image of Rhonda's grief-stricken face (see Figure 4.1), Gail offscreen watching on, as we hear a single breath before it cuts to the closing credits.

Rhonda has been locked in a passive cycle of being 'assessed', dispossessed from the narrative of her own life. But in these final moments Rhonda retakes her agency and we are asked to empathise with her. Ross writes:

By the time the score finishes, we are engulfed by silence, hearing only the sound of Rhonda's breath. With no sound left but the restrained quietness of Rhonda's breath, this suggests that we are right there with her in this moment. (Ross 2012: 64)

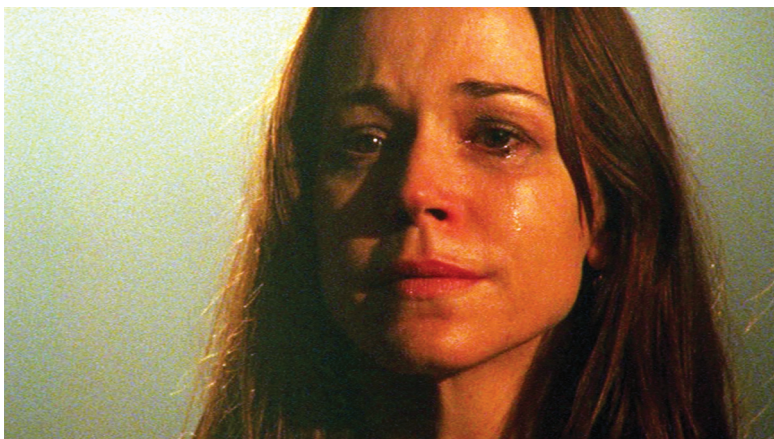


Figure 4.1 Rhonda in the final image of *Blessed*

The scene thus continues Kokkinos's approach in *Antamosi*, *Only the Brave*, and *Head On* of asking the audience not to look at outsider protagonists, but rather with them: to view her films from the margins. French argues that:

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. (French 2013: n.p.)

And in this final scene Kokkinos reminds us that Rhonda is also 'blessed' with two more children: her eldest Mickey, whose name is written across her hand beside a love heart, and her unborn child, whom she cradles with her hands across her stomach, which Kokkinos draws attention to in a close-up (see Figure 4.2). Reorientated to her children, Rhonda represents the broader 'turn towards' each other, in Ahmed's sense of it, across all of the mother-child relationships of the film. Moreover, with her social worker watching on with genuine care, the scene also raises the possibility of a new start for Rhonda: she is seen, heard, and appears to have the support of an institution she previously



Figure 4.2 Rhonda holding her pregnant stomach in *Blessed*

experienced as antagonist. The latter in particular is a notable shift from both Kokkinos's previous films and from genre conventions, both of which have tended to cast institutions as dangers to the marginalised.

In melodrama, for example, there has been a shift away from the 'natural disaster or the slimy character' and towards 'social institutions' as the villain, and particularly those marked by 'patriarchal laws and class structures' (Gaines 1991: 347). Michael Walker (1982: 35) elaborates that when characters are punished for transgressing these ideologies, which is 'often directed against female characters' with whom the audience are encouraged to empathise, it 'leads to the same sort of sufferings as in traditional melodrama, [but] the ideology' functions 'as the villain'. Similarly, hegemonic institutions are constructed as punishing, or at least failing their most vulnerable constituents in Kokkinos's previous films, as well as in preceding scenes in *Blessed*. For example, in *Head On* the police strip and beat transgendered Toula, while in *The Book of Revelation* the police laugh at Daniel when he attempts to report his abduction.

In *Blessed*, an earlier example occurs when Katrina and Trisha are arrested for shoplifting. The two are dressed in the private school uniforms Trisha stole earlier from her mother Gina. The

girls are interviewed by Sergeant Kerrick (played by Neil Pigot), who lectures the girls before concluding with: 'You can't just pretend to be something you're not. [...] And what are you girls? Trash.' His comments reveal that while they were arrested for shoplifting, their larger crime is wearing the stolen uniforms and pretending to be 'something' they are 'not': upper middle class. The moment underscores the hegemonic policing of social divisions and depicts 'what is really at stake in the social politics, not only of the film, but of wider normative societal discourse', which it achieves through a 'symbolic head-to-head between the powers that be: the institutional (in this case, the police), and those that suffer most from institutional exclusion (marginalised working-class youth)' (Hancock 2014: 136). The outsider, realised in *Blessed* across an ensemble of socially marginalised characters, thus again functions as a witness to the failures of hegemonic institutions in the Australian cultural landscape and as a pretext for a critical appraisal of that landscape.

But like many melodramas of protest (and all of Kokkinos's preceding films), *Blessed* also concludes optimistically, offering the redemption of Rhonda as an affirmation of 'the determination to fight on' (Walker 1982: 14). This is most explicitly realised through the penultimate close-up of Rhonda's hands – featuring Mickey's name as she cradles her pregnant stomach – which is the most explicit (and literal) image of hope and rebirth in Kokkinos's oeuvre (see Figure 4.2). That the film ends with Rhonda dancing also reflects another 'motif in Kokkinos' films' (Hopgood 2009: 17). When Vicki dances in *Only the Brave* it introduces Alex's queer gaze; Ari dances throughout *Head On* in a negotiation of his Greek and queer identities; dance is Daniel's livelihood in *The Book of Revelation*, but also a method through which he begins to heal; and in *Blessed*, Bianca dances to drunkenly celebrate the irresponsible purchase of a dress and Rhonda dances in grief. Hopgood (2009: 17) argues that dance functions to 'externalise' these characters' 'inner turmoil and conflict'. While I agree with her persuasive reading, I would add that dance further functions, particularly in key scenes – Ari's final dance, Daniel's recovery

dance, Rhonda's final dance – as a symbolic transformation, too. In each of these scenes, there is an attempt through dance to assert (or reassert) an agency lost or challenged in traumatic preceding events. And in this sense, despite what are often read as grim films (for example, Buckmaster 2009), Kokkinos's films consistently end on notes of ambiguous optimism.

An ensemble of outsiders, an oeuvre of outsiders?

Blessed, Kokkinos's third feature (and fifth) film, represents an expanded return to the preoccupations established in her earlier films, *Antamosi*, *Only the Brave*, and *Head On*. Like those films, *Blessed* employs a stylised social realism and sites her characters in a range of primarily working-class milieus, from grim, state-provided apartments to a series of run-down locations. But where those films were typically organised around a single intersectional outsider, *Blessed* disperses these diversities across an ensemble of outsiders. Thus, in *Blessed*, we follow five mothers and their seven children. Though Kokkinos again employs an intersectional focus to her outsiders – Roo is a queer, Greek-Australian youth, for example, while Rhonda is an abused woman and pregnant mother on welfare – it is less emphatically explored or foregrounded here as in *Head On*, which is perhaps inevitable given the number of characters. Nevertheless, in following a series of different mother–child relationships, Kokkinos again insists on approaching Australian identity by emphasising its overlapping and changing plurality.

This plurality is again embodied by the outsider, in this case the mother and child struggling at the margins, with the film's focus largely organised around the impact of this marginalisation on these mothers, their children, and the relationships they share. Like *Antamosi*, *Only the Brave*, and *Head On*, this again culminates in a traumatic experience – the death of two of Rhonda's children – which establishes the outsider as a motif

for Kokkinos through which themes of alienation, disaffection, and the powerlessness of the marginalised are explored. That trauma is a uniting experience across Kokkinos's outsiders also foregrounds the vulnerability of the marginalised in often confronting ways, though the subsequent emphasis is typically on empathising with them. This is perhaps unusual (Hancock 2014: 133), but is part of Kokkinos's call (in Mitchell 2017) to '[let] go of judgements and prejudices' of social outsiders. But if *Blessed's* exploration of an ensemble of outsiders reflects a return to and extension of many of the stylistic and thematic preoccupations established in her earlier films, then to what extent is it possible to read these shared characteristics across her films as evidence of Kokkinos as an auteur?

Notes

- 1 *Blessed* Production Notes, available at <<http://static.thecia.com.au/reviews/b/blessed-production-notes.doc>> (last accessed 24 April 2019).
- 2 Ibid.