

# Conclusion: an oeuvre of outsiders – an Australian auteur?

I conclude this project by offering some brief notes towards a consideration of Kokkinos as an auteur. That said, Kokkinos's auteur status is perhaps something of a moot point, inasmuch as it is one that is occasionally taken for granted. Henry (2014: 125), for example, notes Kokkinos's 'own auteur status' in passing, while Daniel White and Gina Lambropoulos (2017) describe her as an 'Australian auteur'. However, the auteur label is neither one that is widespread nor one that has received focused consideration outside of Ross's (2012: 51) analysis of the soundscape in two of Kokkinos's five fictional films 'within something of an auteur framework'. In that instance, though, it is to allow for a more 'straightforward analysis' by focusing on Kokkinos rather than the 'ensemble of sound designers' (Ross 2012: 51). In this chapter, then, I conclude my survey of Kokkinos's oeuvre by foregrounding the features across, rather than within, her films to begin a conversation about whether (and why) we might consider her an auteur.

Of course, the 'auteur', or notion of the director as a film's defining influence or 'author', is something of an out-of-fashion concept among film scholars. Though there were important precedents (Hayward 2006), the term is perhaps most associated with *Cahiers du Cinéma* writers' development of the *politique des auteurs* in the 1950s and 1960s (for example, Truffaut [1954] 2008; Bazin [1957] 2008). Early scholarship applied the concept to directors with an 'individuality of style', which was often assessed in relation to *mise en scène* (Truffaut [1954] 2008; Bazin [1957] 2008). By the early 1960s, however, American critics like

Andrew Sarris had shifted the focus and ‘reformulated *Cahiers’ politique* as the “*auteur* theory”, transforming the original polemic for a new cinema of *auteurs* into a critical method for evaluating films’ (Cook 1985: 114; see Sarris [1962] 2008, 1963). In the intervening decades, ‘auteur theory’ has faced a multitude of reformations, revisions, and criticisms (Caughie 2007), largely precipitated by a shift away from romanticised notions of the ‘artist’ and towards a post-structuralist discourse of the ‘death of the author’ (Barthes 1977). One of the results of this has been a more concerted investigation of film as a collaborative rather than solo production (Staiger 2003),<sup>1</sup> particularly in relation to industrial mainstream (rather than independent) filmmaking like Hollywood where the ‘collaborative nature of the business has always put limits on the freedom of the director to claim the status of especially privileged author’ (King 2002: 87). Other key criticisms have included feminist concerns about the historically androcentric foci in auteur theory, perhaps most famously articulated by Sharon Smith’s (1972: 21) description of it as the ‘most incredible of all male fantasies.’

But despite the important criticisms and its wavering scholarly popularity, Adrian Martin (2001: n.p.) argues that auteur theory ‘has never really gone away in practice.’ Martin (2001: n.p.) notes that what he terms ‘classical auteurism’ is, in fact, both a ‘proposition’ that the director can be ‘pinpointed as the one most responsible for its art and craft’ as well as a ‘good way to explore and interpret films [...] through focusing on the “signature” or traces of the director’s style, “vision” and recurring concerns.’ It is not, he insists, the only way to look at a director’s oeuvre, but it remains a useful method among many (Martin 2001: n.p.). In similar ways, Doty (1993: 18) has argued that an auteur is a director who ‘expressed consistent, idiosyncratic stylistic and thematic concerns throughout the body of their films.’ These dual textual emphases on consistent stylistic and thematic preoccupations remain the ‘classical’ (Martin 2001) or ‘traditional’ (Doty 1993) conceptions of the auteur; they are also conceptions that Kokkinos is well placed to fulfil.

Kokkinos's films are 'consistently idiosyncratic' (to adapt Doty 1993): for example, they individually and collectively explore her 'vision of Melbourne' from the perspective of outsider protagonists (French 2013: n.p.). Indeed, like the 'auteur films of Mina Shum set in Vancouver or Léa Pool's films set in Montréal' (Melnyk 2014: 79), Kokkinos's fictional films are all set (and filmed) in her home town of Melbourne. While this can presumably be partly understood as convenience or pragmatism, it nevertheless also reflects an active artistic choice. For instance, Kokkinos wrote or co-wrote screenplays set in Melbourne (*Antamosi*, *Only the Brave*); adapted Melbourne-based literary sources (*Head On*, *Blessed*); and transposed an Amsterdam-based literary source to Melbourne (*The Book of Revelation*). Melbourne thus 'emerges as a character or signifier of meaning in her films' (French 2013: n.p.) with the culturally diverse but cinematically indistinct city grounding key themes and functioning emblematically of Australian society (see Introduction) across her films. There is also a consistency within this broader setting, with Kokkinos privileging exclusively urban and suburban spaces that often symbolise the interiority of her characters (French 2012, 2013): abandoned shacks, urban back alleys, run-down houses in outer suburbs – sites isolated from mainstream society. This points to a level of 'consistent idiosyncrasy' in setting across Kokkinos's oeuvre. Perhaps more significantly, this recurring setting also signals how heavily Kokkinos is involved in the development of her films, whether as a writer (*Antamosi*), co-writer (*Only the Brave*, *Head On*, *The Book of Revelation*), or executive producer (*Blessed*) (Cordaiy 2009). Conceptions of the auteur often rely on a sense that films are 'extensively guided by a director from script to completion' (Tregde 2013: 6), and this is true of Kokkinos. Even with *Blessed*, as the only one of her films that she did not participate in writing, Kokkinos still actively directed its development. Kokkinos notes of the process:

When we started the adaptation process we kept all the writers on board. We did a couple of drafts and each writer dramatised their own story. Those early drafts were

interesting but they weren't hanging together as a film. So I took a step back and had a think about what to do, and went back to my original emotional response to the play [...] and I remember[ed] the line Rhonda says, 'They are my blessings and you are not to touch them', and I thought, every child is a mother's blessing. So I went back to Andrew [...] and I said 'This story is about mothers and children. There's something about the way all of these characters can speak to each other that we haven't brought out into the open, or haven't emphasised as a theme ... the core theme. (Kokkinos qtd in Corday 2009: 19)

As Mitchell (2017: n.p.) points out, Kokkinos's changes are 'substantially different' from the original play: 'Some characters were discarded, some created or enhanced, and other character connections were introduced.' McFarlane (2010: 87), too, notes Kokkinos's uniting 'vision' in the film: these 'five diverse plot strands, with no more than vestigial connections [...] are woven rigorously together by the coherence and compassion of Kokkinos' vision'. In this way, Kokkinos's hand in actively shaping all of her scripts is consistent with notions of the auteur as 'controlling or otherwise influencing the form and meanings' of their films (Doty 1993: 18).

These 'consistent, idiosyncratic' choices are also reflected in Kokkinos's 'stylistic and thematic concerns' (Doty 1993: 18). In terms of style, for example, Kokkinos employs a stylised realism alongside symbolic uses of colour in each of her films (blues and greys in *Antamosi* and *Only the Brave*; yellows, oranges, and reds in *Head On*, *The Book of Revelation*, and *Blessed*). In *Blessed*, for example, family homes are frequently cast in warm colours, such as deep red curtains and a large yellow poster, reflecting the film's broader 'visual concept' of the 'spectrum of colours within a flame' (Production Notes<sup>2</sup>). This use of colour has symbolic significance, too: James begins the film assessing a fire-damaged building which pre-emptively empties Orton and Stacey's death in a fire at the film's end (see Chapter 4). The latter signals that Kokkinos's films are also united by visceral emphases on trauma – extreme close-ups, disorienting angles, slow motion, and heightened

colours and sounds – as with Katina seeing her father’s dead body (*Antamosi*), Alex seeing Vicki self-immolate (*Only the Brave*), Ari seeing Toula beaten (*Head On*), Daniel’s abduction and torture (*The Book of Revelation*), and Rhonda grieving her children’s death (*Blessed*).

These stylistic signatures foreground thematic preoccupations within Kokkinos’s oeuvre. That trauma is a uniting experience across her outsiders, for instance, foregrounds Kokkinos’s ongoing exploration of the vulnerability of the marginalised which she reveals by privileging the perspective of outsiders, ‘all of whom are emotionally vulnerable and scarred by abuse’ (French 2013: n.p.). These outsiders 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). (French 2013: n.p.)

In *Antamosi*, *Only the Brave*, and *Head On*, for example, Kokkinos foregrounds an outsider protagonist who is marked by their location within working-class, Greek-Australian milieus. To this intersectionality she adds, in *Only the Brave* and *Head On*, protagonists who are also young and queer. In *Blessed*, Kokkinos expands this focus to an ensemble of mostly working-class outsiders, most of whom are young and some of whom are also queer (Roo) and/or Greek-Australian (Roo, Trisha, Gina). In *The Book of Revelation*, however, Kokkinos takes a different approach to the outsider. Instead of focusing on a multiply marginalised protagonist that typically offers some kind of disruption to hegemonic conceptions of Australian identity, Kokkinos forcibly removes the white, hetero-masculine Daniel’s privilege through trauma. Daniel is remade into an outsider to his own life, leaving his previous life of success and advantage. Instead, Daniel changes his name, leaves his girlfriend and

apartment, quits dancing in the city for a stereotypically transitional or working-class job (bartender) on the outskirts of town, and begins pursuing strangers in a wholly ineffective revenge campaign before being literally removed from society through police imprisonment (see Chapter 3). Thus, where Katina, Alex, Ari, and the *Blessed* ensemble all reflect Kokkinos's focus on marginalised or 'othered' characters, *The Book of Revelation* offers the reverse by 'othering' the standard hero of much Australian cinema, namely the white, heterosexual, Anglo-Irish man (Seco 2008).

Across Kokkinos's oeuvre, then, each of her films offers a challenge or disruption to hegemonic conceptions of Australian identity, which are embodied by the figure of the outsider. In this way, the figure of the outsider consistently functions both as a motif through which to explore themes of alienation, disaffection, and the powerless of the marginalised, and as a witness to the failures of institutions in the Australian cultural landscape (with families, schools, and the police the typical targets). As Bazin ([1957] 2008: 25) famously argued, auteurs 'always tell the same story, or, in case the word "story" is confusing, let's say they have the same attitude and pass the same moral judgements on the action and on the characters'. Certainly if the combination of 'distinctive thematic concerns' and a 'distinctive style' that reflects those 'thematic concerns' across a 'director's body of work' is what 'makes a filmmaker an auteur' (King 2002: 87), then Kokkinos is well placed. Interestingly, these recurrent foci are, to some degree, reinforced through casting. Like many auteurs, Kokkinos recasts her actors across multiple films with Elena Mandalas, Dora Kaskanis, Alex Papps, George Harlem, Neil Pigot, and Eugenia Fragos, among others, all appearing in at least two of her films, and imbuing her oeuvre with both an inter- and intra-textuality. Pigot, for instance, plays an abusive (albeit differently named) police officer in both *Head On* and *Blessed*, while Harlem plays damaging Greek-Australian husbands/fathers in *Antamosi* and *Only the Brave*.

Kokkinos's thematic preoccupations also suggest a personal undertone to her oeuvre (French 2012), a 'personal' vision

having often been seen as one of the ‘central tenets’ of conceptions of the auteur (Yoshimoto 2000: 55; Polan 2001). Although Kokkinos has rejected a reading of her oeuvre as autobiographical, she has said a number of times that one of her motivations for becoming a filmmaker was that she had yet to see films that reflected her own personal experience (for example, White and Lambropoulos 2017). In this way, her films reflect ‘expositions of her own background’, albeit inevitably to different degrees (French 2012: 66). In a radio interview, for example, Kokkinos noted:

Because I was never mainstream, I was Greek, came from a working-class background, that immigrant experience made me an outsider automatically. My sexuality made me an outsider. [...] How that makes you feel as a person when you feel you are not really part of the mainstream. And all of my films, I think, have touched on that, about engaging identity and how one belongs. [...] So ironically one struggles with being an outsider and yet, on some level, I think I’ve also celebrated that outsider status in all my films. (Kokkinos in White and Lambropoulos 2017: n.p.)

This statement sums up many of the issues Kokkinos has raised in other interviews (for example, Stamocostas 2018; Malone 1999; Katsigiannis 1998) and is interesting for a number of reasons. For one thing, it acknowledges many of the preoccupations of her films – Greek-Australian, working-class, queer outsiders – as located in her personal background. For another, it encourages a reading of her oeuvre as thematically consistent given her note that it is characterised by a ‘celebration’ of ‘that outsider status in all’ of her films. In other words, Kokkinos is framing herself as an auteur with a unifying personal vision. This is consistent with Staiger’s (2003) discussion of the auteur as a ‘technique of self’. In this model, the auteur is ‘reconceptualized as a subject having an ability to act as a conscious analyzer of the functionality of citations in historical moments’ (Staiger 2003: 49). Kokkinos’s

interviews, such as the one quoted from above, thus become a 'performative statement' as a 'citation of authoring by an individual having the authority to make an authoring statement' (Staiger 2003: 51). This is important because 'authorship does matter [...] especially to those in nondominant positions' – as with Kokkinos as a queer, Greek-Australian woman – because asserting 'agency' can be seen as a 'survival' project and an opportunity to undermine 'naturalized privileges of normativity' (Staiger 2003: 27).

Certainly women, queers, and ethnically marked filmmakers (among other sites of difference) are frequently excluded from the category of 'auteur'. Early discussions of auteurs focused exclusively on male directors and most recent discussions of auteurs still rarely feature, let alone feature prominently, women directors (Jaikumar 2017). This is perhaps particularly true of Australian cinema, which has historically been slow to embrace the notion of the auteur, and even slower to confer that title upon marginalised directors. O'Regan (1996: 125) notes that where Australian directors are discussed as 'auteurs' it is typically seen as an 'exception' that occurs only after they have achieved considerable recognition outside of Australia and, in particular, within North America. While this arguably points to an institutionalised cultural cringe – the notion that Australian culture can only be valued when it is first validated by those outside Australian culture (and particularly by those in the United States or, to a lesser extent, Britain) – a handful of directors have made the grade, including one woman. Oscar-winner Jane Campion, 'Australasia's most high-profile and lionized auteur director' (O'Regan 1996: 288), is a case in point. Kokkinos, however, has actively eschewed international (and specifically North American) opportunities. Kokkinos (in Usher 2006) has talked, for example, about receiving multiple offers to make films in Hollywood after the success of *Head On* but in wanting to stay in Australia and make films 'important to [her]':



If we accept that Kokkinos is, at the level of her texts, an auteur – ‘consistently idiosyncratic’ in style and theme – it is perhaps curious that she is not also an obvious auteur candidate at the level of discourse, outside of her self-citations and the handful of writers who (as noted earlier) have described her as such. The auteur is, of course, also a discursive construction influenced, for example, by the ‘discourse produced by film critics and scholars who function, in effect, as reputation entrepreneurs’ (Allen and Lincoln 2004: 871) or ‘reputation builders’ (Klinger 1994: xiii). Beyond idiosyncratic textual consistencies, the ‘auteur’ is thus also discursively conferred – constructed through repeated utterances – revealing the ‘dialogic function between artistic reputations and history – the dynamic circumstances under which an author’s status and the status of her or his works are established, sustained, transformed, unappreciated, or even vilified’ (Klinger 1994: xiii). A director is more likely to be discursively constructed as an ‘auteur’ when they are the subject of a greater amount of critical attention, such as by being the subject of a greater number of reviews, articles, and books (Allen and Lincoln 2004: 881). Yet, there has been an oft-noted paucity of writing focused on Kokkinos (Hardwick 2009; Collins and Davis 2004; Berry 1999), which can be partly understood in relation to her eschewal of a higher profile and international opportunities. But it is perhaps also understood as a result of a ‘critical neglect’ that has been raised as potentially related to the challenging depictions of multiple sites of difference in her work (Berry 1999: 35). In discussing *Head On*, ironically Kokkinos’s most high-profile and written-about film, Berry writes:

Some have suggested to me that it is precisely this very marked ethnic and gay combination that has led to critical neglect of [*Head On*]. They have pointed out that since nearly all of Australia’s prominent film critics are Anglo and straight, and most of them are male, they could not be expected to grasp a film like *Head On*. (Berry 1999: 35)

Or perhaps, in a national cinema at least historically organised around white, heterosexual men (Berry 1999), a director like Kokkinos. In a recent interview, Kokkinos notes:

Making features as a Greek Australian lesbian woman that are provocative, emotionally intense: when you think about my films it's almost a miracle they got made. To make four features in this country is quite an achievement. I'm really proud of each and every one of my four features. That only happened through sheer persistence, hard work and being driven by wanting to say something and also wanting to make a cultural contribution to the landscape. (Kokkinos in Stamocostas 2018)

When asked if she has 'paid a price' for her provocative explorations of diverse protagonists and milieus, she notes:

Have I paid a price? I'm not sure that I have in the sense [that] I wanted to make those films. I wanted to feel that there was a freedom in making those films and I don't have any regrets at all. *I certainly copped a lot of flak*. That's the role of the artist, to pose questions, to take us out of our comfort zone. To explore issues and questions that almost feel slightly forbidden in some way. That's also the role of the storyteller in society, to provoke us into thinking about things more deeply and differently. (Kokkinos in Stamocostas 2018; emphasis added)

Though Kokkinos does not elaborate in the interview on what constitutes 'flak', or whether it was at the hands of reviewers, peers, industry stakeholders, or others, it is nevertheless clear that there has been something of a 'cost'. Certainly it is true that Kokkinos, despite being a celebrated filmmaker, has found it increasingly difficult to secure funding to make films in the government-funded Australian film industry. Her final film was only completed through the personal financial contributions of Kokkinos herself and producer Al Clark (Gonzalez 2009) and, though *Blessed* generally received strong reviews, Kokkinos's

directing opportunities have since lain exclusively in television rather than film (White and Lambropoulos 2017).

If we thus see the paucity in discourse around Kokkinos as partly a result of her decision to eschew an international or mainstream career and partly as a result of a broader national reticence around an outsider filmmaker focused on outsider provocations, then it also becomes possible to see her consideration as an auteur as something of a reclamation. Robert Sinnerbrink writes of marginalised filmmakers:

there is also an *ethical* decision at stake in devoting time and thought to films that deliberately take the path less chosen [...]. In a global cultural and economic marketplace dominated by certain types of stories or ideological points of views, there is ethical purpose in devoting attention to the more marginal, more questioning, more aesthetically and intellectually demanding films that one encounters. (Sinnerbrink 2011: 137–8)

Applying Sinnerbrink's (2011) proposition of an ethical imperative to the question of the auteur, the question here might become: to what extent should the comparative discursive paucity devoted to Kokkinos actually matter in considerations of her as an auteur? Evidence of marginalisation should certainly not be permitted to justify further marginalisation. In her compelling consideration of women auteurs, Priya Jaikumar (2017: 206) writes that: 'Authorship was a coveted and near-impossible goal for those who did not fit normative prescriptions of what authors should look like, and what they should make in order [to] find institutional, critical, and popular acceptance.' In the absence of such 'acceptance', we might instead note Patricia White's (2015: 3) account of how 'feminists have explored the work that has been made by women as an act of historical retrieval' and a 'practical matter of equity'. It is thus not only possible to read Kokkinos as an auteur – as a director whose oeuvre is characterised by 'consistent idiosyncrasies' of style, theme, and personal vision, and who is also regularly engaged in 'techniques

of self' – but, for me, something of an act of reclamation to do so. And if these short notes are to contribute to anything, it is to offer a starting point for larger conversations not only about the work of Kokkinos, but about that of other nondominant directors, including within the privileged discourse of the 'auteur'. It is thus also a 'call to action' to 'question the authorship of our film industries, our policies, our states, our theories' which promise to reveal 'how the norms and productive conditions of authorship have been working for and against' directors like Kokkinos 'the world over' (Jaikumar 2017: 212).

## Ana Kokkinos: an auteur of outsiders

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Ana Kokkinos is an Australian screenwriter, producer, and director best known for her work directing fictional films, including the short *Antamosi* (1991), short feature *Only the Brave* (1994), and features *Head On* (1998), *The Book of Revelation* (2006), and *Blessed* (2009). In this book, I have offered a reading of and across these films through the broad focus of tracing the deployment of the outsider as a textual motif and discursive formation. In doing so, I have suggested a reading of Kokkinos's fictional films as an 'oeuvre of outsiders' and Kokkinos herself as an auteur, the latter in both the classical and 'techniques of self' conceptions. But one of the issues the preceding discussions have revealed is that, in many ways, the issues of marginality and invisibility that Kokkinos's outsider characters face in her films are the very same issues she has faced in achieving recognition of her work. Certainly, if there is only one task that this book can be put to, then I hope that it is in contributing to an increased focus on Ana Kokkinos and her oeuvre. And there is considerable work left to do: in expanding on the starting points offered here; in considering her interventions into Greek-Australian milieus as a specifically transnational auteurism; and in widening the focus of studies to consider her by now significant body of work in television, among others.

## Notes

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- 1 For a detailed account of the rise and fall of 'auteurism' in film theory, see Lapsley and Westlake (2006: 105–28); see also John Caughie (2007).
- 2 *Blessed* Production Notes, available at <<http://static.theia.com.au/reviews/b/blessed-production-notes.doc>> (last accessed 24 April 2019).