

# Revealing what?

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*The Book of Revelation*, Australian director Anna Kokkinos's second feature film, is a faithful adaptation of a novel by the same name, written by Rupert Thomson.

Daniel (Tom Long) and his girlfriend Bridget (Anna Torv) are lead dancers at a well-known dance company in Melbourne. During a rehearsal break, Bridget asks Daniel to buy her a packet of cigarettes. He returns 12 days later, a completely changed man—subdued, fearful and deeply troubled. Daniel, trancelike, attempts to explain his rape by three women, but before he can get any further Bridget, enraged, accuses him of cheating on her.

After leaving both Bridget and the dance company, he moves to an apartment and finds a job in the local pub as a barman. What follows are flashes of memory about his ordeal. On his way to buy cigarettes, he was accosted by three hooded women in an alley, drugged and held captive at an unidentified location for 12 days during which he was sexually, emotionally and physically abused before being dumped in a field near a railway track. Traumatised, he begins looking for the perpetrators of the crime by sleeping with women who may even remotely resemble the suspects, and when they are naked, he looks for clues: a scar, a tattoo and so on. He is unsuccessful in his quest even after a spree of promiscuity.

He meets Julie (Deborah Mailman), an Aboriginal university student on a tram and falls in love with her. The most immediate reason is because her dark skin excludes her from his list of white female suspects. In the meantime, he has established something of a friendship with Olsen (Colin Friels), a cop in the special victims unit and former husband of his choreographer, Isabel (Greta Scacchi), who, unbeknownst to Daniel, has asked Olsen to find him. The positive impact of Daniel's relationship with Julie prompts him to contact Isabel, who has since been diagnosed with a terminal illness.

Just as it seems his life is once again assuming some normality, his repressed trauma surfaces at a nightclub, when, approaching the bar, he thinks he recognises one of his victimisers. While Julie waits for his return from the bar, he follows his suspect into the bathroom and, in a

frenzy, attacks her before realising his mistake and running out, chased by a group of men who proceed to beat him up. Landing in jail for his assault on the woman, Julie contacts Olsen, and presumably, the healing process begins.

In the film's production notes, Kokkinos comments that "In adapting a brilliant contemporary novel, I wanted to create a film that was true to its spirit, its essence. The story fascinated me because of the reversal at the heart of it. Man as victim, women as perpetrators. This simple reversal invites us to look at the situation through new eyes. How to speak of trauma? How to face one's own complicity and the feelings of rage and shame, of love and hate, that follow?"

This is also the novel's central theme, but the novel conveys a sense of being invented on the run. This is evident from some of Thomson's musings about the process of writing *The Book of Revelation*: "When I'm writing fiction I have to have a kind of blind faith in myself, especially when it comes to the psychology of my characters. I often have the feeling that I'm writing about something I know, even if I don't know how I know what I know. Louise Bourgeois said something interesting on this subject: 'I trust the unconscious. The unconscious is my friend.'" Kokkinos's film differs from the novel in one respect. She reduces the number of Daniel's post-kidnapping sexual encounters to 100, whereas Thomson has the unnamed protagonist sleep with about 160 women!

We beg to differ with Kokkinos on the "brilliance" of Thomson's novel. In general, it is a rather tedious work, full of "constructs" instead of developed characters, with numerous sub-plots revolving around completely arbitrary situations. In short, a pure shallow invention divorced from real life. (It's fine that Thomson's unconscious is his friend; it's unfortunate that his friend is rather trivial and empty.)

The film version of *The Book of Revelation* suffers from the same malady. The lead character's trauma is never real. It is so artificially constructed to invoke the idea,

rather than the feeling of trauma, that the viewer is reduced to a state of apathy about Daniel's fate. The scenes showing his captivity and abuse are too far-fetched, sort of a surreal freak show. His psychological deterioration is too mechanical, lacking all complexity and unconvincing.

In any event, the notion of three hooded women drugging, kidnapping and raping a man for 12 days is something that Konnikos treats very lightly. Supposing that such an event were possible, what would it say not simply about the state of sexual relations, but of *social* relations?

It does not seem necessary to invent such a scenario and proceed in such an unrelenting fashion in the depiction of the ordeal to explore the themes Kokkinos claims fascinate her. On the contrary, the sensationalised goings-on tend to divert attention from any real human problems. One never discovers why this happens to Daniel, or anything about these women, and not much about Daniel himself. The only clues to Daniel's plight are the endless close-ups of his grimacing face with expressions alternating between the vacant and the frenzied.

(It never seems to occur to Konnikos that abuse and torture of men, including sexual humiliation—and sometimes inflicted by women, no less!—are occurring in Iraq and Guantánamo Bay on a daily basis, with the full support of the Australian authorities. The filmmaker apparently has her eyes set on loftier matters.)

Daniel eventually finds some physical release through his dancing, demonstrating perhaps his physical and psychological anguish, but while somewhat entertaining, the dancing itself is not so expressive as to reveal the essence of his impending breakdown. Is it necessary for Daniel to be a dancer? Perhaps Kokkinos (and Thomson) can find no other means through which to show how psychological damage can find physical manifestation in a man. After all, given the arbitrariness of the general circumstances, it might have turned out that the victimised man was a good-looking garbage collector, or athletic computer programmer. How would the filmmaker have expressed the torment of such individuals? Or perhaps, Konnikos is making a point about beauty in artistic form and its source—the dancer, the dance, the sculpted graceful dancer's body. No one quite knows.

The location is also similarly arbitrary: why Melbourne and not Sydney or London? These are not insignificant things. (Thomson answers this question himself: "Why Amsterdam? The book was set there from the very beginning. It could have been set in Los Angeles, I

suppose, or Paris—many cities have that hidden seam of perversity, that sense of an underworld—but Amsterdam worked perfectly. Also I'd lived there once for a year.") There are too many "what ifs," too many other possibilities for other scenarios. In short, there is nothing here that creates a sense of tension and inevitability about anyone or anything. Things just glide along according to some preconceived and shallow formula about concepts that have not been rendered concrete. The only—and small—exception is Julie, whose aboriginality makes sense in the context of Daniel's mistrust of white women. It is not accidental that she is the most convincing and likable character in the film.

Kokkinos says (modestly) of *The Book of Revelation*, "I have no doubt that audiences will respond strongly to the film. It is provocative, disturbing, beautiful and challenging. It has a powerful emotional effect that is not easily categorised and defined. Part mystery, part thriller, erotic, dream-like, *The Book of Revelation* allows the space for audiences to find their own answers." It is typical of a certain social type in the artistic milieu, sincere but misguided, to believe that whatever she considers has social significance or artistic magnitude will necessarily be interpreted in a similar fashion by her audience. There are no clear answers in this film because there are no clear questions; the problems as the filmmaker poses them are too abstract, too much concerned with the artist's own artistry. The result is an emotional and intellectual dissonance between the artist, her work and the audience.

Anna Kokkinos's first feature *Head On*—an adaptation of Christos Tsiolkas's novel *Loaded*, although also heavily relying on "shock tactics" of explicit sex and drug taking (like the novel itself)—while quite flawed, nonetheless had certain endearing qualities, in particular the treatment of the migrant Greek family life in Melbourne and the difficulties facing the gay son. *The Book of Revelation* seems a step backward.



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