

The book of revelation

REVIEWED BY ANTONIA QUADARA

The book of revelation, released September 2006, limited national release, directed by Ana Kokkinos, distributed by Palace Films, classification: R.

The general release of Kokkinos' film *The book of revelation* was accompanied by much media interest. This is because the film took, as its central premise, male sexual assault. The tone of the film is not a gritty, realist examination of sexual violence against men. Instead, Kokkinos generates something of a dreamscape to explore the victimisation of a body usually seen as sexually impervious. In doing so, not only does Kokkinos diverge from the usual filmic scenario of women as (sexualised) victims, it also engages with a topic that is considered taboo for many segments of society—the sexual victimisation of men. Moreover, it examines this through the presentation of women as perpetrators and men as victims of sexual assault—a stark reversal of what we know about sexual violence. Kokkinos said of this reversal:

That fascinates me. By making a man the object of desire and the female gaze, we can explore what it means to be a victim with fresh eyes. Everyone knows the story of women as victims. By reversing roles we can examine bigger issues and make people understand that any one can abuse anyone else. (cited in Usher, 2006)

In response to Kokkinos and the film, several questions arise. First, what are the bigger issues? Second, are these issues in fact the concern of the film? Third, can Kokkinos' final statement hold? The notion that "any one can abuse anyone else" without acknowledging the deeply ingrained gendered, raced, and class dimensions of abuse is problematic. And, possibly, it's the complete suspension and reversal of gendered power relations that generates flaws in the film.

Daniel (played by Tom Long), the lead dancer in a well known dance company is abducted by three masked women and taken to an empty warehouse, where he is held for 12 days by the three women, who never reveal themselves to him, or to the audience. At the end of 12 days, Daniel is deposited in a dusty lot, hooded and trembling, clutching his keys and wallet in his hand. From there, the film depicts two experiences for Daniel: his attempts to piece his life together following the abduction, and the extreme victimisation and sexual assault to which he was subjected. This last is told in graphic flashbacks that puncture his return to "normal" life and which, the film goes on to explore, lead him down an obsessive path to find out who did this to him.

While it offers an aesthetically sophisticated exploration of its themes, in its execution and final effect, the film is significantly flawed. It is relatively easy to accept that Kokkinos' intention was not to explore male sexual assault per se, but to use masculine identity as a vehicle to examine the connections between agency, body and trauma. And this is well done. What the film manages is a powerful exploration of these connections. Throughout the film, Daniel cannot articulate what happened. At the police station, he reports that a "friend" was abducted by three women. Silence. "Poor bastard" one officer eventually replies, laughing. He cannot tell his girlfriend, or the company's choreographer. Instead, the trauma of sexual violence is felt. When Daniel first returns to work following his abduction, he simply stands on the outside of the group, still, shell-shocked. His body is no longer his own. It does not feel rhythm, or its own integrity any more. Daniel is unable to express what happened to him, has no words. The film instead conveys how Daniel's experience immobilises him in his own body.

The decision to make the perpetrators women produces a range of contradictory effects. It places female viewers in the uncomfortable position of sexual aggressors, which makes me wonder what men feel when they see themselves portrayed in this way—a far more normalised scenario. So in a sense it offers an opportunity to think more critically about the connections between gender, sexual desire and sexual violence by placing men as the victims of sexual violence, which the perpetrators carry out because "Daniel is beautiful". This, in turn, opens up a chance to refuse the normalisation of sexual violence and sexual coercions as part of heterosexual relationships.

However, the response of reviewers to this is problematic and very telling about the extent to which sex and violence remain entwined within culture. Reviews describe the film as an “erotically-charged thriller”, “deftly combining” “sex and power”, and intriguing because of the gender reversal: “some women may even feeling a little guilty pleasure at seeing men so powerless”. Statements such as these are disturbing. Not because of the suggestion that women might be sexually violent, but because of the misunderstanding of the nature of sexual violence and traumatisation. Reversing gender roles is not a “solution” or counter to it.

These aren’t really what ultimately undermines the film, however. Daniel’s trauma becomes an obsessive search for the women as a way to reclaim control. But the narrative and the camera tell two different stories about Daniel’s response to sexual assault, which is carried out with an equally graphic and repetitive portrayal of sexual liaisons in the name of finding the perpetrators. It is the equal time devoted to graphic sexual violence and graphic sexual encounters that profoundly contaminates the film, and significantly destroys the more thoughtful elements of the study. Reviews—and Kokkinos herself—offer the film as an exploration of masculinity, victimisation, trauma and the “breaking of a particularly male code of silence” (Thompson 2006), but this is not borne out with sincerity in the film.

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