

A QUESTION OF SILENCE

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A Question Of Silence is a feminist thriller about male violence. It is Marleen Gorris' first film and at this year's London Film Festival it provoked passionate reactions from both women and men. The film opens in London this month and will be shown in Newcastle, Leicester and Dundee in March.

A Question of Silence is an uncompromisingly feminist film about male violence that shows how its many different manifestations permeate the lives of all women.

Three women, a secretary, a housewife and a waitress in a cafe, ritualistically murder the manager of a boutique when he challenges Christine, the housewife, with shoplifting. A successful psychiatrist, Mrs Van den Bos, is employed to find out why these three women, who had never met each other before, should murder a stranger. She is expected to find them insane. The film develops like a thriller, but it is not the motives of the three women that are unravelled. It is the class-based and male-oriented assumptions of the psychiatrist that are revealed, to her and the audience, and challenged by what the women have done.

As the film opens we are shown the psychiatrist and her husband, a lawyer, at home. She is seducing him into having sex with her: they have a marriage that appears to be based on financial, emotional and sexual equality. They are a good-looking, successful couple. Yet as she becomes more involved in the lives of the three women she is investigating, so their relationship shifts to reveal the hidden imbalance of power on which it is built. The psychiatrist's realisation that the three women are not mad forces her into an identification with them, while her husband retreats first into the academicism of his profession, then into the use of sexual force against her and finally into an admission of the primacy of his career over hers. It is not the equality of their relationship that is threatened; that equality is shown to be illusory. It is the power invested in him as a man in a world governed by men for men. Yet it is part of the film's subtlety that the lawyer is not portrayed as a domineering bully, but as an ordinary man, selfish perhaps, but not unusually so.

As Mrs Van den Bos interviews the three

women in the bland, hospital-like security of their prison, snatches of their lives are shown to us. Christine is silent. She retreats into herself and draws pictures of stick people, mother, father and children. Her husband says of her, 'She never had much to say'. Mrs Jongmann, the waitress, talks incessantly and laughs wildly. The noise she makes fills the silence of a solitary life. We are given one glimpse of her family, long since departed. When the psychiatrist asks her has she ever thought of remarrying, she howls with laughter and cries, 'Do me a favour'. Andrea, the secretary, appears the most self-assured and is the most successful in challenging the psychiatrist's assumptions. She knows that she is more intelligent than the men she works for, and knows why she remains powerless. She knows, too, that whatever men may think, other women will not think that she is mad, and she is proved right at the trial by the women who were silent witnesses to the murder.

The silence of women has been transformed from an imposition by men who won't listen to what women have to say into an instrument of power when women refuse to speak.

This is Marleen Gorris' first film, and she has been surprised by the passionate reactions it has provoked. She has found that many men have been bewildered by it, obsessed, like the lawyer, the judge and the police, with why the three women should kill a man who is a stranger to them. What many men seem unable to grasp is that the murder, although extremely violent—and, interestingly, the violence is expressed without one single glimpse of the body, which makes a change from present fashion—works as a metaphor for another kind of violence, the violence that is institutionalised in the power men have over women. *Question of Silence* is no advertisement for murder, not even a call to women to react violently against the violence inflicted on them. It is, instead, a profound investigation of the daily oppression of women by men, across class and circumstance. It is also a very enjoyable film, full of gentle mockery at the increasing bewilderment of the male establishment and generous in its celebration of the solidarity between women. In the final scene in the courtroom, when the irate and baffled prosecutor, red in the face, shouts the question, 'What if three men had killed a woman?', the women can only laugh at the depths of his obtuseness. Their laughter is wild, uninhibited and infectious. It will be interesting to see the response of men in this country when the film is released. There is no doubt that women will appreciate its subversiveness.