Women's Studies Int. Forum, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 349–363, 1993
Printed in the USA.

0277-5395/93 $6.00 + .00

AND THE MIRROR CRACKED
Metaphors of Violence in the Films of Marleen Gorris

ANNEKE SMELIK
Utrecht University, Faculty of Arts, Women's Studies Department, Drift 13,
3512 BR Utrecht, the Netherlands

Synopsis—The feminist films of the Dutch director Marleen Gorris, *A Question of Silence* and *Broken Mirrors*, represent violence by and against women. This article explores the metaphors of violence in these two films. Both films show a world in which women suffer from systematic dispossession and objectification: For women the world is like a prison (*Question*) or like a brothel (*Broken Mirrors*). The powerful political effect of Gorris' films lies in their simultaneous realism and metaphorism. This allows the films to be viewed literally and figuratively at the same time, engaging the audience in both an emotional and a critical viewing process. The analysis of both films shows how they carefully develop metaphors by critically using cinematic strategies. This creates a feminist film rhetoric which specifically addresses the *female* spectator. The complex critical process in both films accounts for much of Gorris' political force.

MOVING METAPHORS

When the Chinese film *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang Yimou) was released in Western Europe in 1991, I was struck by a specific interpretation by (largely male) film critics in the Dutch press. Several of them read the film metaphorically, that is to say they interpreted the story of the oppression of four wives by a Chinese patriarch at the beginning of this century as a metaphor for the present Communist oppression by the Chinese state. Although I do not want to deny that such an interpretation is possible and relevant, I do want to point out that such an exclusive allegorical interpretation actually denies the 'literal,' nonmetaphorical story of women's oppression as it is narrated in the film. In other words, by metaphorising women's experiences, the critics disregard the reality of patriarchal oppression in China.

At about the same time Helen Zahavi's novel *Dirty Weekend* created a stir among literary critics in Europe and the United States (Zahavi, 1991). Remarkably enough, this novel about a woman who decides to put an end to sexual violence and actively goes about killing her male attackers was received in precisely the opposite way to the film *Raise the Red Lantern*. In reviewing *Dirty Weekend*, critics read the novel exclusively as a realist representation and consequently accused Zahavi of a sick mind, misandry, and immorality. As Zahavi points out in an interview with the Dutch press: "Had the man–woman roles been reversed, *Dirty Weekend* would have been a realist book, but as it stands now it is a metaphorical novel. It is the expression of a wishful fantasy. What I have written does not really happen in reality" (*De Volkskrant*, July 10, 1992).

These two opposite understandings, one metaphorical, one realist, both affect the representation of gender relations. In both cases, male critics try to mystify, deny, or undermine the feminist import of the text and reduce its political meaning for women. The possibility of actively intervening in the 'message' of a work of representation suggests that metaphors are a powerful political instrument in the practice of making or watching films and writing or reading literature.

In this article I investigate metaphors of violence and their political effects in fiction films made by the Dutch feminist filmmaker Marleen Gorris.[1] I concentrate on her first two films: *A Question of Silence* (1982), which became an international feminist success and won several awards; and *Broken Mirrors* (1984), which got highly acclaimed and is well known within feminist circles, although it was less of a success than the first,

partly because of problems around the distribution of feminist films (Root, 1986).[2]

Marleen Gorris' films greatly move me; they give me the strong impression of having seen 'the truth.' Each time I view her films I experience again painfully that this is what the world I am living in is like. This experience is painful because the films are quite ruthless in their political views. I see Gorris' films as metaphorical representations of challenging feminist positions: *A Question of Silence* presents the Western world as a prison for women, and *Broken Mirrors* shows this world as a brothel. Both films are situated in a separate world apart from normal society. Within the microcosmos of these enclaves, power relations between the sexes explode into extreme violence. In this way the prison and the brothel become metaphors for a male-dominated society.

These political views are presented in a conventional filmic form that is in traditional narrative and cinematic codes. The films make use of the narrative code of realism, in the sense that they create an illusion of reality. Although they work perfectly in a realist mode, I have been impelled to interpret their meanings metaphorically, which the critics have not unanimously done. I want to suggest that the political effect of Gorris' films lies in their *simultaneous* realist and metaphorical quality, equally strong, consistent, and emphatic. The spectator can read a certain meaning (realism) alongside another one (metaphorical); not afterwards, but during the film. She can watch at once in a literal and figurative way; to neglect or ignore one or the other makes the film less effective. To me this double power of persuasion accounts for the strong effect of 'seeing the truth' in Gorris' films. I proceed to discuss *A Question of Silence* and *Broken Mirrors* in more detail to show how Gorris achieves this effect.

LOOKING AND KILLING

In *A Question of Silence* a female psychiatrist, Janine van den Bos, is appointed to investigate for the court whether three women are accountable for their seemingly random and gratuitous murder of a male boutique owner. The film is constructed as a *Bildungsroman* to which the consciousness-raising of the psychiatrist is central. The murder is narrated in three long flashbacks embedded in the quest of the psychiatrist for the motive behind the murder. According to Mary Gentile, the narrative structure of the film emphasizes "the other plot, Janine's consciousness-raising," so as to make the viewer accept the brutal murder more easily (Gentile, 1985, pp. 155–156). The film connects the psychiatrist's development to the lives of the murderers by means of parallel editing and identical use of the camera. In a closely knit structure *Question* gradually reveals that the women have no motive in the conventional sense, but that the murder is the indirect outcome of years of the women's humiliation and objectification.

In featuring stereotyped characters from different classes, ages, civil status, and race, the film reveals the position of women in a male-dominated culture. The three white murderers are Andrea, a middle-class executive secretary and single; Christine, a lower middle-class housewife and mother; and An, a working-class waitress in a snackbar and divorced. Janine, the psychiatrist, is white, upper-class and married without children. In the shop, four other women silently witness the murder: a white older woman, two young white women, and a middle-aged black woman. Although both of Gorris' films show a black woman, their roles are too marginal to highlight the issue of racism.

From the narrative and visual perspective of the three murderers, it becomes clear that in each case they have no right to exist outside their functions for men and therefore cannot develop their own identity. Because the point of view lies consistently with the female characters in *Question*, the female spectator is encouraged to identify with them. Thus they acquire a subjectivity for the spectator which is denied to them within the narrative of the film time and again. *Question* exhibits the drama of women who experience themselves as subjects in a society which does not allow for female subjectivity. By creating cinematic parallels between the women's homes and their rooms in prison, the film shows that in fact very little changes for the women when they are in prison, thus suggesting that in their 'normal' lives they were already imprisoned. The women and, through identification, the female spectator too, find themselves in the peculiar situation of "woman,"

in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, "a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—[who] nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other" (1972, p. 20). They cannot take up the position of subject because they are subjected.

Question represents this feminist insight in metaphors of silence. On several occasions it is made clear that women's speech is not heard, hence they are enveloped in silence. Although 'greatly appreciated' by her boss, the secretary Andrea is nevertheless ignored when she makes a proposal at a business conference, whereas the same plan is met with approval when proposed by a man. When Andrea withdraws into herself and absentmindedly stirs her coffee with a spoon, the sound of the spoon catches the attention of the men, and the man sitting next to her grabs her hand so as to stop the 'noise.' The waitress An talks and laughs all the time, but nobody listens to her. Her garrulity seems to be used like a weapon against the sexist abuse which she gets from her clients in the coffee shop, mainly about her obese figure. We will see later how even the psychiatrist's report is not taken seriously in the court. Whether garrulous like An, intelligent like Andrea, or professional like Janine, within the male world their voices are not heard. Women are surrounded by an icy silence. Therefore, Christine has given up speaking altogether; she is literally overcome by silence. (The Dutch title of the film is 'The Silence of Christine M.') Yet it is Christine who 'speaks' most directly about the motive for the murder. When the psychiatrist asks her why the women have killed the man, Christine draws simple figures on a white sheet: a man, a woman and a child enclosed in a house, obsessively repeating the drawing of the same figures over and over again.

Many male critics and spectators have been outraged by the brutal murder of a man by three women (see Root, 1986); even one feminist critic did not find it "so easy to step around the violent act" (Koenig Quart, 1988, p. 158). It seems to me that these critics and spectators fall into the same trap as in the example given above of the reception of the novel *Dirty Weekend*; they view *Question* on an exclusively realistic level. The representation of the lives of the three murderers and the psychiatrist is certainly very realistic with a wealth of banal detail, but the strong stereotypes of the female characters and the virtual lack of individuation of the male characters directs the film away from realism into social drama. This makes the film into a sustained critique of patriarchal society, rather than an attack on individual men. In the following analysis of the film, I try to explain why I think that the violence of the women is in fact a comment on patriarchal violence.

The flashbacks of the murder are filmed in cinematic techniques that differ greatly from the conventional realist style of the rest of the film, and the murder can therefore be seen as a metaphor rather than as a 'real act.' In the cinematic style of the murder scenes, the sound track is lowered, there is little dialogue, and special film music is added to create an effect of both alienation and suspense. Short takes are speedily edited, and the scene is filmed by a hand-held camera giving the images a wavering quality. Camera and editing suggest a deep bond between the women: They look at each other silently, from one to the other, back and forth, and without speaking repeat each other's murderous actions. As soon as the male victim has fallen to the ground, he no longer comes into focus. The spectator never sees blood, or the body, and never hears the man scream. The camera instead focuses on and participates in the actions of the women, which are very slow, deliberate, and without any trace of emotion or frenzy. Together with the camera, the women perform a choreography, attentively, solemnly, and with dedication (Fig. 1).

The solidarity between the women is extended to the four other women who are present in the shop, the older, the black and the two young women; witnesses who, in their gravity, resemble the choir in a Greek tragedy. They participate in the extensive eye contact between the women and without interfering watch silently . . . just like the audience of the film. In this way, the female spectator is implicated in the solidarity between the women. The spectator is drawn into the scene of the murder in two ways: by identifying with the camera which is physically present, moving around like a character; and by identifying *as a woman* with the female characters through the repeated and explicit close-ups of the eye contact between

Fig. 1. The murder.

the women. Being part of the scene, and watching silently, the spectator too becomes responsible for the murder. This particular viewing position for the audience and the highly stylized way of filming the scene make the murder not realistic, but ritualistic.

Many feminist film critics have pointed to this ritualistic aspect of *Question*. For Linda Williams the "ritual mutilation and murder of a male scapegoat" (1988, p. 108) points to the "wild zone" of women's experience (p. 107). For Andrea Weiss this woman-centered ideology of the film opens up a lesbian reading: "lesbianism [. . .] is positioned within a female continuum which privileges relationships between women over those with men" (1992, p. 119). For Lucy Fischer the murder is clearly not a real life event, but both a "silent ceremonial performance" (1989, p. 293) and a "highly theatrical modernist drama" (p. 295) that purposefully puts the audience in a position of guilt. I would prefer the notion of 'engagement' to that of 'guilt.' It is Mary Gentile who emphasizes the political engagement that *Question* encourages in its viewers. She points out that the filmmaker's use of standard movie techniques throughout the film, while rejecting these cinematic conventions for the murder scene, engages the audience both emotionally and critically: " . . . Gorris is trying to strike an uneasy balance. She wants our attention, our investment in her narrative, but she also wants us conscious, intellectually aware" (Gentile, 1985, p. 162). In other words, by turning the representation of the murder into a metaphor in an otherwise realist narrative, *Question* encourages the dual perspective of watching at the same time realistically *and* metaphorically.

This ritualistic aspect is continued after the murder. For the murderers, the murder is an act of resistance which seeks to break through the deafening silence that surrounds them. The ritual act enables them to temporarily cancel out their state of "not being," of non-subjectivity. Although the film does not present the act of violence itself as a liberation, after the murder each woman performs a ritual act. They all go their own way without speaking to each other, and each of them does something quite out of the ordinary which she clearly experiences as liberating and pleasurable. In a fairground, Christine rides the carousel, flying through the air with her child; An prepares herself a delicious meal serving it on a beautifully set table; and Andrea picks up a man from the street whom she charges extravagantly for having sex with her. During sexual intercourse, she sits on the naked man with most of her clothes on and with cool and detached irony, she humiliates

him while clearly enjoying being totally in control. Again, these events function as metaphors which show that the murder enables the women to momentarily break through all the oppressive patterns of their lives.

LOOKING AND LAUGHING

Another strong metaphor is evoked in *Question* towards the end of the film. To the male order, metaphorically represented by the judicial system, the violent and seemingly random murder of a man by three women constitutes a violation of the taboo on female violence. For them, the easiest way out is to condemn the women as 'insane,' but the psychiatrist Janine van den Bos declares the women to be quite sane. This means the male judges have to actually think about the significance of the act, which is something they cannot or will not do. Hence, the murder is not acknowledged as 'sexual' violence, in that the legal order denies the importance of gender in the murder case. In his eagerness to ignore the issue of gender, the prosecutor maintains absurdly that a reversal of the case, that is, three men murdering a female boutique owner, would have made no difference at all.

The legal order proves itself to be unable to acknowledge the importance and implications of sexual difference; it denies the significant fact that in this case *women* have killed a *man*. In not recognizing the murder as 'sexual' violence, the judicial order cannot understand the motive. The narrative of the film has shown in meaningful detail the paramount importance of the paradox that patriarchy is based on and constitutes the category of gender, while it denies at the same time the sexual difference of women. This denial comes about by taking the male gender as the norm, and the female as the deviation, or in other words by giving men subjectivity, while women remain objects. Because of its inability to accept sexual difference as a meaningful category, the legal discourse becomes violent: the prosecutor breaks off the dialogue, interrupts the speaker, refuses to listen; in short, he does not take women seriously and reduces them to silence. By doing so he represents the violence of a culture which translates indifference into incomprehension.

An reacts to this hostile incomprehension with laughter, setting in motion a wave of laughter among the women in the courtroom and also among the female spectators in the audience. The laughter occurs in one of the final scenes of the film which repeats the same ritualistic procedure as the scene of the murder. Looking at each other, the women begin to laugh one by one: the three murder-

Fig. 2. The murderers laughing.

ers, the four female witnesses (who are known only to the spectators, not to the male characters in the film) and the psychiatrist. The women laugh because they understand what is happening in the courtroom; they are aware of their predicament and the total lack of understanding of their environment. It is a liberating laugh which bonds the women together. With their laughter the women shut out those who do not share their insight and understanding. Therefore, the laughter is placed outside the order of the dominant discourse; after all, speech is no longer possible. The laughter breaks through the silence that has surrounded the women for so long. It also thwarts all male authority, acknowledging the court case as the farce it had been from the start. The murderers are ordered to leave the courtroom and, still laughing, they go down the stairs in the middle of the courtroom, surrounded by the women who witnessed the murder. This ritualistic scene-ending evokes the Greek myth of the Erinyes: After their revenge the women are sent back into the underworld, watched by the chorus of laughing witnesses (See also Williams, 1988). The final judgement is never spoken by the male court; the laughter of the female chorus instead says it all (Figs. 2, 3).

I want to draw out the empowering effects of the women's laughter for the audience. As in the ritualistic scene of the murder, the spectator is inevitably drawn into the scene of laughter. Again, camera and editing focus exclusively on the female characters. The female spectators, in identifying with them, having understood the pain of their subjection and hence their motive for the murder, become responsible for what is happening. The audience is made a witness to the scene of the final judgement. With the murder they could only watch, in horror presumably; with the scene in the courtroom they can actually participate, joining in with the laughter of the female characters. As such, the laughter has the liberating effect of a catharsis. At the end of *Question* the audience can participate in a cathartic ritual—that is to say, that part of the audience which understands that the murder is a metaphor for the smothered anger and resistance of women against their inferior position in society. Those who do not understand this metaphor but who see the murder realistically worry about its criminal nature and thereby are excluded from the subversive laughter, just like the male characters in the film.

Question has become quite famous for its empowering effect on the women in the audience as they burst out laughing at the end of the film; the laughter in *Question* is therefore truly "revolutionary," as Lucy Fischer writes

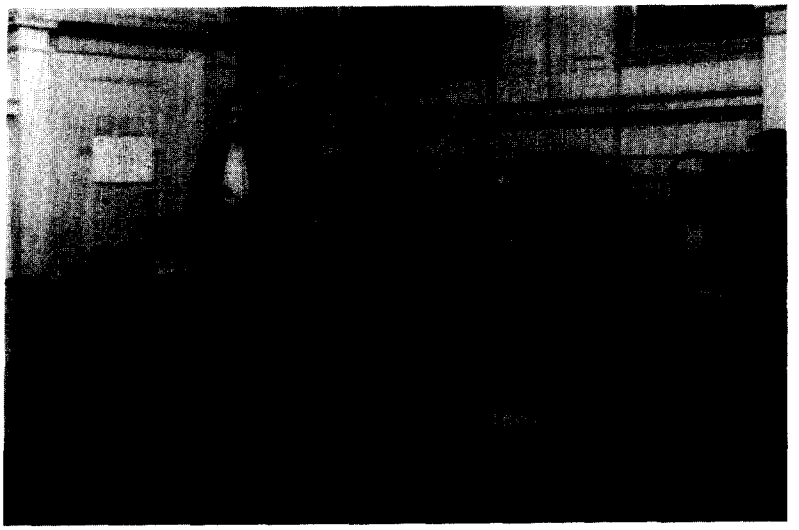

Fig. 3. The psychiatrist in the courtroom.

(1989, p. 298). And B. Ruby Rich recalls women's laughter at a public interview with Marleen Gorris after a screening of the film: "At the New Directors preview in New York, the audience recapitulated the film's own ending: Man after man rose to confront Gorris with hostile or garbled questions, only to encounter laughter from most women in the audience" (quoted in Fischer, 1989, p. 300).

It is only because the murder represents a female fantasy of revenge (as in the novel *Dirty Weekend* by Zahavi) that laughter is possible at the end of the film: Nobody would laugh at a real murder. One can laugh a liberating laugh at a metaphor which is a rich and complex representation of the violent relations between men and women. The political force of the cinematic metaphors in *A Question of Silence*, then, lies in its effect upon the audience, that is in the subversive laughter through which the female spectator engages with the women's resistance. In the end, laughter is the real 'weapon' against male indifference and power (Fig. 4).

PARALLEL PERSPECTIVES

Broken Mirrors recounts two parallel narratives which on the surface seem unrelated: the story of prostitutes in a brothel, filmed as a realist drama, and the story of a housewife who falls victim to a serial killer, filmed as a thriller. In both narratives the female characters are brutally objectified: in the brothel women are humiliated and abused; and the serial killer chains his female victims in a garage and slowly starves them to death, taking polaroid snapshots of them at all the stages of their dying.

Because there is no connection whatsoever between the two narratives until the very end, the film encourages a metaphorical comparison. The spectator has to come to the conclusion that these two separate narratives really tell the same story; that the two stories each give a version of the objectification of women as woman. By embedding the story of the serial killer within the story of the brothel, and vice versa, the two narratives become each other's metaphor: to objectify women equals prostitution equals murder. I argue that just as in *A Question of Silence*, the powerful political impact of the film derives from the simultaneous realist and metaphorical representations. In the following analysis I explore the cinematic strategies that Gorris uses so as to make her metaphors both meaningful and moving.

Broken Mirrors represents women's oppression as the systematic deprivation of their subjectivity. The film radically opposes two value systems: on the one hand the dominant order in which women function as objects and on the other hand the world

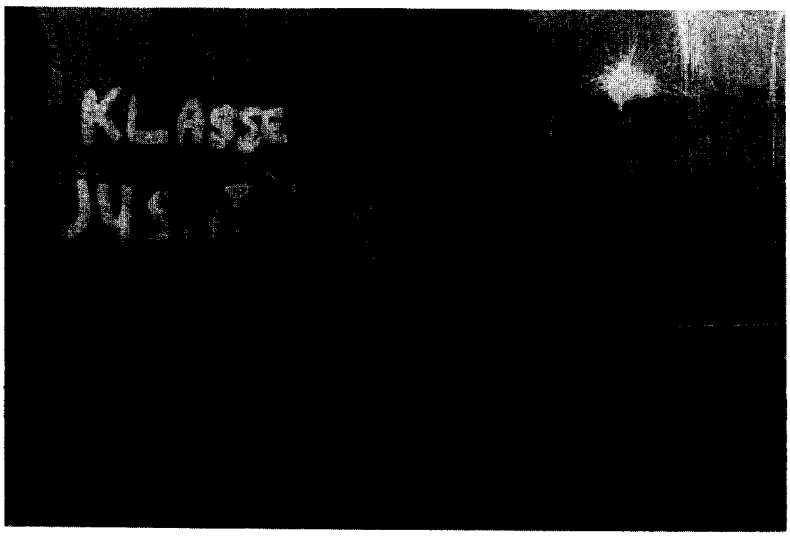

Fig. 4. The psychiatrist looking at the four witnesses outside the courtroom.

of women in which they can be subjects. Through careful use of cinematic strategies, the film foregrounds and values the experiences of women and exposes the symbolic system in all its violence. Again the point of view lies emphatically with the female characters, but in *Broken Mirrors* the cinematic perspective is much more complex and radical than in *Question*. The specifically female perspective is filmed very differently in the two stories of the film and has a quite different impact on the spectator.

Let me first look at a scene from the brothel. In the beginning of the film, the prostitutes gather together in the brothel to start their working day. The women represent different stereotypes of prostitutes: Tessa, a black woman financially supporting her four children in Surinam; (the other prostitutes are white) Dora, an artist; Linda, a depressed young girl; Francine, a "hard bitch"; Irma, an uneducated single mother; Jacky, a snobbish English cocaine addict; and Ellen, the elderly madame (Diane, the newcomer who needs the money for her addicted husband, will arrive later). They sit in a sort of drawing room, when the pimp/manager comes in and greets them curtly. Dora makes an obscene gesture as he closes the door of his office, which makes the women laugh. Her gesture starts off a short but significant scene of about a minute.

A rather lovely, musical tune is added to the sound track while other sounds (what little dialogue there is) are muted. Then the manually operated camera starts moving on its own in the cramped drawing room, in an almost dancelike choreography. In an extended take, the camera moves freely through the room and casually films each of the women as they are applying make-up, drinking coffee, cleaning up, or dancing. The camera does not attach itself to the look of any one of the characters but remains independent, filming the female bodies with intimacy without ever rendering them erotically. The mood is one of harmony: The women take care of each other, joke with each other, or sit quietly by themselves. Then the door bell announces the first customer. The music stops, the camera comes to a standstill and the women remain motionless for just a second before moving into action. The scene ends with a cut to the figure of the waiting customer in front of the glass door.

In this scene the cinematic strategies represent the women three-dimensionally by filming them in time (there is only one cut in the extended take) and in space (the frame of the long shot is quite large in the small and

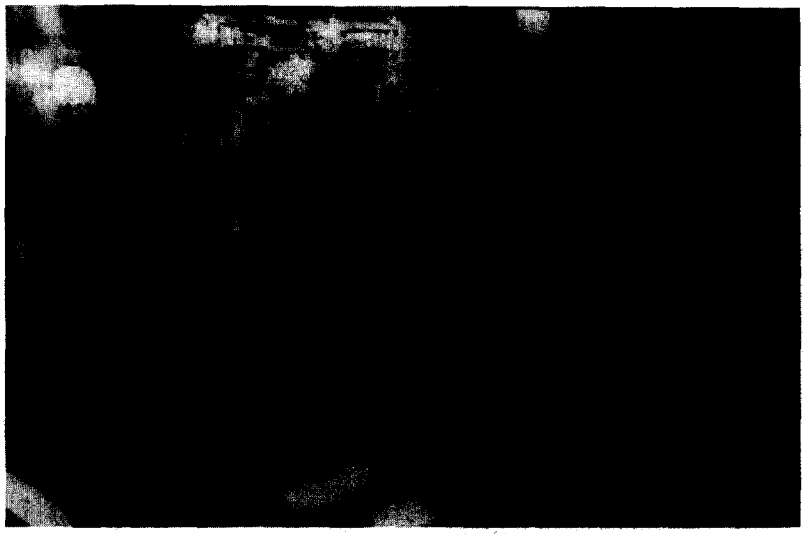

Fig. 5. On the right, the figure of a male customer choosing one of the women. In the foreground, Diane.

crowded room). In this way the film gives the women subjectivity both narratively and visually. Because of the rather peculiar camera movements in this short scene, the spectator becomes part of the company of women. The camera acts like an autonomous character, and the spectator, in taking the place of the eye of the camera, experiences moving around in the room together with the women. The spectator is here specifically addressed as *female*. Teresa de Lauretis has argued that a woman's film addresses the *female* spectator, regardless of the gender of the viewers, when the film "defines all points of identification (with character, image, camera) as female, feminine, or feminist." (1987, p. 133) This is certainly the case in this short scene, which is quite representative of the whole film (Fig. 5).

The privileged position of triple identification—with the female characters, with the independent camera's look, and with the three-dimensional image—is abruptly broken off by the door bell. Therefore, the customer disturbs intimacy not only for the prostitutes but also for the spectator. In the next scene the madame introduces the 'girls' one by one to the customer (and to the spectator). In an edited series of 'portraits,' each woman is filmed in the same frame and medium shot. The montage separates the women from each other and from the space they occupy, which turns them into a one-dimensional picture, much like a pin-up, an object that is exposed for sale to the man's gaze. The film does so without ever fragmenting or eroticizing the female body.

The spectator does not share the point of view of the male customer because of the effect of the preceding sequence. The scene thus exposes the effects of the male gaze upon women. What is the effect of this cinematic perspective? At the moment that a female character makes the transition from a subject to an object position, the spectator makes the transition from a viewing position of empathy and identification to one of critical distance. This procedure returns time and again throughout the film. *Broken Mirrors* thus engages the viewer emotionally with the women as subjects and then makes the spectator experience almost physically the pain of woman's continuous objectification: the pain when she is deprived of her voice, her body, her desires, her freedom. Throughout *Broken Mirrors*, prostitution is only shown from the women's point of view. By blocking the way to identification with any of the many anonymous men in the film and by refusing any visual or erotic pleasure, the spectator is invited to reflect critically on women's objectification. The alternating positions of identification and distance involve the spec-

Fig. 6. Dora and Diane have become intimate friends; they share ironic jokes about the male customers.

tator in a viewing process that is sometimes emotional and sometimes critical (Fig. 6).

LETHAL LOOKS

The thriller story in *Broken Mirrors* seems an illustration of feminist film theory, in that it exposes and criticizes the violent, even sadistic, aspects of the male gaze, as Laura Mulvey (1975/1989) and E. Ann Kaplan (1983) have theorized it.

The technical quality of the color in the thriller story is faint, off-grey, making the world of the murderer and the victim into a quite grim place. The bleak colour scheme indicates that the 'black-and-white' story is metaphorical in its extremity. The murderer is introduced by the classical devices of creating suspense: When he buries and photographs the dead body of a woman, the camera focusses on his hands, his gloves, and his feet, while his face remains outside the frame. The identity of the killer remains unknown by the device of keeping his face literally in the dark, which is maintained throughout the film until the very end when his identity is revealed. Consequently, the camera can never be technically attached to the look of the murderer, which means that the spectator can never see through his eyes (the classic device for identification in film). Therefore, the camera—at a distance—does not identify with but can actually expose the violence of his gaze. When the murderer leaves his office to look for a new victim, the camera follows him from a great distance, constantly on the move tracking him down from behind all sorts of obstacles, never showing his face, but just this dark figure going about methodically looking for another housewife to kill. Again, this is high suspense (and the film music certainly adds to his effect), but the movements of the camera can also be seen metaphorically: The voyeuristic movements of the camera repeat the voyeuristic actions of the killer. The spectator watches a male voyeur without, however, identifying with his look and can therefore take enough distance to be critical.

Because the camera films the man without ever presenting his point of view, the female character can never be seen through his eyes. The film then does not present her voyeuristically to the spectator, but instead presents her point of view in the thriller story. Her perspective is the same as the spectator's: she does not understand what's happening and asks aloud the question that the female spectator is worrying about all along: 'why?' (Fig. 7).

Although for the spectator the murderer is quite literally deprived of vision because his

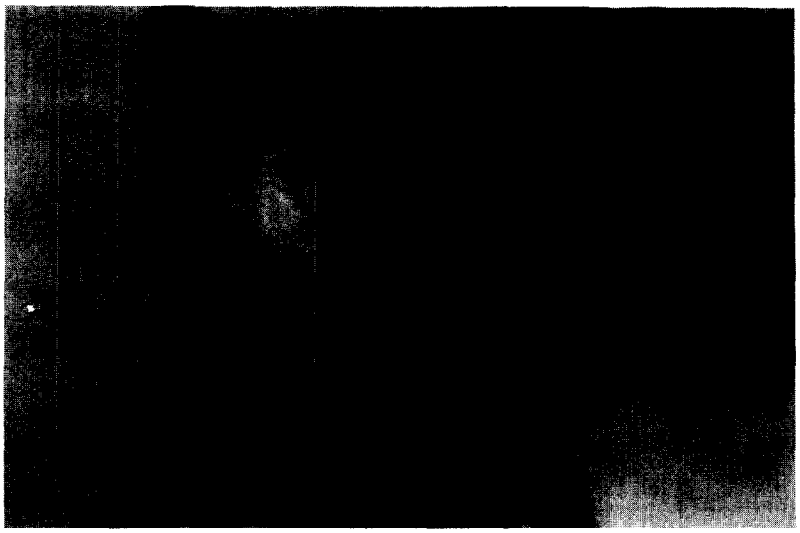

Fig. 7. The (nameless) victim of the serial killer chained to a bed.

face is never shown, he does avail himself of a voyeuristic gaze in the form of a polaroid camera that he uses to photograph his victims. All the elements from feminist analyses of the male gaze can be found in this substitute: A man directs his gaze at a female body; it gives him pleasure to look; and his gaze objectifies, petrifies even, the woman. *Broken Mirrors* shows that looking is not a simple innocent act, because it takes place within a given pattern of dominance and submission. As Kaplan (1983) pointed out, men have the power to act on their gaze. Having captured his victim, the murderer does not touch the woman, nor does he batter or rape her. Instead, he chains her to a bed in a garage and photographs her in each stage of her despair, fear, filth, and starvation. He pins the pictures on the wall, adding them to the pictures of his previous three victims whom he photographed from the beginning of their captivity until their deaths (Fig. 8).

In this context, the act of taking pictures becomes quite threatening; photography metaphorically takes the place of violent sexual abuse. Laura Mulvey (1975/1989) has pointed to the associations of voyeurism with sadism: " . . . voyeurism . . . has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt . . . asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness." (pp. 21, 22) The thriller story in *Broken Mirrors* follows Mulvey's description of how sadism fits in with narrative:

> Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end. (Mulvey, 1975/1989, p. 22)

The end here is the death of the woman; in *Broken Mirrors* the male look is represented as lethal (Fig. 8).

Broken Mirrors never directly shows the man's pleasure in watching the submission and powerlessness of his victim; instead it focusses on the suffering of the woman. Therefore, the spectator does not understand, as she would in a classic Hollywood film, what exactly gives the man pleasure or what makes the woman guilty. For Mulvey it is fear of castration, the fear that the sight of the 'castrated' woman instills in him, which motivates male sadism. In *Broken Mirrors* this is suggested in the metaphor of the camera as phallus; the murderer is 'castrated' in that he does not perform any sexual act other than the surrogate of photographing the female body; a gesture that reminds very much of the impotent serial killer in the film *Peeping*

Fig. 8. The murderer leaving his victim to loneliness, darkness, and starvation. On the wall, the pictures he takes of his female victims.

Tom (Michael Powell, 1960). We need little imagination to see taking pictures as the corresponding act of copulation: The film camera always lingers on in close-up when the killer opens his coat – for a moment the spectator does not know whether to expect a gun or the camera – and takes out the camera, focusses on the woman, presses; a bulb flashes, and the photo slides out of the camera. The camera as phallus replaces the sexual act with the physical penis; that is why the woman is not abused or raped. She is metaphorically raped when being photographed. As Susan Sontag writes:

> Still, there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time. (Sontag, 1979, pp. 14–15)

Broken Mirrors represents the voyeuristic gaze at its most extreme. The female victim comes to the conclusion that: "You hate me so intensely, so terribly; you enjoy seeing me beg, seeing me beg for mercy." She refuses to beg any longer and remains silent; at the moment when she achieves this insight the color comes back into the image.

As in *A Question of Silence*, silence is a female form of resistance when all hope is lost. It is only then that the murderer speaks, begging her to speak, calling her a whore. But the woman does not react anymore; she knows it is the male gaze and nothing else that sees her as a whore. The spectator learns this also from the parallel story of the brothel. Men can possess the women they look at, because they have the power and the money to act upon their gaze. The murderer possesses the female victim in depriving her of her freedom and eventually of her life; the male clients in the brothel temporarily possess the prostitutes by paying for having sex with them. In the thriller story the desiring gaze leads to violence and murder; in the brothel story it leads to contempt, humiliation, and also, violence (Linda commits suicide, and near the end of the film Irma gets assaulted and stabbed).

Voyeuristic pleasure is denied to the male spectator, because *Broken Mirrors* carefully avoids any erotization of the female body. At the same time, empathy or identification with any male character is made impossible, because nowhere in the film can they be recognized as individuals. Thus, while the film thematizes and problematizes the male gaze, it cleverly avoids male pleasure through its use of cinematic strategies of distantiation. Instead the film shows the pain and suffering caused by the male objectifying gaze. In fact, *Broken Mirrors* answers de Lauretis' question: "how did Medusa feel seeing herself in Perseus' mirror just before being slain?" (1984, p. 109).

AND THE MIRROR CRACKED

In this last section I want to show how the feminist politics of *Broken Mirrors* is articulated in the metaphorical meaning of the end of the film – when the mirror cracks.

When watching the final dramatic sequence of *Broken Mirrors*, the spectator has already been exposed to quite a lot of suffering and violence: Linda's suicide, continuous humiliation of the prostitutes in the brothel with its 'climax' in the long night of a fraternity's party, the death of the female victim of the murderer, and finally the assault on Irma in the brothel. To understand the impact of the last scene it is important to realise that the spectator feels quite emotional given the suspense, the accumulation of violence, the identification with the female characters, and the intellectual understanding of women's social position in patriarchy.

In the course of the film, the main characters, Dora and Diane, establish a strong friendship with each other. In the final scene they return to the brothel from the hospital where they have taken the badly injured Irma, with the help of a regular and friendly customer (one of the very few men in the film whom the spectator actually recognizes). While all the women stand or sit dejectedly in the drawing room, the man indicates without words that he wants to have sex. The women are outraged and try to reason him into going away, but he stands there silently waiting. Through close-ups of all the female charac-

ters, the spectator experiences their humiliation and powerlessness. Then the alto aria from Hayden's *Stabat Mater* begins to play softly on the sound track, getting progressively louder while the sound of the scene is muted. This music accompanies the images until the very end of the film, channeling the emotions of the spectator into an elegiac mood.

A close-up of the hands of the man is then shown, removing his gloves, opening his coat and fumbling for something. For just a second the spectator thinks he is reaching for a gun, but he takes out his wallet and pulls out more and more money. This shot is formally exactly the same as the shots of the murderer taking out his polaroid camera. Thus the wallet, the money, is structurally represented as being similar to the camera; both are symbolically linked to a gun and all these objects metaphorically represent the phallus. But more importantly, the spectator now understands that this man, the only friendly customer in the brothel, is the same as the serial killer from the thriller story.

With this one short shot the film addresses the spectator directly, revealing the murderer's identity and bringing the two parallel but separate narratives finally together. This puts the spectator into a different viewing position. She knows more than the female characters in the film, who obviously know nothing about the thriller story and hence do not know this man is a killer. Therefore, the spectator is placed in a more distant and critical position. Because the narratives assign a metaphorical meaning to each other, the spectator interprets the closing scene from a symbolical perspective.

When the man flatly refuses to leave and the women get furious, Diane picks up a small gun at the same moment as the female voice starts singing the aria on the soundtrack. She points the gun at him, deliberately turning it so as to just miss him when she shoots. The man is touched by breaking glass and looks stunned at the few drops of blood on his face. Then he runs away. For the spectator, Diane's act acquires another meaning than just chasing away a man who humiliates the prostitutes; for the audience her gesture is an act of justice. Diane's shooting means a metaphoric trial and execution for the murders the man has committed and, metaphorically at one more remove, for sexual violence in general (Fig. 9).

At the moment when the mystery is finally revealed—the identity of the murderer—the spectator is already convinced by the structure of the film that the identity of the man is completely beside the point. In accepting the reflexive relationship between the two narratives, the spectator understands both of them as a metaphorical expression of the violent

Fig. 9. Diane shooting the mirror (Dora in background).

Fig. 10. Diane shooting the mirror.

power relations between the sexes. The fetters with which the serial killer ties his female victims are an extreme metaphor of the bondage that keeps women chained in a sexist society. Because the treatment of the prostitutes in the brothel can in the same way be seen as an extreme metaphorization of the sexual objectification and possession of women, the serial killer is clearly not an isolated psychopath but rather one step down on the scale of sexual violence against women.

When Diane then slowly and solemnly shoots all the mirrors in the drawing room, her gestures take on a symbolic meaning (Fig. 10). It is a ritualistic act of resistance against the male gaze, against cultural representations of feminity, against the objectifying look that make women into whores, against the distorted self-images of women—all of which she shoots to pieces in the symbol of the mirror. Diane's symbolic act empowers her to leave the brothel—for good—together with her friend Dora. The film ends with the same scene as it started: 'the morning after' a cleaning woman clears up the bloody mess in the brothel, accompanied by a suppliant female voice singing the *Stabat Mater*.

In *A Question of Silence* and *Broken Mirrors*, Marleen Gorris brings about an ingenious play between realism and metaphorism. In both films she has succeeded in finding images that make abstract feminist ideas about women's position in patriarchal society concrete. In fact, one could say she has literalized metaphors. The interplay between realism and metaphorism draws the spectator into a viewing process that is at once literal and figural, putting her in a simultaneous emotional and intellectual position. This complex and critical process accounts for much of Gorris' political force.

ENDNOTES

1. The Dutch feminist filmmaker Marleen Gorris (1948) wrote and directed three films: *De Stilte Rond Christine M.* (*A Question of Silence*, 1982), *Gebroken Spiegels* (*Broken Mirrors*, 1984), and *The Last Island* (1990). The scripts of these three films have been published in: Els Launspach (red.) *Het Nederlands Scenario* (3) Amsterdam: International Theatre & Film Books, 1990. Gorris also directed the television drama *De geest van gras* (1983). In 1993 she directed a short Dutch television series in five episodes: Verhalen van de Straat.

2. Her third film, *The Last Island* (1990), an international production, was not well received and consequently drew little critical attention. What makes this film about the end of the world problematic is its overemphasis on the metaphorical dimension, to the detriment of a realistic approach.

REFERENCES

De Beauvoir, Simone. (1972, 1949). *The second sex* (Translated and edited by H. M. Parshley). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Fischer, Lucy. (1989). 'A question of silence': Ritual in transfigured time. In *Shot/countershot: Film tradition and women's cinema* (pp. 282–300). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gentile, Mary C. (1985). Feminist or tendentious? Marleen Gorris' *A question of silence*. In *Film feminisms: Theory and practice* (pp. 153–165). Westport & London: Greenwood Press; reprinted in Patricia Erens (Ed.). (1990). *Issues in feminist film criticism* (pp. 395–404). Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Kaplan, E. Ann. (1983). *Women & film. Both sides of the camera*. New York and London: Methuen.

Koenig Quart, Barbara. (1988). *Women directors: The emergence of a new cinema*. New York: Praeger.

Lauretis, Teresa de. (1984). *Alice doesn't: Feminism. Semiotics. Cinema*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Lauretis, Teresa de. (1987). *Technologies of gender: Essays on theory, film, and fiction*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Mulvey, Laura. (1989). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. Reprinted in *Visual and other pleasures* (pp. 14–26). London: Macmillan. (Original work published 1975)

Root, Jane. (1986). Distributing 'A Question of Silence': A cautionary tale. In Charlotte Brunsdon (Ed.), *Films for women* (pp. 213–223). London: British Film Institute Publishing.

Sontag, Susan. (1979, 1973). *On photography*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Weiss, Andrea. (1992). *Vampires and violets: Lesbians in the cinema*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Williams, Linda. (1988). A Jury of their peers: Marlene Gorris's *A question of silence*. In E. Ann Kaplan (Ed.), *Postmodernism and its discontents* (pp. 107–115). London & New York: Verso.

Zahavi, Helen. (1991). *Dirty weekend*. London: Macmillan.