

CULT
EPICS

Marleen Gorris

TRILOGY

Marleen Gorris TRILOGY

A QUESTION
OF SILENCE

BROKEN
MIRRORS

THE LAST
ISLAND



CE212

CULT
EPICS

CULT
EPICS

Marleen Gorris

TRIOLOGY



“Gorris’ talent is to mobilize ideas to grip an audience, with characters that fill us with compassion and respect...”

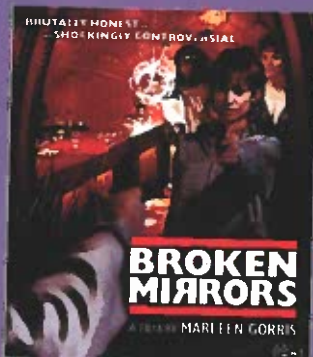
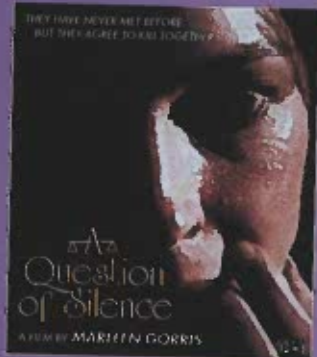
— THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

Cult Epics presents the **Marleen Gorris Trilogy**, three controversial and thought-provoking films, from the director of the Oscar-winning film **Antonio's Line**.

A Question of Silence Three women, strangers with no premeditated thoughts, kill a male shopkeeper in the middle of the day. A female psychiatrist is assigned to the case to find out why.

Broken Mirrors Situated in an Amsterdam brothel, two whores rebel against their lot in life. Meanwhile one of their customers, a serial killer, kidnaps a housewife.

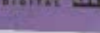
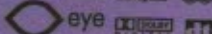
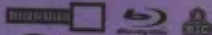
The Last Island Five men and two women, who survive an airplane crash, discover that they may be the only survivors of a world disaster. The question arises: whether the human race can survive or does *man* kind destroy itself.



SPECIAL FEATURES

- New HD Transfers (from original 35mm film elements) and Restoration
- Audio Commentaries by Patricia Pisters and Peter Verstraten
- Vintage Polygon Journal Newsreel
- Behind-the-Scenes
- Poster & Photo Galleries
- Trailers
- First Pressing includes 20-page Illustrated Booklet with Essay – *Mirrors, Murders & Metaphors in the Films of Marleen Gorris* by Anneke Smelik

NETHERLANDS	1982 / 1984 / 1990	APPROX. 308 MINS	DUTCH & ENGLISH LANGUAGES W/ OPTIONAL ENGLISH SUBTITLES	LPCM 2.0 MONOSTEREO DTS-HD MA 2.0 MONOSTEREO	ASPECT RATIO 1.66:1 / 1.78:1	COLOR
-------------	--------------------	------------------	--	---	------------------------------	-------



www.cultepics.com

A Cult Epics Release CE212
© 2023 Cult Epics. All Rights Reserved.
Printed in the USA. Distributed in the USA & Canada.

CULT
EPICS

Marleen Gorris TRIOLOGY

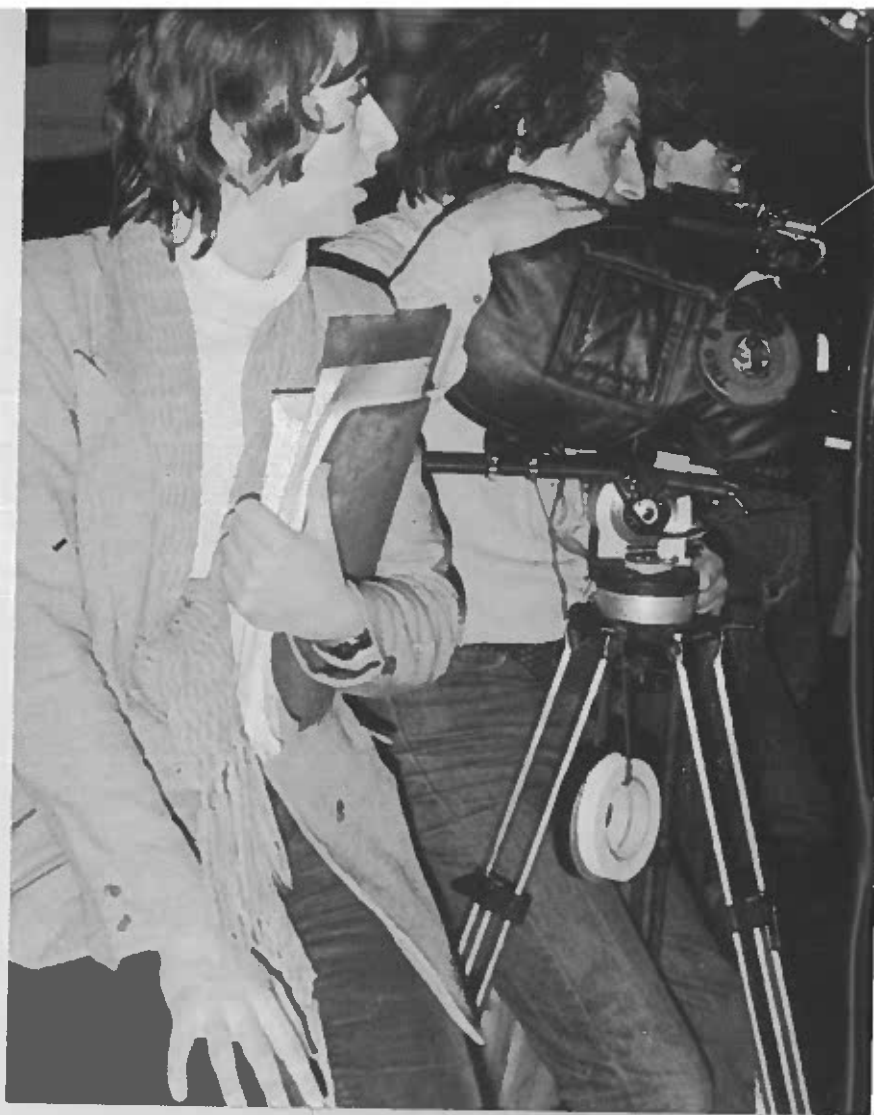


CE212

Mirrors, Murders & Metaphors

IN THE FILMS OF MARLEEN GORRIS

WRITTEN BY Anneke Smelik



Mirrors, murders and metaphors in the films of Marleen Gorris

Anneke Smelk

Film director Marleen Gorris

The Dutch film director Marleen Gorris is probably best known for her Oscar-winning film *Antonia's Line* (1995), an epic narrative centered on the wise, and wisecracking, matriarch Antonia, and her female descendants living in the Dutch countryside (filmed in the north of France). The film can be considered like a fairy tale, tracing the cycle of birth, life and death across four generations of women. As the female voice-over says: "time only begets itself". Featuring slightly surreal scenes, the playful film explores with great humor the sexuality of an older woman (Antonia) as well as of her lesbian daughter (Danielle), who willfully gets pregnant and becomes a single mother long before that was socially acceptable. While not eschewing serious issues such as sexual violence, the film explores an almost utopian vision of a female-centered community, celebrating women breaking free from the fetters of patriarchy society.

Antonia's Line celebratory story was a distinct break with a preceding trilogy of feature films about violence in a male-dominated society. It is now almost four decades ago that Marleen Gorris accomplished two successful Dutch films, *A Question of Silence* (1982) which became an international feminist hit winning enthusiastic women's audiences and several awards; and *Broken Mirrors* (1984) which got much critical acclaim and was well-known within feminist circles. Then she made an international film, *The Last Island* (1990), which was less well received and drew less critical attention. Marleen Gorris not only directed her first four films, as well as the Dutch television series *Verhalen van de straat* (1993) ['Stories from the street'], but also wrote the scripts herself. After the success of *Antonia's Line* winning an Academy Award for best foreign language feature in 1996, however, Gorris no longer wrote the scripts for her own films, but directed stories by others, such as *Mrs Dalloway* (1997), *The Luzhin Defence* (2000), *Carolina* (2003) and her last film *Within the Whirlwind* (2009). In 2017 she announced she would stop making films altogether.

Gendered violence

Marleen Gorris considers her first three films as a trilogy, as they share a similar focus on gendered and sexual violence. In *A Question of Silence* three women kill a man for no apparent reason; in *Broken Mirrors* a male serial killer tortures and starves random female victims; and in *The Last Island* the male survivors of an air crash kill one another off, leaving two women as the only survivors. The issue of how to represent violence is a complex one, but can be best understood in the context of the second feminist wave that started in the late 1960s and lasted till the early 1990s. The gruesome murder in *A Question of Silence*, for example, was by far not the only cinematic representation of women's retaliatory or revengeful violence. On the contrary,

in those early days 'women's movies' (as they were then called) featured female terrorists, bank robbers, freedom fighters, revolutionaries, passionate or cold-blooded killers, and daughters, mothers or wives killing members of their family. Feminist directors from countries all over the world did not only tell stories of women's victimization, but also of women's resistance to sexism, male violence and social injustice. Gorris' trilogy on gendered violence can thus be situated within the political activism of the second feminist wave that saw patriarchal society as the source of many of women's problems. And, sadly, these issues are still with us today. The third – or is it already the fourth? – wave of the women's movement revisits many of those earlier feminist themes, as for example in the #MeToo movement fighting sexism, harassment, and sexual violence.

The 1970s and 1980s created a boom in women's novels, women's movies, women's art, screened and hotly debated on festivals all over the world, and discussed and interpreted in the relatively new academic field of women's studies. I remember the excitement of feeling seen and represented 'as a woman' in those novels, movies, and art works: I felt I was made visible for the first time. Together, we laughed and cried when identifying with 'real women' in feminist cinema, which was such a break from the male-identified gaze that turned women into glamorous goddesses on the silver screen of Hollywood films. So many years later it is perhaps difficult to imagine the enormous impact of Gorris' first two films within the communities of the second women's movement. Especially the famous ending of *A Question of Silence* with the women in the movie, and often in the theater as well, bursting out in raucous laughter, shows the shared consciousness, the strength, humor and solidarity of the women's movement in the 1970s.

In this respect Gorris marked an era and voiced feminist concerns with audacity and passion. Looking back now on those early days of the second feminist wave, it is clear that it was a predominantly white middle-class movement that did not – yet – bring together class, gender, sexuality and race as the third wave would, interlinking movements like #Metoo and #BlackLivesMatter. The notion of intersectionality had not yet entered the debate. Although there is the occasional Black woman in her films, and lesbianism is implicitly touched upon in the first films, and explicitly present in Antonia's Line, Gorris' films mainly center on white middle-class heterosexual cis-identified women. But as the problems the women share are familiar to and recognized by many others, their relevance remains high, even today.

Genre and metaphor

Marleen Gorris can be considered a realist filmmaker, much like her contemporary colleagues such as Margaretha von Trotta, Marion Hänsel, Patricia Rozema, Agnès Varda, or Jane Campion; to name just a few. This is important to mention here, because so much of feminist cinema in those early days was experimental, breaking with the traditional forms of cinematic storytelling, following film theorist Laura Mulvey's call in 1974 for a radical breakdown of the male-centered stories of Hollywood. Examples of experimental filmmakers in the 1980s are Chantal Akerman, Sally Potter,

Lizzie Borden, Marguérite Duras, Monika Treut, and Ulrike Ottinger; again, to name just a few. This stark opposition between conventional and experimental cinema lost its significance in the 1990s, but played a central role in the debates about how to tell stories from a woman-identified female point of view in the early days of feminism. Gorris is a storyteller. She chose to tell her feminist stories in a combination of conventional genres: *A Question of Silence* is a mix of the detective and the courtroom drama; *Broken Mirrors* is a mix of social drama and a thriller; and *The Last Island* is a mix of a thriller and dystopian fiction. *Antonia's Line* is distinctly different in tone; while it belongs to the genre of the epic film it also diverts from it by featuring slightly surreal scenes.

The genres may be conventional, yet the films can be read as both deeply realistic in that they tell stories about women's experiences from a woman's of view, and as profoundly metaphorical, in that they tell a meta-story of political and social relevance. Each of Gorris' first three films is situated in a location set apart from normal society: a prison, a brothel and a desert island. Within the microcosmos of these enclaves, power relations between the genders are revealed and explode into extreme violence. Gorris' films can be read as metaphorical representations of challenging political positions on Western society: *A Question of Silence* presents society as a prison for women; *Broken Mirrors* shows the world as a brothel; and in *The Last Island* a potential paradise turns into a hell, indicating the possibility of the end of the world. The prison, the brothel and the desert island become metaphors for a male-dominated society. The films show that patriarchy is not a nice or sustainable place to inhabit, not only for the women but also for the men who live in it and abide by its rules.

Gorris' trilogy is then both realist and metaphorical at the same time, which makes for a strong affect in the spectator. In bringing together these different affective levels, the realist and the metaphorical one, the viewer has to actively work to get the political message of the film. She can watch at once in a literal and figurative way; to neglect or ignore one or the other reading makes the film less affective. Below I will go into more detail of the films to show how this double power of persuasion works in *A Question of Silence*, *Broken Mirrors*, and *The Last Island*.

1. A Question of Silence

Looking and killing

In *A Question of Silence* three women who happen to be in a clothes shop at the same time kill, for no apparent reason, the male boutique owner. A female psychiatrist, Janine van den Bos, is appointed to investigate for the court whether the women are accountable for their act or whether they are insane. The story is constructed as a Bildungsroman to which the consciousness-raising of the psychiatrist is central. The film connects the psychiatrist's development to the lives of the murderesses by means of parallel editing and matching camera work. The quite brutal murder is narrated in three long flashbacks, embedded in the psychiatrist's quest for the motive. In a closely knit structure *A Question of Silence* gradually reveals that the three women do not really have a motive in any conventional sense, but that the seemingly gratuitous murder is the outcome of years of humiliation and objectification. By creating cinematic

parallels between the women's homes and their rooms in prison, the film shows that in fact very little has changed for the women since they were arrested, suggesting they were already imprisoned in their daily lives.

A Question of Silence features stereotyped characters representing different classes, ages, and race, although the film mainly focuses on the lives of middle-class white women. The three murderesses are Andrea, a middle-class executive secretary and single; Christine, a middle-class housewife and mother; and An, a lower-class waitress in a coffee shop and divorced. Janine, the psychiatrist, is upper-class and married without children. Significantly, four other women silently witness the murder in the shop: an older woman, a black woman, and two young women.

The film systematically locates the narrative and visual perspective with the individual female characters, together symbolizing all women in their diversity. Giving the point of view to a character is a conventional way of giving depth and subjectivity to a cinematic character. For example, a voice-over gives the character a narrative point of view by telling his story, while the camera gives a visual point of view to the character by looking through his eyes. Yes, 'his'. In classical cinema, in Hollywood and much elsewhere in the world, the narrative and visual point of view, and hence subjectivity, are typically given to the male character, while the female character remains objectified. In this classical kind of story the female character does not speak, look or act; she remains a passive object of visual consumption. The female audience could therefore only identify with the male character. This is a simplified explanation of 'the male gaze' that Laura Mulvey analyzed in her seminal article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in 1974. Needless to say that women's movies in the 1970s and 1980s, and still today, often work hard to undo the male gaze and create instead a female gaze and perspective.

A Question of Silence allows the female characters to acquire a subjectivity that is denied to them in the story: many scenes show that the women are not heard, seen, or taken seriously by the men around them. Because the point of view consistently lies with the female characters, the female spectator can identify with them. The women in the movie, and through identification the female spectator too, find themselves in the peculiar situation of a woman who, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) is "a free and autonomous being like all human creatures – but who nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other". Translating this to cinema, it means that the male character is by standard the subject, acquiring subjectivity, while the female character remains an object, being objectified. The second wave of the women's movement very much built on Beauvoir's analysis, exposing and defying the objectification of women in cinema, commercials, magazines or art. The films of Marleen Gorris can be understood as a successful attempt to undo the objectification of women, not only by exposing its violence or showing women's resistance to the male gaze, but even more so by turning the women into subjects of their own, free to work, love and prosper.

A Question of Silence represents this feminist insight in metaphors of silence. The women are not heard, but are enveloped in silence. For example, although secretary

Andrea is 'greatly appreciated' by her boss, she is ignored when making a business proposal at a meeting, whereas the same plan is met with approval when proposed by a man a few minutes later. Hurt, Andrea withdraws into herself and absentmindedly stirs her coffee with a spoon. The sound disturbs the men in the meeting room, and her neighbor grabs her hand to stop the 'noise'. The waitress An talks and laughs all the time, but in the coffee shop where she works nobody listens to her. Her loud garrulity seems a defense mechanism against the sexist abuse she receives from her clients, mostly aimed at 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-dominated world their voices are not heard. Women are surrounded by an icy silence. Therefore housewife Christine has given up to speak at all; she is literally overcome by silence – in psychiatric terms, catatonia. (The Dutch title of the film is 'The Silence of Christine M.'). Yet it is Christine who 'speaks' 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 over and over again: a man, a woman and a child enclosed in a house.

The brutal and gratuitous murder of a man by three women portrayed in *A Question of Silence*, was received with a shock if not outrage by many male critics and spectators at the time of the film's release. Also for many women the violent act was not so easy to watch. Understandably. Yet, it is interesting to look in more detail at how the murderous act is filmed. The three flashbacks of the murder are set apart in cinematic style from the rest of the film and therefore, I argue, the murder can be understood more as a symbolic, metaphorical, act, than a realistic one. To start with, the camera is hand-held in the murder scenes. This is a common technique today, but was more exceptional in the 1980s; simply because cameras were a lot heavier. The editing gets faster with short takes. The sound of the scene is lowered, while there is hardly any dialogue. Special, rather eerie film music, is added to the flashback scenes. Camerawork and montage suggest a deep bond between the three women who kill: they look at each other silently, back and forth, and silently repeat each other's murderous actions. As soon as the male victim has fallen to the ground, he no longer comes into focus. He is an arbitrary victim, a scapegoat. The spectator never gets to see blood or a corpse, and never hears him moan or scream. The camera instead focusses on and participates in the murderous 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.

The solidarity between the three killers is extended to the other four women present in the shop, the older, the black and the two young women. They are a party in the extensive eye-contact between the women and watch silently without interfering. In their silent solemnity, these witnesses resemble the chorus in a Greek tragedy. Their position is not unlike the audience of the film. The female spectator is implicated in the solidarity between the women, by taking over the point of view of both the camera and the looks among the women. Watching silently, the spectator too becomes accountable 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 in the 1980s have indeed pointed to the ritualistic aspect of *A Question of Silence*. The murder is understood as a ritual or a ceremonial performance in which the man was an arbitrary and faceless victim, but also a precise symbolic target. The solidarity between the women opens up a space for women's friendship and love. As the specific cinematic style of the murder scenes, ritualistic and performative, sets it apart from the realist narrative of the main plot, the film engages the audience both emotionally and critically. In other words, by turning the representation of the murder into a metaphor in an otherwise realist narrative, *A Question of Silence* encourages political engagement in the spectator.

Looking and laughing

A Question of Silence evokes another strong metaphor towards the end of the film. To the patriarchal order, represented by the judicial system, the violent and seemingly random murder of a man by three women constitutes not only a crime, but also a violation of society's taboo on female violence. For them it is the easiest way out to condemn the women as 'insane', but in the courtroom the female psychiatrist Janine van den Bos declares the women to be quite sane—much to the shocked surprise of the court. This means the male judges have to actually think about the significance of the act, which they are incapable of doing. They simply cannot understand the significance of gender and patriarchal violence in this particular murder case:

Judge: 'If these women, as you say, are mentally sane, what is the motive behind this murder?'

Psychiatrist: 'You will not have failed to notice that these three women have killed a man, who was also the owner of a boutique.'

Prosecutor: 'Of course I've noticed that. What is it you're suggesting?'

Psych.: 'That this is an important issue. As long as you refuse to acknowledge that...'

Pros. (interrupting her): 'Do you mean to say that they held a grudge against a man who also happened to sell clothes professionally?' (exclaiming) But so many men do!'

Psych.: 'Precisely! Don't you understand that this man...'

Pros. (interrupting her again) (While he speaks the camera slowly zooms in on the face of the female psychiatrist): 'Now listen here, Mrs. van den Bos, I really don't see what you're aiming at. I see no difference at all between this case and, let's say, if they had murdered a female shopkeeper. Or ... or the other way around, so to speak, if three men had murdered a female boutique owner.'

(In the dock An bursts out laughing.)

In not recognizing the murder as revenge and retaliation for gendered violence, the judicial order cannot understand the motive. The film has shown in meaningful details how society withholds women status and subjectivity, objectifying them on the job, in the classroom, at home, in bed. The women have no voice and are not heard. They are silenced—a question of silence. Because of its inability to accept gender 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 renders them to silence. Indifferent to the specific voice of women, he represents a violent society that translates indifference into incomprehension, supported by the invested power of the system.

An reacts to this hostile incomprehension with laughter, setting in motion a wave of laughter among the women in the courtroom. The scene of laughter is one of the final scenes of the film, repeating the same ritualistic procedure as the scene of the murder. Looking at each other, the women begin to laugh one by one: first the three murderesses, then the four female witnesses who are an audience in the courtroom (and who are known only to the spectators, but not to other characters in the film), and finally the female 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 by their environment. It is a liberating laugh bonding the women together. With their laughter the women shut out those who do not share their insight and understanding. The laughter is thus 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 male authority, turning the court case into the farce it was from the very beginning.

The murderesses are ordered to leave the courtroom. Still laughing they descend down the stairs, surrounded by the women who witnessed the murder. This ritualistic ending evokes the Greek myth of the Erinyes; after their revenge the women are sent back into the underworld, watched by the chorus of witnesses who join in the laughter. The final judgement never gets spoken by the male court, but the women's laughter instead says it all.

I want to draw out the empowering effects of the women's laughter for the audience. Like in the ritualistic scene of the murder, the spectator is inevitably drawn into the scene of laughter through the camera work and montage that put the exclusive perspective with the female characters. The audience is made a witness to the scene of the final judgement, like they were made witness to the murder. With the murder the spectators could only watch, most likely in horror. But with the scene in the courtroom they can actually participate by joining in with the laughter of the female characters. As the film actively seeks the engagement of the audience, the laughter has the liberating effect of a catharsis. At the end of *A Question of Silence* the audience can thus participate in a cathartic ritual. But this engagement is predicated on the understanding that both the murder and the laughter are metaphorical. They symbolize the smothered anger as well as resistance at women's objectification and inferior status as 'the second sex' in society. Obviously, if the viewer takes the murder and laughter realistically he or she would quite rightly worry about its criminal nature and lack of ethical accountability.

The laughter at the closing of *A Question of Silence* has become quite famous for its empowering effect on the women in the audience. The roars of laughter have been called truly revolutionary. The feminist film critic Ruby Rich recalled the women's

laughter at a public interview with Marleen Gorris after a screening of the film at its release in 1982: "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".

It is important here to stress once again that the laughter is only possible when understanding the murder as a female fantasy of revenge: nobody would laugh at a real murder. One can laugh at a metaphor that represents a rich and complex representation of the unequal and often violent relations between men and women in Western society in the early 1980s. The political force of the cinematic metaphors in *A Question of Silence*, then, lies in its liberating effect upon the audience. In the end, laughter is the real weapon against masculinist power and indifference.



2. Broken Mirrors Parallel perspectives

Broken Mirrors recounts two parallel narratives which on the surface seem unrelated: the story of prostitutes in a brothel, filmed as a social 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; while the serial killer chains his female victims in a garage and slowly starves them to death, taking polaroid snapshots at all stages of their ordeal.

The parallel montage of two different stories in *Broken Mirrors* makes the spectator work quite hard at making meaning of the film. 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 in fact tell the same story; that the two stories each give a version of the objectification of women. 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.

Broken Mirrors represents women's oppression as the systematic deprivation of their subjectivity. 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 *A Question of Silence*. The specifically female perspective is filmed very differently in the two stories of the film and has quite a different impact on the spectator.

Let me first take a scene from the brothel. Quite in the beginning of the film, the prostitutes gather together in the parlor to start their working day. The women range among class, race and age: Dora, an artist; Linda, a depressed young girl; Francine, a hard bitch; Irma, an uneducated single mother; Jacky, a British cocaine addict; Tessa, a black woman; and Ellen, the elderly madame. Diane, the newcomer who needs the money for her addicted husband will arrive later. They sit in some sort of drawing room, when the pimp cum manager comes in and greets them curtly. Dora makes an obscene gesture as he closes the door of his office, making the other women laugh. Her gesture starts off a short but significant scene of about a minute.

The scene is filmed in warm, saturated colors. There is little dialogue, the sound is muted, and a lovely, musical tune is added to the sound track. The handheld camera starts moving on its own in the rather 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 any of the characters but remains independent, being present in the warm intimacy of the moment. The mood is one of relaxed harmony: the women take care of each other, joke, or sit quietly by themselves. Then the doorbell announces the first customer. The music stops, the camera comes to a standstill and the women remain passive for just one second before getting into action. The scene ends with a cut to the waiting customer in front of the glass door.

In this short scene the camerawork, montage, and soundtrack 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 cramped and overcrowded parlor). Narrative and cinematic resources thus enhance the women's subjectivity. Film theory explains that spectators identify with the camera. In this short scene, the rather peculiar camera movement invites the viewer into the personal company of women. The camera acts like an autonomous character of its own and the spectator, in taking

the place of the eye of the camera, experiences moving around in the room together with the women in this relaxed moment of anticipation.

The privileged position of triple identification – with the female characters, with the independent camera look and with the spatiality of the three-dimensional image – is broken off abruptly by the doorbell. The customer thus not only disrupts the intimacy of the prostitutes but also for the spectator. In the next scene the madame introduces the 'girls' one by one to him, and in doing so, also to the spectator. In an edited series of still shots, each woman is filmed in the same medium frame. The camera look is attached to the male character, who looks at the women with desire. The montage separates the women from each other and from the space they occupy, turning them into a one-dimensional picture, much like a pin-up, an object that is exposed for sale to the man's gaze.

The spectator briefly shares the literal look of the male customer, but because of the effect of the preceding sequence this is experienced as quite disturbing. Having identified with the women in their shared intimacy, the detached male gaze is exposed for its objectifying effect. Or to put it differently, at the moment that a female character makes the transition from a subject to an object position, the spectator makes the transition from the 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 the pain of their repeated objectification: the pain when she is deprived of her voice, her body, her desire, her freedom and even her life. In blocking the way to identification at the moments that the female characters are made into (mostly sexual) objects by the male characters, the audience is invited to reflect critically on women's objectification. These alternating positions involve the spectator in a viewing process that is both emotional and critical. This never makes for an easy spectatorship, because let's face it, *Broken Mirrors* presents quite a gruesome story.

Lethal looks

The thriller story in *Broken Mirrors* is an illustration of the feminist critique that came to be known as 'the male gaze'. The serial killer is filmed in such a way that the viewer can never identify with his murderous gaze, while at the same time exposing the violence of that gaze. The thriller story is technically de-colored, making the world of the serial killer and the victim into quite a grim place, as opposed to the full-color world of the prostitutes in the brothel. The bleak color scheme indicates that the 'black-and-white' story should be understood as metaphorical. The main metaphor plays out ways of looking, as the killer always photographs his victims at different stages of their slow death.

The murderer is introduced with classical means of creating suspense within the genre of the thriller. When he buries and photographs the dead body of a woman in the middle of the night, the camera focusses on his hands, his gloves and his feet, but his face remains outside the frame. The identity of the killer remains unknown by keeping his face literally in the dark, which is maintained throughout the film until the

very end when his identity is revealed. A consequence of this way of filming is that the camera can never be attached to his murderous gaze, exposing the violence of the act of looking and photographing. For example, in a scene where the murderer leaves his office during the lunch break 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. We just see this dark figure going about methodically looking for another housewife to kill. Of course, this is high suspense (and the film music certainly adds to his effect), but the camera movements 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 ever identifying with his look, because the camera films him from too far a distance, and can therefore take enough distance to be critical. The cinematic strategy of suspense is thus turned into a feminist point of view.

Because the camera films the man without ever presenting his point of view, the female character, his next victim, can never be seen through his eyes. Instead, the film takes great care to film from her point of view, although she is chained to a bed while being starved to death. Her perspective is the same as the audience: she does not understand what is happening and asks aloud the question that the spectator is worrying about all along: 'why?'. Significantly, the serial killer never speaks but remains silent.

Although for the spectator the murderer is quite literally deprived of his point of view because his face is never shown in the film, he does avail himself of a typically voyeuristic gaze within the film's story as he uses a polaroid camera to take pictures of his victims. *Broken Mirrors* shows that looking is not an innocent act, because it takes place within a given pattern of dominance and submission. As feminist film theorists pointed out: in the movies, as in society, men have the power to act on their gaze, and sadly, this often results in harassment or sexual violence. *Broken Mirrors* breaks partly with this pattern, because the serial killer does not touch or rape the women. Instead he chains them to a bed in a garage and photographs them in each stage of their despair, fear, filthiness and starvation, until their death. He pins the pictures one by one in a patterned grid on the wall – signifying what is to come for the next victim.

In this context the act of taking pictures becomes quite threatening; photography metaphorically takes the place of violent sexual abuse. In her original analysis of the male gaze in classical Hollywood cinema, Laura Mulvey pointed out how voyeurism leads to sadism. 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." *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 1975. This is indeed the struggle of serial killer and victim in *Broken Mirrors*. The film presents the male gaze as violent and even lethal: his looks kill. This also fits in with what Susan Sontag wrote in her book *On Photography* from 1979: "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.”

In *Broken Mirrors* the camera films in close-up when the killer opens his coat – and for one moment the spectator does not know whether to expect a gun or the camera – to take out a camera, focusing on the woman. He presses, a bulb flashes, and the polaroid slides out of the camera. The camera here replaces the sexual act; that is why the serial killer does not abuse the women: they are metaphorically raped when photographed. The female victim comes to the conclusion that: “You hate me so intensely, so terribly; you enjoy to see me beg, to see me beg for mercy.” She refuses to beg any longer and remains silent from then on, till her unfortunate death. Significantly, at this moment of her insight the color returns to the image. As in *A Question of Silence*, silence is a female form of resistance when all hope is lost. This is emphasized because the same actress plays this particular role in both films (Edda Barends).

The parallel story of the prostitutes in the brothel tells much the same story. The women are subjected to the male gaze, to their desire, money, as well as their contempt, humiliation and, also, violence. Linda gets beaten up by her lover and commits suicide and Irma gets assaulted and stabbed by a customer, losing one eye. As I wrote, *Broken Mirrors* is a gruesome story.

And the mirror cracked

Yet, the mirror breaks in a final dramatic sequence of *Broken Mirrors*.

- ✦ In the course of the film the main characters Dora and Diane establish a strong friendship. In the final scene they return to the brothel deep in the night 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 recognizes. While the remaining women are together in great sorrow in the parlor, many of them covered in blood from the assault, 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 characters, the spectator experiences their humiliation and powerlessness. The sound track starts softly playing an alto aria from Hayden's *Stabat Mater*, the female voice singing Mary's lament in beholding her dead son at the cross (there are many biblical references in this film that I cannot discuss here for lack of space). The music gets 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 man's hands is then shown, removing his gloves, opening his coat and fumbling for something. For just a second the spectator expects that he reaches for a gun, but he takes out his wallet pulling out more and more money. Significantly, this shot is framed in exactly the same way as the shots of the murderer taking out his polaroid camera. Thus the wallet, the money, is structurally put in the position of the murderer's camera; and both are symbolically linked to a gun, metaphorically representing male power. But more importantly, the spectator now understands that this man, the only friendly customer in the brothel, is the same guy as the serial killer in

the thriller story.

With this one brief shot the film directly addresses the spectator, revealing the murderer's identity, and bringing the two parallel but separate stories finally together. This puts the audience in a specific and altered viewing position. She now knows more than the female characters in the film, who of course have no idea of the thriller story and hence do not know this man to be a killer. The narrative intervention on the meta-level of the film does not break off identification with the women, but it does put the spectator in a more critical and engaged position. The parallel structure of the film, in itself a classical way of telling stories, achieves a metaphorical meaning. The audience now understands the significance of both stories in how they mirror and comment on each other, enhancing the feminist analysis of women's oppression in patriarchal society. Its uncompromising perspective makes the film relevant again today, decades later, for example through the revelations of the #MeToo movement in recent years, but also through the internationally accepted notion of 'femicide', a hate crime against women because they are female.

When the (unnamed) customer/killer flatly refuses to leave, the women get even more desperate and furious. Suddenly, Diane picks up a small gun. At that moment the female voice starts singing Maria's lament on the soundtrack. She points the gun at him, but deliberately diverts it so as to just miss him when she shoots, instead hitting the mirrors behind the bar. 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 audience Diane's act acquires another meaning than just chasing away a man humiliating the prostitutes; for them her gesture is an act of justice. Diane's shooting means a metaphorical trial for the murders the man has committed and, metaphorically at one more remove, punishment for sexual violence in general.

At the moment when the mystery is finally revealed – the identity of the murderer – the spectator is already convinced by the film's paralleling structure that his identity is beside the point. He is any man, Everyman. In accepting the reflexive relationship between the two narratives, the spectator understands both of them as a metaphorical expression of the violent power relations between the sexes. The fetters with which the serial killer ties his female victims is a metaphor for the bondage that keeps women chained in a male-dominated society. The humiliation of the prostitutes in the brothel is a metaphor of the sexual objectification of women in society at large. The serial killer is only one step further on the scale of sexual violence against women.

But we need a catharsis. And Gorris gives it to us. Diane slowly and solemnly shoots all the mirrors in the brothel's drawing room. It is a ritualistic act of resistance against the male gaze, against the objectifying look that turns women into whores, against the distorted images of women – all of which she shoots to pieces in the mirror. Diane's symbolic act empowers her to leave prostitution behind her – for good – together with her friend Dora.

And the mirror has cracked.

3. The Last Island

The dystopian story of *The Last Island* is set in a near future in which the world as we know it has come to an end. How, we never get to know, but it is suggested that some kind of disaster, most probably for those days, a nuclear one, has happened (today, it would have been the climate change). After an air crash five men, two women, and a dog, find themselves as survivors on a desert island in the tropics.

Marleen Gorris' third film lends itself to a metaphorical interpretation through its subject: a post-apocalyptic world. What happens when five men and two women survive a plane crash, end up on an uninhabited tropical island and are presumably the last people left on earth? As the dystopian genre goes, they are unable to build a new life together. The violence that slowly but inevitably turns this potential paradise into a hell is a gloomy reflection on contemporary Western society. In this film, the criticism is not aimed at men in general, but at the almost invisible structures of violence that are woven into a masculinist way of thinking. The film singles out religious fanaticism as a source of evil. Like in *A Question of Silence* and *Broken Mirrors*, in *The Last Island* gendered violence is intertwined as an irrevocable fate in the tightly constructed scenario.

The characters are fairly stereotypical, as quite usual for these three films: there is an older, wise, woman, Mrs. Godame, and a younger feisty woman, Joanna, who was a divorced lawyer in her life before the crash. The five men represent different types of masculinity. Patriarchy is here embodied by Nick, an elderly military and a fanatic Christian, who despises women and gays, forcing the others to obey his rules and laws. He goes about quoting by heart from the Bible all the time, which has a deeply irritating effect on the others (and the spectator). Well, in the end he gets crucified, literally. Gorris is never afraid of showing gruesome violence. Then there is young and emotional Jack, who is lusting for life, bored out of his mind, and wishes to have sex with Joanna. Pierre is a caring and nurturing husband and father, mourning the loss of his family. Millionaire Sean is a happy gay, "I love life!", and befriends Joanna. Frank, a rather insipid character, becomes Sean's lover, although intimacy or sex is never shown in this chaste film.

The story moves along slowly, as the survivors come to grips with the horrors of the crash, burying the many dead from the plane. The seven people work hard to create a bearable life together on this beautiful desert island, that Joanna calls a paradise. From the debris of the plane and wood from the jungle, they create huts and shelters. The contents of the luggage, including clothes, books, food and drink, but also a useless box of plastic flowers, and a handy, yet fateful rifle, help to make it their new home. Weeks pass by and they make a livable life for themselves on this island of plenty, with fresh water, fruit hanging from the trees, and small animals to eat.

Gradually, the survivors come to realize they will not be rescued and may even be the last people on earth. A lot of effort goes into making a boat with which they hope to escape from the island to the mainland, although it is about a thousand kilometers away. But the boat does not get far as a tropical storm throws them back on the island, destroying the boat and their shelters. They have to start building all over again.

Trouble in paradise

Unlike Gorris' two first films, *The Last Island* does not have a very clear focal point, although Joanna comes across as the main character. The camera focuses more on her and gives her point of view more than any of the other characters. We have seen above that Marleen Gorris is always aware of the male gaze and critiques, returns, changes it, and creates whenever possible a female gaze. In *The Last Island* there are two short scenes where the male gaze shifts. Nick retreats more and more into the jungle, shooting game with his gun, creating traps, making weapons. Hidden in the trees, he looks through the scope on his rifle to target some of the other people. In a point of view shot he is shown to focus on Mrs. Godame who wanders aimlessly on the beach. As if she senses that she is being looked at, she turns around and gazes back at him intently, even with anger. He drops the rifle, slightly embarrassed, although it is not clear whether she can even see him. This is an interesting scene not only because it represents different points of view from the main character Joanna, but also because the scene does not add much to the developing story. Rather, its function is to reflect on the murderous male gaze, which we recognize as a recurring element of Gorris' style. The hunter's gaze is returned by an older, defenseless, but fearless woman. Later in the film when Nick's fanaticism has exploded, he refers to her as a useless woman that should be killed.

This short scene is slightly unsettling, but the first inklings of serious trouble start when this small group of people realizes they may be the last humans alive. This raises a typical dilemma for a post-apocalyptic story: is it not their moral duty to procreate and continue humanity? The men discuss the issue among themselves, deciding that indeed they should try to perpetuate the human race. Working together on the boat, they all look at Joanna, who is happily working on her own shelter and waves at them with a big smile. Their gaze, however, has shifted: they now see her as the only fertile woman present. Under their collective gaze, strong, independent, spirited Joanna, is reduced to the biological function of her child-bearing capacity.

When confronted with this inane plan, Joanna is the voice of reason, claiming that it is biologically impossible to repopulate the earth starting from such a small group of people. She resists for a long time, "it's not realistic", but eventually gives in to the plan, for the sake of keeping up hope. She chooses gentle Pierre as the man to father her child, knowing quite well the absurdity of this project.

The snake

Joanne is a strong woman who knows what she wants. Or does not want. Calmly, but determinedly, she refuses Jack's advances time and again, ironically saying: "I don't think you are god's special gift to a woman on this desert island". A similar sentence also occurs in *Broken Mirrors*, signifying man's bloated ego in believing how irresistible they are, even in the face of a woman's unequivocal 'no'. Joanna makes it very clear to all the men that she will not be a victim to any kind of sexual violence. When Jack pushes on, Sean says that he will kill any other man who lays hands on Joanne. While this may look chivalrous, it also shows his potential murderous intent. When Jack does

try to have sex with Joanna, she is more than able to defend herself with a knife. The theme of nineteen-year old Jack pursuing Joanna, and her detached rejection, represents the feminist struggle not only against any form of forced sex, but also for sexual independence for women. This is #MeToo, told many years ago in 1990, but still so relevant today.

The palm trees, the blue ocean, the white sand, the pond of freshwater, the fruit hanging from the trees: the island looks like paradise. But there is a snake, of course, and it is for real. Rather than in the biblical story the snake does not seduce Eve and Adam, but it bites a man.

After Joanna has defended herself against Jack, and they struggle back to their feet, he gets bitten by a snake. From that moment on, one hour into the film, things start escalating. Like the biblical snake, here too, the animal signifies the end of paradise. Nick is convinced the snake was poisonous and chops off Jack's hand, who then develops gangrene and dies a slow death. His painful deathbed presents an ethical dilemma to the others. None of the men is able to witness Jack's suffering, his screams, the smell of decay. The women take care of him. The men suggest to poison Jack to help him die an easy death, but he does not want to die, he wants to live. The dilemma creates a first and clear division between the two women, who think it immoral to kill Jack against his own free will, and the men who think they have to help him in this mercy killing. Mrs. Godame and Joanne are disgusted by what they perceive as a lack of courage in the other men to guide someone to die in his own time. Joanna furiously asks them how they can wish for new life if they cannot even deal with death.

Nick's growing intolerance catalyzes a power struggle between the men, resulting in their mutual slaughter. Nick first demands subservience from the two women, who flat out refuse, and then from the men as well. While Pierre and Frank dismiss or ignore Nick's fanaticism, Sean makes fun of it. But of course, for Nick, homosexuality may be even a greater sin, "an abomination", than merely being a woman. His disgust makes him suddenly kill Sean at point blank. A violent chain reaction of honor and revenge follows in which Nick, Frank and Pierre kill one another, leaving Joanna and the old Mrs. Godame as sole survivors.

The Last Island may have been prophetic in its focus on the dire role of intolerant Christians and its relation to gendered violence against women. The bad guy in this film is fanatic, gun-crazy Nick; insecure he withdraws into the security of his religion, putting down the law of God, which, as Joanna aptly remarks, mostly suits him. *The Last Island* focuses on the damning role of religion as serving men and oppressing the 'Other', be it women or homosexuals. Nick's is an intolerant faith, creating a hierarchy with the white male at the top. Nick is driven by Thanatos. But so are the other men as well, even if they resist it out of fear, loyalty or chivalry. On the contrary, the women are ruled by Eros, not so much in the sexual sense, but by their love of life. When Nick shouts that they need rules and laws, Mrs. Godame answers: "Yes! But let them be laws of love and care". Her name indicates she is the God that Nick should have worshipped rather than his God of wrath and redemption.

When the last man dies, Joanna weeps and shouts: "You told me you all wanted life

on this island. Why couldn't you live? Just live? It cannot be that difficult!". In the very last scene Mrs. Godame and Joanne sit on the beach looking at the ocean. When Joanne asks her what keeps her going, the old woman answers: "I enjoy life. There is, after all, nothing else." The women are presented as life-affirming under all circumstances. Even if it means continuing a fairly hopeless life-without-a-future on a desert island.

Conclusion

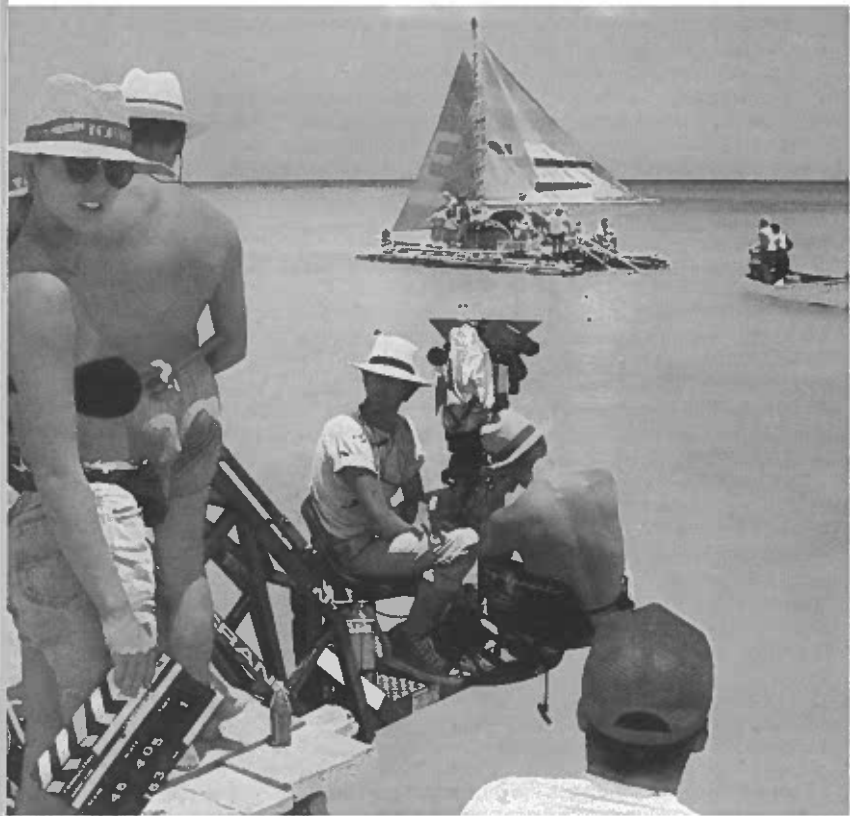
In *A Question of Silence*, *Broken Mirrors*, and *The Last Island* Marleen Gorris brings about an ingenious play between (more or less) realist stories and metaphors. In all three films she has succeeded in finding images to make abstract feminist ideas about women's position in society concrete: women experience life as if living in a prison, a brothel, or a desert island. The interplay between realism and metaphors 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 impact.

Whether it concerns violence of women against men, or men against women, or men against men, in all cases the gendered violence stems from the patriarchal system. Watching the three films so many decades later, it appears that much of the analysis still holds. Power relations between the genders leads to inevitable violence; that much is clear. But let's not forget that in the years since those feminist stories were told for the first time, we have moved on to more equality, to gay marriage, to a multiplication of genders, to LGBTQ+, to new waves of activism as in #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. Yet, as the backlash against abortion rights, gay parenthood, or trans rights, has shown, feminism is still necessary today. The rise of Christian and Islamic fundamentalism and political populism make Gorris' concerns more relevant than ever. The graphic violence makes for stark films, especially *Broken Mirrors* and *The Last Island*, that cannot count on the liberating laughter at the end of *A Question of Silence*. Yet, in spite of the somber endings, there is always hope. And friendship. In all three films women care for each other and care for the world; a female community becomes the focal point of her next film, *Antonia's Line*. *A Question of Silence* creates bonds of women's solidarity; *Broken Mirrors* privileges a deep friendship between Dora and Diane; and *The Last Island* honors mutual care and respect between Mrs. Godame and Joanne. In the end, Gorris' message is life-affirming: let's enjoy life, as there is, after all, nothing else.

July, 2023

About the author

Anneke Smelik is Emerita Professor of Visual Culture and worked for over twenty-five years at the Radboud University Nijmegen (Netherlands). Her first book, *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory* (1998), featured a chapter on the films by Marleen Gorris. She published widely on cinema, video clips, science fiction, and digital culture. More recently, Anneke shifted her research to fashion and the creative industries, focusing on wearable technology, posthumanism and sustainability. Her latest books include *Delft Blue to Denim Blue. Contemporary Dutch Fashion* (2017) and *Thinking Through Fashion. A Guide to Key Theorists* (2016). She is co-editor of the journal *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*. www.annesmelik.nl



© Cult Epics 2023