

## **A QUESTION OF SILENCE in the 1980s**

Gorris baffled friend and foe of feminism with her feature film debut *DE STILTE ROND CHRISTINE M.* In 1982, the consensus was that feminist filmmaking concerned primarily documentaries made for special issue groups, or avant-garde feature films exploring a women's perspective. *A QUESTION OF SILENCE*, as the English release title reads, expanded categories: it wrapped its feminist topic in a relatively conventional, but highly convincing realist style.

Of the 16 feature films produced that year in The Netherlands, 4 were made by women: Annette Apon directed *GOLVEN* (after *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf), Nouchka van Brakel directed *VAN DE KOELE MEREN DES DOODS* (after the novel by Frederik van Eeden) and Lili Rademakers made *MENUET* (after the novel by Louis Paul Boon). Literary adaptations were a trend, and also in this regard *A QUESTION OF SILENCE* was considered courageous: Gorris wrote the original scenario herself, triggered by a newspaper item. A third stunning point was that Gorris, unlike her colleagues, had not graduated from film school or gathered experience in making films: she studied English language at Groningen University and dramaturgy in Amsterdam and Birmingham, Great Britain. She also worked a few years as a stage dramatist. As she initially did not plan to direct her film, Gorris asked the president of the Dutch Film Production Fund, Anton Koolhaas, to read the scenario and think of a director. Koolhaas spread the word that for its dramatic qualities this was the best scenario he had read in years (*Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 9 february 1982; *Leeuwarder Courant* 26 march 1982). This was the more salient as the general opinion in the film trade was that many Dutch films failed to attract large audiences because of the insufficiencies of the scripts. Gorris approached Chantal Akerman for the direction, but Akerman instead suggested Gorris herself to take on the job.

The search for a producer was the next hurdle. The first one demanded a different ending, in which the psychiatrist and her husband would make up with each other again. But encouraged by Koolhaas' endorsement Gorris refused to adjust even a syllable. Matthijs van Heyningen, producer of Nouchka van Brakel's films, gave her a free hand and this is how she could make the film exactly as she had imagined it. One wish was not granted her: the distribution by the Dutch feminist film distribution company Cinemien. The reason was that Cinemien had not (yet) access to the large cinema's, as the Dutch film landscape at the time was rigorously divided between commercial and non-commercial cinemas. Subsidized distributors such as Cinemien were relegated to releasing their films in what was called the 'alternative circuit', while Van Heyningen's Sigma Films expected a highly profitable release in the regular cinemas. *A QUESTION OF SILENCE* indeed turned out one of the most successful Dutch feature films of the year 1982. It won several awards, among which the Golden Calf for Best Film at the Dutch Film Days and the Audience Award of the Women's Filmfestival at Créteil (France). Its selection for the International Forum of the Young Film in Berlin significantly added to its prestige.

The unusual genesis of the film and the confidence of its maker was amply documented in the Dutch press, which generally cultivated a fondness of obstinacy. Two female and more than a dozen male critics wrote about the film in the dailies, at a time before internet the key channel in The Netherlands for reaching a broad film audience. In addition, the publicity campaign smartly emphasized the conventional assets of the film, boosting it as a 'suspenseful and funny thriller with a feminist slant.' The critics confirmed these expectations with appraisal of the originality of the plot, the clever dramatic composition, the psychological tension and development, the excellent acting and the use of realistic aesthetics to create a strictly feminist perspective. The film earned qualifications such as 'A Dream Debut', 'Accessible', 'Intelligent', 'Brilliant'. Even the witty dialogues were acknowledged and valued.

Most interestingly, the two objections that were initially voiced in the press did not run along gender lines. One of the female critics, Willy Wielek-Berg of the progressive confessional newspaper *Trouw* (19 February 1982) could not identify with the psychiatrist and approve of her change of mind on the accountability of the women. She had trouble with the women's silence and laughter in the courtroom, it made her upset that they laughed about man-slaughter. And some of the male critics, among whom Henk ten Berge of the rightwing paper *De Telegraaf* (19 February 1982) could not accept that none of the male characters in the film was 'nice' so that he could have identified with him. Peter van Bueren of the progressive *De Volkskrant* (18 February 1982) reflected on the men's exclusion from the communication and bonding processes by affirming that most films tended to marginalize women; now that it was for once the other way around, he argued, also pro-feminist men had to simply accept the filmmaker's choice.

This outstanding evaluation by the critics, nonetheless, provoked an animated debate about the controversial aspects of A QUESTION OF SILENCE that lingered on for months and was fuelled by interviews with and personal appearances of Gorris in Q&As after screenings. Needless to say that this worked as free publicity. The film was released on 18 February, but still in March and April 1982 articles appeared reporting about and contributing to the debate. Gorris herself persistently and amiably replied to the repetitive questions and defended her dramatic choices and feminist stance with serene certainty. She had strictly chosen for the women's perspectives, because she wanted women and men to engage themselves with women's lives; the men were not negatively depicted, but as realistic characters in a male-dominated society. Often it was reported that the women in the auditorium laughed with the women in the film, and that quite a few men did not understand why or were straightly offended by the laughter. A returning question was about the (individual) motives of the three women for killing the shop-owner, which Gorris, like in her film, refused to make explicit. Many spectators (male and female) experienced this refusal as provocative and frightening, thus underscoring the veracity of Gorris' point: if women revolt against the dominant order they are readily judged to be crazy or creepy. The female psychiatrist

and the other women declare the three women perfectly sane and sound in order to subvert such a judgment.

Suggestions for further reading in the context of feminist film analysis of the 1980s  
If I focus in the above on the reception of this iconic film in the Dutch press, you may be aware that it was likewise an international success. In addition, the film stimulated feminist scholars to critically reflect on the complex relations between film theory and practice. As one report documents, the film demanded a rethinking of distribution and release strategies. The initially burdensome distribution in the UK has been put on the record by Jane Root, one of the members of C(inema) O(f) W(omen), in her article 'Distributing "A Question of Silence" – A Cautionary Tale' in Charlotte Brunson, *Films for Women*, London: British Film Institute 1986, p. 213-223. In an issue of *Frauen und Film* devoted to Psychoanalysis and Film (Nr. 36, 1984, p. 61-72) appeared an article by Gabriele Donnerberg, who apparently had attended several audience debates after screenings of the film, discussing the film's form and aesthetics: 'Warum 'Die Stille um Christine M.' kein 'patriarchalisches Erzählkino' ist, obwohl theoretisch alle Bedingungen dazu erfüllt sind' (Why 'A Question of Silence' is not 'patriarchal fiction cinema', even though theoretically all conditions for this are fulfilled). Mary C. Gentile devoted a chapter in her book *Film Feminisms/Theory and Practice* (Westport, Connecticut and London, England: The Greenwood Press 1985, p. 153-165) to A QUESTION OF SILENCE as a film offering a multitude of readings to the spectator. And last but not least, Anneke Smelik in her *And the Mirror Cracked. Feminist Cinema and Film Theory* (Handmills, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 1998, 90-122) provides an analysis of this and Gorris' second film, GEBROKEN SPIEGELS (BROKEN MIRRORS; in Germany released as DIE GEKAUFTE FRAU) of 1984 as 'metaphors of violence and resistance'. Indeed, these texts each from their own position reflect on issues raised by Gorris' film practice vis à vis feminist film and reception theory of the 1980s.

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