



Three women who have never met before suddenly agree to kill the manager of a boutique after he has caught one of them shoplifting. The apparently motiveless murder and its aftermath is the subject of *A Question of Silence*, a first film by a Dutch feminist, Marleen Gorris, which opens simultaneously at Screen on the Green, Islington and the Paris Pullman tomorrow.

We have a Cinema of Women, COW for short, to thank for the release of this controversial, award winning film. After its enthusiastic reception at the Edinburgh Film Festival, COW, as a feminist distribution group, determined that *A Question of Silence* should be seen by a wider audience.

"Both men and women have linked the film, though men tend to be uneasy about it", says Jane Root, of the collective of six who run COW. "The film is not only about women and feminism, it is also an exciting thriller. Everyone knows who did it, but they don't know why they did it, and this is investigated during the trial in flashbacks of the women's lives which show how they have been treated by men."

It is the first really commercial venture by Cinema of Women, whose aim is to do for the cinema what Virago has done for publishing - to provide women film-makers with the means of getting their work shown. The group was started three years ago by several women film-makers who were unhappy with the present state of distribution. They began in the back room of one of their homes and have now moved to an office at Clerkenwell Workshops, which houses theatre groups, craftsmen and the feminist magazine, *Spare Rib*.

"Distribution of feminist films until now has either been through educational institutions or through the alternative cinema", says Caroline Spry, a camera operative, who, with Audrey Summerhill, a film editor, was a founder member of the group. "We felt very much that women should be able to control how their films were distributed, how they would be presented and what they would be seen with."

"Quite often, other distributors would run a feminist film in a programme that was sexist. We wanted to have a space where there wasn't anything working against what we wanted to say. We wanted to ensure that the money made from feminist films, as they became increasingly popular, didn't get ploughed back by distributors into buying sexist films, and we wanted to make them more accessible. We didn't feel that feminist films should be seen as a genre, in the same way as the avant garde."



The Cinema of Women: from left, Jane Root, Caroline Spry, Audrey Summerhill, Denise Vale, Penny Ashbrook

Photograph: Peter Trievnor

Giving the female a new focus in the film world

Cinema of Women's main work until now has been in circulating their films to community groups, trade unions, and educational institutions. Their catalogue contains a list of 34 films. One of the most popular for schools is *Here comes the Bride*, a cautionary look at the image and reality of marriage, in interviews with teenagers. Others are *Taught to be Girls*, about sexism in schools and ways of fighting it, and *Size Ten*, about women's attitude to their physical appearance. Films which have gone out to trade unions include *Risky Business*, about health and safety at work, and *It's Not Your Imagination*, about sexual harassment. There is a range of films about women's health, domestic violence, pornography, prison and art. Cost is from £8 for the shortest to £30 for a feature length film.

A Question of Silence is our first 35 mm film, the first for which we have had extensive paid advertising, and the first that has ever been censored", says Jane Root. "We

managed to buy it with the aid of a loan from the BFI, which we shall have to pay back through box office receipts."

Jane Root, a freelance journalist when not employed at COW, has become adept at badgering. Last year COW managed to track down the owner of the rights for the 1930s German classic, *Maidens in Uniform*, and bought it for a season at the Everyman, Hampstead. Unable to raise a loan from the BFI, they rang round friends asking for loans of £200, until they raised the amount, with the promise that it would be repaid once the film opened.

One or two of the films distributed are made by members of the collective, such as Audrey Summerhill's *Linda Beyond the Expected* - "just 11 minutes to cover all women's oppression, because that was all the money I had at the time."

They admit there has been a problem in the past getting films of sufficiently good quality. Women find it almost impossible to get into



Confronting the law in *A Question of Silence*

the mainstream of British films as technicians, so it is a question of learning from film school or by trial and error, an expensive process when 10 minutes of film reel costs £100.

"All our films are made by women. Although men can be sympathetic towards the feminist position, being a feminist means you are talking from the position of being a woman", says Audrey Summerhill. "We don't see feminism only as women's issues, but as a whole way of seeing the world and understanding what kind of change is needed."

At present there is, as far as they know, only one woman in Britain with a camera operator's union ticket, although Caroline has a ticket as a camera assistant.

Channel 4 is, predictably, an outlet for feminist films, and several are being televised, including a feature length film about violence in marriage, *The Power of Men is the Patience of Women*, from the German film maker Cristina Perincioli.

Clare Colvin

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