

A QUESTION OF GENDER

DUTCH feminist film-maker Marleen Gorris turns the tables on a cinema audience weaned on male violence against women in her remarkable first feature, "A Question Of Silence" (Screen, Islington).

It is a picture from which the male viewer will emerge feeling at the very least uncomfortable, and quite probably threatened.

Threatened not only by her starkly powerful portrayal of man's domination of society — on the domestic front and in professional life — but threatened also by the very presence of women in the cinema.

Superficially, its plot is preposterous: Three women cold-bloodedly mutilate and murder a male boutique owner after he apprehends one of them for shoplifting. Curiously, but most importantly, the women had never met their victim — nor did they know each other.

The film then follows a female psychiatrist's investigation for the impending court case, during which she gradually reaches the conclusion that all three are perfectly sane, a belief that forces her to re-evaluate her own relationship with her husband.

At first they appear to have a model marriage, each respectful of the other's professional life and attuned to the other's personal needs. But Gorris slowly and meticulously uncovers the husband's facade of liberalism to reveal the deep-seated and quite possibly unconscious male values which ever-so-subtly dominate their relationship.

Through the course of her interviews with the women, the psychiatrist learns that each has suffered throughout her life from male domination — Gorris herself would

FILMS

By ROBIN JAROSI and TIM COOPER

doubtless term it mental violence or terrorisation.

One is a "housewife," slaving (without financial reward) for three children and an ungrateful husband who treats her like a robot; she subsequently retreats into a robotic state of catatonic silence.

The second is a fat, jolly waitress in a cafe, enduring the sexiest jibes of her slovenly male clientele; glad to be separated from her husband, she now lives alone, treating herself to occasional luxury in the form of extravagant French cuisine.

The third is a highly intelligent secretary for a sickeningly sympathetic business executive, who recognises her value — but refuses to acknowledge it in terms of promotion or even to communicate it.

Clearly the murder was their spontaneous reaction to a life of male domination —

an act of revenge. In the context of the film, of course, it is a symbolic act, and if it makes the male viewer feel indignant or outraged then it has evidently made its point.

The danger, I feel (speaking as a man) is that the male viewer may be so shocked by the atrocity of the act that he will take it literally, rather than recognise it as a dramatic tool. He may then spend the rest of the film preoccupied with the seemingly ludicrous notion of women murdering a man "just because he's a man," instead of grasping the real point.

Director Gorris says she has been surprised to learn that some men are unable to understand this — I felt initially confused too — but surely that is a vital point in itself: We (men) are so pre-conditioned in our way of thinking that we find it practically impossible to contemplate such violent feelings in a woman.

At any rate, that point is rammed home in the final 20 minutes of the film, when the psychiatrist asserts in court that she considers the women sane, completely confounding the male law-



● DANIELA SILVERIO plays a beautiful Roman aristocrat, engaged in an affair with a film director searching for a female "image" to inspire his next movie, in Michelangelo Antonioni's first Italian film for nearly 20 years, "Identification of a Woman" (Camden Plaza). To be reviewed.

yers, who cannot comprehend the women's "motive."

The truth, of course, is that they find the real motive too horrible even to contemplate.

The film's thriller plot retains a tight grip on the

audience and the performances are utterly convincing — you won't encounter a single scruffy, crop-haired, musclebound feminist stereotype here — while the ironic humour (of which there is plenty) is pitched at exactly the right level: The laughter will stick in any man's throat.

Marleen Gorris does not make the mistake of preaching (and I'm sorry if I have); she has made a film about women — but I Men, on the other hand, may not be actually enjoying this product. It should benefit from this view the "other side