

Cat-
Reverie-
Shadows-
Reflections-
Puppets-
Agency-
Handbag-
Pendulum-
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SPOILER ALERT

The **cat** in *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1923) doesn't make an appearance until part two, as day breaks and the household stirs back into movement. The clock reads seven. Monsieur Beudet heads downstairs, the cat perched on his shoulder. In the living room, he sits and strokes the animal with what the intertitle calls "an untroubled conscience" before heading to work. A few minutes later the cat is seen dashing into his wife Mme Beudet's bedroom. She summons it, strokes it too, releases it. The cat runs off. Always there, the cat, slipping between spaces, humours, and allegiances, never fully domesticated.

Madame and Monsieur Beudet are first introduced through their hands: she plays the piano and turns the pages of a book, he stands in his cloth shop shuffling coins, a measuring tape draped over his shoulders. **Reverie** and industry, entrapment and flight, female reality versus male. In Germaine Dulac's film, considered an early feminist classic, we are shown Mme Beudet's entrapment as well as the reverie that sustains her, the air filled with visions from the fantasy world into which she frequently retreats. When her daydream is set in motion by images in a magazine, these images depart from their function and go off piste—a car drives across a field of clouds, a tennis champion creeps up on Monsieur B. from behind and carries him off.

Her solace and companion is the piano, and Debussy (he prefers Gounod). She inhabits a piercing solitude. Her husband fails to see her, but is he truly as ignorant and unaware as he seems? His running joke, after all, is a "suicide parody" in which he holds an unloaded pistol to his head, a close enactment of her fantasies. Over and over, his sinister, fairground grin interrupts and sabotages her reverie. Like many an Expressionist film, a contrapuntal aesthetic is spun from **shadows**, mirrors and extravagant gestures. Monsieur Beudet smiles far more often than his wife.

The film opens with scenes of a tranquil provincial town under whose surface, we are told, run hidden passions. The **reflections** in the canal are echoed in Mme Beudet's vacant gaze as she brushes her hair in her mirror, impassive and detached. Each surface frames an image but never possesses it. Later on we see Monsieur Beudet grab a doll with such force that it comes apart in his hands. "Fragile like a woman," he says when he sees that its head has come off; his wife is severed from him in thought, only her physical presence remains in the home.

In the film's climactic moment, Monsieur Beudet fires the pistol he doesn't know his wife has loaded at her rather than himself and hits a vase. He assumes she intended the bullet for herself and, shaken by the incident, goes over to her. In his arms, Mme Beudet remains stiff and remote. Despite the agony writ across her face, he cannot read her. As they sit there in their semi-entwined position, the mirror behind them transforms into a puppet theatre in which the **puppets** begin to sway, mocking the futility of all this human drama and pantomime. Or perhaps, unlike the married couple, they have finally broken free of their strings.

And what happens when violent urges acquire substance, when resentment pools into something larger and long-suppressed anger finds its moment of insurrection?

In Marleen Gorris's *A Question of Silence* (1982), made fifty years later, emotions are dipped in colour, expressionist gestures toned down, and key scenes electrified by an ominous synth. One would think a lot had shifted for women after the second wave of feminism of the 1970s, and in many ways it has, yet both films are to varying degrees portraits of imprisonment, circling questions of female **agency**, female will, and the law. For Madame Beudet, the domestic space is the site of ongoing trauma; for the three Dutch women of *A Question of Silence*, a clothing boutique suddenly becomes a space of transgression and murder. (They happen to carry out their attack on 10 March, the same date that Mary Richardson plunged her knife into Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* at the National Gallery in 1914. Richardson's reason was to bring attention to the struggle for the female vote and the fate of imprisoned suffragettes—additionally, she claimed she couldn't stand the way men gawked at the painted nude.) In Dulac's film, the man is a cloth merchant, while in Gorris's, he is the owner of a clothing boutique; their syntax is one of measures and material.

The three Dutch women who commit the murder never exchange a word. In a moment of extraordinary cinematic tension, we too are bystanders as the first woman removes a blouse from the rack and stuffs it into her **handbag**, a close-lipped space that is an extension of self and home. The shopkeeper sees her, walks over, undoes the act. She repeats it. The other female customers in the shop silently watch on. And then, in almost dreamlike succession, as though responding to a spontaneous, tacit conscription, the two other women repeat the act before forming a circle around the shopkeeper and beating him to death. He is now an effigy of all men—past, present, and future.

Three social classes, three psychological profiles: Ann, the jocular waitress with an ungovernable laugh; Christine the catatonic housewife, abandoned daily to an unkempt flat and three small children; and Andrea, a secretary, seductive, defiant, and far more clever than the men believe. As opposed to Madame Beudet's reverie, which is externalised from the start, their inner lives are withheld, the details doled out little by little through interviews with Janina, the criminal psychiatrist assigned to establish their sanity. As Janina's pries out their stories, the women's faces and voices take up residence in her mind. The **pendulum** swing of the Newton's cradle on her desk, a row of steel kinetic balls in which energy is released with a knock-on effect, is like the moment in the shop, when anger is passed on backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. But the very first knock we feel reaches back much further in time, into a long genealogy of the silent and silenced, in which we would find Madame Beudet.

The more fascinated Janina becomes by her clients, the greater the distance from her husband, who shares the male view that they are deranged. The women play with these expectations. Ann breaks down in her prison cell when they don't bring her a clean towel, the Dutch obsession with order in the home cruelly tested. We watch them losing their minds in jail. In the outside world, they were, we believe, entirely sane. Despite their inextricable complicity, the women never exchange a word with one another. The **silence** is intoxicating, more profound than anything they could ever explain. In the final courtroom scene, the judge asks whether

they would have murdered the shop owner had he been a woman. One by one, they erupt into laughter. The kinetic balls swing back into play, and as the laughter reaches a crescendo they are asked to leave, their answer left hanging, unspoken, in the air. Outside the building, Janina's husband is waiting impatiently in the car. But she turns towards the four women standing on the steps, witnesses to the crime scene, and now witnesses to her own situation. She feels their pull. She won't be going home. No one is smiling, and the men are still not listening.