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## *Gently Down the Stream*

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Recent histories of American avant-garde cinema share a general acknowledgment that by the late 1970s and early 1980s experimental film had reached a critical impasse.<sup>1</sup> A change, as yet unnamed, was in the air, its coordinates still uncharted. Certainly, many of the dominant figures of the early seventies were receding: Frampton had redirected his researches from film to the development of computer-assisted, image manipulation and sound synthesis; Landow turned to performance work and occasional forays into symbolic reworkings of his surname; Sharits had returned to painting; Conrad moved into video and Super-8. With such departures, the operative paradigms of avant-garde practice and the concurrent critical discourse that buttressed them began to shift as the experimental cinema found itself once more (as only befits the concept of experimentation) back in a state of flux.

Enter (among others) Su Friedrich, who seemed to emerge precisely at the point at which the notion of the "emerging artist" had itself emerged—in critical histories, funding guidelines, and exhibition rubrics. Friedrich's films certainly looked "new"—conspicuously feminist, poststructural, perhaps postmodern. The work conjoined the reflexive strategies of the "structural film" with contemporary structuralist (semiotic) interests in textuality and attempted a rapprochement of the personal and the political previously associated more with the European avant-garde. There was a neorealist edge to the work and a certain roughness that made Friedrich's films appear more viscerally wrought and less the product of theoretical and/or metahistorical calculation. Friedrich's cinematic response to the American avant-garde's "state of crisis"<sup>2</sup> may well have been largely intuitive—an attempt to find fresh means to handle very personal concerns. And yet her films (particularly the celebrated *Gently Down The Stream*) signalled an important change that was occurring within the contemporary evolution of the experimental cinema—one that proposed new means for older avant-garde pursuits.

Friedrich, herself, has offered the most precise description of *Gently Down The Stream*:

The text of *Gently Down The Stream* is a succession of fourteen dreams taken from eight years of my journals. They were shuffled out of their original chronological order for the purpose of coherence and because often we know/dream something long after, or before, we can use it in our lives. The text is scratched onto the film (with approximately 18 frames per word) so that you hear any voice *but* that of a recorded narrator. The images were chosen for their indirect but potent correspondence to the dream content.<sup>3</sup>

Each of the dream texts is presented by means of a different formal arrangement of a limited set of visual materials: rephotographed film frames, hand-inscribed texts, black

and white leader, punch marks and scratches in the celluloid. Like dreams themselves the imagery of *Gently Down The Stream* is subjected to multiple repetition and revision: not only are individual shots repeated, but much of the film's central section revolves around images that contain repetitive actions. Friedrich continually returns to images of women exercising (on a rowing machine, in a swimming pool). Rather than "acting out" the dreams, these figures serve as cinematic surrogates for the filmmaker, recapitulating her own efforts to work through the often troubling content of the dreams by exercising her art.

Friedrich's exercises cast metaphorical reflections on the materiality of the medium and the process of filmmaking. Their oscillating movements mime the workings of the cinematic apparatus while the diverse manner in which these shots reappear palpably suggests the labors of the filmmaker. As a film exercise, *Gently Down The Stream* demonstrates Friedrich's considerable technical talents and formal creativity as well as her canny historical sense in reappropriating the formal strategies (rephotography, flicker, static imagery, loop printing) generally associated with the "structural film."

*Gently Down The Stream* engages in its formal exercise at precisely the same rate that it attempts to exorcise "certain personal obsessions."<sup>4</sup> Through her punning conflation of *exercise* and *exorcise*, Friedrich effectively shifts the force of her formal innovations into a psychic/emotive register expressive of the dream texts. Beyond merely mustering such visceral devices as flicker and loop printing to dramatize the dream content, however, the filmmaker manages to appropriate the participatory strategies of the "structural film" and thereby interactively bind the work to its audience in the very voice of the individual viewer. As Friedrich coyly notes, "The film is constructed from my dreams of women and men as lovers and adversaries. The voice you hear might be your own."<sup>5</sup>

In precisely this way, Friedrich's becomes a public exorcism, one that continually exposes and infects the viewer with the psychic consequences of religious constraints, familial binds and sexual conflicts. The film's overall shape is partially predicated upon this therapeutic need. Friedrich's primary device of reworking the same basic material aims at both a technical and a psychic mastery: "Anything repeated often enough loses its mysterious ritual power. . . ."<sup>6</sup> Some sense of this mastery begins to emerge in the final sections of the film which unfold against the moving backdrop of unbounded water rather than the confined imagery of the rower and the swimmer.

In the penultimate dream, for example, Friedrich has moved beyond the primal forces that shaped the earlier psycho-dramatic tales into a purely textual realm.

Five women sing in acapella  
 funny harmony  
 they spell the word truth  
 in German  
 I spell B L I N D N E S S  
 A man says  
 Their Song Is A Very Clever Pun  
 I say I can't agree  
 I don't know German<sup>7</sup>

Here the dream itself turns on a word play that contrasts the true and the false (*blind* in German) and in so doing acknowledges the centrality of language in analysis (both psycho-



Su Friedrich's *Gently Down the Stream*

analysis and film analysis) while, at the same time, highlighting the aesthetic possibilities (graphic and poetic) for textual material in/on film. Friedrich extends her psychic and technical mastery of these materials in the final dream. This most overdeterminedly oneiric passage features a zany encounter between a hungry leopard and a pair of blue hummingbirds, which is given dynamic articulation in the flickering deployment of the semi-poetic text against a graphic field of punch marks and gemlike gouges in the celluloid.

While in much of *Gently Down The Stream* Friedrich seems explicitly engaged in purging herself of very private spectres, the work indirectly attends to some of the ghosts of cinema past as the film comments on the dialectic nature of aesthetic continuity and change. It was the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who had argued against the existence of essences and opted instead for the inevitability of change based upon his direct observation of such natural phenomena as flowing water: one can never step into the same river twice.<sup>8</sup> While *Gently Down The Stream* illustrates the inevitability of change (especially within the avant-garde), the film goes on to reveal the depths of artistic continuity. Despite its many unique qualities, Friedrich's work is unimaginable without the artistic precedents of such films as Frampton's *Surface Tension* (1968), Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966), or Sharits' *S:TREAM:S:S: ECTION:S: ECTION:S:S: ECTIONED* (1968–71). *Gently Down The Stream* resurrects these historic texts, absorbing their lessons and moving on not with the absolute rupture of Heraclitus, but flowing gently down the stream.

NOTES

1. These assessments of the very recent history of experimental filmmaking in this country range from P. Adams Sitney's upbraiding administered in his review of the Whitney Biennial film selection ("Rear-Garde," in *American Film*, July–August 1985, pp. 13 and 61), to more salutary commentary by critics like Jim Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, who does present in his *Film: The Front Line 1983* (Denver: Arden Press, Inc., 1983, p. 23) a critique of *Millennium Film Journal*: "... it's not a magazine that wants to change the world; it wants to keep the world exactly the way that it is."

2. Sitney, "Rear-Garde," p. 13.

3. Su Friedrich, "Gently Down The Stream," offset sheet.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Su Friedrich, notes for *Gently Down The Stream*, Millennium Film Workshop Spring Series 1986 schedule.

6. Friedrich, offset sheet.

7. Su Friedrich, *Gently Down The Stream*, chapbook, 1982.

8. *The PreSocratics* edited by Philip Wheelwright (New York: The Odyssey Press, Inc., 1966), p. 71.