

# Serious Fun

By David Edelstein

**NEW DIRECTORS / NEW FILMS.** Presented by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art. At the Museum of Modern Art through April 14.

Film festival surveys, like this one, are generally read by (1) the filmmakers and their mothers (if they can read English); (2) distributors eager to know whether they can count on good reviews for slow, difficult works (the folks at TROMA, which specializes in films like *Zombie Island Massacre*, have been unusually persistent in seeking my opinion of *Wildrose*); and (3) editors, sometimes. New Directors/New Films, presented by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art, is the New York Film Festival's studious, radical cousin: movies booed at the festival for being "difficult" are usually on the "commercial" end of the New Directors spectrum. Most are far to the left politically, many are "nonnarrative," and the slant is more anthropological than dramatic. This year, they introduce us to different cultures by showing the people who stand against them—dissidents in Brazil, restless youth in India, maltreated women in China and Korea, maltreated women in the U.S., maltreated women in New Zealand. They are also, in the second week, heavy going—although not to the point of maltreatment.

The best are worth the slog. In Su Friedrich's aggressively arty *The Ties That Bind* (April 4, 6), the narrator is a German woman from a liberal family—not a Nazi sympathizer, but not a freedom fighter, either. Like most Germans, she never hurt anyone personally but has been punished and reviled in the years since the war for allowing Hitler's crimes to go unchallenged. That's one binding tie; the other, no less central, is between this woman and her daughter, who happens to have made the movie and whose questions to her mother are presented, one word at a time, in a quivery grade-school scrawl. Shot in bleached black and white, the movie offers the mother's recollections and the daughter's free-form visual meditation: her mother bathing in the sea, her mother's gesturing hand, beads of water on her mother's flesh, and the piece-by-piece construction of a miniature house. Another motif is the *New York Post* and its splashy headlines, many Nazi-related, viz., "Madman's Diary Shocks the World."

The first judgment in my notebook is the blunt "diffuse and pretentious." Take that! But after a while I gave up fighting and simply listened to the mother's story, which told of persecution by her countrymen when she wouldn't declare her ardor for the Reich; and then persecution by the occupying army for being German and, ipso facto, swine.



JAMES HAMILTON

**Friedrich: an original, scrawling her naiveté on an eternal chalkboard**

Then the pictures began to resonate. One goes through something similar at a Robert Wilson production: an image will seem ambiguous or irrelevant, but will hover in the mind and be activated later by another. When I think back on this fragmented movie, it seems all of a piece.

The filmmaker's scratchy questions are her way of telling us that, compared to what her mother has lived through, she is just a child, scrawling her naiveté on an eternal chalkboard. And so, she implies, are we: again and again we confront how much cultural debris there is between our experience and her mother's—including those tabloid headlines, which routinely

exploit Nazism for cheap shocks and titters. Friedrich's technique captures the bleakness of her mother's worldview, the limbo bounded by outrage at the injustices done to her—including her abandonment by an American husband who warned her, when they married and moved to America, that one day he might walk—and guilt over her passive complicity in her country's history. (Her crime was not risking martyrdom.) The film is an original: a moving and courageous tribute from a child to a mother's beleaguered memory.