

JANET CUTLER

Su Friedrich

Breaking the Rules



New York-based filmmaker Su Friedrich (b. 1954) has created a rich body of work that has established her as a major figure in contemporary avant-garde cinema. The maker of formally elegant and emotionally evocative films, Friedrich has produced Super 8 films, videotapes, and a dozen 16mm films, most notably *Cool Hands, Warm Heart* (1979), *Gently Down the Stream* (1981), *The Ties That Bind* (1984), *Damned If You Don’t* (1987), *Sink or Swim* (1990), *First Comes Love* (1991), *Rules of the Road* (1993), *Hide and Seek* (1996), and *The Odds of Recovery* (2002). For all but *Hide and Seek*, she served as writer, director, editor, and cinematographer.

Friedrich’s personal, provocative films are finely woven tapestries of disparate materials: text scratched onto film stock, intertitles, black-and-white leader, still photographs, home movies, found footage, television broadcasts, and original images; ambient sound, spoken word, popular music, and silence. Seen and heard together, Friedrich’s juxtapositions of images, words, and music lend her films great intensity and power. Watching Friedrich’s films is like watching a person’s mind working: you can sense the filmmaker thinking through the possible ways to proceed, drawing parallels and making connections between otherwise unrelated images and sounds, encouraging the viewer to follow a line of thought to the point at which a new idea or a new understanding emerges.

Part of what makes Friedrich’s work compelling is the way that it

resists simple explication. Her films characteristically address highly charged, interrelated issues and explore them in all their complexity—past and present, personal and political, daily life and dream. The intelligence of Friedrich’s work is linked to a sense of urgency. Her most satisfying films are driven by a need to look closely at disturbing, personal experiences, including vivid dreams, childhood traumas, emerging sexuality, turbulent romances, and medical problems. The films bravely lay bare her most intimate concerns, examine her darkest fears and strongest desires, and prompt viewers to address their own sexual identity, family history, religious upbringing, and mortality.

Friedrich lends her works emotional resonance and intellectual clarity through a variety of strategies. She carefully structures intensely private material, maintaining its raw power while giving it lyricism and poignancy. She blends the past and the present, offering insights into the significance of memory. She displaces painful experiences onto ironic tales, using humor to balance difficult material. She mixes intimate recollections with elements of popular culture and gender politics, placing her own experience in a broader social context. She makes use of the conventions of melodrama, allowing her audiences some of the pleasures of narrative filmmaking and attaining a degree of accessibility unusual for experimental filmmakers.

Friedrich’s quirky, self-conscious works defy conventional definition. Experimental in form, they are driven by storytelling. Autobiographical in content, they incorporate social and cultural criticism. Mixed genre in nature, they juxtapose avant-garde, documentary, and narrative modes. Breaking the rules, or rather making them up as she goes along, Friedrich crafts a surprising, unique cinema. At once angry and droll, wounded and analytic, Friedrich embraces and critiques her chosen subjects: the film medium and her own life.

Because Friedrich’s films overlap genres, scholars have taken different approaches to her work. For example, Chris Holmlund calls *Rules of the Road* “autobiography” and *First Comes Love* “ethnography.”¹ Holmlund’s analysis of *Damned If You Don’t* asserts that the film is in part a “remake” or a “makeover” of *Black Narcissus* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1947), a kind of revisionist melodrama that “reconstructs a narrative of heterosexual desire giving it a happy ending for lesbians.”² In a book that examines intersections between the avant-garde and ethnography, Catherine Russell calls *Hide and Seek* “an experimental documentary about adolescent lesbian identity . . . to think of queer filmmaking as ethnographic is to recognize the problem of representation as

self-representation, in which the self is socially and sexually configured." Russell sees Friedrich as the maker of "new autobiography" or "auto-ethnography" in that Friedrich "understands . . . her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes."³ Michael Renov classifies *Sink or Swim* as "domestic ethnography," asserting that in assembling a portrait of her father as other, Friedrich is also representing the self. According to Renov, "*Sink or Swim* functions as a kind of ethnography—instructive and generalizable—for the ways it exceeds the bounds of family portraiture. The film is structured by a series of generic elements that reinforce the universality of the subject matter."⁴ The fact that Friedrich's work invites a variety of critical perspectives is evidence of both its hybridity and its unique sensibility.

While Friedrich's films are distinctly her own, they also have precedents in subgenres of avant-garde practice: the psychodrama (*Damned If You Don't*), the trance film (*Gently Down the Stream*), the structural film (*Sink or Swim*), and the diary film (*Rules of the Road*).⁵ Yet Friedrich both inherits and rebels against the idioms of avant-garde cinema. Film scholars and critics like Bruce Jenkins credit Friedrich with reworking the traditions of the avant-garde, turning existing film practices to her own purposes. Jenkins notes that "*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 . . . generally associated with the 'structural film.'" While Jenkins cites Friedrich's singular talents as a filmmaker, he also points out that "Friedrich's work is unimaginable without the artistic precedents of such films as [Hollis] Frampton's *Surface Tension* (1968), [Tony] Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966) or [Paul] Sharits's *STREAM:S:S:ECTION:S:SECTION:S:S:SECTIONED* (1968–71). *Gently Down the Stream* resurrects these historic texts, absorbing their lessons and moving on."⁶ Liz Kotz writes, "Working to reopen and expand the traditions of American avant-garde filmmaking, Friedrich's work has brought a deeply lyrical style to questions of lesbian identity and lesbian desire. . . . she refuses to fetishize 'the personal' as the locus of meaning in the heavily codified manner of much American 'personal' filmmaking of the 1960s and 1970s."⁷ Scott MacDonald explains that, "By the 1980s, Friedrich was becoming convinced that the rejection of personal filmmaking, structural filmmaking, or other approaches did not 'liberate' cinema in any practical sense; it simply narrowed the options. The issue was not to avoid the personal or the systemic, but to reappropriate and reenergize as many useful dimensions of the previous film-critical practices as possible."⁸ At a time when subjectivity and interiority were no

longer sovereign, and when the cultural politics of feminism and gay activism gave rise to a new wave of socially engaged filmmaking, Friedrich's work constituted an important intervention. It redefined personal filmmaking in formal and thematic terms.

Film historians have also noted that, in appropriating and reinventing elements of experimental practice, Friedrich helped to reinvigorate American avant-garde cinema at a moment when the movement seemed played out.⁹ While acknowledging that her work may have served that function, Friedrich clearly regards her filmmaking as instinctive and reactive. She cites others—Peggy Ahwesh and Leslie Thornton—who in the 1980s also embraced and reacted against dominant avant-garde practices, and in so doing conceived a new generation of avant-garde film: "So I think in some crazy way in my early films I was reacting against both psychodramas and structural films, and trying to do something different. But mostly I was just pissed off and thought, 'Some of these films are really boring, and some of them have potential but they're really badly crafted, and *where are all the women?*'"¹⁰

Friedrich's films challenge the modes of what was at the time a predominantly male enterprise, both in mainstream and independent filmmaking, and add a feminist perspective. As Laura Rabinowitz points out, the world of avant-garde filmmaking, partly because of its marginal status, initially provided women with access to media but eventually reaffirmed their marginalization.¹¹ Friedrich is among a new generation of women experimental filmmakers who took advantage of screenings at the Millennium Film Workshop and the Collective for Living Cinema, honed their skills with equipment available through the cooperative workshops, and emerged as artists eager to make films that provide a passionate critique of patriarchy.

Women's Bodies, Bodies of Water: *Hot Water* (1978)

I took a three-night filmmaking class at the Millennium that was taught by David Lee. On the first day of the class, he made us write a list of the ten things that for us were the most important or powerful in our lives. And then he made us read the list out loud (I now make my students do this at the beginning of every class—which they hate).¹² It was such a revelation for me. My list probably included "riding my bike" and "eating ice cream," but the last thing on the list was "fear." And when I wrote that I thought, "O.K., that's the thing for me—fear."—Su Friedrich

When Friedrich turned from photography to filmmaking, her first effort was striking and revealing. In a Super 8 sound film called *Hot Water* (1978), Friedrich clearly and unselfconsciously introduces concerns she addressed in later films. Initially inspired by her childhood fear of and fascination with water (a topic most richly explored in *Sink or Swim*), *Hot Water* rhythmically patterns images of water in its several forms: a gymnasium swimming pool (a young woman enters the water and swims away); a bubbling potful of boiling water (a woman drops a brick of frozen vegetables into the pot and recoils when, as she pushes the floating brick under water, her fingertips are burned); and snow blanketing a car's windshield and hood (someone brushes it away in three separate shots using three distinct, sweeping arm movements). Another image simply evokes water: a woman exercises on the gymnasium's rowing machine, energetically pumping oars as if she were speeding across the surface of a lake. The film begins with a dedication to bodies of water: the Swanee River, the River Styx, and the Red Sea.

As in Friedrich's later works, the female body is a central motif in *Hot Water*, and the film's main setting, the gymnasium, is an ideal place in which to take pleasure in observing the female protagonist in motion and repose. The film's footage includes the woman's nude back in the changing room and in the massage sequences, her crouched body in the rowing equipment sequences, her sleek body in the swimming sequences, and her feet crossing the deck and entering the pool or being fitted into the loops of the rowing machine. Friedrich's lingering shots caress the woman's body: camera movements glide down the protagonist's nude back during the massage, down her backstroke-swimming body from face to feet as the splashing water churns around her like the boiling water on the stove, down her torso on the rowing equipment from her shoulders to the space between her legs. The filmmaker celebrates the strength and fluid motions of the woman's body rowing and swimming, seeking out its sensuous qualities.

Hot Water is emblematic of Friedrich's work in that its title constitutes a puzzle for the viewer to solve, with numerous possible meanings to entertain. Most immediately, the phrase "hot water" suggests "getting into hot water," or getting into trouble. But what sort of trouble? Is the filmmaker courting danger? In over her head? Considering a sexual encounter bound to end badly? Characteristically, Friedrich's titles are drawn from simple childhood songs and games (*Gently Down the Stream*, *Hide and Seek*, *First Comes Love*) and colloquial expressions (*Sink or Swim*, *Odds of Recovery*, *Rules of the Road*) that take on multiple associa-

tions in her hands. In addition, *Hot Water* employs a back-and-forth rhythm that elicits an open-ended consideration of pain and pleasure, fear and desire. The film marks the beginning of Friedrich's attempts to express in poetic rather than literal terms topics she returns to in *Gently Down the Stream* and *Damned If You Don't*, including the multifaceted tensions between eroticism and repression, pleasure and guilt. In fact, *Hot Water* signals an ambivalence that exists in all her films—a conflict between denying and facing up to fears, repressing and expressing sexuality.

Friedrich's overriding themes are present in her earliest film, but her mastery of technique grew over time. With limited experience and means, Friedrich made films that necessarily resembled a reinvention of the cinema. She began with simply edited, silent black-and-white exercises before moving on to complex sound-and-color works (except for *Hot Water*, with a sound track improvised on toy recorders and drums, Friedrich's first half-dozen films are silent). The course of her career, full of false starts¹³ and great leaps forward, was not simply a passage from apprentice to accomplished filmmaker, but rather a series of steps taken in order to discover a cinematic language to convey a growing and deepening set of concerns. As she says, "In some cases, I do the thing when it *needs* to be done rather than because it *should* be done." As she conceptualizes each new project, Friedrich expands her filmmaking skill to accommodate her aspirations, extending the length of her films, scratching words onto the filmstrip so that the viewer reads as well as watches a work, drafting text, or adding music. In this way, Friedrich's work progresses simultaneously in thematic and formal ways.

Film and Feminism:

Cool Hands, Warm Heart (1979) and *Scar Tissue* (1979)

Friedrich's involvement in the women's movement informs her work in the late 1970s and resurfaces in the more recent *The Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire Too* (1994), made with Janet Baus. This documentary celebrates the political activism of members of "The Lesbian Avengers," including Friedrich, and depicts the first year of the group's activities. In her own work, Friedrich's feminism is most evident in early, relatively didactic films like *Cool Hands, Warm Heart* and *Scar Tissue*.

Cool Hands, Warm Heart depicts women performing private rituals, such as shaving their legs and their armpits, in public streets, on a make-

shift wooden stage before a gathering crowd. In each episode a woman makes her way through the crowd to the stage and challenges the performers. A performer shaves her legs, and the woman wipes shaving cream from a leg and applies it to the performer's face as a man would before shaving his beard. A performer cuts open her shirt to shave her armpits, and the woman places a flower on the performer's lap. A performer braids her hair, and the woman hands her scissors, with which the performer cuts off her braid and loops it around the woman's neck. At one point, the woman stops to look in a mirror and puts on eyeliner. The film's written text reads, "Can I stop them if I can't stop?" The woman is shown to be both critical of and complicit in the rituals compulsively performed to meet socially constructed definitions of femininity. Eventually, the woman becomes an onstage performer, peeling an apple with a knife.

Toward the end of the film, the woman is pulled offstage by another woman, who accompanies her to an arcade where they shoot rifles, play video games, and compete at table hockey. The fun the two women have together, engaging in aggressive entertainments away from the crowd's watchful eyes, suggests an alternative to the violence they do to themselves daily with razors and scissors. In a magical moment, the women play an arcade driving game, and then are seen riding a bicycle together.

Cool Hands, Warm Heart is grounded in the gritty reality of Manhattan's rough-and-tumble Lower East Side, which Friedrich's film transforms into a kind of dreamscape. Its freeze frames poeticize candid footage of the watching men and the women's bicycle ride, as does its poetic text filled with disturbing imagery, implying that film and fantasy overlap. One segment relates:

IN A HOUSE A TREE GREW
IT TOOK ROOT
IT SHATTERED THE WINDOWS
IMPALED THE INHABITANTS
ROCKED THE FOUNDATION
BUT AS IT TORE THROUGH THE ROOF
I WOKE MYSELF UP

By transferring the daily routines of women to the realm of public spectacle, the filmmaker asks us to consider the meaning of and motivation for the activities she documents. As Friedrich calls them, "these

things we do out of fear—we shave the hair off our legs and our armpits—because otherwise we think we won't look like women."

Like *Cool Hands, Warm Heart*, but in a more concise way, *Scar Tissue* addresses the dangers women face in a male-dominated world. In *Scar Tissue*, Friedrich cuts between shots of women's feet in high-heeled shoes and shots of men's midsections to comment on gender roles and power relationships in what seems to be the business world. The film has an ominous quality, its men aggressively poking cigars at each other, standing belly to belly and briefcase to briefcase. Toward the end of the film, the women run, while the men walk in a purposeful, menacing way. Friedrich addresses issues of gender coding in her simple depictions of postures and gestures. Would the women rest their arms confidently across their midsections or stuff their hands into their pockets? Would the men balance themselves uncomfortably on high heels? Limiting her film to contrasting views of men and women, Friedrich suggests ways in which women in the workplace necessarily build "scar tissue."

Early in her career, however, Friedrich made a dramatic turn from social criticism to autobiography, as did other avant-garde filmmakers in the 1960s and 1970s. Examining that earlier wave of autobiographical films, P. Adams Sitney catalogues important differences between autobiography in film and in literature. He argues that "what makes autobiography one of the most vital developments in the cinema of the late Sixties and early Seventies is that the very making of an autobiography constitutes a reflection on the nature of the cinema, and often on its ambiguous association with language."¹⁴ Su Friedrich's early 1980s autobiographical work reflects and elaborates on this dictum. Centering on her dream life, Friedrich's films use visual fragments and scratched text to call attention to the filmmaking process and the written word.

Film and the Evocation of Dreams:

Gently Down the Stream (1981) and *But No One* (1982)

Gently Down the Stream is Friedrich's first fully realized silent film, one in which she demonstrates a determination to depart from earlier, more "rigid" films. The film incorporates narratives taken from Friedrich's journal of ninety-six dreams. In planning the film, Friedrich narrowed down the number of dreams to forty, then thirteen. Abbreviated dream plots scratched onto the filmstrip allow the viewer entry into the world of the film. Friedrich's program notes explain that "you hear your own voice as



Marty Pottenger
in Su Friedrich's
*Gently Down the
Stream*, 1981.
Courtesy of Su
Friedrich.

you read." Because the film is silent, the scratched words, which have a strong graphic quality, work both as a visual component and as the film's dominant voice. At times, the words tremble, suggesting a less stable element than the concrete images of religious icons, gymnasium activities, views from the Staten Island Ferry, abstract flashes of light and dark, and the surface of the sea.

One of the most interesting aspects of Friedrich's work is the complex relationship between words and images.¹⁵ In *Gently Down the Stream*, the poetic rather than literal images have a mysterious, yet powerful relationship to each other and to language. Thus, as Friedrich writes in her program notes, images of "animals, saints, water and women are chosen for their indirect but potent correspondence to the text." For example, recycled images of *Hot Water's* rowing machine accompany the dream text:

WALK INTO CHURCH
MY MOTHER TREMBLES
TRANCES
RECITING A PRAYER ABOUT ORGASM
I START TO WEEP.

The images of *Gently Down the Stream* are not meant to illustrate the dreams. Rather, Friedrich establishes "metaphoric and metonymic relationships" between words and images. In this way, she uses film technique to approximate dream mechanisms like condensation and displacement, which transform literal meaning into symbolic narratives. However, the film does not invite specific dream analysis. Instead, it

suggests the evocative way dreams trigger images that work together and against one another.¹⁶

In discussing the film's stories, which focus on two relationships (one involving a man, the other a woman), Friedrich acknowledges that she relied entirely on her own vision, rather than a feminist agenda, in shaping the film, a decision she's made many times since: "At first it seemed that if I was going to be a 'good' feminist I should show the relationship with the woman to be a good one as compared to the relationship with the man. But the dreams revealed that both relationships were pretty much failures, and that seemed more realistic than trying to show some theory about how relationships *should* be."¹⁷

Friedrich's subsequent works are never doctrinaire. In *First Comes Love*, she was attracted to the ritual quality of weddings, even while decrying the fact that (at the time) lesbians and gays were allowed to marry in only one country—Denmark. In making *Damned If You Don't*, she began the film fully intending to launch an attack on the Catholic Church but found herself moved by its attempts to convince individuals to lead moral lives.¹⁸ Her expression of these tensions and ambiguities—her following the uncertain path—enlivens her thinking and technique, adding surprise and depth to her films.

A related film, *But No One*, includes material that Friedrich could not fit into *Gently Down the Stream*. Unlike that earlier film, *But No One* addresses a single dream and employs a limited set of images: a construction site with workers and a dump truck, prostitutes walking the streets and approaching cars, fish at market, a woman who removes her robe and enters a bathtub, and abstract lines. These images are juxtaposed with words scratched onto the surface of the film. The visual material of *But No One* corresponds to the waking world of the filmmaker—the view in and around her bathtub, through her window, on her block, at her neighborhood market—but it is cast in the form of a dream. Thus, Friedrich establishes a contrast between her relatively banal daily life and her rich inner life. Yet it is clear that the images in her real world, like her dreams, are troubling: again and again the prostitutes approach the cars, the construction workers destroy and rebuild, and the fish are dumped from tanks of water onto market shelves and gasp open-mouthed, in an eerie, soundless way.

Friedrich establishes links between the bathing woman, construction workers, sex workers, and marketed fish. The fish are removed from water, while the woman enters water. Faces on the fabric of the woman's discarded kimono echo the faces of the fish. Here there is a more literal

relationship between elements than in *Gently Down the Stream*: the shots of a man on a fire escape are accompanied by text that reads “fat boy stands on a ledge”; shots of the gaping fish are accompanied by “babies of all races float by in colorful clothes, all dead and dying, little mouths crying above the water.” However, its compact constellation of repeated images is satisfying, an important part of Friedrich’s ongoing exploration of film’s ability to work like dreams and convey a unique, personal vision.

Film and Memory:

The Ties That Bind (1984) and *Sink or Swim* (1990)

The Ties That Bind and *Sink or Swim* both address the importance of the past by structuring disparate materials to evoke memory. *The Ties That Bind*¹⁹ is a significant departure from the films that came before. It is fifty-five minutes long, it has sound, and it features Friedrich’s mother, Lore Bucher Friedrich, talking about her life in Germany during the 1930s and 1940s. Friedrich interviews her mother, and the viewer hears her mother’s answers but never the filmmaker’s questions (although they occasionally appear as scratched text). Lore Bucher and her family experienced the rise of the Third Reich and the war, and while otherwise conventional, they were staunchly unsympathetic to Hitler. Bucher later came to the United States with her American husband, Friedrich’s father. This is not a traditional documentary portrait; while Friedrich’s mother speaks on the sound track, the accompanying images rarely correspond to her words. Instead, the film presents a rich mix of material: various nonsynchronous images of the mother; footage Friedrich shot on a trip to Ulm, Germany, to see where her mother grew up; archival footage of the war; home movie footage taken after the war; an early cinema single-shot film of a woman dancing while holding an American flag; and footage of Friedrich participating in political protests in the present. In keeping with Friedrich’s original impulse to make a film about uprooted people without a home, the film features shots of hands constructing a model of a German house and then destroying it.

The primary tension comes from the filmmaker’s uncertainty about what her mother might reveal about the past: how her mother’s family was affected by Hitler’s rise to power, whether her mother should have done more to resist, what means her mother employed to survive the war and the subsequent liberation, whether she herself would have behaved differently in her mother’s place, whether the filmmaker should be more

politically engaged in the present. In spite of the charged nature of the interview (summed up by Bucher, speaking of the shame in being German: “It is a persecution to the end of my life and I don’t deserve it”), only one overt conflict emerges:

The thing that was most difficult for me to figure out was how to deal with the part when my mother is talking about Dachau and she says, “Nobody was killed there.” I felt I had to find a way to say “No, actually . . .” so I scratched the facts about deaths at Dachau onto the film. When I showed her the finished film, I thought she was going to say, “How dare you undermine me,” but she didn’t say anything about that part of the film. What she said, which was bizarre, was that she could prove she wasn’t in the Hitler Youth, and in order to do that she showed me a document that was signed with her then-married name. At that point, she revealed to me that she had been married in Germany to another man prior to marrying my father. I was probably thirty-five years old at the time, and I never knew that she’d been married before, so that was a completely unexpected revelation for me.

Sink or Swim, which expresses Friedrich’s profound ambivalence toward her father, is her “classic” film, the one that best represents her work; it is most often rented and sold, included in academic courses, and written about by scholars.²⁰ Friedrich establishes a rigorous structure—twenty-six scenes, each corresponding to a letter of a reversed alphabet from Z to A—to address painful but ultimately liberating childhood memories. Some scenes are silent and others are accompanied by Friedrich’s stories about her childhood, recounted in a matter-of-fact tone by a young girl. The film chronicles Friedrich’s life with her father, a linguist and anthropologist who left the family in 1965. Unlike *The Ties That Bind*, this film is about the filmmaker’s memories, rather than those of a parent. Over the course of *Sink or Swim*, Friedrich provides damning anecdotes about a father who taught her the mechanics of swimming before throwing her into the water so she could “sink or swim.” He told her about deadly water moccasins waiting in nests at the bottom of the lake for unsuspecting swimmers; he held her and her sister’s heads under water in the bathtub to punish them; he taught her to play chess and then refused to play again after her first win; he sent her home from a trip to Mexico to punish her for being out too late with a boy.

Sink or Swim contains Friedrich’s most complex interweaving of sounds and images and includes an extraordinarily nuanced, many-faceted relationship between past and present, reportage and poetry. The

film's materials include home movie footage, images from television sitcoms like *Father Knows Best*, educational films about reproduction, documentary footage of women bodybuilders, and newly shot images.

In *Sink or Swim*, some stories are illustrated with completely unrelated images—like the story about my father writing the poem and the images of me putting roses in a vase—and at other times there's a more direct correspondence—like the story about writing in my diary combined with the images of Catholic schoolchildren, which I used because as a child I went to Catholic school. But I consciously wanted *Sink or Swim* to include both direct and indirect correspondences. I wanted to give the viewer's imagination room to play, not just provide them with illustrations of the voiceover stories.

As with many of her films, Friedrich first intended to denounce her subject but ultimately abandoned a one-sided approach. Although many of *Sink or Swim*'s stories reveal Friedrich's father to be surprisingly cruel and distant, others acknowledge that he too is a victim of his past—he lost his sister to drowning in childhood and experienced cultural pressures to behave in an unemotional, authoritarian manner.²¹ Although Friedrich's father initially refused to see the film, his reaction upon seeing it shocked the filmmaker.

My father had a remarkable response to *Sink or Swim*. He sent me a letter and the gist of it was, "Like all your other work, *Sink or Swim* was technically brilliant, but I won't give you an *explication du texte* . . . I don't know whether you remember, but in Otto's book . . ."—he had a brother named Otto who was a writer—" . . . he used me as an example, and so I find that I am pleased once again to have provided someone with good subject matter." So he ignored everything critical in *Sink or Swim* and simply complimented himself for giving me good material from which to make a film! As much as I thought I knew him, that degree of egotism just floored me.

Typically, Friedrich's films arrive at a resolution, even though some endings are ambiguous or ironic. At the conclusion of *Sink or Swim*, Friedrich tells the story of how, instead of continuing her efforts to swim across the lake, as her father demanded, she decided turn back and rejoin her friends, an act of defiant self-assertion. Yet, as the song she sings at the end of the film suggests ("Now I know my A-B-Cs, tell me what you think of me"), Friedrich still yearns on some level for her father's love and approval. She explains, "I was angry at my father for many years, and it

wasn't until I made *Sink or Swim* that I thought, 'It's not just about being angry, it's about admitting to yourself that you wanted to have a father who loved you.'"

Film and Religion: *Damned If You Don't* (1987)

A priest is by definition blameless and he's telling people "Look at your sin, look at your sin," and I'm saying, "I've sinned, I've sinned. And maybe you have too. And if you have, maybe it's not so bad."—Su Friedrich

The tension between repressive Catholicism and the expression of lesbian desire is an important subtext in much of Friedrich's work. With *Damned If You Don't*, Friedrich openly explores the conflict between the powerful vow of chastity and the irresistible lure of sexuality. At the beginning of *Damned If You Don't*, a woman falls asleep while watching a television broadcast of *Black Narcissus*, a melodramatic film about simmering sexuality in a secluded convent. Friedrich calls attention to the televised footage by leaving in the "roll bars" caused by filming television, and by casting the televised footage in black and white rather than in its original glowing color. In addition, Friedrich selects sequences of *Black Narcissus* that depict the tensions between the "good" nun, the "bad" nun, and Mr. Dean (the object of their desire), and this footage is accompanied by droll commentary in which a narrator underlines the sexual underpinning of the film. As *Damned If You Don't* proceeds, the woman shadows and finally confronts an attractive young nun. Friedrich introduces a reading from Judith C. Brown's 1986 *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*, which includes sexually explicit testimony given by a nun regarding her seduction by another nun (the seducer was subsequently imprisoned for her transgressions), as well as recollections by a friend of Friedrich's about growing up Catholic. The film also includes candid footage of nuns on the streets, as well as images of whales, swans, and sea snakes undulating sensually. Friedrich ends *Damned If You Don't* with an extraordinarily erotic scene in which the woman slowly and ceremoniously removes one after another the many layers of the nun's habit until the nun stands nude before her. The eager lovemaking that follows is a consummation ideal for a film addressing the difficulties of achieving erotic release, although as critics have pointed out, it flies in the face of religious and feminist prohibitions against erotic depictions of women's bodies on film.²²



Ela Troyano and
Peggy Healey in Su
Friedrich's *Damned
If You Don't*, 1987.
Courtesy of
Su Friedrich.

Noting the influence of Catholicism on her career, Friedrich draws surprising parallels between filmmaking and sermonizing:

When I make art I do feel that sometimes I'm exhorting people to deal with themselves or deal with a situation. "Are you afraid of your medical problems? Are you having trouble with having a gay identity? What's your relationship like with your parents? Whatever it might be, try to own up to that and do something about it and make your life better." I think that's kind of like sermonizing, but I didn't make the connection until a few years ago between my childhood experience of listening to the weekly Sunday sermons and this impulse I seem to have to exhort people to look seriously at their lives, consider the moral implications of their behavior and speak openly about the behavior of others.

The complexity of Friedrich's sound tracks is evident in *Damned If You Don't*. In this film, she collages witty, spoken analysis of *Black Narcissus*, reading of Renaissance-era testimony, and present-day reminiscences. The film's concluding erotic scene is presented in breathless silence. For Friedrich, however, music is a more complicated issue. She acknowledges that a growing challenge in her work has been whether and when to use music as an element: "I'm no longer the purist that I was in my first works, when I just wouldn't use music no matter how great the temptation." She employs music for the first time in *Sink or Swim* (the Schubert song and the "ABC" ditty), but withholds its extensive use until *First Comes Love* (which she describes as having "wall-to-wall" music). Music is also an important element in *Rules of the Road*, used by Friedrich to evoke the mood of the period.

Film and Cultural Iconography:

First Comes Love (1991) and *Rules of the Road* (1993)

In *First Comes Love*, Friedrich cuts together footage that traces conventional high points of four different weddings, using popular music as a counterpoint to the images. Friedrich's editing strategy has a disruptive effect, since no single wedding is viewed in a continuous way and no piece of music is heard in its entirety. Instead, Friedrich presents characteristic moments in a typical wedding: arrivals at the church, posing for photographs, and sweeping up rice. Focusing not on the whole, but on the telling details, her camera searches out bouquets, limousines, and gowns without individualizing particular couples or wedding parties. The film's transitions are purposefully abrupt, emphasizing the repetition and sameness of each "special event."

Friedrich's assertive technique, including rapid camera movements and jagged editing, as well as eclectic musical accompaniment, call attention to the fact that the events depicted are mediated by the filmmaker. The lyrics of the songs constitute Friedrich's observations on the action, from Al Green's "Let's Stay Together" to Willie Nelson's "You Were Always on My Mind." But the clearest evidence of Friedrich's presence occurs at the moment when the couples take their vows in church; she abruptly interrupts the wedding footage with a rolling title of the 120 countries where gay and lesbian couples cannot legally marry. The list is so long that the accompanying song—Gladys Knight's "That Should Have Been Me"—ends, and the names of countries continue to roll by in silence. Friedrich resumes the wedding footage, but as the film concludes, she inserts a final title stating that in 1990 Denmark became the first country to legalize same-sex marriage.

In 1991, Friedrich outraged some gay viewers by acknowledging the legitimacy of the desire for a legal marriage, and perhaps even the pomp and circumstance of a wedding ceremony. It seemed to some that Friedrich was expressing a yearning for heterosexual life.²³ Today, when homosexual marriage is passionately advocated by many gays and lesbians as a fundamental human right, *First Comes Love* seems prescient. However, as with all of her subjects, Friedrich's attitude toward weddings and marriage remains ambivalent. As the couples leave the church, the film becomes more contemplative, suggesting that, despite the excitement and appeal of the wedding rituals, the couples may not necessarily live happily ever after.²⁴

Rules of the Road, one of Friedrich's strongest films, has a diaristic quality, chronicling the course of a relationship, while focusing on the automobile the couple shared (a 1983 beige Oldsmobile station wagon with fake wood paneling), which serves as an ongoing reminder of past love and present loss. Narrated by the filmmaker, who has lost touch with her former lover and their car, the film contains one image after another of nearly identical station wagons, interspersed with shots of hands playing games of solitaire with a Greyhound bus deck of cards. Images of cars still or in motion are accompanied by long silences or by Friedrich's deadpan recollections of how her lover's station wagon assumed a central place in their lives. Along with the spoken anecdotes, the sound track contains popular songs recorded to sound like music from a 1980s car radio. Most of the film is in color, but it also contains black-and-white views of a woman rowing on a lake, evoking Friedrich's longing for a prior time by "quoting" images from her early films *Hot Water* and *Gently Down the Stream*. These black-and-white images are accompanied by traffic noises, linking the otherwise unseen lover with the shared automobile.

The narrator's relationship with the car is both ironic and touching. She reports that, when her lover first drives up, it is something of a shock (she is taken aback by this "sensible family car"). Later the "homely" station wagon surprises her with its unexpected pickup. The car offers the freedom of travel outside the city but also traps the couple in a confined space during lengthy arguments to and from their destinations. For a brief period after their breakup, the narrator has limited access to the car when her ex-lover is away. Emotionally charged, these moments provide ghostlike evidence of her former lover in the radio station left on and in the smell of smoke permeating the seat covers. The narrator airs the car out in hopes of helping her ex-lover stop smoking. Poignant details like her admitting to scanning license plates to search for the car (while dreading to find it) give way to speculation about what might happen if it did appear. Like *First Comes Love*, *Rules of the Road* is about a cultural phenomenon, in this case, the place of cars in American life. A shared possession, it comes to stand for the relationship, simultaneously providing adventure and claustrophobia. Having a car is one way to participate in the larger society, but it also establishes solidarity between owners of similar cars: "By becoming the owner of one, she seemed to have been initiated into a special clan. And by sharing the car with her, I felt I had become an honorary member of that same family."

Film and Identity:

Hide and Seek (1996) and *The Odds of Recovery* (2002)

In *Hide and Seek*, Friedrich presents an ambitious narrative film about the sexual awakening of the film's twelve-year-old lesbian protagonist (Lou), intercut with interviews with adult lesbians recalling their own pubescence (about issues such as first sexual experiences, whether they ever wanted to be boys, or crushes on teachers). This interview material, often funny and touching, bolsters the narrative in which Lou and her girlfriends learn about their bodies and sex, enjoy intimate friendships with each other, dream about the future, dance, and play. Adolescent confusion about identity and "fitting in" is at the center of the film. Lou experiences jealousy over a friendship, escapes to a tree house, and entertains fantasies about travel to Africa.

Hide and Seek freely and poetically juxtaposes several different kinds of filmic material. These include narrative sequences tracing Lou's daily activities, stories from adult lesbians about their youth, sequences from 1950s sex education film, footage of animals in Africa (from the 1955 film *Simba*), dozens of photographs of lesbians as children (including two of Friedrich), and popular music from the period of Friedrich's adolescence. The film, which depicts typical girlhood situations from a lesbian perspective, explores an underreported subject yet avoids the rhetorical stance of conventional documentary. It is less journalistic than impressionistic, with most of its ideas and arguments bubbling up from a rich, intimate matrix of memories and associations.²⁵

Friedrich was enthusiastic about the making of her most narrative film, *Hide and Seek*, on which she collaborated with her partner, painter Cathy Quinlan. Friedrich has said that she thoroughly enjoyed every aspect of the production, although she recognized that she would not continue making narrative films. Following the production of *Hide and Seek*, Friedrich endured a long, extremely painful period. *Hide and Seek* was well received but the distributor would not give it a limited theatrical release for financial reasons. However, the film was shown on public television because it had been funded by ITVS, and it ran for two years on the Sundance Channel. In addition, during this period Friedrich had her heart set on adapting a book called *Aquamarine* by Carol Anshaw, only to find that the book had already been optioned.

The Odds of Recovery, which takes Friedrich's history of illness as its subject, marks the completion of an important trajectory in Friedrich's



Su Friedrich
with Ariel
Mara and Chels
Holland in *Hide
and Seek*, 1996.
Courtesy of Su
Friedrich.

filmmaking—how best to interject herself into what are essentially autobiographical works. Over a period of twenty-five years, Friedrich has gradually emerged from behind the camera into full view. In *Gently Down the Stream* and *But No One*, two early silent films inspired by her dream journal, and in *The Ties That Bind*, her first fully realized sound film, Friedrich scratches stories and questions directly onto the film stock. In *Damned If You Don't*, she sings the “I Won’t Be a Nun” song offscreen. In *Sink or Swim*, she painstakingly scripts a series of emotionally charged autobiographical anecdotes told in the third person by a young girl, withholding her own voice until she sings a children’s song at the end of the film. *Sink or Swim* also offers glimpses of Friedrich drinking beer in a bathtub and smoking a cigarette on her bed. In *Rules of the Road*, Friedrich enters the film to a much greater extent by delivering voiceover recollections about the car she and her lover once shared. In *Hide and Seek*, there are two photographs of Friedrich as a child, and she plays the teacher in the classroom. Still, as she points out, “unlike a lot of my other work, I wasn’t in the film very directly, except of course Cathy and I wrote the script together, so it’s very much our story, and so ‘I’m there’ in that sense.” Finally, in *The Odds of Recovery*, Friedrich is fully the protagonist, narrating the film, making her medical history the topic of her storytelling, and turning the camera on herself in various states of dress and undress. As Friedrich sees it, “*The Odds of Recovery* was very much a way of owning up to who I am, both as a maker and as a person.”

The Odds of Recovery is an extraordinarily intimate chronicle of Friedrich’s life as a series of illnesses. Taking herself as subject, Friedrich recounts the history of her encounters with the medical profession, including her undiagnosed hormonal imbalance and her many surgeries.



From Su Friedrich’s
*The Odds of
Recovery*, 2002.
Courtesy of Su
Friedrich.

Friedrich calmly catalogs her medical procedures, nervously converses with doctors in examining rooms, angrily addresses the camera when struggling alone with an unruly hospital dressing gown, and anxiously comments on the appearance of her bruised postbiopsy breast filmed in a bathroom mirror. The film’s postdubbed track is especially pure and simple; it includes ambient sounds like dirt scraped into a planter and songbirds that lend her backyard garden a cloistered calm. *The Odds of Recovery* mixes footage of Friedrich’s visits to hospitals with scenes involving her pursuit of alternative therapies: shopping for Chinese herbs, taking tai chi classes, and cooking health-inducing remedies. The film continually compares nature (the time it takes plants to grow) and the body (the time it takes wounds to heal). This idea is best conveyed in images that document Friedrich’s gardening and her crewel work. Throughout the film, her hands are glimpsed embroidering a vine that depicts in its twists and turns the history of her surgeries. The vine’s “flowers” are Friedrich’s affected organs. Camera movements up the vine lead the viewer to key moments in her life; they also evoke the camera movements that pan across her scars. At the end of the film, her story has been told, and the embroidery, a map of her medical problems, is finished.²⁶

One startling issue that the film raises is how Friedrich could continue to make increasingly ambitious, painstakingly constructed films while undergoing medical treatment. As the film lists the dates of her surgeries and provides footage of her medical procedures, it also details Friedrich’s perseverance as an artist in the face of long and crippling illnesses. She has written that it was only in hindsight that she realized that she had been in denial. For example, while she was making *The Odds of Recovery*, she had had a breast biopsy that developed complications but she still took the video camera into the bathroom and filmed herself. Only after-

ward did she realize “that was not the thing to be doing at such a time.” One factor that may have allowed her to continue working is that the making of *The Odds of Recovery* coincided with Friedrich’s use of a computer to edit her work, simplifying and granting her more control over the process, although not streamlining it.²⁷

Country and City Video Diaries:

The Head of a Pin (2004) and *The All in the Small* (in progress)

With *The Head of a Pin* (which I don’t think of as totally realized), I just went out and shot some footage based on the simple idea that “I’m out in the country and I don’t know what the country is like, so I’ll try to convey something of that feeling of ignorance and displacement.”—Su Friedrich

A synch-sound videotape, *The Head of a Pin* is a relatively modest work in which Friedrich offers glimpses of herself and friends on a summer vacation in upstate New York. As with *The Odds of Recovery*, she was willing to let the film evolve, rather than preplanning it in a rigorous way. Repeated image clusters include views of a path in the woods and a rushing river. In fact, the piece turned out differently than she expected because Friedrich came across a determining image: a spider that had trapped a fly twice its size in its web. Their twitching, biting struggle to the death became the leitmotif of the film, returned to again and again, an emblem of nature’s small but frightful dangers. While a less richly structured piece than her earlier films, *The Head of a Pin* is a first step in Friedrich’s decision to make works in video.

Friedrich recently began making *The All in the Small*, a promising new project about the coffee pushcarts in New York City. Her long-range plan is to track the coffee from its harvesting to the time “it gets handed to you for 50 cents.” Like many of her other films, it will trace a process from start to finish. To get a feel for the project, Friedrich has been looking at the pushcarts on the streets of Manhattan during the day and watching them driven back over the bridges to Brooklyn at night. She visited a garage where the coffee beans are stored, interviewed a Senegalese worker while he washed the pushcarts, visited a factory in Queens to see how the coffee is processed, and traveled to Charleston, South Carolina, to interview a coffee importer. She plans to go to Guatemala to videotape a coffee farm, to Miami to film the coffee arriving by ship, and to travel along the route of the shipment’s transport up the East Coast. Friedrich also plans

to interview the workers who make the ubiquitous “We Are Happy To Serve You” paper cups. Although the film will initially focus on the pushcarts and the coffee they serve, Friedrich believes it could go in many different directions. Whatever form it takes, however, it is likely to be unconventional, and to tell us as much about Friedrich as about her ostensible “subject.” In responding negatively to whether her new project would be a *regular* documentary, Friedrich said:

I had to rack my brain to think why I constantly resist making a regular documentary. Or even a “regular” experimental film. If I think about experimental film as a genre, there’s always something about it that I think is different than my own work. Maybe *Gently Down the Stream* fits in, but once you get into *The Ties That Bind* or *Damned If You Don’t*, and even *Rules of the Road*, they don’t . . . I think there’s something more purely visual in experimental films. They’re not so driven by narrative. My work has *always* been driven by a kind of narrative, so I don’t know. I just do what I do.

Coda: Friedrich on Her Career

Although Friedrich clearly uses recurring images, themes, and strategies in her work, she has never had a grand plan for her career. She continues to make both short and long works and to move freely between narrative, documentary, and experimental modes, determined to evolve as a filmmaker. If Friedrich can be said to have any regrets, they are that her work, and the work of other experimental filmmakers, is not more widely seen beyond academic circles and various cable outlets. She is currently trying to remedy that by transferring her work to DVD, beginning with *Gently Down the Stream*, *Sink or Swim*, and *Hide and Seek*. In this, Friedrich has a mission to “contribute to raising the level of the culture” by making work that is serious about both form and subject matter more visible.²⁸

At the same time, Friedrich has long harbored a dream of becoming a feature filmmaker. Admitting that this goal may not be meant for her, she says that she started out thinking that she would make films like Fassbinder.²⁹ At one point, just after *Sink or Swim*, she was asked by a producer whether she wanted to be the next Woody Allen. Although she declined, she has always been fascinated with the prospect.³⁰ Friedrich has a clear sense of the ways in which her films offer alternatives to mainstream commercial cinema. Compelled to make therapeutic, moral

tales, Friedrich explores and exposes her own fears in her works, while urging others to take a fresh, critical view of themselves:

My films will always attempt to face up to problems and invite others to do the same. They show my failings, or at least my sense that I haven't completely realized my desires. *Sink or Swim* shows the extent to which I really wanted to have a good Dad and I didn't. In *Rules of the Road*, I say a little bit about why I didn't do such a good job being in a relationship, and in *First Comes Love*, I admit that I have a soft spot for all of that [wedding-related] pomp and circumstance. So my films start from a feeling of some sort of weakness and then get past it. It's through my films that I can actually talk about it.

As Friedrich's work progresses, she will certainly continue to analyze troubling subjects, push the medium, and provide herself and her viewers with original, lucid ways of viewing film and understanding their lives.

Filmography

- Hot Water*, 1978 (12 min.): sd., b&w; Super 8
Cool Hands, Warm Heart, 1979 (16 min.): si., b&w; 16mm
Scar Tissue, 1979 (6 min.): si., b&w; 16mm
I Suggest Mine, 1980 (6 min.): si., b&w; 16mm
Gently Down the Stream, 1981 (14 min.): si., b&w; 16mm
But No One, 1982 (9 min.): si., b&w; 16mm
The Ties That Bind, 1984 (55 min.): sd., b&w; 16mm
Damned If You Don't, 1987 (42 min.): sd., b&w; 16mm
Sink or Swim, 1990 (48 min.): sd., b&w; 16mm
First Comes Love, 1991 (22 min.): sd., b&w; 16mm
Rules of the Road, 1993 (31 min.): sd., col.; 16mm
Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire, 1994 (60 min.): sd., col.; video
Hide and Seek, 1996 (65 min.): sd., b&w; 16mm
The Odds of Recovery, 2002 (65 min.): sd., col.; 16mm
The Head of a Pin, 2004 (21 min.): sd., col.; video
Seeing Red, 2005 (27 min.): sd., col.; video

Notes

I thank Su Friedrich for generously making her work available to me and for allowing me to interview her for this project. I am indebted to her and to Sam McElfresh and Paul Arthur for their contributions to this essay.

- 1 Holmlund, *Between the Sheets*, 134–35.
- 2 Holmlund, "Feminist Makeovers," 224.
- 3 Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 148, 276.
- 4 Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, 22.
- 5 P. Adams Sitney categorizes avant-garde film genres in *Visionary Film*: the "psychodrama" is a quest for sexual identity; the "trance film" is a somnambulist's journey in which the central character's visionary experience, confronting the past and the self, leads to self-realization; the "structural film" is one in which structure and duration determine content, utilizing "fixed camera position, the flicker effect, loop printing, and rephotography off the screen" (18–22, 407–8). Jonas Mekas's comment that his own diary film "captures bits of life as a mode of reflection" ("The Diary Film," 191) is also useful here.
- 6 Jenkins, "Gently Down the Stream," 196–97.
- 7 Kotz, "An Unrequited Desire for the Sublime," 95.
- 8 MacDonald, *Avant-Garde Film*, 103.
- 9 As Jenkins points out, "Recent histories of American avant-garde cinema share a general acknowledgement that by the late 1970s and early 1980s experimental film had reached a critical impasse" ("Gently Down the Stream," 195). In an essay titled "End of the Avant-garde," Fred Camper names Su Friedrich as an exception, one of the few original artists "reshaping the medium toward their own concerns" (123). In a review in the *Village Voice*, Amy Taubin writes, "Just when it seemed as if half the avant-garde filmmakers born post-1948 were putting on the brakes . . . along comes Su Friedrich's sweetly passionate and genuinely innovative *Damned If You Don't* to make a case for not following the well-worn narrative path" ("Experimental Bent," 64).
- 10 Unless otherwise noted, Su Friedrich's quotes are from an unpublished interview with Janet Cutler, conducted on July 9, 2004, in Brooklyn, New York.
- 11 In his mid-1980s assessment of the avant-garde since 1966, Paul Arthur writes, "Admittedly the position of women in the American avant-garde, at least since the signal interventions of Maya Deren, Marie Menken, and Shirley Clarke, has been one of provisionality" ("The Last of the Last Machine?," 84). Rabinowitz identifies Maya Deren, Joyce Wieland, and Yvonne Rainer as filmmakers who were able to express a feminist perspective, although it was not always recognized, and who often faced challenges in their efforts to finance and distribute their work. She goes on to describe the work of those who came later as more aggressively challenging patriarchy, arguing for women's rights, and validating women's experience (*Points of Resistance*, 10, 190).
- 12 Friedrich currently teaches film and video at Princeton University.
- 13 Friedrich sometimes begins and abandons unrealized films; in the case of *I Suggest Mine* (1980), she completed the film (also titled *Someone Was Holding My Breath*) but was never completely satisfied with it. It is not in distribution.
- 14 Sitney, "Autobiography in Avant-Garde Film," 202.

15 Friedrich is one of the filmmakers who, in the 1980s, was responsible for the return of the written word after its virtual banishment from the avant-garde. In "Bodies, Language and the Impeachment of Vision," Arthur offers reasons why visual texts "fit into the avant-garde's reigning cultural politics," using various films and filmmakers, including Friedrich, to illustrate his points. He concludes: "... the introduction of language has had the paradoxical effect of reinvigorating the avant-garde's compass of permissible imagery by adding both another facet and a tool with which to interrogate, bend, or otherwise force new meanings onto diaristic or poetic schema" (*A Line of Sight*, 150).

16 *Gently Down the Stream* also exists as a small self-published booklet of text and images (1982).

17 MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema*, 290.

18 Friedrich has stated: "And particularly now, when we live in this completely lawless world (even though I obviously don't agree with a lot of the ideas of Catholicism, or any other organized religion, and I think that they got a lot of things wrong), I do think we all need some sort of moral compass. And to the extent that I got that and interacted with it sitting in the church (I might be disagreeing with what was being said, but I was processing it), I think there's something for me in that."

19 For a more detailed analysis of the film, see Fischer's *Cinematernity* and MacDonald's *Avant-Garde Film*.

20 Critics, including MacDonald, often note *Sink or Swim*'s parallels to Hollis Frampton's use of the alphabet in structuring *Zorns Lemma* (1970); also relevant are Stan Brakhage's excavations of childhood and parent-child relationships in *Scenes from Under Childhood* (1968–70) and other films. *Sink or Swim* has been analyzed extensively by Camper in *Chicago Reader*, MacDonald in the *Independent*, Renov in *The Subject of Documentary*, Zryd in *Senses of Cinema*, and by others.

21 "Just as there were things that happened in my childhood that make me behave as I do now, the same thing is true for him and his parents. So it was important for me to acknowledge that chain reaction, not necessarily to forgive him" (McElfresh, "An Interview with Filmmaker Su Friedrich").

22 As Scott MacDonald explains, "Some filmmakers and critics came to see traditional film pleasure as an implicit acceptance of the workings of patriarchy, and it seemed necessary to expunge female sexuality and nudity from serious cinema in the service of progressive feminism. . . . Friedrich's decision not only to include a representation of female sexuality but to use it as a triumphant conclusion of the film is crucial. Friedrich has cinematically appropriated the pleasure of women for women" (*A Critical Cinema*, 2:287). Kotz describes how "in a modern tale of girl gets girl [Friedrich succeeds in] creating pleasure in the discards of a repressive and highly constrained past, and of moving beyond feminist critique to selectively reinvest these images and memories with private and erotic meanings" ("An Unrequited Desire for the Sub-

lime," 98–99). Chris Holmlund ("Feminist Makeovers") and Chris Straayer (*Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies*) also address the issue of lesbian representation (and representations of lesbian desire) in *Damned If You Don't*.

23 While not agreeing with the sentiment, Alisa Lebow describes how in 1991 "screenings in queer festivals were marked by offended grumblings and huffy, premature walkouts" ("Lesbians Make Movies," 18). On a more positive note, Holmlund sees *First Comes Love* (and *Rules of the Road*) as "subtly expanding kinship to include lesbians as well as heterosexuals" (*Between the Sheets*, 134).

24 Because *First Comes Love* focuses on the codes and conventions of heterosexual wedding ceremonies, Holmlund believes it can be seen as a kind ethnographic exercise in which the filmmaker takes the position of the outsider looking in on the rites of the other (*Between the Sheets*, 134–35). In her program notes, Friedrich calls it the "rites and wrongs." Certainly, in contradiction to the film's title (the entire children's chant is recited at the opening of the film), "love" is not always followed by either "marriage" or a "baby carriage."

25 For a more detailed discussion of this film, see Russell's *Experimental Ethnography*.

26 In *The Odds of Recovery*, there is a great deal of attention to "women's spaces"—the kitchen and the garden—as well as to "women's art"—the crewel work. Interestingly, a needlepoint image of Christ's face is a cherished gift from the woman to the nun in *Damned If You Don't*.

27 Friedrich said, "One thing about working on the computer is that there's certainly a physical ease to editing images that just isn't there on a flatbed. However, I cut *Hide and Seek* on a flatbed and *The Odds of Recovery* on the computer, and even though I had more footage to use for *Hide and Seek* (I had about seventeen takes of each thing the girls did) and even though the computer is faster, each film took me about a year to cut. I think my way of processing information slows it down so I still end up taking a lot of time. . . . Working with the computer allows me complete control of the sound editing. When I was assembling *Hide and Seek* on film, there were a lot of layers so I did the basic layers and then had a sound editor come in and build up all the other stuff. But with *Odds of Recovery* I did all the sound editing myself, and I actually Foleyed the sound for all the sound effects. All the stuff in the garden where I'm digging and cutting and weeding, all the stuff in the kitchen—it's all artificial sound. I shot the film silent and put all the sound in later. So the more I'm able to work with sound in the computer, the more I can try out things that I'd never tried before."

28 Friedrich has long devoted her energies to improving the state of independent film distribution, including working on the Film-Makers' Cooperative rental and sales catalog, helping to launch and maintain the distribution efforts of Women Make Movies, and supporting other independent film distribution networks.

29 Friedrich cites the following filmmakers as influences on her work: "Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Akira Kurosawa, Billy Wilder, Maya Deren, Chantal Akerman, Leslie Thornton, Luis Buñuel, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Marlene Gorris, Ingmar Bergman, Leontine Sagan, Agnes Varda, Buster Keaton, Hollis Frampton, Anne Severson, Abbas Kiarostami, Valie Export, Preston Sturges, Vincent Grenier, Leighton Pierce, Frederick Wiseman, David Lee, Vilgot Sjoman, Jean Rouch, John Marshall, Satyajit Ray, Mike Leigh . . ."

30 Friedrich said, "I've also often fantasized about making classic ethnographic films in the style of John Marshall or Robert Gardner, whose work I love. I suppose as you get older you're forced to recognize that you have various dreams that can't be realized and you have to come to grips with the limits of your own talents, resources, funding, personality traits and uncontrollable urges. In my case, I'd say that I keep on wanting to do things against the grain even while I love a lot of the conventional ways of filmmaking."