

**Filmic Resistance Against the Everyday:
Su Friedrich's Re/Mediation of the Present in *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel***

by Alina Predescu, presented at the Visible Evidence XXV Conference, August 8-11, 2018,
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“I have grown afraid
of dying

I have grown afraid
of living too long

But I'm more afraid
of being afraid.”

(Screen text in *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel*)

Su Friedrich's most recent film *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel* (2016) reads as an inflation of visual and aural means of expression that invade the viewer and explain away feelings, questions, regrets, hopes, and desperation, in a frenzy of giving visible and audible form to thoughts that fall outside the domain of the readily shareable. Here, the filmmaker continues her practice of challenging set perceptions and expectations by attending to an affective identity stifled within the realm of conventional socio-politics. The exposure of intimate and uncomfortable thoughts provides an analytical, almost obsessive, dissection of the represented reality: that of the tenuous process of the moving of Friedrich's 93-year-old mother, Lore, to an assisted living facility. The metaphor of the house that crumbles from Friedrich's 1984 film *The Ties that Bind* becomes here the reality the filmmaker resists by arresting it under a magnifying glass in an attempt to hold time still. In *The Ties that Bind*, Friedrich had Lore share her story of coming of age in Germany during the war, and starting a family in the US after marrying an American officer. In that film, Friedrich's found-footage archeology appropriated Lore's evocation into a continuous struggle of keeping both a symbolic and literary household together – the filmmaker's interpretation of her mother's account spoke of a daughter's search for the safety of home and familial belonging. In *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel*, the constancy and safety of the idea of home is shattered – Lore has to leave the place she has called home for 52 years as her declining memory prevents her from living unassisted. The film

is Friedrich's means of coming to terms with the change, as the filmmaker lives through her filming, and uses the act of recording to mediate the process of moving.

The abstract associative quality of *The Ties that Bind* is replaced here by a certain urgency of expression revealing desperation in face of irremediable change. This is visible first at the level of the visuals, anchored within the immediate reality of the moving, or illustrating the filmmaker's associative memory triggered by the event. The images are assembled as in a present continuous, in an attempt to compensate for a loss in the making. In *The Ties that Bind*, the use of found footage signaled a stable present that worked as the grounding from where the past could be reassembled. Now, the present is shaking, and the filming becomes a way of anchoring it. The visuals are then contextualized through layers of actual text – written on the images or as voice-over commentary – that suggest a narrative order and allow for a temporal distance between the taking of the images-document and their purposeful arrangement into a sharable account. This assumed temporal disparity – that, while factual, is reinforced as to become the structure of the film – produces a certain archive effect in the sense introduced by Jamie Baron. At yet another level, the sound track – composed of loud pop music, Friedrich's voice-over idiosyncratic comments, and fragments of dialogue between the filmmaker and her siblings, mother, friends and neighbors – negotiates the emotional overflow that fills the screen. Within discernible traces of domestic ethnography, the film recalls salvage ethnography in its attempt at capturing and freezing a moment in time, an attempt that carries along shades of nostalgia and projects regrets for things about to be lost irretrievably.

I Cannot Tell You How I Feel is both Friedrich's attempt at reinserting her unbearable lived experience into the everyday, and her work of resistance to the cultural markers defining the same everyday. The images-as-document suggest that 'Suzy-the daughter' delegates her participation to the event of Lore's moving to 'Su Friedrich – the filmmaker', who, in turn, works out a retrospective re-appropriation of her expected familial roles through the processing of the footage within the final film. This postponement of the act of living and its recuperation within the frame of social meaning allow for a pervasive tension between a need for conformity and the refusal of norm. The film stands as Friedrich's way of talking out her death anxiety – a feeling that belongs to the everyday in its unspoken commonality, but that becomes all of a sudden actual and overwhelmingly present. The process of analyzing and dissecting the emotions and thoughts along and behind the images of the aging mother brings about a normalization of the experience of death anxiety, and suggests a relief allowed through its re-fitting into conformity. At the same time, the collage of virtually strange or unorthodox remarks of

the filmmaker, edited along excruciating takes of Lore's interactions, troubles spectatorial expectations of familial normality and social conformity.

In the article that introduces the film's screening on the curated online film platform MUBI, Friedrich declares:

But since I was diving headlong into a new and totally bewildering experience, I decided to pick up my camera. I told myself it was to record information for our work, that it was a way to keep track of things like which living facilities we were visiting, what furniture we needed to move, et cetera. But I soon realized that I was doing it so that I could bear witness to the entire experience...for whatever reason, but mainly because my brain was lagging way behind my experience. It was just too much to understand, think about, process.¹

This extratextual information supports the viewer's perception of many of the images and sounds as video-recording notes Friedrich took during the unfolding of the moving process. As Friedrich works these notes into a representation that allows for the actual, retrospective processing of the lived moments, the explanatory text added on the images makes explicit the process of contextualization of the footage as document in order to be shared with the viewer. When we see Lore ready to leave her apartment, turning toward the camera to ask if Suzy is coming, we hear Friedrich replying from off-camera "I'm coming with you." At the same time, the following words appear superimposed over Lore's image: "Yes, I'm coming with you, but I'll be hiding behind my camera." This stands both as Friedrich's unspoken reply to Lore's plea while heading out the door, and the filmmaker's retrospective explanation of her assumed position of witness once removed. Later, following some footage of her mother trying to take photographs of Friedrich, we see those selfsame photographs of Friedrich looking awkward on a park bench and there is superimposed text that reads:

I'm panicking.
Can you tell?
She didn't know what day of the week it was.
She asked me six times where we were going for dinner.
She kept claiming that the doorman had robbed her.

The first three sentences perform a transition from the present of the image – with the present tense 'I'm panicking' – to the same moment that is in the past in relation to the

time of the final film – ‘She didn’t know what day of the week it was.’ This temporal disparity is communicated directly to the viewer – ‘Can *you* tell?’ This question, though, suggests that Friedrich edited the scene in order for the viewer ‘to be able to tell,’ or to sense her desperation, and that possibly the initial images-document used in this scene – as still and moving images – have been taken in a different frame of mind. This construction suggests the elements Jaime Baron identifies as present within what she calls ‘the archive effect,’ namely: a temporal disparity, as the perception by the viewer of a ‘then’ and ‘now’ generated within a single filmic text; a suggested intentional disparity between an initial and ulterior meaning of the images; and extratextual knowledge that validates the perception of temporal and intentional disparity.² Friedrich refines this archive effect into a performative device that allows her to retrospectively reassess her familial role and assume different identities, while recreating the everyday as representation.

In his introductory article to *The Everyday Life Reader*, Ben Highmore writes that “the social is a culture of presentations and performances.”³ In Friedrich’s film, the everyday sociality of family relations appears as a collage of layers that account for different voices taken on by Friedrich’s different identities: the daughter, who does not like to be near the mother, who is terrified at the thought of inheriting Lore’s idiosyncrasies, and who starts to think of an exit strategy, as she would not want to end up in a place like that...; the sibling, aware of the many dynamics at work between mother, sister, and brother; the partner, involved in a couple relationship that allows for moments of respite and perspective; the memory keeper that brings up the threads connecting all these identities; the filmmaker, a collector who hides behind the camera and gathers Lore’s painful testimonies and voice-messages as documents of performances, and a creator of narrative representations of these relationships. However, this identity taxonomy is somehow artificial and reductive as Friedrich constantly weaves in and out of her roles and inevitably occupies more than one at any given moment. While she declares that her video note-taking was not destined for a film, we can detect an ethnographic impulse at work, apparent in that excessive quality of the documents that shows a stringency of salvaging the real though representation. At the same time, the highly crafted form of the film is the result of Friedrich-the filmmaker’s work of making legible the affective life of Friedrich-the daughter, sibling and partner.

The focal point of these performative shifts is the portrait of the mother, or rather of a changing relationship that slides, terrifyingly, into the unknown. Michael Renov defines domestic ethnography as the ethnographic mode where “the desire for the other is, at every moment, embroiled with the question of self-knowledge.” These works, he adds,

“enact a kind of participant observation that illuminates the familial other while simultaneously refracting a self-image; indeed, the domestic ethnographic subject exists only on condition of its constitutive relations with the maker.”⁴ In *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel*, the figure of the mother is mediated through the continuous interjection, perception and explicit interpretation of the daughter. The figure of the mother is translated – it takes shape only through a relationship continuously verbalized by the daughter-as-filmmaker-as-performer. Friedrich makes use of performance in an attempt to modulate a relationship otherwise too strong, and plays with the disconcerting written texts in order to create distances and insert spaces. Winks, sarcastic observations, self-ironic comments projected against records of the dramatic reality of Lore’s situation seem to build into an irreverent mockery of spectatorial expectations. This elaborate construction that simulates the process of free emotional and rational associations engages the viewer from two opposite directions, one that goes along lines of normalization and conformity with the system, the other one suggesting a certain resistance, through questioning or countering the mere moves advanced by the first one. The result is that, while the whole reads as an attempt at lightening a dramatic moment through the humorous camouflage of a very strong bond, the details bring forth the tension of an underlying sense of desperation. In her constant preoccupation to dig for, and expose unsayable ‘truths’ by any means possible, the filmmaker flattens the collage within one noisy surface layer, that of the family’s dealing with a difficult but somehow gradual change. However, as the constitutive elements collide and contradict each other, and as they bend and fracture the audience’s vectors of perception, the viewers are prompted to create distance anew, and to retrace the spatial quality cancelled by the excess of exposure. Friedrich leaves it to the viewer to reestablish the three-dimensionality of her edifice, and to give her construction the solidity needed in order to withstand the flow of conventional conformity.

The filmmaker’s project of finding a representation for her lived experience echoes the questioning proposed by Ben Highmore: “Does the everyday provide the training ground for conformity, or is it rather the place where conformity is evaded? Is the everyday a realm of submission to relations of power or the space in which those relations are contested (or at least negotiated in relatively interesting ways)?”⁵ At the same time, one can assume Friedrich’s scope as that of, in Michael Taussig’s words, “an understanding of the representation as contiguous with that being represented.”⁶ In this case, if ‘that being represented’ belongs to the domain of a schizophrenic everyday, then *I Cannot Tell You How I feel* can be read as Friedrich’s affirmation of a crisis of representation. This work comes thus as the expression of an

irreducible inadequacy of the film or video as medium of representation to the subject of representation. Friedrich has established her authorial persona as that of an experimenter with the medium, an artist that refuses to abide by categories or settle within expected modes of expression. Either directly or obliquely, her films recurrently address or give voice to an interiority trapped within the system, a subject stifled by the socio-political context. While more abstract and evocative in her first films, these preoccupations become concrete and embodied in the most recent productions where, as Friedrich turns the camera on herself, she takes issue with the constraints and limitations of the cinematic machine. *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel* allows thus – as the title suggests – the expression of Friedrich’s acute frustration with a perceived incommensurability between the visual means of expression at her disposal, and a lived experience that is overwhelming through its mere commonality.

¹ Su Friedrich Introduces Her Film *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel*, MUBI Notebook Column, <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/su-friedrich-introduces-her-film-i-cannot-tell-you-how-i-feel>.

² Jaimie Baron, “Archival Voyeurism. Home Mode Appropriations and the Public Spectacle of Private Life,” *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 22-24.

³ Ben Highmore, “Introduction: Questioning Everyday Life,” *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. Ben Highmore (New York: Routledge, 2002), 29.

⁴ Michael Renov, “Domestic Ethnography and the Construction of the ‘Other’ Self,” *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 218-219.

⁵ Highmore, “Introduction: Questioning Everyday Life,” 5.

⁶ Quoted in Highmore, “Introduction: Questioning Everyday Life,” 20.

DVD Data: *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel*. Director: Su Friedrich. Icarus Films. Brooklyn, NY. Release: 2018. Copyright: 2016. 42 minutes. Color.
<http://icarusfilms.com/if-feel>