

11. Su Friedrich’s Swimming Lessons

Su Friedrich’s films are beautiful and moving evocations of the complexities of lesbian desire and lesbian representation. They are not necessarily, however, “lesbian” in any straightforward or obvious way. *First Comes Love* (1991) shows a variety of traditional weddings as if seen by a spy in the house of heterosexual love. But despite the titles that inform us which countries allow homosexual marriage (hardly any in the world), this is not a film that makes fun of marriage, nor is it a film that argues resolutely for gay and lesbian marriage. Rather, the film explores lesbian and gay ambivalence toward marriage, the ambivalence of both wanting the ritual of marriage and wanting to distance oneself from it. Friedrich’s most recent film, *Hide and Seek* (1996), tells a story of female adolescence set in the 1960s, in which twelve-year-old Lou seems to be on the verge of understanding her own attractions to other girls; her best friend is becoming interested in boys, and Lou (played wonderfully by Chels Holland) tries to make sense of her own feelings. Juxtaposed with Lou’s story are interviews with adult lesbians about their own adolescent experiences, as well as documentary and archival footage that demonstrates how “sex education” was addressed in the 1960s. *Hide and Seek* offers a tale of growing up that is “not necessarily” lesbian, but by situating that tale within the narratives of lesbian identity told by lesbians, the film traces a narrative of lesbian desire.

In this chapter I look specifically at that narrative of lesbian desire in three of Friedrich’s films: *Gently down the Stream* (1983), *Damned If You Don’t* (1987), and *Sink or Swim* (1990), with particular attention to *Sink or Swim*. While much of Friedrich’s work is taken up directly with lesbian subject matter, her films are also explorations of ambiguity and

ambivalence. A challenging question for explorations of lesbianism in the cinema is how to address those questions of ambiguity, particularly when there are plenty of reasons—political as well as cultural and artistic—to avoid ambiguity altogether, to relegate it to the days of the closet, of lesbian invisibility. Friedrich's work simultaneously offers a sustained exploration of lesbian desire and ambivalence, and her films explore the varied and complex ways that the cinema can be understood in lesbian terms.¹

Gently down the Stream is a complex and haunting meditation on desire and its manifestations in image and text. Poems written by Friedrich, and based on a collection of her own dreams, are handwritten on the film celluloid, appearing as scratchy and mobile texts. The poems take on a variety of relationships to the images of the film, which range from religious icons, to water, to women shown engaged in a variety of solitary activities, especially rowing (on a machine) and swimming (in a pool). At times, the poems appear to illustrate the images of the film. Given that this is a silent film, the poems could seem to be titles, announcing the action of the film; but these poems do not offer the direct explanation that one expects from titles in a film from the silent era. The poems could also be read as subtitles, and although this is not a film in need of translation, as would be the case with a foreign film, one could argue that given Friedrich's relationship to the development of a film language adequate to the complexities of lesbian desire and representation, she is indeed exploring another language.

Sometimes the poems have a direct relationship to the images on screen, and sometimes they are removed from them, suggesting a contrapuntal relationship between image and text. Friedrich's poems, appearing on screen one word at a time, and with their constantly wiggling letters, are difficult to read in any kind of fluid way and thus are in sharp contrast to many of the images of the film that depict water, whether in a swimming pool or in the ocean. In a more general way, most of the images depict fluid motion—a woman swimming in the pool, another woman working out on a rowing machine. The poems describe dreams of confrontation, of desire, of sexual contact, while the images, when they do show women, show them engaged in solitary activities, autonomous and seemingly unaware of being observed.

The written text and the image track are manipulated in a variety of ways. Sometimes images fill the screen, with the text intercut with them, or with the text written over the images. Sometimes the images are framed, as if they are projected in a film within the film, with a rectangle

of white appearing in the background of the image, with the words of the poem appearing in the foreground of the image. In her analysis of the film, Chris Holmlund points out that while some of the poems do indeed speak of lesbian desire, this is not a film that one can describe easily or automatically as a “lesbian film” (1994). Holmlund sees Friedrich’s film—and her film work more generally—as challenging the ways in which a given text can be seen and understood as “lesbian.” For Holmlund, what is most interesting and challenging about Friedrich’s work are not the moments of explicit lesbianism but, rather, the ways in which lesbian representation folds into questions of spectatorship and authorship, form and address. As Holmlund points out quite forcefully, studies of lesbianism in film need to be concerned with more than lesbian visibility, and Friedrich’s work is a stunning demonstration of the various indirect and complicated ways in which lesbianism can be understood in relationship to film (1994, 38).

Thus Holmlund’s reading of *Gently down the Stream* focuses not only on those poems, for instance, that write explicitly of lesbian desire, but of how the film as a whole frames and reframes lesbian desire: “Although the poems frequently allude to lesbian sexuality, and although the various reframing strategies Friedrich employs change how women in general are viewed, nothing in the images per se suggests the women we see are or might be lesbians” (1994, 23). Holmlund notes that the first poem that one can call explicitly lesbian is the fourth (of fourteen that appear in the film):

A woman sits on a stage
 hunched over in the corner
 She calls up a friend from
 the audience
 asking her Come and make love to me
 She does
 I can't watch
 She mutters I CAN'T
 can't hold you
 the last time was too
 tense so many
 memories
 (cited in 1994, 20)

The images that accompany this poem show a woman on a rowing machine and a woman's feet stepping into a swimming pool, and both sets of images are repeated throughout the film.

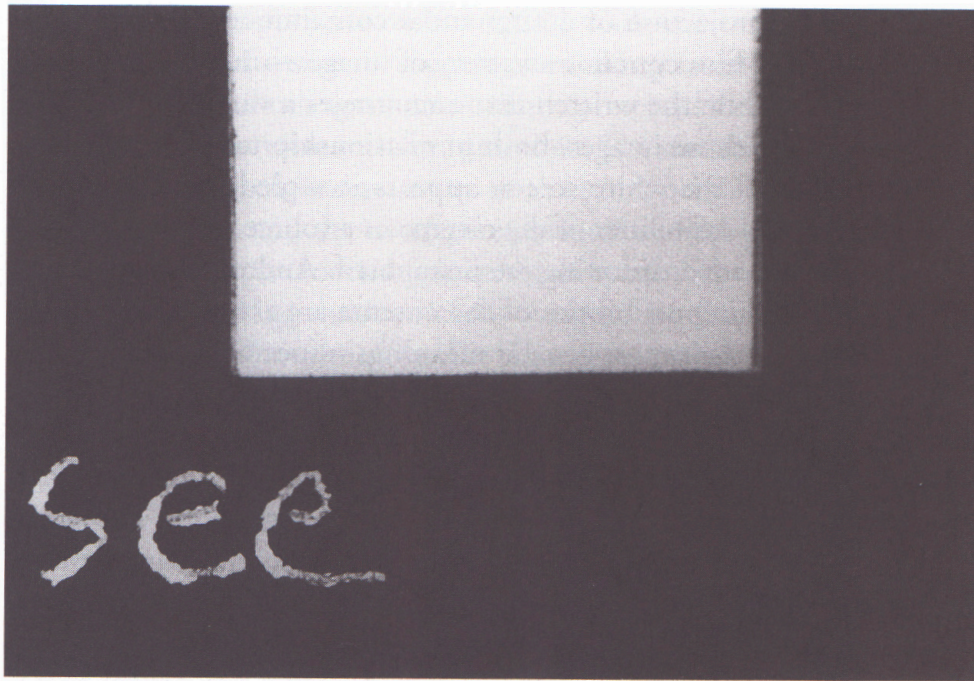
I'd like to suggest that one of the most striking aspects of Su Friedrich's film work is the way in which, not lesbianism per se, but what one might call the prelesbian, or the possibly lesbian, or the potentially lesbian, takes visual and narrative form. Hence, I am struck in *Gently down the Stream* by the moments that precede the appearance of the poem cited above. After images of the woman at her rowing machine, the following poem appears:

In the water near a raft
I see a woman
swimming and diving
in a wet suit

see her pubic hair (Friedrich 1983, 42)

The first three lines of the poem appear on a darkened screen with a white screen within the frame in the top right of the image. The image creates the effect that a film is about to begin on the white screen, with the scratched words of the poem suggesting an introduction of sorts. On the second appearance of the word *see* (in the fifth line of the poem), the white screen disappears, and the entire screen is dark. After the word *hair* appears, the screen fades to a lighter shade of dark, images of the woman on the rowing machine fill the space where the white screen had been, and the poem discussed by Holmlund (cited earlier) appears. These brief moments—a poem about seeing a woman swimming and diving, seeing her pubic hair (as if seeing through the wet suit), and images of a white, luminous screen—literally introduce us to the poem of lesbian desire, and to the image of, if not a lesbian, then a woman coded according to many iconic representations of lesbianism (short-haired, athletic, somewhat butch looking). Holmlund is right; the poem I have just cited is not explicitly lesbian. But the scene opens up the possibilities of lesbian representation—a woman seeing another woman, and then seeing something forbidden. The white screen within the frame suggests a dream space, in keeping with the source of the poems written into the film, but also a screen of possibility, a screen on which the various associations of the poems can be read and imagined in different ways.

In my book *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (1990), I examine a group of films, both classical Hollywood films and al-



Su Friedrich's *Gently down the Stream*. Courtesy of Su Friedrich.

ternative films by women directors, in which the figure of the screen functions both as a thematic and visual device within the films, and as a powerful figure of ambivalence, that is, as a surface that suggests simultaneous passage and obstacle. The figure of the screen complicates what has been the major paradigm in feminist understandings of the cinema, the gaze with its attendant division of the world between the man who looks and the woman who is looked at. For the screen surface embodies contradictory impulses: it is both present and invisible; it positions a fixed scene yet can interfere with the facility of that positioning. I suggest that in films such as *The All-Round Reduced Personality (Redupers)* (directed by Helke Sander, 1977), *Illusions* (directed by Julie Dash, 1982), *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (directed by Patricia Rozema, 1987), and *The Man Who Envied Women* (directed by Yvonne Rainer, 1986), the figure of the screen stands as a complex inquiry into the nature of cinematic spectacle, understood not only in terms of the ubiquitous (male) gaze, but also and especially the simultaneity of mastery and the breakdown of oppositions on which mastery is based. Looking at how films position and work with screen surfaces, I suggest, offers the possibility of understanding the dynamics of cinema as more than the interplay of the gaze.

The white screen in *Gently down the Stream* also suggests what I have called "screen tests," that is, meditations on the ways in which the film

screen is both a projection of desires and a containment of them. The screen within the film contains a variety of images—mainly of women and of water—while the written text encourages a variety of possible configurations of those images, both in relationship to the text and to each other. When the white screen appears, coupled with the poem about seeing, the possibilities of the cinema as a source of both directed seeing and unbounded dreaming are juxtaposed. And more specifically, it is as if the lesbian possibilities of the cinema are articulated in their most specific and their most general meanings—specific in the sense of the sexual desire of one woman for another, and general in the sense of a woman looking at another woman. While I am not completely comfortable with a term like *prelesbian*, I do think that Friedrich's film work challenges the entire question of lesbian representation, for at stake is the possibility of understanding ambivalence and ambiguity in relationship to lesbian desire insofar as the founding myths of cinematic representation are concerned: seeing and being seen, watching and looking, merging and separating.

Gently down the Stream is obsessed with water, from the title of the film to the repeated images of women swimming, or stepping into a pool, to the poems themselves. As Holmlund points out, the "images stream past, just as the nursery rhyme title promised they would" (1994, 22). But as Holmlund also notes, Friedrich manipulates both the implications of the title and any conventional notion of water as uninterrupted flow: "The first woman we see 'row, row, rowing her boat' is doing so on a machine, not on a river or a stream. Friedrich plays with screen direction, too, confounding any sense of 'down' by, for example, showing the woman first swimming left to right, then reversing the image so she appears to be swimming right to left" (22). Lindley Hanlon has noted that "this is *not* a gentle movie. . . . The brash, fragmented, scratched-in text bursts out at us in a rhythmic fury" (1983, 84). Holmlund also describes the scratching of the film and the appearance of a variety of ruptures in the film: "Any notion of 'gently' is completely jettisoned" (22).

While Friedrich's use of water imagery calls up the mythic associations of women with water, she also uses that imagery in complex and sometimes surprising ways. This is perhaps all the more important given that in lesbian representation water has particularly intense associations; the title of Bonnie Zimmerman's study of contemporary lesbian fiction, for instance, is *The Safe Sea of Women* (1990). While water appears in a variety of forms in Friedrich's films, a particularly insistent image is the woman swimmer. In *Gently down the Stream* shots of a woman swim-

ming alone in a pool are repeated, and while the image certainly suggests the flow of desire, it suggests something more—a woman going against the flow, both autonomous and connected to the rhythms of another force. The woman swimmer, then, is a narrative motif in Friedrich's work that embodies many of the same principles as the screen-within-the-film, and the two figures become central in Friedrich's visual and narrative explorations of cinema and lesbian representation.

It is thus striking that one of the images repeated in Friedrich's most unexplicitly lesbian film, *The Ties That Bind* (1984), is a woman swimmer—the filmmaker's mother. *The Ties That Bind* is an experimental documentary in which Friedrich interviews her mother about her life in Germany during Nazism and after the war during the American occupation. The film combines documentary footage with images of Friedrich's mother, and the daughter's questions are not spoken but scratched on the film in a way reminiscent of *Gently down the Stream*. Friedrich's mother describes her position as an anti-Nazi woman whose family suffered during the war and who herself was imprisoned. While the film creates a sympathetic portrait of the mother, there are moments in the film—particularly when the mother insists that everyday Germans did not know about the systematic killing of Jews—that the daughter's questions become pointed, disbelieving, and challenging. Sometimes the mother is depicted in her living room, and sometimes at work, suggesting an attempt to capture the rhythms of everyday life and the ways in which the past lives with an individual in the most banal routines. The mother is also shown swimming in a lake, and while swimming could be read as yet another of those banal routines, it suggests something more, a complex symbol of both peace and struggle, as well as a figure for the daughter's admiration for the mother—her athletic body, her autonomy, her own desire to swim against the current of Nazi Germany.

If *Gently down the Stream* is ambiguously lesbian, some of the same formal dynamics appear in Friedrich's most explicitly lesbian film, *Damned If You Don't* (1987). Taking the lesbian possibilities of nuns as its point of departure, the film provides a highly condensed rereading of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's 1947 film *Black Narcissus*, narrated by a woman's voice and reedited to focus on the sexual tension between women (and men) in the film. Other stories of nuns are recounted in the film: the story of Sister Benedetta as recounted in Judith Brown's book *Immodest Acts* (1986) and narrated by another woman's voice, and commentaries by women on their own Catholic education and their

crushes on nuns. All of these stories surround the depiction of a romantic and eventual sexual encounter between a woman, who at the beginning of the film is watching *Black Narcissus*, and a nun. Their paths eventually intertwine, and the film concludes with their lovemaking.

At one point in the film, the nun is seen visiting the Coney Island amusement park. We see her purchase a ticket and enter a building, and given the focus in the film on the ways in which cinema, by way of *Black Narcissus*, has represented nuns, one might think that she is entering a movie theater. We find the nun, instead, at an aquarium where she stands entranced before the lush, sensual movements of whales. The aquarium may not be a movie theater, but the nun watches the spectacle of the whales with all of the fascination of a film spectator before a movie screen. The scene is shot in high contrast so that the “screen” of the whales appears white and luminous, with the nun’s darkened silhouette in the foreground. Friedrich depicts the water, separated from the nun by the glass of the aquarium, as both invitingly sensual and suggestive of a dangerous eroticism. While we—and the nun—see whales rather than women, their movements are sleek, powerful, and beautifully instinctive and are quite reminiscent of the women whose movements are repeated again and again in *Gently down the Stream*.

There are two whales, and the implications of their sensual dance are unmistakable, their sheer joy in their movements and bodies a visual reminder to the nun of her own desires. We are made to understand that what was designed perhaps as a moment of escape for the nun from her lesbian attraction becomes instead a scene of identification and pleasure. When the nun first watches the whales, she is in the company of others, parents with their children for the most part. But they leave, and we see the nun alone as she gazes at the screen of the aquarium; first one whale is visible, and then it leaves the frame, and for a brief moment we see the nun as she looks at the water and then walks off screen.

This is certainly not the most “obvious” lesbian moment in the film. The scene is enormously sensual, and it picks up on other depictions of water in the film—most particularly in the images of a swan and a water snake, both swimming through the water, and as Holmlund argues, each representative of the two principal women in the film, the nun (the swan) and the woman to whom she is attracted (the snake) (1994, 26–27). The scene of the nun, entranced before the screen-like image of the whales in their beauty, is a prelude to the actual lesbian drama of the film, and in this sense it is quite similar to the scene I have discussed in

Gently down the Stream where we see a white, luminous screen and a not-explicitly but potentially lesbian poem.

The formal device of a screen surface, the narrative and visual motif of bodies swimming, and the evocation of possible lesbian desire can be seen in relationship to another preoccupation of Friedrich's films. Much of Friedrich's work is autobiographical, with particular attention to her own childhood and adolescence. Friedrich also extends considerably the range of the autobiographical to reflect on how the lives of girls and teenagers affect who they become and how. If the screen and its accompanying text (in *Gently down the Stream*) or spectator (in *Damned If You Don't*), and its images of bodies and water suggest literally and figuratively moments of lesbian possibility, then the recollection of childhood and adolescence also opens up ways of understanding how the various components of the past make possible the emergence of lesbian identities. To be sure, this aspect of Friedrich's work is potentially more complicated than the visual device of the screen with its accompanying elements of swimming, water, and lesbian desire. For in exploring the ways in which experiences of the past can be read in relationship to lesbianism, the danger is that one downplays the overwhelming effects of gender and sexual socialization. Holmlund suggests that a particularly important aspect of Friedrich's films is the focus on kinship, on how lesbian identities are shaped by the forces of family, and how lesbians seek new definitions of relationships, often mapping the patterns of family life onto new forms that both resemble and depart from their more conventional structures (1994, 18). Indeed, Friedrich's work is quite remarkable in its ability to explore both the horrific ways in which the institutions of the family, of gender, of heterosexuality work to perpetuate themselves, and the ways in which they fail to do so.

I turn now to *Sink or Swim* (1990), which is an exploration of Friedrich's relationship to her father as well as a meditation on the ways in which identities are formed by the effects of childhood and adolescence. From both her own personal standpoint and that of a more general cultural history, Friedrich explores the ways in which we map, from the vantage point of the present, our own histories and our own ways of imagining the world. Like *Gently down the Stream*, *Sink or Swim* is not explicitly lesbian, but the imprint of lesbian desire is unmistakable. Whereas *Gently down the Stream* and *Damned If You Don't* contain figures of screens in order to hypothesize moments of possibility and to embody ambivalence, *Sink or Swim* in its entirety functions as a meditation on ambivalence—specifically the ambivalence of the daughter's

relationship to the father, and more generally on the ambiguity of the image as a screen for contemplation. As in the other films, water figures prominently here as a source of strength and fear, and the female swimmer returns throughout the film.

Sink or Swim consists of twenty-six episodes, structured by the alphabet in reverse. The alphabetic structure of the film serves a double purpose. Friedrich's father is a linguist and anthropologist, so the alphabet makes sense as both a structural device and a reference to his occupation. In addition, the alphabet is evocative of a child's ordering of experience, particularly in terms of the recitation of the letters of the alphabet in a rhyme (which is heard in the epilogue to the film). Friedrich's father left her family when she was young, and so the narration deals with memories of childhood and adolescence filtered through the experience of abandonment. Most of the stories told about the father in the film suggest a controlling presence whose behavior was often cruel. The title of the film comes from the way he taught his daughter to swim (recounted in "Realism"). He explained the principles of swimming to her and then tossed her into the deep end of a swimming pool after telling her that she would have to manage on her own. He taught his daughter how to play chess (recounted in "Pedagogy"), but once she beat him at the game, he refused ever to play with her again. When the daughter and her sister were being bad, he punished them by forcing their heads under water in the bathtub until they felt they would explode ("Loss"). He tells his daughter that there are deadly snakes in a lake, whereas she finds out later that they are not indigenous to the region ("Realism"). Perhaps most cruelly, when he takes her on a trip to Mexico, he becomes enraged when she is late for meals with him (because of a flirtation with a boy), and he sends her on a plane back home ("Flesh").

The daughter's sense of rage, confusion, and pain is palpable in the film's narration. In "Envy," for instance, which immediately follows the description of the trip to Mexico, the daughter finds a poem that the father wrote about the experience in which he refers to her as a "child orphaned by divorce." The narration continues:

The girl had waited so long to get some kind of apology from him, but this wasn't the one she imagined. He still didn't realize that he had been acting like a scorned and vengeful lover, and that hers had not been the tears of an orphaned child, but those of a frustrated teenage girl who had had to pay for a crime she didn't commit. (Friedrich 1991, 127)

Despite the painful memories told in the film, there is distance in the narration, for the girl's experiences are told in the third person. And

even though a cruel father emerges, there is such a strong attempt to understand him that he does not come across as an archetypal villain. He is the one who introduced his daughter to the myths that will enable her to see possibilities of female strength. And he too suffered loss. In “Memory” (Part One), the death of his sister is described, and the father’s own complicated relationship to female children and to water becomes somewhat more comprehensible. As a child, the father and his sister used to swim at a neighbor’s pool, and one day, instead of waiting for him, she went swimming without him and died instantly of a heart attack. The home movies shown during this section of the film are of the father, as a boy, and his sister (shortly before she died) swimming in a pool. Friedrich obviously shares much with her father, for she too is an anthropologist of sorts, her camera observing and recording the rituals of father-daughter relationships.

The film begins with “Z” (“Zygote”) and ends with “A” (“Athena, Atalanta, Aphrodite”), with the film’s narration spoken by a girl in voice-over. In a sense the film imagines the birth, from the zygote at the film’s beginning, of the three mythical women whose names give the title to the last letter of the film: Athena, the goddess of war and justice, who sprang fully formed from the head of Zeus; Atalanta, abandoned in the woods by her father at birth because he wanted a son and who was welcomed back into her father’s home after she proved herself as an athlete and hunter; and Aphrodite, the goddess of love. All three of these women figure prominently in the film’s narration, and they all have a strong link with the daughter and her father. In “Zygote” the story of Athena is told, and in “Temptation” the narration tells of how the father gave the daughter a book about Greek mythology, which she read voraciously. When her father found her reading the book after she had been sent to bed, he asked her which myth she liked the best, and she told the story of Atalanta.

Most of the visual episodes comment on the voice-over narration. Only rarely, however, is there a one-to-one relationship between image and narration. This illustrative effect occurs in “Pedagogy” (where the chess story is recounted and we see a chess game being played) and “Ghosts” (in which there is no spoken narration but, rather, a close-up, negative image of a typewriter as invisible hands type out the letter that forms the story, in which the daughter describes how her mother listened to Schubert lieder, and how one in particular, which we have heard in a previous section, “Kinship,” made her cry the most—“Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel”). Most often the visual episodes provide associative material. In “Utopia,” for instance, the girl’s voice describes how she and

her sister were forbidden to eat sugar and did not have a television set. One night a week, however, they visited an elderly neighbor who made them ice cream sundaes and with whom they watched *Don Ameche's Flying Circus* on television. The images show circus performers on horseback, trapeze acts, and acrobatic stunts. In "Homework," the narration describes how, as soon as the father left, a television set entered the house. Clips of various vintage television advertisements and situation comedies fill the screen, including—ironically—*Make Room for Daddy*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *Father Knows Best*. The sequence concludes with a close-up of Robert Young as Jim Anderson in *Father Knows Best* in an intimate moment with his daughter Kitten.

Cross-references are made between different sections of the film. The final images from *Father Knows Best* in "Homework" echo the concluding images of an earlier section, "Virgin." In "Virgin," the narration describes how the girl imagined that water in the gutter was the Nile River, that her house was a harem, and that her father was the handsomest man she ever met. Images show footage of a parade and a creek, and finally, at the end of the episode, while the girl describes her father as the handsomest man, we see a father and daughter at the parade, in close-up. Throughout the film Friedrich's camera observes fathers and daughters—ice skating, playing, eating. This visual echo between "Virgin" and "Homework" is particularly interesting given how it introduces the sense of a gap between the idealized images of sitcoms and the painful separation from the father. "Virgin" is also interesting for the multiple levels of both image and voice. One could easily consider this one of the ambiguously lesbian sections of the film, for the girl's fantasies of harems and mermaids could be read as a girl's identification with same-sex desire. Similarly, the "Competition" section includes erotic images, both heterosexual and lesbian. Lesbian desires coexist with total adoration of the father, and *Sink or Swim* insists throughout on the complicated narratives that inform the development of sexual identities and the bond between father and daughter.

The title of the film comes from "Realism." When she tells her father that she wants to learn how to swim, he takes her to the university pool and offers the following lesson: "He took her to the deep end, explained the principles of kicking and breathing, said she'd have to get back all by herself and then tossed her in" (Friedrich 1991, 119). The narration continues: "She panicked and thrashed around for a while, but finally managed to keep her head above water. From that day on, she was a devoted swimmer" (119). Unlike other episodes described in the film's narration

about the father's somewhat abusive ways of teaching, this one suggests a mastery on the part of the daughter, particularly in her devotion to swimming. But the narration continues to describe how the following summer on a family vacation, where the girl spent most of her time at a lake, the father told her that poisonous snakes inhabited the lake and attacked swimmers. Only later did the girl discover from her mother that the snakes did not inhabit the region. Much like the defeated chess player in "Pedagogy," the father emerges as jealous of his daughter's pleasure and desperate to maintain his own authority.

The images that accompany the narration in "Realism" show one girl riding her bike around the rooftop of an apartment building; a girl swimming in a pool; and a girl and her father leaning against a building, eating. When juxtaposed with the spoken narration of the film, these visual episodes encourage different views of learning, of apprenticeship. Obviously, the closest connection is between the girl swimming in a pool and the story told, but when the swimming images appear, the narration has moved from the swimming pool to the lake. The girl who rides her bicycle does so alone. And the girl and her father who lean against a building have little to do with swimming, but much to suggest in relationship to the father-daughter bond. When intercut with each other, these images suggest both intimacy between father and daughter and autonomy on the part of the girl. It is possible to read the images as a kind of utopian view of the girls portrayed and their relationships to fathers, whether visible or absent (again echoing an earlier section of the film), but the narration also encourages us to see what might be missing from the everyday images of girls' activities: family dramas of power and control, the desires of girls either encouraged or squelched by the authority figures in their lives.

"From that day on, she was a devoted swimmer": one may well question the father's particular ways of relating to his daughter, but *Sink or Swim* also celebrates what the father gave to his daughter and, more specifically, how she is her father's daughter and an autonomous observer and participant. Throughout the film, images of women and water are suggestive of the father's power and the daughter's strength. In "Kinship" there is no spoken narration but, rather, a recording of the German song "Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel," which (as noted above) we later discover was a favorite song of the daughter's mother. The images in this section are far ranging, showing two women in a shower, the desert, a car window, and a train. The most striking juxtaposition is between water and the desert. The lesbian significance is explicit in the sense that we see,

in a very grainy film, two women in a shower together, yet these explicit images remain ambiguous in the sense that they are not anchored in a specific lesbian narrative. They could be seen in contrast to the images of a woman—Friedrich herself—walking alone in the desert (thus juxtaposing a woman alone and two women together), and they could be read as providing a visual counterpoint to the song, which is about a woman's longing for her absent male lover.

The last section of the film, "Athena, Atalanta, Aphrodite," returns us to the lake referred to in earlier sections of the film. The narration tells of the woman's desire to swim across the lake, as her father had done so many times. She is haunted, always, by the thought of the water moccasins, and by the presence of her father as both an inspiration and a source of fear. The water may be frightening, but it too is a source of strength, and the woman renounces her desire to imitate her father, accepting, instead, her own relationship to the water and to the world. The final lines of the narration speak of loss but ultimately reconciliation and the desire to swim freely:

She stopped swimming and began to float under the bright sky. The sun warmed her face, and the water surrounded her like a lover's arms. She thought of her friends lying on the sandy beach and realized how tired she had become. It was time to start the long swim back to the shore.

On the way, she only stopped once, to turn around and watch her father, as he beat a slow and steady path away from her through the dark orange water. (Friedrich 1991, 129)

The images that accompany this final section of the film suggest both opposition and continuity. We see two women on a beach with a young girl who plays in the sand. These could be the friends alluded to in the narration, or they could be the figures who enable the woman to watch her father depart, that is, another configuration of kinship. Alternating with the images of the two women and the girl is a shot of a lake, possibly the same setting as the accompanying images, and possibly not. Gradually, the camera zooms forward as if tracing the swimmer's movements across the lake, and removing her—and us—from the people on the beach to frame the water and the trees on the lake as a surface from which to read both the narration and the complex associations of images and text that have characterized the film.

If this last section of the film suggests a possible lesbian resolution, the "Epilogue" returns us to a scene of ambivalence. The "ABCs" song is sung by the filmmaker herself, and we see home movies of Friedrich as a



From the "Athena, Atalanta, Aphrodite" section of Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim*. Courtesy of Su Friedrich.

girl in a bathing suit. The song is sung in a round, six times, and the final words are: "Now I've said my ABCs, tell me what you think of me." Given the complex associations that are made in the course of the film, it is too simple to see this epilogue as the girl's—and filmmaker's—return to a desire for acceptance by the distant father. Certainly, the final words and images speak to the audience as well, asking us to reflect on our own family histories. Yet the continuing desire for the father's presence, even as he swam into the distance in the final section of the film, is unmistakable. He may well have beaten a "slow and steady path away from her," but he remains a part of her. And she makes the choice, again and again, to swim rather than to sink, that is, to live with his complex legacy.

Lesbian images are present in *Sink or Swim*, but they do not offer comforting resolutions or linear narratives. Catherine Russell has described the various slippages in the film as offering a meditation on the impossibility of any certainty or any fixed identity: "The difficulty of self-representation becomes that of cinematic representation. 'Identity' becomes dispersed across a cultural spectrum of 'positions' and discourses" (1998, 365). Following Russell, one could also say that the difficulty of lesbian representation becomes that of cinematic representation. In other words, lesbian representation in Friedrich's work is a function of

the cinema itself as simultaneously offering directed vision and unlimited fantasy.

As I've attempted to demonstrate in this essay, lesbian representation in Friedrich's work is tied to a preoccupation with ambivalence, and the figures that recur in her films—the swimmer, the screen, the disjunction between written text and image track—open up spaces for contemplation, for reflection on both the specificity of lesbian desire and the impossibility of fixing that desire to one specific image or narrative. In this sense, even though I too for the sake of convenience distinguished between the explicitly lesbian (*Damned If You Don't*) and the unexplicitly lesbian (*Gently down the Stream, Sink or Swim*) films, that distinction is itself undone in Friedrich's work. Even though her work is concerned with the specifics of cinematic representation, I think it is useful in this context to read her films in relationship to a novel that is also taken up with similar ambiguities of what it means to speak of lesbian representation. Carol Anshaw's novel *Aquamarine* (1992) begins with a brief and powerful narrative that becomes a kind of primal scene for the events that follow. It is October 1968 at the Olympic Games in Mexico City, and Jesse is competing in the race of her life, the 100-meter freestyle. As she gets ready to dive into the water, her eyes catch a glimpse of Marty Finch, the swimmer to beat in the race. Marty looks back, and Jesse "can't read her face. She is still trying to decipher it, to pull some important message off it, still trying to link today with last night, to figure out the connection between those events and this one" (5). In these opening pages of the novel, we do not know what "those events" are; we know only that the glance at Marty causes Jesse to enter the water one-tenth of a second late. And that time costs her the race; Marty wins the gold medal and Jesse the silver.

The novel then proceeds to July 1990, and in three different sections (each of which occurs in the same time frame) Jesse's life is imagined in three different ways. In the first, she is married and expecting a child and lives in her hometown of New Jerusalem, Missouri, where she and her husband manage a local tourist attraction, a cave. Jesse has a flirtation with the local UPS deliveryman. In the second, Jesse is a college English professor who lives in New York City with her female lover, Kit, a soap opera actress. The two visit New Jerusalem to attend Jesse's mother's retirement party. In the third, Jesse lives in Florida, where she runs a somewhat rundown swimming school; her husband has left her, and she lives with her daughter, while her son lives in town. Jesse is having an affair with a black man, Oscar. Through the three possibilities of Jesse's life, we learn that Jesse has carried with her the painful memory of that

October Olympics throughout her life. She and Marty were lovers and made love the night before the fateful race. Jesse wrote to Marty, as the two promised they would, but her letters went unanswered. A nagging fear in her remembering of the past is betrayal, that Marty manipulated Jesse in order to control the competition. The fear of betrayal is perhaps most explicitly drawn in the second possibility for Jesse's life, where she has had a number of short-lived affairs with women, and where she constantly fears that Kit, with whom she is deeply in love, will leave her. Only in the second possibility, however, is Jesse willing to take the risk of love, as she did in 1968; only in assuming the lesbian desire that was a source of passion, of conflict, and of betrayal for her in Mexico City is she able to live a life different from, yet connected to, the past.

But the lesbian Jesse is no more or less affected by the past than the other two Jesses, who also live out their own dramas of betrayal, of intimacy, of making sense of the past. In all three sections of the novel, Jesse's godmother, Hattie, is a constant source of love and strength. Jesse's close relationship with her mentally retarded brother, Willie, also takes on different forms in the three lives. Both Hattie and Willie were present in Mexico City, and they appear in Jesse's lives as privileged observers. The lesbian Jesse may be radically different from the two other Jesses, but she shares a life with them as well.

The aquamarine of the novel's title evokes both Jesse's love of the water and the ever-present, unresolved drama of the past. The first Jesse has, in the caves, a reminder of the shimmering beauty of the water and the pain of the past. The second Jesse has distanced herself from the water, as if by being a lesbian she has incorporated the past into her life. The third Jesse lives what appears to be the most continuous relationship to her past, given that she is around water all the time and continues to live her identity as a swimmer. But in all three lives, the water is mysterious, it is tantalizing, and it is a shimmering surface through which each Jesse tries to see what the past meant, what its hold on her continues to be. In the final section of the novel, Jesse makes a visit to Australia to confront Marty Finch once and for all. But the moment of reckoning is filled with ambiguity. We do not know which Jesse has made the journey—perhaps all three, perhaps none. When she finally sees Marty, she “doesn't give off so much as a blink of wondering who Jesse is, or trying to put her into this context, or wondering why she is here—none of the things that happen when you're not expecting someone” (197). What Jesse sees, at the novel's end, is neither a satisfying resolution nor a comforting explanation of the past. As Marty once again meets Jesse's gaze, “it appears she has been expecting Jesse all along, as

she leans forward against the railing and moves straight into a smile of pure pleasure, her eyes filled with lies" (197). Jesse is suspended in time and desire: "Jesse waits to, wants to, hear them" (197).

Anshaw's novel and Friedrich's films share a preoccupation with water and swimming, on the one hand, and with lesbian representation that opens up hypotheses and spaces for contemplation of women looking at other women, desiring other women, loving other women, on the other. Water is a place of reverie, a place that holds memories and possibilities. When the second Jesse visits her high school swimming pool, she stands on a starting block, ready to enter the water. She "bears down, to somewhere beneath reverie, where, if all the circumstances are right, she can—for an instant—feel it all over again" (Anshaw 1992, 132). What Jesse and the daughter in *Sink or Swim* "feel all over again" is different but related, for in both cases it is the drama of fear and possibility. The second Jesse "doesn't want to spend the rest of her life racing against a someone she needs not to be anymore" (133). Neither does the daughter in Friedrich's film, and part of what she imagines herself to be is passionately detached from the world her father represents. Lesbian desire is one such passionate detachment.

There may well be an enormous difference between the significance of a traumatic event from the past, in *Aquamarine*, and the particular way in which swimming, for Friedrich, is associated both with the father's power and the daughter's complicated relationship to it. But in both cases, swimming embodies the strength to move against the current as well as the possibility of falling into the abyss, of sinking. In both Anshaw's novel and Friedrich's films, lesbian narratives do not triumphantly affirm lesbian identity but affirm, rather, lesbian possibilities. They are possibilities as rich with complexities as the color aquamarine, as Athena and Atalanta, as a swimmer moving downstream.

Note

1. For relevant discussions of Friedrich's films, see Gever 1988; Holmlund 1997, 1998; Kotz 1993; MacDonald 1992, 283–318; Weiss 1992, 155–61.

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