

TEXT AS IMAGE

IN SOME RECENT NORTH AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE FILMS

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Su Friedrich, *Gently Down the Stream* (1981)

During the early 1980s, Su Friedrich completed three films in which the use of texts—in all three cases, words scratched into the film emulsion—is crucial (all three films use black and white film stock, so the scratched words are white on black). Two of these films—*Gently Down the Stream* and *But No One* (1982)—are brief attempts to deal filmically with troubling dream material. The third, the 55-minute *The Ties That Bind* (1984), is a personal documentary about Friedrich's mother's experiences as an anti-Nazi German living in Germany during World War II and the arrival of the Allies, and subsequently, as an emigrant to the U.S., where her marriage with Friedrich's German father breaks up. Essentially, *The Ties That Bind* is a daughter's attempt to come to terms with her mother's experiences and responses to them, and with the implications of these experiences for Friedrich herself. In *The Ties That Bind*, scratched texts are used to ask the mother questions that understandably interest and trouble Friedrich. By presenting these questions one scratched word at a time ("So/you/did/know/about/the camps?"), Friedrich simultaneously engages the viewer/reader in asking the questions (Friedrich's mother seems to respond to our reading of the questions), and, to a degree, detaches them from the particular mother-daughter relationship. It's as though the filmmaker (or the film) is asking them for the daughter.

As interesting as *The Ties That Bind* is, however, its use of scratched text is less central and less complex than the use of text in the earlier dream films. In each of these, the texts are the central visual imagery of the film (*The Ties That Bind* uses imagery of Germany collected by Friedrich on a visit and other kinds of imagery), both in the sense that the texts are what catches our eye and in the sense that the images the texts conjure up are more potent than the imagery photographically recorded. Both *Gently Down the Stream* and *But No One* have a creepy power, but I find the earlier film considerably more intense: its scratched texts seem to quiver with anxiety.

In a program note for *Gently Down the Stream*, Friedrich explains that the text of the film "is a succession of fourteen dreams taken from eight years of my journals. They were shuffled out of their original chronological order for the purpose of coherence and because often we know/dream something long after, or before, we can use it in our lives. . . . I chose to work with dreams that were the most troubling to me, that expressed my deepest fears, anxieties and longings, or ones that had forced a sudden awareness about a nagging problem." The photographic background for the textual revelation of the dreams (the background into which they're scratched) includes several kinds of imagery: at first, shots of figures of the Virgin and Christ (and what looks to be a nun and a penitent); then shots of a woman rowing on a rowing machine, apparently in a gym (my guess is that this is found footage); then of a different woman entering and swimming in an indoor pool (this, too, looks like imagery from another era); and finally, shots of a body of water, filmed, I assume, from a ferry boat.²⁶

Both the scratched texts and the photographic imagery are presented in a variety of ways. The textual words are scratched one or two words at a time (late in the film, *blindness* is spelled letter by letter); and while some include the fluttery movement that is the usual sign of direct scratching into the emulsion, others are rephotographed so that while obviously scratched, they are still sometimes caught in a blur. Generally, the size of the words and the use of capitals or lower-case letters provides emphasis, sometimes subtly, at other times dramatically. For example, after the passage, "I/wake/her/she/is/angry/smears/spermidal/jelly/on/my/lips," the word *no* suddenly grows from small to large then back to small.²⁶ The photographed imagery is sometimes presented full frame, and at other times appears within a frame-within-the-frame, on the upper right or in the middle (and is punctuated intermittently by moments when the frame-within-the-frame image is clear white). Near the end, white circles, made I assume by punching holes in the film, provide another kind of punctuation. At times the film looks flat, dead; at others the eye feels a brief barrage of flicker.

In her program notes, Friedrich indicates that she is "more concerned with finding ways to integrate the (harsh) wisdom

of dreams into my life than I am in analysing the structure and function of dreams through any given system (Freudian, Jungian, etc.)." But for the viewer there is a fascination in trying to understand the nature of the psychic disturbance dramatized by Friedrich's dreams. One fundamental aspect of the disturbance seems apparent when one connects the imagery of Catholic icons (Friedrich was raised Catholic) with several texts, which are presumably dream-distortions of particular sexual feelings or experiences: "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 / ROARS / HOWLS / ROAR / HOWL / She mutters / I / CAN'T / can't / hold / you / The / last / time / was / too / tense / So / many / memories"; "I / draw / a / man / take / his / skin / inflate / it / get / excited / mount / it / IT'S / LIKE / BEING / IN / LOVE / WITH / A / STRAIGHT / WOMAN." An internal conflict between Catholicism and lesbianism seems obvious and is extended by dream material that deals with reproduction: "I / lie / in / a / gutter / giving / birth / to / myself / two / fetuses / dark / green / and / knotted / up / Try / to / breathe / so / they / don't / suffocate / I / can / pull / one / out / but / it / starts / to / crumble / up."

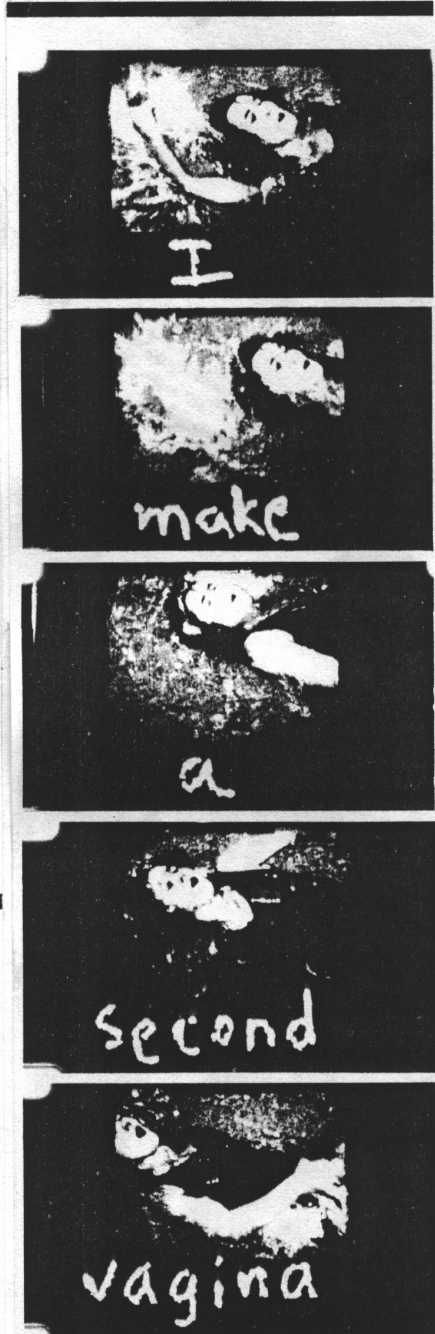
The disconcerting impact of *Gently Down the Stream* has a good deal to do with the way in which Friedrich uses text. Because we must participate in the one-word-at-a-time process of constructing the sentences that convey her dreams, we are pulled along by the current of Friedrich's psychic flow; and because—as in Frampton's *Poetic Justice*—we "shoot" the imagery suggested by the texts, we find ourselves, in a strange way, inside the filmmaker's psyche. Like McCall and Tyndall, Friedrich effectively reverses the conventional balance of text-image and, by doing so, is able to use the spectacle of photographed imagery (most of which seems to offer little more than a series of metaphors for our voyage down the filmmaker's stream of consciousness) as the context for the textual significations of deeper psychic experiences.

In 1982 Friedrich designed and had printed a book that contains the complete text of *Gently Down the Stream* and selected stills. The long, narrow, "streamlike" shape of the book combined with the rippled cover make it more an evocation of the film than a simple record. The book is available from Friedrich, 100 Forsyth St. #16, New York, NY 10002.

Michael Snow, *So Is This* (1982)

Few filmmakers have had as large an impact on the recent avant-garde film scene as Canadian Michael Snow, whose *Wavelength* (1967) is probably the most frequently discussed "structural" film. Snow has been a friend and/or a collaborator and/or an influence on most of the filmmakers I've discussed so far, and, given the interests of his earlier films, a Snow film exploring the intersection of the film experience and the literary experience was probably inevitable. Snow has frequently exposed the interference generated when a given medium attempts to represent reality and/or when various media intersect. In *Wavelength*, we are simultaneously aware of what we are seeing (documentary imagery of a loft and through the windows, Canal Street, New York City; fictional imagery of a death and its discovery) and how the continually changing film stocks, filters, and lighting, and the continuously shortening zoom distance to the windows at the other end of the loft affect what we see. *Side Seat Paintings Slides Sound Film*, (1970) presents a series of slides of some of Snow's early paintings: we "see" the paintings and the distortions of them created by the various steps the imagery has passed through. Snow has explored elements of the literary experience in several of his works: "*Fameau's Nephew*" by Diderot (*Thanx to Dennis Young*) by Wilma Schoen (1974) includes a long, rolling credit sequence that plays with text in amusing ways; his *Cover to Cover* (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design/NYU Press, 1975) plays with the act of turning the consecutive pages of a book. But until *So Is This*, Snow had not made the process of reading printed texts a central dimension of a film.

In *So Is This*, Snow interfaces what he sees as essential



Frames from *Gently Down the Stream* (1981) by Su Friedrich.