

## Fractured Fairytales and Experimental Identities: Looking for Lesbians in and around the Films of Su Friedrich

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Today, thanks to a number of different factors,<sup>1</sup> exploring lesbian aesthetics and lesbian spectatorship is increasingly in vogue. Broadly speaking, three lines of approach have been suggested, though none is entirely separate from the others. Critics of mainstream films often argue that lesbians are underrepresented, unrepresented, even unrepresentable, appearing only as stereotypes and/or as subordinate characters, or confined to certain subgenres like the prison film and the lesbian vampire movie. Indeed, Sue-Ellen Case views the lesbian vampire film as emblematic of how fraught looking for lesbians in screen representations of all kinds can be: “To ask ‘will the real lesbian please stand up,’ when she is embedded in the dominant discursive mandate to disappear, or in the subcultural subversion to flaunt her distance from the ‘real,’ is like asking the vampire to appear in the mirror” (9).

A second tack has been to study subcultural appropriations of popular movies like *Personal Best* (Robert Towne, 1982), *Lianna* (John Sayles, 1983), *Entre Nous* (Diane Kurys, 1983) and *Desert Hearts* (Donna Deitch, 1986).<sup>2</sup> Critics interview and imagine rebel lesbian spectators who raid narratives containing discreetly lesbian characters, then reframe these narratives to fit their own deviant desires. Yet, as I have argued in “When Is a Lesbian Not a Lesbian?,” not only do “femme films” like these

perpetuate heterosexual assumptions about lesbians, but lesbians in the audience often evaluate them as they would other mainstream films, and their readings are often indistinguishable from straight readings.

Because it is so hard to “see” lesbians in and as spectators of mainstream films, some critics prefer a third route, examining experimental, independent and/or documentary films in the hopes that a lesbian aesthetic, or at least a feminist aesthetic, will emerge more distinctly here. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, privileges avant-garde films over mainstream movies because the former “emphasize what our cultural imagination and the whole history of cinema have constructed as the visible, what *can be seen*, and eroticized” (“Sexual Indifference” 173).<sup>3</sup> Although in “Film and the Visible” she stresses that what can be seen changes according to “scene” and time,<sup>4</sup> on the whole her film analyses tip toward texts rather than toward reception.

I both appreciate and share the desire to call attention to a lesbian presence in and/or in front of film common to these approaches. At the same time, however, like many (including de Lauretis), I am uncomfortable with generalizations which imply there is or could be “a” timeless lesbian aesthetic or “a” single and/or distinct lesbian spectator. Furthermore, while I recognize the importance of producing and promoting new ways of seeing, I am chary of promoting experimental film over mainstream movies as the basis of an *a priori* more liberating cinema. As Judith Mayne says, “Given the institutionalized ways in which the cinema functions, and how individuals are acculturated to respond to the cinema, it is difficult to know just to what extent a truly alternative cinematic practice is possible” (*Woman* 4).

In effect, critics evaluating lesbian experimental films as well as lesbian filmmakers have, over time, proffered very different versions of “what can be seen, and eroticized.”<sup>5</sup> It seems to me more fruitful, therefore, to approach lesbian aesthetics and spectatorship in relation to historically specific experiences and expectations of *both* experimental and mainstream film.

To this end, I propose to discuss four films directed by Su Friedrich during the 1980s and early 1990s — *Gently Down the Stream* (1983), *The Ties that Bind* (1984), *Damned if You Don't* (1987) and *Sink or Swim* (1990).<sup>6</sup> And because I want to reflect on representation and, at the same time, to connect mainstream and experimental film, I will discuss her experimental films using a series of terms which might as easily describe lesbian appropriations of mainstream movies: naming, reclaiming, raiding, outing, and reframing.<sup>7</sup>

Friedrich's work lends itself well to this kind of politicized assessment. For years Friedrich has been concerned with the political resonances of aesthetic choices, first as an art student involved in the women's movement, then as a member of the *Heresies* collective, and now as an experimental filmmaker, teacher, and writer who is openly lesbian, yet who also talks about having been involved in heterosexual relationships.<sup>8</sup> Although Friedrich exhibits her films at lesbian and gay festivals around the world, she continues to show her work in non-gay festivals because she is interested in reaching as many people as possible. In interviews, she consistently maintains she is "more interested in finding the nuances, the subtle points, which would undermine or recast . . . absolute feelings" ("Radical Form" 118).<sup>9</sup>

Yet while Friedrich's films stand out for their creativity, accessibility, and sensuality, they also provide many examples of overt lesbian content, imagery, and address. Like many recent lesbian narratives, the four I will look at are in some way autobiographical.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the insistence on a separate and seamless lesbian identity characteristic of so many coming-out stories from the 1970s and early 1980s, however, Friedrich's films translate the acceptance of diversity which has become more typical of lesbian individuals and communities since the mid 1980s (see Faderman, esp. ch. 11). Indeed, except for *Damned if You Don't*, Friedrich's films do not focus on her own or others' lesbianism. Rather each critiques the ways communities and institutions shape individuals, fracturing fairytales, and creating experimental identities in the process. Thus even though each, if differently, revolves around Friedrich as "author," often literally writing her into the text, no film reinforces what Mayne calls "the common, easy equation between authorial presence and the fictions of identity" ("A Parallax View" 177).

Two films — *The Ties that Bind* and *Sink or Swim*, as well as Friedrich's latest films, *First Comes Love* (1991) and *Rules of the Road* (1993) — center on family, marriage, and "divorce."<sup>11</sup> Since the mid 1980s, the family and marriage have been prime topics of discussion among lesbians and gay men, due to the number of lesbians having children, to a rise in gay marriages, and to the horrifying percentage of gay men living with and dying of AIDS.<sup>12</sup> Friedrich, however, refuses to oppose homosexual to heterosexual families. Instead she transforms the very concept of "family," and thereby renders visible "the symbolic mediations of kinship by sexuality" (Weston 67).

Doubly marked as of the 1980s and early 1990s, then, the topics Friedrich's films take up and the narrative strategies they employ are nevertheless so varied as to make critical appeals to "a" lesbian aesthetic or "a" lesbian spectator quite difficult. Not surprisingly, then, as I show in the penultimate section of this paper, except in the case of *Damned if You Don't*, most critics have failed to perceive the lesbian "vampires" which lurk in them. While experimental form, alternative forums, and changing contexts may prompt perception, explicit content still — unfortunately — governs what is labeled "lesbian." The consequences of such critical short-sightedness are severe: 1) Friedrich's aesthetic of inclusiveness is misperceived as an aesthetic of universality; 2) shifts in lesbian identities and identifications go unnoticed; and 3) heterosexual identity and identification appear monolithic and unchanging.

Unquestionably, looking for lesbians in and in front of movies is a frustrating and complicated task. Nevertheless, it is a necessary and an urgent one, which everyone, not just lesbians, will benefit from undertaking. Rather than pit experimental films against mainstream movies, and rather than view audience reactions as distinct from critical responses and/or as separate from theoretical debates, let us acknowledge how dependent and interconnected lesbian aesthetics and spectatorship are, and how much both are shaped by extra-textual economic, social, and historical factors. There are no hard and fast answers, but neither should we wish for any. More helpful — and surely more pleasurable — is to approach the interrelated questions of lesbian representations as Friedrich herself has done:

I really think that the most oppressive situation is one in which we feel we *must* work in a particular way, and that other ways of working are wrong, revisionist, conservative, etc. . . . As I've gone along, it seems more important to allow myself even more freedom: to look out both the front and back doors, as well as all the windows; to still assume that there are infinite possibilities in how a film can be made, and what it can say. ("Radical Form" 123)

A fourteen-minute short, shot in black and white without sound, *Gently Down the Stream* (1983) presents an oneiric succession of images. In it Friedrich accents *autobiography*, transposing fourteen dreams she recorded over eight years in her journals by scratching her thoughts directly onto the film strip, one word at a time, and illustrating them with a variety of images.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the film's recombinations of texts and images, naming and reframing are key. Most of the mini-poems in the scratched texts deal in some way with female sexuality, and most name this sexuality as lesbian. The first to do so is the fourth dream poem, which passes imperceptibly into the next poem. Both poems are intercut with images of a woman on a rowing machine, and images of a woman's feet stepping into a swimming pool. The text reads:

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<sup>14</sup>

The next poem is initiated by a white screen, and linked to the preceding sequence by the same images of feet entering a pool. It too has lesbian overtones, if rather unexpected ones:

Woman on the bed shivers  
I wake her  
she is angry  
smears spermicidal jelly  
on my lips

NO! NO! NO!

The last mention of lesbianism is more oblique, embedded within one of two rather negative and violent, if funny, dream poems about men:

I draw a man  
take his skin  
inflate it  
get excited  
mount it

It's like being in love with  
a straight woman

Two other dreams, both of which precede the overtly lesbian poems, allude to a female sexuality which is not necessarily lesbian. Several concern artistic creation, and two deal with self-creation and birth.



Figure 1. Su Friedrich. Still from *Gently Down the Stream* (1983).

Everywhere the images and words we see are in some way reframed. Because the texts appear, for the most part, as single words, their graphic qualities stand out. All those which concern women flutter before our eyes, but the two dream poems about men do not: Friedrich used an optical printer to hold them still (MacDonald, "Damned if You Don't" 7). Other images punctuate, echo, and extend the words. Diagonal scratches and punched holes are, like the words, etched into the film itself. Snippets of action footage sporadically appear, usually (though not always) framed within a rectangle on the upper right hand side of the image: the woman on a rowing machine, statues of the Virgin and Christ, a woman swimming, a woman entering a pool, waves, water, sea, sand, a seal. Some of these images are repeated, at times in slow motion. Some, shown as negative images or shot in extreme closeup and/or out of focus, are difficult at first to identify.

Yet 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. Lesbian sexual acts are not represented. Friedrich herself points to the difficulty of interpretation. In an unspoken crosscultural pun based on the German expressions *nicht erkennig*, which can mean “blindness,” and *erkennigheit*, which can mean both “perception” and “truth,” she acknowledges how frequently silence and blindness are interwoven with sound and sight:

Five women sing in acapella  
 funny harmony  
 they spell the word truth  
 in German  
 I spell B L I N D N E S S  
 A man says  
 Their Song Is A Very Clever Pun  
 I say I can't agree  
 I don't know German

*The Ties that Bind* (1984) continues to question the roles language and context play with respect to silence, blindness, sound, and sight. Here, however, the connections between the US and Germany become focal issues, and the references to mother, birth, and sexuality sprinkled throughout *Gently Down the Stream* take center stage. A fifty-five minute black-and-white documentary, *The Ties that Bind* is woven around a series of interviews Friedrich conducted with her mother about what it was like to grow up in Nazi Germany. While Friedrich herself is “heard” throughout the film via one-word scratched questions,<sup>16</sup> *The Ties that Bind* is more biographical than autobiographical. Lore Friedrich’s voice dominates the sound track, responding to questions asked by her daughter Su but replaced in the film by the scratched texts. In snatches we see a parade; a demonstration; Lore at home, at work, in the street, on the beach and in the water; fundraising letters addressed to Su; newspaper headlines; clips of TV shows; the construction and destruction of a model Bavarian house; and travel footage. Other images have been raided from archival sources of various kinds: family photos and home movies; an old Library of Congress film of a woman dancing with an American flag; and Nazi film footage of the devastation caused by Allied bombing raids in Lore’s home town.



Figure 2. Su Friedrich. Still from *The Ties that Bind* (1984).

Because *The Ties that Bind* revolves around what Lore Friedrich saw, heard, and knew during an era when, as Lore says grimly, “you have to keep your mouth shut,” naming and reclaiming are key. Midway through the film, Su retraces in reverse her mother’s journey from Germany to the US, visiting and photographing the old house her mother lived in as a child. For the first two-thirds, closeups show hands<sup>17</sup> assembling a tiny gingerbread-style Bavarian house which looks much like this house. When it is finished, a woman’s feet stomp it to pieces, then the hands set it ablaze, anticipating Lore Friedrich’s account of the Allied bombing of Stuttgart and ransacking of her home.

Silences assume ominous proportions, though they also allow the spectators time to reflect on the multiple ties that bind images to images, words to words, and words to images. There are moments of revenge and denunciation when mother and daughter put a name to, a face on, anonymous war or profit machines. At one point, offscreen, Lore indicts her piano teacher as a Nazi. Earlier, hands had drawn a Hitler moustache on a male model taken from the *New York Times* Sunday magazine section. The model was part of a Ralph Lauren ad campaign featuring young boys with an “Aryan” look, that is, dressed to resemble the Hitler youth of the 1930s.

For the most part, however, *The Ties that Bind* is less concerned with assigning individual responsibility than with seeing differently. Reframing strategies are pervasive and often ex-



press what words cannot. Badly framed closeups and medium shots of Lore Friedrich's hands and feet emphasize the importance of looking at what Friedrich's mother "does" or "looks at," not just listening to what she says. Shaky hand-held footage conveys the intensity of Su Friedrich's reactions at Dachau. Whip pans over a crossroads visually translate her mother's anger at the destruction of her home. Inserts of tabloid newspapers whose headlines scream things like "Boom!," "Americans Must Die," and "Ron Calls for 'Star Wars' Arms" remind us the threat of war is still very much alive. Other headlines demonstrate how fascinated the US is by fascism, promising "Hitler's Secrets Bared," or proclaiming "Memories of a Madman Stun the World" and "Nazi Death Squad Busted." Closeups of the fundraising letters Su Friedrich receives underline how much antiwar and anti-hate work remains to be done. One of these, a letter from Amnesty International which reads "Suppose the soldiers came and took away your sister in a truck," is particularly poignant: it echoes Lore Friedrich's description of being hauled off in the middle of the night by Nazis. Because Friedrich has chosen not to use the equipment needed to synchronize her film camera to the TV image, horizontal bars traverse TV boxing matches, game shows, commercials, and war movies, defamiliarizing everyday images we take for granted.

Periodically footage appears of women's demonstrations (they are predominantly lesbian) outside an army depot in upstate New York. Lore Friedrich critiques the Nazi glorification of motherhood at length, but we also hear about women's complicity. *The Ties that Bind* thus at no point valorizes women over men, the US over Germany, or the present over the past. Rather, Lore passionately insists that US soldiers are "no better than anyone else." At times words fail her: only the pain in her voice, and her sobs, can hint at the horrors she has been through:

But then of course came the occupation and another wave of terror, just because of the occupation. . . . I have seen old people beaten, they were herded on trucks . . . [she cries] . . . and I kept thinking what if it were my father, what if it were my mother. . . . I could have killed them all. [Crying.] Oh, how could one ever forget it? You know it's funny, Susi, no it isn't funny, but my father was such a gentle man, and my mother was a good woman but sometimes she got very very angry, and I have been spanked a couple of times, but when I think of the brutalities I had to see in my life: that people can live and be so brutal. It's really difficult to understand.

Su Friedrich's scratched clarification of the sign held by pro-nuclear protestors, seen right after her mother's description of the US forces' mistreatment of old people, is quite possibly the most terrifying statement in the entire film. One word at a time, we read: "The sign says: Nuke them till they glow then shoot them in the dark."

Despite the atrocities it details, however, *The Ties that Bind* is a profoundly humanist film, concerned with what it means to be a woman in a war and what it means to be the daughter of a woman who was in a war. It contains nothing that might be considered specifically lesbian. Lesbians are present — Su herself, some of the women demonstrators — but they are anonymous participants in complex networks of kinship and inheritance. First and foremost, this film stands as a testimony to the tenacity of desire and love of life, with the final scratch text representing Friedrich's tribute to her mother's triumph over adversity, horror, and hate: "In 1980 (after raising three kids alone) she bought herself a piano and began to practice the scales."

In contrast, *Damned if You Don't* (1987) takes *lesbian* desire as its central focus. In this film fiction joins history as Friedrich examines earlier representations of lesbians while composing her own story of lesbian "lust." The forty-two minute, black-and-white *Damned if You Don't* is thus the least autobiographical of these films: only an unidentified offscreen voice speaks of a personal past, remembering what it was like to grow up Catholic. Although Friedrich herself is heard offscreen several times, the credits make no mention of her presence *in* the film; she is only listed as working *on* the film.

There are four basic narrative elements, all overtly concerned with naming and reclaiming nuns as lesbians. The main story is a melodrama about two women identified in the credits as the Other Woman (Ela Troyano)<sup>18</sup> and the Nun (Peggy Healey). As in many melodramas, "the chaste are chased,"<sup>19</sup> but for once the pursuer is not a man, but another woman. In her black bolero pants and tight black top, tight white pants and white top, and low-cut diaphanous black dress, this Other Woman is voluptuousness incarnate. What the Nun looks like is, of course, a mystery. Her hair is covered and her figure disguised until the final scene, when she is quite literally unveiled and undressed by her neighbor.

At the beginning and end of the film, images of a swan and a water snake are intercut with shots of the two women, suggesting that the Nun is the "pure" swan, the Other Woman

the “dangerous” snake. The swan appears behind bars. Later images of the Nun shot through grillwork make it clear that she too is a prisoner. Throughout, the neighbor watches the Nun and the Nun watches the neighbor. In church the neighbor slowly and suggestively runs her hand over the back of a pew the Nun has just touched. As a respite from the mounting sexual tension, the Nun takes a trip to the Coney Island Amusement Park.

The neighbor buys a needlepoint head of a crucified Christ to embroider as a gift for the Nun. Extreme closeups show her needle emerging through Christ’s lips and piercing one of his eyes. A bit later the Nun returns to her room to find the needlepoint hanging crookedly on the wall. Rapid flashbacks combined with shots of a male and female tightrope walkers convey her psychic balancing act. Finally she gives in to desire, and goes to her neighbor’s room. Only when she decides to act on her sexual attraction do we at last see the swan without the bars and the Nun without the veil: slowly, the Other Woman disrobes her and, in silence, the two make love.



Figure 3. Su Friedrich. Still from *Damned if You Don't* (1987).

This main story is constantly interrupted by and reframed against two others, raided from popular film and history, respectively. The first, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *Black Narcissus* (1947), is reworked on both the image and the sound tracks.<sup>20</sup> *Damned if You Don't* begins with the Other Woman lolling on her mattress, watching the Powell and Pressburger film on television. The TV images are intercut with shots of her falling asleep. Offscreen, a voice with a slight German accent (Martina Siebert) retells the story of four nuns sent to work in a convent high up in the Himalayas, emphasizing the repressed heterosexual desire "The Good Nun" (Deborah Kerr) and "The Bad Nun" (Jean Simmons) feel for Mr. Dean (David Farrar). Friedrich's film uses only one moment of synchronous sound, when the voice of "The Good Nun" angrily bans Mr. Dean from the convent. Another offscreen voice (Friedrich's own) interrupts, prompting the narrating voice and laughingly singing Mr. Dean's song: "No, I won't be a nun. No I shall not be a nun. For I am so fond of pleasure, I cannot be a nun." As in *The Ties that Bind*, Friedrich has not adjusted her camera to the television images, so horizontal bars roll across the screen each time the Powell and Pressburger film appears. *Black Narcissus's* heterosexual romanticism is further restrained because *Damned if You Don't* is in black and white: gone is the lush color which earned the original Academy Awards for best color photography and best art direction.

The second subnarrative is excerpted from historian Judith Brown's study of a nun, Sister Benedetta, found guilty of "misconduct" in Renaissance Italy and imprisoned for thirty-five years within her convent. Closeups of the book's title, *Immodest Acts*, and dedication, "To Simona," precede a long shot of the neighbor reading under a tree in a garden, then a flat offscreen voice (Cathy Quinlan) reads two floridly sensual passages from Sister Crivelli's testimony against Sister Benedetta. Accompanied by unrelated images of unidentified nuns and the Nun, the first tells how Jesus removed Sister Benedetta's heart and replaced it with his own. The second describes a series of lesbian acts in graphic detail as, on screen, the embroidery needle pierces Christ's eyes and mouth.

Quinlan's laughter and comments and Friedrich's voice prompting and judging the reading interrupt both selections. Quinlan chuckles, for example, as she reads, "How can I live without a heart now?" "Well, why not?" Friedrich responds. Stepping completely out of character, Quinlan replies, "You know what? I just had the funny idea that Sister Crivelli said

this millions of times too. At a certain point she was just reading the fucking testimony.”

Periodically, if more parenthetically, we hear about other lesbian love stories as well. At one point an anonymous voice on the sound track “outs” nuns she had crushes on as a child. Other nuns are framed on screen in two-shots or three-shots, by association also becoming lesbians, or at least potential lesbians. Friedrich is ambivalent about the ethics of “outing” these unnamed nuns, however. At the end of the film, just before a large “AMEN” fills the screen, she adds her thanks “to the nuns and priests who permitted me to shoot in their institutions; they weren’t aware of the precise nature of the film. Others, who appear in the film, were unaware that they were being filmed. Their presence should not be construed as an approval, on their part, of the contents.” What she says of her earlier film, *Scar Tissue* (1979), is thus true of *Damned if You Don’t* as well: “I harbor no illusions about the virtue of filming innocent bystanders: it isn’t kindly” (qtd. in Hanlon 82).<sup>21</sup>

But though apologetic, Friedrich is not contrite. Even if “outing” isn’t nice, it isn’t a sin: in this film at least, you’re only damned if you *don’t*. Each and every element speaks to lesbian spectators of the persistence of lesbian desire through time and across cultures, despite silencing and persecution. Most important, perhaps, is what Friedrich in her offhandedly ironic way calls the “god forbid . . . happy ending”: in *Damned if You Don’t* for once the girl gets the girl (“Radical Form” 123).

In *Sink or Swim* (1990), Friedrich returns to her childhood and her family. Via the voice of a little girl (Jessica Lynn) she speaks to her father, a successful linguist and anthropologist, about his abuse of her, and importance to her. Unlike *The Ties that Bind*, where Friedrich’s mother is very much present, however, in *Sink or Swim* Friedrich’s father is never heard and only appears briefly in a few home movies.

The twenty-six vignettes of this forty-eight minute, black-and-white film are organized around the alphabet listed backwards. Each is introduced by a one- or two-word title, beginning pre-birth (“Zygote,” “Y Chromosome,” “X Chromosome”), then moving on to childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The last images — multiple superimpositions of Friedrich in a one-piece bathing suit with a little skirtlet — regress to adolescence as, on the soundtrack, Friedrich loops her voice singing the alphabet song into a round. The film ends as the image freezes and a single voice concludes, “Now I’ve said my ABCs, tell me what you think of me.”

Of these four films *Sink or Swim* is thus the most obviously autobiographical. Woven around Friedrich's relationship with her father are stories and images of strong, independent, and attractive women. Thus in passing and obliquely, the boundaries of kinship are widened to include lesbian lovers, friends, and fantasies. We see evidence of Friedrich's burgeoning interest in, then desire for, other women: the glamorous female circus performers of "Utopia"; the sleek female bodybuilders of "Temptation"; two naked women kissing and hugging in a shower in "Kinship"; two explicitly lesbian Japanese drawings in "Competition." The overtly lesbian images of "Kinship" are accompanied by a Schubert lied which, we later learn, was Friedrich's mother's favorite after her husband left her.

But *Sink or Swim* is by no means solely an autobiographical film. As in her other movies, Friedrich deflects attention from herself, rewriting her experiences so that they may speak to other little girls and dads living in the United States between the 1950s and the 1980s. The stories read by the child narrator are in the third person. Anecdotes from the childhoods of Friedrich and her father are interwoven with material raided from Greek mythology, nursery rhymes, Bible stories, movie plots, and fairy tales. The images also move beyond the personal towards the universal. An early home movie of Friedrich's father happily throwing a little girl into the air is intentionally misleading: we think that he is playing with Friedrich; we learn we are watching her sister. Shots of Friedrich at various ages are intercut with new and recycled images of other little girls, including Asian Americans and African Americans, who ride bicycles, eat sandwiches with their dads, go to First Communion, ice skate, play on the beach, and jump into swimming pools ("Realism," "Oblivion," "Memory," "Journalism," "Loss" and "Athena/Atalanta/Aphrodite"). Whether their carefree images mask dramas much like Friedrich's own, or whether they merely point to Friedrich's sense of abnormality and isolation is unclear. Only the beaming little heroines in "Homework," plundered from 1950s sitcoms like *The Donna Reed Show*, *Make Room for Daddy*, and *Father Knows Best*, live a patently different life: the bars rolling across the silent television images signal the unattainability, perhaps the artificiality, of the happiness they enjoy.

The editing, especially, suggests how complexly and ambiguously childhood remembrances of family dramas affect adults. Friedrich's childish conviction that her father was, as she says in "Virginity," "the smartest, most handsome man she'd ever met," is repeatedly reframed. While the young Friedrich

imagines herself as Athena and her father as Zeus, already in "Zygote" we learn that Zeus had many illegitimate children. "Discovery" returns to the theme of multiple mating, poking fun at Paul-Friedrich-the-anthropologist by diagramming his three marriages and two sets of children in a chart labeled "The American Kinship System: circa 1950-1989." "Pedagogy" portrays Friedrich's father as so competitive he refused to play chess with her once she started beating him; "Flesh" and "Envy" tell of how fiercely though unconsciously jealous he was of a teenage boy she played with on vacation in Mexico. In "Realism" Friedrich describes how he taught her to swim: he explained the principles, then threw her into a pool and left it up to her whether she would sink or swim. He also taunted her, saying water moccasins were waiting to attack her. "Quicksand" recounts how he forced her to watch a scary movie; "Loss," how he half-drowned her and her sister in the bathtub as punishment.

Significantly, however, just before telling of her near-drowning in the bathtub, Friedrich acknowledges how much her father had been marked by his sister's accidental drowning when he was young ("Memory"). The images which accompany this story establish a visual equivalence between Friedrich's past and his past: shots which look like the home movies from Friedrich's childhood show a young boy (her father? someone unrelated?) and girl playing in a country pond. As a result, though *Sink or Swim* was made because Friedrich needed and wanted to tell her version of what happened when she was little, it becomes impossible to view the film solely as her exposure of an abusive father.<sup>22</sup>

Friedrich is more sympathetic to her mother, yet again not uncritical. In "Insanity" we learn her mother threatened to kill herself and her two daughters when her husband left. In "Ghosts," the only section besides "Kinship" without narration, we see a negative image of Friedrich's hands typing a letter to her father. The letter tells him her mother played a Schubert lied "about a woman who yearns for her absent lover and feels she cannot live without him" over and over after he left.

Friedrich herself refuses such all-consuming mourning. Although later in the film she too is depressed and alone, confused by her conflicting reactions to seeing her father treat her young stepsister as he treated her, she is by no means incapacitated ("Bigamy"). Instead, she returns to the typewriter, now shown as a positive image. She types the story as we hear it read in voice-over: her father has insulted her stepsister who is now "trying to invent a more interesting story." We

realize that throughout *Sink or Swim* the adult Friedrich has been trying to create “a more interesting story.”

Friedrich-the-grown-up is thus as responsible for naming her own identity as Friedrich-the-child was for sinking or swimming. She consciously reclaims and rejects traits from both parents. Her father’s gift to her at age seven of a book of Greek mythology obviously helped to shape her life, and also this particular film. The last story, triply named “Athena/Atalanta/Aphrodite,” returns to one of the film’s basic themes: the choice between sinking and swimming. Two women lying side by side in the sand watch a little girl toddle along the sea shore.



Figure 4. Su Friedrich. Still from *Sink or Swim* (1990).

Their companionable relationship, as lesbians and/or friends, discreetly presents another family model. The narrator tells of how the girl, now an adult, tries to match her father’s feats by swimming across the lake as he had done when she was a child. Halfway to her destination she grows tired and scared, and decides to swim back. Physically, of course, she could have completed the trip. Psychologically, however, her decision to return marks a step towards independence. But the coda attenuates this autonomy by returning to an image of Friedrich as adolescent and coupling it with the verse, “tell me what you think of me.”

Is Friedrich singing to her father? to the audience? to what kind of audience? It is impossible to say with certainty to whom this film is addressed, for naming (by Friedrich of her-



self) and reclaiming (by Friedrich of her past) are undermined by constant raiding and reframing. Nevertheless, consistently yet good-naturedly, Friedrich lays bare the extent to which gender-based role-playing shapes family dynamics, and hints at the ways in which sexuality, not just gender, structures kinship.

By recasting the tactics lesbian spectators use to tailor mainstream films to fit their own desires — naming and reclaiming, raiding, outing, and reframing — Friedrich fashions an avant-garde cinema full of fractured fairytales. Stock characters, linear plots, and conventional endings give way to experimental identities, experimental id-entities, through humorous juxtapositions of sounds and images. Phallic elephant trunks are matched with X chromosomes and softly blowing milkweed with Y chromosomes (*Sink or Swim*); a woman (Friedrich herself) sings Mr. Dean's song as if it were her own, and traditionally male symbols (a swan, a snake) are associated with female characters (*Damned if You Don't*); a leopard metamorphoses into a lesbian (*Gently Down the Stream*); and more. Only *The Ties that Bind* eschews such playfulness. What humor there is, is black, as when a woman smiles broadly in a TV ad for dentures, and Lore Friedrich says, "You don't know. You have to keep your mouth shut."

But are these experimental identities and fractured fairytales addressed to lesbian spectators? Do Friedrich's personal avant-garde narrative films participate in and/or help constitute a lesbian aesthetic? Is there, will there be, can anyone see, a fairy behind the fairy mask worn by the little "Su Friedrich" who stands, beaming with pride, next to her father in the section of *Sink or Swim* labeled "Virginity?"

In the majority of critical evaluations of Friedrich's films, the answers to these questions is no. The many instances of lesbian naming and reclaiming, raiding, outing, and reframing in Friedrich's films go unnoticed except when a veritable constellation of such features are present, among them: 1) verbal and/or visual representations of lesbian sexual acts, combined with 2) a simultaneous if not necessarily synchronous representation of lesbian issues on both image and sound tracks, for 3) the bulk of narrative time. If anything, the fact that Friedrich's films are experimental only makes perception of lesbian elements more difficult: so much is in flux that representation of sexual acts is not in and-of-itself enough to assure recognition.

Such recurring patterns of myopia, dismissal, and/or displacement, I believe, limit appreciation and enjoyment of Friedrich's work. Only in the case of Friedrich's least "out"

film, *The Ties that Bind*, is the absence of reference to lesbianism understandable. Scott MacDonald, for example, recognizes that naming and reclaiming are essential to the narrative, but without connecting either to lesbian identity. He prefers to discuss Friedrich in terms of an eclectic experimental aesthetic.<sup>23</sup> Most reviewers consider *The Ties that Bind* in relation to a feminist aesthetic, without foregrounding its debts to earlier experimental directors.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, J. Hoberman evaluates the film using terms that are more humanist than feminist: he speaks of “the routine politicization and paths of resistance of the filmmaker’s daily life” (“White Boys” 63).<sup>25</sup>

This oscillation between feminism and humanism figures in reviews of the other three films as well, making it easy for critics and, by extension, their readers, to overlook the presence of lesbian content, images, and spectators. Of the sixteen critics of *Sink or Swim* I surveyed, for example, only four use the term “lesbian,” even though the film clearly includes lesbian images and, like *The Ties that Bind*, was screened at lesbian and gay festivals.<sup>26</sup> Four critics position the film in relation to a feminist and experimental aesthetic.<sup>27</sup> Yet, appropriately, these four do not view Friedrich’s film solely in terms of a feminist tradition but also invoke male avant-garde directors.<sup>28</sup> Like Jonas Kover, who claims that “each person probably could come up with memories of parental misdoing that they could splice into the viewing,”<sup>29</sup> most reviewers applaud the film’s refusal of stereotypes and stasis in terms which emphasize its widespread appeal without, however, noticing Friedrich’s efforts to include girls of diverse races.<sup>30</sup>

The general critical failure to label anything in *The Ties that Bind* and *Sink or Swim* “lesbian” is undoubtedly due to their focus on family, because, as Kath Weston points out, many Americans still perceive gays as “unencumbered by relations of kinship, responsibility or affection” (23). But although *Gently Down the Stream* only mentions mother in passing and says nothing at all about father, its lesbian references and its appeal to lesbian spectators also remain largely invisible to critics, with sexuality again masked by gender and gender again buried under humanness. Only MacDonald views the film’s multiple namings of lesbianism as central to its visual and textual references to women, birth, and reproduction.<sup>31</sup> Most critics instead speak of *Gently Down the Stream* in terms of a feminist aesthetic and/or position it against a backdrop of earlier experimental films made by both men and women.<sup>32</sup> Lindley Hanlon, for example, says “most of the poems . . . foreground the struggle for female identity and sexuality” (84).<sup>33</sup>

Not surprisingly, however, critics of *Damned if You Don't* do, for once, recognize lesbianism as an essential and distinct part of a feminist aesthetic.<sup>34</sup> Still what they see varies a great deal, suggesting yet again how fraught looking for lesbians is. A key disagreement is over the positioning of lesbians in relation to other women and, especially, in relation to men: who is the “you” in the title? who, exactly, will be “damned if they don’t”? Martha Gever takes an implicitly separatist stance, arguing that Friedrich “introduces a male character in order to exile him from her story” (15). MacDonald insists, however, that Friedrich is “willing to share . . . pleasure with men (her use of a male and female tightrope walker to announce the love making suggests that the sexual pleasure of women need not be confined to women)” (“Friedrich” 42 and *A Critical Cinema* 287).<sup>35</sup>

Aesthetic questions are approached from several different points. For Amy Taubin, the first sequences are key. She calls them “pointedly unprofessional,” arguing that “degraded images . . . suit [Friedrich’s] meaning better than conventionally transparent ones” (64). MacDonald prefers to discuss the later sequences: “[T]he imagery of the nun and the whales is one of the most sensuously beautiful passages I’ve seen in film, in fact throughout *Damned if You Don’t* (and in *Gently Down the Stream* and *The Ties that Bind*, for that matter) Friedrich handles black and white with remarkable dexterity and authority” (“Friedrich” 39).<sup>36</sup> Only Gever writes about *Damned if You Don’t* in terms of a specifically lesbian aesthetic, opposing it, moreover, to mainstream films like *Lianna* and *Desert Hearts*.

Friedrich’s critics are by no means wrong to read her films in terms of a feminist or a humanist aesthetics, and they are absolutely right when they approach her work in light of earlier experimental films directed by men as well as women. For while the strategies Friedrich employs resemble those used by lesbian spectators of mainstream films, such strategies are advocated by proponents of all sorts of “identity politics.” What I have called raiding and reframing are, moreover, staples of modern and postmodern art.

The problem as I see it lies not so much in what critics do see as in what many do not see, or choose not to write about. Too often they fail to look for and/or bring out the lesbian content, imagery, and address which pepper *Gently Down the Stream*, *The Ties that Bind*, and *Sink or Swim*. As a result, their reviews have the — quite probably unconscious and undesired — side effect of further straitjacketing lesbian representability by promoting lesbian invisibility.

Having for years felt excluded from mainstream movies,<sup>37</sup> Friedrich makes a point of weaving her films around nursery rhymes, clichés, and dreams in order to facilitate diverse identification.<sup>38</sup> While she often mentions women who have influenced her and/or whose work she admires, at times she is quite happy to acknowledge her debts to male filmmakers as well. At other times, as in her discussions of *Sink or Swim*, she opposes her work to that of the male avant-garde, explaining that “historically, it’s been the position of a lot of male artists to insist that they are speaking universally, that they’re describing experiences outside of their own and thereby being transcendent” (qtd. in MacDonald, “Film, Family and Feminism” 29 and *A Critical Cinema* 309).

Friedrich prefers to begin at home.<sup>39</sup> For her, the personal is not only powerful but pleasurable: “I’ve always wanted to make films that are as emotionally honest as they can be, and then I hope that other people will learn something from seeing them or feel that a part of their own life is being honored in the films” (qtd. in MacDonald, “*Damned if You Don’t*” 8 and *A Critical Cinema* 296).

Clearly, then, if and when you’re looking for lesbians, who is looking, at what, how, and why makes a great deal of difference. For most people, whether gay or straight, the critiques of heterosexuality or hints of homosexuality present in such experimental films as *Gently Down the Stream*, *The Ties that Bind*, and *Sink or Swim* are not enough to provoke discussion of a lesbian aesthetic or to acknowledge lesbian spectators. Similarly, while knowledge of Friedrich’s sexual preference and/or attentiveness to subtexts may, as with mainstream films, fuel readings of her films as “lesbian,” it is also entirely possible that they may not.

Even among lesbians, the issues of lesbian spectatorship and aesthetics are hotly contested, as Judith Mayne’s description of audience reactions to Midi Onodera’s *Ten Cents a Dance* (1986) demonstrates. Although Onodera defines herself as a lesbian and herself plays a lesbian in the first of the film’s three sections, the largely lesbian and gay audience at the 10th Annual San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival refused to see *Ten Cents a Dance* as a lesbian film. Many booed and demanded their money back, resenting the lack of screen time accorded lesbianism and objecting to the inclusion of a straight woman in the lesbian “sex” scene.<sup>40</sup> Shifting scenes, therefore, does not necessarily alter what can be seen. The same tendencies — to ignore lesbianism, to reframe lesbianism as female bonding,

or to position lesbianism as irremediably other — can be found in critical and popular reactions to both experimental films like Friedrich's and mainstream movies like *Lianna* and *Desert Hearts*.<sup>41</sup>

Experimental cinema is *not a priori* more liberating than mainstream cinema. If anything, the gaps between what de Lauretis refers to as "subjective vision" and "social visibility" ("Film and the Visible" 223) may be even more acute here because so few spectators, either gay or straight, feel comfortable with experimental films. Friedrich herself admits that:

The fact that lesbians (in general, or often) exist somewhat outside the normal walks of life certainly doesn't seem to make them any more interested in, or responsive to, non-narrative film. Although I haven't taken a poll about this, I suspect that the numbers fall about the same within the lesbian community as in the straight one. As much as I'd like to think the opposite, being a lesbian doesn't automatically make a woman more sophisticated about art, or less desirous of the big-screen-color-love-story-with-a-happy-ending. (Personal correspondence of 10 Dec. 1991 and 4 Oct. 1992)<sup>42</sup>

This does not mean, of course, that, as filmmakers, critics, and/or spectators we should (to paraphrase de Lauretis) automatically applaud or celebrate a film which manages to reach popular audiences with some kind of "lesbian message" ("Film and the Visible" 276). But if we are to increase lesbian visibility, surely it is essential that we broaden our definitions of lesbian aesthetics and acknowledge diversity among lesbian spectators. Are we overgeneralizing and simplifying what we see and speak of as feminist, female, and/or heterosexual? Are we creating still another ghetto for lesbians by limiting what we see and speak of as lesbian? Might we be participating in the formation of yet another cliché about women by insisting that "women's cinema" always be in some way experimental and/or personal and/or narrative? Although Friedrich's films may fit this description, there are and will be other films by lesbians and non-lesbians which are neither experimental nor personal nor narrative. At this particular moment in time, doesn't it make sense to acknowledge how important sexuality *and* families are to lesbians, at the same time as we recognize that lesbians are not just defined by what they do in bed or at home?

There are not and there never will be any all-encompassing lesbian representations; there is not and there never will be any catchall formula for lesbian spectatorship. I believe, therefore, that Friedrich's films are better read in relation to the

genres (documentary, autobiography, interview format), both avant-garde and 'illusionistic' films" ("Guerilla" 9).

<sup>4</sup>In this essay and the discussion which follows it, de Lauretis is more cautious about championing experimental film. In conclusion, however, she again argues against the "romance or fairy-tale formulas adopted by films such as *Lianna*, *Desert Hearts* and *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*" and in favor of *She Must Be Seeing Things* because the latter "locates itself historically and politically in the contemporary North American lesbian community, with its conflicting discourses" (265).

<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of some of the changes in mainstream critical, trade, and "film fan" publications during the 1930s to 1950s, see Noriega. Discussions of 1970s lesbian experimental films place them on a continuum with women's films, merely adding an emphasis on lesbian sexuality and touch to a list of elements defined as specifically female, feminine, or feminist (the body, the family, the everyday, circular forms, sound/image disjunctions, rhythmic structures, et cetera). See, for example, Dyer, Hammer, and Kimball. In contrast, analyses of 1980s lesbian experimental films foreground sexuality and voyeurism, and insist on marginality and gender bending. See, for example, de Lauretis; White.

<sup>6</sup>All four films are available from Women Make Movies (462 Broadway, Suite 501, New York, NY, 10013; 212/925-0606), Canyon Cinema (2325 Third Street, Suite 338, San Francisco, CA, 94107; 415/626-2255) and the Museum of Modern Art (11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY, 10019; 212/708-9530).

<sup>7</sup>Others propose different terms to describe similar strategies. Lesselier, for example, speaks of twisting and reappropriating (93), while Mayne speaks of citation, replacement, and changing context ("A Parallax View" 179).

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Friedrich's comments in interviews with MacDonald about the process of choosing fourteen dreams from ninety-four ideas for *Gently Down the Stream*: "I asked my current lover, who was a man, and a former lover, who was a woman, and one male friend and one female friend (both of whom are gay) to read all the dreams and tell me which ones they liked" ("*Damned if You Don't*" 7 and *A Critical Cinema* 292).

<sup>9</sup>See also MacDonald, "Film, Family and Feminism" 34 and *A Critical Cinema* 317.

<sup>10</sup>For analyses of the importance of autobiography to lesbian fiction see Martin; Zimmerman.

<sup>11</sup>*First Comes Love* ironically if wistfully examines heterosexual marriage rites. The film ends by pointing out that only in Denmark are lesbians and gays allowed to marry. The most clearly autobio-

genres (documentary, autobiography, interview format), both avant-garde and 'illusionistic' films" ("Guerilla" 9).

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<sup>11</sup>*First Comes Love* ironically if wistfully examines heterosexual marriage rites. The film ends by pointing out that only in Denmark are lesbians and gays allowed to marry. The most clearly autobio-

graphical of Friedrich's films to date, *Rules of the Road* features her voice reflecting on what it means to lose a loved one — and her station wagon. *First Comes Love* is distributed by Women Make Movies and Canyon Cinema; *Rules of the Road* by Canyon Cinema.

<sup>12</sup>For a thorough and provocative discussion of lesbian and gay families, see Weston. For a typical debate about marriage, see Stoddard and also Ettelbrick.

<sup>13</sup>In the program notes Friedrich explains that the dreams “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” (qtd. in Jenkins 196).

<sup>14</sup>Rather than use slashes between each word to insist on their separation as MacDonald frequently does, I am, at Friedrich's request, using the “poetry” form she designed for her book version of *Gently Down the Stream*.

<sup>15</sup>Published in *Heresies* and as a small art book, the text is “dedicated with love to the two blue hummingbirds A.S. and D.L.” (Friedrich, “*Gently Down the Stream*” 45).

<sup>16</sup>During a debate about Dachau she is also, at one point, literally heard.

<sup>17</sup>The hands are Leslie Thornton's, but she is never identified as participating in the film.

<sup>18</sup>As MacDonald points out, the label “the Other Woman” does two things: it emphasizes that the Nun is herself a woman, and it foregrounds the triangular nature of the lesbian relationship — the nun is married to Christ (“Friedrich” 39).

<sup>19</sup>Friedrich uses this formula to describe an earlier film, *Scar Tissue* (Hanlon 81).

<sup>20</sup>For a more thorough discussion of Friedrich's “remake” of *Black Narcissus*, see Holmlund, “Feminist Make-Overs.”

<sup>21</sup>In an interview with MacDonald in *Afterimage*, Friedrich tries to justify her use of the nuns by saying, “they were out in the world. And I wasn't making a direct connection between any of those nuns and any particular material in the film. I think it would be very different and completely unacceptable for me to interview nuns and then reveal their private lives . . . without their permission. . . . [T]his may be splitting hairs, and the nuns definitely wouldn't be interested in my hair splitting, but I made a conscious choice not to use any images of them over any explicit sexual material. I'm sure you're right that they would all be incensed to find themselves in the film, but what can I do? There *are* nuns who have either come out or have gotten involved with women and left the convent, so the issue in the film is legitimate” (qtd. in “*Damned if You Don't*” 9 and *A Critical Cinema* 300-01).



<sup>22</sup>In interviews Friedrich often speaks of the “absurd ambivalence” she feels towards her father and her past (MacDonald, “Film, Family and Feminism” 32 and *A Critical Cinema* 314). See also McElfresh.

<sup>23</sup>MacDonald detects the influences of cinéma vérité, structuralist filmmaking, and more. For him, “Friedrich’s interest in combining disparate forms of film . . . has remained the hallmark of her approach” (*Avant-Garde Film* 109).

<sup>24</sup>Field, for example, mentions the “impact of feminism” on content and form alike (6). Nosowitz alludes in passing to “water imagery” which “evoke[s] a specifically female consciousness.” Similarly, Kruger describes the film as “a scrutiny of both a mother/daughter relationship and the demands of national identity” (“Su Friedrich” 89).

<sup>25</sup>See also Edelstein, who calls the film “an original, moving and courageous tribute from a child to a mother’s beleaguered memory” (56).

<sup>26</sup>Warren Sonbert erroneously labels the rather chaste clips in “Kinship” “lesbian pornography”; Daniel Mangin speaks of “this lesbian life”; Berenice Reynaud describes the women on the beach in “Atalanta” as lesbians. Liz Galst mentions Friedrich’s own lesbianism, but sees the film solely as the exploration of Friedrich’s relationship to her father. MacDonald frames the film in terms of a kind of gender bending, but without mentioning lesbianism: “[T]he crucial issue for Friedrich is using film to help reconstruct our understanding of what gender means so that we can see that each woman and man combines both genders and that in this combination they are more fundamentally alike than different” (*Avant-Garde Film* 111). Only Fred Camper names as lesbian not just the images in “Kinship” of adult women kissing but also the earlier girlhood fantasies about harems, mermaids, and women bodybuilders in “Virginity” and “Temptation.”

<sup>27</sup>See Camper; Dargis; MacDonald, “Film, Family and Feminism” and *A Critical Cinema*; and Sonbert.

<sup>28</sup>Two critics specifically contrast *Sink or Swim* with mainstream media: MacDonald argues that Friedrich avoids “the dramatic chase and intercutting that leads to a maintenance and confirmation of . . . conventional definitions of gender and family” (*Avant-Garde Film* 110). Camper maintains that the only aesthetic *Sink or Swim* refuses is that of television (18).

<sup>29</sup>See Berman, who describes the film as “wonderfully accessible.” See also James; MacDonald, “Film, Family and Feminism” 28 and *A Critical Cinema* 287-88; and Upchurch.

<sup>30</sup>At screenings, however, women of color often acknowledge Friedrich’s inclusion of girls of different races. She herself calls atten-

tion to this sequence in her introduction to the script: "In the case of images that portray young girls interacting with their friends or fathers, an effort was made to include girls of different races, in order to show that the experiences described in the film are shared by many girls/children, regardless of race or class."

Only Hoberman situates *Sink or Swim*'s universal appeal within a specific historical framework: "[O]ne of *Sink or Swim*'s least obvious and most impressive qualities is how, while presenting itself as both timeless and placeless, it evokes a generic American '50s" ("Life with Father" 43).

<sup>31</sup>An internal conflict between Catholicism and lesbianism seems obvious, and is extended by dream material which deals with reproduction" (MacDonald, "Friedrich" 35).

<sup>32</sup>Among those mentioned are Len Lye, Stan Brakhage, Carolee Schneemann, Paul Sharits, Diana Barrie, Harry Smith, Roberta Friedman, Maya Deren, Hollis Frampton, Martha Haslanger, Marjorie Keller and Leslie Thornton. See Field; Hanlon; Jenkins; and MacDonald, *Avant-Garde Film*. Kruger refuses to position *Gently Down the Stream* within any aesthetic tradition ("International Women's Film Festival" 79). Klawans says only: "Su Friedrich's *Gently Down the Stream* . . . can be described about as easily as you can hold on to a handful of water. I cannot tell you what it's about" (1988: n. pag.).

<sup>33</sup>Hanlon describes Friedrich's images as "nondescript" (81) and says she finds in them "no sensuality . . . no visual play of light or choreography of motions to relieve the ugly, tawdriness of the actions" (80). Hoberman, too, speaks of "fleeting, deliberately impoverished images" ("White Boys" 63).

<sup>34</sup>Taubin, for example, calls the film "a meditation on lesbian sexuality in relation to a community of women — Catholic nuns — in which desire is all the more compelling for being silenced" (64). MacDonald, too, recognizes that "the open expression of lesbian desire necessitates the rejection of male-controlled institutions . . . which assume the repression of female desire" ("Friedrich" 40-41). See also Bronski; Gever; Gomez; Rasanen; Stuart; and von Kunstadt.

<sup>35</sup>Friedrich makes a similar point in MacDonald, "*Damned if You Don't*" 10.

<sup>36</sup>For Rasanen, also, the film is "a real prize . . . beautifully shot in black and white . . . hypnotic as a dream" (1).

<sup>37</sup>In an interview with MacDonald, Friedrich says she used to dislike narrative film "partly because I'm a woman (I saw a lot of films about interesting male characters and stupid female characters) and at times because I couldn't identify with the romantic line of the films" (qtd. in "*Damned if You Don't*" 10 and *A Critical Cinema* 306).

<sup>38</sup>The program notes to *Gently Down the Stream* provide an example of Friedrich's willingness to share her intimate experiences

with others: "The film is constructed from my dreams of women and men as lovers and adversaries. The voice you hear might be your own" (Jenkins 196).

<sup>39</sup>*Sink or Swim's* origins are typical. Friedrich begins, she says, with "stories from my own life that I feel the need to examine closely, and that I think are shared by many people. . . . I think . . . that you get to something that's universal by being very specific. [Y]ou have to start at home" (qtd. in MacDonald, "Film, Family and Feminism" 28-29 and *A Critical Cinema* 208).

<sup>40</sup>Some audience members also criticized the depiction of unsafe sex between gay men. Festival organizers countered by insisting that *Ten Cents a Dance* was "not only by a lesbian, but strongly pro-lesbian" (Mayne, "A Parallax View" 178). Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* was similarly debated. While on the whole enthusiastically received at the San Francisco Lesbian/Gay Film Festival, because the film is overwhelmingly about black gay men some criticized Riggs for denying his own involvement with a white man (Kleinhans 116).

<sup>41</sup>Nor has the experimental film world "been particularly receptive to lesbian expression" (Soehnlein 48).

<sup>42</sup>In her second letter to me, Friedrich goes on to say: "Mind you, I like happy endings as much as the next gal, and we should have our share of those kinds of movies, but we also have to support the less predictable, more idiosyncratic work being made, because that work is also and equally about what it is to be a dyke." See also Soehnlein's interview: "The lesbian community isn't any more open to formal experimentation than the straight community. Many of them just want a Hollywood version of their lives" (49).

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