

Film

QUARTERLY

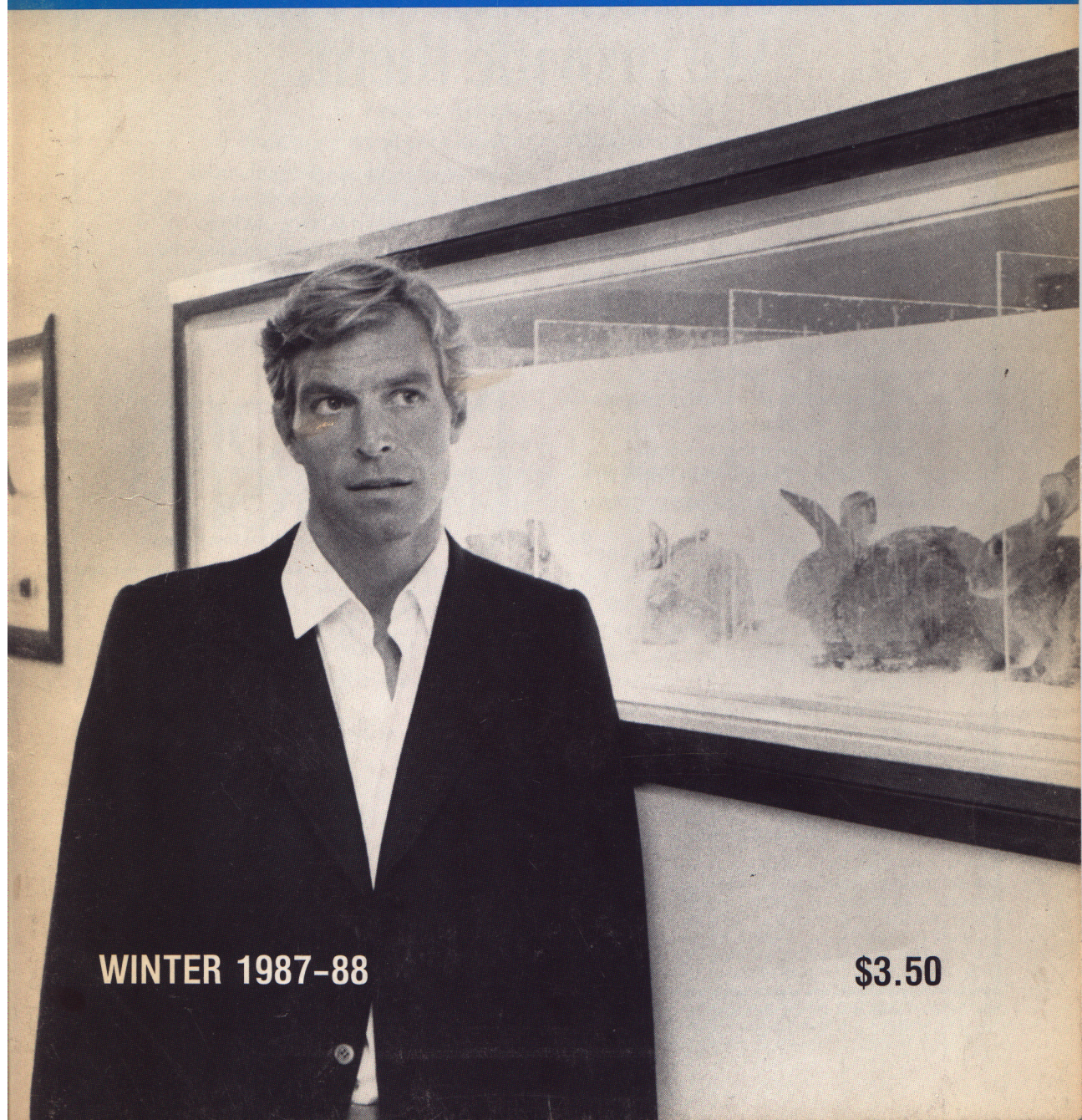
DARIO ARGENTO

JON JOST

SU FRIEDRICH

THE STEPFATHER GONZA

NYAMANTON *YELLOW EARTH*



WINTER 1987-88

\$3.50

SCOTT MacDONALD

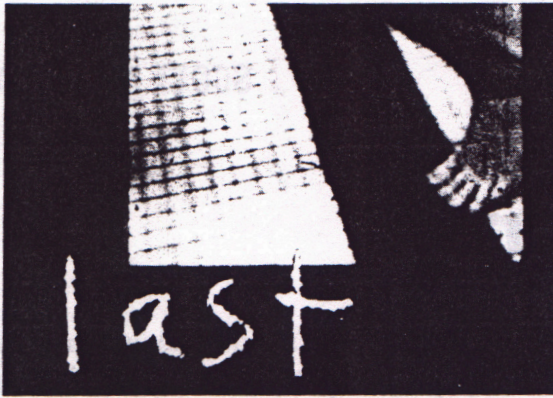
Su Friedrich: Reappropriations

It's not unusual these days for those who have followed the history of North American avant-garde film to complain that the great days of "The Movement" are over, that important avant-garde film-makers are no longer coming onto the cinema scene. While this attitude is definitely not one I share, I notice that even those who announce such views make certain exceptions. Perhaps the most frequent of these is Su Friedrich.¹ Su Friedrich has earned the respect of those who have lost patience for avant-garde cinema, despite the fact that she's made relatively few films: *Hot Water*, 1978; *Scar Tissue*, 1979; *Cool Hands Warm Heart*, 1979; *I Suggest Mine*, 1980; *Gently Down the Stream*, 1981; *But No One*, 1982; *The Ties That Bind*, 1984; and *Damned If You Don't*, 1987. Her acceptance may seem strange until one sees *Gently Down the Stream*, *The Ties That Bind*, and *Damned If You Don't*. These three films reveal a combination of formal inventiveness and moral courage which has characterized most of the avant-garde film-makers who have been considered major figures.²

Gently Down the Stream combines extensive hand-scratched texts and photographed imagery. In a program note for the film, Friedrich explains that the texts are "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 appear to be a nun and a schoolgirl); then shots of a woman rowing on a rowing machine, apparently in a gym (this looks like found

footage, though Friedrich shot it herself); 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, apparently filmed from a ferry boat. 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 which is the usual sign of direct scratching into the emulsion, others are rephotographed so that although obviously scratched, they are motionless—sometimes caught in a blur. Generally, the size of the words and the use of capitals or lower-case letters provide emphasis, sometimes subtly, at other times dramatically: for example, after the passage, "I/wake/her, she/is/angry, smears/spermicidal/jelly/on/my/lips," the word "no" suddenly grows from small to large, back to small. (I've used slashes to remind the reader of the impact of Friedrich's one-word-at-a-time method on the experience of "reading" *Gently Down the Stream*.)³ 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 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 analyzing 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



GENTLY DOWN THE STREAM

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. 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 which 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 we "shoot" the imagery suggested by the texts, we find ourselves, in a strange way, inside the film-maker's psyche. Friedrich effectively reverses the conventional balance of text and image, and by doing so, is able to use the photographed imagery (most of which seems to offer little more than a series of metaphors for our voyage down the film-maker's stream of consciousness) as the context for the textual significations of deeper psychic experiences.⁴

In *The Ties That Bind* (1984), Friedrich explores the historical context of her relationship



with her mother, Lore Bucher, an anti-Nazi German who came of age along with the Third Reich, and at the end of World War II, came to the US with her GI husband—they met when he was working for the de-Nazification program—ultimately to raise their three children as a divorced, custodial parent. (A text at the beginning of *The Ties That Bind* introduces Friedrich's mother with her maiden name. For the sake of clarity, and since the majority of the film deals with her life before marriage, I've used Lore Bucher, rather than Lore Friedrich, throughout this discussion.) The central narrative thread of *The Ties That Bind* is a series of responses by Lore Bucher to questions. She examines her life, beginning at that moment of her childhood when she first heard about the Nazis.

The basic situation of the daughter/film-maker talking with her mother about their shared background is reminiscent of a group of films made during the early to mid-1970s—Martha Coolidge's *David: Off and On* (1973), Claudia Weill's *Joyce at 34* (1973), Amalie Rothschild's *Nana, Mom and Me* (1974), Ed Pincus's *Diaries* (1976)—in which the domestic life of the film-maker (and the effects of the camera's intrusion into this environment for a purpose other than mythifying it in conventional home movies) is the object of investigation. We see Bucher in her Chicago apartment, going for her regular swim in Lake Michigan, working in an office. And on the sound track, we hear her reminiscences and her attempts to deal with Her-Daughter-the-Film-maker: at one point she complains, "Susi, you should not do that! That's terrible," when Friedrich tape records her awkward piano playing.

Friedrich's questions of her mother are

scratched directly into the film, one word at a time (the film is silent when the scratch words are shown).⁵ One result is that our construction of the questions tends to make them seem as much ours as hers, especially since they concern issues most of us have wondered about: "Didn't anyone try to sabotage the Nazis' orders?"; "So you did know about the camps?" (I have not used slashes to divide the scratched words in *The Ties That Bind* because Friedrich's timing in the later film allows for a smoother, less syncopated reading/viewing experience.)

Much of what Lore Bucher reveals is fascinating. We are reminded of the many ways in which Nazism worked itself into the everyday lives of Germans and of the struggles of German families not in synch with the developing Third Reich. Whether one takes Bucher's stories at face value or not, a sense of this period seen from the inside comes across. Nearly as interesting as Bucher's memories of the rise of Nazis are her comments on the arrival of the Allies at the end of the war.

The majority of what we see in the film does not document or dramatize what Bucher says (her comments are the only audio element Friedrich uses); rather, it provides a range of contextualizations. The visual imagery takes two forms: hand-scratched texts and photographed imagery of a variety of kinds. In addition to her scratched questions, Friedrich uses text to provide emphasis and add new information. In general, the texts have an unusual power. Because they are scratched, they give the film a handcrafted, personal feel (an effect familiar from the history of filmic uses of scratches as imagery: Brakhage's titles and "by Brakhage," for example, and Len Lye's *Free Radicals*, Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* and *Plumb Line*, Diana Barrie's *Letters from China* and *Magic Explained*). And because of Friedrich's one-word-at-a-time presentation, and her skillful timing, they have considerable graphic and narrative power.

As is true in *Gently Down the Stream*, the photographed imagery in *The Ties That Bind* is not, at least at first, the primary focus of the viewer's experience: one's attention is on Lore Bucher's vocal reminiscences and Friedrich's scratched texts. But the more one sees the film, the more the intricate network of subtle relationships between the sound track and the

photographed imagery declares itself.

The photographic visuals of *The Ties That Bind* include a wide range of imagery. As mentioned earlier, there is a good deal of 16mm material studying Lore Bucher and her environment in July 1982, when Friedrich was working on the film. In addition, there is the inky, loosely hand-held Super-8 footage (later enlarged to 16mm) that Friedrich collected when she travelled to Germany to visit Ulm, Dachau, and Berlin in 1982, and the 16mm material she shot when she travelled to upstate New York to attend a Seneca Army Depot antinuclear demonstration. There are several kinds of older footage as well: archival material from the war; home movies of Bucher and Paul Friedrich during the early years of their marriage; and in one instance, a shot of a "patriotic" woman prancing around waving an American flag—an Edison paper print from the Library of Congress collection. There is also footage of TV shows and ads, of a woman reading the newspaper (at a table, in the bathtub, on the toilet . . .), and of Friedrich looking through several pieces of politically oriented junk mail which warn of nuclear holocaust and of the rebirth of Nazism in the contemporary US. Finally, there is footage of Friedrich (presumably) constructing and subsequently destroying a small plastic model of a traditional German house, which is presented periodically during the first half of the film.

Despite the variety of Friedrich's imagery, the highly edited film does not create the barrage effect of dialectic montage. Rather, the various sources of visual and auditory imagery create a flow within which individual threads of information periodically intersect in suggestive ways. At the very beginning of the film, for example, as Lore Bucher tells of first learning about the Nazis when she was a child, the photographed imagery is a subjective camera shot of someone coming out of a tunnel into the light—suggesting the young Bucher's growing consciousness of the larger world and the birth of the Reich, as well as Friedrich's coming out of the darkness about her past. A moment later, just as Bucher explains how "that man" (Hitler) came just at the moment when the Germans were "looking for *some* way out of their total and utter misery" during the postwar depression, we see a desolate winter landscape followed by a murky shot of a hawk diving to

attack its prey (a shot which is repeated in two instances later in the film: just after Bucher explains how one of her teachers attacked her for passing homework answers to a Jewish friend, and when she describes the Allied tanks rolling in to “liberate” Ulm). The more one examines the particulars of the various threads of information, the richer the film becomes.

One of the more important effects of Friedrich’s tactic of interweaving the various kinds of material—an effect made particularly effective by her decision to use only black-and-white footage—is to remind us that the struggles of the past and present are parts of the same overall mind-set and historical process. Soon after Bucher exclaims, “That people can live and be so brutal!” (she’s talking about the Allied invasion of her town), Friedrich reveals a sign in the vicinity of the Seneca Army Depot: we can’t read the sign clearly, but a directly scratched circle surrounds it, and a scratch-text explains, “The sign says ‘Nuke them till they glow, then shoot them in the dark.’” We are reminded not only that the sort of people who enjoy the brutalities of war are still around, but that the technologies which have developed to make worldwide nuking possible (and the Seneca Army Depot necessary) were one of the breakthroughs of the war that brought down the Third Reich; in fact some of the technologies came here with German scientists after the Allied occupation of Europe. That the Allies were/are, as Lore Bucher explains, “no better than anybody else” insofar as their potential for brutality is concerned, is also suggested by the crowd of flag-waving, club-wielding demonstrators protesting the women’s encampment at Seneca, seen just before she makes this comment.

While the continuity between the growing militarism in Germany during the 1930s and that in the United States during the 1980s may be the most obvious implication of the network of interconnections Friedrich developed during the editing of *The Ties That Bind*, the relationships she sees between growing up as a woman in Germany then and in the US now are equally and perhaps more fundamentally important to the film. Judging from the elements of Nazism focused on, Friedrich sees the Nazis’ approach to the question of gender difference as crucial to their ideology (one passage describes the Nazi Cross of Honor awarded to women who stayed



THE TIES THAT BIND

out of the workforce and had many children), and the general position of women in German society as responsible for the nature of her mother’s experience during and after the war. Upon graduation from high school Lore Bucher had planned and expected to go to college: “And then I was told I could study no further. The guardian who was set up after my father had died claimed that there was not enough money to continue the education. . . . All I had talked about was how I wanted to go to the university and study. And I have never forgotten the *shock* when we were told. . . . They consented to pay for secretarial school. . . .”

Ironically, soon after Bucher offends a Nazi party functionary, she is taken from her home in the middle of the night by soldiers who transport her to the airbase at Darmstadt, where her secretarial skills are put in service of the German government. Later, during the Allied occupation at the end of the war, she worked at the American military headquarters. But she never accepted the truncation of her hopes. In fact, her meeting Paul Friedrich was “like a straw. I thought, ah, now God is good after all: I couldn’t do it [go to college] then, eventually I will do it,” and she remembers his assuring her, “Oh don’t worry about it, you will be able to do this and you will be able to do that, you can play the piano and you can go and sing.” But when they don’t have enough money, she returns to work to pay for his college tuition. When he divorces her in 1965, she is left with three children to raise. The film ends with the scratch-text, “In 1980 (after raising three children alone) she bought herself a piano and began to practice the scales.”

That her mother’s continual sacrifice has made it possible for Friedrich to have a better life is implicit in the fact of *The Ties That Bind*.

Though Lore Bucher was never able to study to become a pianist, Su Friedrich has become a film-maker. It seems only fitting that in her first long film she pays her respects to what her mother has gone through. And yet *The Ties That Bind* is full of poignant ironies. For one thing, it seems clear in Friedrich's questions that she has long wondered to what degree her mother acted in complicity with the Third Reich (at least by inaction); and the fact that she seems to be asking the relevant questions for the first time, in the film, suggests that she has grown up with suspicions of her mother and of her own Germanness. In other words, Lore Bucher's experiences have continued to have a negative effect on her life and on at least one of her children—on relationships that didn't begin until after she had moved to the US. While Friedrich's making the film suggests her coming to terms with this dimension of her heritage, and an end to her suspicions of her mother, the film itself suggests that should the increasing militarization of the US lead to the nuclear war that terrifies the Seneca Depot demonstrators, the sacrifices of Lore Bucher—and of all the other women who have supported children and husbands at the cost of their own development—will have come to nothing. *The Ties That Bind* sings Lore Bucher as a survivor, but it quivers with fear.

Friedrich's decision to explore her German background confronted an implicit cultural taboo. Like many of us who have German roots, Friedrich was (and, I'm sure, still is) haunted by the specter of the Holocaust: even if we grew up after the Holocaust ended, our genetic inheritance seems to condemn us. At the time when she talked with her mother, Friedrich could not be sure what her mother might reveal about herself—and by implication, about Friedrich. And even once she had learned of her mother's fervent disapproval of the Nazis and what this stance may have cost her, Friedrich had to have been well aware that whatever suffering her mother and the rest of her family endured was probably mild compared to what went on in the camps, and that therefore a film that tried to create sympathy for a German family could seem counterproductive. The finished film, however, is useful and revealing in a wide variety of ways, not least of which is that it allows people of German heritage to admire the courageous example of some Germans in

resisting the Nazi horror, and hopefully to feel their own progressive urges reconfirmed.

Damned If You Don't, Friedrich's newest film, returns to the issue of Catholicism and lesbian sexuality. But where *Gently Down the Stream* grimly dramatizes the psychic trauma this conflict seems to have created in Friedrich, the new film is as good-humored as it is daring. *Damned If You Don't* imbeds a narrative about a young nun (played by Peggy Healey) who is pursued by a young woman (played by Ela Troyano) within an informal investigation of some of the ways in which the issue of nuns and sexuality has played itself out in Western culture.

Damned If You Don't begins as the Troyano character lights a candle and pours herself some wine in preparation for watching the Michael Powell–Emeric Pressburger film, *Black Narcissus* (1947) on TV. Her preparations suggest ritual, rather than offhand TV viewing; and this is reconfirmed during the subsequent narrative: it becomes clear that as part of her romantic pursuit of the nun, she is immersing herself in cultural lore about nuns. Later we see her reading Judith C. Brown's *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*.

Black Narcissus is about a nun who is in charge of a convent in the Himalayas, where she and her colleagues minister to the surrounding communities. In its time, *Black Narcissus* was an important critical success (it won Academy Awards for best color photography and best art direction in color, and Deborah Kerr was judged best actress of 1947 by the New York Film Critics for her role as the good nun). In *Damned If You Don't*, however, the commercial film's implicit ideology, rather than its formal successes, are at issue. By recording passages of the film from a black-and-white TV screen, Friedrich impedes the viewer's ability to become engaged with *Black Narcissus* on its own terms (she uses the inevitable interference bands that are created when film records from TV both to distance us from *Black Narcissus* and to impart her own rhythms to *Damned If You Don't*). This distancing is confirmed by a critique of the implicit sexual politics of *Black Narcissus*, written by Friedrich and Cathy Quinlan and spoken on the sound track by Martina Siebert.

The critique amusingly reveals the male-

centered nature of even this film about nuns, where the convent (formerly a palace for a general's concubine) is located on a mountain called the "Bare Goddess," and where in every crisis the romantic Mr. Dean can be counted on to save the nuns. The précis suggests not only that the nuns' repression of their heterosexual desire is not entirely successful (one nun—a "bad nun"—offers herself to Mr. Dean and even the "good nun" is moved by him), but that the nuns are interesting primarily as sublimated lovers. The précis continues as Friedrich herself sings, "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," a line we hear sung later by the Mr. Dean character as he leaves the convent laughing.⁶

We see the young woman following the nun, who enters the church. (In the credits, Friedrich identifies the young woman as "The Other Woman," a designation which can be read either as an emphasis of the nun's womanness—the *other* woman—or as a reference to the conventional romantic triangle: here, of course, the nun is "married" to God.) The Other Woman follows the nun into the church but when the nun realizes she's being followed, she leaves. The Other Woman is then seen planting flowers in a garden near where the nun lives, while the nun takes the subway to Coney Island. As Friedrich intercuts between the two women, the sound track adds other kinds of information. Periodically during the remainder of the film, we hear a woman (Makea McDonald) reminiscing about her discomfort when the nuns in her Catholic school discussed sexual anatomy with her class, describing the crushes she had on certain nuns, discussing the apparent love relationship between two of the nuns who taught at her college, and remembering a heterosexual relationship. In other instances, we hear a different woman (Cathy Quinlan) read passages from *Immodest Acts*: specifically, the court testimony of Sister Mea Crivelli recalling her sexual experiences with Sister Benedetta during Benedetta's trial. Some of Crivelli's testimony is highly imaginative: for example, she remembers Sister Benedetta having powerful pains in the chest for eight to ten hours each night until the second day of Easter when her heart was removed by Jesus; three days later the heart was returned by Jesus. Despite the excesses of her testimony, however, Crivelli's

revelations were apparently enough to send Benedetta to the convent prison for 35 years; Crivelli remained in the convent.

As the central narrative of *Damned If You Don't* develops, it becomes clear that the Other Woman is as ardent in her pursuit as the nun is frightened. After planting the flowers, she buys a design for a needlepoint image of Jesus (a similar kind of needlepoint is done by the good nun in *Black Narcissus*). Meanwhile, at Coney Island, the nun wanders around, finally entering the aquarium where she watches a pair of white whales twist and twirl together through the water. The 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. Presumably the beautiful whales image the nun's growing desire for the Other Woman. When the nun returns to the convent and again sees the Other Woman, she is very disturbed. But the Other Woman persists. She sews the needlepoint of Christ and, while the nun is out, hangs it in her room.

The final section of the film—the meeting of the two women—is announced by the loud tolling of a bell on the sound track, and accompanied by shots of two tightrope walkers gracefully making their way along a high wire. Suddenly the nun is at the Other Woman's apartment. The film concludes with a long, exquisite scene of the two women making love, with the credit, and finally with a large "AMEN."

In addition to the central narrative, and the précis of *Black Narcissus*, *Damned If You Don't* includes a variety of visual imagery which, in some cases, enlarges the film's references to nuns and convents. During the long central section, as the film follows the activities of the nun and the Other Woman, we see many shots of nuns: singly, in pairs, in groups, outside churches, walking along the street (much of this material was filmed in Venice). We also see imagery of buildings I assume are convents, and in one instance, Friedrich explores a nuns' cemetery near Venice where photographs of dead nuns identify their tombstones. The film also includes imagery which seems to function metaphorically. At intervals following the end

of the précis of *Black Narcissus* we see imagery of a black-and-white snake moving through water in an aquarium and of a swan swimming in a pond behind a fence. On one hand, because of the formality of their coloring, the snake and the swan seem to be references to the nuns; their environments suggest the nuns' imprisoned sexuality. On the other hand, snakes and swans have traditionally been used as imagery of maleness. I assume Friedrich means for *Damned If You Don't* to reappropriate this imagery, to redirect it so that it suggests not a phallogocentric power over sex, but female sexuality itself.⁷

Simply describing the various kinds of imagery included in *Damned If You Don't* does not create an effective sense of Friedrich's film. As is true in *The Ties That Bind*, Friedrich's painstaking editing creates a complex sensuous weave which continually articulates meaning. A range of suggestive intersections between various strands in the weave are developed. In some instances, these intersections are poignant and/or amusing. During the reading of Sister Critelli's testimony about Sister Benedetta's heart being taken out of her body, Friedrich presents brief shots of nuns in public. Again and again, the gestures of the nuns seem to relate to Crivelli's comments. When Crivelli recalls Benedetta saying, "I see Jesus approaching," for example, a nun looks toward the sky. (During the end credits, Friedrich includes a reminder that the nuns she filmed had no idea of the context their images would be used in, and she thanks the nuns for their unwitting participation.)

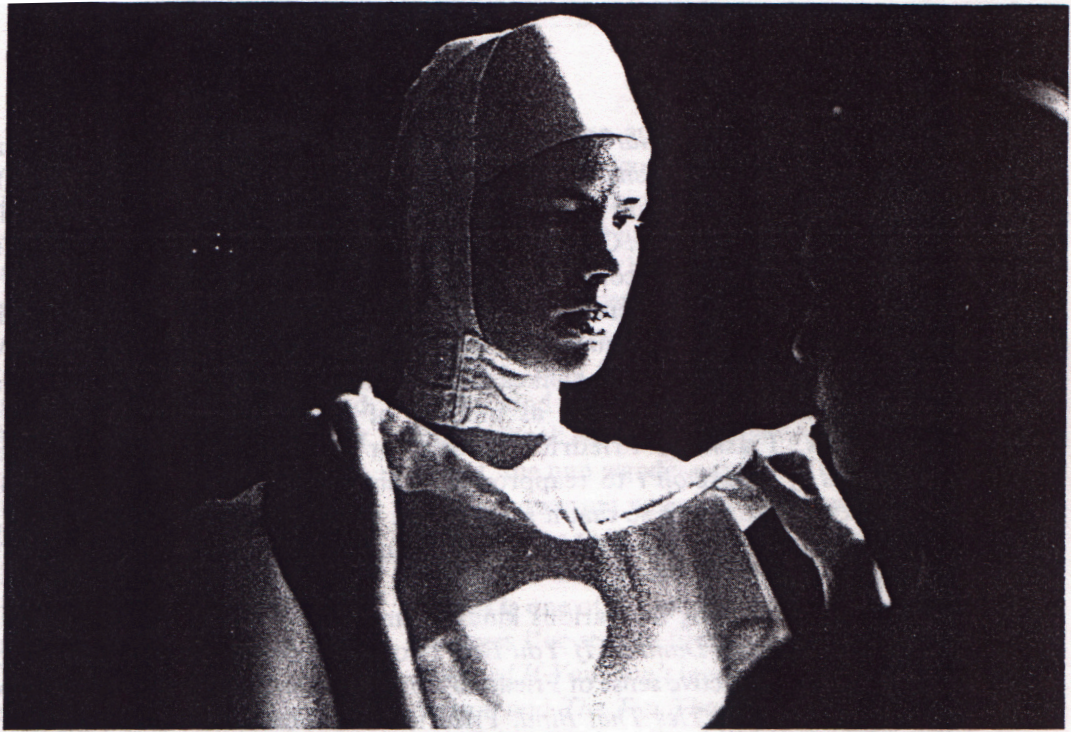
In other instances, shots which are germane to the film's central narrative take on a second level of meaning as a result of what is heard on the sound track. As the nun walks through Coney Island (escaping the stress caused by the Other Woman's pursuit, and perhaps thinking about her childhood experience), we hear Makea McDonald talking about the schizoid quality of her heterosexual experiences: as McDonald tells of her spirit leaving her body during heterosexual sex, we are watching a phallic-shaped tower; customers are inside a revolving room which travels up the tower. At the end of her reminiscences, McDonald sings the Lord's Prayer; as she hits the highest notes, the nun's face flares to white.

A less obvious, but fundamental element

which unites the various strands of *Damned If You Don't* is a series of self-reflexive moments which punctuate the film. The first of these occurs at the conclusion of the précis of *Black Narcissus*, when we hear Friedrich and another woman talking (and Friedrich awkwardly singing the song from *Black Narcissus*). Another occurs when Friedrich's hand-held camera is used for a subjective shot of the Other Woman following the nun: the movement of the camera becomes so (amusingly) violent that it seems to refer directly to Friedrich, as well as to the character she's developing. Still other examples include several exchanges between Friedrich and Cathy Quinlan about the particulars of Quinlan's reading of *Immodest Acts*, and the conversations between McDonald and Friedrich about McDonald's experiences; during this interview, we are conscious of the microphone in much the way we are aware of it during Friedrich's interview with her mother in *The Ties That Bind*.

Our consciousness of the procedure of making *Damned If You Don't*, when combined with the fact that the woman in the film is involved with the same texts (*Black Narcissus*, *Immodest Acts*) as the artist making the film, suggests that, basically, the Other Woman represents Friedrich (or an important dimension of Friedrich). In one sense, *Damned If You Don't* is reminiscent of the tradition of psychodrama delineated by P. Adams Sitney in *Visionary Film* (New York: Oxford, 1974), where the artist's quest for Beauty or Vision is often represented by the figure of the ever-pursuing Dreamer. Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* and Brakhage's *Reflections on Black* can serve as examples. Here the Other Woman's pursuit of the nun suggests the quest of the sensual for the spiritual. Of course, as *Damned If You Don't* develops, we realize that the nun is more than a spiritual being. The film's increasing focus on the nun's turmoil over her pursuer, which leads to the final revelation of the nun's desire for the Other Woman, suggests that Friedrich's quest is for wholeness, the unity of the sensual and the spiritual. The wholeness is implicitly available to both the nun and the Other Woman (and Friedrich), but requires on both their parts a rejection of male-controlled institutions (such as the Catholic Church) which assume the repression of female desire in the service of a male-defined spiritual-

Peggy
Healey
and
Ela
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DAMNED
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ity, and of male-controlled institutions (such as the commercial cinema) in which the spectacle of female desire is marketed for the pleasure and utility of males.

Damned If You Don't is a courageous film on two different levels. Obviously, to attack nuns as an institution, even to *seem to* attack nuns, is highly unusual; and to do so with humor and in the name of an open expression of lesbian desire will be downright shocking for many viewers. The love-making scene where the Troyano character undresses the nun is as outrageous as it is sensual. And yet, within avant-garde film circles, within academe, within mainstream art contexts this level of Friedrich's courage will be understood and respected. (When *Damned If You Don't* was shown at the Flaherty Film Seminar this past summer, it was enthusiastically received.)

The second level of Friedrich's courage is her rejection of what has often been seen as one of the central tenets of feminist film-making since the mid-1970s. Once the filmic gaze was recognized as essentially (or at least traditionally) male, some film-makers and critics came to see traditional film pleasure as a problem, as implicit acceptance of the workings of patriarchy. Exploitative representations of the female body and female sexuality in the commercial cinema (and in the avant-garde cinema) were critiqued. It seemed necessary to expunge female nudity from serious cinema in the service of progressive feminism. Other forms of film pleasures

also seemed questionable: the sensuous rhythms, textures, and structures of personal and structural forms of avant-garde film seemed too suspiciously self-indulgent (and in some cases, even phallogocentric) to be sexually progressive.

Some film-makers refused to take such concerns seriously and continued to make films to be enjoyed, regardless of the implicit gender politics. Other, feminist film-makers were (or seemed to be) exploring ways of eliminating or interrupting all forms of film pleasure which could be thought to reconfirm the patriarchal tradition of film history, regardless of the cost of this tactic on the resulting film's effectiveness as entertainment.⁸

I would guess that while Friedrich may have originally been in sympathy with the second position (*Cool Hands Warm Heart* and *Scar Tissue* suggest she was), she has come to feel it a dead end, an attitude which implicitly reestablishes male primacy. If male films are sensual and pleasurable, while female (or at least "feminist") films are rigorously unsensual and pleasureless, males are defined, once again, as having something females lack. Traditionally, women have been "damned" to function as cogs in an exploitative male cinema which thrives on female sensuality. In some feminist films, women are "damned" a second time, to wander through ideologically pure but pleasureless (or, at least, sexless) narratives.

Damned If You Don't is Friedrich's declaration of independence from this pattern. The

new film energizes feminist deconstruction by locating it within a context of at least two forms of (redirected) film pleasure: the excitement of melodramatic narrative and the sensuous enjoyment of cinematic texture, rhythm, and structure. Friedrich's decision not only to include a representation of female sexuality, but to use it as the triumphant conclusion of the film is central to her new direction. Friedrich has cinematically reappropriated the pleasure of women for women. Yet she is willing to share this pleasure with men (her use of a male and female tight-rope walker to announce the love-making suggests that the sexual pleasure of women need not be confined to women): if men are fortunate enough to be able to take pleasure in the pleasure of women, so be it! Regardless of what men or women do, however, Friedrich can *not* be a nun, Catholic or filmic.

NOTES

(Su Friedrich's films are distributed by Women Make Movies, 225 Lafayette St., Rm. 211, New York, NY 10012; tel. (212) 925-0606.

1. See, for example, Fred Camper, "The End of Avant-Garde Film," *Millennium Film Journal*, No. 16-18 (1986), pp. 122-123.

2. *Scar Tissue* is a silent, 6-minute collage of male and female gestures, recorded on 42nd Street; *Cool Hands Warm Heart* follows a woman's interactions with three performers on Orchard Street, each of whom performs in public a conventional female ritual normally performed in private (e.g., one shaves her armpits). *But No One* uses hand-scratched texts and flat photographed imagery to reveal Friedrich's dreams; it appears to have been made on energy left over from *Gently Down the Stream*. I have not seen the 12-minute Super-8 film *Hot Water*, or *I Suggest Mine*.

3. The complete text of *Gently Down the Stream* was published in *Heresies*, No. 16 (1983), pp. 42-45. Friedrich has been a member of the *Heresies* editorial collective.

4. In 1982 Friedrich designed and had printed a book which contains the complete text of *Gently Down the Stream* and selected stills. The long, narrow "streamlike" shape of the book and its rippled cover make it more an evocation of the film than a simple record. The book is available from 102 Forsyth St., #17, New York, N.Y. 10002.

5. Originally Friedrich recorded both her own questions and her mother's responses. Later she eliminated herself from the sound track and put the questions into textual form. Sometimes we can hear Friedrich in the background when her mother is talking.

6. Actually, the original lyrics are slightly different from those Friedrich sings. In the film, Mr. Dean sings, "No, I can't be a nun, No, I cannot be a nun, for I am so fond of pleasure. I cannot be a nun." Mr. Dean's repetition of "cannot" is true in at least two senses: not only his love of pleasure, but his gender prevents him from being a nun. Friedrich *can* be a nun, but her "won't" and "shall not" suggest she will resist doing so.

7. In an unpublished interview (September 26, 1987), Friedrich indicates that she thought of the snake as relating to the Other Woman, the swan as suggesting the formally dressed nun. Her intercutting between snake and swan thus becomes a symbolic

Images in Our Souls

Cavell, Psychoanalysis, and Cinema

edited by Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan



Photograph from Ingrid Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* (1973). Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive, New York

In his work on "the Hollywood comedy of remarriage," Stanley Cavell has speculated on the existence of another, adjacent genre that holds no place for the conversation that makes comic remarriage possible. In *Images in Our Souls*, Cavell defines this genre—"the melodrama of the unknown woman"—in which men and women speak different languages, and where men confront the "unknownness" of the other.

The contributors to *Images in Our Souls* explore recurring issues of male skepticism, activity and passivity, and gender differences in cinema. Subjects include Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and *Shadow of a Doubt*, Babenco's *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, Ophuls's *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, Chaplin's *The Kid*, Bergman's *Cries and Whispers*, and the films of Peter Weir.

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