

“It’s Not As Bad As You Think: A Spoonful of Experimental Cinema (from the Plate of Su Friedrich)” by Alex MacInnis, FOCUS Magazine, Vol. 15, 1995



Sink or Swim

I T'S NOT AS BAD AS YOU THINK: A SPOONFUL OF EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA (FROM THE PLATE OF SU FRIEDRICH)

by Alex MacInnis

Finding out about experimental films often feels like some sort of desperate chase after wandering marsh lights or a desert mirage. They lurk outside the warm kingdom of commercial filmmaking, invisible to the vast majority of the world's cinephiles. Even claims to their very existence seem to be greeted with stern disbelief or dismissal.

These experimental films break the expectations in style and content that make even "independent" or "art-house" films safe bets for a screening experience. They don't provide the viewer with a comforting safety net of familiarity. And as a result they are ignored or written off as dull, difficult, and academic. They have little support in getting made (being entirely dependent on non-commercial sources of financing) or in getting shown (most people assume they're boring, so no one wants to see them). An intrepid cinematic explorer, sensing that these films *could* be a source of interest and perhaps even pleasure, faces an uphill battle in trying to find any of these potential gems. Even the "classics" of experimental film are hard to locate.

Yet these films *are* being made, despite the hostile environment. And in the interest of raising awareness for some of these films and the pleasures they offer, I would like to discuss a sample of work by Su Friedrich, a talented experimental filmmaker working since the late 1970s. Scott

MacDonald, an academic ardently devoted to experimental film, has championed Friedrich's contributions, stating that "no filmmaker of her generation—at least in North America—has more effectively used the discoveries of what has been coined as avant-garde or experimental cinema in the service of crucial contemporary issues."¹

I will be discussing two of her films: first *The Ties That Bind* (1984), her longest work to date and a turning point from her earlier, shorter, almost exclusively silent films; and then her subsequent film, *Damned If You Don't* (1987), which shows how Friedrich develops similar techniques in significantly different ways. I will also illustrate the accessibility of her work and its value as an excellent starting point for people wishing to increase their familiarity with experimental film.

Friedrich builds her films around strong personal narratives, taken from first-hand testimony, and presented from different points on the continuum between documentary and fiction. The viewer is enticed into an emotional arena and only then is called upon to examine larger social and political issues. These films attack the notion that experimental cinema needs to be a dull, academic endeavor. The characters are both emotionally and intellectually engrossing, as fascinating as any of the finest scripted creations in a "purely" fictional film. On a formal level, our expectations of synchronized sound and image tracks are not frustrated, but rather pushed to a new plateau; voice, image, and written text are layered so that each benefits from its proximity to the other. We are "synchronizing" not a redundant voice/image relationship, but two or more elements that normally have no direct relationship, thus creating an active synthesizing process as we watch the films.

The Ties That Bind takes as its starting point the memories of Friedrich's mother, Lore Bucher, an anti-Nazi German during World War II. Bucher narrates her experiences during the rise of Nazism, the war, and subsequent Allied occupation, up to her arrival in America with new husband and family (which is where Su Friedrich enters the picture). The soundtrack is comprised only of silence and Bucher's

voice reminiscing about her experiences. While we listen to the compelling, emotionally charged stories, we are shown a complex medley of images: non-synchronous contemporary footage of Bucher, found footage from the war, text scratched into film emulsion, Super-8 footage Friedrich shot on a trip to Germany, footage from a women's anti-war demonstration, and a wide variety of tangential related imagery. All are anchored by recurring shots of a tiny model of a German house being constructed, crushed, and then set ablaze.

Much of the film is handled with conventions that indicate the personal presence of the filmmaker. Friedrich's footage is almost entirely hand-held and shaky—sometimes very pointedly so. She includes flash-frames and roll-outs, using elements that are usually removed in editing to build rhythmic patterns. As for the soundtrack, much of it is silent—a definite taboo in mainstream cinema. The interviews with Lore Bucher are edited in a “sloppy” manner which fails to erase the traces of Friedrich's presence at these recordings. Instead, we often hear part of Friedrich's response and reactions—repeatedly involuntary and spontaneously echoing our own reactions to hearing some of the stories. And it is this voyeuristic feeling as we witness Friedrich hearing her mother's stories which creates a sense of immediacy to the film; Friedrich's memory of her family is being constructed as we watch and listen.

But despite her occasional appearance on the soundtrack, Friedrich sets up the strongest dialogue between herself and her mother via the division of image and sound. The voice of Lore Bucher dominates the soundtrack while her daughter is in complete control of what we watch. Friedrich represents the questions she asks Bucher not with her own voice, but as text that she hand-scratches into the film emulsion itself. We **read** her question and **listen** to her mother's answer. The scratched text segments are always silent, so each woman gets her turn to “speak.” And as the presence and emotion in Lore Bucher's voice convey her subtext, Friedrich's written words are themselves charged. They appear one at a time (usually on black leader,



The Ties That Bind

sometimes etched directly onto an image) and flicker, pulse, and shimmy with the familiar rhythms of old home movie footage. They are imbued with the aura of Friedrich and their simple, scrawled, appearance invokes the thought of a young girl writing in stubby crayon, asking her mom questions, angry when she doesn't always get an answer. They are personal and immediate in a way that printed text can never be.

Friedrich relies on our assumption of a synchronized relationship between image and sound to build the relationships between what we see and hear. Often, there is no direct relationship immediately visible, and so we begin to build ideas as to why these two different elements are being juxtaposed. And there are gentle, almost subliminal, reminders that there *is* a relationship which ties the emotion of the voice to the impact of the images. As we listen to memories of the horrors of the bombings, we watch a small flame (perhaps the remains of the model German house). As Bucher laughs uncomfortably, the flame flickers as if from a breath blown across the fire. When she talks about being in shock after an attack, the word shock is matched with the image rolling-out to white, disintegrating before our eyes. While we hear her crying, we see a close, overhead shot of the tide rolling

upon the shore. Small reminders like these keep reinforcing our already ingrained tendency to assume some level of synchronization of image and sound. Therefore, we begin to search in increasingly challenging ways to form a relationship in the absence of these clues. This impulse becomes a formal binding tie that keeps the disparate elements building up on each other.

A key way Friedrich uses this tool of synchronization to build the thematics of the film is through the repetition of similar images against different events in Bucher's testimony. As we learn more about her life, the same shots take on different and deeper meanings. For example, we see shots of a piano before we know anything about Bucher's relationship with the instrument. These first shots seem virtually meaningless. But later, we learn of the Nazi party member who instructed her on the piano during her youth, how Bucher fought with her, and how she was subsequently sent to work far away from her family. When we see the piano during this sequence we remember that we have already seen these images before and they quickly acquire importance. When we see the piano by the end of the film it has even more poignance because we have learned that one of Bucher's lasting regrets was not being able to develop her talents on the instrument. The piano, which early on had very little significance, becomes the element which ends the film. The last shot is of Friedrich's scratched text, appearing one word at a time: "In 1980 (After raising three kids alone) She bought herself a piano and began to practice the scales."

Whereas in *The Ties That Bind* the structure and narrative come from the sound of Lore Bucher's stories, *Damned If You Don't* uses the image to create the narrative. A sensual woman engages in a ritual of seduction with a young nun. We see their brief encounters and watch the nun silently wrestle with conflicting passions. Finally, the seduction ends, leaving the new couple in the act of consummating their desire.

But that is not all we see. The film is an amazing document of visual sensuality. Friedrich has developed her lapsed-Catholic's eye for

mysticism and sublimated eroticism. There is footage of fish, eels, and swans moving sensually through their environments, and, most memorably, heart-breakingly beautiful shots of the nun watching beluga whales swimming silently in an aquarium. Added to this is footage of a host of habited nuns walking through the public sphere, convents, snow-scapes, a convent graveyard, and a condensed, shot-off-television version of *Black Narcissus*, a late-Forties film by Powell and Pressinger about a “Good Nun” and a “Bad Nun” in a remote convent and their passions for a local man.

Without the sound, one could easily understand the story. No narrative information is conveyed by the sound track. Long periods of time go by where there is no sound and it plays as a sensual silent film. The sounds and spoken words, when they are present, function to add layers of meaning and significance to the narrative.

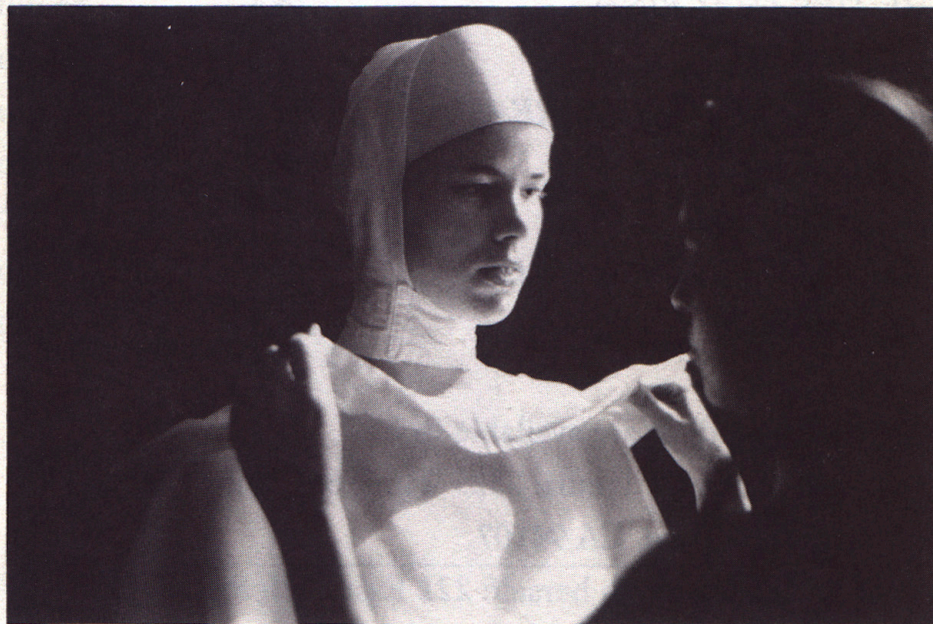
For example, the soundtrack begins with a woman narrating the condensed version of *Black Narcissus*. She presents a tight and amusing “reading” that highlights the sexual politics of the film and its take on the nuns’ passion—one of whom suppresses her desires, the other surrendering to them. Next come excerpts read aloud from *Immodest Acts: The Life of A Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (written by Judith C. Brown). The excerpts repeat the testimony of Sr. Mea Crivelli describing the passions and desires of her holy sister, Sr. Benedetta, intertwining religious rapture and carnal pleasure in a mystically sensual way. Other vocal components include the remembrances of a woman (Makea McDonald) who talks about her relationships with nuns while growing up and attending Catholic School, and voices (sometimes McDonald) reciting Catholic sermons and prayer.

The women’s vocal texts expand the scope of the film, bringing the fictional narrative into the larger social sphere. The texts suggest that this is a dramatization of a social phenomenon, occurring both in Renaissance Italy and today. This is further reinforced by the inclusion of extra-narrative images of other nuns between scenes in the story. We wonder if any of these nuns might have similar testimony to share.

Not that the film posits lesbianism or sexual consummation as commonplace among the holy sisterhood. But it does provide the fiction with an extra air of importance and immediacy. We begin to wonder how to place the fiction within the space of “reality.”

And while this film is not as overtly personal as many of Friedrich’s films, her presence is felt in much the same way as it is in *The Ties That Bind*. A hand-held camera (sometimes violently unstable), flash frames, roll-in and roll-out patterns, video roll bars, and black leader are all integral components of the visual rhythm of the film. Most of all we **hear** Friedrich’s friendly and casual presence. We hear her giving direction to the women reading the texts and making editing changes as they narrate. And we get to listen to her interactions with Mc Donald: Friedrich’s prompting questions, her laughter, and her trading quips with McDonald as they record the soundtrack. It may even be Friedrich’s voice we hear break into the song from *Black Narcissus*: “No I won’t be a nun/ No I shall not be a nun/ For I am so fond of pleasure/ No I shall not be a nun.”

The films of Su Friedrich are both rich and pleasurable. Her most notable skill as a filmmaker is her control of visual and narrative rhythms, enabling her to structure diverse elements to form relation-



Damned If You Don't

ships that shift and change without frustrating or boring the viewer. Her films are not about a denial of pleasure, but are an investigation of people's experiences as microcosms of larger social phenomena. Her films are a fine argument against the stereotype that experimental film equals dull film. Hopefully, this short analysis of where some of the interest in her films can be found will provide an impetus for some searchers to delve further into her films.

ENDNOTES

¹MacDonald, Scott. "From Zygote to Global Cinema via Su Friedrich's Films." *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 44, No's 1 & 2. Spring/Summer 1992, 30.

SU FRIEDRICH FILMOGRAPHY

<i>RULES OF THE ROAD</i>	1993	31 min.
<i>FIRST COMES LOVE</i>	1991	22 min.
<i>SINK OR SWIM</i>	1990	48 min.
<i>DAMNED IF YOU DON'T</i>	1987	42 min.
<i>THE TIES THAT BIND</i>	1984	55 min.
<i>BUT NO ONE</i>	1982	9 min.
<i>GENTLY DOWN THE STREAM</i>	1981	14 min.
<i>I SUGGEST MINE</i>	1980	6 min.
<i>SCAR TISSUSE</i>	1979	6 min.
<i>COOL HANDS, WARM HEART</i>	1979	16min.
<i>WARM WATER</i>	1978	12min.

Many of these films are available from:

Canyon Cinema: 2325 Third St., Suite 338, San Francisco, CA 94107.

Su Friedrich herself: 222 East Fifth St., #6, NYC, NY 10003.

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