

CHAPTER 14

Su Friedrich: “Giving Birth to Myself”

The filmmaking career of Su Friedrich, Abigail Child's contemporary, had a remarkable start. After a brief self-apprenticeship to the medium during which she made four short films in three years, she found her own powerful voice with *Gently Down the Stream* (1981), a film that immediately commanded attention. A second short film, *But No One* (1982), explored the same material. But two years later, she surged to the forefront of her generation of avant-garde filmmakers with a fifty-five-minute portrait of her mother, *The Ties That Bind* (1984). She followed that in 1987 with a forty-two-minute narrative film. Thus she demonstrated her originality in lyrical, documentary, and narrative modes in her first decade of filmmaking. Her subsequent work has moved through those genres, often mixing them. The first narrative film, *Damned If You Don't* (1987) also concretized her reputation as one of the important new voices of lesbian cinema, an aspect of her work that has been prominent in her films since then.

She had the good fortune, rare among her generation, to become an avant-garde filmmaker without wanting to. After graduating with a degree in art history from Oberlin College where she taught herself still photography, she traveled in Africa taking photographs. Subsequently, she worked in New York

as a graphic designer and volunteered her time to *Heresies*, a radical feminist journal. When she sought equipment to make her first films and venues to show them, she came in contact with her contemporaries who, unlike her, had often studied avant-garde filmmaking and its history in the classrooms of such charismatic filmmakers as Hollis Frampton, Ken Jacobs, Peter Kubelka, Paul Sharits, and Stan Brakhage. They were the first generation of avant-garde filmmakers trained in universities and art schools. Many of them venerated their teachers and subscribed to their aesthetic principles. It was often painfully obvious in a program of new works which filmmakers had studied at SUNY Binghamton (with Ken Jacobs, Larry Gottheim, Saul Levine, Dan Barnett, and Ernie Gehr), who had come from SUNY Buffalo (where Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, and Tony Conrad taught), or from Antioch College (where Conrad had succeeded Sharits before he too went to Buffalo), the San Francisco Art Institute (whose large faculty then included Larry Jordan, Janis Crystal Lipzin, James Broughton, and George Kuchar), or Bard College (where Adolfas Mekas ran the program in which many filmmakers briefly taught: Bruce Baillie, Andrew Noren, Ernie Gehr, Barry Gerson, Storm De Hirsch). Later the Massachusetts College of Art became a center for avant-garde cinema (with Saul Levine, Mark LaPore, Erika Beckman, Abigail Child, and Dan Barnett on its faculty).

Friedrich had not seen avant-garde cinema before she started to make her own films. European art films—Fassbinder, Buñuel—inspired her. She encountered the work of the major avant-garde filmmakers unsystematically. Rather than seeking their approval or benediction, she maintained a vigorous skepticism, bordering on hostility, toward even the filmmakers from whom she learned the most: Stan Brakhage and Hollis Frampton. During the time Friedrich was teaching herself to make films, Brakhage's work had been singled out for criticism by feminists and by the Left: His emphasis on individualism, the nuclear family, and poetic election made him politically suspect. Furthermore, his public rejections of collective action, propaganda, and semiological theory exacerbated his vulnerability as the influence of theoretically minded avant-garde filmmakers from Great Britain began to exert an influence in America. Frampton, who had painfully experienced the political consequences of his adolescent championing of Ezra Pound's poetry and polemics, warily and successfully negotiated his way in the same political minefield.

In contrast to Friedrich's career, that of Leslie Thornton might illustrate the experience of a filmmaker with a cinematic education. I cite her because she was closely associated with Friedrich in the 1980s: They shared an editing studio and often traveled together to show their films. Thornton had studied at SUNY Buffalo with Sharits and Frampton and did graduate work in filmmaking at MIT. Although she started to make films in 1975, three years before Friedrich, and worked prolifically, she did not find her own distinctive

voice (and with it a degree of recognition) until 1985 when she made *Adynata*. Yet very few of the school-trained avant-garde filmmakers ever achieved Thornton's breakthrough. (Only Peter Hutton, as far as I know, moved more quickly than Thornton from the classroom to prominence as an avant-garde filmmaker. The film he made at the San Francisco Art Institute, *July '71 in San Francisco, Living at Beach Street, Working at Canyon Cinema, Swimming in the Valley of the Moon*, 1971, immediately launched his career.)

Friedrich's earliest films, *Hot Water* (1978), *Cool Hands, Warm Heart* (1979), *Scar Tissue* (1980), and *I Suggest Mine* (1980), instantiated both her commitment to an explicitly feminist cinema and her hesitation to operate in a personal mode. Speaking of the third film, she told Scott MacDonald: "I thought I should try to do something very personal, entirely about me. I failed miserably."¹ Her maturity as a filmmaker began in 1981 when she turned to her dream journals for material. The confluence of several factors made her *Gently Down the Stream* a remarkably successful film. In the first place, by concentrating on her dreams, she unwittingly aligned her film to the central tradition of the American avant-garde cinema and especially to the heritage of Maya Deren, who had attained iconic status with the upsurge of feminism at that time. By adhering to the textual evidence of her dream journal, Friedrich stressed the mediation of language in the consciousness of dreams as no filmmaker had done before her. Furthermore, at that very moment the function of language in the relationship of the unconscious and conscious mind was becoming a central concern of film theory. The film's almost incidental acknowledgment of lesbian desire fused the filmmaker's feminism to her use of film as an instrument of self-examination.

Gently Down the Stream combines aspects of Frampton's work and Brakhage's without becoming derivative of either. The priority of language in the film reflects the influence of Frampton, then at its apex. Yet she adapted Brakhage's technique of scratching words directly onto the emulsion in order to give her journal entries the dynamics of single frame changes. In so doing, she actually preceded by seven years Brakhage's own commitment to that method of dynamizing texts in *I... Dreaming* (1988) and a number of later films; since 1958 he had made his titles that way, and in *23rd Psalm Branch* he had scratched some words on the 8 mm filmstrip. Evidently Friedrich saw the potential for organizing a whole film around scratched texts before Brakhage himself realized it. Of course, he knew that Larry Jordan had pioneered and elaborated the strategy in his prescient *Man Is in Pain* (1953), but

1. Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 290.

Friedrich certainly did not. In her manipulation of the scratched text and the photographic images, she used the optical printer available to her at the Millennium Film Workshop as an instrument of rhythmic invention. Again, the interplay of single-frame inscription and optical freezing and looping would not become an integral part of Brakhage's working methods until the 1990s when Phil Solomon (a contemporary of Friedrich's, himself formerly a student of Ken Jacobs at SUNY Binghamton) accepted a teaching position in the same department as Brakhage in the University of Colorado and put his remarkable mastery of the optical printer at Brakhage's disposal. Brakhage insisted the resulting films were collaborations.²

Friedrich talked to MacDonald about *Gently Down the Stream*:

If people see the film without knowing it's made from dreams, they do tend to get very anxious. But if they recognize that the texts are dreams, they tend to accept the film. . . . 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 [ninety-four from her journals] and tell me which ones they liked. . . . I didn't really use that as the basis for making a final decision about which to use but it did help me to think about the dreams. Finally, I chose to do the dreams about women with moving scratched words and the dreams about men with optically printed freeze-framed scratched words. I did about forty dreams, some with images, some without. . . . [T]he timing is important. I started out with each dream on an index card, and kept whittling down the phrasing until it was really succinct. Then I started breaking it up into lines to see how it should be phrased in the film. I heard the rhythm of each dream very clearly in my mind before I started scratching. . . . if something wasn't right, I'd cut out a few frames or add a few frames.³

When MacDonald asked her if she read much poetry, she answered, "I read Walt Whitman one summer—almost nothing but him. The only other poets I've read closely are Sappho and Anna Ahkmatova."⁴ However, *Seeing Red* (2005) gives evidence of the centrality of poetry in her formation. The film is

2. Solomon is another instance of a schooled filmmaker (SUNY Binghamton, Massachusetts College of Art) whose critical reputation crystallized very slowly. After more than twenty years of making films, he began to achieve some prominence in the mid-1990s.

3. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 2, pp. 291–92.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 290.

a confessional monologue, which she calls a diary. At one point the filmmaker quotes two lines of Emily Dickinson:

To make a prairie, it takes a clover, a bee and a reverie
The reverie alone will do if bees are few.

And later she reads us Whitman's "O Me, O Life!" from a volume she has had for thirty years. In both instances she invokes the poets to demonstrate the "scary" persistence of the anxieties of her youth as she enters her fifties.

The anxieties evinced in the texts of *Gently Down the Stream* might be deduced as dream records from the elliptical transitions and the fantastic images evoked, or from the title of the film, if the viewer calls to mind the next phrase of the lullaby: "Life is but a dream." Yet where one dream ends and the next begins is ambiguous. In the published transcription, the division into thirteen dreams is much clearer than in the film itself. Moreover, the alternation of moving and frozen titles is less systemic than the filmmaker indicated to MacDonald. The play between male and female themes, reflecting the filmmaker's bisexuality during the period of the film's genesis, would seem to owe something to Frampton's playful use of set theory in the organization of *Zorns Lemma*. Of the thirteen dreams that make up the film, only four have frozen-frame writing. The ninth dream clearly refers to a man: "Building a model/ house for/ some man/ Do it/ without/ getting paid/ Do it/ wrong." In the fourth, the change of style emphasizes the direct speech of a woman: "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." All the words move except "Come and make love to me." Similarly, there is an alternation between dancing and still words in the sixth dream. First we see the moving words: "Woman on the bed shivers." Then the still letters read: "I wake her/ She is angry/ Smears spermicidal jelly/ on my lips." The dream concludes with the word "No!" in motion, growing larger and larger.

Even the first dream, registered with frozen letters, turns out to be an encounter with a woman, although the designation "old friend" is at first ambiguous: "Wander through large quiet rooms/ An old friend says What/ are you doing here?/ I say The weavers/ worked as slaves to make these rugs/ Think/ She shouts Why/ do you come here/ and SPOIL everything?/ This pure/ civilization."

It would seem, then, that despite the systematization of moving and frozen words Friedrich mentioned to MacDonald, the alternation has a purely rhythmical function. The still words at first serve as a foil to set up the dynamics of the trembling text of the second dream: "Walk into church/ My mother trembles/ trances/ reciting a prayer about orgasm/ I start to weep."

Furthermore, although the first dream indicates guilt about the abrasive manner of the dreamer's "politically correct" comments, the imagery surrounding the exfoliation of the words is of votive statuary, as if proleptically announcing the ecclesial location of the second (and the seventh) dream. In fact, the imagery of the whole film moves through three sites: a church (here metonymically represented only by religious statues); subsequently a spa where we see one woman on a rowing machine, another stepping into a pool, and a third swimming; and finally we see first surf and then the open sea with sea mammals, perhaps porpoises, viewed on a whale-watching trip. These images sometimes have tangential connections to the texts. For instance, the third dream text ("In the water near a raft/ I see a woman/ swimming and diving/ in a wet suit/ See her pubic hair") shares an erotic fascination with the rower and swimmer, but there are no shots of a raft, diving, or pubic hair in the film. More obliquely, when we read the fourth dream ("A woman sits on a stage...") the posture of the rower seems hunched, and her apparatus a stage on which she sits before the camera. The editing juxtaposes the backstroke of the swimmer to the text of the seventh dream ("Walk into church/ Look in a cage/ A bloody furry arm is torn/ from the body of an animal/ Did it rip its own arm off?"), fixing our attention on the arm of the swimmer amid fantasies of imprisonment and self-destructive violence. Insofar as the montage of word and image links the dream of dismemberment to the erotically charged swimmer, the images function as free associations to the materials of the dream.

In rebellion against her Roman Catholic upbringing, Friedrich typically identifies the church as a site of sexual repression and imprisonment, as when her mother comically prays for orgasm. In that dreamworld, the church would encourage the autocastration of its captives. Friedrich's first long dramatic film, *Damned If You Don't*, triumphantly depicts the liberation of a nun into a satisfying lesbian relationship.

The return to the site of the church in the seventh dream vividly invokes an image of castration in picturing the vulva in menses ("bloody furry"). When we recall that Buñuel was one of her tutelary filmmakers, we can see how the image of the severed hand in *Un chien andalou* predicts the animal's dismembered arm. Both encode a punishment for masturbation, which Friedrich's dreamer believes might be self-inflicted. If the five women singing "wahrheit" in the twelfth dream stand for the five fingers of a hand, the blindness the dreamer spells out would be the folkloric result of onanism. In the church dream, the votive animal is a rebus for the harsh saying of Jesus: "If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off" (Matthew 5:30).

The connection of religious devotion to sexuality is more obliquely encoded in the first moving image of a strip of film on which we see the face of a female saint, or perhaps the Virgin Mary, fluttering up and down,

misregistered in the optical printer. While it manifestly asserts the ad hoc nature of the filmic image, it connotes too the iconography of female ecstasy, most familiar from Bernini's *Saint Teresa*, as the sublimation of sexual satisfaction. The irony of the montage pits the repression of sexuality in the church against the narcissistic theater of the health spa, as if it were itself a church, requiring daily devotions, teasingly offering a grail of glimpsed pubic hair. But at the same time it suggests that labor at the optical printer, and even filmmaking itself, might be a form of devotion.⁵

Gently Down the Stream is one of the great films of poetic incarnation. The first lines of the eleventh dream could be a motto for the whole film: "I lie in a gutter/ giving birth to myself." It is always as much about becoming a mature filmmaker as it is a quest-romance of erotic self-discovery. If Friedrich's dreams constitute a psychological autobiography, their reassembly within the work, juxtaposed at times to the imagery of her first film, *Hot Water*, inflects the personal meaning of the oneiric allusions as aspects of her cinematic vocation. Therefore, another facet of the "church" the filmmaker walks into is the cultic sanctuary of the avant-garde cinema itself. In his seminal book, *The Three Faces of the Film*, Parker Tyler divided his chapters into three categories, "The Art, the Dream, and the Cult." Friedrich's film characteristically acknowledges all three.

There has always been a cultic dimension to the avant-garde cinema and its audience. Friedrich herself told me in the early 1980s that she was particularly sustained by showing her films to friends and by seeing their films. This candor struck me as particularly revealing of the avant-garde film community of the period. I frequently alluded to her position in lectures then, exploring the notion of a cinema of friendship. When the audience is expanding and vigorous, as it was in the 1960s and early 1970s, and seems to be once again in the early years of 2000, the public screening locations become the sanctuaries of the cult of avant-garde cinema. In more difficult times, filmmakers have gathered together in small informal groups or sent each other prints of their films. (The current widespread use of videotapes and DVDs may alter that phenomenon.)

In *Gently Down the Stream*, the prevalence of primal scene fantasies makes the transition from private to public arenas fluid. The emblematic dream is the fourth, in which a performer calls a woman up from the audience to have sex with her. The dreamer says, "I can't watch," but the enlarged, frantic titles "MOANS, ROARS, HOWLS" indicates that she cannot shut out the fascinating and terrifying experience. Of this portion of the film, Friedrich said to MacDonald: "Every time I show the film and I'm in the audience, I think about how some-

5. For an elaboration of this idea, see Nathaniel Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema* (San Francisco: tumba, 2003).

body in the audience feels. As a filmmaker, I'm doing just what the woman in the dream is doing. I think there's something about making a work that has to do with wanting to please people, to make love with the audience. This dream is a bald statement of a desire that I think is part of a lot of films."⁶ She does not see, or acknowledge, the concurrent aggression, so typical of primal scene representations, to force the audience to experience what they cannot bear to see.

Gently Down the Stream elicits our erotic imaginings with its elliptical narratives and the ambiguous associations among the dreams. Consider the sixth dream, in which the awakened sleeper might be angry at the dreaming narrator for her bisexuality, punishing her by acting out her own pain at discovering the evidence of the betrayer. However, the dream logic does not foreclose alternative scenarios: The awakened woman could be heterosexual herself, the covert referent of the dream simile "like being in love with/ a straight woman," and the taste of spermicide would then be the displaced consequence of making love to her.

Behind these fantasies looms the archaic image of the punishing mother taking revenge for her own frustrated and sublimated orgasm on the daughter for her sexual awakening. Regressing even farther, her punishment may be the negative consequence of the pleasure of bed-wetting. For Freud tells us in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: "People who dream often, and with great enjoyment, of *swimming*, cleaving the waves, etc. have usually been bed-wetters, and they now repeat in the dream a pleasure which they have long since learned to forgo."⁷ In fact, the title of Friedrich's first film, *Hot Water*, the very source of the swimming images here, could be read as an allusion to nocturnal urination with its pun on "trouble," a situation inviting punishment.

From the exhibitionistic sex and the smearing of spermicidal jelly the dream sequences turn more violent: the bloody limb of the beast ripped off in church, the dreamer making a second vagina and suffering the anxiety of not knowing "which/ is the original?," the ambivalence of masturbating with the inflated skin of a cartoon man, ending in the most painful and witty line of the film: "It's like being in love with/ a straight woman"; giving birth to dying fetuses in a gutter, and culminating in the frightening aggression of the leopard eating two hummingbirds. There we find a savage identification of the dreamer with the leopard, the symbolical beast of Dionysus. The shots of porpoises, from a whale-watching boat, reinforce this allusion: they

6. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 2, p. 291.

7. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* ["The Dream-Work"], in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. A. A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, 1938), pp. 390-91.

too are the cultic animals of Apollo, Dionysus's brother god; together they are the patrons of poetry, the theater, and prophecy. That there are two blue hummingbirds must mean they are linked to the two dark green fetuses of the eleventh dream. Eating the hummingbirds and feeling their feathers "humming/ on my/ tongue" gives an aggressive and triumphant cast to the cunnilingus it symbolically depicts.

If we see the leopard as the symbol of Dionysus, the five final dreams would seem to dwell on the magic of art or creation: The dreamer makes a second vagina; she builds a house, a common dream symbol for the body; she draws a man; she gives birth to herself. That she builds the house "wrong" in the eyes of the male authority, and does it without pay, may refer to the thankless genre of her filmmaking, the construction of exquisite corpses. Rather than submit to the rewards of the man who would pay for the normative house, she draws a man in the subsequent dream and, like a Pygmalion in reverse gender, makes love to her creation. From the two vaginas she then gives birth to twins, herself and a double. But these dreams of creative power are filled with anxiety and guilt. The creation of the second vagina, a defense of her bisexuality and a guarantee of her femininity, makes her anxious about her sexual nature as well as her artistic originality; twice she asks, "Which is the original?" In the birth scene she must breathe to sustain her children, but the double begins to "crumble up" in her hands.

The penultimate dream invokes the power of language and song: "Five women sing in a cappella/ 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 punishment of blindness for truth is the story of Oedipus. Since Friedrich's mother emigrated from Germany to America as a war bride, the language she claims not to know is her mother's *muttersprache*. In the finale of the film, "mutter" appears between "flutter" and "utter" on the tongue of the leopard-filmmaker.

The summer that Friedrich devoted to Whitman she would have seen that his greatest poems of poetic incarnation occur at the seaside—"As I Ebbed with the Ocean of Life" and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"—where the sea itself was his "savage old mother incessantly crying." Like Whitman, Friedrich must wrest the power of speech, overcome the silencing of the angry mother who haunts the film and would prevent the poet giving utterance to herself by smearing spermicide on her lips.

The mother's voice is fulcrum of *The Ties That Bind*, Friedrich's next film, her first with sound. The hand-scratched titles of *Gently Down the Stream* had been a brilliant ploy to forestall the problem of sound, but she could no longer sustain her project without it. She admitted to MacDonald: "I [felt] very intimate with that device [scratched texts], but I also [felt] that I might not be able to use it much longer. . . . I was really scared about

editing sound and picture. It was completely unknown territory for me."⁸ In fact, one of the vital powers of the feminist avant-garde cinema of the 1980s was its exploration of sound montage. The work of Yvonne Rainer was central to this moment; her *Journeys from Berlin/1971* provided a model for the Menippean satire that was the dominant genre of ambitious films at that time. It brought into ironical collision personal history, world politics, film theory, and psychoanalysis. Rainer's success in this genre and her influence may have been a factor in Friedrich's avoidance of Menippea (although there are traces of it in her two feature-length dramatic films *Damned if You Don't* and *Hide and Seek*, 1996).

The Ties That Bind is a palinode to *Gently Down the Stream* and a prologue to *Sink or Swim* (1990), her abecedarium of childhood distress. It begins with a series of images reflecting the dreams of the earlier film but quickly replaces the threatening archaic mother with a rather sympathetic portrait of Lore Bucher Friedrich. She is intimately connected with the sea, or rather Lake Michigan, where we frequently see her swimming. It both beckons her to death and sustains her life; two scratched titles read: "Sometimes she says/ One day I might swim out so far that I wouldn't make it back to shore," and "At other times she says/ Having the lake near me has saved my life." We see the filmmaker building a model house (but not "for some man" this time); five girls are playing on a beach. Of course, they do not spell out "the word truth in German," but the oppositions of truth and blindness, German and American, mother and daughter bind this film as tightly as they do the dream diary. If *Gently Down the Stream* can be called a film of the unconscious, *The Ties That Bind* continually shows the work of the superego.

In this first sound film, the mother's voice, in a sustained interview, is virtually all we hear. The daughter speaks twice: once to offer the date when Roosevelt learned of the death camps for Jews, and once, very briefly, when her mother scolds her for recording her playing an Austrian folk tune haltingly on the piano. The filmmaker inserts her questions by scratching them, silently, onto the image track, to which she adds, occasionally, brief asides and quotations of her mother. Yet there are no synchronized images of Lore Bucher speaking in the film's fifty-four minutes. When Friedrich films her at home, she is talking on the telephone, serving and eating breakfast, or playing the piano, but even here the visual style shows the influence of Stan Brakhage's *15 Song Traits*, with more attention to hands, feet, and torso than to the face. In counterpoint to the single voice of the interview, the filmmaker has fashioned an intricate montage of Super-8 mm material blown up to 16 mm (a visit to Germany, a few home movies), images of the mother swimming, shots

8. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 2, pp. 293, 295.

from television, fragments of World War II documentaries, and the filmmaker herself constructing, crushing, then burning a model Bavarian house. She also uses headlines that appeared in the *New York Post* while the film was being made and shots of political demonstrations in which she participated to contrast her times and her political life to that of her mother's stories.

Unstated, but clearly evident in the film, is the compulsion to call her mother to account for her German childhood and youth during the Third Reich and to test the strength of her own political convictions against the backdrop of her mother's narrative. The filmmaker seems to share the dominant myth in America of Nazi Germany: that the population nearly universally acquiesced to the ideology of the Hitler regime and knew of the extermination of the Jews. Lore Bucher Friedrich speaks with apparent frankness on both issues, consistently representing herself as a victim of history. Hers was an anti-Nazi family. She was punished in school for her friendship with two Jewish girls, humiliated for insisting on the greeting "Gruss Gott" rather than "Heil Hitler," and for parading out of uniform. Yet she admits she would not risk her life as the members of the White Rose underground did (there is an homage to five White Rose "martyrs" in the film). She fiercely contends that she knew of concentration camps but not of extermination, countering by citing an article she clipped which asserts that not only the German leadership but the Allied chiefs, the Pope, and even the leaders of Switzerland and Sweden knew of the death camps and did nothing. Even while asserting her ignorance she admits a shame for being German, only to claim its unfairness:

I felt ashamed being a German. Embarrassed. And to this day and always will, no matter what. Because I hear it, I get it from right and left. It is a persecution to the end of my life and I don't deserve it. But that's the way it is.

It is when her mother says that she knew only of Dachau and that it was not a death camp until the very end of the war that the filmmaker carves her longest and most passionate intervention on the celluloid, amid shots she took herself on a visit to Dachau: "NO. From 1933-1945, 30,000 people were either shot, killed in medical experiments or worked to death. And after I blame the Germans OR WISH THAT MY MOTHER COULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING ANYTHING I ask myself what I would have done AND WHY THE AMERICANS DIDN'T BOMB THE RAIL LINES TO THE CAMPS They were begged to do it."

Here at the heart of the film Friedrich struggles with her own political ineffectualness as well as her mother's. Yet despite the efforts of her montage to align the American militarism of the early Reagan government—through

newspaper headlines, a letter from the Weisenthal Center about the rise of anti-Semitism fueled by American Nazis, and images of the demonstrations in which she participated—with the events her mother described, Lore Bucher Friedrich's narrative overwhelms the film. Her daughter's political protests seem trivial against that historical backdrop. The very fact that Friedrich was permitted to film women in passive resistance being carried to police vans undermines any comparison to the White Rose. Of course, the filmmaker is aware of this problem and attempts to work with it. In MacDonald's interview, she says:

The temptation was to have this strong sound carry the image, but I was afraid of the image getting lost. I started with a forty-five second bit (when she says she feels so horrible that she's a German) and inched my way along from there, going to a two-minute section, then to a five-minute section, and finally I could work on a ten minute section comfortably.⁹

Before I made *The Ties That Bind* I had such bad feelings about being German, being the daughter of a German; and my father is half German too. I don't think I really trusted the material I had. When I was working on the film, I told myself to stop worrying, to stop thinking I shouldn't be doing it, to stop disbelieving her, to trust her. . . . It was strange to suddenly be thinking of my mother in this respectful way, to really be admiring her for what she did, for surviving. I had never thought of *her*.¹⁰

The film succeeds in conveying the impression of intimacy, as if the filmmaker had not heard all her mother's stories before. It also reflects the process of its construction as Friedrich described it: Its dialogue is between "strong sound" and image. The mother's voice defeats the attempts to distrust her and wrests a confession of admiration in the final title, printed, not hand scratched: "In 1980 (after raising three children alone) she bought herself a piano and began to practice the scales." Her aspirations to a professional education, as a physician, horticulturist, or musician, had been thwarted when she was a high school student by the death of her father, who is the central focus of her affections in her narrative. Throughout the film the piano is the constant symbol of her hopes, resistance, and survival:

I had taken up piano again. My teacher was Mrs. Pongratz.
Mrs. Pongratz was a Party member. She was the only piano teacher

9. Ibid., p. 295.

10. Ibid., pp. 294–95.

in our neighborhood, right? She also played in our cathedral, she was very well known, and I felt, "well, to hell with it, all she does is teach me music." But that was not all she did, because every time she was talking about how I should join and she was showing me pictures and I said, "No, I don't want to." Then I stopped and I said I did not want to have lessons anymore. It must have been half a year that I had lessons and that was all because I just couldn't STAND her. And one day when she came, my oldest sister had opened the door and said, "Here is Frau Pongratz again. She wants to know whether you would join the Party or the BDM," and I said "No" and I went out and I threw her down the stairs. I gave her one push. And she grabbed herself, thank god she didn't hurt herself, but she did fall down.

Her litany of oppression, humiliation, and disastrous timing includes punishment at school from Nazi teachers, refusal by the executor of her father's estate to pay for her higher education on the grounds of insufficient funds (which she did not believe), and the firebombing of Stuttgart while she was visiting her sister in a hospital there. The incident with the piano teacher led to her arrest and a period in a forced labor camp from which she was released only when her mother was dying of cancer. Even after the fall of Germany, drunken GIs maliciously trashed her home: "I really hated them. All I could say was, well, if they want to be liberators, then good night—they are no better than anybody else." This catalog of disasters culminates in the brief account of her marriage, in which the piano played a symbolical role:

I have been often very sad that I could not do what I really wanted to do. And somehow the meeting of your father was . . . like a straw. I thought, ah, now God is good after all, I couldn't do it then, eventually I will do it. Because I started the piano after the war. With ice cold fingers and in this old fur coat I would sit there and practice in gloves, right? And I remember very clearly talking with your father about it and saying, "Someday I can regain what I feel I have lost, because I could not go to a university and study." And he said, "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." Of course I had no idea just how poor we were going to be! . . .

True, I have told him I will do anything . . . I will do anything. As a matter of fact, I have gone as far as saying, "I want to get out of Germany and if someday you're tired of me and you don't love me anymore, well . . ." Of course that was always understood not if we had a family. And that was one thing which he told me when he came and

said, "Here is my ring. I want a divorce and once you told me that if I don't like you anymore I can leave you." I said, "Paul, that was not meant after 15 years of marriage and what I have gone through with you! That was meant perhaps after one or two years having come to this country." Right? But of course as long as it was convenient for him to interpret it that way, that's what happened.

Just as the death of her father and the subsequent termination of her education loom as the decisive events of Lore Bucher's autobiographical account, for Su Friedrich the divorce of her parents, when she was ten, becomes the fulcrum of her autobiographical films: *The Ties That Bind* ends with it; *Sink or Swim* centers on it; and even *Rules of the Road* (1993) explores its psychic echoes. To MacDonald she admitted: "when I was interviewing my mother for *The Ties That Bind* and she got onto the subject of them getting divorced, it really struck a nerve and I thought it might be something to explore later."¹¹

In *Sink or Swim* she found a form adequate to the complexity of the subject. Perhaps the experience of making her first dramatic film, the forty-two-minute *Damned If You Don't* helped to prepare her for this work. There, in accord with the Menippean satires prevalent at that time, she expanded the visualized narrative of a young nun stalked and seduced by a laywoman with voice-over reminiscences by nuns and the reading of an account of a visionary lesbian nun in the Renaissance. Frequently the filmmaker included her own voice coaching and correcting her narrators. The black-and-white images of the anguished nun and the woman cruising her recall the trance film genre of the 1940s and 1950s, but its climax is not a symbolical denouement but a close-up representation of their lovemaking. For *Sink or Swim* she adapted a simple and liberating ploy to relieve the autobiographical anxiety: She hired a young woman to read the texts and she changed the first-person references to "The Girl" or "she."

Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* and *Hapax Legomena: (nostalgia)* were formative influences on the structure of *Sink or Swim*. The central and longest section of *Zorns Lemma* consists of one-second shots of one-word street signs edited in alphabetical cycles. Using the roman alphabet, with *j* and *i* syncretized as well as *u* and *v*, each cycle lasts twenty-four seconds. Gradually letters are replaced with nonverbal images in inverse frequency to their use as initial letters in English words; so the final letters of the alphabet (*x*, *y*, *z*) are the first to fall out. Friedrich organized her film in twenty-six unequal segments and an epilogue, running from *z* to *a*.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 310.

Initially, following Frampton's model, she thought to have several sections for each letter, or several words in each section. Her working manuscript moves from "Z, zeal, zero, Zeus, zygote" to "ALIMONY, abandonment, absence, abuse, academia, addiction, adoration, adversity, advice, ambivalence, anger, anniversaries, anthropology, anticipation, anxiety, archetypes, argument, arrogance, artifacts, asshole." In this expanded form the principle of free association is transparent. "Ambivalence" in A-catalog is characteristic of the whole film, as the list itself demonstrates. Whereas Frampton used the alphabetical model to filter out personal references (with limited success), Friedrich employs it as a confessional tool in her exploration of the psychodynamics of her relationship to her father. That is even clear in the final titles that largely retain the topic words of her original manuscript. Where she has made a change, I put the original in brackets: Zygote, Y Chromosome, X Chromosome, Witness [Warrior], Virgin [Virginity], Utopia [Umbilical Cord], Temptation, Seduction, Realism [Romance], Quicksand, Pedagogy, Oblivion, Nature, Memory, Memory, Loss, Kinship, Journalism, Insanity, Homework [Help], Ghosts, Flesh [Femininity], Envy, Discovery [Debt], Competition [Context], Bigamy, Athena/ Atalanta/ Aphrodite [Alimony]. In every case, the words are tangential to the visual and verbal material of the episodes.

Like the voice-over reminiscences of *Hapax Legomena: (nostalgia)*, Friedrich's commentaries smuggle an autobiographical narrative into the displaced descriptions. But she is neither as systemic nor as monomorphic as her precursor. The chapter headings allow her to create a poetic sequence of semi-autonomous nodes, functioning like the thirteen dreams of *Gently Down the Stream* but more distinctly divided. As in the dream diary, each section is a monad reformulating images and suggestions dispersed throughout the film. The changing chapter titles announce a new perspective or a variation on what we have already learned or surmised from the previous sections.

Friedrich's episodes range through a variety of styles and materials, sometimes directly related to either the key word or the narrative texts, but more often obliquely alluding to one or both. For instance, the opening montage of microscopy illustrates the title "Zygote" directly by showing sperm inseminating an egg. But it bears a negative relationship to the voice-over story of the birth of Athena directly from Zeus's head. The narrative implies a strong identification of the narrator with Athena and her father with Zeus in early childhood, despite the visual evidence of natural human conception. Scott MacDonald cogently analyzed this opening trope as a comment on cinematic editing and dramatic illusion as much as on biology:

The opening "Zygote" sequence, though only one minute and 43 seconds long, can be read as a witty encapsulation of conventional

film history. The passage of intercutting that leads finally to the climax of fertilization and cell division provides a sly commentary on commercial cinema since D.W. Griffith. What is more central to conventional movie pleasure than a dramatic chase, expressed through intercutting, that leads to the maintenance and confirmation not only of the species, but of conventional definitions of gender and family?¹²

The two silent sections that follow—"Y chromosome" and "X chromosome"—are metaphorical: A hand releases airborne milkweed pods in one and we see the tip of an elephant's trunk and foot in the other. According to the filmmaker, these are visual jokes.¹³ There is a feminine quality to the soft milkweed fuzz representing the male Y chromosome and a phallic overtone to the elephant's vagina-like trunk opening, reinforced by its massive leg. However, the rubric "Witness" offers an ambiguous piece of evidence—a home movie showing the filmmaker as a young child playfully tossed in the air by her father. It is accompanied by a nursery rhyme about ambivalence: "When she was good, she was very, very good, and when she was bad she was wicked."

As the film proceeds, both the visual materials and the narrations trace a chronological development from conception and early childhood to maturity while the alphabet is running in reverse. Sometimes the visual theme of one section will continue into the next, even if the texts are not similar. We gradually understand why we are seeing circus performers in "Utopia" when the text reveals that despite the father's forbidding his daughters to eat sugar and his refusal to acquire a television, they were treated by a neighbor every Friday evening to ice cream sundaes and a chance to watch Don Ameche's *Flying Circus Show* on his television. But in the subsequent episode, which continues the circus imagery, "Temptation" alludes to the erotic temptation of seeing muscular female acrobats dressed in skimpy bras and thongs, while the text recounts the myth of Atalanta (the "great athlete and hunter" who proved to the father who abandoned her that "she was as good as a man"). We also learn that after she received a book of mythology from her father on her seventh birthday, the girl "would sit in the closet and read the stories long after being sent to bed," waiting for her father to come home. This is, of course, the point at which the filmmaker explores the childhood indications of her homosexuality, linking them to her adoration of her father and the antinomian pleasures of defying his rules.

12. Scott MacDonald, "From Zygote to Global Cinema via Su Friedrich's Films," *Journal of Film and Video* 44, no. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 1992), p. 31.

13. Telephone conversation with filmmaker, August 22, 2003.

When he “caught her” reading in the closet, he asked her to recount her favorite myth. As she told him the story of Atalanta, he fell asleep. Both the narrative and the circus material continue in the next section, appropriately called “Seduction.” Here we learn that the father did not stay awake long enough to hear of Atalanta’s fate. Defeated in a footrace by Hippomedes, who used a ruse taught him by Aphrodite, she had to break her vow of celibacy and marry the victor. For failing to pay sufficient homage to Aphrodite, the goddess turned them into lions. On the screen we see a bestiary of circus animals and their tamers. The early manuscript of alphabetical words indicates that originally the two-part story of the father and Atalanta fell under the categories of “Seduction” and “Romance,” while the bestiary images had been scheduled to appear earlier under “Virginity.” Apparently, in the course of making the film Friedrich realized the more powerful irony to be effected by fusing the female erotica with reading mythology in the closet. In either form the associative chain, virginity-utopia-temptation-seduction-romance, dominates these early episodes of the film before the father’s cruelty and abandonment come into play.

In several ways, the origins of this film and its range of allusions are overdetermined. Friedrich herself acknowledged that Frampton has been an influence on her, but she attributed her use of the alphabet primarily to the fact that her father is a linguist and an anthropologist. For most of the filmmaker’s lifetime he has been a member of the distinguished Committee for Social Thought at the University of Chicago. His works include studies of Indo-European words for trees and kinship names, music in Russian poetry, and agrarian reform in Mexico, although we would not get a clear sense of his professional distinction from his daughter’s film. The three poets she says he has studied intensely, Whitman, Sappho, and Ahkmatova, are central to Paul Friedrich’s studies of poetry.¹⁴ In fact, he was keeping a dream journal at the same time that she was making *Gently Down the Stream*; in his published study of it, he writes of his “identification” with Whitman.¹⁵ Likewise, we can trace the prevalence of mythology themes in his work. He is the author of a book on Greek goddesses upon which the filmmaker

14. Paul Friedrich, *The Language Parallax: Linguistic Relativism and Poetic Indeterminacy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986); Paul Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); chapter 5, “Homer, Sappho, and Aphrodite” offers an extended reading of Sappho’s poetry.

15. Friedrich, in *The Language Parallax*, chapter 5, “The Poetry of Language in the Politics of Dreams,” interprets the use of language in one of his own dreams and traces the elaboration of the dream into a poem through two drafts. He writes: “the poem (or I, a poet like Walt Whitman) exploits the entire repertoire of aesthetic strategies and devices that I call poiesemes: for example, phonic and visual images that startle; sudden shifts of mood (compassion, outrage); vivid juxtaposition of antithetical forms; metaphors and other analogies (e.g. between surface and projectile points; and, above all, the distillation of gist whereby ethnopolitical conflict is boiled down to a name)” (p. 78).

ironically comments in the section called "Competition." This title refers at once to the opposition of Aphrodite and Demeter in Paul Friedrich's book, *The Meaning of Aphrodite* (1977), and the daughter's competition with the father and with his wives; for she tells us the book, which "argues for the need to reintegrate"¹⁶ the erotic and the domestic goddesses "is dedicated to his third wife." She does not mention that the wife, Deborah Gordon Friedrich, also collaborated on one of the chapters. The images mount a witty opposition between European images of Madonna and Child (often breastfeeding) and Asian erotic woodcuts (including breast sucking), in a parody of art historical discourse.

Friedrich is also in "competition" with the great filmmakers who preceded her within the history of the American avant-garde cinema. Mythopoeia had been central to the work of Deren, Anger, Broughton, Markopoulos, Brakhage, Harry Smith, and others. Several of the major feminist filmmakers of her generation challenged these earlier masters by reworking the serial form most visibly exemplified by Brakhage's *Dog Star Man*, but eschewing his mythological allusions. Abigail Child's *Is This What You Were Born For?* and Leslie Thornton's *Peggy and Fred in Hell* are examples of this. However, in *Sink or Swim* Friedrich directly confronted the mythopoeic mode as a patriarchal inheritance which, she freely confesses, had been a crucial factor in her Oedipal pedagogy. She conflates the scholar Paul Friedrich with the antiacademic filmmakers in this respect. By treating her identification with Atalanta ironically, as if she too had been abandoned by her father because of her gender, she hints that her impressive success as a filmmaker would then be an Atalantan triumph within the tradition that had been dominated by males.

In describing the thesis of *The Meaning of Aphrodite*, she implies that her father's speculation "that there may have been an earlier goddess who embodied the qualities of both Aphrodite and Demeter" (her summary) is a projection of his erotic imagination. So she understands his serial marriages (graphed in the "Discovery" chapter) and his scholarship (described in both "Discovery" and "Competition") as acting out a quest for an idealized woman. In this she stands apart from those feminists (including Carolee Schneemann among filmmakers) who have been inspired by theories of a primal goddess worship anterior to Greek and Hebrew mythology. Her ironies deflate the pretensions of filmic myth making: Neither her cinematography nor her editing evoke the mythopoeic mode; she relegates all allusions to myth to the child's voice-over.

16. In *The Meaning of Aphrodite*, p. 190, Paul Friedrich credits Anna Ahkmatova, "who synthesized in her person and projected to her readers both of the complexes dealt with in this chapter as part of a more general image of the artistically creative woman."

As the film progresses, the stories of Paul Friedrich's cruelty and blindness to his daughters deflect attention away from the filmmaker's relationship to the artistic precursors of her metier. For instance, the short narrative of "Pedagogy," in which she tells us that her father taught her chess but would never play with her again after the first time she checkmated him, overshadows the allusion to the chess game near the end of Deren's *At Land*, framed in same way with only the player's hands visible. Friedrich's relationship to Deren is both remote and complex, especially in *Sink or Swim*. Her projection of the figure of the father is so powerful and intricate that her film seems, superficially, to be a work of realism where Deren has pioneered modes of subjective quest romances. In fact, "Realism" is the rubric Friedrich gives the story from which her title derives. There, while we watch "realistic" images of urban children playing, swimming, and eating in some instances with their fathers, the girl narrator tells us that her father taught her to swim by throwing her into the deep end of a pool after a brief lecture on kicking and breathing. Later he terrified her with stories of water moccasins. Nothing could be farther from the magical images of Deren as a version of Aphrodite, emerging from the backward-rolling waves of the sea at the start of *At Land*.

Yet tangentially Deren still informs *Sink or Swim*. The trance film as she perfected it often turned upon fantasies of suicide. In Friedrich's film, by contrast, her mother's suicide threats occur under the chapter title "Insanity." Then, labeling "Ghosts" the long static shot in negative of the filmmaker typing a letter to her father she could not mail (about her mother obsessively listening to Schubert's song, "Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel"), she ironically displaces the spectral effect Deren achieved by using images in negative, in *Ritual in Transfigured Time* and throughout *The Very Eye of Night*. In fact, *ghosts* may be taken as a term for the rhetoric of displacement itself. Within the logic of Friedrich's film it conjures the "Kinship" section in which she had heard the Schubert song. Its lyrics, in German, evoke the anguish of an abandoned woman. To the rhythms and refrains of the song the filmmaker has edited an erotic *periegeton*, intercutting grainy shots of women embracing in a shower with images of travel by airplane, train, and car to Death Valley. The long shots of the solitary female figure in the desert landscape and amid monumental rocks might evoke *At Land* to a viewer familiar with the genre even without the other hints of Deren's haunting of the film. There are echoes of Walt Whitman, too, with both the narrative of "the savage old mother incessantly crying"¹⁷ and in the shots of birds: the two white birds that fly off together near the start of the section and the later images of a solitary dark flyer are emblems from "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," the great poem of

17. Jeffrey Stout reminded me of this allusion.

poetic incarnation where Whitman recuperates his vocation from his identification with the music of "you solitary singer," the bird who lost his mate:

For I that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping,
 Now that I have heard you,
 Now in a moment I know what I am for — I awake . . .
 O you demon, singing by yourself — projecting me,
 O solitary me, listening — never more shall I cease imitating, perpetuating
 you . . .
 Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before what there, in
 the night,
 By the sea, under the yellow and sagging moon,
 The dusky demon aroused — the fire, the sweet hell within,
 The unknown want, the destiny of me.¹⁸

As the filmmaker relives her parents', perhaps all parents', erotic tragedy, lesbian love displaces heterosexuality. Significantly, the *periegeton* is ambiguous as to whether she is the deserted lover or the deserter, her father or her mother, Faust or Gretchen, the figure Deren represents or the lovers—male and female—she discards in *At Land*. Placing the Schubert song before its contextual explanation (unless we remember the sad story of the mother's obsession from *The Ties That Bind*) allows Friedrich to make it her own music "projecting me" before it is a sign of her mother's neurotic compulsion. In the letter that concluded "Love. P.S. I wish I could mail you this letter." she wanted to tell her father of her aesthetic revelation: "It's so strange to have so ecstatic a melody accompany those tragic lyrics. But maybe that's what makes it so powerful: it captures perfectly the conflict between memory and the present."

Deren and Whitman fuse with Friedrich's genetic parents in this film of poetic incarnation, haunted by the end of "Out of the Cradle":

That he was sung to me in the moonlight on Paumanok's gray beach,
 With the thousand responsive songs, at random,
 My own songs, awaked from that hour,
 And with them the key, the word up from the waves,
 The word of the sweetest song, and all songs,
 That strong and delicious word which, creeping to my feet,
 The sea whispered me.¹⁹

18. Walt Whitman, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," *Selected Poems 1855–1892: A New Edition*, ed. Gary Schmidgall (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), pp. 212–13.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

Friedrich's film is one of the many responsive songs arising as if at random, driven by the mother's fantasies of death and the father's displacements of guilt.

Aesthetic issues are inseparable from Oedipal dynamics here. Not only did Paul Friedrich write on music and poetry, he wrote poetry himself. Twice in the film his poetry comes under critical scrutiny for its solipsistic blindness to the "the conflict between memory and the present." The first occasion is the middle of the alphabet: "Memory" is the longest chapter; in the published script it appears in two parts. The first is an evocation of the death of Paul Friedrich's beloved sister when they were children. She had a heart attack jumping into an ice-cold pool. The second part describes a poem he wrote twenty years later when his first child, Su Friedrich's elder sister, was a week old. The filmmaker quotes a passage from it in which she stands in for the lost sister: "But now there is only the quiet face that replaces a drowned sister at last." According to the narrator, "No one blamed him for her death, but he carried the burden of guilt and loss for many years," because she had not waited for him to complete his chores before going to the pool. However, instead of keeping him from extraordinarily abusive punishment of his own children, that guilt may have driven him to reenact a version of that disaster. In the very next section, "Loss," we hear how he held the heads of both the filmmaker and her older sister under the water of a bathtub because they fought with each other and "made [their] mother miserable."

In the course of making the film, Friedrich discovered forgotten home movies her paternal grandfather had taken of his children in the 1930s. So in the first part of the "Memory" chapter we see Paul Friedrich as a boy, playing with his brother and sister and, astonishingly, images of them all swimming in the very pond where the sister died perhaps a year later. (It is one of the ironies of archival footage that we would not know these are actual records of Paul Friedrich's childhood merely by looking at the finished film.) Then, although the discussion of the poem begins "Twenty years later," the home movies go back in time to images of Paul Friedrich playing with his first child when she was a toddler. "Loss," however, uses an utterly different montage strategy: shots of families taking their daughters to their first communion rite counterpoint the account of the father's brutal "baptism" of his daughters.

"Bigamy" offers a different conflict between memory and the present. Friedrich uses the term as an etymological, not legal, category: Two marriages are sequential, not simultaneous. The penultimate chapter of the film proposes a visual self-portrait of the filmmaker as the child voice recounts a meeting, as an adult, with her father and her eleven-year-old half sister:

Just then her father stopped the girl in midsentence to say that her story didn't interest him. The woman became rigid with fear.

This was her childhood, being played out all over again by the young girl.

By this point, rhyming episodes have drawn an intricate web of connections throughout the film. The trip of the father and this young daughter to visit the now-mature filmmaker recalls a disastrous trip they once took together in Mexico that spans the "Flesh" and "Envy" chapters. The former heading refers to Friedrich's youthful sexuality; she had to be eighteen or nineteen at the time. When she was repeatedly late for meals because of the attentions of a Mexican boy she met on the beach, the father abruptly sent her back to Chicago. "Envy," however, is an interpretive category; for the chapter focuses on the poem he later wrote about the event: "How You Wept, How Bitterly." Criticizing the obtuseness of the poem, the narrator complains, "He still didn't realize that he had been acting like a scorned and vengeful lover, and that hers had not been the tears of an orphaned child, but those of a frustrated teenage girl who had to pay for a crime she didn't commit."

A second *periegeton* of subjective, often handheld, images of Mexico encompasses both sections. The first time we see a receding landscape from the back window of a vehicle, it corresponds neatly to the narrator's description: "She sat by herself at the back of the bus and watched the coastline disappear." The second time it is synchronized to the last line of the father's poem:

Your eyes at our parting condensed all children orphaned by divorce
A glance through a film of tears at a father dwindling to a speck.

Sink or Swim poses the resonances of its own sound and picture nuances against the insensitivity of the father's poetry, which fails to negotiate the play of the ecstatic and the tragic the filmmaker heard in Schubert's song and strives for in her art. That very play, in fact, is at issue in Whitman's "A Voice Out of the Sea" where, as Jeffrey Stout observed, "the bird's song, which both constitutes the mourning of the bird's lost mate and the poet's ecstatic election as one who must sing such songs."²⁰

Visually the "Bigamy" chapter is a self-portrait. We see the filmmaker in bed, in the bathtub, watching television, or at her typewriter, smoking or drinking a beer in nearly every shot. Even this wry acknowledgment of addictions caps suggestions from earlier parts of the film. We learn in "Homework" that once her father got a divorce, the taboos were lifted. A television entered the house and the girl spent all her allowance on candy. Significantly,

20. Jeffrey Stout, e-mail letter to author, June 26, 2007.

we see flashes of early 1960s comedies—*Life with Father*, *The Donna Reed Show*, *Father Knows Best*—with idealizations of paternal authority, interrupted by a commercial for Lucky Strike cigarettes. Smoking, drinking, and watching television, then, are marked as the obsessive compensations for the lost father. Writing, too, has its refracted history within the film. In this case, the “Journalism” chapter spoke of her diary, a tenth birthday gift from her sister, where she wrote about “punishment assignments, fighting with boys, and playing with her friends,” and wrote about the divorce, of which she was so ashamed that she wrote in pencil. (Her mother surreptitiously erased those entries.)

In the last chapter, two women sun themselves on a beach while a naked baby girl plays as if these three females might correspond to the trinity “Athena/ Atalanta/ Aphrodite,” which is the final rubric. One of the women is framed remarkably like Maya Deren as she lies on the sand in *At Land*. The camera very slowly zooms out over the lake as the narrator tells a parable of renunciations. Recalling how her mother clung to her father after their divorce, the filmmaker determines not to swim across the lake following him, but to stop. After a hint of fascination with death, which echoes both Deren’s scenarios and her mother’s speech in *The Ties That Bind*—“The water surrounded her like a lover’s arms”—she swims back to her friends.

The compulsion to repeat finds its emblem in the multiple superimpositions of the epilogue; visually a home movie shot of the filmmaker as a preteen is compounded over itself while on the soundtrack we hear her own voice for the first time, in a round in six tracks, chanting the ABC song. Here is how she analyzed the conclusion for Scott MacDonald:

The conclusion of *Sink or Swim* was more a way for me to acknowledge my absurd ambivalence. A lot of the stories in the film are about doing things to get my father’s approval, and then at the end in the last story I decide I’m not going to swim across the lake to please him. I’ve made a sort of grand gesture of turning back to shore, swimming back to my friends who will hopefully treat me differently than my father has treated me. But then in the epilogue I turn right around and sing the ABC song, which asks what he thinks of me! I believe that, to a certain extent, we can transcend our childhood, but in some way we always remain the child looking for love and approval.²¹

Friedrich seems to have directed the ambivalence she acknowledges toward her parents to her cinematic precursors as well. Although confessional irony is her primary mode, she has never directly addressed in a film her origins as a

21. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2*, p. 314.

filmmaker. Yet, as I have been trying to demonstrate here, in the three strong films in which she "gives birth to [her]self" she inherits the debts of a rich film-making tradition infolded within even richer literary and artistic traditions. Throughout this book, I have stressed the importance of one of those formative contexts, that of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and to a somewhat lesser extent Walt Whitman, for that filmmaking tradition. Since Friedrich, like Abigail Child, gave birth to her filmic persona as an elective heir of Hollis Frampton, who imbibed the Emerson-Whitman lineage by way of its intricate evasions through Ezra Pound, we are not often confronted in her films with the visual spectacle Emerson called "a pictorial air," available to the filmmaker "by mechanical means": rapid movement, detached perspectives, in brief, what I have encapsulated in Emerson's phrase "turning the eyes upside down."²² In her case, as in Frampton's, we must turn from the sixth short chapter of *Nature* ("Idealism") where that phrase appears, to the fourth ("Language") where we find: "wise men pierce . . . rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things. . . . The moment our discourse rises above the ground line of familiar facts and is inflamed with passion or exalted by thought, it clothes itself in images."²³ Friedrich's films repeatedly examine the problematic nature of finding images for her passionate and exalted discourse.

The incongruity between that discourse and images lies at the heart of one of her minor films, *Rules of the Road*, another autobiographical work so thoroughly ironical it might be the satyr play to her major three I have been discussing in this chapter. It also happens to ironize the vehicular theme and perpetual camera movement so often extolled in these chapters. On the soundtrack, the filmmaker for the first time delivers her own monologue, narrating the painful breakup of a relationship with a woman she does not name. The story centers on a car they shared for work, errands, and weekend excursions while they lived together in Brooklyn. As she narrates the history of the station wagon, she interweaves memories of rides from her childhood with accounts of the pleasures and conveniences the car provided her and her lover as well as the fights had while driving. Above all, the voice-over emphasizes her remorse over the breakup. In this account, the automobile gradually becomes an allegorical figure for both the woman she loved and the relationship itself:

The car seems to collect and hold onto the spirit of those fights in much the same way that the brown cloth seats eventually became

22. Jeffrey Stout drew my attention to "the trip to Coney Island, where the view from the train is like a film strip and the Ferris Wheel is like a film reel" in Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't* as a particularly cogent instance of the Emersonian aesthetic.

23. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983) p. 23.

suffused with the ugly smell of smoke from all the cigarettes we consumed. . . .

I liked to imagine myself driving it many years from now when it became one of the old and familiar things in my life, a part of my small and precious universe of old friends, favorite objects, and her.

There is more camera movement in *Rules of the Road* than in any other Friedrich film. She continually pans, zooms in and out, walks with the camera, nearly always with the goal of finding yet another old beige station wagon parked or moving on the streets of New York or on the highways. The few moments shot from within a moving car express the exhilaration of “the low degree of the sublime” associated with a symbolic break from her parents’ severely economical use of the family car (“giddy with relief at leaving behind my parents’ Spartan ways”) and with erotic euphoria (“When I was doing the driving, I felt as though I was carrying her in my arms—away from the relentless, claustrophobic city towards an unpredictable generous expanse of forest or ocean”). But the euphoria of vehicular movement is merely a foil to the obsessive stalking of similar station wagons in the hope and fear of catching sight of her former girlfriend.

The restless images provide an ironic commentary on the autobiographical monologue, as if they had to stand in for the unfiled record of the lost relationship. There is no sense that the visual track of *Rules of the Road* would be meaningful as an autonomous poem of movement or travel. In this respect, the film provides a sharp contrast to Stan Brakhage’s *Visions in Meditation*, which is the subject of the next chapter. Brakhage’s concept of moving visual thinking would locate in his images alone the “discourse . . . inflamed with passion or exalted by thought.”