

RAINER'S PROMINENCE AS AN AVANT-GARDE choreographer accelerated her recognition as film-maker, and her feminism, her Godardlike pastiche of quotations and allusions (often to the heroes of the Left and to European theoreticians) gave her immediately a heroic stature that younger women film-makers with the same intellectual orientation earned more slowly. That younger generation, represented by Su Friedrich, Leslie Thornton, and Abigail Child, among many others, have transferred the themes and even some of the cinematic rhetoric of Rainer's films, shorn of her debts to Godard and even Bergman, to the native tradition of the lyrical-compensatory film, bringing about the most significant renewal of energies within the avant-garde cinema of the 1980s, by challenging the male dominated subgenres: autobiography, serial epics, dream journals.

Two years after she started making films, Su Friedrich scratched her dream journal onto leader and images of a woman exercising: *Gently Down the Stream* (1981). With an optical printer she manipulated the rhythms of the scratched words, otherwise reminiscent of Brakhage's titles, which he may have derived from Larry Jordan's film *Man Is in Pain* (1955). By the 1980s, access to optical printers was widespread among avant-garde film-makers. These machines, which permitted the artist to rephotograph previously processed strips of film at different speeds, forwards or backwards, and to enlarge or mask-out parts of the image, began to appear in institutional film-making departments in the late 1970s and were even privately owned (sometimes homemade) by a few film-makers in the 1980s.

Friedrich uses the optical printer minimally to slow down the flickering words, freeze the surf on a beach, or isolate the image of a woman exercising in a gymnasium on part of the screen, leaving the rest as a black background for her writing. The extraordinary force of the film comes directly from the well-timed progression of the pared-down text which captures the mystery and terror of dreams, even more vividly than Framp-ton's verbal phantasmagoria, *Hapax Legomena: Poetic Justice*, to which it owes a debt comparable to that to Brakhage. Yet, what is most remarkable about Friedrich's pulsing words is the way they invest the film's scanty and casual black and white images with strange power and beauty.

Some early, jumpy shots of plaster saints prepare the first of several controlling metaphors when we read "walk / into / church / my / mother / trembles / trances / reciting / a / prayer / about / orgasm." The subsequent images of a woman on a rowing machine and another swimming in a pool suggest that exercise has become a substitute for prayer, the gymnasium an ersatz church. Sexual imagery and animal violence dominate the rest



of the text. The drama progresses from intimations of primal scenes in church and on a stage in which the etching poet is a witness to surprising acts of erotic possession: "I make a second vagina . . . I draw a man, take his skin, inflate it, get excited, mount it . . . I lie in the gutter giving birth to myself . . ."

Su Friedrich does give birth to herself as a major film-maker in this fourteen-minute silent film. As the imagery moves from the gymnasium pool to the ocean shore and the open sea, the power of language and song become the theme of the dream poem. She hears a chorus of five women spelling out "the word for truth in German but she spells "B-L-I-N-D-N-E-S-S." She rejects the oneiric suggestion that the women sing "a very clever pun" in her mother's native language, implying in her rejection that the price of an abstract, theoretical truth is blindness by scratching the letters over swiftly moving images of light sparkling on the sea. Then, when she dreams that "a leopard eats two blue hummingbirds" she feels in a phonetic and syntactic eruption the "er / utter / mutter / flutter" of the feathers "humming" on her "bones / hearts / tongue."

Late in the film, the fin of a large sea creature can be seen in the water, as if she were filming from a whale watch excursion. Although it rhymes visually with the woman we had earlier seen swimming in the gymnasium, it also charts the evolution of the imagery from the figure who commands her erotic fascination to the Dionysian emblem of her own poetic incarnation; for the dolphin and the leopard are the bestial companions of the god of wine and inspired drama.

She avoided the Menippea of the period of her coming to maturity as a film-maker: her films represent a free movement amid avant-garde and narrative genres: collage, psycho-drama, autobiography, portrait. Her critical and analytical portraits of her mother (*The Ties that Bind* [1984]) and her father (*Sink or Swim* [1990]) are her most powerful films. The latter owes something to Frampton's use of alphabetical models in *Zorns Lemma*. Like several of the best film-makers of her generation, Friedrich deals explicitly with lesbian issues, making us aware of the earlier neglect of this passion, even in a tradition that has been remarkably daring in its bold treatment of male homosexuality.

ABIGAIL CHILD TOO TRACES HER INHERITANCE THROUGH BRAKHAGE AND FRAMPTON:

I've also learned great amounts from Stan Brakhage and Hollis Frampton, through their liberating ideas about film: that you didn't need plot, that anything can be used, their sense of the visual nature of the medium, of all the areas which had not been tried. Frampton was using words, which was especially appealing to me, a modern poetry of images. You could say *sugar*, for example, and film *black*, take things of different kinds, in