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DADDY'S GIRL

★★★SINK OR SWIM
Directed by Su Friedrich.

By Fred Camper

Su Friedrich's new film, *Sink or Swim*, takes its title from an incident in her childhood: when Friedrich asked her father to teach her to swim, he took her to a pool, explained the theory and mechanics of swimming, and then threw her into deep water. It is to the film's immense credit that this tale, told on the sound track by the film's child narrator, isn't presented as the horror story it might have been in the hands of a more simpleminded filmmaker. After some flailing, Friedrich learned to keep her head above water, and has been a swimmer ever since. This story makes clear, as does the film (showing Saturday at Chicago Filmmakers), Friedrich's divided attitude toward her father—as someone who loved her and introduced her to the world but also as someone who often acted inappropriately, disruptively, even abusively.

Indeed, much of the richness of this autobiographical film, whose honest engagement with essential human dilemmas proves immensely moving, stems from its refusal to make simple choices or settle into unambiguous positions. One of Friedrich's themes is the interpenetration of the past and the present; we discover that theme as her adult identity gradually emerges from a difficult childhood, but also in the way that the past keeps reasserting its influence, even in adulthood; this is one of many examples of the film's divided, multiple nature.

In fact, the film as a whole doesn't fit into any single category or genre. While it has been described as Friedrich's film about her father, the film involves the rest of her family and her own growing independence as well, and could just as well be called autobiography. *Sink or Swim* shares aspects of certain feminist films of recent years—the use of home movies in Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite*, the collagelike form and concerns with gender identity of many earlier works, such as the films of Yvonne Rainer—yet it also recalls the structural film, whose formal elements are themselves primary concerns. This multiplicity extends down to the film's individual sections, and finally to each moment of each section: meaning, emotion, ideas are never fixed or static, but are always being redefined as new material is brought to light, as the filmmaker struggles to come to terms with her past.

The film, shot in grainy black and white, is divided into 26 sections, one for each letter of the alphabet, each introduced by a printed intertitle and presented in reverse alphabetical order. The first section, "Zygote," begins with science-film footage of a human egg, sperm fertilizing the egg, the zygote beginning to divide, and finally an embryo. As the zygote begins to divide, the voice of the young girl begins to tell the story of Athena, who, unique among Zeus's daughters, sprang full-grown from his brow. The ironic disparity between the facts of human reproduction as seen in the imagery and the myth of asexual reproduction heard on the sound track introduces one of the film's central conflicts, the struggle of a child to create her own self, in the face of the "facts" of the world that her parents provide her. This myth and others and stories from Friedrich's own life are told on the sound track in the third person by the narrator. We soon find out that when she was very young, Friedrich's father gave her a book of Greek mythology and that she has at least since then been fascinated by stories.

Gradually, in fits and starts, section by section and with many backward glances, the protagonist's identity emerges. "Zygote" is followed by "Y Chromosome," with images of a flowerlike milkweed, and "X Chromosome," with amusingly phallic images of an elephant's foot and trunk. Friedrich's humor, an important leavening for material so personal and traumatic, is based on a mixture of directness and creative juxtaposition. Thus the sections named for the male and female chromosomes are illustrated by standard symbols of the two genders, but they are reversed—Y being the male chromosome.

Later in the film, an animated sequence begins with a white page reading across the top "The American Kinship System"; a family tree, beginning with "Husband," "Wife," and several children ("Girl," etc), begins to form. But Friedrich's parents divorced when she was 11, and her father remarried twice, so on the same chart, "Wife #2," "Wife #3," and more children appear. While standard genealogical charts often show multiple marriages, Friedrich's progressive presentation of her own family history makes it seem humorously absurd.

Quite early in the film, in a section titled "Virginity," the first hints of Friedrich's independent self emerge, as we learn of her preadolescent fantasies about harems and mermaids. Soon after, the title "Temptation" is followed by images of women bodybuilders. It is important, I think, that neither here nor later in the film does Friedrich connect erotic references to women in any direct way with her family past; no cause and effect of the sort that pop psychologists might infer is ever suggested. Such direct linkages would suggest a more simply determined self than Friedrich claims.

Indeed, none of the film's connections ever point in a single direction. A story of her father forcing her to watch a scary movie is followed by an account of how her father, having taught her to play chess, refused to play with her after she beat him for the first time. The connection between these two stories is surely an indictment of her father, but then we hear a story of a trauma in his own childhood and we come to un-

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Film Ratings
★★★★ = Masterpiece
★★★ = A must-see
★★ = Worth seeing
★ = Has redeeming facet
• = Worthless

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derstand that here, as always, issues of blame and guilt are never simple.

Similar ambiguities characterize the relationships between all the elements of this film, but most striking, perhaps, are the relationships between the two language-oriented elements—the section titles and the girl's narration—and the imagery. Sometimes the connections are direct, often to humorous ends ("Zygote") but more often to make the personal nature of the film clear. The first little girl we see is Friedrich's sister, being held in the air by her father. The viewer understands her as a surrogate for Friedrich herself. When the narrator describes the father's own childhood trauma, involving the accidental death of his sister, we see home-movie footage of the father as a child with his brother and sister. A story about her mother's suicide threat is accompanied by footage of a hospital room—the place where unsuccessful suicides usually wind up. Often, however, a kind of displacement operates. Stories of Friedrich's childhood swimming experiences are accompanied by recent footage of children swimming; a tale of watching the circus on a neighbor's TV is accompanied by footage of a (presumably) more recent circus. Similarly, the relationships between section titles and imagery also range from direct to indirect. Early in the film, the titles tend to refer specifically to material in the sections they name ("Virginity"), as the film progresses they frequently become more poetic and allusive ("Ghosts"). This is a suggestion, perhaps, of the growth from the directness of children's naming to adults' ability to use metaphor.

Friedrich has remarked that it was only when she began writing about herself in the third person that it became possible to tell her stories at all. Perhaps the intensity of the material required that degree of distance; at any rate, the "she" suggests that we are watching the story of a person not yet fully formed, not yet ready to assert herself as an "I" in the world. The awkwardness of the narrator's voice—a young girl reading often complex texts—is an appropriate additional kind of displacement. However, the girl's voice varies so frequently in its degree of emotional inflection that its effect is a little jarring.

The film's variety of connections results in a collage of extraordinary richness, a portrait of a persona that is somewhat less than unified. As the adult woman struggles to emerge from the skein of family influences, she begins to take actions to assert her own autonomy. On a narrative level, this process climaxes when she decides *not* to swim across a lake that her father had often swum (he had also tried to scare her from swimming in it when she was a child). But on a cinematic level, the climax comes earlier, in a powerful section titled "Kinship." From the point of view of a traveler, presumably Friedrich, we look through the window of a plane as it takes off. Then there are images of Death Valley, as our protagonist walks about accompanied by a friend. Intercut periodically are images of nude women in a shower and sauna; at one point two women embrace. The little girl whose father had both introduced her to and made her scared of the world now has a physicality—an ability to move through space—and a sexuality of her own.

But since one of Friedrich's themes is the continual interdependence of past and present, her film cannot end

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here. In fact, the sequence just described is accompanied by a discordant and unexplained element—a German art song on the sound track. A few sections later, in "Ghosts," a typewriter is seen in negative typing out a letter from Friedrich to her father. On the sound track, instead of the young narrator's voice, we hear the typewriter keys, giving the section a harshness, even a confrontational directness, that most of the other sections lack. In the letter, she describes her mother's loneliness after her father left the family. Mother would rush the children to bed each evening, and then listen, alone, to an album of Schubert lieder. Her favorite song was also young Su's favorite, "Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel"—the song we heard earlier. Friedrich explains in her letter that she only recently learned the translation of the lyrics, which describe a woman who yearns for her absent lover and feels she can't live without him.

Now—and particularly on a second viewing—we are able to understand "Kinship" in a new way. The adult Friedrich has defined herself in part in opposition to the song, as represented by her postdivorce mother: not at home alone, but seeing the world; not heterosexual, but lesbian. And yet, as is so often true of Friedrich's connections, the two elements (song and image) that relate as opposites also relate as identities, for the sexual footage is intercut with the travel footage, representing a different time and place: our adult traveler is at the moment, or so it would appear, also without a lover.

More complete explanations of things seen earlier are offered more than once in the film. This pattern is a beautiful way of expressing the dependence of the present on the past: however much one may think one is living in the present, however ordinary one's present moment may seem, the past will always return to assert its grip. Nonetheless, the adult Friedrich continues to struggle to emerge. We see her as an adult for the first time when the narrator describes the adult Friedrich (now "the woman") observing her father treat his young daughter, her stepsister, in the same kind of sternly inconsiderate way that she remembers so well from her own childhood. As the narrator describes how the woman watched this scene with horror, while sipping lemonade, we see the adult Friedrich, alone in her bathtub, perhaps a bit depressed, drinking beer from a bottle. But witnessing the father-daughter scene as an adult may have been also liberating: the sequence ends with the adult Friedrich typing out the story on her typewriter, now seen in positive rather than the negative of the earlier typewriter sequence. She has thus finally emerged, from all the displacements of black-and-white negative, third-person narration, and home movies, as the film's independent center.

Such moments of clarity and independence do not obviate the continual return of Friedrich's principal persona—a being hopelessly divided, irreparably torn between present and past, between fantasy and reality, between a remembered family past and an adult present forged outside of the family unit. But such divisions and contradictions should not be seen in a wholly negative light. What Friedrich cannot be—a person who regards her consciousness as unified and integrated, and who organizes the world around that consciousness—is mirrored in what the film's style generally avoids. Its gritty, nonglossy black and white mimics the look of the home movies that are so prominent in its imagery. Unlike the static, formal compositions in more conventional movies, Friedrich's hand-held camera responds to her bodily movements and attitudes of the moment.

In the films of Stan Brakhage, a similar use of small movements filmed by a hand-held camera produces a musical rhythm that ultimately imposes the sense that a single personality, even a single body, is organizing the world. In contrast to Brakhage's vision of the transcendent self, Friedrich as well as other younger filmmakers have posited a self that is contingent, malleable, internally divided, and very much a product of its environment. In the work of an earlier generation of personal filmmakers the "self" is taken as a given, springing full-grown like Athena from Zeus's brow; Friedrich's self is constantly in the process of being formed and reformed, from the moment the sperm enters the egg, through all her experiences with her parents, through all the choices she makes—and *Sink or Swim* lays that process of formation bare, surrounding the protagonist with the images and sounds that influence it.

A humorous moment late in the film speaks directly to Friedrich's conception. The narrator says that after the father left the family, they were able to buy a television, something he had always forbidden, and we see images from *Father Knows Best*. In one shot, we see the faces of three scrubbed and smiling kids, all in a line, object-like as only American mass culture can make them. Friedrich is making fun of this concept of the happy nuclear family, and the artificial media image gives Friedrich's personal stories a social dimension as well. But there is another, deeper joke at work. The compositional perfection of this image, and the way the children's faces are reduced to objects, is utterly contrary to the style

of Friedrich's film. It contradicts the style of the home movies she uses, with their jerky images of active children, but it contradicts the overall space of the film as well.

In a section titled "Quicksand" the narrator recounts a story about Friedrich's father forcing her to watch a scary movie. The imagery connects allusively, rather than directly, to the title and to the story told on the sound track. We see footage taken from a roller coaster in relatively short takes and edited with a jagged, unpredictable rhythm; shots rarely feel as if they are brought to completion. This style combines with the sweeping movements of the roller coaster to create the feeling of a space that is continually dividing and breaking apart in ways that cannot be anticipated—one sees a vision of the world fraught with peril, unexpected voids, quicksand.

This vision, of space and of the self, lies at the heart of ***Sink or Swim***. The surprising and playful stylistic shifts, between home movies, newly photographed footage, and rephotographed older footage (the nude women in "Kinship" are from Friedrich's first film); the disparities and displacements between image and text; the disruption when the text directly names what is seen in the image—all these suggest nothing less than the flailings of a beginning swimmer trying to comes to terms with inner and outer chaos. The difference is that through her imaginative control of her medium, Friedrich has raised those flailings to the level of art, and in so doing has expressed both their regressive terror and their forward progress.

In the film's final image she manages not only to combine the diversity of her themes in a single cinematic moment, but to go beyond them as well, with an aching expression of haunting power. The film's reverse alphabet has just concluded, and we see a shot of Friedrich as a girl, posing for the camera in a manner rare in the film and vaguely reminiscent of the shot of the three children from *Father Knows Best*. She stands in a bathing suit with an oddly frilly skirt as an adult voice—Friedrich's own, in fact—begins to sing the ABCs. Shortly after she begins, the song begins again, her voice superimposed over itself, in the manner of a round. At the same time the image is superimposed over itself, paralleling the music, until suddenly all the aural and visual superimpositions drop out. The child is then seen alone again, in freeze-frame, while her single voice sings the last line of the song, "Tell me what you think of me."

Just as the film itself crosses several genres and contains a variety of styles, so the film as whole can be taken in several ways. It is not only a film about the artist's father, not only an autobiography, but, as this ending makes clear, it is also a letter to her father, a larger version of the letter we see her type in the film, which she ends by typing "P.S. I wish I could mail you this letter." The film, too, is a letter she cannot send, a letter filled with reproach, criticism, anger, but also gratitude, even love. The film in fact offers evidence to her father that in some ways he taught her well: not only does she know her alphabet, but she knows it backward. But more, the film's incessant story telling is evidence that the book of Greek myths he gave her as a child and his encouraging (sometimes undercut by discouraging) her to tell him stories have had their effect. On one level, the film is a gift to her father, a gift that, in a contradiction that perhaps mirrors many of the film's smaller contradictions, she cannot proffer.

Of course, "Tell me what you think of me" is also addressed to the audience—the filmmaker asking for approval. But perhaps the strongest meanings to the last line are to be found if one considers it addressed directly to her father. After all the film's progression, after all the difficulties that the protagonist endures in order for her adult identity to emerge, there is something chilling in the way the film reverts to this child's request for approval at its end. The film and its adult maker know this terror well, as can be seen by still another aspect of the alphabetical ordering of the film. The reverse order, in its arbitrariness and oddness, can be seen as the creative assertion of an adult, taking the things she has been taught and reordering them in her own way. That she chooses to order the alphabet in reverse makes the reversion to the "correct" order in the song all the more horrible: the autonomous adult has once again reverted to the uncreative child, parroting rather than creating, seeking approval rather than going off on her own. But in the regression, and in the obvious contrast between reverse and forward orders, is also the adult's cry of rage at the way the past keeps returning. She still seeks Daddy's approval, but she is also enraged that she continues to feel this need. The film's ending is a cry of protest that a child, an adult, anyone, should feel such dependency: and so the final image lingers, in the memory, like a scream that cannot be answered, like an open wound that cannot heal.