



Life With Father

Two recent films, one by Su Friedrich, the other by Abraham Ravett, deploy the strategies of the avant-garde to explore the relationship between fathers and sons—and daughters.

BY

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RAVETT'S FATHER SURVIVED AUSCHWITZ.



BY AND LARGE, THE FOUNDERS AND FIRST MASTERS of American avant-garde film were a blatantly self-invented lot. Rugged individualists such as Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, and Stan Brakhage picked their own names, fabricated new personal histories, and chose (or chose to ignore) their parents—artistic and otherwise. Andy Warhol and the so-called structuralist filmmakers who followed in the '60s sublimated this start-from-scratch principle to reinvent the medium, ignoring everything produced since D. W. Griffith—starting movies again, as it were, from ground zero.

The ploy worked. And, not surprisingly, the heirs of those artists—the avant-garde filmmakers who came of age in the '70s and '80s, learning their craft and finding their niche in the universities—felt burdened by the weight of existing tradition. For nearly twenty years now, experimental movies have been struggling to keep from becoming an arcane academic discipline. The cutting edge has been less one of form than of content; thus, it's striking that two of the past year's most acclaimed and successful avant-garde movies, Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim* and Abraham Ravett's *Everything's for You*, are movies whose makers use the film language of their aesthetic grandfathers to invoke their literal fathers.

An unconventional but rigorously constructed narrative, *Sink or Swim* (included in both the 1990 New York Film Festival and the 1991 Whitney Biennial) uses the same basic organizing principle as Hollis Frampton's 1970 *Zorns Lenina*. Friedrich, dividing her movie into 26 labeled segments, assigns each a letter of the alphabet, so that the viewer always knows at any given time where he or she is in the film. Where Frampton's films were polemically antipsychological, however, Friedrich boldly explores her most intimate relationships. On the one hand, *Sink or Swim* is a structural movie; on the other, it's a mythopoeic film in the tradition of Deren or Brakhage, a personal exorcism making extensive use of Greek mythology and the Freudian paradigm.

Shot in luminescent black and white, *Sink or Swim*'s imagery is austere but charged and matter-of-factly cosmic. The movie opens with medical footage of a human egg undergoing fertilization, accompanied by a voice-over account of Zeus and Athena. The unseen narrator, evidently

a girl in her early teens, is Friedrich's stand-in; she recounts the filmmaker's 26 (mainly childhood) stories in the third person. Assigned such evocative titles as "Virgin," "Seduction," and "Insanity," these anecdotes focus on Friedrich's relationship with her domineering father, from birth through divorce to their present uneasy truce. "Ghosts," the only part of the movie with synchronous sound, has the narrator typing a letter to her father that will never be sent.

Friedrich's narrative is unusually suggestive in



FRIEDRICH'S FATHER TOSSED HER INTO THE DEEP END OF THE POOL.

part because the correspondence of sound to image is never precisely literal. The "Utopia" section shows footage taken of a circus as the narrator explains that the film's protagonist was permitted to watch TV just once a week and, even then, only at a neighbor's house. Television imagery resurfaces some thirteen sections later with "Homework." The girl's father has left the family, and they have finally purchased a television set; this part of the story is told against a montage of opening credits from *Make Room for Daddy* and *The Donna Reed Show*. Without belaboring the point, Friedrich first establishes the wonder of television, then makes it as clear as anything ever has that these idealized sitcom images are our equivalent of Soviet socialist realism.

One of *Sink or Swim*'s least obvious and most impressive qualities is how, while presenting itself as both timeless and placeless, it evokes a generic American '50s. It is against this backdrop that Friedrich conjures up the purity of a daughter's unconditional love. Filtered through the childhood lens of magical thinking, *Sink or*



Swim presents the disturbing spectacle of paternal authority inflicting, over a period of time, a series of injuries both premeditated and casual. Each gift is a Trojan horse: the protagonist's father takes her to see *The Time Machine* and forces her to watch the scary parts, teaches her to play chess and then refuses to play with her after she manages to win a game, takes her on a trip to Acapulco but sends her home early in disgrace after she is late for several meals.

Sink or Swim takes its title from the father's pedagogical methods—to teach her to swim, he explains a few basic principles and then throws her into the deep end of the pool. (Friedrich has compared her film to *Mommie Dearest*: “It’s about the damage either parent can do when they’re trying to shape their child in their own image.”) The aquatic imagery that was prominent in Friedrich’s earlier films is here ubiquitous. Shots of water coursing through a New York City gutter or flickering home movies of swimming kids are counterpointed with stories of wateroccasins her father used to frighten her. In a stunning one-two punch, the film reveals that the father blamed himself for the childhood death of his younger sister—she died of a heart attack after jumping into icy water—and that he used to discipline his own children by pushing their faces into a full bathtub. The film ends with the narrator revealing that the protagonist is not going to swim across the lake her father used to traverse. “I’ve made a grand gesture of turning back to shore,” Friedrich told one interviewer, “swimming back to my friends who will hopefully treat me differently than my father has treated me.”

Sink or Swim ends under the signs of Athena, Atalanta, and, belatedly, Aphrodite—with the filmmaker slugging beer in the tub. Friedrich is heard chanting the alphabet song: “Now I’ve said my ABCs/ Tell me what you think of me.” Her attempt to win her father’s and our approval by dredging her own lake lends the song a measure of earned defiance. *Sink or Swim* is a film that is proudly personal and triumphantly artisanal, as accessible as it is uncompromising.

Abraham Ravett’s *Everything’s for You* is another meditation on the figure of an absent father. Here, too, the child-parent relationship is characterized by failure, regret, and a longing for some impossible intimacy. But Ravett’s unhappiness is less angry than Friedrich’s—his father is dead, not absent, more a victim than a perpetrator. Like Friedrich, whose German mother married her GI father in the aftermath of World War II, Ravett has a close, if secondhand, relationship with wartime displacement and misery. His father was a Polish Jew who survived both the Lodz ghetto and Auschwitz.

Everything’s for You begins by invoking the missing father: “His name was Chaim.” It soon develops that Chaim had several names and even other offspring. Early on, the filmmaker is heard questioning his father about his two children who were killed during the war. A granite wariness masks the old man’s face. These are questions he can never really answer. After Chaim’s death, Ravett finds pictures of his long-dead half-siblings. “What can I know? I can’t know anything,” he repeats. The film itself conveys a sense of images as transitory and unstable. Titles flash on the screen and quickly vanish; photographed faces dissolve into white light. Ravett makes old snapshots flicker like candles in the wind. Archival footage of the Lodz ghetto appears in ethereal negative. The film is composed of dreamlike fragments and traces, accompanied by Ravett’s incantatory interrogation of these mute images. (That Ravett frequently addresses his dead father in Yiddish gives the film another sort of ghostly quality.)

Ravett’s litany of unanswerable questions is a kind of exorcism. Just as Friedrich uses film as a way to post the letter she could not mail, Ravett asks his dead father the questions he was unable to pose in life.

Although *Everything’s for You* is less severely structured than *Sink or Swim*, it is no less nonlinear—a film that produces its meaning not so much through narrative voice-over as through the juxtaposition of that voice-over (among other sounds) with both related and unrelated images. Like Friedrich’s film, Ravett’s deploys home movies and family photographs, in addition to archival material. Here, however, these artless chunks of dailiness are manipulated through optical printing, as well as interpolated with several flashbacks rendered in purposefully cartoonlike cell animation.

These sequences (drawn by Emily Hubley, a filmmaker in her own right) are contrasted with Ravett’s relationship with his own young children. There is a haunting image of the filmmaker’s son, also named Chaim, looking up at his enigmatic father standing naked in the shower—a child as yet unable to articulate his unanswerable questions.

SINK OR SWIM IS DISTRIBUTED BY DRIFT DISTRIBUTION (83 Warren St. #5, New York, New York 10007) and by Women Make Movies (225 Lafayette Street, New York, New York 10012). *Everything’s for You* is distributed by Abraham Ravett Films (193 Nonotuck Street, Florence, Massachusetts 01060) and the National Center for Jewish Film (Lown 102, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts 02254); it will also be shown at New York’s Museum of Modern Art January 5 and 6. ■