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Reviews/**Film Festival**

A Modernist Approach to Biography

By CARYN JAMES

Biography, once considered a direct and factual form, long ago gave way to interpretive psychobiography. Several films to be shown today at the New York Film Festival take that modernist approach, still archaically called avant-garde, and apply it to lives as different as those of Andy Warhol and an Indian classical musician named Siddheshwari Devi. As these collages of images and voice-overs swirl across the screen, each becomes a collaboration among the subject, the film maker and the viewer, creating biographies whose forms mirror the lives they chronicle.

"Siddheshwari," by the Indian experimental film maker Mani Kaul, is beautifully photographed but impenetrable. It will be shown today at 4:30 P.M. at the New York Film Festival. Yet for all its obscurity, it shares the artistic sensibilities in evidence in two of the three films included in the program called "Avant-Garde Visions," which will be shown tonight at 7. Su Friedrich's autobiographical "Sink or Swim" and Jonas Mekas's "Scenes From the Life of Andy Warhol" are much more affecting and accessible.

Ms. Friedrich's story is tough-minded and touching. A little girl's voice begins with a fairy-tale, third-person narrative about a little girl, obviously the narrator and admittedly Ms. Friedrich. She seems to have an ordinary 1950's upbringing. Slowly she reveals that her adored father was sometimes abusive. He teaches his daughter to swim by explaining the theory of swimming and tossing her into the deep end of a pool.

As the girl's narrative unfolds, Ms. Friedrich's black-and-white images — part home movies, part new film that blends in seamlessly — do not illustrate the story. They comment on and enhance it, creating emotional resonances. The 10-year-old girl confesses to her diary that her parents are divorcing, while film of girls in school uniforms watched by nuns on



The Film Society of Lincoln Center

A scene from Su Friedrich's autobiographical film "Sink or Swim."

Avant-Garde Visions

PIÈCE TOUCHÉE, directed by Martin Arnold, 16 minutes.

SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF ANDY WARHOL, directed by Jonas Mekas, 35 minutes.

SINK OR SWIM, directed by Su Friedrich, 48 minutes.

At Alice Tully Hall as part of the 28th New York Film Festival. These films are unrated.

the playground suggests the atmosphere that made her feel singled out and ashamed.

As a woman, the narrator types a letter to her father. We see the typing in progress but do not hear the voice, which clearly would no longer be a girl's. Recalling a Schubert lied that always made her abandoned mother cry, she writes, "It captures perfectly the conflict between memory and the present." Resolving those conflicts and offering the viewer a rich, suggestive view of biography is precisely what all three films attempt.