

2001

Sink or Swim

For a film that’s as simple as ABC, Su Friedrich’s *Sink or Swim* gets more mysterious the more times you watch it.

Even on first viewing, you catch onto the plan. *Sink or Swim* will consist of 26 brief segments, each headed by a title card that announces a topic. The first to come up is “Zygote”—a natural enough beginning—followed by “Y Chromosome,” “X Chromosome” and so on. The alphabetical order (zeewyexical?) is perfectly clear, or seems to be; and its hint of whimsy matches the deadpan humor of the opening shots. “Zygote” is illustrated with black-and-white footage that might have been borrowed from a Surrealist’s high-school science film. An ovum floats onto the screen, as majestic as a full moon; spermatozoa wriggle eagerly in a school. “Y Chromosome” is a handful of white fluff, opening in slow motion into the wind; “X Chromosome,” an elephant’s foot and rooting trunk.

So far—and at this point you’ve barely had time to settle in the dark—the only puzzle is why you should be moving backward through the alphabet. But as you progress, or regress, beyond ZYX you can feel the complications beginning to gather.

If you’re familiar with the avant-garde in general and feminist cinema in particular, you might think that *Sink or Swim* will be a confessional work. How right you’d be. *Sink or Swim* belongs to the genre of “Memoirs of a Catholic

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Girlhood in 1950s America.” And yet the voice on the soundtrack neither belongs to Su Friedrich nor claims to speak about her. Instead, you hear a child-like narrator telling you about some third party, called The Girl. The stories about this character are full of local color and private detail; but the order in which they’re told soon turns out to be as impersonal a structure as the alphabet.

Look at the titles: “Witness,” “Virginity,” “Utopia,” “Temptation.” *Sink or Swim* is taking you from creation to a state of innocence to the fall, followed by adventures in a post-lapsarian world. By around the fifth minute, you’re reading backward not only into the life of The Girl but also (as the voiceover suggests) into the stories of very old and outsize characters: Athena, Aphrodite, Atalanta. These three were among the mythological figures introduced to The Girl by her father, a professor of anthropology and linguistics otherwise known as Zeus.

This much of the film’s beginning is paraphrasable; it’s information pieced together from language. Meanwhile, the early images are off in their own world of zoology and show business. You see caged jungle animals and prancing horses, showgirls, acrobats and circus fliers, the grinning competitors in a women’s bodybuilding contest. I’d call these pictures a delirium, except that they somehow jibe, in an unhurried way, with the words. Running on at their own pace, and often framed with apparent casualness, these black-and-white pictures might be likened not to a fever dream but to home movies—although that comparison fails, too, unless these are the Home Movies of the Gods. In their perfectly modulated light, where the range of greys is wide and rich, whatever glimmers may occur dance across the surface of things like rumors of the supernatural.

As the homely yet uncanny pictures move out of the timeless realm of natural history and displays of physical prowess, into the social world of the streets and alleys of Brooklyn, you begin to notice that the lights most often do their dancing on water. More on that later—much more.

More, too, on the curious fact that Z could stand for Zeus, just as easily as zygote. Maybe you’d like to ponder that overflow of meaning, which makes the contents of the pattern spill over from the very first box. Maybe, if you remember your basic biology, you’re also wondering if Friedrich goofed with her puffy Y chromosome and ponderous X. Or did she intend to reverse genetic expectations?

But the time for those questions may already be past. “Seduction” is now before you, to be followed (naturally enough) by “Realism.” There can be no better heading under which to ask: What’s going on here?

What’s really going on, I suppose, is that Su Friedrich is unburdening her-

self about her father, who was terrifying when he bullied her and even more terrifying when he walked away. Or maybe she's explaining how The Girl became Su Friedrich. She seems to be doing both; and there, perhaps, lies the mystery that runs through this brief and orderly film. Before Friedrich can look straight into the mirror, she has to wind her way into her father's mind. To purge herself of the pain he inflicted, she has to play his scholar's game and turn her life into a diagram. So she's devised her brilliant *Sink or Swim*, a film that's deviously straightforward and dispassionately harrowing.

The harrowing parts, which are so strong that I've heard them make a whole audience suck in its breath, take us straight into the meaning of the title. When The Girl wanted to learn to swim, we hear, Zeus took her to a pool, offered a few words of advice and tossed her into the deep end. This was "Realism."

As the child on the soundtrack informs us, The Girl responded well to this harsh pedagogy; she came to love swimming. (We see girls splashing in a city pool.) Only when we get to the sections titled "Memory" and "Loss" do we plummet, with The Girl, beneath the sparkling surface. It seems the father had a beloved sister who drowned as a child, and for whose death he had felt responsible. (We see more home movies, not godlike this time but grainy and flickering.) The Girl, like the audience, knew nothing of that history when the father first risked her in deep water. But the information is available, and horrible in its implications, by the time we learn how Zeus disciplined his daughter when she was wild. He filled the bathtub, then forced down her head.

There's more, and worse. How strong Friedrich must be—how much like her father—to resist simply blurting it out. I've lived through none of these events, except in screenings, and yet I'm tempted to recount them all. But then, by doing so, I would betray Friedrich's canniness, wit and ceaseless intelligence, which are the qualities she seems to have rescued from childhood, as Athena bore away her father's shield and thunderbolt. Does Friedrich show us a flailing, sputtering girl during the tale of the bathtub? No—the images are of children in white, going to their first communion at a Brooklyn church. The surface remains cool; the topics continue to move along in order, unperturbed and quietly deceptive.

We're roughly halfway through the alphabet—so we know we're in the center of the film—when the little girl's voice temporarily drops off the soundtrack and the music starts. It's Schubert: "Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel." Why this song? For now, there's no clue. Why have the images abruptly flown away from New York City, to scenes of trains, desert highways, birds wheeling over palm trees, two women making love in the shower? We seem to have entered, without transition, into the filmmaker's adult life, and again we don't know why, since the section's title, though suggestive, gives no immediate help. What we now see and hear ostensibly represents "Kinship."

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Kinship to whom, or what? We will get the answers—Friedrich withholds nothing—but not where we'd expect to get them; and that's because the pattern of *Sink or Swim* is as deceptive, even as treacherous, as what we call the normal order of life. "Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel" was the song the mother listened to over and over, weeping, after her divorce. Kinship was the topic the father was studying at the time he left his family—that is, his first family. And so, at the core of *Sink or Swim*, we have this enigmatic passage that looks like a diary film but isn't; this nexus of themes that are laid out for us in rational fashion, but elsewhere and under the wrong titles. (An episode about the divorce, that might well be called "Loss," has been displaced to "Journalism"; material that deals with kinship, and is labeled as such, is shifted to "Discovery.") It's impossible to watch this middle piece, this travelogue of the emotions, and not feel that an urgent confession is in progress; and yet, when you know all that *Sink or Swim* has to tell you, it's also impossible to say exactly what's been confessed. Maybe that's because the kinship works both ways. Maybe Friedrich sometimes feels as emptied out as her mother, and at the same time wonders if she makes love like her father.

But now I've yielded to the film's treachery. I'm talking about Su Friedrich, when I ought to speak of The Girl, or Athena, Aphrodite, Atalanta—and that's as it should be.

The astounding feat that Friedrich performs in *Sink or Swim*—defying death more thrillingly than any circus flier—is to persuade you that you're getting the raw facts of her life, as you no doubt are, even as you're being drawn into a territory of ghosts. That a haunting of sorts is in progress can't be denied. As you move past the era of childhood, with its footage lifted from 1950s television shows—the only non-ironic use I've ever encountered of *Make Room for Daddy* and *Father Knows Best*—you see Friedrich herself in the present, a handsome and big-boned woman but glum, who stalks the margin of things. She presents herself as someone who spends her days clacking away at a typewriter in a low-rent apartment, staring at weedy lots through chain-link fences, soaking in that ever-dangerous bathtub, always with a cigarette burning close at hand, always with a beer bottle stuck to her lips. Some Greek goddess.

But if you cast your mind back to the beginning of *Sink or Swim*, following the film's underground currents, you'll recall that you've seen Friedrich's beer bottle before. In a scene of kids playing dress-up, it lay in the dancing waters of a gutter, which The Girl (so we're told) used to pretend was the River Nile.

You might think that Athena, wised up, left that bottle behind as her marker. How right you'd be. And yet—this is the simple, mysterious, death-defying part—The Girl wasn't all wrong.