

Su Friedrich in the Swamp of Images

“If I only make one-minute videos that I put on Facebook...it would be so pointless.”

Interview by Giovanni Marchini Camia during the 2016 Viennale Film Festival.

Published November 12, 2016 online at www.fandor.com

Avant-garde filmmaker Su Friedrich has been making intimate, self-revealing cinema for close to four decades now. In her twenty-four films to date, she’s tackled subjects such as the conflict between her Catholic upbringing and homosexuality (*Damned If You Don’t*, 1987), her difficult relationship with her abusive father (*Sink or Swim*, 1990), and getting evicted from her Williamsburg apartment by way of gentrification (*Gut Renovation*, 2012).

By candidly confronting personal struggles, Friedrich’s films invite reflections on broader, often universal concerns. This is again the case with her latest, *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel*, which premiered at this year’s Viennale. A documentary about the experience of moving her 94-year-old mother—already familiar from Friedrich’s sublime 1984 exploration of identity and history, *The Ties That Bind*—into assisted living, *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel* offers a moving, tragic, frequently funny, and profoundly empathetic consideration of mortality and filial responsibility.

Giovanni Marchini Camia: When you started filming your mother’s move out of her apartment, did you know you would make the film? Or do you have a habit of filming important events in your life?

Su Friedrich: I didn’t know I was going to make this film, but I don’t just film events in my life. I’m not a diary filmmaker; I start working when I have an idea. I need to have some sort of goal. At the beginning of this film, when I say, ‘I’m going to be hiding behind my camera,’ it suggests that as soon as we decided to move my mother, I decided to make a film about it. But it wasn’t like that at all. I thought, ‘Oh shit, this is going to be such a terrible experience, my summer is ruined!’ When I picked up the camera, it was to have something to think about aside from all this terrible stuff we had to think about.

Marchini Camia: So there was a therapeutic aspect to making this film?

Friedrich: No, because this isn’t art therapy. Art therapy is something very particular: People have troubles and they go to an art therapist. They aren’t artists; they’re people with problems who use a paint brush. I’m a person with problems who also is an artist. I don’t disrespect art therapy, but it’s not at all the same thing. If I start thinking about working on a film because the subject has deep emotional resonance for me, I know it’s going to be really hard and that I’m going to have to go to places in my mind that I don’t want to. But it’s also going to be hard because I’ll have to get good footage, good sound, I’ll have to write good texts, and then I’ll have to edit so that it all makes sense and works well. There is a huge, huge, huge amount of craft and thought and planning and consciousness in the process that completely takes over from the emotional stuff.

Also I think the goal of art therapy is that you understand how you're feeling and you get better. That never happens when you're making a film! [*Laughs.*] You have a better understanding of what you're thinking, but afterwards, you have this product, this object that follows you around for the rest of your life and makes you recognize—I will speak individually, other people may have had different experiences—it makes *me* understand that I never really come to the end of my feeling about the thing. The film can only be a limited discussion, and I will continue, forever, to experience whatever it is—my mother, my father, being thrown out of my house...

Marchini Camia: And why is it important for you to share this process and discussion with an audience?

Friedrich: There's two parts to it, which are equally important. One part is the content: the emotion, the story, the revelation, the confession—whatever you want to call it. The other part is the craft: the shooting, the editing, and writing. The first part I want to share because of something I first learned in 1981, when I made [*Gently Down the Stream*]. This will sound immodest, but somebody came up to me afterwards and said, 'Thank you so much for making that film, because I've had the exact same experience. Nobody has ever expressed that in the way you have and it's really great for me to hear somebody else say they've had this experience.'

It's not as if then I thought, 'Ah, I'm the savior of the world!' But I have also sometimes gone to see a film, read a book, read a poem, or seen a painting in which I've recognized something about my own life and thought that the person had suffered like me, laughed like me, had sex like me, eaten too much chocolate like me.... No matter what it is, we share this life. That's been my experience all along: I make a film about my father, everybody comes up to me: 'My father, my father, my father....' I make a film about medical issues, people come up to me: 'My operation, my this, my that....' Every time I make something, there will be a lot of people who have the same experience and want to hear it talked about.

That was the one side of why I show it to people. The other is simply that I'm a filmmaker and I love films and I work incredibly hard, especially in the editing, to create things that—I hope—move in ways that are interesting, exciting, funny, make associations between images, between texts and image, that somebody likes to see on the screen. So, of course, if I work so hard to do that, then I want to show it to people! [*Laughs.*]

Marchini Camia: You've been making very personal films since your debut, in 1978. Personal films have a long tradition in avant-garde cinema, but over the last decade or so, the zeitgeist seems to have become all about laying yourself bare—most obviously on Facebook, Instagram, etc. How do you regard this shift in attitude, and do you feel it has any relation to your own practice?

Friedrich: The idea of making very personal films, laying oneself bare, is interesting, because if I read Dickens or Jane Austen, or if I see a film by Agnès Varda or Steven Spielberg—to me all art is laying oneself bare. Even if a writer or filmmaker takes somebody else's story, they're still, almost always, working from a place that means a great deal to them emotionally, that touches their heart very, very deeply. So, on the surface, they make a film about another character, but it's very much about them. We're always laying ourselves bare when we make work. I just do it more obviously, let's say.

This thing now, though, about the zeitgeist, it's very difficult for me. It's very difficult for everybody. Everybody I know who makes work is saying, 'Oh my God, what do we do now in this environment?' Because everything is media! Now everything is conveyed through a moving image. The carefully selected, thought-about, worked-over thing that we have known as film starts to become part of this big swamp of images. It does make me feel like people will have less and less of an ability to differentiate between the two.

I don't know what that's going to mean for us, and what that's going to mean for us as makers. I thought about it when I was making *Gut Renovation*, and I thought about it very much while making this film: Maybe I should just stop making films; or, fuck it, I'm going to continue making them in the same way I always have. I have no control over the world, and if until the day I die I still make my carefully crafted films that you should watch in one sitting with the lights off, and no one is watching them that way anymore, I can't do anything about it. [Laughs.] But if I stop doing that, if I only make one-minute videos that I put on Facebook, then I'll just kill myself. It would be so pointless.

Marchini Camia: I read that you gave your mother final approval of *The Ties That Bind* and that you wouldn't have released it if she'd had objections. Since she's no longer capable of making such calls, why was her approval not a preoccupation this time?

Friedrich: It was a preoccupation, from the first day until today. I could go to her tomorrow and say, 'Mom, I made a film about you, is it OK?' And if she said yes, five minutes later she would forget. So I could ask for her approval, but that would be completely dishonest and stupid of me. I had a lot of ideas and feelings about it, the whole time, for the last two years, and I finally thought, 'It is what it is.' I hope people don't think I'm making something that discredits her terribly, but if they do, I have to live with the consequences. I know I can't show her this film. She would be upset by certain things in it. And so I finished it, and I premiered it the other night, and mostly what people said was, 'This is not critical of your mother. This is not a negative portrait. You say things that sound negative but she comes across mostly in a way that we admire her.' And I'll live with that, that's OK with me.

Marchini Camia: I was at the premiere, and in the Q&A afterwards many people commented on the scene in which your mother tells the ludicrous story about her doorman robbing her and balancing a bowl of hot soup on his head. I'd like to bring that up again because, I must admit, that scene was excruciating for me to watch. I'm having difficulties judging whether it was because of the scene itself, or because of all the laughter in the auditorium.

Friedrich: As you say, there was a lot of laughter in the audience. That surprised me. I felt it was nervous laughter. People who aren't familiar with that experience don't know what to do with it. When I was editing the film, I kept thinking it was a miracle that one day, by chance, I had the camera sitting on the dining table, her sitting on the couch, and she suddenly started telling the story. For me it was great that I could have it in the film, as evidence of how crazy and painful it all was. Then this laughter in the audience was very strange for me.

Marchini Camia: Generally, there was a lot of humor in the film, and other scenes were genuinely funny. Why was it important for you to make this dimension so prominent?

Friedrich: If you make a film about something like old people losing their memory and getting stuck in assisted living, ugh, who would want to watch that? I wouldn't! But if you do go see it, then at least you won't just be dragged through the dreary mud. That's one part of it. The other part is that life is pretty funny, really. It's terrible, and then, my God, if you can't laugh at it, what will you do? And this is something I've learned over many years from my partner. She learned to laugh about some tragedies, and I understand how important it is. Then, some things are truly ridiculous, so to me it's a mixture of trying to make a joke about a terrible thing, and then simply making a joke. In this case, just like in *Gut Renovation*, I couldn't just be angry through the whole film. I was angry when all of it was happening, but in the film you have to have some levity. I love comedy, I should just make a comedy.

Marchini Camia: In the film you say you don't like your mother very much, which is something you reiterated in the Q&A. And yet the film expresses such strong affection—I didn't believe you when you said it in the film, and I didn't believe you when you said it in the Q&A.

Friedrich: [*Laughs.*] Damn it, believe me!

Marchini Camia: Do you think your films give expression to your subconscious despite yourself?

Friedrich: The simple words, 'I don't really like my mother and I don't want her to live near me,' are true. When I'm sitting in a room talking with her, all I wanna do is be somewhere else. Because I find the conversations either difficult, or boring, or upsetting, or something. And I'm not talking about now, I'm talking about the past. In the sense that we can meet a new person and feel like, 'Wow, I wanna be friends with them!' I would say that if I met my mother as a stranger, I would never think that. But of course she's my mother, so I have a lot of sympathy for her, I have empathy, I have pity, I have attachment. One feels in the film that there's that kind of loyalty that you have to somebody because they're your family, and I guess people call that love, and that's there, of course, because that's in me.

Marchini Camia: When you were making the film, were you familiar with Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie*?

Friedrich: I love Akerman's films, of course, but I hadn't seen it. Often, while I'm making something, another film or book will come out on *exactly* the same subject. It happens a lot, because we all share these stories. There were probably ten movies about people and their mothers when I was making this one. So in the case of Akerman, her influence is so great, and what I understood the film to be about was so intense, that I thought, 'No, I can't handle it. I will wait until afterwards to see it.' I still haven't seen it because I was just finishing the film and too busy, but of course, I will see it.

Marchini Camia: I know I'm projecting here, but in several instances it almost felt as if you were in direct dialogue with Akerman. There are obvious thematic and also some aesthetic parallels, but this feeling was especially strong in the last line of your film, when you talk about contemplating suicide and then rejecting it in favor of 'putting one foot ahead of the other.'

Friedrich: Wow, that's interesting, because I didn't mean it exactly that way. I do talk about 'the exit strategy' that all people my age talk about, which one can call suicide. But that's meant when you're eighty-five, or ninety. When I'm talking about putting one foot in front of the other, I'm talking now, so the sequence is important. Just to clarify: For now, I'm going to keep going, but when I get to eighty-five, then I might use the exit strategy. But I think we have dialogue with other filmmakers all the time, intentionally or not. For you, or anybody else, to see a dialogue between my film and Akerman's makes sense to me, even if we haven't seen each other's film. Sadly, she's gone; she can't see my film and I have yet to see hers, but I can imagine that there's dialogue.

*BAMcinématek hosts [An Evening with Su Friedrich](#) (and her films *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel* and *The Ties That Bind*), 7:30 p.m. Thursday, November 17th.*