

**SU FRIEDRICH, "The Ties That Bind,"
Millennium:**

Su Friedrich's *The Ties That Bind*, 1984, is a scrutiny of both a mother/daughter relationship and the demands of national identity. That the nation delineating this identity is Germany in the '30s and '40s ominously multiplies the problematics of nationalism: the ties that bind are not only the supposed benevolences of motherhood, but also the repressive dictates of the Fatherland. Friedrich, the daughter of a German Catholic mother and an American serviceman, traveled to Germany in 1982 to shoot footage of its monumental sites of oppression—Dachau, the Berlin Wall, and so on. She juxtaposes these scenes with found footage of wartime Ulm, her mother's hometown, and accompanies both groups of images with her mother's photographic and verbal accounts of the Nazi regime under which she grew up, the Allied bombings, and her marriage to an American. This allows the maternal storyteller to "state her case," and also illuminates the virtual impossibility of individual rebellion (as opposed to group action) in the face of governmental terrorism.

Friedrich has said that in making *The Ties That Bind* she "was committed to investigating the areas of German complicity and resistance"; in doing so, she also examines the conflict, complicity, and resistance of her own mother. In effect, the film is like a court transcript of a mother brought to trial (albeit kindly) by her own daughter. The guilt of the Nazi regime is, of course, without doubt, but the mother's ability to speak the truth is clearly under investigation. She speaks only in response to her daughter's questioning, but we barely hear the interrogator's voice as it almost silently feeds its queries to the defendant. While Friedrich remains the silent child, the mother gives voice to the daughter's filmwork.

This childlike silence has been a major operative in Friedrich's earlier work—*Gently Down the Stream*, 1981, for example, a succession of dream sequences culled from eight years of journals, in which the images are interrupted with text rendered in a scratchy juvenile scrawl. In *The Ties That Bind* Friedrich attempts to join her repertoire of riveting images, which instantly look like extraordinary pieces of antiquity, with intelligently articulate sound, but again she chooses not to relinquish her own silence. As her mother narrates a tale of failed opposition to the Nazis, we see hands riffling through the pages of *The New York Times Magazine*, drawing mustaches on the fashionable male models; we see someone construct a tiny house from a build-it-yourself kit as we listen to the mother's story of her own childhood. This ties in with Friedrich's search for her mother's house in Ulm, a search strongly portrayed through the use of a flashlight beam darting about on a darkened map of the town. And this constant focus on "the house" also suggests its place as the site of women's presence, their interiority. Finally the miniature house is smashed by a marauding pair of boots, and this shot is followed by one of soldiers marching.

The Ties That Bind connects its effective literalism with a group of complex issues: the shifting attributes of memory, the repression of familial contempt, and the economy of fascism, be it that of Nazi Germany or of today's more integrated logistics of "pure war." One hopes that Friedrich will continue to move away from the silent, the intimist, and the psychologized toward a more vocal, rigorous picturing.

—BARBARA KRUGER