

HISTORY NOW



★★★THE TIES THAT BIND

Directed by Su Friedrich.

By Harvey Nosowitz

"History," wrote poet Charles Olson, "is the function of any one of us." The statement could easily be an epigraph for Su Friedrich's film *The Ties That Bind*. Friedrich refuses to draw a line between the historical and the personal, a line that would allow us to see history as an inexorable fate, a looming backdrop against which millions of individual lives are played. Instead, she insists, as did Olson, that "a life is the historical function of the individual."

The Ties That Bind is built around a series of interviews with the filmmaker's mother, who grew up in the German city of Ulm and lived in Germany through the Second World War and the first years of the Ameri-

can occupation. She refused to join the Nazi party; at around 20 years of age she was "drafted," separated from her family, and forced to work as a secretary in a factory. She was allowed to return to her family a few months before her mother's death, and she continued to work as a typist until the war ended. She witnessed the destruction of Stuttgart. She worked for the American occupation forces (despite the fact that she hated them for vandalizing her family's house in Ulm), met the man she would later marry, and eventually moved to America. There, her husband left her, and she raised their children alone.

As in other Friedrich films, the grainy, high-contrast, black-and-white images do not illustrate the text; rather, they explicate it. While there are images of the mother talking—mostly close-ups of her hands—and documentary images of Germany during the war, other images, less directly illustrative, predominate. These include the assembly of a plastic model of a house; headlines from the *New York Post* and *Daily News*; images of contemporary protest marches; and images of present-day Germany.

There are also words scratched directly on black film, a technique (usually identified with filmmaker Stan Brakhage) that has become a crucial part of Friedrich's style. In *Gently Down the Stream* (1981), a silent film, the scratched-on text functions as the filmmaker's voice (a voice more personal than any recorded voice could be) recounting a series of dreams. These are accompanied by images "chosen for their indirect but potent

correspondence" to the text (according to Friedrich's notes for the film).

In *The Ties That Bind*, the scratched-on text again becomes the filmmaker's voice, asking questions (which are answered by the mother's voice on the sound track), disagreeing (as when the mother says that there was no killing at Dachau until the war was nearly over), and, most important, transforming the mother's past-tense narrative into the filmmaker's present-tense one.

The question, "Why was my mother unaware of, or unresponsive to, what was going on around her?" becomes, for Friedrich, the question, "How can I be aware of, and responsive to, what is going on around me?" While the mother, acting partly under the influence of her parents, did not support the Nazis, she did not oppose them either. Friedrich proposes, through the combination of scratched-on text and image, an alternative to her mother's passivity; an active engagement with the historical process.

As the mother talks about her belief that the German people were unaware of what was happening in the concentration camps, Friedrich shows images of present-day newspaper headlines and letters from various activist groups requesting support. Through this and other devices, she shifts the film's weight from the past to the present, and raises the question: "What do I know about what is happening around me?"

In her mother's narrative, the war is not a story of military strategy and political intrigue, but one of lives ruined and homes destroyed. All of Friedrich's films address themselves

to specifically female imagery; in *The Ties That Bind*, the model house that is ritualistically constructed in the early part of the film becomes a metaphor for the filmmaker's mother. Unfortunately, the metaphor is debased later in the film, when Friedrich abandons her usual subtlety for a moment of unwelcome directness: the model house is crushed by a booted foot, and later set on fire. For the most part, the film is not so strident; Friedrich's style is better suited to posing questions than to spouting rhetoric.

Water imagery is used more successfully to evoke a specifically female consciousness (another carry-over from the earlier *Gently Down the Stream*). Throughout the film, we see images of the mother swimming or near the water; the scratched-on text quotes her as saying that living near the lake saved her life.

Although she questions her inaction, Friedrich's portrayal of her mother is generally sympathetic. The titles of Friedrich's films are generally ironic; in this case the irony is undercut. "The Ties That Bind" suggests restriction, but also a more positive attachment.

Friedrich's approach has its weaknesses. The positive traits that she sees as specifically female are countered by negative traits even more specifically portrayed as male: aggressiveness, blind patriotism, destructiveness. This polarization undercuts a more crucial message: that history is not an overwhelming, inhuman force, but the function of each individual man and woman.