

# VICE

## These 1980s Documentaries Tell the Story of the Holocaust from a Female Point of View

by Erin Schwartz

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"Dis-Moi" by Chantal Akerman and "The Ties That Bind" by Su Friedrich, screened as part of a Metrograph series on female filmmakers, explore intergenerational trauma and the transformative act of allowing women to recount their own stories.



Most of the women interviewed in Chantal Akerman's documentary *Dis-Moi* demur, at first: *I don't have very much to tell you*. In Akerman's 1980 short documentary, screened with Su Friedrich's *The Ties That Bind* at New York's Metrograph theater last weekend, the director speaks to elderly women, all survivors of the Holocaust, all of whom knew her grandmother. They tell stories of extreme violence in the warm stillness of their living rooms, tiny worlds peopled with houseplants, with arrays of framed photographs, cake, tea, and vodka set out for their guest. There's one woman who doesn't hesitate; she recounts story after story in accented French, like water springing from a stone. She tells Akerman, "I have so much to say to you, we could stay eight days and not finish it."

Akerman and her subjects are a closed loop, composed as a kind of group portrait; shots of the elderly women and the director alternate, building a convincing illusion that no one else is in the room. While their intimacy allows the story to unfurl naturally, it also generates a sense of dissonance: there's something jarring in the rhythm of everyday life going on while the women recount stories of world-rending loss. It's challenging to reconcile the calm inside these Paris apartments—the delicacy of old women offering homemade sweets; their insistence that Ackerman have children someday, and her soft, sphinx-like smile in response—with the incommensurability of the violence that destroyed their own families, decades before.

*Dis-Moi* is paired with Friedrich's *The Ties That Bind* as part of Metrograph's series [“Tell Me: Women Filmmakers, Women's Stories,”](#) a selection curated by Nellie Killian of films that, in featuring women whose stories are not often heard, make “the simple, radical step of allowing women space and time to talk about their lives.” *The Ties That Bind* also examines the intergenerational legacy of the Holocaust; Friedrich interviews her mother, Lore Bucher, who witnessed Hitler's rise to power when she was a young woman in the southern German city of Ulm. Bucher was urged to join the Hitler Youth but never did. In one harrowing episode, she recounts soldiers taking her from her family's home in the middle of the night, conscripting her to perform administrative work at a military airport. (She suspects the catalyst for the arrest was her attempt to push a proselytizing Nazi piano teacher down a set of stairs.) Still, Friedrich struggles to understand the extent to which her mother was complicit in the Holocaust. The filmmaker's words appear throughout the film in shaky, jagged handwriting, white on black; at one point she writes, “After I blame the Germans, OR WISH THAT MY MOTHER HAD DONE SOMETHING, ANYTHING, I ask myself what I would have.”

Friedrich's camera follows her mother's hands as they slice the air, one wrist wrapped in an elastic bandage. She doesn't show her face as she speaks. Instead, the film collages Bucher's narration with an allusive patchwork of images—a bird of prey diving; the flat grin of a professional wrestler; a toothbrush rubbing sudsy, white teeth; a figure reading an issue of the *New York Post* with the headline “Nazi Death Squad Busted.” A toy Bavarian home is constructed, trampled, and burned. Footage of the bombing of Stuttgart is interspersed with Bucher briskly dropping flowers into a vase.

Friedrich told GARAGE that this style began as an experiment in film form, but that she also wanted to create an environment where her mother felt she could speak openly. “These kinds of stories are very sensitive; people aren't very willing to talk. For me to go and sit on the couch with her with a microphone in my hand, as if I wasn't really doing anything serious, meant that she was more willing to talk freely.”

For both Akerman and Friedrich, making these films in the intimacy of women's homes allowed them to add to the narrative of a common history through the particular stories of their subjects. Series curator Nellie Killian told GARAGE, “These women, who often are living relatively ordinary lives, deserve to have a documentary portrait made about their lives... It isn't about an attempt to have an objective depiction of what happened. It's not investigative. It's about the truth of the women's experiences.”

Friedrich described revisiting her film in the current moment as “sobering,” with the resurgence of white nationalism and a president in the White House who openly uses the rhetorical tools of fascism to attack minority groups. She recalled learning from her mother that, during the

Holocaust, “there were a lot of educated people who were more or less aware of what was going to happen, and who did what they could to prevent it from happening, but it still happened.”

“I looked around at all of us now and think, many of us are very educated and we know what’s going on, but how much can we do now to keep this thing from happening? Part of me fears because of that,” she continued. “Back then, people were willing to get themselves killed in order to keep Hitler from continuing what he was doing. I don’t see a lot of people here who are willing to be killed... I can’t be sanguine about it. I don’t really know what to think, except that it makes me nervous.”

Dis-Moi + The Ties That Bind has a [second screening](#) on Sunday, February 11th. Nellie Killian also recommends [The Women’s Film + It Happens to Us](#) with director Amalie Rothschild on Saturday and [Six Portraits](#) on Sunday.

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