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Su Friedrich's *Today*

The first-person documentary is a nonfiction collage, the footage assembled evidence of Friedrich's dedication to her task over months and years.

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By [Jasmine Liu](#)



From *Today*. Courtesy Su Friedrich.

Su Friedrich
Today
(2022)

Nothing feels more superficial to me than the advice to live every day like it is my last. (The frequency with which this occurred in my past life is why I happily no longer live in the Bay Area.)

Underlying such counsel is the presumption that our desires can be abstracted from how much time we have left. This confuses me: mortality and temporality are intricate questions that can't

be solved with simple-minded hacks.

By its title, I supposed Su Friedrich's newest film *Today* (2022) would take place over one day. But it takes place over six years, and this discrepancy captures the central tension of the film, which documents Friedrich's journey to meet a basic goal she sets in the opening scene: "Try to pay attention to the moment. Try to see the humor in it. Look for the beauty in things. Just take some deep breaths." She narrates this over a point-of-view shot of her leg and her foot lying in bed.

The first-person documentary is a nonfiction collage, the footage assembled evidence of Friedrich's dedication to this task over months and years. She begins with usual suspects, predictable subjects for a project of mindfulness: a water sprinkler on the sidewalk on a hot summer day, an upbeat song on the radio in the car. Each moment is pure and true, but life is both *a* moment and *many* moments—past and future moments, for instance, and moments that others around her are living in—so Friedrich's mission of giving primacy to the former is not at all straightforward.

The first moment of crisis comes just a couple minutes in—a minor crisis, but a crisis nonetheless. At a diner, she considers a glass case filled with baked goods. Her camera pans from bottom to top over the items on display as white Courier font text flashes over them. "I love cake," it reads, as she shows us a substantial cake. "I love pie," it reads, as she shows us three golden pies. More and more pies appear; she takes a beat. "I should resist," she determines.

Who hasn't been in that situation a hundred thousand times, tempted by sight, reined in by superego? She wants one thing (indulgence); she wants another (restraint). Later, gazing at a man paddleboarding at sea, the indecision of that prior moment still hangs in the balance. He falls off his board and she freezes the scene. Like an uninvited friend who won't let up, the white Courier text returns: "But I'm on vacation!"



From *Today*. Courtesy Su Friedrich.

A hairline crack in her resolution to live in the moment has appeared. She may be looking at the ocean, but she is thinking about something else altogether.

The crack continues to split. Some of this is attributable to the fact that, to put it in banal terms, she is going through a lot. Her dad is dying, her mom is dying, her good friend Diane is dying. Being close to somebody who is end-of-life illuminates the impossibility of living in the moment.

whose moment? The composition of her shots of her father and mother, who are separated and in Chicago and New York respectively, suggests an absence rather than presence—though whether this absence is one that Friedrich herself experiences or one that is a deliberate preference to keep audiences at a distance is unclear.

In conversations she has with each while they lie in their beds, she represents only their torsos, legs, and feet, as if portraying their faces in that vulnerable position would be too much. As she surveys her father's limbs, his sheets, his nightstand on which rests flowers and liquids, she voices over a short written piece about her visit, recounting her father's recitation of a Robert Frost poem to her. By presenting the scene in this way, she doubly removes us from that moment, delivering it to us in past tense. She reads the poem, then trains the camera on the window. "Enough," she flashes on screen for an instant. "I want to go see my friend from high school."

Those familiar with Friedrich's past work might guess that this moment with her father requires escape. Friedrich's 1990 film *Sink or Swim*, perhaps her most acclaimed to date, is told through short stories with a mythological quality. The film explores the lifelong pain and confusion that her father wrought on her through his persistent unavailability in childhood. Although these films differ considerably, they, along with every other film in Friedrich's oeuvre, share an interest in the possibility of reconfiguring her life through the motions of shooting footage, assembling it, and finding a narrative.



From *Today*. Courtesy Su Friedrich.

Taking care of her mother, she discloses, is "using up all [her] energy," which produces more internal conflict, because she badly wants to see Diane before she dies. Diane was her first friend in New York, and much of what we learn about her is through old photos of her dancing and a video of her performing a musical poem featuring the repeated use of the word "chinchilla." "I know I'll regret not going," Friedrich displays in text.

I expected this to indicate a forthcoming visit, but one never materializes. Instead Friedrich reads an email Diane's friend sends her with updates about Diane's deteriorating condition. Now Friedrich is being torn out of her moment not by a crisis of willpower but a crisis borne by the limitations of being mortal. She has finite time and she can't be in two places at once. She sits by the bed of her mother, who jerks her feet beneath the sheets and who by this point is delirious and does not know who or where she is. The text reads: "How much longer will she last?" To be with a dying person is to struggle between being in the moment, precious as it is, and ahead of the moment, worrying about the inevitable end.

Friedrich only addresses her father, her mother, and Diane's deaths in past tense—after they occur, rather than in the moments they occur—something that initially struck me as disjunctive. But thinking about the missing visit with Diane now, I am sure that it is a finer representation of death than any other—desires not expressed, words not exchanged, all without a satisfying why.

The paradox of Friedrich's film is that while it testifies to her efforts to pay attention, it is also what motivates her to pay attention in the first place. In one scene, she is back in bed with her leg and foot before her, this time with a bandage wrapped around her knee. She's just gotten a minor knee surgery, so she flexes and points her foot, then does a few leg lifts. "If it weren't for the fact I was filming it, I still wouldn't be doing it," she confesses. Moments later: "Oh shit!" She's overdone the lift, too focused on getting the shot right. It's comical that the avant-garde filmmaker needs something to come between herself and the world to exist in it—not so different from the dowdy millennial's plight of not being able to appreciate a handsomely-plated dish without taking a picture first.

In *Today*, Su Friedrich shows us that the paradox of being "in the moment" is that it is made of the messiness of negotiating never-ending competing claims on what it means to be in the moment. We may suffer profound loss, observe sunshine amid thunderstorms, participate in neighborhood block parties, see questionable museum shows, and learn pottery for the first time, going back and forth between this thing and the other. By the end of the film, I saw the collection of sprawling, simultaneous moments of Friedrich's life as—yes, anxious, but—full.

Contributor

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