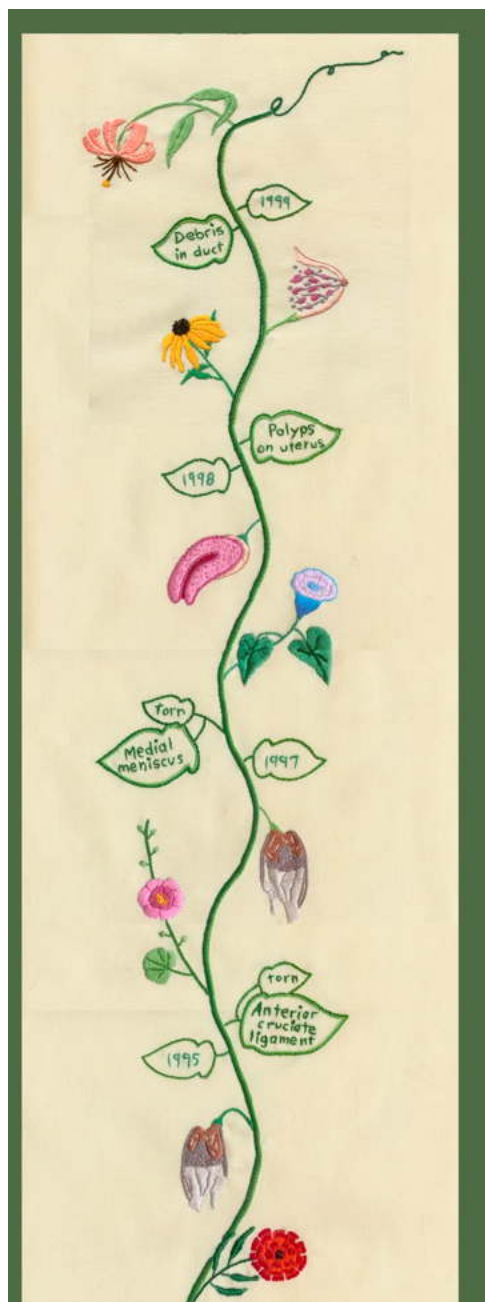


JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



“Making it through”: sickness and health in Su Friedrich’s *The Odds of Recovery*

by [William C. Wees](#)

“Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship in the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.”

—Susan Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor*

“If we lump all surgical procedures together your chances of making it through are considerably better than 95 out of 100. It could be said, however, that for the 5 out of the 100 who did not survive, the odds were pretty bad.”

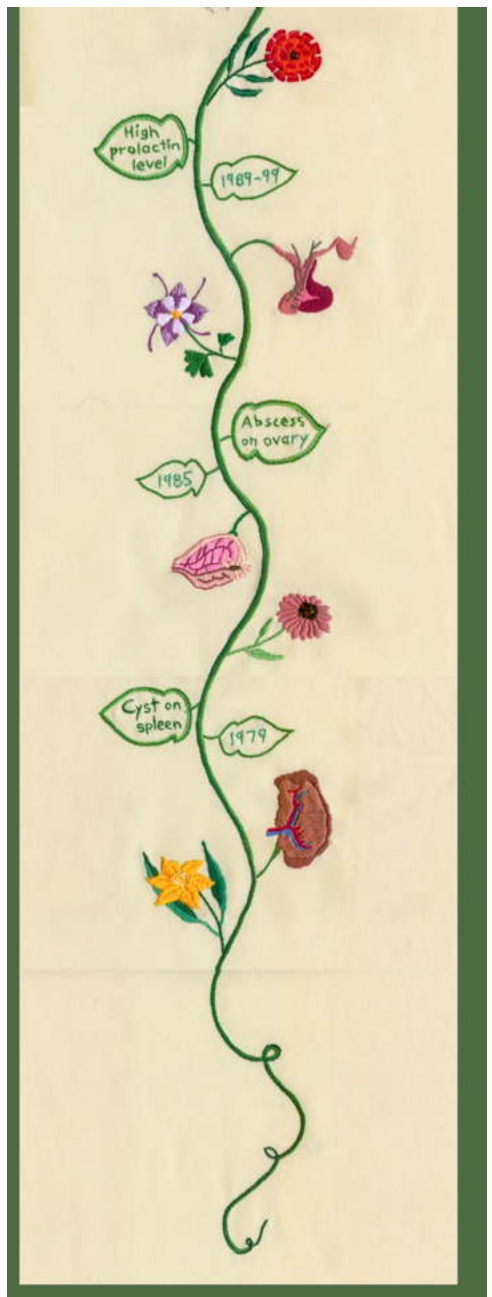
—Edward L. Bradley III, M.D., *A Patient’s Guide to Surgery*

Before undertaking her critical analysis of the myths, metaphors and other literary conceits and mystifications surrounding the physical realities of tuberculosis and cancer, Susan Sontag insists that the point she wishes to make in *Illness as Metaphor* is that

“illness is *not* a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphorical thinking.”[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

I suspect Su Friedrich would agree. Certainly her 65-minute film *The Odds of Recovery* (2002) presents her medical problems with prosaic, non-metaphorical, clinical clarity. [2] This is not to say, however, that “metaphorical thinking” has no role to play in Friedrich’s account of her many years of alternating illness and recovery. In fact, as we will see, the film’s organization and argument depend on Friedrich’s willingness to draw upon both “truthful” and “metaphorical” ways of engaging with the realities of sickness and health.

As a recurrent citizen of “the kingdom of the sick,” Friedrich appears in front of the camera for substantial portions of her film: checking in at hospitals, filling out forms, struggling with hospital gowns, meeting with doctors, undergoing examinations, displaying the scars of her various surgeries, submitting to the intimidating diagnostic machinery of modern medicine. Through intertitles, voice-over, and direct address to the camera, and with varying degrees of objectivity, bemusement, frustration, and anger, Friedrich recounts the history of her six operations and a ten-year effort to reduce her body’s over-production of the hormone prolactin. Woven into this narrative is an account of her diminished sex life and strained relationship with her partner due to the physiological and psychological consequences of multiple operations and too much prolactin in her system. Throughout the film, as Janet Cutler has written about Friedrich’s films in general,



The embroidered vine provides the imagery for a long credit sequence at the end of the film. The camera moves "up" the vine from the first to the last operation and to one last flower and the tip of the vine

"You can sense the filmmaker thinking through the possible ways to proceed, drawing parallels and making connections between otherwise unrelated images and sounds, encouraging the viewer to follow a line of thought to the point at which a new idea or a new understanding emerges." [3]

Combining documentary and experimental techniques, Friedrich presents a candid and often unflattering portrait of the artist as victim of "a revolving-door relationship with the medical establishment" due to her body's failure to remain consistently healthy. [4] But in a parallel "kingdom of the well," the filmmaker goes about her everyday activities: shopping, cooking, reading, bathing, practicing t'ai chi movements, gardening, and embroidering. The last two make the most important contributions to the film's imagery and meaning. The garden is on a roof adjoining a loft in Brooklyn that Friedrich shared with her partner and several roommates. The embroidery records her medical history in the form of a sinuous vine of colorful blossoms and equally colorful, but anatomically correct, representations of the parts of Friedrich's body that have required surgery. The garden not only represents the antithesis of the sterile, uninviting, monochromatic, and slightly claustrophobic mise-en-scène of hospital hallways, doctors' offices, examining rooms, and paraphernalia of medical technology, but it also provides the filmmaker with imagery of the changing seasons and the natural cycles of life, death and regeneration. The vine, which we see Friedrich embroidering as the film progresses, documents the medical traumas Friedrich's body suffers at the same time that it becomes a visual metaphor for continuity and growth. (I will have more to say about the implications of the embroidered vine in my conclusion.)

At the outset, Friedrich faced three formidable problems in making *The Odds of Recovery*:

- how to contain her erratic medical history within a formal structure that would allow her to represent the real-life experiences that inspired the film but distill those experiences into a unified work of art;
- how to avoid exhibitionism while putting her body on display; and, finally,
- how to avoid easy appeals for sympathy while engaging the viewer empathetically in her tale of ill-health.

She solved the first problem by adapting the "here-we-go-again" saga of her operations to a repeated pattern of formal elements that, despite differences in detail, give the story of each operation a similar shape within the chronological structure of the film. The account of the first operation establishes a theme and subsequent accounts of the other operations offer variations on that theme. The theme-and-variation structure helps to hold the film together while, at the same time, allowing diverse—and even discordant—elements to fit within the film's narrative as it moves from one operation to the next.

To address the risks of exhibitionism and sentimentality, Friedrich drew upon several strategies to establish a critical distance between herself as filmmaker and herself as autobiographical subject. These include constantly varying the tone or mood of the film by intercutting images from the kingdoms of the well and the sick, by making extensive use of intertitles to provide information as well as moments of humor and self-revelation, and by complementing her own on-camera comments with a medley of other voices on the soundtrack: the receptionists, nurses, technicians and doctors Friedrich must deal with during her numerous trips to hospitals, as well as a variety of anonymous male and female voices reading extracts from texts that range from *A Patient's Guide to Surgery* to *T'ai Chi Ch'uan Principles and Practices* to *Getting the Love You Want* to *The Science of Breath*.

The cumulative effect of these strategies is to undercut the impression of Friedrich as the film's unique, unified subject and unmediated object of the camera's gaze. As the film's protagonist, she exists within a matrix of personal concerns and larger, social contexts that come with her role as reluctant citizen of "that other place" of ill-health.

The combination of techniques Friedrich deploys in her cinematic presentation of selfhood places her film among those Michael Renov identified as "the new autobiography in film and video." The "new autobiographies" are works of "self-inscription" that are notable for their "construction of subjectivity as a site of instability," where "the domain of the subject and that of the enveloping world are mutually constitutive." [5]. Along the same lines, Susanna Egan has argued that "film may enable autobiographers to define and represent subjectivity not as singular or solipsistic but as multiple and as revealed in relationship." [6]

And, in his book-length study of the autobiographical documentary, Jim Lane recognized that in the wake of poststructuralist theory,

"an emphasis on the weakening of the referent, coupled with the decentering of particularized social subjects, reflects a 'constructed' view of the autobiographical subject, a view that has played a central role in autobiographical criticism across literature, film, still photography, painting and other media."

While the new forms of selfhood made possible by the autobiographical documentary "do not imply a universalist application," Lane writes, "if they are rigorously conceived, they can argue a position on society and the culture at large." [7] The autobiographical subject can bear broader, social significance if represented through means such as those adopted by Friedrich for *The Odds of Recovery*. [8] Those means are, I hope to show, "rigorously conceived" and effectively executed in her "single-person-produced filmic autobiography." [9]

[Go to page 2](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 54](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



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