

Playback: Su Friedrich's 'Sink or Swim'

by Angelo Madsen Minax

Mon, 02/27/2023

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In 2003 I was enrolled in a class taught by Vanalyne Green called “The Personal Essay Film.” I had recently fallen in love with Vanalyne—like you do when you’re an angry teenager having your entire worldview destabilized—after watching her essay film about how she got herpes from a hot cowboy that looked like the Marlboro Man. The day’s viewing was *Sink or Swim* by Su Friedrich. I didn’t have the words then to articulate the splendor, the darkness, the gentle wisdom of this film. But now I do.

There are black-and-white images, some gestural, some demonstrative: desert landscapes, bodies of water, circus performance, female bodybuilders, the filmmaker settling into a bath. There are words and voice: a precocious, perhaps prideful, child with crisp enunciation recounts third-person stories of another child’s (read: our filmmaker’s) desperate inability to please (read: be loved by) her father. There is Kairos: as we move visually from origin through maturation, we begin to realize the on-screen text is moving backward through the alphabet. There is mythos: we begin with the story of a trine—Athena (born without a mother), Atalanta (abandoned at birth because Zeus—her

father—wanted a son), and the byzantine Aphrodite (in this instance, I want to say she is a stand-in for both poetry and consequence). And there is Eros. Oh, Eros. I recently told a friend that I had returned to my carnal ways in my new work, after a brief stint in family-friendly entertainment. She replied, “But what is more carnal than the family?”

Through a weaving of myths and anecdotes, we are introduced to an academician father who unleashes cruelty with the poise of someone who is evaluating a very expensive wine. Yet he is not villainized, nor are we asked to pity the child, though it is impossible not to. We are simply given the facts. The veil of exceptionalism sheathing the intellectual class is swept left to reveal that no one is above cruelty. In fact, some dole it out in superbly calculated ways—through opera, and poetry, and summers in New England.

Poetry does not absolve cruelty, but as a formal and tonal cinematic strategy, it does massage the unease that comes with irresolution. The film refuses to settle into singularity, but rather floats in the agony of interdependence—its poetics being both the wound and the remedy. We are offered imagination as a shield to trauma. The pride I hear in the child’s voice is one of not having been broken. But what good is not being broken if it means you are so hardened to your own pain that you become hardened to the pain of others? I want to pathologize, to assess what this kind of cruelty does to a child. But it’s too close to home. Seeking the love of a parent who will never love you is a timeless dilemma.

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