

CURRENT ISSUE

Su Friedrich's Cinema CONVERSATIONS

Su Friedrich in conversation with Cecilia Muhlstein

Su Friedrich's work in film is essential in understanding the importance of avant-garde film and history. Since the late 70s she has addressed issues of sexuality, feminism, capitalism, and identity politics. Her latest film, From the Ground Up, 2007 deals with the production, distribution, and consumption of coffee.



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Courtesy of the artist.

Cecilia Muhlstein: I recently came back from San Francisco where I saw the Joseph Cornell exhibit at MOMA. The ephemeral dreams, found objects, words, important to his work, are refracted in your films. I notice like Cornell's work, your films engage in dreams which become places, where language appears in the unexpected, and the fantasy—even your scripts read like poems. I keep thinking of the fragile black and white images of birds flying in the sky as your mother's voice describes bombs in Germany during the Nazi occupation, in *The Ties That Bind*, 1984 you're looking for something to prune in *The Odds of Recovery*, 2002 or the fish, breathing heavily in the market, awaiting death, in *But No One*, 1982. How does the dream turn logic or dis-logic for you in your work?

Su Friedrich: I only worked directly with dreams while making *Gently Down the Stream* and *But No One*; I used actual dream texts and also tried to make the film's form respond to the nature of the dream state. I don't mean that I tried to replicate the dream on film, but I attempted to create a dislocating experience for the viewer. By scratching words onto the screen and combining them with images that were only tangentially related to the dream text, I wanted to create that sense of dislocation that one has when one tries to recall a dream—the feeling that one's simple verbal description of "what happened" never quite captures the elusive, convoluted and illogical narrative that one experienced while dreaming.

Beyond those two films, I suppose there is often a quality or experience in my work that relates to dreaming insofar as I mix so many elements together (both visual and verbal) and, while I try to create credible and comprehensible relationships between the elements, I also refuse to be completely literal or didactic. This results in a lot of slippage, a lot of moments when one watching one kind of image while hearing some different kind of sound and meanwhile one isn't being told why the two are in conjunction. I want the viewer to be inside the film and perhaps trust that there is a meaning being created by these conjunctions and that the meaning will make itself clear over time even if it isn't clear when it first appears. This might be an unconscious effort on my part to mimic the dream state; I wouldn't say it's often a conscious one. On the other hand, I think that dreams are an incredibly rich source for ideas and images and the way that they function in our lives is quite remarkable, so I see that my films are quite indebted to them even when I don't consciously use dreams or try to work with "dream logic".

CM: The section, *Ghosts*, from *Sink or Swim*, 1990 uses a typewriter to inform meaning on the screen, where for instance, in earlier pieces, or *The Ties that Bind*, 1984 you scratch letters onto the film directly. What is the relationship to language and sound in how you conceive a project?

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SF: Each film has its own needs or makes its own demands. In the earlier films, the scratched (animated) words were necessary because I wanted to make the viewer read those wobbly words, one at a time, so that the text would slowly reveal itself. The scratched words also had a fragile quality, and sometimes seemed like a child's voice, which was also appropriate to the context. In the other case, using the typewriter was necessary because of its different context: it was a letter, it would have been typed in real life, and so I needed the viewer to understand the "realism" of that scene (which I put in quotes because of course it's shot in negative and the sound fades out half way through, so it isn't exactly realistic.)

I tend to start my films from language rather than images. I have an idea (of the subject matter) and I think that through primarily with words (talking to myself, making notes, reading, etc) and eventually the visual elements start to emerge. From then on, it's a battle (or a dance) between the words and images. Sometimes the words dominate or determine the image, and sometimes the images force the words to change. Each time, things work out a bit differently, but in every case I'm concerned about having the two elements work in a sort of sync. In other words, even though I'm not shooting synch-sound of people speaking, I'm creating another sort of sync by having the movement and meaning of the images relate very closely to the movement (the rhythm and changing pitch) and meaning of the words.

CM: Politically your films seem to focus on the fragments of institutions. How individuals are fragmented by different institutions whether its medicine, racism, sexuality, nationalism, war, and family. Do you feel that your work resonates or feeds into the political agendas of each era?

SF: I always approach a new film with a feeling of wanting to work on two simultaneous concerns: one is my interest in what happens when images and sound are juxtaposed, which is an endless source of fascination and surprise, and the other is my belief that I should speak about something that concerns or affects or engages the body politic. I'm known as a "personal filmmaker", known for making work that's often autobiographical, and that's true; I do tend to speak from my own experience. But as someone who grew up during the 60s—i.e., during the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, the Gay Liberation Movement, the Vietnam War, etc.—it's always been obvious to me that there are a lot of things that need fixing, and a lot of ways that my private life was informed by public policy. Consequently, it was a *fait accompli* that I would speak in my films about things that were part of the public discourse.

Perhaps I could explain this more easily by saying that I do believe the feminist motto: "The personal is political." I don't see any break between inside and out; my experiences are shared by millions of other people and what I/we experience is a mirror, or a microscopic version, of the things that unfold on the largest public scale. And because of that, it makes perfect sense to me to have my films confront the most local (personal) issues through the filter of the global, and vice versa.

CM: *The Odds of Recovery*, your auto-medical-biography, *Sink or Swim*, the father as "story," and *The Ties that Bind*, the personal explorations of mother as locus, are highly subjective stories. How does your new work imagine narrative structures?

SF: I can't afford to shoot 16mm film anymore, so over the past few years my work has been tending more towards the documentary rather than a more experimental and interior form, although I don't think that difference is inherent in the two mediums. In other words, one can still make subjective, personal, experimental, you-name-it work when shooting in video, but it has created a different vantage point for me because shooting in digital video allows me to be in a moment for an endless amount of time. By comparison, I always shot film with a wind-up Bolex, which restricted my shots to 27 seconds, and it was a silent camera, so I was forced to deal with sound as a separate element.

I wouldn't say the new work is any sort of conventional documentary, and I don't know how to talk about different narrative structures, but having this often-longer video footage and the live sound of the shots is a change, and one which I'm still trying to figure out. My last three works do diverge from earlier work because of the extent to which I'm looking outward, filming the world more directly, or perhaps just using images of the world in a more direct way than I did previously. For example, *Sink or Swim* tells stories about myself, primarily during childhood, by having written and performed voiceover text with images mostly shot "from life" but disconnected in a sense from the text, whereas in a recent piece, *Seeing Red*, I also tell stories about myself, primarily current ones, but I address the camera directly in a sort of diary format. Both structures have their reasons for being; I don't think either is better or more appropriate as a way of telling a story, but I never would have made *Seeing Red* if I were still working in 16mm, and I don't know if I would have made *Sink or Swim* in the same way if I had been working in video back then.