tion” (169). We might think of *News from Home* as restoring that deletion, as inscribing maternal discourse into film language. Though Mother’s thoughts, with their sentimentality, pathos, and manipulation, may be “improper,” they are nonetheless expressed. If Hirsch urged women to listen “to the stories that mothers . . . [would] tell,” she did not promise they would be uniformly inspiring or uplifting (167).

While *News from Home* takes a tentative step toward rendering a maternal viewpoint, that enunciation is highly qualified. The maternal voice is inflected with the daughter’s judgmental outlook, an unavoidable consequence of its placement in her film. In an act of aesthetic passive aggression, the sound mixing frequently drowns out the maternal monologue: sometimes Mother’s voice is incomprehensible as it fades into a scene; other times, it is drowned out by ambient noise. At moments, Akerman’s dissemination of her mother’s letters seems a breach of privacy. As Jane Flax notes, “Women tend to feel guilty that they are somehow betraying their mother in an attempt to resolve and terminate the symbiotic tie” (35).

On one occasion, it is implied that Akerman has sent her mother the script of another film she is making. Her mother strives to be positive but admits to finding it “sad,” “dreary,” and “social.” Ironically, the same words might apply to *News from Home*, but without the negative connotations. While Akerman’s stark portrayal of maternal consciousness is sometimes “sad” and “dreary,” revealing the potential for desperation at the maternal core, its distanced delivery foregrounds the “social.” Stripped bare of a fictional scenario, or of verité voyeurism, the film highlights the hazards of traditional motherhood where the only news is old. Akerman has left that universe, and her film documents the spatial and psychic journey she has taken; but it also reveals the poignant pull of hearth and home.12

**Motherhood and History**

Our family is in fact constituted by and in the general movement of History, but is experienced, on the other hand . . . in the depths and opacity of childhood.

(Jean-Paul Sartre)

While a societal framework is absent from *Grey Gardens* and contingent in *News from Home*, it is prominent in a series of feminist experimental documentaries of the 1980s and 1990s. Again, they are made from the

12 For a further discussion of the maternal theme in Akerman’s work, see the writing of Brenda Longfellow.
filial stance, but they evince a developing respect for the maternal position. The first text to signal this move is Su Friedrich’s *The Ties That Bind* (1984). It presents an extended interview with the artist’s mother, Lore Bucher Friedrich, who came of age in Germany during the Third Reich, then emigrated to the United States with her GI husband after the war. Specifically, the film inquires about Bucher’s experience of Nazism and of her German ancestry—phenomena that have bedeviled both mother and child. Rather than conceive the mother-daughter dyad in some essentialist Imaginary space, as does *Grey Gardens* and even *News from Home*, the film locates the mother within *history* (or *herstory*) and inquires how such a placement affects the matrilineal line. This strategy squares with Miriam Hansen’s notion of creating an oppositional discourse: “[C]onceptualizing an alternative tradition requires a concept of experience which not only is the opposite of socially constructed signs and systems of representation but, rather, mediates between individual perception and social determinations, and emphatically entails memory and an awareness of its historical diminishment” (quoted in Bergstrom and Doane, 172).

Friedrich employs several techniques that work against the realist pull of the documentary text, positioning her film in an avant-garde vein. Sometimes, images are decelerated or frozen. Instead of being synchronized with the picture, her mother’s narration accompanies disparate
visuals: a contemporary setting (home or office), her photographic past, an abstract montage (mountaintops, toothpaste commercials). At points, these shots relate to Bucher’s commentary, as when her words about German expansion are juxtaposed with images of men boxing, but at other times they do not. Bucher’s face is often segmented in extreme close-up, which prevents a sentimental audience response. At times, Friedrich’s choice of imagery seems almost random, as when she focuses on her mother’s feet. But, ultimately, these shots seem a reference to *Rubyfruit Jungle*. As its heroine muses: “I filmed [my mother] through the week . . . and she was thrilled that I could work a camera. It didn’t take her long to figure things out because when I took a shot of her revving up her rocker she snapped, ‘What are you doing taking pictures of my feet? People wanna see my face not my feet?’” (Brown, 180–81, my italics).

While Friedrich does not appear in *The Ties That Bind*, Bucher refers to her daughter, whose questions and remarks are “vocalized” through intertitles scratched into the emulsion in the manner of Stan Brakhage. At one point a title inquires of Bucher, “How old were you then?” and at another, “Can you tell me more about the [American] occupation?” On other occasions, Friedrich’s words label something (like the German “cross of honor”). In its refusal of synchronized sound, the text shares with other feminist works a tendency to grant the disembodied female voice a new authority (Silverman, *Acoustic Mirror*, 141–234).

Ostensibly, Friedrich imposes a “silence” on herself in order to highlight her mother’s words. But Friedrich’s titles betray a certain power and insistence. Because they are handwritten, in what David Edelstein deems a “quivery grade-school scrawl,” they reassert the filial stance. Furthermore, they periodically seem to “shout,” despite their apparent muteness. When Bucher claims that people were unaware of the murders in the concentration camps, a capitalized intertitle declaims “NO!” In an interview, Friedrich explains that “[i]t made [her] extremely uncomfortable to behave as if [her] mother was lying, but . . . when it was necessary . . . to contradict her [mother’s] version of . . . history, [she] did.” Thus “the film is meant as a dialogue” (Friedrich). But Barbara Kruger finds it more “like a court transcript of a mother brought to trial (albeit kindly) by her own daughter.”

On another level, Friedrich’s stance shares much with that of the oral historian as she interviews her subject and transcribes the latter’s life story. But rather than conform to conventional models, Friedrich invests the procedure with a feminist bent. Kristina Minister has noted how male oral historians have favored a linear/chronological approach: preparing a set of topics and compelling the subject toward addressing them. Furthermore, their queries have focused on people’s concrete actions rather
than on their emotional response to events. For Minister, the feminist must discard such a framework, which is at odds with how women have been socialized to communicate: “[F]eminist interviewers [must] adopt their narrators’ time frame, shifting gradually to new issues only after old ones have been developed” (39). And researchers must relinquish claims of objectivity: “Before oral history can build subjective records of women’s lives, interviewers must position themselves subjectively within the discourse” (36). While Su Friedrich does not claim to be a feminist oral historian, her filmmaking mode seems informed by Minister’s dictates—in its fluid temporal structure, in its anecdotal and emotional tone, in its suppression of the interviewer’s voice, in its assertion of the latter’s affective connection to her subject.

The tale that Friedrich extracts is one of contained resistance within a system of “ties that bind.” While Bucher and her parents were antifascist, they were not martyrs; they simply attempted to survive the era with minimal complicity. Though Bucher was friendly with members of the political underground (like the White Rose), she did not join them. As she admits, they “did what [she] would not do.” Rather, her rebellion took the form of helping Jewish students in school, or refusing to shout “Heil Hitler.”

The structure of the film asserts explicit connections between mother and daughter in relation to their sociohistorical positioning. Friedrich intercuts newspaper headlines about political dramas of her day, like nuclear war, that rival the Nazi threat. She includes documentary footage of protests she has attended, such as a 1983 women’s antiwar march, evincing the need for continued vigilance. Finally, she photographs a stack of political mail from such organizations as Amnesty International. At times, her intertitles try to envision her own response to the German menace. One reads, “I just can’t imagine it,” and another asks what she would have done. At other moments, they suggest how she has repressed her mother’s background and experience: “I can’t remember the war stories she told me when I was young.” This lacuna is explained by the stigma Friedrich feels about her ethnic heritage: “[M]y own shame at the legacy of the Germans kept me from finding out more about the war when I was younger” (Friedrich). Her mother expresses a similar sentiment as she talks of feeling “embarrassed” about being Teutonic: “It is a persecution to the end of my life and I don’t deserve it.”

As Bucher is honest about her timidity, Friedrich confesses her romantic desire for a more intrepid mother who could have “done something” about Nazism. When Molly Haskell first formulated the notion of the “woman’s film,” she spoke of the ordinary woman who becomes extraordinary (161). Friedrich uses similar language to describe the theme of The Ties That Bind but minimizes the valorous tone: “The
[film] presents the life of an ‘ordinary’ woman living through extraordinary times—not in order to make her a hero, to investigate how fascism and war are formed by and affect daily life” (Friedrich).

The text also signals how war and womanhood interrelate, a continuation of what Scott MacDonald has called Friedrich’s “attempt to rethink gender” (36). A title introduces the image of “the cross of the German mother,” as we hear how childbirth was encouraged for nationalistic reasons. The theme of women’s patriotism is highlighted by a clip, earlier in the film, of a turn-of-the-century American movie showing an American woman dancing with a flag. But while the American woman’s relationship with the symbol of her country seems one of spectacular adornment, the German woman is urged to serve in a maternal role.

Intercut throughout the film is footage of Friedrich’s journey back to Ulm, Germany, in 1982, to find the house in which her parent was raised. In this respect the work is similar to Christa Wolf’s Patterns of Childhood (Kindheitsmuster), originally published in 1976, in which a woman returns to the town where she grew up and experienced Nazism. In other respects, The Ties That Bind invokes Helma Sanders-Brahm’s Germany, Pale Mother (Deutschland, Bleiche Mutter, 1980). In that dramatic film, a woman relates, through voice-over narration, the tale of her ordeal as a child in war-torn Germany, when her father was sent off to battle, and she and her mother had to survive on their own.13

In The Ties That Bind, when Friedrich voyages to Germany, a title tells us how she “saw [her] mother’s home for the first time” and located the “room [that] had been hers.” She also documents the process of assembling a miniature cardboard house in the style of a European chalet. Barbara Kruger finds this focus on the home suggestive of “its place as the site of women’s presence [and] . . . interiority.”

Through the journey motif, Friedrich proclaims the positive aspects of mother-daughter doubling—of “the ties that bind.” It seems requisite that she retrace the steps of her parent, inhabit her residence, see out the same window. But this bonding bears no trace of symbiosis, for it is strength that Friedrich learns from Bucher. Jessica Benjamin argues that female desire must be imagined “intersubjectively,” in terms of connection versus disengagement: “Woman’s desire . . . can be found not through the current emphasis on freedom from: as autonomy or separation from a powerful other, guaranteed by identification with an opposing power. Rather, we are seeking a relationship to desire in the freedom to: freedom to be both with and distinct from the other” (97–98).

13 Some other fiction films about mothers and daughters include The Thin Line, Autumn Sonata (1978), Malou (1983), Imitation of Life (1934, 1959), Mildred Pierce (1945), and Stella Dallas (1937).
While Bucher is not idealized, she is portrayed as a woman who maintains autonomy. This fact is crucial for the maternal relationship, for as Adrienne Rich has stated, “The quality of the mother’s life—however embattled and unprotected—is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist” (250–51). Bucher survives incarceration in a German work camp, where she is impounded for secretarial service. Later, she endures divorce and life as a single, working parent. While she has faced personal and historical constraints (the war, the death of her parents, the termination of her education), she has overcome them. She mentions her childhood wish to take music lessons and her husband’s failed promise to provide them. The film ends by revealing that she has purchased a piano and begun to “practice scales.” Throughout the film, we see shots of Bucher swimming, images of release and liberation. She confesses that one day she might “swim out so far” that she “can’t come back.” Again, Rich’s words illuminate this trope of a borderless terrain: “The most important thing one woman can do for another is to . . . expand her sense of actual possibilities. . . . It means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life. To refuse to be a victim and then go on from there” (250). The women in *The Ties That Bind* “refuse to be victims”—either of their historical circumstances or of patriarchy’s malign mother-daughter plot.

*Voices from the Attic* (1988) is another work in which a daughter confronts her mother’s wartime existence. However, this time the parent is a clear victim rather than a potential “oppressor.” Debbie Goodstein returns to the Polish village in which her Jewish mother was hidden, as a child, during the town’s occupation by the Nazis. The film begins inside the attic in which her mother was sequestered, as Goodstein attempts to visualize her family’s plight: “I try to imagine sitting in a ten-by-fifteen-foot space with fifteen other people. The room is hot (about one hundred degrees). There’s no electricity, also no plumbing, no lighting of any kind. We can’t bathe or brush our teeth. We sleep on straw and go to the bathroom in a pot.” While her film seeks to uncover her mother’s past, which has been shrouded in secrecy, an aunt acts as a maternal surrogate, since her parent refused to make the trip. In the opening monologue, Goodstein makes clear that the voyage is a search for her own identity as well, since she has always felt that the attic shaped her life. Once in Poland, she feels that she is “reliving things never seen and stories never heard.” “Being there,” she states, “felt like being back.”

In making the film, Goodstein joins a group of minority artists focused on the maternal theme. As Natalie M. Rosinsky has noted: “Members of racial, ethnic . . . and economic minority groups . . . have deline-