Su Friedrich, Gently Down the Stream (1981)

During the early 1980s, Su Friedrich completed three films in which the use of texts—in all three cases, words inscribed into the film image—were crucial (all of the films use black and white film stock, so the scratched words are white on black). Two of these films—Gently Down the Stream and But No One (1982)—are brief attempts to deal directly with troubling dream material. The third, the 55-minute The Ties That Bind (1984), is a personal documentary about Fried- rich's mother's experiment with Gypsy living in Germany during World War II and the arrival of the Allies, and subsequently, as an emigrant to the U.S., where her marriage with Friedrich's Gypsy father breaks up. Essentially, The Ties That Bind is a daughter's attempt to come to terms with her mother's experiences and responses to them, and with the implications of these experiences for Friedrich herself. In The Ties That Bind, scratched texts are used as a method by which to wrestle with the implications of these experiences for Friedrich herself. By presenting these questions one scratched word at a time ("So you did know about the camps?") Friedrich simulates the to-and-fro, back-and-forth in asking the questions (Friedrich's mother seems to respond to our reading the questions), and, to a degree, detaches them from the punctuated interrelatedness of the parent-daughter relationship. It is as though the filmmaker (or the film) is asking for their daughter.

As interesting as The Ties That Bind is, however, its use of scratched words is, in many ways, more complex than the use of text in the earlier dream films. In each of these texts, the central visual imagery of the film (The Ties That Bind uses imagery of Gypsy soldiers collected by Friedrich on a visit to Germany and other kinds of imagery), both in the sense that the texts are what catch our eye and in the sense that the images have a certain emotional and aesthetic potency over the imagery photographed and recorded. Both Gently Down the Stream and But No One have a creeping power, but I find the earlier film considerably more intense. Its scratched texts seem to quiver with anxiety.

In a program note for Gently Down the Stream, Friedrich explains that "the film is a succession of fourteen dreams taken from eight years of my journals. They were shufled out of their original chronological order for the purpose of convenience because often we know our dreams nothing long after, or before, we can use it in our lives. . . . I chose to work with dreams that were the most troubling to me, that expressed my deepest fears, anxieties and longings, or ones that had forced a sudden awareness about a nagging problem." The photographic background for the textual revelation of the dreams (the background into which they're scratched) includes some kind of imagery: at first, shots of figures of the Virgin and Christ (and what looks to be a nun and a peni- tent); then shots of a woman rowing on a rowing machine, apparently in a gym (my guess is that this is found footage); then of a different woman entering and swimming in an indoor pool (to be completely forthcoming), and finally, shots of a body of water, filmed, I assume, from a ferry boat.

Both the scratched texts and the photographic imagery are projected onto the female body. The textual words are scratched on two or three words at a time (late in the film, blindness is spelled letter by letter); and while some include the fluttery movement that is the usual sign of direct scratching into the emulsion, others are rephotographed so that while obviously scratched, they are still sometimes caught in a blur. Generally, the size of the words and the use of caps or lower-case letters provides emphasis, sometimes subtly, at other times more sharply. At times the film looks flat, dead; at others the eye feels a brief barrage of flicker.

In her program notes, Friedrich indicates that she is "more concerned with finding ways to integrate the (harsh) wisdom of dreams into my life than I am in analyzing the structure and function of dreams through any given system (Freudian, Jung- lan, etc.)." But for the viewer there is a fascination in trying to understand the nature of the psychic disturbances dramatized by Friedrich's dreams. One fundamental aspect of the disturbance appears when one connects the imagery of Catholic icons (Friedrich is raised Catholic) with several texts which are presumably dream-distortions of particular sexual feelings or experiences: "A woman / sits / on / a / stage / hunched / over / in / the / corner / (She / calls / up / a / friend / from / the / audience / Asking / her / Coming / and / make / love / to / me / She does / I / can't / watch / ROARS / HOWL / ROAR / HOWL / She / mutters / I / CAN'T / I / can't / hold / you / / The / last / time / was / too / tense / So / many / memories," "I / draw / a / man / take / his / skin / inflate / it / get / enclosed / mount / it / ITS / LIKE / BEING / IN / LOVE / WITH / A / STRAIGHT / WOMAN." An internal conflict between Catholicism and les- bianism seems obvious and is extended by dream material that deals with reproduction: "I / lie / in / a / gutter / giving / birth / to / my / boy / myself / two / fetuses / dark / green / and / knotted / up / Try / to / breathe / so / they / don't / suffocate / I / can / pull / one / out / but / it / starts / to / crumble / up."

The disconcerting impact of Gently Down the Stream has a good deal to do with the way in which Friedrich uses text. Because we must attempt to work in the one-word-at-a-time process of constructing the sentences that convey our dreams, we are pulled along by the current of Friedrich's psychic flow; and be- cause—as in Frankfurt's Poetic Justice—we "shoot" the im- age suggested by the texts, we find ourselves, in a strange way, inside the filmmaker's psyche. Like McCall and Tyndall, Friedrich effectively reverses the conventional balance of text and image, and, by doing so, is able to use the suceptability of photographs to suggest the scenes (most of which seems to offer little more than a series of metaphors for our voyage down the filmmaker's stream of consciousness) as the context for the textual significations of deeper psychic experiences.

In 1982 Friedrich designed and had printed a book that contains the complete text of Gently Down the Stream and selected stills. The long, narrow, "streamlike" shape of the book combined with the rippled cover makes it more an evoca- tion of the film than a simple record. The book is available from Friedrich, 100 Forsyth St. #16, New York, NY 10002.

Michael Snow, So Is This (1992)

Few filmmakers have had as large an impact on the recent avant-garde film scene as Canadian Michael Snow, whose Wave-length (1967) is probably the most frequently discussed "structured" film. Snow has been a friend and/or a collaborator and/or an influence on most of the filmmakers I've discussed so far, and, given the intervals of his earlier films, a filmmaker exploring the intersection of the film experience and the liter- ary experience was probably inevitable. Snow has frequently exposed the interference generated when a given medium attempts to represent reality and/or when various media in- tersect. In Wave-length, we are simultaneously aware of what we are seeing (documentary imagery of a city) and through the windows, Canal Street, New York City; fictional imagery of a death and its discovery) and how the continually changing film stocks, filters, and lighting, and the continuously shorten- ing zoom distance to the windows at the other end of the film affect what we see. Side Seat Paintings Slides Sound Film, (1970) presents a series of slides of some of Snow's early paintings: we "see" the paintings and the distortions of them created by the various steps the image has passed through. Snow has explored elements of the literary experi- ence in several of his works: "Rameau's Nephew" by Diderot (Thanks to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen (1974) includes a long, rolling credit sequence that plays with text in amusing ways; his Cover to Cover (Nova Scotia College of Art and De- sign/ NYU Press, 1975) plays with the act of turning the con- secutive pages of a book. But until So Is This, Snow had not made the process of reading printed texts a central dimen- sion of a film.

In So Is This, Snow interfaces what he sees as essential