
Media Arts Salutes American Art

An Interview with Filmmaker Su Friedrich

Su Friedrich: Right, but I don’t think my choices are that preordained. It’s not that I start by saying it’s important to work with family or autobiography—ideas just come to me and have an urgency, and I respond to them. My earlier autobiographical film, The Fix That Bird, really has more to do with my mother’s life and the effect the Second World War had on her. It doesn’t focus that much on my relationship with her. Daunted if You Don’t (出示的由 AFA 在 1989 白令岛艺术家电影节) is autobiographical, but only in the way that most fiction is most people call on their own experiences even if they choose to speak through a fictional character. But the experience of making those two films allowed me to be more direct in Sink or Swim. Even though the form is somewhat disguised—I speak about my experiences and my father’s experiences in the third-person—it’s clear to anyone who sees it that the film is about us.

SM: Why did you decide to work with a third-person narrator?

SM: If it was too difficult to write Sink or Swim in the first person, I drafted all the film’s stories in the first person, but there was something too overwhelming... I didn’t like the sound of it, and I didn’t think it would be accessible to people. I thought it would make them too aware of me, and that the more neutral third-person narration would allow them instead to think about themselves, about their families.

SM: Had you thought at any point of using your own voice on the soundtrack rather than the girl’s?

SM: I did, but I don’t particularly like the sound of my voice, and I didn’t want it to sound too shrill through five minutes of editing. It was actually a friend’s suggestion to me a child’s voice—I had been thinking of using another woman’s voice. I thought it was a brilliant idea—it’s exactly what the film needs. I think that happens a lot—certain crowd ideas are not necessarily one’s own, but are suggested by others.

SM: But you do use your own voice in the “Alphabet Song” that ends the film when you sing “Tell me what you think of me.”

SM: Right. There’s a bit of irony in having that song end the film because the love story is about deciding not to do something risky that I associate with my father—swimming across the lake—but going back instead, to be with my friends. In effect, the text is “I’ll do what’s good for me and not what pleases him.” But then in singing that song, I say “Now I’ve said my ABCs”—in other words, I’ve told you everything—”Tell me what you think of me.” So I do ask for his approval. It was done with a sense of humor, but also with a sincere realization that in some ways you spend the rest of your life trying to overcome bad childhood experiences.

SM: Was it a difficult film emotionally to make?

SM: Extremely.

SM: Because you were dredging things up?

SM: Exactly. I felt like I was both betraying my father and exposing my feelings to the world, which
From Sink or Swim.

is a risk you often take as an artist. Of course, there is a certain gratification in that, in being able to express your feelings, since a lot of people can never say what they feel and therefore can't get any response. For me, making this film and getting such a positive response to it has been very affirming. It led me to understand that I was not alone. We tend to think of our problems as only our own, but that just isn't the case. I throw the film to a mound of people and half of them come up to you afterwards and say, "My God, that was so much like my childhood!"

SM: One of the things that's so deeply affecting about the film is that it is so even-handed. It doesn't come across as a strident denunciation of your father and the pain he inflicted on you, so much as a series of tales in which both of you are wounded because of the family structure. Was that your original plan or did the balance come as you made it?

SF: It was something that happened over time. When I started the film, I was extremely angry and imagined it as a kind of revenge against my father for all the things he had done. But I worked on this film for a long time—three months to write the text, and two years to complete production—and the more I looked at it, the more I realized how important it was to bring the other side of the story, to bring in some detail about his younger life that would explain some of his behavior as an adult. Just as there were things that happened in my childhood that made me behave as I do now, the same thing is true for him and his parents. So it was important to acknowledge that chain reaction, not necessarily to forgive him but to give him...

SM: Some sort of human nature, as opposed to simply being a monster?

SF: Yes. So I allowed a little more room for my father's past, and I wasn't as cruel as I might have been, but my intentions stayed pretty much the same. I wanted to describe very clearly certain incidents in my life, or in our life together, because I felt the father-daughter relationship in our culture was underestimated, and still is in a somewhat taboo subject. Most of the people I know have had troubled childhoods, and there has to be more understanding, particularly in the case of divorce, in order to break the cycle of dysfunctional families.

SM: How did you come to use the alphabet as your central structural element? And did your decision to link our story to each of the twenty-six letters limit you or free you in making the film?

SF: I get the alphabet idea at the very beginning. My father isilingual, and of course language is made up of the alphabet. And because the film is about storytelling and speech, I wanted to keep the alphabet in the forefront during the whole film. It's also a very vivid experiential childhood to acquire the alphabet, and then to acquire the use of work. Traditionally, the primer is meant to teach you the alphabet, but at the same time it teaches you a certain kind of sociality. So there's some irony in that. If you are doing something scary, I think it's important to have a fast structure that now feelings can fit into. I believe that having a certain amount of discipline gives you a greater freedom: that's an all-faceted way of seeing things, but it really works for me.

SM: Did you involve your immediate family at all in the planning of the film?

SF: I talked to my sister, who is a year older than I am, and my brother, who is ten years younger.

SM: So it was a 'reality check' to talk with your siblings?

SF: Definitely. Since my sister and I are close in age, we shared a lot of our experiences, and she gave me details that I hadn't remembered...

SM: How did your family respond when they saw the film?

SF: My sister and brother both liked it a lot, and found it valuable. Just as it puts certain fears of mine to rest, and clarifies certain conflicts I had with my father, it was also helpful for them. My mother and father haven't seen the film: my mother really wants to, but she hasn't managed to yet, and my father doesn't want to know anything about it. I think that a lot of people who work with autobiography—particularly with material about troubled families—imagine that by making a film, they'll find a new way of relating to their parents which will somehow heal the breach. And I think I imagined that would happen. But when it was finished, I understood it wasn't going to. I may have made it possible for people who see the film to talk with their parents, but that didn't work for me.

SM: Who was your intended audience?

SF: Because I am a woman and I was always thinking of a young girl while I was writing the stories, I had in mind young girls as my audience. But I've really been gratified that so many men have responded very well to it. Some react to it out of their memory of childhood, while others have said, "I'm the father of two teenage girls and I really appreciate this, because it makes me think about my behavior." It seems to me that I've been able to reach those viewers.