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# ***Su Friedrich: Interviews*, edited by Sonia Misra and Rox Samer. University Press of Mississippi, 2022, 192 pp.**

Sibley Labandeira

This volume from the University Press of Mississippi series *Conversations with Filmmakers* is an excellent addition to their extraordinary roster. It is the first book devoted to the work of Su Friedrich but has quickly been followed by two more: the monograph *Su Friedrich* by Barbara Menzel (2023) and, to the delight of Spanish readers, *Su Friedrich. Conversaciones con Scott MacDonald* published by the Punto de Vista Film Festival (2024).

Sonia Misra and Rox Samer gather eighteen texts, which include fifteen interviews and three pieces penned by Friedrich. Arranged chronologically, they cover four decades and offer two previously unpublished conversations, including the editors' own, which is one of the highlights of the collection. What is more, Misra and Samer go beyond what one might expect of a book of interviews, in the sense that two of the pieces are not re-prints but transcripts, in the first instance, of Episode 377 of the podcast *Filmwax Radio* and, in the second, Friedrich's recorded responses for Caroline Berler's documentary *Dykes, Camera, Action!* (2018).

As a subject, Su Friedrich is fascinating and her trajectory is impressive, with more than twenty films under her belt and counting. She is perhaps best known for *The Ties That Bind* (1984), *Sink or Swim* (1990), *Hide and Seek* (1996), and more recently *Gut Renovation* (2012). For those unaware, she has been the recipient of prestigious fellowships, such as those granted by the Guggenheim and the Rockefeller foundations, as well as multiple awards from world renowned festivals, such as the Grand Prix at the Melbourne Film Festival, the Special Jury Prize at the New York Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, or the Outstanding Documentary Feature Award at Outfest in Los Angeles. In 2015 the United States Library of Congress selected *Sink or Swim* for preservation in the National Film Registry.

*Su Friedrich: Interviews* illustrates the work of this remarkable filmmaker, whose production defies conventional classifications. In the past, most approximations to her work have been looked at from categories such as experimental cinema, documentary cinema, feminist cinema, or queer cinema. While there are reasons for different authors to claim Friedrich's work for their areas of academic interest, to leave it at that would not only be reductionist it would also be inaccurate. Misra and Samer steer clear of these kinds of simplifications, both in how they analyse the director's body of work and in their selection of interviews. Instead of leaning into one or other of these categories, the book illustrates how all those different avenues of exploration in film overlap and interact in different ways in each of Friedrich's films. One thing that becomes abundantly clear after reading the book is how limiting and futile it is to try to label Su Friedrich as anything other than a filmmaker full stop or, if you will, a great filmmaker. Yes, she uses experimental and documentary strategies, but

she combines them with more traditional storytelling techniques. Yes, we could say she works in the terrain of non-fiction, but her films are by no means conventional documentaries. She manages to be critical without being solemn or prescriptive, offering pieces that are intimate and subjective but never narcissistic. It is a fine balance that she strikes.

The introduction provides a biography painted with very broad brushstrokes. However, anyone familiar with Friedrich's work will already know some details since most of her films stem from her personal experience and go on to address the larger structures that inform that reality. She has become known for scrutinising a myriad of tangible objects and social phenomena, that may or may not be familiar to the spectator. However, her questions, conundrums, and conclusions are both far reaching and easy to identify with. The introduction does a good job of pointing out essential ideas and key moments in the filmmaker's body of work, however, it barely fleshes them out. Perhaps the idea is to let Friedrich speak for herself, as it were, through the interviews but, as a collection, the book advances with jumps and cuts. This could be understood as a mirroring of Friedrich's films, where we are always left with unanswered questions and plenty of room for interpretation, where the stories are not always linear and can only be completed in the mind of the spectator/reader. In essence, the editors give us plenty of food for thought without masticating it for us. That said, a little more context for each text would have been very welcome, especially if we take into account the shifting circumstances in which the interviews took place and how different they are in length, tone, and depth. Readers will, however, find some detail in the chronology and filmography that follow, which complement the introduction by offering clear coordinates in which to inscribe the gathered texts.

The first piece to follow this useful, yet somewhat sparse, framing is a pairing of two letters: one from Su Friedrich to long-time friend and peer Leslie Thornton and another from Thornton to Friedrich, originally published in *Idiolects* in 1983. In addition to the beauty of starting the collection with a text full of warmth and wit, it also signals something crucial in Friedrich's creative process: the important role that the people in her life play in her work. This is something that comes up time and again. While her films are very much her own, she is not insulated from what is happening around her nor does she work in isolation. She says as much in several instances, such as in the 2018 interview with Erin Trahan: "If it weren't for the people who looked at my work while it was in progress, I swear to you it wouldn't exist [...]. They're people I know really well, who are really smart, and I keep going back, rewriting, reediting, going back over and over and over. We are not good enough by ourselves" (120). The fact that she repeats anecdotes where her partner and her friends give helpful criticism and advice does not come off as redundant, but as reaffirming.

One of the highlights of the collection is the lengthy conversation between Friedrich and film scholar Scott MacDonald, which took place over several years (1986–1990). This is perhaps the best-known interview in the book, as well as the most quoted, and was included in the second volume of MacDonald's fabulous series *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*. While Friedrich is articulate and generous in all her interviews, this one stands out because it conveys a special kind of rapport. Friedrich expands copiously on her early films, their genesis, their production, and their circulation. She shares her thoughts on touchy subjects, fears, and resistances. She delves into her love for editing, her affinity for both structural films and traditional storytelling. She clearly states the influence of art history, conceptual art, and minimal art as well as the women's movement. Also, this text reveals how it is of paramount importance for her to be direct and honest about her emotional experiences, but at the same time to be analytical, and how that might be why her films have been credited

with a universal appeal. For her, this is directly related to her experience as a woman: “Historically, it’s been the position of a lot of male artists to insist that they are speaking universally, that they’re describing experiences outside of their own and thereby being transcendent. I think conversely that you get to something that’s universal by being very specific” (34).

This interview is followed by another noteworthy text from 1988, Friedrich’s own article “Does Radical Content Deserve Radical Form?”. In it, she painstakingly explains her position to this very difficult question; a question that had also been put to other major filmmakers, such as Barbara Hammer and Abigail Child, within the context of a panel discussion of the *Forum on Radical Form: Radical Content*. Friedrich’s response as well as those of her colleagues were published in *Millennium Journal* but no further details of the panel or of the resulting texts are given. Nonetheless, it is a beautiful piece that reveals Friedrich’s complex and nuanced view of the filmic medium, as she explains how she finds the slogan “radical content requires radical form” to be too oppressive and too abstract.

She again shows her distance to radical positionings and limiting categories in her text “Film Buffs Are Film Buffs No Matter Whom They Sleep With” from 2008—which follows two interviews from 1997 centred on her movie *Hide and Seek* (1996). This film about lesbian childhood weaves together three distinct audiovisual discourses: interviews with adult lesbians recounting memories from their childhood, the fictional story of Lou, a twelve-year-old who is discovering feelings for her best friend, set in the 1960s, and archival educational films of that era directed to schoolchildren in their transition to adulthood. It is after this film when Friedrich has to confront with even more intensity how others slap different labels on her work, such as independent filmmaker, experimental filmmaker, or lesbian filmmaker. Friedrich insists, “I sort of wish we could just talk about film” (55).

The remaining twelve interviews, that is two thirds of the book, are dedicated to Friedrich’s work in the twenty-first century. According to the editors, Friedrich is best known for her films from the 1980s and 1990s, while most of the films she has released in the 2000s have received less attention. While it might be true that these later films are much understudied, which is one of the main contentions of the book, the result is a bit lopsided. As one might expect, most of these later conversations go back and forth discussing Friedrich’s most recent films in comparison with her best-known works of the 1980s and 1990s.

As the interviews progress, they gain a retrospective quality without shying away from current circumstances, as for example when Giovanni Marchini Camia in his 2016 interview talks about the zeitgeist of “laying yourself bare” in social media. Again, Friedrich avoids any kind of simplification. She articulates a defence of self-exposition, stating that “[t]he idea of making very personal films, laying oneself bare, is interesting, because if I read Dickens or Jane Austen, or if I see a film by Agnès Varda or Steven Spielberg—to me all art is laying oneself bare [...]. We’re always laying ourselves bare when we make work. I just do it more obviously” (101). That is not to say that the current digital context does not present important challenges. In her words: “Everything is media! Now everything is conveyed through a moving image. The carefully selected, thought-about, worked-over thing that we have known as film starts to become part of this big swamp of images. It does make me feel like people will have less and less of an ability to differentiate between the two” (101). However, there is a big difference between the superficial navel-gazing that seems to invade every nook and cranny of social media and what Friedrich does in her films, and how she does it. She could be seen as

an essayist in the tradition of Michel de Montaigne, trying and testing ideas, speaking her mind freely, declaring the measure of her sight more than the measure of things themselves.

The collection ends with two unpublished pieces, an interview by Allison Ross and the editors' own interview, both from 2020. The former discusses Friedrich's early films in their relation to the notions of collective memory, expression of desire, and the element of chance, both in life and in movie making. The latter is the final text and is perhaps the only conversation that comes near to the playfulness and camaraderie of MacDonald's superb interview. Done over a videocall in the midst of quarantine, it addresses areas of Friedrich's career that seem to have fallen by the wayside in previous conversations. It achieves this not only by mentioning films that have not received a great deal of attention, like *Practice Makes Perfect* (2012) or *Head of a Pin* (2004), in which Samer has located an unexpected connection to *Hide and Seek*, but also, by addressing Friedrich's experience as a film professor at Princeton University and how it has affected her filmmaking. Indeed, this last matter has not been raised before and Friedrich agrees it is not by any means trivial. While she is aware of how fortunate she has been in securing a position at Princeton University, she also is quite candid about the toll it takes.

The editors also dedicate some very necessary space to two websites Friedrich is responsible for: one dedicated to the work of film director William Greaves and the other, *Edited by*, devoted to the work of women film editors that have, "invented, developed, fine-tuned and revolutionized the art of film editing" as stated on the homepage of the site. Launched in 2019, it reflects one the greatest paradoxes in film history, and in film studies, which is the obvious and declared importance of montage in cinema vs the scant attention paid to film editors. When one looks at the history of film editing, as Friedrich did, what one discovers is a fascinating story, and a story where women have played a decisive role.

In conclusion, the book might not be exhaustive, but it offers a substantive and interesting mapping that will be satisfactory to those who are familiar with Friedrich's work and is a great resource for those who are not. Friedrich comes across as sceptically humorous and affable, she speaks directly and matter-of-factly, she is giving but with a healthy portion of no-nonsense. The overall impression is not only that Su Friedrich is a unique filmmaker who merits more scholarly research, but also that her activism, erudition, and skills as a researcher are put to the service of endeavours that go beyond her filmography. Most importantly, Friedrich's films and diverse undertakings remind us how film (and video) can be a powerful tool for social, cultural, and political critique.

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