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Pushing the boundaries of the historical documentary: Su Friedrich's 1984 *The Ties That Bind*

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This article argues that Su Friedrich's 1984 film *The Ties That Bind* employs what were at the time atypical forms and techniques to push the limits of the traditional historical documentary. Its aesthetic experimentation helps to redefine the idea of historical representation in film, and does so mainly by treating evidence as both partial (in both senses of the word) and contingent, offering a radical challenge to normative history and destabilizing the notion of history as authority. Unlike conventional documentaries, the film marks its own limitations: its inability to provide stable answers or eternal certainties. Questioning her mother's spoken memories, and commenting on them, Friedrich forces a rupture in the 'evidence' of history and establishes a place in which to 'speak' herself. By including the past that her mother is talking about on the sound track, as well as the present on the image track (such as images of her mother's life in the early 1980s, images of intertitles etched into the film emulsion revealing the questions Friedrich asked her mother and her reactions to the things her mother said, as well as images of the filmmaker's visits to historical sites), Friedrich brings the present into the past, and demonstrates how history is, to quote Walter Benjamin, 'time filled with the presence of the now'.

Keywords: history; historiography; memory; evidence; historical documentary; documentary experimentation

An anonymous scholar reviewing a book proposal on documentary aesthetics took umbrage at one of the works to be discussed, Su Friedrich's 1984 *The Ties That Bind*, which, in his or her opinion, certainly did not belong in the book as it was more avant-garde than documentary. This essay suggests Friedrich's black and white film employs forms and techniques that were unusual at the time in order to push the limits of the traditional historical documentary and to confront us with our desire for reassuring

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narratives. The aesthetics it employs help to redefine the idea of historical representation, and do so chiefly by treating evidence as both partial (in both senses of the word) and contingent, consequently destabilizing the notion of history as authority. Unlike conventional documentaries, the film also marks its own limitations: its inability to provide stable answers or eternal certainties.

We will be arguing that *The Ties That Bind* enters into a political struggle with the means of representation, and by doing so offers what was a fresh perspective on the representation of history. Although academic history had entered into new areas of focus and entertained new methodologies, as Robert A. Rosenstone laments, the means of presenting their findings seldom deviated from traditional norms (Rosenstone 2004, 1). Hayden White, a decade before Su Friedrich made her film, had pointed out the prevalence of narrative forms in history writing. Yet there had been few experiments in new forms of emplotment in history writing, and only the beginnings of such formal experimentations in history filmmaking (Rosenstone 1995, 198–225). Because Friedrich was concerned with the politics of representation, because she was concerned with the political effects of representation, and because she suspended many of the conventions of documentary representation that are based on the presumption that cinema can represent reality, her formal and stylistic experimentation is, as Laura Marks remarks in another context, ‘thus not incidental but integral’ to the film (Marks 2000, 1).¹ By ignoring the ideal of transparency, by foregrounding an awareness of the decisions and choices she has made in the selection and combination of sounds and images, Friedrich shares with her viewer the fact that her documentary is not simply a reflection of reality, but a material reality in its own right.

Friedrich describes *The Ties That Bind* as a personal investigation of her mother’s life (Friedrich 1985, 890). In it, she questions her mother, Lore Bucher, about her life in Germany during the rise of Hitler, World War II, the American occupation, and her later years, after marrying, moving to the United States, and then separating from her husband. But personal recollections are, as Henri Bergson has written, fugitive (Bergson 1991, 106). Whether voluntary or not, buried in routine, or habitually unnoticed, they materialize in fleeting moments, often for a specific occasion. Marita Sturken notes that the camera image fixes an event ‘at a single moment’. Yet unlike recorded images, ‘memories do not remain static through time—they are reshaped and reconfigured, they fade and are rescripted’ (Sturken 1997, 21).

In their reconstruction memories morph; fragments are remembered, added to, and modified as time goes on. Teshome Gabriel writes of visiting his birthplace in Ethiopia to see his aged mother after a 32-year absence. Before leaving the US he went shopping and bought the latest technology: still cameras, video, sound recorders. But he returned back to US without taking a single picture:

I did not need the magic of cinematic representation and scripted narrative to stand in for me; a whole different level of creating traces began to occur [. . .] I am now able, when the need arises, to . . . tell vignettes of my trip to Africa, to keep reshooting it, renarrativizing it; that is, I can keep retelling the story and readapting it according to prevailing circumstances and situations . . . [T]he memory of a lived experience is anything but fixed (Gabriel 1998, 76–77).

For Gabriel, memories are reshaped as they are retold, constantly being revised, rewritten, overlaid with commentary, narrativized.

Sometimes our memories are grounded in the variability of our imagination. Richard Fung tells us in *My Mother's Place* (Fung 1990) of visiting the place where his mother grew up, Moruga, in southern Trinidad: 'I had remembered going there as a child. I had a strong image of a beach and I could see across [to] Venezuela. On this trip home, I realized I had never actually been there. I'd invented the memory'.

Bergson thinks of memory as the definitive example of the relation of the reality of spirit and the reality of matter (Bergson 1991, 9). And memory can make clear the temporal relation between the moment of the events recalled and the moment of the narrative that reports it. As the daughter asks in the here and now, the mother remembers the absent there and then. The necessity to report, to externalize the memory, brings forth the recollections. Memory, then, is an act, an act that takes place in the present (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer 1999). As Susan Engel puts it, 'One creates the memory at the moment one needs it' (Engel 1999, 6).

One might say then, that Lore Bucher's memories come to light, are 'exercised', when provoked by her daughter's questions.² And the answers, the oral testimony, the traces of the past brought to the present and the feelings about that past, are addressed to someone specific: the daughter.³ So the daughter might be seen equally as contributor to and interpreter of her mother's stories.

By questioning her non-Jewish German mother as well as herself as a German-American, Su Friedrich is not aiming to reach some exhaustive or absolute truth about the Second World War in Germany, but vestiges of the past in the present that will help her (and her spectators) to understand the one by the other. By interrogating her mother's spoken memories, and by commenting on them, Friedrich forces a rupture in the evidence and establishes a place in which to 'speak'. But she is not creating an empty space where no history is possible; rather, she is creating a space where histories can meet and mingle. In this view, history is not excavation; it is a narrative of the past. Such narratives contain conditions for individual and contemporary histories. Any history, then, is intrinsically 'one's own'.

'Before I made *The Ties That Bind*', Friedrich explains in an interview with Scott MacDonald, 'I had such bad feelings about being a German, being the daughter of a German [. . .] I don't think that I trusted the material I had. When I was working on the film, I told myself to stop worrying [. . .] to

stop disbelieving [my mother], to trust her' (MacDonald 1998, 8). Soon after the film was released, Friedrich said that she now realized that her own shame kept her from finding out more about Germany when she was younger: 'The more I learn, the more questions arise; making this film is just the beginning of a long process [...]' (Friedrich 1985, 890). In this respect, Su Friedrich's journey is more memorable as enunciation than epiphany. Her personal search for German history, as Linda Williams proposes about many contemporary documentaries, should be defined not as a search for an essence, a truth, but as 'a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths' (Williams 2005, 65).

Friedrich's aim in this film, then, is not for discursive transparency. Rather, *The Ties That Bind* is an elastic conversation between syntax and semantics. And Friedrich's personal search does not replace unacknowledged authority with her own personal authority; it strikes the foundations of authority itself, the very notion of authority, and challenges its constitution.⁴ The referential function of Friedrich's sounds and images is consequently freed 'from [their] false identification with the phenomenal world and from [their] assumed authority as a means of cognition about that world'.⁵

What is at issue, then, is not the inability to represent history, but the adoption of a critical stance that promotes consciousness of the collision of histories when making the past one's own. When we seek out a past, when we form histories, we are adapting that past to our own intention. In this understanding, it is inevitable that one takes a past and makes it one's own, infusing it with one's own intentions.⁶ If this were a fiction film, we might say that it is as interested in story telling as it is in telling a story. Yet documentaries, too, are interested in story telling. As Hayden White and others have pointed out, it is common to think of the fiction writer fabricating his or her stories and the historian 'finding' them in the socio-historic world. This, however, 'obscures the extent to which "invention" also plays a part in the historian's operations' (White 1973, 6–7).⁷

Writing about documentary, Trinh T. Minh-hà suggests that the truth is not 'out there' for us 'in here'. Yet the power of the conventional documentary, like that of conventional history, derives its impact in part from its ability to bring reality 'out there' to us 'in here'. This, Trinh says, is based on a positivistic perspective and the Cartesian division of subject and object, and 'perpetuates a dualistic inside-versus-outside' view of the world. (Trinh 1990, 83). The knowing subject controls the object known. It is this 'stepping back', the so-called objective view, which gives the conventional historical documentary its authority. Several documentaries have challenged this kind of authority, such as, for example, Trinh's own *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), as well as Chris Marker's *A Grain Without a Cat* / *Le fond de l'air est rouge* (1978), Jill Godmilow's *Far from Poland* (1984), John Akomfrah's *Handsworth Songs* (1986), Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory*

(1991), Mindy Faber's *Delirium* (1993), or, more recently, Rithy Panh's *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine/S21: La machine de mort Khmère rouge* (2003), Péter Forgács's *El Perro Negro: Stories from the Spanish War* (2005), and Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia for the Light/Nostalgia de la luz* (2010).

At the same time, however, other progressive works, no less ideological or political, have employed more traditional historical practices. Even today, most historical documentaries demonstrate very little epistemological skepticism and rely on overt or implied truth claims to engage and persuade viewers. Take, for instance, a recent Kurdish documentary, Çayan Demirel's *Prison No. 5/5 No.lu Cezaevi* (2009). The video explores the violent measures taken against dissidents following the 1980 Turkish *coup d'état*. It relies on the testimony of the victims. History resides in the memories of these witnesses and, thanks to Demirel, it is now out in the open. The discursive nature of testimony – indeed, the discursive nature of memory – is ignored, because to discuss it would be to undermine its status as an unquestionable ground for explanation. The documentary maker's job is to discover the truth and reveal the past. And the video does, indeed, offer a new version of the truth. The new evidence presented requires a new interpretation of the version of history sanctioned by the state. In *Prison No. 5*, history is ultimately knowable. Meaning is meant to be clear. And from the new interpretations Demirel offers, viewers are invited to make informed judgments.

Or, going back to the 1980s, consider the example of Connie Field's iconic *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*. Rather than problematizing the concept of historical knowledge, the film presents sequences from World War II propaganda films that encouraged and honored women in the war industries, and intercuts them with interviews with five 'Rosies', who testify to very different motives and circumstances. One history replaces another. The old one was false; the new one accurate.

What *The Ties That Bind* offers us is access to the way Friedrich approaches her mother's testimony. It also puts forward, in Prathama Banerjee's lovely phrase, 'the unfinished nature of the past' (Banerjee 2002, 18), thus mobilizing that past to challenge the authority of not only 'history', but the present as well.

Friedrich's documentary affects this challenge via an expressive separation of sound and image. This separation does not privilege any one information track. The sound track does not drive the image. And the visuals, no matter how interesting, do not generally 'mean' anything on their own. Her aesthetics open up our sense of history to uncertainty and to multiple authorities. If, as Anton Kaes suggests, historical images circulate in an endless cycle, an endless loop, validating and reconfirming each other, the history we are presented with here differs (Kaes 1989, 196). It is not meant to conquer memory, to conform to conventions, or proclaim itself truth. If the 'historiographical operation', to use Paul Ricoeur's term (2006, 325), consists of documentary proof (here testimony, often moving

testimony), a coming to understanding (beyond 'knowledge'), and then the historian's representation of that understanding, *The Ties That Bind* has some questions about that second stage, and is reluctant to enter the third. The film never represents history, even Friedrich's history, in a definitive way. We get information on the sound track, and generally very different information on the image track. In an undated 'Statement of Purpose' on her homepage, the filmmaker writes:

Of course the fun part is taking so many disparate bits of sound and image and forcing them into a sometimes uneasy alliance. Each element becomes something other than what it is when it's alone, and sometimes the joining of elements produces an effect, a meaning, a movement or an emotion that I didn't anticipate.

The relative independence of the various filmic elements, while it allows us to see each from a new perspective, also undermines the persuasiveness of each. This lack of articulacy can be frustrating. But it can also stimulate (and liberate) the imagination by teaching us to embrace the 'disorder inherent in every order', especially the notion of evocation, rather than analysis, and the instability of multiple authorities.⁸

In the beginning of the 55-minute film, after titles that introduce brief facts about Lore Bucher to the audience, we hear a woman's voice saying, 'Well, for example, when I learned the first time about Nazis was, of course, when you were told in the papers [...] The image that appears on the screen is from a camera moving towards the exit of a tunnel. As the woman continues to tell her story (her brothers were at first sympathetic toward the Nazis), we see footage of little girls on the shore, then, as she continues to talk about her family's feelings about the very difficult times after World War I and Hitler's many promises, we see hands turning pages of advertisements in *The New York Times Magazine* until they stop to paint a 'Hitler moustache' on the photo of a male fashion model. We still have not seen an image of the woman speaking. Then nearly 25 seconds of silence, and the image of hands opening the box of a kit for a scale model of a Bavarian-style house. The instructions. Laying out the parts to be constructed. When the voice begins again, it begins with the word 'and'. The woman begins to talk about the stock market crash, the depression, and then inflation. The image we see is of mountains and snow, with condensation on the camera lens. Then birds in the sky. A partial image from a wrestling match on television comes next. This is followed by black as the voice says, 'It's terrifying!' When the image returns, it is a partial shot of Lore Bucher, a knee, an arm, a hand, a telephone cord (see Figure 1.) The image changes to the beach again, as the voiceover recounts her family's reaction to Hitler. This time the picture is of a much closer shot of legs and hands in the sand. More black leader. Then an interior shot of bare feet and the telephone cord, as the voiceover talks about one of her brothers wanting



Figure 1.

join the Party, and her father stepping in to say, 'Absolutely not'. Back to the house kit. We are three minutes into the film and have yet to see Lore Bucher's face. Later we do see her talking on the phone, swimming, playing the piano, working in an office, eating breakfast [...] But the sound never appears to be derived from the image. And only toward the end of the film do we see footage from the historical moment discussed on the soundtrack: home movie footage of Lore Bucher and Paul Friedrich in the early days of their union, a visible presence of an absence, the blissful couple.

Scott MacDonald praises the perceptual and conceptual intersecting of visual and auditory imagery in the opening sequence, and Friedrich's 'consistent refusal' to use synchronized sound as a 'complex and suggestive' weaving of cinematic elements (MacDonald 1988, 107). The filmmaker herself wrote about wanting to make 'as many demands as possible on the medium' (Friedrich 1989–90, 123). She thinks of herself as 'playing' with the film's materiality, the frame, surface, and rhythm (MacDonald 1992, 308).

Along with her radical separation of sound and image, a separation that draws attention to the filmmaker's selection of the sounds and her formal contributions to the film's visuals, Friedrich 'speaks' through intertitles hand-scratched into the film's emulsion.⁹ They appear slowly, word by word, as if to mimic her thought process.¹⁰ They divulge her motivations, the questions she was asking her mother, and her reactions to the things her mother said: 'When I was a kid I never understood why my mother hated fireworks so much'; 'I can't remember the war stories she told me when I was young. But I remember looking a lot at a big picture book of the Second World War'; '[...] didn't anyone try to sabotage the Nazi's orders?'; 'But why did they come and drag you out of the house?'; 'When my mother saw

the photos [of her childhood home] she said, “How awful! They removed all the shutters and window boxes”.’

Like silent film intertitles, these interrupt the narrative flow. But they are not the only images in this heterogeneous mix that disrupt the narrative flow. The titles themselves are sometimes interrupted by photographic images. (Lore Bucher watching the military on parade, for example, in the middle of the title about her hating fireworks.) And unlike many silent film intertitles, these titles have a known origin. It is a form of narration that engraves, rather than effaces, its source. When she proffers her interpretations of her mother’s testimony, when she expresses her thoughts and feelings, Friedrich is ‘speaking’ directly to the spectators, bypassing her mother. By communicating to viewers through the image track, the filmmaker pushes audience members to interpret and question what she and we get from the audio track, from Lore Bucher’s testimony.

These titles sometimes talk back to the testimony, weighing and evaluating it. Most documentaries that rely on testimony, the words of those who were there when the events happened, omit that which seems doubtful or does not fit with the filmmaker’s point of view. *The Ties That Bind* is an exception. Friedrich describes the film as ‘a dialogue’ (Friedrich 1985, 891). Besides interrogating her mother, she comments on the answers, sometimes even questioning their veracity. We hear, for example, her mother’s voice insisting, over images of barbed wire:

It was the main leaders of the countries that knew. But the people did *not* know. And I will say this to the end of my day, we did *not* know the Jews were gassed or killed. They were put into concentration camps; that is all we knew.

Then a title asks: ‘So you did know about the camps?’ The voice continues: ‘We, our family, knew of one camp and that was Dachau. And at Dachau, according to the investigation, only at the very end of the war were there killings’. The titles return with vehemence, in capitals and larger than usual: ‘NO’. Then they read: ‘from 1933–45, 30,000 people were either shot, killed in medical experiments, or worked to death’.¹¹

What is at stake here is not the evidence of reality but the reality of evidence: Lore Bucher is a partial, contingent witness. As a result, knowledge, too, is not only partial and contingent, but also contestable. This is an attempt at understanding, at gaining insight, an attempt to determine what is valid. Instead of visualizing memory, Friedrich interrogates it.

But it is not a matter of distinguishing between reliable and unreliable information. We do not need to decide what is and is not trustworthy. We always know that what we hear is autobiographically certified and hardly disengaged. History, like memory, cannot be fixed; it is always created anew; it is always in the process of becoming, always incomplete. Paul Ricoeur writes of a ‘circle’ of interpretation, as propositions become material for

subsequent explanation, and subject to re-writing (Ricoeur 2006, 321). He also writes that history's point of departure is testimony and the critique of testimony; this is what gives credibility to our understandings of the past (Ricoeur 2006, 278). But a verbal representation of some part of the past, like we hear in this film, is always rhetorical and therefore interpretative. And it is always tied up with forgetting. (Memories are, in Henry Rousso's words, a 'structuring of forgetfulness'; Rousso 1991,4.) Some aspects of past experiences go unnoticed. Nevertheless, we remember; we remember, so we won't forget. And we testify so that others won't forget. Friedrich's images, too, are partial, selective, and certainly not disinterested. 'Traditionally', she has written, 'a documentary would [...] be shot in sharp focus with good sound, would be edited for maximum clarity and information-dispensing, and would in the broadest sense be seen as a truthful and comprehensive portrait of a people or place made from as neutral advantage point as possible' (Friedrich 2009, 23). But this documentary is not concerned with sharp focus, clarity, dispensing information, or neutrality. Some footage is optically printed to slow the images down, distort their speed, elongate them, stretching them so we see their duration, extending (rather than arresting) time. The image is more than a visible sign functioning to illustrate her mother's life. To read the visuals is to read gaps, partial images, barely legible images, black leader. Like the expressive quality of the handwritten intertitles, this footage emphasizes the materiality of the image itself, the sensuality of film stock and the eloquence of impermanence.

Framing is another way Friedrich 'speaks'. Her framing calls attention to the film's formal properties, and hence to the filmmaker herself, her authorial 'voice'. By calling attention to themselves, these shots make us aware of the discontinuities between sound and image, so that any seemingly fixed meanings of historical authority become increasingly unstable and uncertain. Su Friedrich's images avoid an authoritative identification with the phenomenal world, but perhaps more importantly, with the gaps, partial images, barely legible images, and black leader, the filmmaker defies her own authority. Ideology and text are both apparent, and overwhelm any sense of untainted, unmediated history.

For many in the audience this may be an epistemological confusion. We are used to seeing history as a coherent narrative, progressively framed. Yet it would seem that for Friedrich, this is performatively impossible, as the historical narrative, like any other narrative, necessarily contains selection and reconfiguration, and any forward thrust is artificially imposed.¹² Her work, her disorder, is, of course, also artificially imposed. But it doesn't hide behind the conceit of coherence or a fixed ground.

The image that follows the statistics of Dachau is the most conventionally framed shot in the film, a four-second portrait of her mother from the waist

up, a 2/3 profile leaning on her fist in silence (see Figure 2). When we describe this as the most conventionally framed shot, we mean to draw attention to the fact that in *The Ties That Bind*, we never see documentary's traditional 'talking head'; the image of someone testifying. The images that accompany the spoken word in fact never match, not even in time. The sounds we hear are the memories of what Lore Bucher went through during the Third Reich, her teen years and young adulthood, and the early years of her marriage. The orality of her testimony is compelling. The inflections, the volume and rhythm of her speech, tell us how she would like to be understood. 'And I will say this to the end of my day, we did *not* know [...]' It would not be erroneous, then, to say that we might identify the sound track with the mother and the image track with the daughter. In arranging the sound/image relations in this manner, Su Friedrich not only breaks with the conventions of the direct sound interview, one of the mainstays of documentary, she also brings the past to the present and the present to the past. The sound tells us of the past; however, the images we are provided with through most of the film belong to the present. Even stills of university students Hans and Sophie Scholl, Willi Graf, Christoph Probst, Alexander Schmorell, and Professor Kurt Huber, members of the White Rose resistance movement, who surreptitiously composed and distributed anti-government leaflets, were re-photographed for the film. And archival footage of the destruction of German cities in the Second World War was shot from the screen during Friedrich's 1982 trip to Germany.¹³ The images of a concentration camp were shot



Figure 2.

during the same journey. A past represented in a present image: a past presented in a new context, still viable, but displaced (Gabriel 1998, 81).

As Lore Bucher tells of the atrocities she experienced in her past, the images on the screen are frequently characteristic of the present day, suggesting the potential for more atrocities. As she talks about her dark memories of the Second World War, Su Friedrich inserts newspaper headlines which report President Reagan's call for 'Star Wars' arms, reports of a rise of anti-Semitism in the present-day United States, as well as a mass mailing 'urgent message' appealing for help 'to do something' about these injustices. The little scale-model Bavarian home, once constructed, is stomped to bits by huge black boots, more fashionable than military, then set afire. The film has no images of Nazi soldiers, but several of US military and police. By bringing the present and the past to the audience at the same time, Friedrich wants us to see the prolongation of impenetrable darkness, as not in the past, but in the very present day.

By including the past that her mother is talking *about* on the sound track, and the present on the visual track (images of her mother's life in the early 1980s, images of intertitles etched into the film emulsion, as well as images of the filmmaker's visits to her mother's hometown, Dachau, and antiwar protests), Friedrich brings the present into that past, and demonstrates Walter Benjamin's contention that history is not empty time, but 'time filled with the presence of the now' (Benjamin 1992, 261).

Friedrich's history begins *in media res*, and never arrives at a point of closure, denying authoritative resolution to the issues the film raises, and passing on to the spectator the responsibility to see the correlations between the past of people who lived before and the present of those who live today.¹⁴ The film doesn't promise completeness, it doesn't smooth over inconsistency, incoherences, or loose ends. For Friedrich, the struggles are ongoing. And by providing examples of action that can be taken, such as the demonstrations against the nuclear buildup, she proposes a connection not only with the past and present, but also with her mother, herself, and audience members, and maybe even with possible changes in the future. She scratches on the surface of the film emulsion, 'And after I blame the Germans', then in capitals, 'OR WISH THAT MY MOTHER COULD HAVE DONE SOME THING, ANY THING', and then, 'I ask myself what I would have done', establishing an association with her family and herself, and what we, as the viewers, can do about the atrocities of the present day. A moving camera shot of an auto repair shop displays a sign that is hard to read. Friedrich circles it, then supplies an explanation: 'The sign says, "Nuke them until they glow, then shoot them in the dark"'. Clearly there is work to be done. We cannot, however, assume that once illuminated, darkness will go away. Su Friedrich uses formal means, a 'complex network of

interconnections', in MacDonald's words, to entreat the audience to join in (MacDonald 1988, 108). By presenting history in all its intricacy, by creating and presenting competing truths, by using formal means that encourage the viewers to actively participate in constructing their own meanings, she entreats her audience to join in.

Her willful creation of history is blatantly based on personal concerns. Unlike Rea Tajiri in *History and Memory* or John Akomfrah in *Handsworth Songs*, Friedrich does not seem to feel a responsibility to represent a community. And unlike Faber in *Delirium*, she doesn't seem to feel the need to represent a gender. If fantasies and dreams contribute to her history, they are personal fantasies and personal dreams. Friedrich writes in her 'Statement of Purpose' on her homepage,

Being specific to a person, a place, an event is a great challenge; it's tempting to spin off into theories or generalizations, but what little I've managed to observe of human nature leads me to think most of us don't fit into whatever categories have been created.

Yet it would be wrong to say that this search is limited to the history of Friedrich's family, because Friedrich not only questions her mother's past, but the present day as well. This leads the film to establish a link to current political platforms. Films freeze moments (mummify them, André Bazin says), but rather than memorializing her mother's life by freezing moments of the past, Friedrich complicates that life by bringing it into the present. In other words, in attempting to come to terms with her history, Friedrich refuses to draw a teleological line from the past to the present, 'a line', as Harvey Nosowitz puts it, 'that would allow us to see history as an inexorable fate, a looming backdrop against which millions of individual lives are played' (Nosowitz 1984). By ridding history of its fatalism, Su Friedrich encourages decision-makers, her fellow citizens, to consider how one might bring about changes. As Rosenstone has written about one of Péter Forgács's films, there is a certain modesty implied, a willingness to let the viewer decide what lessons to take away from the history offered (Rosenstone 2006, 87). Perhaps it is true that films cannot change the world. But Friedrich is banking, optimistically, on the notion that they can change the way we think about the world.

Filmmaker Alexander Kluge notes that 'A documentary film is shot with three cameras: 1) the camera in the technical sense; 2) the filmmaker's mind; and 3) the generic patterns of the documentary film, which are founded on the expectations of the audience that patronizes it' (quoted in Trinh, 1990, 88). Friedrich eschews this last 'camera' and puts both expectation and representation under scrutiny. Just as documentary aesthetics have come to represent 'truth' in fiction film, Friedrich's anti-transparent aesthetics might be viewed as manipulation, and consequently not 'factual'. But not following validated techniques does not mean

that her work is nonfactual.¹⁵ On the contrary, she is redefining what kinds of evidence might be acceptable in a documentary, and what kinds of evidence might contribute to our understanding of her mother's history. And because Su Friedrich decentralizes authority, gives history an artificial look, and lets us see how her real is produced, that anonymous reviewer did not seem to think that *The Ties That Bind* could be a documentary.

In a 1987 interview, Trinh T. Minh-hà, when asked which genre her work was, experimental or documentary, replied that she doesn't see them as separate entities at all (Trinh 1987,15). Friedrich's film would seem to be giving the same response *avant la lettre*. But Friedrich herself thinks of the film as solely documentary.¹⁶ Commenting on the term 'experimental documentary', she wrote:

It would be far better if we called our work documentaries and let the traditionalists squirm in their seats (or coffins) at having something so "experimental" assert itself as, simply, a documentary. Why should they be the ones to dictate how one goes about documenting the world? Why are their works "documentaries" and ours "experimental documentaries"? That just serves to limit the field and to make people think in a limited or simplistic way about a huge body of films—as if some are "true" (proper, authentic, etc.) and others are efforts to undermine (or correct) the traditional ones, when in fact there are so many complicated ways to group, categorize and analyze the field [...] Why do we need "experimental documentary" [...] when what people are doing is simply revising, enlivening, challenging, having a dialogue with, and *therefore carrying on or contributing to* the evolution of [the genre]? (Friedrich 2009, 22–3, italics in the original)

Rosenstone writes of the notion of encountering the past as a site of the sublime, 'something which may be experienced in flashes but never explained' (Rosenstone 2006, 86). Friedrich's history revises, enlivens, and challenges traditional representations of history, pushing the boundaries of the historical documentary in ways that confront our perceptions of historical experience, the conventions of historical narratives, indeed, even the notion that history is in the past. Her film is a historical documentary that never tries to explain, is aware of its limitations, and revels in the play of indeterminacy and its articulation. The indefinite past comes to meet the indistinct present, the connection between the two no less formidable than the ties that bind a mother and daughter, a citizen to her motherland, or memories to the vicissitudes of representation.

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Notes

1. See also Kobena Mercer (1994).
2. The term is Paul Ricoeur's (2006, 56).
3. '[M]emories', writes Engel, 'must find an audience to become part of history' (Engel 1999, 154). Audience members, in a sense, then 'borrow' the nuances, textures, and immediacy of those personal memories as they transform them into 'history', (Engel 1999, 158).
4. See Trinh T. Minh-hà (1990, 89).
5. See Trinh T. Minh-hà (1990, 78). Trinh is speaking about language and theory.
6. See Bakhtin's discussion of language as a 'shot though with intentions and accents' (Bakhtin 1981, 293–4).
7. As Tzvetan Todorov and others have pointed out, the notion of history as interpretation and invention is not new. What is new is the valorization of the notion, 'the feeling of euphoria that now accompanies the pronouncement' (Todorov 1995; Trouillot 1995, 5).
8. The phrase 'disorder inherent in every order', is Trinh's (1990, 95).
9. In a few instances, words also appear on top of an image.
10. Some of the descriptions of the film appeared previously in Spence and Navarro (2011). We thank Vinicius Navarro and Rutgers University Press for permission to use them again here.
11. David Lowenthal writes that the ultimate uncertainty of history makes us anxious to validate that things were as reputed, the established truths (Lowenthal 1985). In this sense, it might, as Brian Winston has suggested in conversation, be interesting to think what pleasures or displeasures audience members might have felt as Lore Bucher made those statements about Dachau.
12. See Ricoeur (2006, 448) and Robert A. Rosenstone (1995, 55–61).
13. Email correspondence with Su Friedrich, 17 May 2010. In 'Alles und Noch Viel Mehr', she said that the footage was screened at the Ulm City Archives (891). The footage shot during the trip was transferred from Super-8mm to 16mm for the film. See MacDonald (1993, 102–11).
14. One can imagine that this would have special resonance for members of her audience today who object to the US incursions into Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.
15. The phrases 'representation under scrutiny' and 'validated techniques', are Trinh's (1990, 90 and 85, respectively).
16. Conversation with Spence, Flaherty Film Seminar, August 1990.

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