

## **Homeland Insecurity: revisiting Su Friedrich's *The Ties That Bind* (1985)**

by [Miranda Wilson](#)

In early 2025, U.S. State Senator Bradford Blackmon introduced the Contraception Begins At Erektion Act to the Mississippi State Legislature. Described by BillTrack50 as “a provocative legislative attempt to regulate male reproductive activities, potentially as a satirical response to or commentary on restrictive reproductive health legislation”, the Act proposed hefty fines for “ejaculation without fertilization”. Unsurprisingly its progress through the state legislature was short-lived but the Act served its intended purpose, attracting global media attention and highlighting not only the inconsistencies in the ways male and female bodies are made subject to regulation but the strategic value of precisely targeted irreverence as a means of drawing attention to how social space is produced, understood and lived. As Senator Blackmon observed: “people can get up in arms and call it absurd, I can’t say that bothers me” (Marquez par. 7) – in other words, drawing attention to absurdity was the point. Underpinning Blackmon’s legislative mockery is an urgency for action, a recognition and defiance of a creeping antipathy toward human rights generally and gender rights specifically that is being sanctioned and emboldened by the openly authoritarian inclinations of the current U.S. administration. Among many other curtailments of human rights being vaunted daily, Trumpism associates itself with the expansion of legislative powers that proscribe reproductive autonomy, as of December 2024 abortion was banned in 12 U.S. states (KFF).

In common with inventive and irreverent Democrat lawmakers, finding an effective means of responding to the inconsistencies, threats and absurdities of Trumpism is a pressing concern for documentary filmmakers and theorists. U.S. documentary cinema has its own traditions of hard-hitting works of provocation, and the rich legacy of feminist avant-garde film is an abundant resource from which to draw both inspiration and courage. Here I consider the particular relevance to the current historical moment of Su Friedrich’s *The Ties That Bind*, an innovative, intimate documentary that makes evident the very ordinary ways through which authoritarianism (in this case fascism in Germany in the 1930s and 40s) can establish itself. The film makes a compelling argument for an understanding of history as present and proximate in our everyday lives. Historian Robert O. Paxton argues that the storming of the Capitol on Jan 6, 2021 has made unequivocal the parallels between Trumpism and fascism (par 5). Looking again now at Friedrich’s work provides a reminder not only of the insight and virtuosity of this filmmaker but of the enduring relevance of a film that, forty years after it was made, offers us ways of understanding, contextualising and responding to the resurgence of authoritarianism in the United States and globally.

**‘Home’ movie**

Friedrich's filmic strategies have been described as "open[ing] up our sense of history to uncertainty and to multiple authorities" (Spence and Cengiz 381). *The Ties That Bind* re-situates what at first may appear to be a well-known global historical narrative – the inexorable rise of Hitler's Nazi Party in 1930s Germany – in the familial/domestic sphere; and the filmmaker makes her own mother's voice the film's primary structuring element. In *The Ties that Bind* home is the locus of the narrative that unfolds. The film's purposeful gendered transgression positions mother (Lore Bucher) and daughter (Su Friedrich) as history's interlocutors and it recognizes the public and private spheres as so intricately intertwined as to make ideas of the separateness of these spaces untenable. The documentary unfolds as an experiment with sound, with voice, with the absence of sound and with uncertain sound-image relations. Specifically, Friedrich positions Lore Bucher's compelling voiceover recollections of her teenage years and young adulthood in Nazi Germany (before, during and after the second World War) against recurring and richly affective silences that surround images – both archival and contemporary. These sound variations directly and indirectly support and expand her account and interrogation of the historical events that so profoundly impacted so many. The soundscape here is a strategy that effects a collapse of the distance between past and present. The narrative and the silences in combination with the images counter popular myths and (mis)understandings regarding the rise of the far right in Germany in the 1930s and its subsequent catastrophic consequences. Viewers are prompted to consider the far-reaching effects of these events into the here and now.

A second 'voice' in the film, Friedrich's own, is surrounded with silence. The filmmaker's narration and questions to her mother appear in text form, word-by-word, scratched by hand into the materiality of the film stock and, though this aesthetic strategy precludes aurality, it is a mode of questioning that imparts a 'liveness' to the daughter-filmmaker's voice. As we watch, Friedrich's words twitch and quiver against a black screen and transmit a restless, interrogative urgency. The urgency that informs her line of questioning seems to address an imperative to address her own uncertainty regarding her family's complicity (if any) with the Nazi regime. What emerges almost immediately in the film is that her mother's story is an account of the daughter of non-Jewish, resolutely anti-Nazi, German parents who despite intense pressure held fast to her family's political and moral principles.

Friedrich has called the film "a dialogue" (Friedrich par. 3). As mother and daughter address the past, the persistent theme of their conversation is the complex and far reaching nature of 'the ties that bind', that is, familial ties, ties of nationhood, ties to one's community and the ties of shared ethical and political principles. In his comprehensive discussion of Friedrich's documentary, Scott MacDonald describes how "the complex network of interconnections between the many facets of the film [mother and daughter, sound and image, past and present, familiar and experimental film

practices] become ‘the ties that bind’ the film and the viewer’s experience of it together” (*Avant-Garde* 108).

The filmmaker’s part in the documentary’s mother/daughter dialogue extends beyond the hand-scratched texts of her questions and comments. Friedrich structures a compelling discursive relationship between the film’s carefully selected images and Bucher’s recollections. In constructing aesthetic relations between the film’s elements, Friedrich not only draws connections between past and present but at all times signals the deeply imbricated relationship of familial and social ties with politics and power.

Paxton has argued that rather than being strictly doctrinal in origin, fascism is a movement that has as its underpinnings strong social ties, including shared feelings of “rightful predominance” fuelled by a “an obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation and victimhood” (qtd in Zerofsky 9-10). In Friedrich’s film, questions about the complexity and resilience of these kinds of social ties are compellingly articulated in Lore Bucher’s detailed account. She describes the ways in which politics gradually infiltrated everyday life at her high school, from pressure to conform to increasingly pervasive anti-Jewish sentiment, to pressure to join the BDM (*Bund Deutscher Mädel*, the girls’ wing of the Hitler Youth movement). Lore’s family background and her friendships with her Jewish schoolmates were thus crucial interpersonal ‘ties’ that underpinned her resistance to these pressures, pressures that most of her non-Jewish German schoolmates rapidly succumbed to. We also discover that the loyalties that bound an ordinary German citizen (Lore’s piano teacher) to the Nazi regime were instrumental in the teacher’s reporting Bucher’s anti-Nazi sentiment to the authorities, an act that resulted in Bucher’s subsequent arrest and detention during the war. *The Ties That Bind* re-tells global events through an understanding that history is a cumulative unfolding that both shapes and is shaped by the social, the familial, the domestic, the everyday.

### **Re-‘Fashioning’ fascism**

Making clear the contemporary context for Friedrich’s 1985 film, MacDonald has described U.S. commercial media’s post-war repression of analyzing the rise of Hitler in favour of disseminating a more socially acceptable and considerably less-searching consensus that Hitler was ‘a madman’ and the Nazi’s were “a near alien species” (*Avant-Garde* 103). Currently, in 2025 the characterization of Nazism by the MAGA movement represents a marked, though similarly less-searching shift. That is, the movement frames authoritarianism as acceptable, urgent and necessary, seemingly the only means of restoring the ‘American dream’ of prosperity for all (2024 GOP Platform). Discourse on the U.S. right shares clear parallels with Hitler’s propaganda machine. In *The Ties That Bind*, what becomes apparent in Lore Bucher’s account of pre-WWII Germany is that nascent Nazi ideology associated itself strongly with very ordinary aspirations of traditional family life:

“my brothers... were introduced to Nazi-ism by Hitler proclaiming, ‘I shall give every German a house, a garden, a job,’ and I mean, promise, promise, promise, promise, promise, right.”

Friedrich positions Bucher’s critique of Nazism’s propagandist use of the everyday against images of what at first appears to be an innocuous domestic pastime. As Bucher speaks we see the hands of a younger woman (we presume Friedrich) flick through the pages of *The New York Times Magazine* and pause at a full-page Ralph Lauren fashion advertisement, a meticulously-styled image of an adolescent boy dressed in a re-versioning of traditional Germanic folk costume (layered woollen fabrics and braces) and sporting a distinctively Hitler-like haircut. The magazine image, given its juxtaposition with Bucher’s recollections, would likely have raised immediate and troubling questions for the film’s original audiences. The images would seem to suggest that either the legacy of Nazi-ism has become so distanced and emptied of meaning that it is nothing more than a questionable advertising gimmick. Or, more unsettlingly, viewers might infer that it’s a socially-acceptable appropriation by contemporary mainstream U.S. media and/or fashion industry of the iconography of Hitler’s Germany. As if to ensure that the significance of this image not be overlooked, Friedrich takes a marker pen and adds an instantly recognisable ‘Hitler moustache’ to the image of the boy.

For viewers in 2025, this moment in Friedrich’s film presents disquieting evidence that overt dalliance with fascism is far from a new phenomenon in mainstream U.S. culture. In an analysis that aligns with Friedrich’s insights, Dennis Tourish argues that the origins of Trumpism are deeply rooted in Republican Party history. He traces a continuum from 1950s McCarthyism to Barry Goldwater’s defence of extremism to Richard Nixon’s “Southern strategy” to Ronald Reagan’s 1981 repudiation of government:

“Government isn’t the solution to the problem: government is the problem” (12).

In *The Ties That Bind* Friedrich constructs tensions between voice and image that work to reveal, within aspects of everyday mid-1980s United States, perceptible traces of authoritarianism—that is, nationalism, conformity, militarism. Over the course of the documentary, an absolute, even abrasive silence accompanies various images from daily life:

- at one moment a celebratory U.S. street parade complete with historical military armaments, marching girls and a brass band;
- at another, U.S. flag-waving counter-protestors angrily confronting women participating in a peace demonstration in New York state; and
- at another, these same peace protestors offering passive resistance as they are arrested and dragged bodily by police to armoured vans.

As the film proceeds, Friedrich's silenced images of contemporary United States are positioned in varying proximity to her mother's evocative enunciation of everyday life under the Third Reich. In this way, the film seems to argue that the seeds of authoritarianism—rather than residing so far outside our experience that they are impossible to comprehend or are 'alien'—remain resolutely with us in the present and manifest themselves in a multitude of ways, both overt and less so.

### **Model house/model woman**

Friedrich repeatedly ties the idea of authoritarian power structures as they manifest themselves in the everyday to Nazi ideology concerning both the female body and the home. In the sequence that follows her mother's account of Hitler's promises to the German people about the material comforts of domesticity, the voiceover ceases and there is an equally abrupt shift in imagery. All sound is again absent as a woman's hands (again we presume Friedrich's) carefully open and unpack a box containing a kitset for a scale model of a Bavarian house. The silence that accompanies these images seems filled with the rueful reminiscences we have just heard. This alternate structuring between voice and silence recurs throughout the film. In his discussion of "the unheard voice in the sound film", Justin Horton terms the startling effect of the sudden temporary removal of all sound in a film as "abandoned sound", a radical strategy that leaves the spectator "in a purely visual mode": the film

"becomes more silent than even silent cinema was" (20-22).

Friedrich uses these radical, resonant silences to create interludes of space and time around her mother's recollections. Lore Bucher's acutely-felt, detailed memories of events that shaped her young adult life now shape each silence that follows their utterance and inflect the visual sequences with meaning. In this instance, Bucher's critique of the illusory possibility of the model (ideal) home is made pointedly literal in Friedrich's images of an actual model house, that is, a toy-sized replica. We return again and again over the first two thirds of the film to soundless images of this replica. Its significance intensifies as Bucher's recollections of the repercussions coming from her family's non-compliance with the Nazi regime accrue; we learn how their comfortable way of life was gradually taken from them.

Recurring images of the construction of the model house in *The Ties that Bind* also construct a literal 'home' movie in the documentary. Bucher's recollections culminate in her experience of the widespread destruction of the German cities of Stuttgart and Ulm by aerial bombardment in the final days of the war. In a brutal irony, she experienced the post-war vandalization of the Bucher family home by the 'liberators' – U.S. troops. Interspersed with this narrative we see the model house as it is precisely and painstakingly assembled then, in short order, trampled on, set fire to and melted

down until it is nothing more than a blackened residue. As we watch and listen we come to understand the silence surrounding these images as emblematic of many silences –

- the silenced voices of the victims of the Holocaust;
- the fearful, anguished silence of non-Jewish German citizens who opposed the Nazi regime;
- the silencing of those who did speak out and in turn were silenced;
- and, in particular, Lore Bucher's long held silence about the traumatic ordeals of her youth.

Friedrich positions these representations/interrogations of the domestic ideal – its weaponization through political promises and through destruction in war – against similarly challenging representations/interrogations of patriarchal concepts of the ideal woman. The documentary makes an interrogation of gender intrinsic to its interrogation of history. Images of the female body in compliance with hegemonic codes of gender recur in the film and make unsettling links between the Nazi valorisation of the model German female body and corresponding

“assumptions... about the correct status of women” that ‘tie’ “Germany of the 1930s with America of the early 1980s” (MacDonald *Avant Garde* 108).

In the film's opening moments, Friedrich's hands, having added a Hitler-esque moustache to the Ralph Lauren commercial, turn the page. The film allows us space and time enough to take in a double page advertising spread – a naked female model (a ‘model’ woman) reclines, eyes closed, her face, neck and breasts thickly coated in a mud-like substance. On the opposite page the advertisement heralds a beauty breakthrough: “Introducing primitive solutions that virtually reverse the effects of age on surface skin”. It is an image that is evoked when soon after in the film as Bucher speaks of The Cross of Honour of the German Mother, a medal awarded by the Nazi regime to its most fecund female citizens:

“...a bronze for so-and-so many children, a silver for so-and-so many children ... but certainly this was for ever and ever proclaimed... it was just terrible, yeah...the great mothers and the families, a tremendous to-do.”

Here Bucher's recollections are positioned against the image of a brightly-lit slowly revolving glass figurine, the transparent naked torso of a heavily pregnant woman – the ‘model’ mother. The image of the figurine is interspersed too with images of medically-preserved fetuses. A purposeful parallel seems to be being drawn between Nazi ideology and the promotional material of the U.S. pro-life movement which, as medical historian Kathleen M. Crowther has identified,

“proliferated since the *Roe [v. Wade]* decision [and] is full of descriptions and images of fetuses used to demonstrate the personhood of the unborn...detached from the maternal body, suggesting the fetus is an autonomous individual” (Crowther 4-5).

A further sound gap occurs at this point in the film – a ‘pregnant’ silence – as Friedrich’s hand-scratched intertitles inform us of the response of Lore’s mother when she received her Cross of Honour:

“I/WOULD/NEVER/WEAR/THIS/THING!/she/said/and/threw/away/her/silver/medal”

There is an ongoing centrality of issues around the control of women’s reproductive rights in contemporary U.S. politics. Indeed, the film’s release came at a time when the legal precedent that established reproductive rights, *Roe v Wade*, was considered “under siege” (Hull & Hoffer). What emerges in the film, in the interconnection between Friedrich’s images of these carefully constructed representations of women and what is said and *unsaid*, is a gap that creates space and time for us to detect unsettling and ongoing correlations between the past and present regarding control over the female body. I am reviewing *The Ties That Bind* now, post the 2022 Supreme Court decision (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organisation*) that has resulted in the recriminalisation of abortion in many states in America (Crowther 4), and in the midst of an on-going campaign of attacks against gender rights by the second Trump presidency. For this reason, the historical correlations detectable in the film’s silences seem to resonate more loudly and speak with urgency to the current cultural moment. Michel Chion has said how

“every instance of silence in film is disarming since it seems to expose our faculty of hearing...we are no longer just listening to the film; we are being listened to by it” (148).

Friedrich’s strategic use of omission – through sound and the absence of sound – constructs insistent, involving, un-soothing silences that seem to both ‘hear’ and ‘speak’ across time and space and work to situate us, the audience, not apart from but inside the film’s historical discourse.

A tension between sound and silence is present at all times too in the film’s non-synchronous sound strategy – we hear Bucher before we see her, when we do finally see her we are initially granted only a partial view (shots of a knee, a hand, an elbow, her feet as she crosses and uncrosses her ankles). Significantly, though we do eventually see Bucher’s face, though we see her talking and laughing, we never hear the words she utters in these images and at no time do we see her speak the narration that structures the film. To this end Friedrich employs a purposeful home movie aesthetic in the film’s footage of her mother: the footage is silent, a restless handheld camera resists/delays the kinds of contextual shots (mid-shots, long-shots) that might give us more immediate visual information, ‘a fuller picture’. The filmmaker’s choices implicitly both challenge and thwart our expectations around the documentary convention. Friedrich withholds

the direct address of the talking head that gives eyewitness testimony and satisfies our epistemological desire for a definitive account. Instead *The Ties That Bind* works to frame memory, history, the past, as partial, “always in the process of becoming, always incomplete” (Spence & Cengiz 385).

The home movie aesthetic carries with it a sense of informality, of leisure, of ease. Roger Odin has argued the home movie has distinctive representational codes – it “refuses to represent anything shocking...[OR] to reveal a pessimistic view ...it constructs a euphoric vision of family life” (262).

In employing this filmic mode Friedrich transgresses these codes and finds another way to interrogate the idea of home, the domestic and its broader political implications. Even as Lore Bucher speaks of the upheavals and catastrophes of the past, it is clear from these ‘home movie’ fragments that her current home life is ordered, comfortable and secure. Friedrich positions the home movie aesthetic – ‘ordinary’ images of the domestic, the intimate, the everyday – against Bucher’s vivid vocal recollections of Hitler’s Germany to further problematise our understanding of history. It becomes clear this comfortable and apparently benign setting contains also deeply uncomfortable truths,. These truths, though not necessarily always spoken aloud, remain always present, always on the cusp of being voiced, of re-emerging, and regrettably, as we are discovering on a daily basis, of recurring.

### **Knowing and ‘not knowing’**

“A great many people knew the Nazi’s were systematically killing Jews. Franklin Delano Roosevelt knew and Winston Churchill knew, Stalin and the Russians knew, the Pope in the Vatican knew...” (Lore Bucher in *The Ties That Bind*)

Friedrich has described the collective memory of World War Two as “fraught with guilt and silence” (Friedrich 1985). The filmmaker’s sound strategy in *The Ties That Bind* seems closely tied to this understanding and to its relevance to her mother’s experiences before and during the war. It becomes clear in the film that Lore Bucher’s strategic use of her voice, significantly both through speech *and* through purposeful silence, was critical to acts of resistance against the day-to-day pressures of the Nazi regime. She speaks of her refusal to say, ‘Heil Hitler,’ in school assemblies, of her repeated response to pressure to join the BDM and the Nazi Party – “No, I don’t want to”. Bucher speaks too of silence as a survival strategy. Anti-Nazi pamphlets were widely distributed by student-led resistance group, The White Rose, in the city of Ulm where she lived –

“they were distributed by someone else and you found them in the street, you found them somewhere else, maybe in a railway station, they were just put there”.

Bucher makes it clear silence and denial when questioned about the pamphlets was the only safe option:

“You did not talk about that. You were asked about it but you did not talk about it. You didn’t know anything about it. You’d just never heard of it.”

She speaks with pleasure too of the success of her anti-Nazi colleagues at the German airfield where she was detained during the war . They destroyed (and thereby silenced) orders that came through to launch air raids. At the same time as silence is acknowledged as a strategy of resistance and as an inevitable strategy of self-preservation, it is problematized as potential complicity and then complicated further through the film’s recognition of the inevitable gaps in understanding experiences when viewing the past from the present. In the silence that follows her mother’s protestations that she, her family and many ordinary Germans did not know of the Nazi’s systematic killings of Jews in the concentrations camps, Friedrich literally spells out the inevitable ethical pitfalls of interrogating history from the safety of the present. She does so word-by-word on the screen. Shifts in the text between lower and upper case communicate the escalation and de-escalation of the tension and frustration inherent in her undertaking:

“And/after/I/blame/the/Germans/OR/WISH/THAT/MY/MOTHER/  
COULD/HAVE/DONE/SOME/THING/ANY/THING/I/ask/myself/  
what/I/would/have/done/AND/WHY/THE/ALLIES/DIDN’T/BOMB/  
THE/RAIL/LINES/LEADING/TO/THE/CAMPS/They/were/begged/  
to/do/it”

Viewed now ‘How might history judge us?’ seems to be the pressing and uncomfortable question that emerges in the address of *The Ties That Bind* to its audience. What becomes uncomfortably apparent too is that when the present appears less safe and certain, we discover that the luxury of critical distance is an illusion.

The sophisticated sound and image scape of *The Ties That Bind* speaks to the underlying premise of the filmmaker’s undertaking. Out of its complex and recurring sound and image patterns, its outpourings and silences, its uncertainties and hesitations, out of a multiplicity of imbricated images of past and present, out of what appears to be an onslaught of chaos and confusion, there emerges in Friedrich’s film a coherence that familiarizes us with what has been distanced by time and space. She locates history right here with us in the everyday, in the commonplace, at home. Implicit questions regarding the nature and strength of the ties that bind us to our fellow citizens are posed to each of us through Lore Bucher’s small daily acts of resistance against society’s efforts to undermine the bonds she shared. If, as Paxton argues and Lore Bucher’s experience indicates, fascism is a social movement, its grievances are nurtured, neutralized or countered in the everyday, at home, in the schoolyard, in the

neighbourhood, even at piano lessons. Through Lore's recollections and through the specific sound/image scape of *The Ties That Bind*, Friedrich makes it clear that these everyday spaces are thoroughly enmeshed with the prevailing structures of politics and power and that acts of resistance, however small, matter. What can be inferred too from Friedrich's provocative and involving film is that the answer to countering the divisions and enmity that fascist movements respond to, amplify and are fuelled by may lie in the purposeful forging of social ties – 'the ties that bind' – in ways that transcend perceived grievances and differences. As Janet Cutler has noted, Friedrich was credited in the mid-1980s with helping "to reinvigorate American avantgarde cinema when the movement seemed played out" (315). The challenge taken up by Friedrich and evidenced in *The Ties That Bind* offers an aesthetic mode that could enliven the approach of U.S. documentarists in the current historical moment – it is through a frank and fearless 'looking back' that a path forward might emerge. *The Ties That Bind* exemplifies a filmmaker's willingness not to sidestep or absolve uncomfortable contradictions regarding her own nation's legacy of lapses in regard to the fomenting of right wing extremism.

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