

“Key Scene: The Filmmaker’s Song in ‘Sink or Swim’” in *Movie: The Little Black Book*, ed. by Chris Fujiwara, Cassell Illustrated, 2007, p. 625



## Key Scene **The filmmaker’s song** *Sink or Swim*

Friedrich’s masterpiece unfolds in 26 segments. Its autobiographical narration, eloquently read by young Jessica Meyerson, centers on the filmmaker’s childhood, when her parents were splitting up and her father, a professor with an authoritarian streak, dished out discipline that crossed the line into abuse.

Instead of trying to illustrate this emotionally charged material in a literal way, Friedrich fills the screen with allusive images, including archival footage and shots she photographed as an adult. The result is an intensely revealing document that might seem too personal for comfort if the circumspection of its imagery didn’t so perfectly balance the intimate content of its spoken words. Another distancing device is the film’s overall configuration, marking the story’s progress by labeling the episodes with letters of the alphabet in reverse order.

One expects the movie to finish with the segment tagged A, but instead Friedrich offers a profoundly

moving coda: home-movie footage of herself as a girl, printed multiple times in overlapping layers that mimic the structure of the accompanying soundtrack, on which Friedrich sings “The Alphabet Song” as a round, dubbed from multiple tapes of her present-day voice. At the very end, the screen returns to a single picture and the soundtrack to a single voice, leaving us with a faded image of Friedrich as a child and the unadorned cadence of the song’s last line: “Tell me what you think of me.” The viewer wants to reply: “I think you are one of cinema’s most courageous avant-garde artists.”  
David Sterritt

**Date** 1990

**Nationality** USA

**Director** Su Friedrich

**Cast** Su Friedrich

**Why It’s Key** In a daring act of cinematic self-exposure, the filmmaker inserts her own voice and picture into a deeply personal film during its last moments, making an intimate and revealing portrait even more so.