



BIG SONIA

SURVIVOR. GRANDMA. DIVA.



INFLATABLE FILM & ARGOT PICTURES PRESENTS A FILM BY LEAH WARSHAWSKI & TODD SOLIDAY

IN ASSOCIATION WITH SIFF / TRUE PRODUCTIONS & WOMEN YOU SHOULD FUND & BYEN | DIRECTED BY LEAH WARSHAWSKI & TODD SOLIDAY | PRODUCED BY LEAH WARSHAWSKI | ORIGINAL SCORE BY BRAD ANTHONY LAINA | EXECUTIVE PRODUCER TOM WRIGHT
CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS CLAUDE & BERTINA THAU & NICCOLE STARK | ASSOCIATE PRODUCER SARA LYNN WRIGHT | STORY PRODUCER & CONSULTING EDITOR ERIC FRITH | DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY TODD SOLIDAY | FILM EDITOR TODD SOLIDAY
ADDITIONAL EDITOR DOUG LOVISEKA | ANIMATOR DAWN NORTON | GRAPHIC DESIGN & ILLUSTRATION RACHEL KNOTOFSKY | COLOR & FINISHING SERVICES BY LIGHTPRESS | POST-PRODUCTION SOUND SERVICES BY SKYWALKER SOUND



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About *Journeys in Film*

Teaching Core Curriculum with Film

Founded in 2003, Journeys in Film operates on the belief that teaching with film has the power to help our next generation gain a richer understanding of the diverse and complex world in which we live. Our goal is to help students recognize cultural biases and racism (including their own), cultivate human empathy and compassion, develop a deeper knowledge of universal issues and current challenges, and encourage civic engagement as competent world citizens.

Award-winning feature films and documentaries act as springboards for lesson plans in subjects ranging from math, science, language arts, and social studies to other topics that have become critical for students to learn about: human rights, environmental sustainability, poverty, hunger, global health, diversity, gender, and immigration. Prominent educators on our team consult with filmmakers and cultural specialists in the development of curriculum guides, each one dedicated to an in-depth exploration of the culture and issues depicted in a specific film. The guides complement teachers' existing lesson plans and meet mandated curricular requirements, providing teachers with an innovative way to fulfill their school districts' standards-based goals.

We prepare teachers to use film effectively in the classroom through customized professional development workshops and online webinars.

Journeys in Film is an organization with proven results. Individual teachers worldwide and entire school districts in the U.S. have employed our interdisciplinary film-based curricula.

- Millions of students have learned about our multicultural world through Journeys in Film's middle school series, based on films from Iran, South Africa, South Korea, the Maori of New Zealand, Tibet, India, China and Saudi Arabia.
- Students are becoming inspired by the courageous contemporary and historical figures portrayed in films such as *Hidden Figures*, *The Post*, and *He Named Me Malala*.
- Films like *Schindler's List*, *Defiant Requiem*, and *Big Sonia* not only teach about the Holocaust, but also demonstrate how one person can make a difference in the lives of others.
- Teachers are using our outstanding documentary series to teach about historical events, American prison systems, the critical role of photojournalists, and positive psychology.

Journeys in Film guides help teachers integrate these films into their classrooms, examining complex issues, encouraging students to be active rather than passive viewers, and maximizing the power of film to enhance critical thinking skills and to meet the Common Core Standards.

Why teach with film?

Today's students are the most visually literate generation in history. According to the Social Science Research Network, 65% of people are primarily visual learners. Today's students are more affected by media than ever before. They seldom need to be coaxed into watching films; after all, everyone loves a good movie. Through their own desire to be entertained, students become captivated learners.

Films have long been overlooked as an educational tool. We teach our students literature that originates from many places around the world, but we tend to forget that what often spurs the imagination is both visual and auditory. Film, which in minutes can be screened and beamed to every country in the world, is this extraordinary educational tool that goes right into the heart of different cultures. One of its strengths lies in its ability to present information rapidly and convey atmosphere, making that world come to life. It allows viewers to "feel" and thereby develop empathy skills, thus potentially increasing the likelihood of students connecting personally to the content, which in turn helps with understanding and analyzing concepts.

In teaching with films, we encourage our students to be critical consumers of what they see and teach them to consider the perspective of the filmmaker and challenge generalizations. Analyzing film and media is an empowering skill and one that is increasingly important for young people. To this end, it is imperative to integrate the film into a larger lesson, using it as a launching pad for historical and cultural exploration, as well as an examination of narrative perspective, character development, and media literacy.

In one 7th grade student's words, "I like Journeys in Film because it just doesn't teach you like a book. It's better when you can actually see it happening. Films give a first-hand view of places and stories."

Journeys in Film is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

Directors' Statement



Sometimes the really big stories come from the smallest places. As filmmakers, we travel all over the world chasing stories about people making an impact. In making *Big Sonia*, we realized some of those stories are right in our own backyards and that you don't have to go far to come home.



When we began filming in 2011, Leah's grandmother Sonia Warshawski was 85 years old, and we had just started dating. On the heels of our last feature documentary, *Finding Hillywood*, our intention was to make

a short film about Sonia's small tailoring shop, John's Tailoring, and the steady stream of loyal customers that came in for the conversation as much as for tailoring. Sonia's extended family had joked for years about using the shop as the subject of a reality show. We'd all long witnessed Sonia holding court from her counter-top podium, doling out marriage advice, recommending books about WWII to teenagers, and doing interviews for local news stations. We knew Sonia had a gift for making anyone in her shop feel like the most important person in the world. And we knew the shop was her own refuge from the horrors of her past as a teenage Holocaust survivor.

However, once we started filming for our short, our anticipated *weeks* of production turned into *months*. It soon became apparent to us that customers were drawn to John's Tailoring not just for gossip and a bit of human connection, but for their

own redemption. They came in because Sonia sets a glowing example of how an ordinary person can move past deep personal and historical trauma to find peace and heal others.

Still, our time with Sonia revealed her complex side. Her interactions with customers — many of whom she sees as her best friends — are very different from her relationships with her own family, which have often been tense and tender, overshadowed by decades of survivor's guilt and post-traumatic stress. During the course of production, we began to perceive the trauma suffered not just by Sonia, but by my aunts and father, who had survived their own brand of trauma in a household gripped by grief and loss. We also began to see the ways in which Sonia's pain had branded Leah, as a third-generation survivor, the grandchild of refugees, and the child of a parent who'd long grappled with his own mother's distance and pain.

Then, suddenly, the plot turned. Sonia got an eviction notice for John's Tailoring, her home-away-from-home for 35 years. Her panic was palpable. And while we knew Sonia would survive the physical loss of her shop, we were also compelled by her store's powerfully symbolic role as a forum for human connection--a stronghold and a place of safety for Sonia and so many others. We continued to fundraise and film, and our "short" turned into a feature. Oh, and somehow in the middle of it all, we got married. The store was now woven into the fabric of our lives, too.

Despite featuring a Holocaust survivor, *Big Sonia* is not a "Jewish movie." And it's not a "Holocaust movie." More than anything, *Big Sonia* is a story about humanity: our human potential to overcome even the worst of the world's sins and atrocities with love, compassion and understanding. It's a tale about survival, yes, but not only the heroic kind—the kind

that was forced upon Sonia and is forced upon other victims of genocide and hatred. It's also about the everyday acts of survival we must all undertake just to be human: to overlook slights and disappointments, to rise above bigotry and ignorance and self-doubt, to push for peace and forgiveness even when our instincts urge retribution or bitterness.

We premiered *Big Sonia* at bi-coastal film festivals the day after the 2016 presidential election. At the time, we had no way of knowing that the themes of our film would find new relevance in our current political moment. Sonia's life story has been called an antidote to the hate and fear we see around us, and we hope that is true. But the real lesson of *Big Sonia* is that we've *all* got the capacity to combat the worst humanity has to offer. Like Sonia, we all have the opportunity to create for others the places of comfort and connection where survival takes root.

With love and gratitude,

Leah Warshawski & Todd Soliday

Co-Directors

Big Sonia

Introducing *Big Sonia*

Teaching about the Holocaust is essential, and yet recent statistics show that many Americans simply do not know about it.¹ Sometimes the overwhelming numbers that died as a result of Hitler's rise to power is hard for the human mind to comprehend. In this film, however, the viewer learns about the Holocaust through the eyes of one person who lived through it and her family, who were forever shaped by the events of the 1940s.

Teenage Sonia Warshawski was living with her mother, father, sister, and brother in Międzyrzec, Poland, when the German army invaded. Her father and brother were shot, her sister disappeared and her survival was uncertain, and Sonia and her mother were forced to work as slave laborers until the day they were deported to the Majdanek death camp. After her mother died in the gas chamber, Sonia was sent first to Auschwitz-Birkenau and then to Bergen-Belsen, where she was finally liberated as the war drew to a close.

This film by her granddaughter gives students insight into both the horrors of the Holocaust as a whole and the profound effect that it had on one individual and succeeding generations. Now in her nineties, Sonia is a vibrant, busy woman who loves interacting with family and with the customers who come to her tailor shop. She speaks to school groups, prison inmates, and others about her experiences. Her story is one of unimaginable suffering, but also of hope, of resilience, and of a refusal to let herself hate. Classes viewing this film will have a memorable experience, a blend of factual knowledge of history and the personal story of a remarkable woman.

Film credits:

DIRECTORS: Leah Warshawski & Todd Soliday

WRITTEN BY: Eric Frith

PRODUCER: Leah Warshawski

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Dwayne J. Clark, Thomas Lee Wright

CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Claude and Bertina Thau,
Ni'Coel Stark

MUSIC: Brad Anthony Laina

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Todd Soliday

¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/study-shows-americans-are-forgetting-about-holocaust-n865396>



Viewing a Documentary Film

Enduring Understandings

- Documentary films present the filmmaker's own vision of reality; it is essential for the viewer to watch actively rather than passively to judge the credibility of the film.
- Documentary filmmakers use many distinctive techniques including photographs, interviews, animation, and re-enactment, as well as film of actual events, to convey their ideas.

Essential Questions

- How does one judge the validity of a documentary?
- What biases on the part of the filmmaker and the viewer can affect the way the film is perceived?

Notes to the Teacher

The goal of this lesson is to teach not only about the filmmaker's techniques used in *Big Sonia*, but also to help students become active, critical viewers of documentary film in a world where images are often substituted for extended written information. This film is about Sonia Warshawski, but it is also about the positive nurturing power of telling stories of our own experience.

Big Sonia tells the story of a nonagenarian named Sonia. She lives in Kansas City and the film reveals to us that she is a Holocaust survivor. The film relates Sonia's experience of surviving the Holocaust and weaves this story through material about her work maintaining a tailoring business, about her relationship with her adult children, and finally about her efforts to communicate, through talks and public engagements, a message of harmony and compassion. The film's narrative style combines observational footage of Sonia at work and at home with animated footage that visualizes and expresses her thoughts and feelings generated by her memories of surviving the Holocaust.

The filmmakers chose to divide the timeline of the film between action and interviews in the present and representations of the past. The filmmakers use observational footage (whereby the filmmaker follows action as it appears to "naturally" unfold), on-camera interviews, voice-over, music, animated sequences, and a small number of still images (photographs) to construct the story.

In Part 1 of the lesson, you will show the first 10 minutes of the film to acclimate the students to its unusual structure. Stopping the film to study **HANDOUT 2** on the structure of the first 10 minutes and a film glossary will enable them to

re-view the opening, applying critical thinking and analysis. They should then be better equipped to approach not only the opening, but also the entire film, in a similar manner. Download the glossary from <https://journeysinfilm.org/product/glossary-of-film-terms/> and print out a copy for each student to keep. The Glossary of Film Terms is also available to download from the *Big Sonia* page on the Journeys in Film website.

At the end of Part 1, you will distribute one more handout, a sheet of viewing assignments. Students should have adequate time to read through this and make their selections. You may wish to select a few of the assignments as most appropriate to your particular group of students or your classroom goals. Students wishing to select more than one assignment should be encouraged to do so and allowed to handle the combination in any suitable manner (or to select the one deemed more useful for a report) after viewing the film. You may wish to consult **TEACHER RESOURCE 1: COMMENTARY ON ASSIGNMENTS** well in advance of any class discussions.

Part 2 of the lesson involves showing the film in its entirety. Since this film is nearly 90 minutes in length, it may take an additional day to complete the viewing. It might be good to look for a stopping place any time in the last few minutes of the period and ask for feedback. Students may wish to point out special things they have observed and/or ask questions about the observations of others. As noted, you may wish to consult **TEACHER RESOURCE 1: COMMENTARY ON ASSIGNMENTS** well in advance of any class discussions.

Part 3 asks students to respond to particular aspects of the film, either in oral reports or in writing. If you want written reports only, it would be useful to ask some students to read their reports aloud as topics for additional discussion.

If you wish, you may use the Glossary as the basis of a film literacy vocabulary quiz, selecting as much of it as necessary for your course goals.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience

Lesson

(SOCIAL STUDIES, FILM LITERACY)



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Duration of Lesson

3 or 4 50-minute class periods

Assessments

Written/oral assignment taken from **HANDOUT 3**

Participation in class discussion

Materials

DVD of *Big Sonia* or streaming capability

DVD player and monitor or screen

Copies of **HANDOUTS 1-3** for each student

Copies of *Journeys in Film* glossary from
<https://journeysinfilm.org/product/glossary-of-film-terms/>

TEACHER RESOURCE 1: COMMENTARY ON ASSIGNMENTS

Procedure

Part 1: A Close Look at Opening Scenes

1. Distribute **HANDOUT 1: ACTIVE VIEWING**. Tell students they will be watching the film, *Big Sonia*. Read through the handout together, discussing as appropriate and encouraging students to ask questions.
2. Show the first twelve minutes and fifty-five seconds of the film (to the shot of a garment cleaning device). Let this shot finish and then stop the film.
3. Distribute **HANDOUT 2: ANALYSIS OF OPENING SCENES** and **HANDOUT 3: A GLOSSARY OF FILM TERMS**. Rewind the film and watch the first 10 minutes again, pausing frequently to read through each section of **HANDOUT 2** with your students, and referring them to terms on the **GLOSSARY** as necessary.
4. Have students read through the glossary and go over the vocabulary to be certain your students are familiar with each term.
5. Finally, distribute **HANDOUT 3: ASSIGNMENTS**, asking your students to select one (or more) of the assignments to keep in mind (and take notes on) as they view the film in its entirety. Give them the due date for any writing you will be collecting or the due date and the format for oral presentations. Allow them to read through and make decisions for homework.

Part 2: Viewing “Big Sonia”

1. Show the film, either from the beginning or from wherever it was stopped, as you prefer and time permits.
2. If the class period will end before the film is finished, stop the video a few minutes before the class ends. Ask students to point out special things they have observed and to ask questions about the film or about the observations of others. Do the same after the film is finished. As noted, you may wish to consult **Teacher Resource 1: Commentary on Assignments** well in advance of any class discussions.

Part 3: Culminating Project

1. Give students adequate time to prepare either written or oral responses to the questions on the assignments sheet. Be sure to set clear deadlines. Hold conferences with students as they work to be sure they are on task and successful.
2. Give students an opportunity to present their oral reports with whatever structure you have established. If you have assigned written reports only, choose a few of the best and ask the students who wrote them to read theirs aloud. Allow for class discussion following the reading of each.
3. Conclude the discussion by reminding students that analyzing the techniques of filmmaking and the choices that the filmmaker makes can enhance both our understanding of a film and our enjoyment of it. Explain that it is also important to look at the film holistically once the analysis is complete.
4. If desired, review the Glossary (Handout 3) in preparation for a vocabulary quiz to be given at a later date.



Handout 1 ► P. 1

Active Viewing of a Documentary Film

In recent years, the documentary film mode has become notably popular with filmmakers and with audiences. What had been a rather “obscure” part of film culture has arguably become more mainstream and recognized. While many of us might more typically view narrative fiction films, documentaries have increasingly offered us a rich alternative. Documentaries can often provide an insight and perspective on subjects and lives that narrative fiction films might not. The narrative choices that documentary films make available are exciting for both filmmakers and audiences.

The documentary film tradition reaches back to the early years of cinema history and, as it has developed, the documentary form has worked its way through hard news and films about nature and travel to bring us to this current moment in which documentaries are visually arresting and often startling in the subject matter with which they engage. They comprise a major part of the film culture, with documentary film festivals taking place globally.

The subjective filmmaker: Thinking about points of view

A filmmaker’s creative starting point is to pose the question: What is my perspective on the subject that I want to explore in my film? It’s a subjective standpoint. In this respect, a subsequent question that a viewer might ask is: Does this film emphasize certain aspects of its subjects at the expense of other aspects? The viewer also needs to consider questions like these: In what ways is the film “true” to its subject? How have the filmmaking style and film language influenced my response to the subject?

We shouldn’t approach a film with a sense of distrust; however, it is appropriate to view and think about documentary films in terms of where the filmmaker is coming from in approaching the subject matter. In doing this, we can make a more measured judgement about how we accept or reject what the film offers.

Key to thinking about documentary film is developing our sense of intentional or unintentional distortion; this leads us to consider the ways in which audience members respond to a given film. All audiences bring to a film viewing two things: their own real-life experience and their experience of life as depicted in film. As critical, active audiences, we are committed to bringing precise attention and thinking to a given film, asking how the language of cinema is used to construct a version of the subject matter.

The “filmmaker” is the name that we give to the individual and the key creative team, who produce a film. This team can include director, producer, writer, film distributor. These roles and functions are all in the position to control, shape and influence most powerfully what the film is attempting to say.

We might argue that, unlike a narrative fiction film, a documentary film presents even more of an opportunity for personal filmmaking as the director will have chosen the subject to explore. In the context of narrative fiction filmmaking, there is a key difference and it’s this: the director will often be engaged to lead the production of a film that is based on someone else’s screenplay or concept.

Lesson

(SOCIAL STUDIES, FILM LITERACY)



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Handout 1 ► P. 2

Active Viewing of a Documentary Film

Challenging our thinking and long-held convictions

Let's assume that a documentary filmmaker has made a sincere effort to present a version of a subject that, while subjective, is also genuine and thoughtful. What do we do, though, when the view of the film is in opposition to that of the viewer? There is something positive in this potential conflict between what the film is saying and what we understand of the subject. In this respect, a documentary film can provoke us to rethink ideas and ways of understanding a given subject that may be long held and rooted in our own personal backgrounds. The thoughtful audience member has the responsibility to be attuned to conflicting perspectives in order to think fully about the filmmaker's intentions and our own reception of the final piece.



Handout 2 ► P. 1

Big Sonia: Analysis of Opening Scenes

*The following is a description of the first twelve minutes and fifty-five seconds of the film. You will be viewing the first 10 minutes again; pay close attention to the structure of these first 10 minutes. Note the use of voice-overs, panning shots, intercutting, montage sequences, and split edits, etc. (These terms and others that are in bold letters below are defined in the **Glossary**). It may be useful to think “This shot shows...” as each appears on screen. This will help you understand the nature of a documentary film as an assemblage of images on a chosen subject. [Note: If it is not clear what you’re seeing, try to figure out why the film’s director wanted you to be momentarily confused.]*

Momentarily, there is a black screen and on the soundtrack we hear the sound of a creaking door. There is then the first shot (a wide **SHOT**) of the film and it could not be more ordinary and unassuming: we see the elderly woman closing her front door as she heads out. Then comes the film’s first **TITLE CARD** that reads: Inflatable Films Presents. The card is accompanied by a whimsical piece of musical underscore and we hear the voice of Leah Warshawski who is the co-director of the film saying, “Hey, grandma.” The scene cuts to a mid-shot framed from the back seat of the car. We watch as Sonia gets into the car. Her granddaughter, Leah, is at the steering wheel.

The visual style deployed in this opening scene can be described as observational, using available light and thereby reinforcing a feeling of realism; it uses a handheld camera that can readily follow the action and events in front of the camera lens.

The older woman is Sonia, the subject of the film, although at this point we do not know her name. Sonia comments, “It’s chilly. I’ve got some sweets for us.”

Whimsical music plays on the soundtrack as Sonia settles into the car. Sonia tells her granddaughter that she should be wearing a sweater on a chilly day.

The film cuts to a title card: “A Film by Leah Warshawski and Todd Soliday.” The phrase “A Film by” tells us that it is has been authored, that it has a specific point of view on its

subject. The film then cuts from the first title card and back to the footage that introduces us to Sonia. Sonia hands chocolate bars to her granddaughter and to the camera operator. (We assume it is Todd Soliday; importantly, we never see him in the film). We watch and hear Sonia talking about the clouds as she is driven in the car. She says, “When you’re flying, it’s unbelievable: it’s bogminding. All this nature.” This observation may seem like a minor, irrelevant comment but it will be anything but within the context of the story of Sonia’s life that is eventually revealed. The next title is a production **CREDIT** and it is followed by a medium shot from inside the car of Sonia chatting to Leah.

There is then a **CLOSE-UP** of Sonia in profile from the camera’s position on the back seat of the car. Sonia comments, “I’m handling it better since I got older.” On the soundtrack, the music has become more pensive. Critically, the film does not at this point describe what “it” is. The film withholds key information so that the viewer remains intrigued, waiting to find out the answer. “For a normal person, it’s very difficult to understand, and you always kind of think ‘Oh, it might come back on me.’” We see Sonia in close-up looking at her granddaughter in the driving seat.

The **SEQUENCE** of shots within the car concludes by **CUTTING** to Sonia exiting the car and commenting, “It’s a beautiful day.” The shot holds and Sonia exits the frame.

Handout 2 ▶ P. 2

Big Sonia: Analysis of Opening Scenes

The sequence next cuts to two medium-wide shots of “old” radio engineering equipment in a corridor. On-screen text informs the audience that the venue is KCUR Studio, National Park Radio, Kansas City. As Sonia walks along the corridor there is a **SPLIT EDIT** as we hear a radio engineer settling Sonia into a radio station studio. There is a wide shot of Sonia being settled into the studio.

There is then a cut to a shot of a recording sign illuminated in the radio studio. We are offered the beginning of the drama of the film’s story. There is a close-up on Sonia as we hear the voice of the radio interviewer [who is only identified by on-screen text providing her name] asking her about her experiences as a child. The interviewer sets up Sonia’s recollections by explaining that Sonia’s granddaughter is making a documentary about her grandmother’s past. As we hear the interviewer explain this, there is a brief shot of Leah and Sonia sitting listening to the interviewer. It is important that we only hear the interviewer as a **VOICE-OVER**. The visual focus is entirely on Sonia, who is shown in close-up when she states, “How I made it out was a miracle.” The scene is scored in a pensive manner at this point. Critically, the film at this point still does not define what it was that Sonia escaped. Immediately after this dramatic statement, the film cuts to its title card: *Big Sonia*. The musical underscore becomes more assertive and upbeat to accompany this.

The sequence then cuts to a wide shot (of drone camera footage) as it descends over a somewhat dilapidated looking building. Several other shots show the view of the building that we will soon realize is a shopping mall that is almost deserted. We still do not know specifically what the event is that Sonia spoke about in the radio interview, and so the filmmaker is skillfully sustaining our interest by withholding

the information that we most want to know. This approach begins to create suspense.

Next there is a cut to a wide shot that shows Sonia, in silhouette, walking into a very empty mall towards the camera. The scene cuts to a handheld shot of Sonia hurrying to open the door to her shop as the phone inside rings. The camera follows Sonia as she rushes towards the phone and answers a customer’s call. The mundane nature of this event still disguises the great “secret” that the story will reveal about her experiences as a child. The sequence then shows Sonia setting up her shop. There is a **MONTAGE** of close-ups that shows shoes, cushions, tape, and a music box. This brief montage is underscored by a waltz-like piece of music that is tinged with a culturally-specific sound that relates to Sonia’s Jewish heritage.

The sequence cuts to a close-up shot that shows Sonia arranging flowers in her shop. This image of the flowers, of nature, will recur in the film and carry metaphorical value. There is a cut to a medium close-up of Sonia arranging a garment on a rack. The key detail of this shot, although it is not emphasized, is that Sonia’s left arm, which is nearest the camera, is marked by a tattoo that we partially see. The film does not offer more detail about it at this point. Indeed, so brief and understated is this detail that not every viewer may initially see it.

The scene then cuts to a medium-wide shot that shows us a sewing machine and, alongside it in the background, a framed photograph of a young man. (We will learn later that this is an image of Sonia’s late husband, John). This photograph is revealed as the camera tracks from right to left but we are not, at this moment, given more information about the man shown in the photograph. Throughout the opening sequences of the film, the filmmakers establish various details that are

Handout 2 ► P. 3

Big Sonia: Analysis of Opening Scenes

duly explained in relation to Sonia's life as a young person and as an adult.

The sequence cuts to a close-up of Sonia applying makeup and there is a montage of handheld shots that show Sonia attending to her customers. We have a shot of Sonia looking through garments on a rack. We hear the director of the film ask Sonia, "Is it all for sale, grandma?" We see Leah sitting alongside her grandmother and this provides us with an interesting question about the voice of the director. This sequence in the shop further constructs Sonia as a warm and much-liked person and part of a community. This evident sense of belonging and friendship will clearly contrast very soon with the revelations about Sonia's youth. The montage of customers coming into the shop is fast-paced and eventually the camera holds on Sonia in a medium-wide shot; on the soundtrack we hear Fred, one of the customers, speaking warmly of Sonia.

There follows a medium close-up of Sonia measuring a pair of trousers. We do not see the person wearing the trousers above the knee. As with the absence of a close-up shot of the radio interviewer earlier in the opening of the film, the "identity" of Sonia's customer is not important. What is important is that the camera shows Sonia's hands and arms as she attends to the trousers. As she does so, we see the tattoo on her left arm; again, it is not commented on in any way. The identity of the customer is unimportant. What is much more important is that as Sonia measures the lower leg, she again reveals the tattoo on her left arm.

There is then a cut to a wide shot of the shop exterior and we see that it is called John's Tailoring. Playful music plays on the soundtrack as customers offer comments on-camera about Sonia and one customer explains how tough it is for

a business to survive in the nearly empty mall. Again, this seemingly mundane observation foreshadows a plot point about the fate of the shop and thematically how people start over after disruptive events in their lives. The comments are all very positive and affirmative.

There is a close-up of flowers on Sonia's shop counter. The camera tracks slowly across the counter as Sonia pulls out a pile of illustrations from a drawer and scatters them on the counter. As she does so, she explains that what she is showing us are her doodles. This is a critical moment in the film: the music shifts from being playful to communicating more a sense of mystery. What are these doodles of? Why have they been drawn? Sonia explains answers to these implied questions: "When you think about it, it's like a medicine." We see her start to make a drawing and the live-action scene then cuts to the medium of animation as we hear her voice as a voice-over. On the right of the screen an animated flower is shown flourishing and we hear her say: "I love flowers and birds. It's in the nature, flying. Especially, I love butterflies." The visual style of the animation is abstract. Then we see an animation of Sonia looking at butterflies that float around her. Sonia's voiceover refers, for the first time, to her mother and how she thought that Sonia would design hats for her work. The animation then cuts back to live-action footage of Sonia making her doodle. The sequence then cuts back to an animated scene showing Sonia as a girl and we hear her say "Sometimes you don't know what will come out in doodling. It's like a therapy."

As the animated images hold for a moment, we hear the radio interviewer and the sequence then cuts back to Sonia's radio interview. (The film will return to the interview later.) We hear but do not see the interviewer comment to Sonia, "You are



Handout 2 ► P. 4

Big Sonia: Analysis of Opening Scenes

one of the last living survivors.” We hear this comment on the soundtrack and it connects powerfully to the image that we see simultaneously: the shot shows Sonia’s arms at rest on the desk where she sits, and we see the tattoo on her arm again. We hear and see Sonia, in a medium close-up, comment, “You live with it all your life and you can never forget because if that is Hell I was in that Hell.” As she speaks, her granddaughter reaches out her hand to comfort her. The sequence then cuts to a close-up of Leah holding Sonia’s hand.

The sequence cuts to a title card that reads: *Miedzyrzec, Poland, September 1939*. Another piece of text appears telling us Sonia’s age. The music accompanying the title card is somewhat pensive. Significantly, an animated flower moves across the lower right-hand corner of the title card. The title card cuts to the second animated scene that shows Sonia and her mother outside their house. On the soundtrack we hear a siren and see the shadow of a warplane across their home. The wide shot zooms out further and there is the sound of bombing as Sonia and her mother are shown running inside, as the sounds of gunshots grow. Fighter planes are shown over the house and on the soundtrack we hear Sonia recalling that “When the war broke out, I was 13.”

The animated scene cuts to Sonia being interviewed in a more formal way as she sits on a chair against a black backdrop. The scene cuts back to the animation that now depicts Nazi soldiers outside Sonia’s home and there is the sound of gunfire. The dominant colors of the animation now are black and grey. We hear Sonia’s voice-over on the animation as she recalls the first deportation of Jews to concentration camps. The sequence cuts back to Sonia in the live-action interview recalling how she watched events from an attic window; the sequence then cuts back to the animation, this time to a medium-wide shot that shows a worried-looking Sonia at the

attic window. The film cuts back to Sonia being interviewed and she recalls “Horrible, horrible things.” The music is very pensive and melancholy now. The animation continues and there is a medium-wide shot of Sonia at the attic window; we hear her continuing to talk about looking down as gunshots are heard again. The sequence then cuts back to Sonia in the in-camera live action interview, followed by the animation showing a wide shot with armed Nazi soldiers in the lower part of the frame and Sonia depicted in the top part of the frame. There is tension in this little girl and the soldiers clearly sharing the same space.

The sequence cuts back to Sonia’s radio interview very briefly, then back to the animation with a wide shot showing her hiding on the top floor of her house. We hear Sonia’s voice on the soundtrack as she recalls this event. The animation style evokes a sense of a children’s picture book. We hear her say “My brother, my father: I never saw them again.” A new animation scene is presented now that shows Sonia and her mother in the woods as a deportation train pulls into view, one of its doors opening to reveal a blood red interior and the abstract forms of other prisoners. Sonia explains that her sister escaped and that she and her mother were put onto a train. “It’s impossible to erase it.”

The sequence then cuts back to Sonia at the shop in the present day and it is such a contrast with what she has been recalling.

The **GLOSSARY** lists many familiar words, which have special uses or meanings in the film industry. Becoming familiar with them will help you express yourself when you discuss and/or write about this film as well as other films in the future, fiction films and/or documentaries. You can find this glossary at <https://journeysinfilm.org/product/glossary-of-film-terms/>. The Glossary of Film Terms is also available to download from the Big Sonia page on the Journeys in Film website.



Handout 3 ► P. 1

Techniques and Film Devices in *Big Sonia*

1. Reminders to the audience that there are real persons making this film.

In the opening sequences of the film, we learn that the film has been made by Sonia's granddaughter whom we see driving Sonia to the radio station (and then subsequently at other points during the film). The filmmaker does not disguise this relationship. Later in the film's opening section, we see the director sitting with her grandmother in a radio interview. Critically, it is important to recognize that a documentary film is a creation and construction that is made by people who bring their knowledge, attitudes, understandings and point of view to a subject.

Assignment: Watch for and record *at least* three other moments when the viewer is reminded that the film is not some "magic capturing of reality" but a conscious assemblage of moments *based on* reality. What does each moment contribute to the viewer's understanding?

2. Using animation to illustrate a story

During the telling of Sonia's past as a concentration camp detainee during the Holocaust, animation is used. The animation expresses the emotional distress and trauma of this experience. What do you think the filmmaker was hoping to achieve by using animation rather than archival photographs or other resources?

Assignment: Watch for other scenes where the filmmaker uses animation instead of live action and make notes on several of the animated sequences: What is depicted? How effective are these sequences? What else could be done in their place if the filmmaker was opposed to using animation?

3. Using BACKSTORY

During the film's opening 12 minutes and 55 seconds, the film establishes Sonia's backstory and does so in several distinct ways. Sonia is shown discussing her past in a radio interview that threads throughout the film and provides it with a narrative link between past and present. The radio interview becomes part of the voice-over material in the film.

Assignment: What is the effect of the different ways of presenting Sonia's backstory? Watch for and take notes on other times when Sonia discusses her experience as a Holocaust survivor and also as a wife and as a mother. How do these scenes affect the viewer?

4. Using VOICE-OVER as storytelling

Big Sonia emphasizes observational footage as the basis for the film's visual style. In the material, we see Sonia and the other people in the film (they are the film's "characters") speaking to each other and to the camera as they undertake various activities. The film also includes more formally arranged interviews with Sonia, her daughters, her son, and several other people who have a connection to Sonia. The film, though, also uses voice-over as a major form of expressing Sonia's thoughts and feelings and those of her family, thus developing the theme and advancing the plotline. The voice-over that is most powerful and significant in the film is arguably used in relation to the animated scenes, providing the historical context and background information about Sonia's life.

Handout 3 ► P. 2

Techniques and Film Devices in *Big Sonia*

Assignment: Watch for **voice-over sequences** and describe several. Which are most effective in telling this story?

5. Highlighting relationships

One of *Big Sonia*'s key storylines explores the relationship between Sonia and her children, two daughters and a son, and their particular responses to Sonia's past as a Holocaust survivor.

Assignment: Pay attention to the particular sequences that focus on Sonia's daughters and her son. How would you describe the differences in their relationships to their mother and her past? Pay special attention to the sequence showing Sonia at a family gathering. We hear voice-overs from her children explaining the importance of such an event for their mother.

6. Storytelling as a healing power

At two different points in the film's timeline, Sonia's adult son Morrie reads the poem about his mother that he wrote as an adult from a child's perspective; he titled the poem "Sonia at 32." These are key scenes in the film. The one that first shows Morrie reading the poem stops abruptly when Morrie breaks down in tears as he reads the text. Late in the film, observational footage shows us Morrie pressing flowers and then placing them in the poetry book to mark the page of his poem "Sonia at 32"; we hear him reading the poem in its entirety as a voice-over. This second reading of the poem

paired with observational footage of Morrie pressing flowers relates as a motif to the images of nature that Sonia speaks about in the film's opening sequence when she talks about her doodles.

Assignment: Why does the filmmaker choose to repeat the poetry-reading as a voice-over? Include any other differences you may have noticed. Pay particular attention to the first of these shots, described above. In what way is this depiction most appropriate? What is the reason for this scene being included in the film? What is different and what does it tell us about the relationship between Sonia and her son? What does the film say to us about creativity?

7. Creating "reality" for the camera

Refer to the film's late scene when Sonia opens her new shop and her daughters and son are in attendance to help her.

Assignment: To what extent does the presence of the camera and film crew control the family's behavior? Are they "putting on a show" or being themselves in this situation? Do you think the filming changes family dynamics or merely reveals them?

8. Point of view: The prison sequence

Throughout *Big Sonia*, various points of view are presented. Often we hear Sonia's point of view on a subject, and then we are given the points of view of her children, of high school students, and of prisoners at a correctional facility. The prison sequence late in the film begins with Sonia during her radio interview. (The film returns to this interview several times



Handout 3 ► P. 3

Techniques and Film Devices in *Big Sonia*

throughout the film as a way of setting up a sequence.) She is explaining her mission to spread a message of compassion that relates back to her Holocaust experience. Pensive music underscores this moment and the sequence then cuts to show Sonia in a wide shot walking past the barbed wire and exterior fence of a massive looming prison in the background. On the soundtrack, we hear Sonia's voice-over (taken from the radio interview) and there is a moment of split-audio when we begin to hear the voice of a man who will be shown in the next shot to be a prisoner. He is shown explaining his circumstances. The sequence cuts back to following behind Sonia as she enters the prison and we see several shots as she is checked upon entry. Pensive music underscores the sequence which then includes another prisoner being interviewed on-camera explaining his own backstory. These two prisoner interviews are juxtaposed with the observational footage of Sonia being checked as she enters the prison.

The sequence cuts to Sonia talking with a group of inmates, then to interviews with several inmates. The sequence then cuts to a new "character" in the film, SuEllen Fried, who explains that she runs an initiative called Reaching Out From Within. Fried explains that she saw a news story about Sonia and realized that the Optimist Creed that Sonia has on the wall in her shop is also used by the Reaching Out From Within rehabilitation program. The sequence then cuts back to Sonia speaking with the prisoners as they sit with her. Closeups show us prisoners looking, listening, and responding to Sonia's story about her childhood and the Holocaust.

Assignment: What is the attitude of the prisoners to Sonia and to her personal history? How does Sonia's point of view about her experiences connect with the prisoners? Why is this sequence placed in the late part of the film?

9. The use of music

Throughout the film, the action is accompanied by music. Some of this music is playful, and at other times it is more somber.

Assignment: Select a sequence and discuss how the music enhances the images and action and how the music changes according to what we are seeing and hearing.

10. The power of objects

Throughout the film there are scenes that emphasize the power of objects: there is a scene in which Sonia shows her granddaughter the scarf that once belonged to Sonia's mother, a book of poetry, a photograph of Sonia's family, a letter written from the concentration camp, the Optimist Creed.

Assignment: What are the purposes of the objects that we see used and referred to in the film? How do they communicate the theme of the film?

Handout 3 ► P. 4

Techniques and Film Devices in *Big Sonia*

11. Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition means placing things next to one another to call attention to their similarities or differences. Go back to the opening twelve minutes of the film.

Assignment: Look for several sequences that gain strength by being out of order. What is gained by the juxtaposition of two sequences? Be prepared to describe the sequences and the effect of the ordering on the story.

12. Dramatic tension and resolution

Big Sonia's intercutting narratives construct Sonia's storyline by mixing the present with her memories of the Holocaust.

Assignment: Why does the filmmaker choose to conclude the film with the sequence of Sonia setting up her shop at a new location? What does this reinforce for the viewer?

13. Summary evaluation of the film

Ideally, you managed to follow the story of Sonia's life as a young person and as an adult and how the events of the life stages are related. What are the themes of the film? Consider the ideas of compassion, memory, hope, overcoming difficulties. (Remember that a theme should be stated as a full sentence, not merely listed as a topic.)

Assignment: Do you think that the film's structure (showing Sonia in the present remembering the traumatic events of the past) indicates and clarifies the powerful relationship between Sonia and her family's daily life and memories? Explain.

14. Repetition of a type of sequence

At two points in the film, early and late, two sequences explore the same topic, the experience of speaking to a small group as a Holocaust survivor. The first sequence shows Sonia meeting with a group of high school students, the second with a group of prison inmates.

Assignment: What are the differences between the two sequences? What do the high students respond to? What do the inmates respond to in Sonia's recollection?

15. Reviewing a film

A movie reviewer tells the audience his/her opinion about whether a film is worth seeing and why. Usually the content includes storyline, as well as topics such as actors' skills, cinematography, sound track, and themes.

Assignment: Write a review of the film as if for your school paper. Would you recommend this to your fellow students? Why, or why not?



Teacher Resource 1 ► P. 1 Commentary on Assignments

1. Reminders to the audience that there are real persons making this film.

Any of the many montage sequences might serve this purpose since it is obvious that the various shots do not necessarily follow one another but were assembled by someone for a particular purpose.

2. Using ANIMATION to illustrate a story

The film makes extensive use of animated scenes in order to visualize Sonia's experience of the Holocaust. Clearly there is no archival footage of Sonia specifically from this time and therefore animation is an interesting way to render the events that Sonia recalls. Notice how the visual style of the animation is abstract rather than realistic. The animation allows the filmmaker to precisely emphasize elements of Sonia's recollections using colors, shapes, and proportions that would not be likely in real life.

3. Using BACKSTORY

Throughout the film, the details of Sonia's backstory are revealed. Critically, this technique has something in common with all narratives. This is an opportunity to make the point that documentaries are constructions as much as fiction narratives are; they deploy many of the same conventions, such as characters who are in opposition to each other, an overarching conflict, the creation of tension, and eventual resolution.

4. Using VOICE-OVER as storytelling

Voice-over works well when it adds emotional value and information that an image does not necessarily provide. Voice-

over can both reinforce and clarify what is shown; it can also act as a counterpoint to it.

5. Highlighting relationships

The film presents Sonia's warm relationship with her customers, but clearly the relationships that she has with her children are more complex. Also, there is an opportunity to explain Sonia's relationship with her own mother.

6. Storytelling as a healing power.

Storytelling as an act of memory and of personal and cultural history has many and varied examples. We have the example of stories told about the Holocaust and we might look to American history and be able to identify the many and varied stories told about the American Civil War. Considering the relationship between our past (history) and the way that our present engages with it might provide your students with a broad and deep subject to explore. Perhaps invite your students to apply the example of storytelling in Big Sonia (in terms of how memory is articulated at both the personal and the community levels) to American history. Invite your students to identify a film, a song, a poem, a novel, or short story that is an example of how the past is brought to life as a healing process between different cultures and communities.

7. Creating "reality" for the camera

The concept of reality is a huge question to grapple with and might allow you to engage your students with the concepts of truth and "fake" information.



Teacher Resource 1 ► P . 2 Commentary on Assignments

8. Point of view: The prison sequence

This sequence of the film is an emotional ‘high point’ in which Sonia’s mission to communicate her message of kindness reaches its fullest expression. The sequence functions as a dramatic resolution of the narrative’s storyline about Sonia sharing her experiences of the Holocaust in terms of her “public-facing work.” Certainly, this sequence should be compared and contrasted with Sonia’s visit to the high school that is shown earlier in the film and there is an interesting discussion to have around comparison and contrast between the sequences.

9. The use of music

As an exercise, ask the students to close their eyes and just listen to a given scene for its music. As another exercise to demonstrate the power of music, perhaps select a brief scene, without any dialogue in it (for example the series of shots showing Sonia entering the prison) and play it mute with a piece of music from a separate sound source that is in keeping with the event being depicted. Then play the scene again with a piece of music not in keeping with what is being depicted. Finally, ask your students to consider how music works when it is integrated with voice-over.

10. The power of objects

Objects as motifs in this film symbolize the larger themes of memory, legacy, family heritage and also, too, the act of bearing witness.

11. Juxtaposition

The entire film engages in a process of juxtaposition, moving from the storyline in the present (for example when the film first shows us Sonia at the tailoring shop) to the storyline in the past (the animated scenes depicting the events of the Holocaust).

12. Dramatic tension and resolution

Invite students to pay attention to the role of music in creating tension and resolution (and a sense of harmony and happiness) throughout the film. What other elements build tension and lead to resolution?

13. Summary evaluation of the film

Ask students to consider whether their reaction to the film was more emotional or intellectual. In what ways does the film offer a counterpoint to the sense of hope with a clear sense of the toll that Sonia’s past has taken on her and her relationship with her children.

14. Repetition of a type of sequence

Discuss: Do the students relate more to the sequence with the high school students?

15. Reviewing a film

Suggest that students bring in copies of some film reviews and establish what the expected format for such an essay might be.

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Journeys in Film
PO Box 65357
Albuquerque, NM 87193
www.journeysinfilm.org