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Title	Documentary Case Studies: Behind the Scenes of the Greatest (True) Stories Ever Told, edited by Jeff Swimmer
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Publication date	2019-06-01
Original Citation	Culloty, E. (2019) 'Documentary Case Studies: Behind the Scenes of the Greatest (True) Stories Ever Told, edited by Jeff Swimmer', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 17, pp. 255-258. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.17.24
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.17.24
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Download date	2026-11-06 00:57:44
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/8239



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Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 17, 2019, pp. 255–258
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.17.24

Documentary Case Studies: Behind the Scenes of the Greatest (True) Stories Ever Told, by Jeff Swimmer. Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, 184 pages.

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Since Michael Rabiger first published his seminal *Directing the Documentary* in 1987 there has been a steady growth in practical guides to documentary filmmaking. As the authors of these books are often experienced filmmakers or lecturers in documentary practice, they offer an important counterpoint to the academic literature on documentary representation. The idea for *Documentary Case Studies* arose from Jeff Swimmer's experience as an associate professor in documentary production at Chapman University, where he noticed "how animated students get when they hear behind-the-scenes stories about their favourite films" (ix).

The resulting book presents aspiring filmmakers with insights into production practices and stories of motivation. The overall tone is celebratory, as Swimmer highlights the tenacity and resourcefulness of the filmmakers he interviews. Each of the thirteen chapters introduces a documentary case study and the major challenges its filmmakers had to overcome. The book is written in an informal, journalistic style that condenses the production process into short dramatic narratives. Swimmer appears to be a keen student of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) as each chapter sets up the filmmakers as heroes with obstacles to conquer. For example, the production of James Marsh's *Man on Wire* (2008) is presented as a "quest" to overcome "professional restlessness" by producer Simon Chinn (13); when Chinn failed to get a response from his key interviewee, he "licked his wounds and returned to wooing" the interviewee's partner (15). While this style is certainly easy to read, such forced drama can become tiresome and the animated tone is often at odds with the banality of what Swimmer is describing such as arranging interviews.

The documentary case studies are high-profile and relatively recent; only one film was made prior to 2000 and almost all were nominated for an Academy Award. Although mindful of playing into the "awards industrial complex" (ix), focusing on high-profile films allows Swimmer to cut down on a great deal of explanatory context when describing the issues faced by the filmmakers. The documentaries were chosen to "explore a wide range of strategies for meeting production challenges" (ix) such as sourcing funding, working with difficult interviewees, and filming in dangerous locations. Stylistically, the case studies range from observational films such as Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington's *Restrepo* (2010); reflexive film such as Robert Kenner's *Food Inc.* (2008); re-enactments such as *Man on Wire*; and expository films such as Morgan Neville's *20 Feet from Stardom* (2013). Thematically, they reflect the major concerns of the post-9/11 era: Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*

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(2012) is one of five films addressing war and conflict while Josh Fox's *GasLand* (2010) is one of three films addressing health and environmental issues.

The case study approach is intuitive and accessible. However, the book might have greater practical and pedagogical value if each chapter were devoted to a specific filmmaking challenge or dilemma. This would have allowed Swimmer to compare how different filmmakers have addressed common obstacles. As it is, there is a great deal of repetition across the chapters because the filmmakers inevitably encounter similar issues relating to funding and access. Moreover, with an average chapter length of eleven pages, there is little space to explore the nature of the challenges in depth. In consequence, the apparent lessons are often slight. For example, the opening chapter on *Food Inc.* presents a scenario in which the desired interviewees refuse to participate. Apart from making a general (and recurring) lesson about the value of perseverance, Swimmer highlights how the filmmakers "decided they needed to make industry rejection a part of their film" (7). They do this by using onscreen text to state "[c]ompany X refused requests for interview" so that "company snubs become like punctuation marks ending many of the film's chapters" (7). Curiously, this long-established convention of investigative documentaries is presented as though it is an innovative textual strategy.

Other films present more thought-provoking challenges that are, unfortunately, left underexplored. Chapter six on *The Act of Killing* concerns the difficulty of making films about violence; specifically, engaging the perpetrators of violence. *The Act of Killing* has attracted significant debate regarding the ethical implications of filming murderers as they re-enact their crimes (van Klinken). However, Swimmer is largely unconcerned with these issues and appears unwilling to pose critical questions to the filmmakers he interviews. Regarding the film's director Joshua Oppenheimer, Swimmer simply notes that he "imposed strict limits on matters of taste and ethics. He had to put his foot down on some of [the subject's] filming requests" (63). Swimmer is more interested in practical issues of production, noting that "they kept costs to a minimum by calling in favours whenever they could" (62). The "importance of smart partnerning" and using persuasion to get favours is another recurring theme (ix).

Nevertheless, some engaging insights do emerge when the filmmakers are willing to acknowledge their regrets and mistakes. Chapter twelve on Josh Aronson's *Sound and Fury* (2000) recounts the director's regret about the final look of the film with its "mushy, soft focus look" and "unimaginative backdrops" (137). As a former director of commercial videos, Aronson admits to being totally unprepared for the reality of shooting in people's homes: "I didn't know how to shoot at such a small level. So I just let it happen without injecting my visual sensibilities" (137). Chapter seven presents the interesting case of Josh Fox, a former theatre director, who set out to make a short film that would "raise the alarm" about fracking in his home state (75). His highly successful feature *GasLand* grew organically from a "ramshackle process" of filming and editing and by incorporating the audience feedback he received at screenings of the short film (75). These insights into the filmmakers' process, or lack of process, are interesting and fit well with Swimmer's overall aim of inspiring students to make documentaries.

The book ends with a short section of "conversation points", which lists three or four topics of consideration arising from each chapter. This is potentially a nice supplement to the preceding chapters, but the material is insufficient and the lessons are often slight. A conservation point on *30 Feet from Stardom* includes "simple advice for persuasion: when asking for a favour, take the person to lunch. It's hard to say no over lunch" (152). A question accompanying Mark Jonathan Harris's *Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the*

Kindertransport (2000) wonders whether having a personal connection to the story is "necessary in order to create powerful films" (154). This is certainly a worthwhile talking point, but for use as a prompt in a seminar or tutorial, it would benefit from the inclusion of suggested reading. Without additional material, the conversation points often struggle to move beyond the kind of prompts one might be asked at a book club.

Overall, *Documentary Case Studies* is a light book that is most suitable for a general reader looking for background information about celebrated documentaries. While Swimmer has an infectious enthusiasm for documentary filmmaking, the lack of depth detracts from the potential usefulness of the book in an educational setting; especially when one considers the volume of high-quality books on the subject. For example, James Quinn's *This Much is True* and Megan Cunningham's *The Art of Documentary* also explore documentary production through interviews with filmmakers, but run to almost twice the length of Swimmer's book. They also use a more conventional interview format allowing the reader to see the author's questions and the filmmakers' responses. In contrast, in *Documentary Case Studies* the voice of the filmmakers tends to be lost within Swimmer's own writing style.

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Suggested Citation

Culloty, Eileen. "*Documentary Case Studies: Behind the Scenes of the Greatest (True) Stories Ever Told*, edited by Jeff Swimmer." Book Review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 17, 2019, pp. 255–258. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.17.24.

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