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CASE STUDIES AND THE DISSEMINATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Edited by J. Damousi, B. Lang, and K. Sutton
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This is a part of the Routledge series on studies in cultural history and it focuses on a practice that many academics use in their research, namely the case study. The authors argue that the case study genre is theorised only within isolated subject fields and that this research method has risen to prominence during times of change or epistemological uncertainty (p. 2). Traditionally, in Western culture, case studies have been used by lawyers, theologians and doctors since 1850. It is also the foundation on which writers build their storylines for drama, suspense or detective novels. Case studies clearly influence both public and academic life: The first part of the publication focuses on the forces that shape case studies, such as power structures, technology, typology and traditions. The book starts with the development of hospital case studies, where this genre originated, and moves on to the second chapter that compares Freud and Milgram with each other, while the next chapter comments on the work of Wulffen, a criminologist and sexologist. The last chapter in this section of the book also focuses on a German in the person of the feminist Käthe Schirmacher who, according to Johanna Gehmacher, made herself into a case in order to promote her opinion and point of view.

The second part of the work focuses on the complex bond between the case study genre and the knowledge of modern subjects as well as subjectivities, by focusing on four historical cases that disclose how humans react and shape themselves, both in the light of and also against their own cases – providing reflexive discourse and concentrating on the public sphere of these studies. Chapter 5 explores the development of the sub-culture of the transvestite community by focusing on the narratives that were created by people who practised cross-dressing in the early twentieth-century Germany. The next chapter focuses on one of the well-known cases of so-called convent captivity; that of the Polish nun Barbara Ubryk who suffered years of imprisonment and abuse. The last two chapters in this part of the publication focus on the medical issue of doctor-patient relationships, written by Lisa Featherstone on Victor Wallace, and by Joy Damousi on Viola Bernard.

The third and final part of the book focuses on the role of case studies in literature and culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is called ‘Literary circulations’ and it focuses on the inter-disciplinary and transnational aspects of case studies as they are used in writing. Chapter 9 explores how a novel writer based his story on a contemporary murder trial in modern literature, and chapter 10 discusses the use of medical case material in literature aimed at the French middleclass of the turn of the twentieth century, through the writings of Dubarry. The next chapter returns to Freud, this time by focusing on the interpretation of German literature on castration. The book closes with a psycho-analytical exploration of Linda Le’s use of the works of Ingeborg Bachmann.

This book investigates the case study by explaining the historical development of this genre. It then moves on to scrutinising the genre in order to improve a critical understanding of the case study as the ‘center of cultural and social understandings of the emergence of modern subjectivities’ (p. 10). I believe this book should be on library shelves and that theologians, lawyers, doctors and writers should be made aware of its existence, as they can all benefit from its rich content. From a theological point of view, this is an important study to take note of, but I doubt if it would have a significant influence on the way the case study is currently used as scientific research method.