Nearly thirty years into its life, this is an ideal time to assess the pay-cable television company HBO. Fittingly, The Essential HBO Reader and It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era both analyze HBO’s evolution, innovation, and influence within the contemporary television landscape. Yet the books are different enough in scope and approach that they do not duplicate each other.

The Essential HBO Reader, part of University of Kentucky Press’s Essential Readers in Contemporary Media and Culture series, succeeds in providing smart academic readings of HBO programming accessible to a wide readership. Bracketed by an opening essay covering HBO’s history and two closing essays appraising aspects of its representational and corporate legacy, the book’s four sections cover each of the channel’s dominant programming areas: drama, comedy, sports, and documentary.

The drama section is the most comprehensive, rightfully so given that this is HBO’s most substantial area of success and influence. Christopher Anderson authors an excellent overview, interrogating the ways in which HBO has used the original drama series to position itself as the primary symbol of “quality” television. Sharply tying the perceived cultural value of HBO drama to the network’s economic motivation to retain discerning subscribers, the essay provides a revealing look at what Anderson dubbed “the most solemn rite of contemporary television culture—the cultural consecration of HBO” (38). The case studies that follow perpetuate, rather than complicate, that consecration by exploring the production elements and formal characteristics that have made shows like Angels in America, Oz, The Sopranos, and The Wire so important and distinctive. Given the complexity of these dramas, it is unfortunate that the chapters are short, with most being less than ten pages. But the best essays in this section, such as Horace Newcomb’s piece on Deadwood and Kim Akass and Janet McCabe’s essay on Six Feet Under, succeed at distilling the most essential elements of HBO’s dramas in concise yet astute prose.

The book’s comedy section is similar in structure and approach. It launches with a pair of overviews: Bambi Haggins and Amanda Lotz co-author a look at HBO’s stand-up comedy, while Jeffrey P. Jones surveys comedy talk shows. Both essays excel at placing this programming within an industrial context, pinpointing the ways in which HBO provides an alternative outlet for comedy. The subsequent case studies of The Larry Sanders Show, Sex and the City, and Curb Your Enthusiasm continue this theme of comedic alterity, with David Lavery’s look at Curb Your Enthusiasm making for an especially delightful read as he celebrates the cantankerous Larry David by enumerating many of his character’s disastrous interactions.

The documentary section relies on overviews rather than individual case studies. While Susan Murray does focus exclusively on America Undercover, most of HBO’s documentary projects fall under that series umbrella, from high-minded fare like Down and Out in America to more sensationalistic programs like G-String Divas. Thus, with Murray’s essay joined by Thomas A. Mascaro’s overview of HBO documentaries and Jeffrey P. Jones’s coverage of HBO’s erotica, the documentary section gets somewhat repetitive, especially the overflowing (even if deserved) praise for Sheila Nevins, the longtime head of HBO’s documentary division. That said, the Murray and Jones chapters perceptively explore how the curious coupling of socially relevant and sexually exploitative elements across HBO’s documentaries fits exactly with the network’s broader attempts to market its programming as above and beyond network fare. Jones additionally makes a convincing case for the social importance of what many view as purely sensationalistic material in shows like Real Sex and Taxicab Confessions.

Besides the brevity of most essays, which leaves some key ideas underexplored, the other weakness in The Essential HBO Reader is the relative lack of critical interrogation of HBO’s claims of exclusivity and quality, embodied by the famous “It’s not TV, It’s HBO” slogan. Gary Edgerton’s opening essay, for instance, praises HBO for its breakthrough programming and pioneering economic models, but offers exultant quotes from former HBO chairman Chris Albrecht as if they were evidence of HBO’s preeminence, rather than
part of a comprehensive marketing scheme or descendants of quality television rhetoric that stretches back to broadcast television’s earliest days. Similarly, a number of the essays in the drama and comedy sections conclude with a reiteration of the idea that because HBO does not have to kowtow to advertisers and the FCC, its shows have nearly unlimited creative license. While this is true in some measure, HBO is still limited by its own network identity and subscriber demands. Furthermore, it can be tiresome to read the same argument repeatedly expressed.

The major exception to The Essential HBO Reader’s overall praise for its subject is Toby Miller and Linda J. Kim’s essay, which alone constitutes the sports section. This strikingly provocative chapter focuses primarily on HBO’s substantial involvement in boxing, and it pulls no punches in being highly critical of the network’s exploitation of the sport and its participants, questioning not just the morality but even the legality of HBO’s combined administration and coverage of boxing. Because of its strong polemical stance, as well as its expectation that the reader has at least passing familiarity with theories of political economy, the essay doesn’t actually seem to belong in this book.

In fact, it would fit much better in It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era. Toby Miller does pen the book’s foreword, which argues that the book is as much about television studies as a discipline as it is about HBO and its acclaimed shows. As such, rather than organizing the chapters by programming types, It’s Not TV separates its three sections in terms of media-studies perspectives: industries and economies, texts and contexts, and audiences and identities. Drawing from approaches as varied as political economy, cultural studies, formal analysis, queer theory, and genre theory, the book asks an overarching set of questions: is HBO really “not TV,” and what does a “not TV” industry, text, and audience look like?

The opening industry section provides the most comprehensive deconstruction of the not-TV concept, and it is launched by a penetrating essay by Avi Santo on HBO’s production culture. Santo argues that HBO is neither TV nor not-TV; it is instead “para-television,” defined as “production practices and programming choices that are purposely situated alongside recognizable television forms in order to confer particular meanings upon them” (24). In other words, HBO does draw heavily on existing forms and practices of television, as the syndication of the channel’s programs would indicate, but it simultaneously innovates in order to distinguish itself as superior. While this preoccupation has been central to HBO’s success, Santo observes that it can also put HBO in a bind. For instance, driven to emphasize distinction because of its subscription model, HBO is forced to keep innovating, rather than copy past successes, and while that ethos is a plus for fostering programming diversity, it can interfere with a corporate bottom line. Santo’s claims are complemented by the other essays in this section, including Tony Kelso’s analysis of HBO’s business model and another essay by Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, this one looking at the mobilization of HBO’s quality rhetoric. The section also features an analysis of HBO Asia by Shawn McIntosh, lending a global perspective on HBO’s corporate activities.

The next section moves from industrial factors to aesthetics. David Marc’s analysis of Carnivale and Lisa Williamson’s look at HBO sitcoms echo the previous section’s arguments productively. Williamson argues that HBO’s comedies transform genre conventions beyond just those of the sitcom, targeting a savvy audience willing to pay for unorthodox comedy. Marc contends that an excess of innovation doomed Carnivale, thereby illustrating that HBO’s failures are as revealing as its successes. This section also includes the most deliberately provocative essay in the book, Marc Leverette’s piece on the graphic language, violence, and sex contained within HBO’s programming. Leverette indulges himself a bit excessively in flouting linguistic taboos, but in doing so he underscores his central point: that HBO uses such transgressive content to position itself as operating outside of television norms, even as that becomes a formula in itself that predictably satisfies audience desires for defying boundaries.

The final section of It’s Not TV focuses on the audience. Conor McGrath and Rhiannon Bury separately refer to HBO’s online forums in order to explore the reception of K Street and Six Feet Under, respectively. Like David Marc, McGrath finds that HBO does have creative limits based on audience expectation; while individual program ratings might not matter, viewer response certainly does. Bury presents an engagingly complex argument about taste cultures, asserting that HBO’s viewers position themselves as “quality audiences” of quality television, and their cultured tastes fit neatly in line with traditional bourgeois aesthetic standards in both progressive and regressive ways. This section’s final two essays reveal more about the texts under analysis than their audiences, but they suitably round out the book overall. Cara Louise Buckley and Brian L. Ott provide a queer reading of Carrie’s consumer habits in Sex and the City, arguing at the end that while such practices often “function hegemonically to maintain prevailing relations of power,” they can also “offer more socially resistant and transgressive possibilities” (212). Joanna L. Di Mattia closes the book with an eloquently written essay about Angels in America and the ways in which it relentlessly makes visible the traditionally invisible gay
body, thereby highlighting both HBO’s innovative practices but also the overwhelming limitations of gay representation elsewhere on television.

Di Mattia’s essay is a fitting end to It’s Not TV, with its sophisticated integration of queer theory, postmodernism, and formal analysis and its manifold interrogation of the relation of HBO programming to television in general. As such, it also indicates a larger point: The Essential HBO Reader is a solid read for the HBO enthusiast, but It’s Not TV is really the essential HBO reader for academics.

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BOOK DATA Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (eds), The Essential HBO Reader Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009. $50.00 cloth; $25.00 paper. 384 pages.
Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (eds), It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era: New York: Routledge, 2008. $95.00 cloth; $29.95 paper. 260 pages.

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Interrogating Postfeminism:
Gender and the Politics of Culture
ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra

Perhaps because postfeminist popular culture is such a contested area despite numerous panels at academic conferences on the topic (including the one convened in 2004 at the University of East Anglia, U.K., by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, from which this resulting book takes its title), only two full-length books had addressed it through 2001. Tania Moderski’s Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Postfeminist” Era (1991) and Sarah Projansky’s Watching Rape: Film and Television in a Postfeminist Culture (New York University Press, 2001) were published ten years apart and Negra’s What a Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism (Routledge, 2009) is the only other specialist volume to have appeared since then. The paucity of scholarly literature is all the more surprising given that related nonacademic books such as Susan Faludi’s Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (Crown, 1991) have been bestsellers. Thus Interrogating Postfeminism, a productive and diverse collection of articles, usefully helps to fill a gap in film and media studies literature.

What is postfeminism and what is its impact on popular culture? Tasker and Negra offer the following definition, which is worth quoting at length: “Postfeminist culture works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially, it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer. Thus, postfeminist culture emphasizes educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment. Assuming full economic freedom for women, postfeminist culture also (even insistently) enacts the possibility that women might choose to retreat from the public world of work . . . As this suggests, postfeminism is white and middle class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self” (2). In the world of postfeminism, the struggles of the second wave of feminism—“the personal is political,” community activism, equality, reproductive rights—have withered away to such trivial forms of “empowerment” as plastic surgery and “cardio striptease” exercise classes.

Tasker and Negra contend that postfeminist media texts are intriguing because they rarely resist or critique feminism explicitly. Instead they undermine feminism by implying that its goals have been accomplished and so it is time to move on or, even, to enjoy the benefits. “The ‘taken into accountness’ permits all the more thorough dismantling of feminist politics and the discrediting of the occasionally voiced need for its renewal” (28), as Angela McRobbie puts it in “Postfeminism and Popular Culture,” one of the anthology’s most illuminating articles. She goes on to discuss a quintessential postfeminist text, the 2001 film Bridget Jones’s Diary, arguing that it invokes feminism only to end up celebrating the most conservative of happy endings, the traditional marriage ceremony. Thus, according to McRobbie, “feminism is only invoked in order to be relegated to the past” (37).

Interrogating Postfeminism is not intended to be a comprehensive account of the topic. The editors state that the volume “speaks to an emerging body of work that . . . remains unsure about its material, limits, and theoretical territory” (11), though one of the most valuable parts of the book is the lengthy introduction itself. The territorial uncertainty is reflected in the anthology’s organization, which with its lack of subsections has no obvious trajectory and might be at risk of raising more questions than it answers, particularly for the reader who is new to the debate about postfeminism. However, this diversity is also a kind of strength as the anthology moves beyond postfeminism’s “greatest hits,” such as Sex and the City and Ally McBeal to include a wide array of texts, including Riot Grrrl music (Anna Feigenbaum, “Remapping the Resonances of Riot Grrrl”), the children’s show Dora the Explorer (Sarah Banet-Weiser, “What’s Your Flava?”), and even Quentin Tarantino’s films (Lisa Coulthard’s “Killing Bill: Film Feminism and Film Violence”).

Among the highlight contributions is Sarah Projansky’s “Mass Magazine Cover Girls,” in which the author summa-