

Book Reviews

Brown, Jeffrey A. *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity: The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero as Cultural Nexus*. Routledge, 2019.

The superhero genre and its diverse media formats – comic books, video games, film, television, toys, and books – is a multi-billion-dollar enterprise in the United States of America and throughout the world. Jeffrey A. Brown's 2019 monograph *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity* lays a solid foundation for understanding the ubiquity of Batman not only in American popular culture but in global popular culture. Brown's main thesis is that the contemporary comic book Batman encompasses a multiplicity of identities that allow for the representation and discussion of socially relevant issues. Batman's character- and narrative-multiplicity hinges on fan identification, character stability, and character flexibility. While Brown views Batman as an agent of hegemony, he also considers how Batman constructs, reinforces, and challenges dominant ideas beyond his core mission of fighting criminals to enforce modern property laws and a specific notion of justice. Brown is concerned with such dominant ideas as familial relations, sexuality, ethnic representation, violence, and morality, as well as mass-mediated intertextuality and consumerism. Batman's multiplicity of identities is the link, or the nexus, connecting contentious social issues to the comic book character Batman. Brown achieves his stated thesis with a strong conceptual framework, quality evidence, and pertinent examples.

Following the introduction, in chapter 2, Brown traces the establishment of the current conception of the core Batman as a dark and brooding figure – Batman Prime – and how this notion of a basic Batman identity functions as a semiotic grounding point for variations across time, imaginative realities, media formats, individual creators, and social issues. In the third chapter, "Batman and Sexuality," Brown considers how Batman has interacted with issues of sexual representation including homosexuality and heterosexuality. In chapter 4, "Batman and Sons," Brown interprets Batman's position as both a literal and figurative father. Chapter 5 focuses on the two central women who assume the Bat symbol and name, Batgirl and Batwoman.

In chapter 6, Brown explores Batman's hegemonic status as a white able-bodied wealthy heterosexual American male and as a racially "colorblind" superhero. He also focuses on the depiction of African American superheroes through Batman's protégés Batwing and The Signal, and through Marvel Comic's Batman analogue Nighthawk. Chapter 7, "Batman and Villainy," addresses Batman's association with the darker side of the central superhero dichotomy between good and evil. Here, Brown interprets Batman as an antihero and details Batman's relationship with The Joker, Superman, and three villainous Batman analogues, Owlman, Wrath, and Nemesis. The final chapter "I'm the Goshdarn Batman!" examines the depiction of Batman as "cute," the cute trend in general, and how the cute trend relates to Batman specifically as a derivative of Japanese "kawaii" aesthetics that facilitates a character/consumer affect of endearment, innocence, and protectionism.

One of Brown's strengths is his expansive knowledge of Batman's 80-year comic book presence. For example, all chapters include detailed representative comic book examples related to the social issue under discussion. Further, Brown incorporates detailed representative comic book examples from every decade of Batman's existence beginning with 1939. Another strength is Brown's insightful and discerning interpretation of the cute superhero. I found it to be one of the most intriguing analyses in the book. Brown clearly and precisely explains how a hypermasculine, brooding, violent Batman translates into a diminutive, happy passive one, describes the cultural resonance the cute Batman embodies, and delineates how the film *The Lego Batman Movie* spoofs and unpacks Batman's model of dominant masculinity.

Although *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity* ends with one of the most rigorously written chapters in the book, it would have been helpful instead if Brown ended the book with a short epilogue summarizing his findings. Even a brief final assessment would have satisfied my need for critical closure to the multiple social issues surveyed. Another weakness was Brown's lack of consistency regarding Batman's relationship to the idea of hypermasculinity, the exaggerated forms of male stereotypical behavior such as aggression, emotional self-control, physical strength, sexuality, violence, and virility. Brown uses a variety of adjectives to describe the masculinity portrayed by Batman. "Excessive machismo," "overblown performance of masculinity," "masculine bravado," "masculine supremacy," "toxic masculinity," "exaggerated machismo," "excessively masculine." Therefore, it is not that Brown does not consistently engage with the concept of masculinity in

relationship to Batman throughout the book, he does. The point I am stressing is that the use of hypermasculinity (appearing first on page 10) would have been a simpler and more consistent, condensed conceptual anchor for understanding this aspect of the comic book Batman's multiplicity and cultural sustainability. Because Brown did not foreground the idea of hypermasculinity, the concept appeared to be up for critical debate as to its central importance in interpreting Batman (and all other superpowered women and men).

Despite this, Brown's facility with the comic book genre and superhero genre is evident throughout *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity*. He has immersed himself in the aesthetic, corporate, formulaic, generic, institutional, legal features, and genealogies of Batman. His immersion into the corporate, institutional, and legal facets of Batman is noteworthy since comics creatives work in tandem with comics industry brokers and comics management. Ultimately, knowing all about Batman in his fullness, depth, width, and breadth made this book possible. Brown's analysis of Batman demonstrates how a popular cultural production reflects national structures, systems, institutions, beliefs, values, histories, traditions, and practices of creativity, ingenuity, domination, oppression, suppression, marginalization, privilege, and entitlement. Overall, Brown's study of the contemporary comic book Batman as cultural nexus makes a positive and excellent addition to comics, gender, sexuality, and media studies.

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Cote, Amanda C. *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games*. New York UP, 2020.

In Summer 2021, California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing sued AAA game development company Activision-Blizzard for repeated violations of sexual harassment and discriminatory practices against women. During the same week, several former and current employees of indie darling Fullbright shared their experiences of sexist microaggressions at the studio. The explicit and implicit sexism at both large and small studios reflects the experiences shared through interviews with women gamers in Amanda C. Cote's *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games*. A harrowing reminder of the discrimination of women throughout the texts, industries, and communities of

games, Cote's book soberly illustrates the progress still needed to foster gender equity in gaming circles.

As Cote states in the book's introduction, her work is deliberately broad, asking how the rise of casual games targeted to women in the early 2010s affects hegemonic definitions of who counts as a gamer. In the Introduction and chapter 1, Cote explores how gaming companies historically focused on male gamers to rebound from the market crash in the early 1980s. Since then, gaming in the US has been traditionally associated with masculinity, and movements that explicitly encouraged women to play games had little sustained success. As companies expanded their markets and game offerings to reach women, discourses in a variety of gaming spaces constructed the first-person shooter, role-playing game, and other masculinized game genres as "core" while games played in short bursts or free-to-play online games were considered "casual." Unsurprisingly, most core games feature few women, and those that are depicted are often portrayed as sexualized objects. Meanwhile, casual games that are targeted for female audiences often feature stereotypically girly traits and aesthetics, as Cote discusses in chapter 3. As the casual market expanded and even AAA studios moved to target women, more men found their hegemonic dominance in gaming spaces threatened. The term "gamer" has historically been constructed as white, straight, cis, and male, thereby gatekeeping people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and women. Drawing from Antonio Gramsci, Cote argues video game spaces are currently experiencing a crisis of authority, whereby the rise of casual games threatens hegemonic masculinized "core" games, leading men to engage in more explicitly sexist harassment to hedge their authority as gamers.

Through illuminating interviews with several women gamers, Cote explores how the historical moment of the rise of casual games operates within the upsurge of sexist harassment and microaggressions in gaming spaces. Chapters 2 and 3 include conversations about the overt and inferential sexism these women experience from different gaming communities. Cote approaches these interviews with nuance, noting that even though most women belong to several of the same demographics, their experiences, attitudes, and beliefs about their identities varied greatly. Most of the women identified chiefly as gamers, while some subscribed to the belief that because they played casual games, they weren't "real" gamers. Several of Cote's interviewees expressed frustration, fear, and anger over the overt harassment they experience when playing online with male players, while others felt the representations of women in dominant video game series such as *Grand*

Theft Auto contributed to sexist gaming cultures. In chapter 4, Cote describes how several women took explicitly feminist stances against this behavior, proudly proclaiming themselves as competent and competitive women in online spaces. Other women players, like those in chapter 5, were more comfortable hiding their identities during online play to avoid any direct name-calling or sexual advances. Some even avoided online spaces altogether to forego any potential negative situations. Cote also includes follow-up interviews with several women years after the original in chapter 6, showing how women gamers may change how they negotiate their gamer and female identities across gaming spaces. After exploring how these women dealt with sexism in gaming in different ways, Cote posits a powerful argument: no matter how individual women cope with sexism, their actions alone cannot bring about equity in gaming cultures. Broader cultural shifts are necessary, from accountable game moderation to the active recruitment of women into core gaming environments. Most cogent to Cote's work, casual games should not be seen as the downfall of core games, but rather as another form of video games for all players to enjoy. Similarly, women should be recognized as part of the core gaming demographic since the popularization of video games, not just as an ancillary group that only plays feminized casual games.

Gaming Sexism provides a powerful account of women's experiences with sexism, harassment, and discrimination in gaming spaces, and, like all great research, can be built upon to further investigate gaming communities and address some of the areas lacking from Cote's study. While Cote focused mostly on women who game, further analysis could explore how women encounter and deal with sexism in ancillary online game environments, such as YouTube reviews and Twitch streams. More work should also investigate how women experience and navigate sexual discrimination and harassment in video game work environments, particularly as more stories come out regarding workplace harassment from both AAA and indie studios. As Cote mentions in the conclusion, her work mostly discusses the experiences of women from the US and Europe who play games from the same regions. Games researchers should expand the scope of these projects to include and focus on women, LGBTQ+, disabled individuals, and/or people of color from different areas around the globe to provide a more nuanced picture of how sexism and other forms of discrimination are perpetuated in gaming spaces. Despite these omissions, *Gaming Sexism* serves as a worthy starting point for such discussions.

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Langford, Michelle. *Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance*. Bloomsbury, 2021.

In the last two decades, several scholars have placed allegory at the center of their study of Iranian cinema. Most of them, such as Negar Mottahedeh in *Displaced Allegories*, limit their case studies to a handful of auteurs or films from the post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. Michelle Langford's strong background in studying cinematic allegory, however, allows her to extend her case studies to a selection of films from the early years of feature film production in the 1930s, pre-revolutionary genre films of the 1960s, and the dissident new wave cinema of the 1970s. Langford adds to Mottahedeh's argument of "displaced allegories," expanding the study of allegories in Iranian cinema beyond the mere result of censorship. She thereby argues for a more complex approach to allegorical aesthetics as an essential part of the poetics of Iranian cinema.

Langford opens the first chapter of her book with the study of allegory in Ovanes Ohanian's *Mr. Haji the Movie Actor* (*Haji Aqa Aktor-e Sinema*, 1933). She argues that this self-reflexive silent film allegorizes the tensions between tradition and modernity ushered by new modern media, such as cinema. Langford compares this optimistic approach to modernity with the pessimistic approach that permeates the new wave cinema. She contends that if films such as *Mr. Haji* inadvertently promoted the modernizing agenda of the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah, then the new wave films and some genre films benefited from utilizing allegory for attacking and criticizing the modernizing project of the last king of the Pahlavi dynasty, Mohammad Reza Shah.

In chapter two, Langford studies the different ways Iranian films allegorically use the figure of the child to promote or to resist the political agenda of their times. She examines Kamran Shirdel's pre-revolutionary documentary *The Night It Rained* (*Un Shab Keh Barun Umad*, 1967) as a bridge to explore the role of child-centered films in post-revolutionary cinema. At the center of this analysis lies the claim that Shirdel deploys the child actor to allegorically criticize the role of the modern media, including cinema, in Shah's mythic and heroic nation-building project. Langford studies Jafar Panahi's *The Mirror* (*Ayneh*, 1997) as a post-revolutionary counterpart to *The Night* and discusses the different ways the film

allegorically questions the Islamicate values through a child-centered (non)film by hinging on the disconnect between reality and representation.

In chapter three, Langford considers Marziyeh Meshkini's *The Day I Became a Woman* (*Ruzi Keh Zan Shodam*, 2000). The author reads this film as an allegory of Iranian post-revolutionary cinema that challenges the Islamicate values imposed by the rigorous codes of modesty. Building on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of "becoming," Langford claims that beyond the evident allegory, the film also registers an affective becoming-woman through allegorical aesthetics. This process of affective becoming-woman is formed between the viewer and the film and becomes possible in scenes where the viewer is a necessary part of the filmic assemblage.

In chapter four, Langford discusses cine-poetics by examining Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A Time for Love* (*Nobat-e Asheghi*, 1990) and Majid Majidi's *Baran* (1999). For Langford, the poetics of cinema are not simply reduced to the citation of poems but are extended to cinema's unique potential in forming its own poetics. In developing her claim, she draws upon Persian *ghazal*, a form of lyrical love poetry, and coins the term "cinematic ghazal" (136) to characterize certain moments in her case studies where poetic modes of expression are privileged over narrative. Langford mainly locates such moments in the scenes pervaded with sensual imagery that present love as concurrently pleasurable and painful.

Chapter 5 focuses on cinematic allegory in Iranian post-revolutionary war cinema. Here, Langford predominantly confines her attention to Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *Gilaneh* (2005). She argues that *Gilaneh* goes against the trend of Iranian war cinema because of its preoccupation with narrative from a maternal perspective, and its refusal of idealizing the martyrdom modeled on the Karbala paradigm. Langford claims that in this film the main maternal character, Gilaneh herself, is the allegorical manifestation of *vatan* (homeland), not as the female geobody of the nation in need of protection but rather the melancholic urgency of attending to the nation's forsaken wounds.

In the final chapter, Langford studies Asghar Farhadi's *About Elly* (*Darbare-ye Elly*, 2009) in the context of Benjaminian *Trauerspiel* (mourning play). Langford argues that *About Elly*'s refusal to serve the mythic and transcendent function of the Karbala-paradigm-based mourning, and its resistance to didacticism, align it with Benjaminian *Trauerspiel* rather than traditional Iranian *ta'ziyeh*, a traditional Iranian form of religious theater. Langford zeros in on the significance of sadness and mourning in Iranian culture and claims that the collective protagonist of *About*

Elly symbolizes a generation that deals with these post-revolutionary ideological discourses through dissimulation. She contends that Farhadi uses “dissimulating camera” (194) as an essential allegorical procedure to harmonize form with content.

Langford advances her argument to the coda, claiming that as the new wave films of the 1970s signaled the dream of the future anti-Shah revolution, films like *About Elly* and *Mirror* herald the future protests in the new millennium. Langford discusses little Mina (the protagonist of *The Mirror* who removed her headscarf and stubbornly declared she didn’t want to act anymore) and wonders whether the real Mina (the actress, Mina Mohammadkhani) also does not want to “act” according to the Islamic Republic’s compulsory hijab laws. Langford ignores the fact that many youths of this generation, including the defiant Mohammadkhani, divert their energy from acting against the grain of the society through dissimulation to emigrate to other more democratic countries where they are not forced to act in the constraints of the Islamic values.

In unpacking the multiple layers of meaning in Iranian films, Langford demonstrates a deep understanding of the specificities of the Iranian social, cultural, and political context. Yet the mastery of Iranian culture and history, in some parts, prompts the reader to wonder how far the author can go in the study of allegory if the symbolic figures, actions, imagery, or events of the allegory are not necessarily born out of filmmakers’ deliberate artistic decision-making but are imposed on them and are fait accompli. For instance, in her study of *The Mirror*, Langford discusses the allegorical role of the street names – all of which are political names – traversed by little Mina in her attempt to return home. Considering that almost all the major streets in the capital city of Tehran were renamed after the Islamic Revolution to remove any sign of the Pahlavi Dynasty from the city, the use of the names – such as Baharestan, Jomhuri, Enqelab, etc. – in the film is not the result of Panahi’s decision-making and are instead inseparable parts of the realist films that follow a *flaneur*.

Overall, *Allegory in Iranian Cinema* is a well-researched, articulate, and detailed book that would contribute toward thinking of allegory in Iranian cinema outside the restraints of censorship. The extension of the case studies to both sides of the pivotal revolution of 1979 clearly demonstrates the allegorical aesthetics as an integral part of the poetics of Iranian cinema. Moreover, the comprehensive and close analysis of selected primary films, and the brief discussion of several secondary films infused with theoretically savvy arguments, results in a scholarly piece of work that yields an enriching and informative reading experience.

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Nichols, Michael D. *Religion and Myth in the Marvel Cinematic Universe*. McFarland, 2020.

Comparing, conflating, and contrasting the heroes and stories of ancient myth with the box-paneled (or cinematized) adventures of contemporary superheroes has a long history. Since the boom of the superhero genre, a publishing cottage industry provides academic and popular expositions on the types, meanings, and significance of such transhistorical narrative affinities between legend and caped crusaders (see Reynolds 1994; Dalton 2011; Morrison 2012). In *Religion and Myth in the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, Michael D. Nichols continues this comparative focus towards, specifically, the “Infinity Saga” of the perennially popular Marvel Cinematic Universe, which comprises twenty-two films (presented through three “Phases”) released between 2008 and 2019. This book is the first, to my knowledge, to provide an extended comparative mythic analysis to the entirety of the MCU during the Infinity Saga, a “self-contained mythic text” (Nichols 10).

The introduction to *Religion and Myth* lays the methodological groundwork for the analysis that follows. Nichols believes that the MCU films “tap into the fundamental questions about what it means to be human,” queries best deduced by “delv[ing] into the symbolic layers of such stories” (7). His goal is to “use broad cross-cultural comparison to illuminate the ways in which the MCU delves into timeless themes, symbols, and issues akin to more ancient religious and mythic narrative...and thus express[es] something proud about the human condition” (7). Nichols breaks with postmodern theorists who posit that either “myth” is an

unstable discursive concept without a legitimate referent (8) and/or that the comparative method is merely a construction of decontextualized patterns only viable within the eye of the comparer. Instead, Nichols notes not only the human propensity to “categorize” but also the legitimacy of an approach which simply denotes “correspondences and resemblances” between traditions of our “common humanity” (8). Thus, each succeeding chapter compares a theme/concept/symbol found in several pertinent ancient texts with its supposed appearance in a specific MCU “Phase” or set of films.

Chapter 1 examines “Phase One” of the MCU, connecting the origin stories of superheroes such as Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, etc. to the concepts of the rite of passage, which signifies “a person’s movement from one state of life to another” (17). Here, Nichols explicitly describes the MCU heroes as resembling the shaman (elsewhere, he describes the Marvel characters, in similar definitional terms, as “religious virtuosos,” 13), a religious figure who in many ancient cultures acted as a mediator between the human and supernatural realm. Shamans went through rites of passage to acquire and develop their divinatory “powers.” Both the shaman and religious virtuosos are gifted with the ability to “handle the sacred and dangerous powers which populate the universe” (13). By going through a process of initiation whereby they experience the death of their old “self” (e.g., Tony Stark, Bruce Banner, Steve Rogers) into their new, not-quite-human being (i.e., Iron Man, the Hulk, Captain America), MCU characters are thus marked, like the shaman, as powerful and possessing enhanced supernormal abilities through scientific or magical means. Nevertheless, like the shaman, these heroes are simultaneously liminal, unstable, and mortal creatures. These traits follow the superheroes throughout the Infinity Saga, fueling tension in narratives and between characters.

In chapter 2, Nichols discusses the villains of the MCU and their relationship to the protagonists, employing two concepts in religious studies discourse: the shadow-self and monster theory. The former, proposed by Carl Jung, is a facet of the individual which represents “everything negative that the subject refuses to recognize about [themselves] and yet is always thrusting itself upon him...directly or indirectly” (39). The latter typically examines the appearance of the monster in all forms of literature, noting the monstrous “represents a disruption of the perceived natural or cultural order” (40). To Nichols, significant figures in mythic traditions (e.g., Buddha, Beowulf, Jesus) and the MCU heroes face off against opponents who are both monstrous agents of discordance and evil, inverted representatives of the individuals themselves.

Chapter 3 focuses on the notions of “pollution” and “impurity” within the second Phase of the MCU. With frequent reference to seminal scholarship in the subject of ritual purity, as well as influential ritualistic traditions from the Hebrews to the Greeks, Nichols defines impurity/pollution as “matter out of place,” the very breakdown of preconceived notions of order and other. In both mythic and MCU narratives, when liminal figures (those existing between distinct conceptual spaces) and their dangerous potentialities are left unchecked, it can “produce situations of impurity which are liable to spread...to the nearest liminal individual, then society at large” (73). Thus, as the MCU protagonists move beyond their origins and begin to function as everyday heroes the films shift focus to themes of infection, contamination, and corruption, such as the infiltration of SHIELD by Hydra in *Captain America: Winter Soldier* or the “Extremis” virus in *Iron Man 3*.

In chapter 4, this impurity/pollution thread continues to discuss Phase Three films that depict the Marvel heroes fighting, not contra villains or monsters, but against themselves or their “families.” Comparing with works such as the *Iliad* and *Theogony*, Nichols examines how the superheroes’ liminal, ambiguous, and supernatural-destructive impulses, when combined with the increasing narrative tensions and destabilization of the initial Phases, leads to internecine and intrafamilial conflict. This strife is between the Avengers themselves or specific heroes against villains revealed to be family. These conflicts, which often result in the deaths of loved ones, signify another transition for the hero: either a reaffirmation of their identity or a new path forward.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the final two *Avengers* films, the villain Thanos, and the phenomena of death in religious and mythic discourse. The name Thanos, Nichols is quick to note, is from the Greek word for death (*thanatos*), and thus the imposing antagonist is the very personification of death for the entire MCU series, especially in the final *Avengers* entries. The former chapter focuses on the figure Thanos and comparable mythic personifications of death in Mayan, Abrahamic, and Indian lore. Both religious and MCU narratives share a common perspective on death: “irresistible chaos and the fear of life's instability” (16). In the latter chapter, Nichols discusses the appearance of both an “underworld journey” and apocalyptic battle in the final MCU Infinity Saga film *Avengers: Endgame*. In the final battle in which the entirety of the Marvel league destroys Thanos, Nichols finds the narrative end and moral arc of the entire Infinity Saga: “death haunts us all as a fact of the human condition, but by opposing it and defining oneself against it, a kind of peace is possible” (16). The conclusion to *Religion and Myth* reiterates

the main argument and methodology of the book, as well as contending that the MCU's films will serve as new mythic guides for future audiences in their own quests for meaning.

Overall, *Religion and Myth* is a well-written, engaging work that illuminates the shared themes, concepts, and narrative progressions between the MCU and humanity's oldest surviving myths and religious histories. Nichols surveys a wide variety of ancient mythic material. Thus, comparisons with the MCU never appear forced or contrived as he gives each religious element thorough comparative attention and extensive primary source citation. Additionally, Nichols has successfully refuted voices (such as George R. R. Martin quoted in chapter 2, 39) that portray the MCU canon as mindless blockbuster fodder. The author has elaborated a unique perspective that is a valuable individual and scholarly tool when critically interacting with these films. While I remain skeptical of his broader claim that the religious themes in the franchise are the reason for their global popularity, I am not at all wary of utilizing his interpretations and interpretive approach in future viewings or analyses. As Marvel begins a new, ambitious phase of releases, the methods and notions Nichols has eruditely explicated will surely be helpful.

One issue that Nichols could have dealt with more is countering the claims of the postmodern/"anti-comparative" tendency. In both the introduction and conclusion, he emphasizes that humans have a cognitive desire to categorize: "the human brain cannot function without categories and to put information and date into categories requires comparison" (9, cf. 162). This is a weak justification because it fails to address the root of the postmodernists' problems: the very categories employed. While thinkers like Jonathan K. Smith are opposed to the comparative approach, these scholars compared the positions, arguments, and ideas of thinkers, religions, and texts. They did not compare ideations and narratives of, say, oral traditions of an oral language filtered through a tenured academic's conceptual *weltanschauung* and linguistic apparatus with other such ideations and narratives. While Nichols' project is not in vain, I cannot see this work utilized by scholars outside of the comparative approach without a more robust defense of his method.

Religion and Myth has a potentially broad audience. This work lacks overly sophisticated academic terminology or prose, making it accessible for casual or general readers (i.e., those outside the religious studies guild or academia altogether). They will indeed find an interesting method by which to watch either

past or new comic book adaptations. Students in cultural or religious studies may find this book helpful if their research deals with superhero reception, the contemporary relevance of myth, etc. Professors may feel this book is useful for assigned reading classes on superheroes and religion, myth, or theology. However, if one is opposed to the comparative approach, this work might be methodologically flawed beyond repair.

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Nygaard, Taylor and Lagerwey, Jorie. *Horrible White People: Gender, Genre, and Television's Precarious Whiteness*. New York UP, 2020.

As most viewers will likely acknowledge, the days of mainstream television shows evading sociocultural commentary for the sake of allegedly apolitical entertainment are over. In their book, *Horrible White People: Gender, Genre, and Television's Precarious Whiteness*, Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerwey explore the unavoidable complexities of these cultural transformations, attending primarily to the ways the white left has become obsessed with its own anxiety and suffering. They make a compelling case for taking seriously the sociocultural repercussions that result from the production and consumption of television shows, particularly in the mobilization and reification of white supremacy. More specifically, they articulate how distribution, genre, aesthetics, and representation “work together to culturally recenter liberal White failure and victimhood while usurping attention from the plight of minorities whom these liberal and progressive White people supposedly seek to help” (9).

Nygaard and Lagerwey set up their book as a series of analyses examining what they deem to be “Horrible White People” shows. According to the authors, this designation pertains primarily to upmarket comedies such as *Broad City*, *Fleabag*, *Transparent*, *Insecure*, and *Master of None*. They argue that this subgenre proliferated after the Great Recession and peaked between 2014 and 2016. The examples they examine are all comedies or satires starring mostly white actors who regularly engage with discourses of liberal progressivism and racial equality. Many of these shows prioritize emergent feminist storylines around sex, gender, and relationships. As the authors argue, what is most striking about these shows is the “bleak grimness, black humor, and ethos of failure” that unites them as they center white precarity (5). To define this genre, they analyze 32 television shows and identify an insidious iteration of an intersectional, “woke” version of whiteness uniting them. Throughout the text, Nygaard and Lagerwey ultimately argue that Horrible White People characters – those who are obsessed with their own suffering – are representative of the liberal white populace that ultimately came to invest and participate in the maintenance of the social systems they supposedly claim to critique.

In the first chapter, Nygaard and Lagerwey explain how the emergence of streaming services and on-demand viewing options accelerated distribution of these shows and contributed to the rise of Horrible White People programs. In short, they argue that these shows and their characters reflect desirable logics for presumably white, liberal audiences in the twenty-first century industry and, thus, they sell well across the Atlantic too. This observation matters most because it demonstrates how the investments of said series transcend national contexts. In the second chapter, the authors consider the various ways Horrible White People shows challenge the raced and gendered familial norms and ideologies typically found in sitcoms. Through discussing issues like the loss of access to privileged experience, featuring “bad” protagonists, and presenting alternative forms of family, these shows recentralize “White suffering under the seemingly protective guise of liberal social critique” (76). The third chapter attends to the unique way female friendships are mobilized in Horrible White People shows to absolve white girls of their responsibilities for participating in or benefitting from systems of privilege. A purportedly feminist undercurrent can be found within the multitudinous examples the authors share as they observe how precarity and empathetic girlfriends are employed to excuse women of various performances of socially abject behavior. In the fourth and final chapter, Nygaard and Lagerwey turn to another genre that has

developed alongside *Horrible White People* shows, which they refer to as “Diverse Quality Comedies.” While the two genres are quite similar, they are nevertheless distinct in the sense that the latter have creators and casts of color. Yet the authors argue that despite their own innovations and complexities, these shows still adhere to the same aesthetics of whiteness. Ultimately, the analysis in this chapter demonstrates how diversity serves to make the shows appear progressive while also helping them reach untapped audiences for new profits, thereby reaffirming the capitalist interests of the industry. Although *Diverse Quality Comedies* resemble *Horrible White People* shows in various significant ways, they do offer some hope for progressive change since they make whiteness and white supremacy visible. Nygaard and Lagerwey conclude the book by turning to explicitly conservative, mass-market, male-centered programming to emphasize that white precarity and supremacy indeed continue to structure all of television and not just niche comedies.

Throughout the entire text, Nygaard and Lagerwey demonstrate a consistent commitment to critical feminist and anti-racist methodologies. Though such an orientation is arguably an imperative for this sort of work within media studies, it undoubtedly deepens their conclusions. Their attention to dualities within the comedies is also laudable, particularly since shows that present themselves as progressive are often riddled with unique tensions. Importantly, the authors recognize that not everything about the given shows is harmful; in fact, in some ways, they can be quite productive. However, their narratives can also serve as the Trojan horses for their more sinister effects. My personal critique of the book is predominantly rooted in its organization. The authors certainly took on a daunting task by taking more than thirty television shows into consideration. While I recognize that this move contributed to their argument about the ubiquity of these comedies as almost an entirely new genre of its own, it did make their more precise observations somewhat difficult to follow. Despite its rather convoluted structure, *Horrible White People* insightfully addresses both the dangers and potentials which seem to be arising as contemporary television begins to contend with its own whiteness. While it is possible that “*Horrible White People* shows” may never be formally recognized by wider audiences as their own genre, Nygaard and Lagerwey’s observations nevertheless allow readers to embrace a keener eye toward both the critique and consumption of contemporary media that covertly affirms structures of oppression all the while claiming to challenge them.

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Paasonen, Susanna. *Dependent, Distracted, Bored: Affective Formations in Networked Media*. MIT Press, 2021.

With *Dependent, Distracted, Bored: Affective Formations in Networked Media*, Susanna Paasonen provides a check to many of the common narratives about networked technology. Paasonen, a Professor of Media Studies at the University of Turku in Finland and a leading scholar in the field of affect theory, takes a nuanced approach in her study of networked connectivity as the infrastructure of our modern-day lives, questioning assumptions purported by outlets such as the news media that “we are hopelessly addicted to devices and apps that distract us to boredom” (4). Instead, Paasonen examines how technological systems such as social media have become interwoven in our lives and analyzes the complex and oscillating affective formations attached to these systems. She takes a mixed method approach, combining excerpts from a large collection of student essays on the topic of technology and daily life, with robust research in media theory from such scholars as Raymond Williams, Bruno Latour, Lauren Berlant, and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. Acknowledging the complex role social media has played during the COVID-19 pandemic and in our lives beforehand – as both disseminator of information and means of social connection – Paasonen brings together the lived experiences of her sample of students with affect and media industry theories to better understand the “complexity, contradiction, and ambiguity” (7) of networked living in affluent countries.

Each chapter investigates a widespread assumption about networked technology, taking on questions of dependency, distraction, boredom, and nostalgia in turn. After the introduction, which lays out the premise and theoretical basis of the book, Paasonen centers the second chapter, “Dependent: Agency and Infrastructure,” on questioning the well-established media rhetoric that equates reliance on networked technologies to addiction. This chapter focuses the most heavily on analyzing excerpts from student essays, a major highlight of the book. Though Paasonen is careful to provide a caveat to the inclusion of this research by acknowledging its limited sample comprised of Finnish university students, she draws helpful connections between the detailed experiences the students report regarding their internet habits and larger societal trends. Paasonen ultimately draws

from a complex web of perspectives to bring the point home that narratives of dependency often fail to capture the complexities of human-technology interaction.

The third chapter, “Distracted: Affective Value and Fickle Focus,” similarly seeks to debunk narratives that cast networked media as purely a form of distraction, but in this case, Paasonen relies more heavily on media theory, drawing on the work of Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and others. As Paasonen explores themes of value, attention, and scarcity on the internet and poses some complex questions about internet usage – for example, is our attention span on social media like that of a goldfish? (65) – she demonstrates an expansive knowledge of media theory. Occasionally, this comes at the expense of the chapter’s through line argument, which at times can be hard to decipher within the many complex connections being made. This may however serve the point, as Paasonen concludes the chapter by discussing the complexities of distraction as an affective formation which oscillates on an attention spectrum.

In the fourth chapter, “Bored: Flatness and Enchantment,” Paasonen considers boredom as an affective formation, questioning the common narrative that life was fuller and more meaningful before the internet and debunking the concept that boredom is a modern phenomenon that leads to cognitive decline. In a similar fashion to the previous chapter, she concludes that boredom also falls on a spectrum of “fascination, enchantment, interest, and excitement” and that these – along with boredom – are all a part of the networked media experience (138). She connects this to an insightful argument about the possibilities for using technology in the university classroom, which I found quite convincing. Much as this chapter prompts the academic reader to rethink how technology can be reevaluated as a pedagogical tool, the concluding chapter, “Nostalgia: A Toxic Pursuit,” beckons the reader to reevaluate the way networked media is often cast in a negative light through the draw of nostalgic memorializing of the pre-digital past. Here Paasonen reminds the reader of the many forms of social progress in recent years and suggests that considering the past as simpler than the present presupposes a white male subject position. Paasonen writes that, “critiques of the contemporary, for which there is certainly much need, should build on something other than wistful nostalgia if they are to hold critical edge” (146), serving as yet another pointed critique of the ways in which our modern society often attempts to explain the cultural implications of networked technology through overly simplified frameworks.

Dependent, Distracted, Bored calls out many of the key biases in rhetoric circulating about the internet in (affluent) society today. Paasonen maintains a

somewhat ambivalent tone about networked technology in relation to social good, emphasizing how deeply it has become ingrained in our contemporary way of living. For a media scholar such as myself who often considers the cultural harms of social media in my research, this serves as a corrective, with its reminder of the many ways in which I enjoy the benefits of social media in my own life. The call of the book seems to be to move beyond making value judgments of networked technology so that we can focus on exploring the complexities, the nuances, and the wealth of affective experiences that come with going online; there is a richness in the uncertainty.

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Saunders, Rebecca. *Bodies of Work: The Labor of Sex in the Digital Age*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

The importance of digital systems cannot be understated. The slogan of Occupy, for instance, demonstrates how corporate elite control advanced technology to dominate precarious workers across the globe. Given that the “conjunction of automation and globalization enabled by information technology” has reconstituted capitalism and made “labor available to capital on a planetary scale,” Nick Dyer-Witford proposes the notion of a “cyber-proletariat” to define a “global proletariat caught up in a cybernetic vortex” (15). Caroline C. Perez’ analysis of data bias is similarly indicative of the systemic denial of women as social and economic actors. Her work demonstrates that research, which informs and is informed by data, utilizes a “male-unless-otherwise-indicated” cognitive approach and subsequently produces gender data gap (13). Additionally, since digital value chains emphasize capital’s contingency on women’s performance of neo-Taylorized clerical work, which exists in combination with their unpaid domestic labor, the emergence of what Ursula Huws calls “cybertariat” becomes inevitable.

It is in the intersection of class, gender, and digital economy that Rebecca Saunders’ *Bodies of Work* addresses digital pornography. Titled “Digital Labor and the Porn User,” Part I exhibits how visual technologies and strategies exploited in the production of pornography are conducive for capital accumulation. According to Saunders, the economic utility of heterosexual intercourse lies in its potential to perform successful reproduction. Pornography emphasizes the depiction of

decisively non-reproductive intercourse, which makes it unproductive for capitalist economic systems. Digital pornography becomes amenable to capitalism due to its economization of the “unproductive” pornographic act. Consequently, the monetization of unproductive temporalities depicts the economic governance and reconstitution of sexual desire.

Saunders points out that “excess” configures the relationship between desire and capitalism. On VividCams, for instance, viewers can view in real time a naked female performer whose body directs the viewers’ desire “not only to her image and the prospect of its greater revelation but to the woman’s sexual pleasure” (33). The controlled revelation of the performer’s body and its potential for visible orgasm creates an opportunity to capitalize on viewers’ libidinal energy and attention. Saunders outlines other similar modes of extending the users’ engagement with pornographic content by the tantalizing promise of masturbatory and sexual fulfillment.

Part II shifts its focus to “datafication of desire” and the visuality of productive labor. It begins with the analysis of hyper-categorization in pornographic content (58). By codifying sexual impulses in definitive organizational systems, digital pornography performs the bureaucratic function of disciplining desire into determinable taxonomies. That anatomical categorization is absent in the depiction of male bodies testifies to the penetration of gender biases in visual registers. The patriarchal architecture of digital pornography is complemented by its heteronormative subculture, which is established by nomenclative “Othering” of trans-performers and androcentric portrayal of female homosexuality.

A discussion on speed and bodily discipline in hard-core pornography follows next. When pornographic films chart pleasure, they illustrate the material performative labor of participating sexual bodies. Male performance is measured by the consistent maintenance of rhythmic penetration while female arousal is characterized by passive endurance of the penetrating penis. Saunders insists that the visible “sexual athleticism” of the performers is indicative of “culturo-capital imperatives of digital acceleration and categorization” (113; 109). Since the apparatus of digital pornography expects the athletic bodies of the performers to “work,” it effectively celebrates their libidinal labor as workers.

Labor produces eroticism for the implied viewers, which is why the female body becomes highly susceptible to disembodiment. The concluding sections of chapter 4 and the totality of chapter 5 delineate the repercussions of the erasure of women’s physicality. Anal gaping, for instance, demands labor from the female

body to offer “maximum visibility” to the viewers (136). The resultant dissection functions to simultaneously penetrate the anatomical gape and make visible its reality, reproducing in iconography the oppositional iterations associated with the female body. The final chapter of Part II introduces the notion of “the capitalist grotesque” in the context of pornographic systems.

It is in Part III that Saunders offers to the readers a thorough analysis of contemporary interventions in pornography and their avowed relationship with anti-capitalism. Alternative pornographies, for instance, reject labor intensity and material productivity to offer performative spontaneity to the spectators. Homogenized taxonomies are replaced by labels that seek to redefine categorization of desire at both linguistic and conceptual levels. The synonymy between sexual experience and the pornographic film, however, makes economic alienation probable and increases labor time for the productive sexual body. Consequently, the problematic dismissal of labor erases the boundary between the performative self and the self, making productivity itself a characteristic of the self.

Interventionist pornography overcomes, in some measure, the frailties of alternative pornographies, particularly the corporate emphasis on consumptive and aesthetic output. Its emphasis on collective ownership distinguishes it from the commemorative vocabulary of alternative pornographies. Saunders focuses on Shine Louise Houston’s Pink and White Productions to explicate its distinct approach to labor. Though Houston’s company films sexual interaction for the performers, the filmic output provides the spectators access to implied pleasure. Here, the social relations between the performers can serve the function of cultivating communities, which, according to Saunders, can typify the transcendence of “capitalist co-optation of community” (277).

The book’s approach to capitalism and digital pornography fosters new understandings that cross disciplinary borders. Its theoretical vocabulary contributes to emergent interventions into debates concerning the labor of pornography and its association with capitalism in contemporary digital culture. *Bodies of Work* is undoubtedly a remarkable academic achievement.

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Huws, Ursula. *The Making of a Cybertariat: Virtual Work in a Real World*. Monthly Review, 2003.

Perez, Caroline C. *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. Abrams Press, 2019.

Schwartz, Roy. *Is Superman Circumcised? The Complete Jewish History of the World's Greatest Hero*. McFarland, 2021.

As a comics scholar, I have read many books that claim to offer extensive analyses of graphic narratives and their place(s) in American culture. Most fall short in achieving that goal. Roy Schwartz's *Is Superman Circumcised?* stands as a stark exception. This work contains some of the best analysis, history, and sociology pertaining to comics I have ever read. Indeed, Schwartz's title question is provocative, prompting the reader to jump quickly into this book (perhaps not as fast as a speeding bullet, but certainly quickly).

The book is organized around four parts, tracing the ancient origins of this hero to the current, postmodern meaning of Superman. Each part is subdivided into key chapters that address specific topics in this history. The "Postwar to Postmodern" section is particularly strong with its discussion of Superman through the "Silver Age," the "Bronze Age," a "Dark Age" (around his highly publicized "death" in the 1990s), and the "Modern Age." Schwartz also offers important interpretations of Hebrew parallels in both name and backstory for Superman. Especially impressive is Schwartz's incredible textual depth as he moves between the different mythos competing between the original Siegel and Shuster comics, the later DC-corporate writings, and the popular TV and film versions of the character. This depth not only offers a wide view of Superman and his impact within our culture but provides a blueprint for scholars to examine such longstanding characters.

The book is peppered with pictures to visually punctuate the comparisons Schwartz finds across storylines and depictions. His discussion of the milieu surrounding Superman's creation as a cultural response to the anti-Semitism in Western culture is important and necessary for all readers to understand. Moreover, Superman, as Schwartz proves, sometimes represents other political situations, like the New Deal and various immigration policies throughout the twentieth century. Schwartz also develops a comprehensive history of Jewish-American comics artists

and writers in the industry from the 1930s to today. He chronicles the publishing history and sales figures for Superman and the other comics throughout the various “Ages” in the Superman universe. He also explains Superman’s significance within the Jewish-American community and for oppressed peoples around the world. To quote the author, “Superman’s true superpower isn’t his strength or speed, it’s his iconicity. He’s so archetypal that, within the framework of his lore, he’s essentially a *tabula rasa*” (126). The character thus represents the best qualities for all peoples; he is the aspirational hero for humankind. Perhaps this is why the book contains numerous excerpts from comics detailing Superman’s battles against Hitler and other enemies throughout the twentieth century.

At the core of this work are philosophical arguments around the Man of Steel. Schwartz’s interpretations of archetypes (e.g., for Superman, for Clark Kent, and for Lois Lane) are especially strong and compelling. Schwartz employs Nietzsche and Jung to reinforce the biblical overtures to Superman’s qualities and symbolism (though he avoids digging into the former’s more problematic elements, such as his influence on the eugenics movement). The author also returns to the politics, morality, and identity concerns that lie at the heart of Superman’s (many) storylines. One of the most important distinctions this book makes is its focus on postwar and contemporary versions/plots around Superman. The depth of this discussion is truly remarkable and fruitful, allowing readers to grasp the evolution of this beloved superhero, especially in the current period where his character battles for relevance more than ever. We all can learn from the character and the author because “Superman is an alien in all senses of the word – extraterrestrial, foreigner, outsider – who not only personifies the best immigrant but all the best in America” (139).

Still, Schwartz does not venture far from his discussion of Jewish connections to the comics and the character, including the parallels between Superman’s “passing” as a waspy Americanized immigrant like many of his creators. In many ways, this skillful discussion of identity is the book’s true superpower. For instance, Schwartz explains that once Jack Kirby emigrates from Marvel to DC and joins the Superman team, he reinvents Jimmy Olsen’s backstory as an homage to his Jewish childhood and he infuses Jewish iconography into the comic art. Schwartz also turns attention to Superman’s legacy throughout popular culture, paying close attention to the film versions.

As a work of academic research and popular engagement, this book succeeds on multiple levels. With nearly forty pages of notes and a wealth of sources, this

book achieves monumental status as a scholarly endeavor. Yet this work is not stuffy, pedantic, or banal. Its prose is exciting and engaging, which makes it hard to put down. While not as vibrant as the comics themselves (for no book can be), this monograph animates Superman as a character that jumps off its pages and comes to life in every discussion about him. Indeed, as Schwartz notes, “Superman was like nothing seen before and everything seen thereafter” (89). I feel the same way about this extensive book.

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Shimpach, Shawn (ed.). *The Routledge Companion to Global Television*. Routledge, 2020.

Companion guides are much like *Doctor Who* companions in that they are valuable, underappreciated, and yet never quite seem to satisfy everyone. Much like *Who* companions of late, Shimpach’s team approach, utilizing a broad collection of 41 chapters, covers most of the bases with this guide. Shimpach notes in his introduction that “Constituting television in global terms... involves attending to it all over the world without privileging a version of it in any one place in the world” (7). Understandably admitting the human limitations of such a Doctor-like impossible task, he further states that “This Companion is not an introduction to global television or global television studies, nor is it a completely comprehensive account of everything that is happening, everywhere in the world” (10). Yet the book mostly succeeds in its goals, and Shimpach has assembled a masterful range of scholars and perspectives. In this review, I shall discuss each section in brief, highlighting the most important contributions in each.

The first section, “Objects and Ideas,” both sets the foundation of TV Studies as used in the book while also setting up its typical pattern. John Hartley’s initial chapter sets up the general (yet monumentally important) question “What Is Television? A Guide for Knowing Subjects.” His focus on technology permeates several other papers in the section. Both Purnima Mankekar and Jorge A. Gonzalez eschew discussion of the physical object of a screen with Mankekar more interested in affect and Gonzalez focusing more upon the impact of social inequality upon dissemination. Gonzalez’ contribution (and, indeed, those of scholars from and of the Global South more generally) is especially welcome in a companion like this as

the very white, middle-class, and Western/Global Northern state of media studies can often lead to assumptions about the availability of technology and/or infrastructure.

In the rest of the section, Timothy Havens, Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, and Lothar Mikos all focus on history and context, taking the reader carefully through the complicated nuances of the interactions between and among state(s) and broadcast systems. Toby Miller ends the section by looking ahead and, in so doing, helping (re-)establish television as an object of study, despite its frequent ostensible deaths.

The second section focuses on audiences. As above, the pattern emerges of moving from the general to the specific, with several later chapters in the section consisting of case studies of specific genres. A focus on terminology and a reprise of concerns over technology and its impact also feature heavily in this section. Thus, while “Audiences” begins with an appeal to move past the “active v passive audience” argument (Shanti Kumar) it ends with work on both children’s TV (Anna Potter and Jeanette Steemers) and reality TV (Annette Hill) and their respective appeals to the audiences who enjoy them (Esther Milne and Aneta Podkalicka). Among these are concerns about the ethics of audience data-gathering (Jonathan Corpus Ong and Ranjana Das) and measurements of engagement via the peplemetre (Jerome Bourdon and Cécile Méadel). The most interesting chapter of the section is perhaps the one by Andy Ruddock; he argues that audiences may themselves become an archive for future researchers. That idea of audience-as-archive evokes oral and anthropological histories that can benefit (and benefit from interacting with) its sister discipline of media and cultural studies.

Section three of the book considers “Information, Programs and Spectacle.” It is in this section that the book starts to especially shine even as the sections themselves grow ever larger. Case studies become the norm, allowing for deep dives into specific areas of study. Of particular interest is Susan Turnbull and Marion McCutcheon’s work looking at the transnational movement and interpretation of Nordic Noir, as well as David Rowe’s looking at sports media distribution. The various chapters that look at how media intersects with the rise of populist movements and leaders in Turkey (Ergin Bulut and Nurçin Ýleri) and the US (Douglas Kellner, who positions the situation in the context of horror and spectacle) are also well executed. Black culture and its representation are also featured in two strong chapters (Ousmane K. Power-Greene arguing for *Roots* as historiography and Ayanna Dozier looking at Beyonce’s *Lemonade* as a

representation of race and gender in a globalized context). Asha Nadkarni's chapter on the American-produced, India-set sitcom *Outsourced* is a great examination of the complexities and nuances of both representation and of economic inequality. Esther Hamburger and Pawan Singh both examine different aspects of resilience in the global media industry, with Hamburger focusing on telenovelas and Singh on the international success of Priyanka Chopra.

The fourth section looks at cultures and communities. It essentially examines why and how people do things with television. This is a truly invaluable section for anyone who specializes in sociocultural theory relating to media as it covers everything from citizenship (Graeme Turner) and identity (Alexander Dhoest) to localization (Frederic Chaume) and diversity (Ana-Christina Ramón and Darnell Hunt). Looking at the concepts of gaming (Divya McMillin, focusing on India) and fun (Ruoyun Bai, looking at China) in the context of non-Western television are also key contributions. Nomusa Makhubu is one of the most important chapters in the volume, as the chapter looks not only at television as art (itself a worthy topic) but also views this through a postcolonial lens.

The final section examines systems, structures, and industries. Much like the earlier sections, this one begins generally, with Jean K. Chalaby's chapter on media globalization as a function of value. It then moves on to regional media in a broadly chronological progression (Aniko Imre on Eastern European media in the Cold War, Joe F. Khalil on Arab TV, Guillermo Mastrini and María Trinidad García Leiva on Ibero-American TV industries, and Lyombe Eko on African TV and convergence). China (Ying Zhu) and Turkey (Ece Algan) are both given as case studies relating to politics and media control while South African TV's industrial progression is placed in a global context (Ruth Teer-Tomaselli). The final three chapters are some of the more interesting case studies as they focus on digital media. Both Martin Fredriksson and Ramon Lobato take as their foci illegal downloads and other "informal distribution" (Lobato) networks. These are critically important in understanding globalization as it pertains to media, yet they can often be overlooked. Aymar Jean Christian rounds out the book by looking at the production and distribution of webseries, another important aspect of contemporary television.

Though edited collections can somewhat vary in quality across their chapters, this book is uniformly excellent. It makes for a strong, solid guide that can be used as student readings as well as for scholarly work. I might have liked to see more

space given over to Latin America or Asia outside India and China, but overall, this Companion is, in a (*Who*) word, fantastic.

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