

Same Time, Same Station: Creating American Television, 1948–1961. By *James H. Baughman*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. xiii + 443 pp. Photographs, notes, index. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-8018-7933-7.

Reviewed by Daniel Horowitz

The history of television has increasingly captured the attention of scholars. Especially fruitful have been explorations of the cultural, social, and political dimensions of the medium by a number of authors: Ella Taylor, *Prime Times Families* (1989), on situation comedies; Tino Balio (editor), *Hollywood in the Age of Television* (1990), on the relationships of two media and their industries; William Boddy, *Fifties Television* (1990), on the environment in which the emerging medium operated; Lynn Spiegel, *Make Room for TV* (1992) and Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are* (1994), on gender and family; and Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium* (2003), on the intersection of content and politics. Relatively rarer is a book that integrates content, technology, business, and politics, as do two recent books on individual networks: David Weinstein, *The Forgotten Network: DuMont and the Birth of American Television* (2004) and Michele Hilmes (editor), *NBC: America's Network* (2007).

Since 1970, when he completed the three-volume work that he began in 1966, Erik Barnouw has stood as the authoritative historian of the subject. The revised second edition of his book, published in 1990, is now available in one condensed volume as *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*. Characteristically, Barnouw, like many who write on the history of television, was not trained as a historian. Barnouw drew mainly on secondary works: court cases, interviews, general-interest magazines, and the business press, especially *Broadcasting*. He carried out relatively little research in archival material, in part perhaps because such sources were not then easily available. His book relies on anecdotes, personalities, and stories, focusing on the political environment and content—and he devotes very little space to the history of television as a business. When his narrative arrives at the 1950s, the Red Scare plays a very significant role. Writing about the years between 1948 and 1952, he notes that television “now entered an

adolescence traumatized by phobias. It would learn caution, and cowardice” (p. 112). This was followed soon after by what Barnouw calls a “Golden Age” (a term he was not the first to use in this context), which was characterized by “impressive sometimes dazzling experiments” (p. 151).

Now James L. Baughman has provided us with the most thorough, well-researched, and broad-ranging history of television we have to date. To be sure, Barnouw’s coverage of both radio and television extends over a longer period than Baughman’s, even though Baughman goes beyond the span of years mentioned in his subtitle. Still, Baughman’s achievement is a major one. Trained as a historian, he is a professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Media at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Based on an examination of 117 primary-source collections, organized and written in a clear manner, and broadly conceived, *Same Time, Same Station* examines the period that began when television started entering significant numbers of homes in the late 1940s and ended in 1961, when the rules and procedures governing the media were fully developed. The essential narrative of Baughman’s compelling story entails struggles between two competing visions of television’s potential. On the one hand, NBC executives (led by Sylvester “Pat” Weaver Jr., president of NBC-TV from 1953 to 1955), along with writers, some entertainers, and advertising executives, felt that TV could “break the monotonous rush to formula” that dominated radio and movies and turn instead for inspiration to the performing arts, thus providing rich cultural fare for increasingly aspiring and affluent consumers. Opposing this vision were those who, drawing heavily on radio and movies, had lower, market-driven expectations. “By the late 1950s,” Baughman notes, with a touch of irony, “the second or more risk averse of these two groups had won the argument” (p. 3). He unfolds his narrative not as a morality play or tragedy, though it is possible to read it that way. Indeed, if Senator Joseph R. McCarthy was the villain of Barnouw’s story (and given much less attention in Baughman’s), then Weaver, whom Barnouw discusses only briefly, is the imperfect hero of Baughman’s tale.

Baughman weaves a complex tale. He pays attention to other media that provided precedent, talent, and competition. He recognizes the importance of the intersection of technological advances, business strategies of corporate sponsors and advertising

agencies, government control, talented performers, and audience response. He is especially adept at exploring the relationships between television and Hollywood and the sometimes parallel ones between New York and Los Angeles. Avoiding the temptation to see the 1950s as a Golden Age, nonetheless he is intrigued by Weaver's "cultural missionary work" (p. 105) and by the experiments he and others developed. Baughman provides all the material a business historian would need to develop a more analytical interpretation, though he himself sustains an interest in managerial decisions and corporate strategies. Indeed, at especially suggestive moments, he uses counterfactual speculation both to highlight the constraints of decisions made and to speculate on alternative possibilities. Again and again, he reveals that major players were acting in the dark, unaware of unintended consequences that a historian can see retrospectively.

Throughout, Baughman is careful and at times skeptical in his judgments. For example, he shows that Edward R. Murrow's attack on McCarthy on *See it Now* did not have the impact Murrow's supporters have assumed it did. Likewise, he cautions against embracing the widely accepted version of the story of William Paley pushing Murrow aside because of a personality conflict and public pressure, pointing, among other factors, to considerations that a business historian would appreciate: changes in the medium and CBS's "intensely competitive programming strategy" (p. 245). Baughman shows that most members of the audience cared little about the scandal over the quiz show *\$64,000 Dollar Question* that culminated in congressional hearings in 1959. More generally, he is leery of claims that television and advertising created demand or controlled consciousness, preferring instead to emphasize misjudgments, uncertainties, and false starts, as well as the power of the audience. Baughman's stand on such issues may be controversial, but on these questions and others he draws on a command of sources to build a complex case patiently.

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*in Europe and North America came to understand consumer culture as a source of pleasure and symbolic exchange, from the early 1950s to the present.*