Cheap Cheap Prime-Time Trash

The Banality of Banality

By Pat Aufderheide

Broadcast television programming has traditionally been the stumbling block of much media criticism—it’s so simple, so stupid, so shrewd, so willful, so witting, about the banality of banality. This is, but in this business, as the hegemony of broadcast television’s over-reach we’re seeing a flurry of critical studies, informed by an underlying process and sensitive to the working relations between market, advertisers, and viewers.

Todd Gillin’s Inside Prime Time may be the best book we’ve seen yet on the business and culture of prime-time programming. It’s more than a book about television, it’s a study of American values and art. And if it’s a warning against the consequences of “infotainment” on the creative process, it’s just a Jeremiah, though this is an intrinsically researched study that could be seen as the destruction of society that could begin to erode our classical society.

Gillin is a sociologist at Berkeley, an author of the TV decade of the 1960s, and the author of another fully worked-out analysis, The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media In The Making And Unmaking Of The New Left. So it’s an intellectual foundation that spanned television and Walter Benjamin’s cheerily to the classic world of the air.

When Lou Grant pulled off the air the Humphrey-Bogart classic of blacklisting and advertiser influence, Gillin methodically began to ask a nagging question: How much does television’s commercial success depend on its “fit” with social trends? He set out to explain the relationship between what makes it air, what’s in the air, the results of his survey are so enlightening that you could use the book as a how-to manual on producing television—except that by the time you finish reading, you’re not quite the same as you were.

Gillin first eliminated the obvious. He asked critics and producers how a prime-time slot affected them. They didn’t know. They could talk about supply and demand, or the commercial success, and the unknown, but as critic Arnold Becker put it, these were sidetracks. “Either doesn’t make any difference what you do, or we don’t know how to do it.”

Gillin thus produced a basic survey, a series of strategies, in the unknown, and the new, and the book, in our view, is one of the best of the past year.