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Dumb & dumber

by Mark Bauerlein

A review of Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*, by Steven Johnson.*

Steven Johnson
Everything Bad Is Good for You:
How Today's Popular Culture Is
Actually Making Us Smarter.
Riverhead Books, 256 pages, $23.95

The editors at Riverhead probably thought that this title was the ultimate in counterintuitive mischievousness. To turn common sense notions on their heads, especially those bearing traditional valuations, is a familiar routine. So much complacent opinion spills into the drift of received wisdom, one supposes, that a voice against the current is just what's needed.

Maybe so, in science and technology, but the last thing intellectuals should champi-on right now is popular culture. Steven Johnson casts himself as a defender of a world disdained as cheap, violent, and infantile, but it's hard to play that role when economic power is all on the side of video games, ESP ESPN, MTV, etc. Still, the tone is earnest and the thesis simple. In the last thirty years, popular culture has become "more complex and intellectually challenging … demanding more cognitive engagement … making our minds sharper." The content of popular culture remains often vulgar and inane, Johnson concedes, but the formal elements—rules, plotlines, allusions, interactivity—have grown more sophisticated, making today's games, weblogs, reality shows, and sitcoms into "a kind of cognitive workout" that hones mental skills. Pop culture provides something more important than "healthy messages." It cultivates "intellectual or cognitive virtues" of spatialization, pattern recognition, and problem solving, virtues that reflect twenty-first-century realities better than traditional knowledge and reading/math skills.

This is a bold claim, and one expects the empirical evidence to run deep. Most of the commentary, though, amounts to Johnson's musings upon what he observes around him. He recites the standard complaints about pop culture fare, details some computer games and television shows, and devotes a short passage to IQ scores. His authority on television seems to be the critic at Salon.com, and his awareness of the literature on IQ runs no further than a few books and articles (though he likes the pop psychology concept of "emotional intelligence").

The case for cognitive benefits begins with a fundamental feature of games: "far more than books or movies or music, games force you to make decisions." In an artificial reality, players decide where to steer a car, how to invest money, which weapon to grab. The content is juvenile, but "because learning how to think is ultimately about learning how to make the right decisions," the activity entails a collateral learning that carries over to users' real lives. The images are flashy and jumbled, but "It's not about tolerating or aestheticizing chaos; it's about finding order and meaning in the world, and making decisions that help create that order."

The benefits continue with the progressive complexity of television shows. That *Hill Street Blues* introduced multiple plotlines into primetime, a technique developed in *Twin Peaks*, *ER*, etc., that each episode of *The Simpsons* abounds with allusions, and that reality shows enact "elaborately staged group psychology experiments"—all signal the evolution of programming from the linear plots and dull patter of *Starsky and Hutch*.

Last, Johnson cites the evidence of IQ scores, which have risen markedly at the same time that popular culture has expanded and improved. Scientists have explained the three points per decade increase by noting improved nutrition, higher educational attainment, and acquaintance with tests themselves, but some attribute it to escalating cognitive demands of the contemporary environment. Stevens agrees, and pinpoints popular culture as the primary source.

These piecemeal trends are the phenomena that justify Johnson's sanguine conclusion that pop culture has made a "race to the top," not the bottom, and that the-sky-is-falling judgments should cease. One might respond to this breezy applause by rehearsing the actual content of pop culture, but the case stands or falls, Johnson insists, on outcomes. Very well, then, here are a few he doesn't mention:

> among schoolchildren, there is a strict correlation between television and achievement—the more you watch, the worse you perform; on the 2003 PISA assessment of mathematical and problem-solving skills, U.S. teens did *worse* than they did on the 2000 exam; on Johnson's "multiple-plotlines-are-more-sophisticated" criterion, dramas that fail, besides *Dragnet*, include *Oedipus* (Sophocles), *Medea* (Seneca), and *Phèdre* (Racine); Johnson claims the Internet enables wonderful forms of social and political activity, but every measure of young people's civic, geographic, and political awareness demonstrates a blank ignorance of current events and basic mechanisms of government; the average IQ in the area of visuo-spatial reasoning has risen dramatically, yes, but verbal and arithmetical aptitudes have not; Johnson notes a six-point gain in SAT verbal scores in the last five years, but in fact the gain is only three points, and the 2004 score is one point *less* than the 1986 score.

These outcomes blunt Johnson's sanguine prophecy about pop culture smarts. The only likely mental benefit is the visuo-spatial IQ gain, which may stem from a heavily visual pop culture environment. Even with that gain, a fuller treatment would make one ponder what has been lost. Popular culture may improve the abstract, artificial spatialization and problem solving that IQ tests measure, but smartness there complements dumbness elsewhere. If all those hours online and at the joystick were spent reading books and learning languages, we might see verbal aptitudes rise, and teachers and employers would complain less about the deplorable writing of young adults. If teenagers spent less time on blog diaries and more doing algebra, the U.S. might climb higher than the low twenties in international rankings by math aptitudes. If we prize decision-making skills, a few months with Plutarch's heroes are worth a lifetime of *The Apprentice* (which Johnson compares to *The Price Is Right* and judges "an intellectual masterpiece").

The variation in aptitudes summons the very content question that Johnson seeks to expel from the issue. For content isn't so cleanly divided from aptitude, and someone with little knowledge of history, civics, art, and science is hardly any wiser for having mastered web surfing. Does Johnson really believe that games and sitcoms benefit young people more than Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton? His recent column in *Wired* is entitled: "Pop Quiz: Why Are IQ Test Scores Rising around the Globe? (Hint: Stop Reading the Great Authors and Start Playing *Grand Theft Auto*.)”

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