But the Roberts family — Supreme Court nominee, the his family — to the sweep of trial; there was nothing immoral, be appropriate and respectful.

Exploring the Text
1. Do you think Robin Givhan makes a convincing argument? Explain why or why not.
2. Look at the photo of the Roberts family. Do you agree that they are “costumed in [history],” or are they just “appropriate and respectful of history” (para. 9)? Explain your answer.
3. What is the effect of the many proper names, including the names of products, that Givhan uses throughout the piece?
4. Who is Givhan’s audience? What assumptions about audience bolster her argument? What are the ways in which Givhan shows she’s open to other points of view?
5. How would you describe the tone of Givhan’s piece? In what ways do you think her tone is a response to her audience and the subject matter?
6. What’s your opinion on the subject of the flip-flop-wearing lacrosse team (para. 7)? What do you think they should have worn?
7. Consider the word appropriately in paragraph 7. Why do you think it is italicized? What do the italics add to the connotations of the word?

Watching TV Makes You Smarter

STEVEN JOHNSON


The Sleeper Curve

Scientist A: Has he asked for anything special?
Scientist B: Yes, this morning for breakfast . . . he requested something called “wheat germ, organic honey and tiger’s milk.”
plot and reach a decisive conclusion at the end of the episode. Draw an outline of the narrative threads in almost every *Dragnet* episode, and it will be a single line: from the initial crime scene, through the investigation, to the eventual cracking of the case. A typical *Starsky and Hutch* episode offers only the slightest variation on this linear formula: the introduction of a comic subplot that usually appears only at the tail ends of the episode, creating a structure that looks like the graph below. The vertical axis represents the number of individual threads, and the horizontal axis is time.

A *Hill Street Blues* episode complicates the picture in a number of profound ways. The narrative weaves together a collection of distinct strands—sometimes as many as 10, though at least half of the threads involve only a few quick scenes scattered through the episode. The number of primary characters—and not just bit parts—swells significantly. And the episode has fuzzy borders: picking up one or two threads from previous episodes at the outset and leaving one or two threads open at the end. Charted graphically, an average episode looks like this:

Critics generally cite *Hill Street Blues* as the beginning of "serious drama" narrative in the television medium—differentiating the series from the single-episode dramatic programs from the 50's, which were Broadway plays performed in front of a camera. But the *Hill Street* innovations weren't all that original; they'd long played a defining role in popular television, just not during the evening hours. The structure of a *Hill Street* episode—and indeed of all the critically acclaimed dramas that followed, from *thirtysomething* to *Six Feet Under*—is the structure of a soap opera. *Hill Street Blues* might have sparked a new golden age of television drama during its seven-year run, but it did so by using a few crucial tricks that *Guiding Light* and *General Hospital* mastered long before.

Bochco's genius with *Hill Street* was to marry complex narrative structure with complex subject matter. *Dallas* had already shown that the extended, interwoven threads of the soap-opera genre could survive the weeklong interruptions of a prime-time show, but the actual content of *Dallas* was fluff. (The most
Probing issue it addressed was the question, now folkloric, of who shot J.R. All in the Family and Rhoda showed that you could tackle complex social issues, but they did their tackling in the comfort of the sitcom living room. Hill Street had richly drawn characters confronting difficult social issues and a narrative structure to match.

Since Hill Street appeared, the multi-threaded drama has become the most widespread fictional genre on prime time: St. Elsewhere, L.A. Law, thirtysomething, Twin Peaks, N.Y.P.D. Blue, E.R., The West Wing, Alias, Lost. (The only prominent holdouts in drama are shows like Law and Order that have essentially updated the venerable Dragnet format and thus remained anchored to a single narrative line.) Since the early 80’s, however, there has been a noticeable increase in narrative complexity in these dramas. The most ambitious show on TV to date, The Sopranos, routinely follows up to a dozen distinct threads over the course of an episode, with more than 20 recurring characters. An episode from late in the first season looks like this:

The total number of active threads equals the multiple plots of Hill Street, but here each thread is more substantial. The show doesn’t offer a clear distinction between dominant and minor plots; each story line carries its weight in the mix. The episode also displays a chordal mode of storytelling entirely absent from Hill Street: a single scene in The Sopranos will often connect to three different threads at the same time, layering one plot atop another. And every single thread in this Sopranos episode builds on events from previous episodes and continues on through the rest of the season and beyond.

Put those charts together, and you have a portrait of the Sleeper Curve rising over the past 30 years of popular television. In a sense, this is as much a map of cognitive changes in the popular mind as it is a map of on-screen developments, as if the media titans decided to condition our brains to follow ever-larger numbers of simultaneous threads. Before Hill Street, the conventional wisdom among television execs was that audiences wouldn’t be comfortable following more than three plots in a single episode, and indeed, the Hill Street pilot, which was shown in January 1981, brought complaints from viewers that the show was too complicated. Fast-forward two decades, and shows like The Sopranos engage their audiences with narratives that make Hill Street look like Three’s Company. Audiences happily embrace that complexity because they’ve been trained by two decades of multi-threaded dramas.
Multi-threading is the most celebrated structural feature of the modern television drama, and it certainly deserves some of the honor that has been doled out to it. And yet multi-threading is only part of the story.

The Case for Confusion

Shortly after the arrival of the first-generation slasher movies — *Halloween, Friday the 13th* — Paramount released a mock-slasher flick called *Student Bodies*, parodying the genre just as the *Scream* series would do 15 years later. In one scene, the obligatory nubile teenage baby sitter hears a noise outside a suburban house; she opens the door to investigate, finds nothing and then goes back inside. As the door shuts behind her, the camera swoops in on the doorknob, and we see that she has left the door unlocked. The camera pulls back and then swoops down again for emphasis. And then a flashing arrow appears on the screen, with text that helpfully explains: “Unlocked!”

That flashing arrow is parody, of course, but it’s merely an exaggerated version of a device popular stories use all the time. When a sci-fi script inserts into some advanced lab a nonscientist who keeps asking the science geeks to explain what they’re doing with that particle accelerator, that’s a flashing arrow that gives the audience precisely the information it needs in order to make sense of the ensuing plot. (“Whatever you do, don’t spill water on it, or you’ll set off a massive explosion!”) These hints serve as a kind of narrative hand-holding. Implicitly, they say to the audience, “We realize you have no idea what a particle accelerator is, but here’s the deal: all you need to know is that it’s a big fancy thing that explodes when wet.” They focus the mind on relevant details: “Don’t worry about whether the baby sitter is going to break up with her boyfriend. Worry about that guy lurking in the bushes.” They reduce the amount of analytic work you need to do to make sense of a story. All you have to do is follow the arrows.

By this standard, popular television has never been harder to follow. If narrative threads have experienced a population explosion over the past 20 years, flashing arrows have grown correspondingly scarce. Watching our pinnacle of early 80’s TV drama, *Hill Street Blues*, we find there’s an informational wholeness to each scene that differs markedly from what you see on shows like *The West Wing* or *The Sopranos* or *Alias* or *E.R.*

*Hill Street* has ambiguities about future events: Will a convicted killer be executed? Will Furillo marry Joyce Davenport? Will Renko find it in himself to bust a favorite singer for cocaine possession? But the present-tense of each scene explains itself to the viewer with little ambiguity. There’s an open question or a mystery driving each of these stories — how will it all turn out? — but there’s no mystery about the immediate activity on the screen. A contemporary drama like *The West Wing*, on the other hand, constantly embeds mysteries into the present-tense events: you see characters performing actions or discussing events about which crucial information has been deliberately withheld. Anyone who has
watched more than a handful of The West Wing episodes closely will know the feelings: scene after scene refers to some clearly crucial but unexplained piece of information, and after the sixth reference, you'll find yourself wishing you could rewind the tape to figure out what they're talking about, assuming you've missed something. And then you realize that you're supposed to be confused. The open question posed by these sequences is not "How will this turn out in the end?" The question is "What's happening right now?"

The deliberate lack of hand-holding extends down to the microlevel of dialogue as well. Popular entertainment that addresses technical issues—whether they are the intricacies of passing legislation, or of performing a heart bypass, or of operating a particle accelerator—conventionally switches between two modes of information in dialogue: texture and substance. Texture is all the arcane verbiage provided to convince the viewer that they're watching Actual Doctors at Work; substance is the material planted amid the background texture that the viewer needs to make sense of the plot.

Conventionally, narratives demarcate the line between texture and substance by inserting cues that flag or translate the important data. There's an unintentionally comical moment in the 2004 blockbuster The Day After Tomorrow in which the beleaguered climatologist (played by Dennis Quaid) announces his theory about the imminent arrival of a new ice age to a gathering of government officials. In his speech, he warns that "we have hit a critical desalinization point!" At this moment, the writer-director Roland Emmerich—a master of brazen arrow-flashing—has an official follow with the obliging remark: "It would explain what's driving this extreme weather." They might as well have had a flashing "Unlocked!" arrow on the screen.

The dialogue on shows like The West Wing and E.R., on the other hand, doesn't talk down to its audiences. It rushes by, the words accelerating in sync with the high-speed tracking shots that glide through the corridors and operating rooms. The characters talk faster in these shows, but the truly remarkable thing about the dialogue is not purely a matter of speed; it's the willingness to immerse the audience in information that most viewers won't understand. Here's a typical scene from E.R.:

[Weaver and Wright push a gurney containing a 16-year-old girl. Her parents, Janna and Frank Mikami, follow close behind. Carter and Lucy fall in.]

Weaver: 16-year-old, unconscious, history of biliary atresia.
Carter: Hepatic coma?
Weaver: Looks like it.
Mr. Mikami: She was doing fine until six months ago.
Carter: What medication is she on?
Mrs. Mikami: Ampicillin, tobramycin, vitamins A, D and K.
Lucy: Skin's jaundiced.
WEAVER: Same with the sclera. Breath smells sweet.
CARTER: Fetor hepaticus?
WEAVER: Yep.
LUCY: What’s that?
WEAVER: Her liver’s shut down. Let’s dip a urine. [To CARTER] Guys, it’s getting a little crowded in here, why don’t you deal with the parents? Start lactulose, 30 cc’s per NG.
CARTER: We’re giving medicine to clean her blood.
WEAVER: Blood in the urine, two-plus.
CARTER: The liver failure is causing her blood not to clot.
MRS. MIKAMI: Oh, God. . . .
CARTER: Is she on the transplant list?
MR. MIKAMI: She’s been Status 2a for six months, but they haven’t been able to find her a match.
CARTER: Why? What’s her blood type?
MR. MIKAMI: AB.
This hits CARTER like a lightning bolt. LUCY gets it, too. They share a look.

There are flashing arrows here, of course—"The liver failure is causing her blood not to clot"—but the ratio of medical jargon to layperson translation is remarkably high. From a purely narrative point of view, the decisive line arrives at the very end: "AB." The 16-year-old’s blood type connects her to an earlier plot line, involving a cerebral-hemorrhage victim who—after being dramatically revived in one of the opening scenes—ends up brain-dead. Far earlier, before the liver-failure scene above, Carter briefly discusses harvesting the hemorrhage victim’s organs for transplants, and another doctor makes a passing reference to his blood type being the rare AB (thus making him an unlikely donor). The twist here revolves around a statistically unlikely event happening at the E.R.—an otherwise perfect liver donor showing up just in time to donate his liver to a recipient with the same rare blood type. But the show reveals this twist with remarkable subtlety. To make sense of that last "AB" line—and the look of disbelief on Carter’s and Lucy’s faces—you have to recall a passing remark uttered earlier regarding a character who belongs to a completely different thread. Shows like E.R. may have more blood and guts than popular TV had a generation ago, but when it comes to storytelling, they possess a quality that can only be described as subtlety and discretion.

Even Bad TV Is Better

Skeptics might argue that I have stacked the deck here by focusing on relatively highbrow titles like The Sopranos or The West Wing, when in fact the most significant change in the last five years of narrative entertainment involves reality TV. Does the contemporary pop cultural landscape look quite as promising if the representative show is Joe Millionaire instead of The West Wing?
I think it does, but to answer that question properly, you have to avoid the tendency to sentimentalize the past. When people talk about the golden age of television in the early 70’s—in invoking shows like The Mary Tyler Moore Show and All in the Family—they forget to mention how awful most television programming was during much of that decade. If you’re going to look at pop culture trends, you have to compare apples to apples, or in this case, lemons to lemons. The relevant comparison is not between Joe Millionaire and MASH; it’s between Joe Millionaire and The Newlywed Game, or between Survivor and The Love Boat.

What you see when you make these head-to-head comparisons is that a rising tide of complexity has been lifting programming at the bottom of the quality spectrum and at the top. The Sopranos is several times more demanding of its audiences than Hill Street was, and Joe Millionaire has made comparable advances over Battle of the Network Stars. This is the ultimate test of the Sleeper Curve theory: even the junk has improved.

If early television took its cues from the stage, today’s reality programming is reliably structured like a video game: a series of competitive tests, growing more challenging over time. Many reality shows borrow a subtler device from gaming culture as well: the rules aren’t fully established at the outset. You learn as you play.

On a show like Survivor or The Apprentice, the participants—and the audience—know the general objective of the series, but each episode involves new challenges that haven’t been ordained in advance. The final round of the first season of The Apprentice, for instance, threw a monkey wrench into the strategy that governed the play up to that point, when Trump announced that the two remaining apprentices would have to assemble and manage a team of subordinates who had already been fired in earlier episodes of the show. All of a sudden the overarching objective of the game—do anything to avoid being fired—presented a potential conflict to the remaining two contenders: the structure of the final round favored the survivor who had maintained the best relationships with his comrades. Suddenly, it wasn’t enough just to have clawed your way to the top; you had to have made friends while clawing. The original Joe Millionaire went so far as to undermine the most fundamental convention of all—that the show’s creators don’t openly lie to the contestants about the prizes—by inducing a construction worker to pose as a man of means while 20 women competed for his attention.

Reality programming borrowed another key ingredient from games: the intellectual labor of probing the system’s rules for weak spots and opportunities. As each show discloses its conventions, and each participant reveals his or her personality traits and background, the intrigue in watching comes from figuring out how the participants should best navigate the environment that has been created for them. The pleasure in these shows comes not from watching other people being humiliated on national television; it comes from depositing other people in
a complex, high-pressure environment where no established strategies exist and watching them find their bearings. That’s why the water-cooler conversation about these shows invariably tracks in on the strategy displayed on the previous night’s episode: Why did Kwame pick Omarosa in that final round? What devious strategy is Richard Hatch concocting now?

When we watch these shows, the part of our brain that monitors the emotional lives of the people around us — the part that tracks subtle shifts in intonation and gesture and facial expression — scrutinizes the action on the screen, looking for clues. We trust certain characters implicitly and vote others off the island in a heartbeat. Traditional narrative shows also trigger emotional connections to the characters, but those connections don’t have the same participatory effect, because traditional narratives aren’t explicitly about strategy. The phrase “Monday-morning quarterbacking” describes the engaged feeling that spectators have in relation to games as opposed to stories. We absorb stories, but we second-guess games. Reality programming has brought that second-guessing to prime time, only the game in question revolves around social dexterity rather than the physical kind.

The Rewards of Smart Culture

The quickest way to appreciate the Sleeper Curve’s cognitive training is to sit down and watch a few hours of hit programming from the late 70’s on Nick at Nite or the SOAPnet channel or on DVD. The modern viewer who watches a show like Dallas today will be bored by the content — not just because the show is less salacious than today’s soap operas (which it is by a small margin) but also because the show contains far less information in each scene, despite the fact that its soap-opera structure made it one of the most complicated narratives on television in its prime. With Dallas, the modern viewer doesn’t have to think to make sense of what’s going on, and not having to think is boring. Many recent hit shows — 24, Survivor, The Sopranos, Alias, Lost, The Simpsons, E.R. — take the opposite approach, layering each scene with a thick network of affiliations. You have to focus to follow the plot, and in focusing you’re exercising the parts of your brain that map social networks, that fill in missing information, that connect multiple narrative threads.

Of course, the entertainment industry isn’t increasing the cognitive complexity of its products for charitable reasons. The Sleeper Curve exists because there’s money to be made by making culture smarter. The economics of television syndication and DVD sales mean that there’s a tremendous financial pressure to make programs that can be watched multiple times, revealing new nuances and shadings on the third viewing. Meanwhile, the Web has created a forum for annotation and commentary that allows more complicated shows to prosper, thanks to the fan sites where each episode of shows like Lost or Alias is dissected with an intensity usually reserved for Talmud scholars. Finally, interactive games have trained a new generation of media consumers to probe complex environments
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and to think on their feet, and that gamer audience has now come to expect the same challenges from their television shows. In the end, the Sleeper Curve tells us something about the human mind. It may be drawn toward the sensational where content is concerned—sex does sell, after all. But the mind also likes to be challenged; there’s real pleasure to be found in solving puzzles, detecting patterns or unpacking a complex narrative system.

In pointing out some of the ways that popular culture has improved our minds, I am not arguing that parents should stop paying attention to the way their children amuse themselves. What I am arguing for is a change in the criteria we use to determine what really is cognitive junk food and what is genuinely nourishing. Instead of a show’s violent or tawdry content, instead of wardrobe malfunctions or the F-word, the true test should be whether a given show engages or sedates the mind. Is it a single thread strung together with predictable punch lines every 30 seconds? Or does it map a complex social network? Is your on-screen character running around shooting everything in sight, or is she trying to solve problems and manage resources? If your kids want to watch reality TV, encourage them to watch Survivor over Fear Factor. If they want to watch a mystery show, encourage 24 over Law and Order. If they want to play a violent game, encourage Grand Theft Auto over Quake. Indeed, it might be just as helpful to have a rating system that used mental labor and not obscenity and violence as its classification scheme for the world of mass culture.

Kids and grown-ups each can learn from their increasingly shared obsessions. Too often we imagine the blurring of kid and grown-up cultures as a series of violations: the 9-year-olds who have to have nipple broaches explained to them thanks to Janet Jackson; the middle-aged guy who can’t wait to get home to his Xbox. But this demographic blur has a commendable side that we don’t acknowledge enough. The kids are forced to think like grown-ups: analyzing complex social networks, managing resources, tracking subtle narrative intertwinnings, recognizing long-term patterns. The grown-ups, in turn, get to learn from the kids: decoding each new technological wave, parsing the interfaces and discovering the intellectual rewards of play. Parents should see this as an opportunity, not a crisis. Smart culture is no longer something you force your kids to ingest, like green vegetables. It’s something you share.

Exploring the Text

1. What audience is Steven Johnson addressing? How can you tell? How does he establish ethos?
2. How would you describe the tone of Johnson’s piece? Why might it be particularly well suited to his subject matter?
3. Johnson calls his theory—that the “most debased forms of mass diversion” (para. 4) turn out to be good for us, after all—the “Sleeper Curve,” after a scene in a Woody Allen movie. How does using one form of popular culture to examine
another form affect Johnson’s argument? Find other examples of Johnson connecting different forms of popular culture to help develop his argument.

4. How do the charts accompanying the essay illustrate Johnson’s points? How important is it to know the television programs to which the charts refer? Do the charts provide sufficient evidence that viewers are “cognitively engaged”? What other evidence might Johnson have used?

5. In the section “Televised Intelligence,” Johnson equates the intellectual demands of television with those ascribed to reading. Do multiple threading, flashing arrows, and social networks match up with attention, patience, retention, and the need to follow several narrative threads? What qualities do they have in common? What are their differences?

6. Examine the ways that Johnson provides counterarguments and responds to them.

7. What economic explanation does Johnson offer for why television has become more intellectually demanding? What are the reasons that you watch your favorite television shows and movies multiple times?

8. Johnson says that “flashing arrows” (the way the audience is given the information it needs to follow the plot) have grown increasingly scarce as television narratives have grown more complicated. How does he connect that observation to the relationship between texture and substance (para. 21)? Based on your own television watching, do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.

9. Create a chart that illustrates the “active threads” in a show you watch. How does it compare to the charts Johnson uses? How do your findings support or challenge Johnson’s argument?

Celebrity Bodies

Daniel Harris


Just months after the fatal heart attacks of two Uruguayan fashion models, one of whom collapsed within seconds after stepping off the runway, having eaten nothing but lettuce leaves in the months before her death, Titanic star Kate Winslet announced that she is suing Grazia magazine for slander. The British tabloid accused her of undergoing a crash diet at a fat farm in Santa Monica,