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Words  
“Millennium”

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Elsewhere I have argued that the future is made of words and images that we create and use in the present, and that the nature of these words is such that we project our future(s)<sup>1</sup> from them[1]. Ultimately, we then treat those projected worlds, made of our own words and images, as being something real, or at least real enough to be considered unavoidable, and thus we read back meaning on the present based upon the unavoidable future that we have created. If one accepts this schema, then it begins to make sense not only to examine this process of future creation, but to examine the particular words and images that we have chosen to create the future. Here, I want to examine a particular word—the word “millennium”. A recent edition of the television programme *Equinox* began with the question “Why has the millennium—a date of our own making—become the focus for the hopes and fears of mankind?”<sup>2</sup> The answer lies in the question—it is our own making. We are not only the ones who have done the mathematical calculation to make it 2000, we have created the meaning and significance that it has. And then strangely, dumb-founded and amazed, we stand back as though we are looking upon something as other-powered as the sun. How do we do this?

I dare say that as recently as a decade ago, many would have had to consult a dictionary to see just how many years there are in a unit called a “millennium”—and maybe many still would, because even today the word is hardly used in the mathematical sense of counting a thousand years. If we were using it only to indicate a mathematical change, we would more likely be referring to “the *next* millennium” or “the second millennium A.D.” But we do not often hear this. We have moved very quickly from having no denotation for the word (thus the need to consult a dictionary) to just one connotation for the word—hence we say “*the* millennium”

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<sup>1</sup> I use the convention of adding a parenthetical “s” to the word “future” purposely to draw attention to the notion that more than one future is possible.

<sup>2</sup> *Equinox Special: Apocalypse When?* Charles Furneaux, producer, aired Channel 4 January 3, 1999.

with a definite, rather than an indefinite article preceding it. For those of us interested in keeping open the possibility of multiple possible futures, it is important to find multiple connotations.

In contrast to the state of affairs a decade ago, last year, every time I entered a chip shop, retail store, pub, bus station or office tower, wafting through the air were the strands of Robbie Williams' pop song "Millennium". I happen to like this song. With its haunting, unhurried melody, it became a mood, an atmosphere and a background. But it was also numbingly inescapable, as pop songs often are. So too has become this word "millennium".

Just as the way in which we talk about a thing can give a thing its meaning, rather than the thing's meaning demanding a particular way of talking, we might want to consider what factors might have shaped "*the* millennium". In comparing it to the way in which we talk about the first decade of a new century, we find that we had no need for a shorthand in the decade that began the twentieth century. Lou Hohulin of the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Dallas notes that "in this century, we didn't have anything for the first decade. People called it 'the first decade of the century'". Steve Perrault, senior editor and director of defining at Merriam-Webster, a dictionary publisher in Springfield, Massachusetts, has suggested that we will not be able to impose a way of talking about the first decade of the next century. Instead, someone will come up with something that is popularly catchy, and that will be the process[2]. This fails to address what influences can make something "catchy". Insofar as we did not seem to need a shorter way of saying "the first decade of the century" when it happened, and now we need a shorthand for the first decade of the next century, if not for the whole millennium, it would appear that brevity is important. If so, what meaning does the value of brevity in name carry along with it for the thing being discussed?

A grammarian might note that as between an indefinite article ("a") and definite article ("the"), the definite is the more exacting; in fact, it defines. Consequently, "a millennium" should refer to any period of a thousand years, but "the millennium" should only be referring to a particular thousand years; *which* thousand depends upon the context of its use. Yet the use of the definite article, "the" with the word "millennium" is strangely indefinite in one sense at least. This is because it does not operate to distinguish a particular millennium from any millennium, but rather operates to call attention to, and emphasise, the term which follows—"millennium." In this sense, "the" functions more like it does in the colloquial phrase "he is the man", or as in the vernacular of the 1980s, when "the" plus a suffix of "-ster" on proper names ("the Jack-ster") emphasised the importance of the individual. Consequently, "*the* millennium" is not a phrase which distinguishes a particular thousand years from any period of a thousand years. It is instead the calling attention to, the emphasising of, the mood and atmosphere of something important and special. The ignition switch just happens to be the mathematical moment that is 2000; all the sound and fury are our making.

So *the* millennium is not just the third period of a thousand years A.D. It means a lifestyle and a mood; a hip buzzing and whirling of sound, light and action, lifting and driving our material, spiritual, virtual and emotional lives to, to,... to what? Well,

we cannot really know what, at least not in the comfortable way in which we predict weather or market economics. It is not that we predict those things with precision, either, but as socio-linguistic institutions, we are comfortable with the fact *that* we predict them, and make it a regular practice to do so. It is possible, even likely, that it is driving us to nothing in particular. Hype about hype. And what a disappointment that will be. In fact, some anticipate that it will be so much of a disappointment that Jerusalem's city authorities decided to build a new extension to its psychiatric hospital to accommodate disappointed pilgrims this year.<sup>3</sup> Some of these pilgrims will have predicted the coming of God. Secular culture has predicted that we are going to have a big party. The entertainer formerly known as Prince formerly told us more than a decade ago that the year 1999 was going to be the cause for great partying—presumably in anticipation for the year 2000. Perhaps more predictable was that his song “1999” would return to the sales charts in 1999. The mood of something different and even surreal is promoted popularly by television with an entire show from the makers of *The X-Files*, called *Millennium*.

So why hype it? What meaning are we seeking to create with the hype? And what future(s) are we creating and eliminating by the locus of the hype, the word “millennium”? If we look to how we have recently begun to incorporate the word “millennium” into our language, I think we can begin to see how we will be giving it meaning.

In addition to the meaning inscribed by the article preceding “millennium”, we have evolved the word from noun to adjective. It seems that one can really be certain that a word has arrived, has achieved currency and presence when it takes on a different grammatical form in the language. I seem to recall that as recently as the 1970s, “party” changed from being just a noun or adjective to a verb, thus enabling us, in the words of Prince, to “party like it's 1999”. And it is. And here comes that song again. And with it comes the millennium again. And who is partying and why has “millennium” become an adjective? We have a millennium dome, the millennium bug and if you listen, hip salespeople selling ideas and goods of all sorts are referring to “millennium ideas”, or perhaps, with the importance of an added syllable, “millennium concepts”. What are these? In the ways in which I hear this phrase used, it seems as though one could just as easily say “new ideas” or “new concepts”. What is being added by saying “millennium”, particularly in this adjectival form?

Three to five years ago, “millennium” had already become a label which meant “new product for profit.” Between January 1, 1995 and August 1997, the United States Patent and Trademark Office had received applications for millennium champagne, millennium vacuum cleaners, millennium pest control products, millennium floor wax, millennium slot machines, millennium gas masks for protection against chemical and biological agents (!), millennium undergarments, Millennium Staffing temp agency, millennium deodorant, Millennium Minutes TV history segments, Millennium Money scratch-off game cards, Millennium Legacy videos of

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<sup>3</sup> *Equinox Special: Apocalypse When?* Charles Furneaux, producer, aired Channel 4 January 3, 1999.

the deceased for friends and relatives, Millennium Time Capsule plastic long-term storage containers, millennium date-conversion software, Chateau 2000: The New Millennium recreational vehicles, Meal of the Millennium culinary events, Living in the 3rd Millennium online services, Working Straight Through the Millennium, The Official Chocolate of the New Millennium, Your Home Improvement Store for the Next Millennium, Billing into the Next Millennium, and one that we can only hope was meant ironically, Official Sponsor of the Millennium (Miller Brewing Company)[3].

This consumer aspect is not limited to the United States. In Britain, the return of the yo-yo has been ushered by the “Millennium 2000 Thunder Yo Yo” marked by “Longest Spin” and “High Performance” (in comparison with the lowly “Pro Play 2000” which boasts only “Longest Spin”—there seems to be a logical problem with the superlatives here—“Weight and Balance”). In Britain there is now also a Millennium Telephone Card. On its banner, just above the red-ink figure of a crusader with the cross of St George on his shield, *The Express* has begun announcing itself as “The Newspaper for the New Millennium”. If one’s notion of the millennium is future-oriented, self-help is available. To find one’s way forward, there is the two volume set in *The Rough Guide* travel series on “The Millennium”.

The catchy sound of anything millennium is not lost on grant-awarding agencies either. Millennium Awards are distributed by large organisations like the British Millennium Commission, who together with the British Association for the Advancement of Science help to manage the British Association Millennium Awards to communicate science, and relatively smaller ones like The Northern Ireland Environmental Link, which has circulated posters offering that “This Millennium Award Scheme [referring to the Sustainable Communities Millennium Award Scheme, or SCMAS] is designed to enable individuals to undertake projects which will promote sustainable lifestyles in communities. These Millennium Awards can provide for creative projects, training and research in all aspects of sustainable development.”

While most consumer uses seem to indicate that “millennium” is forward-looking, The Royal Mail thinks that the millennium means we should be looking back in commemoration. It will be issuing a series of stamps this year to “mark the millennium.” One of the artists who produced one of the stamps, Justin Mortimer, reported that “To be on a stamp you have to be dead or royalty, so it had to be someone who was dead” (because his brief was to represent an English television figure)[4].

According to Belfast’s *The Irish News*, something called the “millennium effect” is going to boost the economy. An independent forecasting group called the Centre for Economics and Business Research “analysed the positive and negative effects of the millennium and found that overall it would boost gross domestic product [in Britain] by 0.2 per cent[5].” The evidence for this forecast is the extra spending from party-goers, The Millennium Dome, and “other related millennium projects” and company expenditures for their computers “to beat the millennium bug”. At the same time, spending will be retarded by individuals and companies for fear of possible computer problems. “Banks will be cautious about lending to

companies unable to prove they will survive the bug, while takeover deals will be shelved until the millennium period is over[6].” (Unless banks are going to wait a thousand years, I think its clear that whatever meaning we give to “millennium” the front-running denotation is no longer that it means a thousand years.) This seems to be further evidence that for most of consumer and economic culture, “millennium” means future-oriented, but that future should perhaps be feared and not celebrated.

In recognition of the Christian significance of the beginning of the third millennium, on November 27, 1998, Pope John Paul II announced that “in celebration of entering the third millennium of Christianity, penitents who do a charitable deed or give up cigarettes or alcohol for a day can earn an ‘indulgence’ to eliminate punishment on earth or in purgatory.... By restoring indulgences to so prominent a position, John Paul II is making penitence a theme of the millennium celebration[7].”

There will be some recognition of the limits of western and religious significance of the year 2000. As of January 1, 1999, China had made no plans to commemorate the start of the year 2000. Japan, which counts years based upon the emperor’s reign, anticipates few celebrations of the western millennium. And Israeli religious authorities “already have warned against celebrations because New Year’s Eve at the turn of the millennium falls on a Friday night, the Jewish sabbath[8].”

In trying to keep open as many possible futures as possible, we can see that in looking at the meanings invested in the word “millennium” there is still a sense of both looking forward and looking backward, and in both directions, reasons to celebrate and reasons to fear. In popular, secular and money culture, there seems to be more of a closing down of possibilities regarding looking back, and more of a focus on future orientation. Still open are the options in these linguistic communities that the future(s) will be positive or negative. In these cases, “millennium” is a placeholder for an emotive mood which, like a great party or a loathed doom, begins to have its possible expressions limited to a dichotomy of thumbs up or thumbs down. Religious culture, most obviously Christian culture, seems to regard it as a time of commemoration. Between choices of past or future and joy or fear exists additional possibilities. These possibilities are found in the recognition that we are doing all of this meaning creation in the present. I would like to advocate that “millennium” is a linguistic moment to stop—to look neither forward nor backward, to suspend the drive for joy or the avoidance of fear, and to acknowledge what we are doing in the present. That, more than the number 2000, is a rare opportunity for investing meaning in the future(s).

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