
AT ISSUE

The Edgy Decade

How it has happened is something that only future historians will be able to explain: somehow we have traveled halfway through the current decade without giving it a name. The absence of such a tag line is, apparently, sorely felt. The editors of the mass-circulation *USA Weekend* recently held a "Name That Decade" contest, but the best that 700 respondents could come up with was "the Whiny '90s."

This business of naming decades is relatively new. We've just left the Decade of Greed behind, having already survived the Me Decade that preceded it. It makes you wonder why we bothered to give them separate names. Before these twin decades of selfhood, with a few exceptions (the Roaring '20s), we were content to let decades speak for themselves.

Decades used to be eponymous. Two words, "the 1960s," conjure up a larger world of allusions than the entire text of the average modern novel—sexual revolution, political upheaval, general Dionysian riot, you name it. Need an antidote? Try "the 1950s." It was the thesis for which the '60s became the grand Hegelian antithesis. Or, to put it in lay terms, "the 1950s" is a kind of verbal saltpeper.

To agree on a name for a decade is to agree not on its meaning but on the rules of an interpretive game about the state of American culture. Thus, "the 1950s" once had the quality of an expletive, containing in a way that even the most egregious swear word could not intimations of all that is oppressive, dull, and ordinary. Recently, however, the decade has undergone an intellectual facelift. Nobody is suddenly claiming that we didn't settle down, move to Levittown, and raise a family with Mom staying at home while Dad went off to work. The revisionists are not, in other words, contesting the essential character of the decade. Nor are they mere sentimentalists. They are saying that perhaps that character

has a little more to recommend it than we have been willing to recognize.

Indeed, elsewhere in this issue Alan Ehrenhalt goes further, arguing that precisely those things that made the decade seem oppressive, dull, and ordinary to some—its restricted menu of personal and consumer choices, its willingness to take direction from authority—were two of its greatest virtues.

To name a decade rather than let it name itself is often to launch a pre-emptive rhetorical strike. If we really have just lived through the Decade of Greed, what's left to argue about? I believe, however, that these last days of the 20th century have already named themselves. There is a word that runs through the American consciousness today like the endless "omm" of the *uber* meditator,

so ubiquitous that we are only barely aware of its presence. The word is *edge*. We are living in the Edgy Decade.

"Edgy" has become the decade's adjective of choice. It is everywhere. Heaping praise on a novel in the *New York Times* recently, reviewer Michiko Kakutani saluted the writer's "idiosyncratic vision and his ability to articulate that vision in wonderfully edgy, street-smart prose." The success of a new rock band is explained by a newspaper critic in terms of the group's "edgy but ethereal" sound. Edginess is apparently *de rigueur* in music: "Flutist To Bring Her Edgy, Progressive Sound To Town," promised a *Houston Post* headline recently. Edge is desirable even in children's entertainment. *Casper*, a movie based on the old children's cartoon and comic series, was panned the other day by a critic who explained that it just wasn't edgy enough. Scholars might say that the term exerts a kind of *edgemony* over popular criticism.

The edge is the place to be. In Washington, D.C., devotees of bondage, discipline, and other quaint sexual endeavors gathered this spring for a "Fetish Fest" at a nightclub called

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you-know-what. Edge is, if at all possible, the *thing* to be. It is the name of the guitarist of the rock supergroup U2.

Many of these examples are drawn from the Nexis on-line data base of news stories. Anything on line is edgy. A search through Nexis turns up, for the first half of this year, nearly 100 stories headlined with the e-word. (E-mail is edgy too.) Many of the headlines refer to economic affairs—"Dollar Fluctuates Vs. Yen in Edgy Early Tokyo Trade"—which is appropriate since much of our current edginess derives from economic unease.

"Edge" and "attitude" are the Two Horsemen of the rising Generation X—although its members insist that they have edge and attitude precisely because they are *not* rising but drifting in the backwash of the American Dream, scrambling for leftovers. Those with the most edge and attitude, paradoxically, are those who have given up (at least temporarily) on pursuit of the Dream: the "slackers."

There are, however, larger reasons for America's edginess. We are living, after all, at the edge of the millennium—or actually two millennia, if you consider that we are leaving one and entering another. In fact, such in-betweenness or indeterminacy is the essence of edginess. Call it fin de millennium confusion. And it is not only a millennium that we are leaving behind. We are postmodern, post-Cold War, and now, it appears, post-New Deal as well. But we are pre-We Don't Know What. It's good to be on the (cutting) edge, but a little scary, too. It leaves you, well, *edgy*.

Edge awareness has infiltrated every corner of our consciousness. We increasingly live and work, for example, in what we call edge cities. They are new and exciting outposts on the suburban frontier, but, as even their defenders (including this writer) admit, they are also more than a little bland and homogeneous. They are not comfortable.

This is one of the essential qualities of edgi-

ness: even when it is good it is bad. Edgy may be bold, unexpected, and exciting; it is also disconcerting and unsettling. The edge is a zone of instability. A culture cannot live for long on the edge. Like the slacker, it must eventually make some choices.

That is exactly what our culture appears to be doing. Staying true to the paradoxical qualities of the edge, it is inching forward and looking back. Finding itself adrift and ill at ease in earlier times, as Ehrenhalt writes, America has always renewed itself in just this way. Values and ideas that once seemed hopelessly out of date can in fact be renovated and restored.

Thus that antediluvian quality, character, was the subject in May of a White House conference bringing together (among others) President Bill Clinton and conservative Republican William Bennett. Bennett has also picked up the reins of a campaign against gratuitous sex and violence in popular music that was launched during the 1980s by Tipper Gore, the vice president's wife. Bennett's target is the corporate purveyors of popular music.

Personal responsibility and community responsibility: these may be the Two Horsemen of the era ahead. It's in music, surprisingly, where this can be glimpsed most clearly. Disturbing as they are, gangsta rappers and Nine Inch Nails are not what's most important (or even where most of the money is) in music. Jazz, that most American musical genre, is now dominated by a legion of sparkling young musicians who have turned their backs on the "free jazz" of the recent past in favor of the more rigorously ordered idioms of 1950s hard bop, a form that requires both tight ensemble playing and creative individual improvisation.

That seems a good analogy for what's wanted today, and it gives us reason to hope that we are living not in a netherworld of indeterminacy but at the edge of renewal.

—Steven Lagerfeld