A Culture on the Brink
and a Millennium for Good Measure

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There's every reason in the world
that the millennium should not matter to us. So how come it does? If you listen to some people—though not me, despite many accusations and at least one radio-drama parody in which a Professor of Deep Understanding explains away everything by saying it's a product of "millennial anxiety"—the millennium means everything.

Cultural and political madness is indeed a standard feature of periods of apocalyptic expectation. By the end of the fifteenth Common Era century, the standard pattern of apocalyptic anxiety was set: hope and dread in nearly equal measure, extreme obsession with the body, a penchant for conspiracy theories, the deep desire for great leaders, ambivalence about technology, and inordinate attention to signs and portents of all kinds. In times like these, history teaches us, all bets are off and anything goes.

Yet, if you listen to other people, the millennium has nothing to do with any of the cultural craziness we see around us. Umberto Eco has offered this pronunciamiento when asked to say what, if any thing, was typical of the end of millennium: "Something which is typical is the insistence of journalists and TV to discover that there is something typical of the end of millennium—the mass-media reaction, which is an artificial one. You are producing the expectation. The rest of the people don't care."

Don't they? I'm not so sure. In fact Eco's reaction is itself typical, especially among a certain well-educated class of intellectual skeptics. The impotent waving off of millennial anxiety ignores the complicated ways in which our culture works, folding real-world concerns and events—environmental threats, say, or political issues of divergent haves and have-nots in a world ruled by information—into old tales of destruction and transformation. It is true that the millennial overlay on these issues can sometimes serve to obscure what we might actually do about them. Because apocalyptic expectation, both bright and dark, has an enervating effect, letting people off the hook either in a quietism of happy expectation or in a paralysis of mounting fear. As Baudrillard argues, "The millennium revises all historical requirements to the point of erasing the very marks of history... We launder and purify, desperately trying to end the century with a politically correct balance sheet. This is by and large a question of historical purification. The entire twentieth century is on trial. And this is new. None of the previous centuries did that. What they did was history. What we are doing is history's trial."

Things have changed as we approach this ending, though I would never suggest that the Year 2000 has been directly causal in making us what I suppose we must continue to call post-modern. Most of us now accept without fuss the idea that truth is embedded in language, or that culture is not a reflection of God's will. Such changes in attitude, together with others like them that loosen the bonds of an age-old metaphysical environment, have been both necessary and liberating. The cultural deadline of the millennium does not cause these changes, as I said, but it does somehow heighten them, make them feel more pressing—as it does, likewise, with other changes and endings that are less positive in effect. The essential task now, in analyzing our varied and sometimes confused cultural experience, is to fight the temptation to declare endings left and right in a frenzy of end-time reckoning, to annihilate without regard for what might be preserved. We must resist declarations that, instead of the helpful recognition of contingency, foster a cultural nihilism—or simply the indifferent cynicism of the cash nexus, where everything has a price but nothing has a value. Indeed, I believe such a combination of resistance and recognition is the only attitude worth cultivating as we try to move forward along a trajectory of political change and, I hope, justice.
We cannot acquire that perspective, however, unless we first confront the millenarian narratives that cling to our various crises — unless we confront the idea of the millennium itself, and its strangely influential, world-swallowing properties. As a cultural construction, the millennium obfuscates: it stands in the way of our future-creating projects as something to get through, a threshold that has to be crossed. And we must see the threshold before we can cross it (which is what Dreams of Millennium is about).

So why resist all the resistance to the millennium? Why persist in thinking that it means anything at all? Surely, you might still want to say, the intelligent attitude is to see the millennium for the hype-fest it is, and simply ignore it. Well, here is my reason, and I don’t suggest it is for everyone. If you are determined that the millennium means absolutely nothing to you, then fine, I have no quarrel. What I have discovered in thinking and writing about the subject over the past five years, however, is the complex web of desires and fears, many of them unconscious, that cling to transitional dates, those periods of imagined change that stand outside the regular course of time. These are what anthropologists call liminal spaces, interstices in the normal flow that must be passed through before the ordinary way of things can be resumed.

It doesn’t matter if the transitional date is arbitrary, because it functions despite all the conscious arguments against it. A transitional date organizes and measures cultural beliefs and expectations; it carves out time by drawing lines in the social mind. It reminds us that we are future-producing creatures, dimly aware of our mortality and yet constantly throwing our plans and projects (and our genes and ideas and mortgages) into the unknown not-yet-here. It becomes, finally, a focus for dreams, those “psychological structures full of significance,” as Freud called them in his revolutionary book, whose publication was delayed so it could bear the liminal date of 1900. Dreams express our wishes, anxieties, and hopes. They tell strange stories and flow in odd ways. When we wake they seem to slip away, leaving only wispy traces behind. The traditional dreams of millennium — which speak of transcendence, transformation, violence, apocalypse, and utopia — are among the most powerful dreams we know. We have lately added some new variations, concerning aliens and technology and the ecosystem, but these dreams are real if anything is. They are cultural and psychological forces to be reckoned with, never merely the “undigested bit of beef” that Scrooge preferred to see in Marley’s appearance. Dreams teach us our needs; they also remember our failures. They speak the hidden language of the soul.

This may sound altogether too dreamy for the debunkers, perhaps for you as well. But I want to say this: not everything is hype, and not every idea or celebration is reducible to an exercise in product placement. The millennium is not meaningless simply because a lot of silly guff is being promoted in its name. Critical intelligence is a rare enough commodity in this overheated world to risk suggesting that we need less of it. I’m not doing that. Yet we should be careful that our laudable hype-alert doesn’t become just one more quick-time parlour game, one more piece of self-congratulatory sophistication which we consume as surely as the material and cultural products that furnish every corner of our world. If we did allow that to happen, we would miss what I think is still, despite everything, a sterling opportunity, one that obviously doesn’t come around very often, to reflect on what it means to be who we are: human, mortal, anxious, happy, confused, and much else besides.

I confess that I have no concrete suggestions for the shape the third millennium should take. There will be, I nevertheless dare to hope, momentous events afoot within each one of us. For somewhere in the distance between manners and rhetoric, somewhere in the wide expanse between probability zero and probability one, lies hope’s true country: the individual imagination. Here, and only here, can we hold ourselves truly responsible, in the one court of appeal that really matters — the one in which we sit in judgment on ourselves. Only here, finally, can we modest skeptics form the wishes and desires that will take us bravely into the next thousand years. Beware the millennium hype, by all means. But don’t ever let that skepticism overcome your capacity to dream.

As we might already be discovering, with Year 2000 now upon us, and our culture still very much on the brink, the millennium can be regarded as not really a date at all — though we need the date to make it stick. It is, rather, a psychological space, a way of thinking: an intimation of mortality, an opportunity for assessment, a locus of fear, a chance for hope. It is time itself put into question.

Note: This article was adapted from the new introduction to, and the closing paragraphs of, Dreams of Millennium: Report from a Culture on the Brink (Penguin Books, 1999).

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