

Hearing teenagers in purple flannels call their soy mochas “rad” perfectly illustrates the mechanisms behind the perpetually regurgitating cow stomach that is American pop culture. Not that that’s a bad thing—“nothing new under the sun” and all yields innovative hybrids—but the feedback loop of fashion really strikes a nerve when what was new in your youth becomes another generation’s vintage clothing. One of the dominant aesthetics of the last few years has been the 1980s: Ray-Bans, short shorts, fanny packs, wrist warmers. Forget the old “friends don’t let friends wear neon” maxim. The image of *Pretty in Pink* James Spader and his antagonistically feathered hair seems the most fitting mascot for our time, a time where we find ’80s slang unwittingly coloring our conversations: dude; awesome; bummed; stoked; shred; balls out; sweet; this rules. And of course, the crown jewel, rad. “This band is rad!” “That burrito was rad!” “You’re comin’ over tonight? Rad!”

On the suggestion of a childhood friend who is also struggling with the difficult fact of our combined seventy years, I rented *Thrashin’*. It’s a sports-sploitation flick that came out in 1986 when we were nine years old, and it features all the stomach-churning, Pepto-tinted vibrancy of the era, as well as a Circle Jerks song.

In the mid to late ’80s, Hollywood spent much time and money trying to capitalize on then-underground sports and their associated subcultures: surfing (*North Shore*), breakdancing (*Breakin’*), BMX-biking (*Rad*) and skateboarding (*Thrashin’*; *Gleaming the Cube*). Along with the synthesizer soundtracks and presence of non-ironic moustaches, what unites most of these films is their reliance on the same dramatic formulation: small town kid and/or outsider competes in a high-stakes competition against nationally known surfers/skaters/BMXers in the hopes of not only winning the prize money, but winning respect (and usually the heart of a girl). As Powell-Peralta-era skaters ourselves, *Thrashin’* repelled my friends and me. A skate gang called The Daggers who wear dangly dagger earrings and paint their faces when they “joust”

with their enemies in a drainage ditch? In the parlance of our childhood: it was retarded. Listening to lines such as, “Well, what do you thrash?” “What’d you got?” felt as embarrassing as having your mom stand outside a skateshop dressing room, checking to see how your pants fit. In a narrative sense, the movie was bad. Not good bad, like retro ’70s pimp-in-leather, gimme-some-skin baaaad bad, but awful bad—“cornpone” in certain regional Southern dialects, or “schmaltzy” in the Yiddish of my New York-born Jewish grandmother. (Say it and wave your hand dismissively.) Worse yet, while rendering a subversive subculture as clownish stereotypes decked in plaid shorts, Hollywood failed to capture skateboarding’s most obvious linguistic feature: the word rad.

During the entire hour and thirty-two minutes, the characters utter a litany of dated terms that, unlike rad, have never come back into fashion: gnarly; studly; stylin’; tasty skate betties; acid rock; you’re dead meat; I’m gonna cream that mother! But not one person says rad. This registers as a particularly epic oversight. Not because the characters in that competing skateboard movie, *Gleaming the Cube*, say rad in the first five minutes. (“That was so rad,” a kid tells Tony Hawk while skating an empty pool.) And not because the characters in that maudlin 1986 BMX movie *Rad* say rad (and dude, and awesome) constantly. It’s tragic because skaters in the Venice Beach/Santa Monica area—the very area in which *Thrashin’* is set—seem to have coined the term.

Although I can’t say for sure fer shur, the famous Z-Boys of Dogtown appear to have invented rad in the second half of the ’70s. This was back in the days of sidewalk surfing, when shoeless shredders with bowl-cuts balanced on the pointed tips of their skateboards to hang ten. The Z-Boys were surfer kids. Out of habit, they injected their aggressive surfing moves into the then-softcore, ballerina sport of skating and, in the process, birthed modern vert skating and the sport as we know it today. They were inventive. Clothes, language, finesse—to them, style was everything. No surprise, then, that it

was they who sawed the tail end off the word radical, as if it were some constrictively low roof on an old Econoline van, and fashioned something new.

Only an old dude with parental leanings would have to tell you that rad is slang derived from the word “radical,” and means good, great, awesome, okay. It’s an expression of extreme enthusiasm which captures the joy you feel about something completely, overwhelmingly magnificent: a sunny day; finding a twenty dollar bill on the ground. Rad is the highest form of flattery, a stronger qualifier than cool, more super in its superlativeness than awesome. There are no gradations of rad, no radder or raddest. Yes, people say “raddest,” but the term is redundant, used more to fit a sentence’s tense or texture than to imply a qualitative hierarchy. As with pregnancy, rad is an absolute: something is either rad or it is not. You are either pregnant or not. There is no kind of pregnant.

All of which should elicit a resounding: duh?

But how about this: according to Merriam-Webster, radical (\`ra-di-kəl) is Middle English, derived from the Latin *radicalis*, meaning “of roots,” and *radix*, meaning “root.” As an adjective, it first appeared in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, after which it came to mean different, drastic, extreme, counter to tradition, a break from the ordinary. (*A radical change in company policy.*)

In early skateboarding vernacular, radical usually referenced tricks or someone’s bravura (killer) performance—“a radical air,” “a radical session”—or meant wild, edgy, unplanned, a precursor to modern skateboarding’s “sick.” The connotation can be extended to those pioneering skaters’ lifestyles in general: not having longhair, which most anyone can grow, but the Z-Boys’ fundamental shift away from accepted skateboarding tradition. As a noun, a radical is someone who stands in extreme opposition to accepted norms and customs, a person of revolutionary ideas or one who calls for drastic social, political or economic reforms. (This was before Mountain Dew commercials made the term extreme as unpalatable as a frat party.) So Z-Boys like Tony Alva and Stacy Peralta weren’t only radical sportsmen, they were revolutionaries, because they essentially said, “No more hanging ten, fools, it’s time to tear up some pools,” and their new style turned a stick with wheels into a distinctive breed of clothing and speech that swept through global culture and changed

human history. They did the same to words.

Viewed through an anthropological lens, it’s no surprise that rad would have originated in southern California, the land of free-thinking and invention that gave the world tons of great things (rad shit) like Vans, surf instrumental music, Korean tacos and The Minutemen. I mean, could rad have originated in the Midwest, that flat kingdom of soybeans and corn? All northern California seemed able to deliver was the term “hella,” a contraction of “hell of” used in place of “very” (*That VW is hella fine*) which arose in San Francisco’s Hunters Point neighborhood in the late ’70s, spread through Berkley and the Deadhead ranks like fleas, and still lingers in crunchy places like Eugene, Oregon and Flagstaff, Arizona. It’s a term I still begrudge northern California for. But if rad is a kind of lyric chopper bicycle, one can’t help but try to picture the exact moment the welder hit the frame. I picture kids being lazy. Summer in LA. It’s hot. Everything gets sluggish when you’re stoned and full of burritos and woozy from skating for miles through that toxic bus exhaust heat. You look for shortcuts: cutting through alleys to bypass a block; jaywalking to get a Slurpee. Shortening words seems an obvious extension. Laconic lips inadvertently turn radical into rad, the same way they recently truncated “totally” into “totes.” Consider the convenient, Smart Car portability of totes versus the many-sectioned centipede of totally. Or abbreviating “whatever” as “whatevs.” Such sonic ingenuity is proof that stiffs like Mr. Hand in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* are wrong for thinking that stoned bums like Spicoli never contribute anything to society. (Um, how about the phrase “tasty waves,” Mr. Hand?) It’s also nothing new. You can hear whatevs’ earlier incarnation in the 1987 movie *North Shore*. When the bad boy native surf gang spots clueless mainlanders in their lineup, one of them tells Vince, their leader: “Plenty’a haole surfers, but we’ll blow them away, bra.” Vince growls: “Whatevahs.”

So convenience and style, the twin mothers of invention. But also, whether the Z-Boys knew it or not, abbreviating radical was a way of claiming a bit of the dominant culture as their own. Like spray-painting drunken geometries on the sides of the station wagon your mom gave you when you turned sixteen, removing the *-ical* removed the whole word from the standard

lexicon—a radical move, in the literal sense—tearing away its Latin roots so they could refurbish this bit of 14<sup>th</sup> century Middle English into a full-on American original, as wholly ours as jazz and Blues and hamburgers. As with all popular inventions, though, the words got away from them.

When the '70s turned into the '80s, rad entered its first golden age. Every teased-hair mall rat from Reseda to North Carolina said it, thanks to the vehicle of its popularity: Valley Girl talk, aka Valspeak. Valspeak emerged in the late '70s in California's San Fernando Valley. Built from bits of surf and skater slang from nearby beaches and fused together with some sort of pink chewing gum, this bubbly pastiche was characterized by its rising terminal intonation—which, like so many Canadians I know, made declarative sentences sound like questions—as well as its overuse of terms like like, totally, you know, sooo, whatever, radical, duh, as if! Frank Zappa wrote a song about Valspeak, after which the nearby Hollywood media machine pushed the local Valley phenom into national visibility. There was the 1983 movie *Valley Girl*, the TV show *Square Pegs* (1982–1983), then later *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Clueless*, recently *The Hills* and whatever, whatever—the familiar feedback loop of culture. (Soooo over it, btw.) Despite its initial underground origins and the subsequent Valspeak craze, it was the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* cartoon that gave radical its final push through the blood/brain barrier of popular consciousness and into wider use. “Radical!” screamed Donatello, Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael in seemingly every episode during the late '80s and early '90s. Suddenly, the kids in your high school marching band said radical. Your little cousin with the big-rimmed glasses said it. The boy down the street who always had snot caking his nostrils said it—people who'd never touched a skateboard, let alone heard the *Repo Man* soundtrack—which is part of the reason nobody wanted to touch the word for so many years. It was tainted. But America has a short memory. Time makes old leprosies appear fresh again.

Every generation goes through this, with each decade defined as much by the cut of its pants (bellbottom vs. baggy vs. super skinny) as by its slang. The 1920s were the era of the “bee's knees.” The late '40s were

“so reet.” The “groovy” '60s were “far out.” The disco '70s were “dynamite, out of sight.” People were “buggin' out” in early '90s hip hop, and had “bling” in the late '90s. Rad came to prominence alongside “bogus” and “gnarly” yet outlasted them all. The dueling processes of cementation and erosion seem arbitrary. I don't hear people saying “hot dogger” or “tubular.” (Then again, I never heard anyone in the late '80s say “I'm gonna cream that mother!” the way The Dagger's leader in *Thrashin'* did.) Yet “right on” never died out. “Killer” never did either. Or maybe I've been saying both for so long that I failed to notice how dated *I* sounded. Theoretically, “golly gee” and “far out” could come back into fashion, but more likely these sayings, like MC Hammer pants and Kid 'n Play haircuts, will forever remain artifacts of their respective times, sunk in the murky bottom of that cultural La Brea Tar Pit where all the VHS tapes, “jive turkeys” and giant, old school mobile phones go, props for period pieces, too dated for even future scenesters to touch. (After all, before there was the pejorative hipster, there was the pejorative scenester.) While “as if!” sleeps on memory's casting couch, waiting to see if irony will ever call it back to duty, people say rad. A lot.

When wisemen say “everything comes in cycles,” I have to keep my eyes from rolling. That canned phrase is so vague as to be almost meaningless, and it reeks of such woo-woo New Ageyness that I can almost smell the BO at Burning Man. But as a saying, it too has never fallen out of favor, no matter how much I wish it would (and wish it would take “everything happens for a reason” with it). Also, I have to admit, in some sense the line is true: what is old often becomes new again. Trendy, yes, but not in an annoying way. Some things are evergreen, like Son House's 1941 “Depot Blues,” which will never sound anything but stirring and heartfelt, and Link Wray's driving instrumental “Ace of Spades,” and a thick strawberry milkshake shared with your soul mate at a mom and pop roadside stand in the coming summer heat. Maybe The Chiffons' “He's So Fine” sounds “of an era” as they say (itself a great phrase), but age has reduced none of the melody's potency. My mom was a kid when that song ruled the airwaves in the spring of 1963. I was born in 1975. Yet when it plays, we both sing along and sway our heads. You have to. The song is contagiousness. Maybe all great cultural artifacts work the same way. If

it's good, it's good, its appeal resistant to erosion. Like the word cool. Like Bob Dylan's visage in most any early black and white photo where he's smoking a cigarette with his sunglasses on. Like a blue and white 1956 Ford Fairlane. Not like the movies *Thrashin'* or *North Shore* or *Rad*, which will age more like wet wooden wine barrels than the sturdy vintages they contained—unraveling, rather than improving—and endure as entertainment for future teenagers going through an ironic phase, as well as commentary on the Hollywood mindset at a certain point in history. Definitely not like the word rad.

The word never really went away. Like headbangers who love Iron Maiden and cockroaches who will survive nuclear apocalypse, rad was always there, lurking in the margins while we all did something else, like watch the rise and fall of nü-metal and Creed and *American Idol* winners. As long as there's air to breathe, a heshier in acid washed jeans will play air guitar to Ratt, just as slang will lay in wait after its generation has finished playing with it, letting the dust of decades settle upon its dormant husk before the new kids on the block (NKOTB) rise from their (vintage, refurbished) playpens to pick them up again and naively, like all previous generations, think they invented what was never really new to begin with. Because as Carl Sagan said, "You have to know the past to understand the present." And Confucius before him: "Study the past if you would divine the future," which resembles in content but not origin that famous line in Ecclesiastes 1:9, "There is no new thing under the sun," which bears witness in today's contempo garage bands who ape Thee Headcoats who aped The Kinks, just as The Kinks aped rhythm and blues, for *homo erectus* is descended from apes, and so too will future thirty-somethings with receding hairlines spend way too much time dissecting the films and vernacular of their now retro youth while begrudging the cruel nature of time and, in turn, reveal their own uncoolness (not a word) by completely draining the cachet from an actual word by thinking too much about it, which is somehow antithetical to cool, even though to appear cool you have to think a lot about what you're going to wear and what you're going to say and how to style your hair. For as The Dude in *The Big Lebowski* said, "Yeah? Well, you know, that's just like, uh, your opinion, man," so too did Stanley "Stoney" Brown (Pauly Shore) in *Encino Man* say, "Don't harsh my mellow," a phrase I quote here for the first and last time, and will never utter again.