

Dis-Realities in Collision: MAD, LSD, and the Emergent Consciousness of the Nuclear Age

Douglas C. Youvan

doug@youvan.com

www.youvan.ai

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The mid-twentieth century produced two of the strangest constructions of human consciousness: Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) and the psychedelic revolution associated with LSD. On the surface, these seem opposed. MAD was an elite, technocratic doctrine in which superpowers modeled planetary suicide as a rational equilibrium. LSD was an underground, chemically induced experiment in dissolving ego boundaries and perceiving cosmic unity. Yet both were, in different ways, dis-realities: artificially generated, systematically maintained departures from ordinary reality that nonetheless exerted enormous causal force on the world. One was a meticulously engineered macro-hallucination of strategic thinking; the other, a mass micro-hallucination of altered perception. Their interaction, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, produced an emergent cultural field that ranged from flower children and anti-nuclear activism to deep shifts in ethics, aesthetics, and spiritual imagination. This paper treats MAD and LSD not as separate episodes, but as components of a coupled system. It explores how these two dis-real overlays shaped each other, how they reframed concepts of unity and annihilation, and how they generated a third, hybrid space of countercultural response. In doing so, it offers a case study of how powerful unreal constructs can steer the trajectories of societies when technology gives a civilization the means to end itself.

Keywords: Mutual Assured Destruction, LSD, dis-reality, nuclear age, Cold War, counterculture, flower children, psychedelics, peace movement, emergent phenomena, collective hallucination, ethics, apocalyptic imagination.

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1. Introduction: Two Hallucinations at Scale

The middle decades of the twentieth century forced human beings into an unprecedented relationship with unreality. On one side stood Mutual Assured Destruction, a doctrine that turned hypothetical nuclear exchanges into the central organizing principle of global politics. On the other stood the proliferation of LSD and other psychedelics, which enabled individuals to enter vivid inner worlds in which self, time, and meaning were radically reconfigured. Both phenomena are usually told as separate stories: one about generals, war rooms, and missile silos; the other about communes, music festivals, and heady experiments in consciousness. This paper proposes a different starting point. It treats both as large, structured disruptions of reality perception, and asks what happens when they operate together in the same historical field.

The claim is not that MAD and LSD are “the same thing,” nor that one caused the other. Rather, they are two different modes of dis-reality that intersected in time and population. MAD was an engineered macro-hallucination sustained by models, simulations, and rituals of readiness. LSD was a chemically induced micro-hallucination that weakened the grip of ordinary coordinates of identity. Young people in the 1960s and 1970s came of age inside both fields, absorbing the nuclear logic of all-or-nothing annihilation while experimenting with inner experiences of radical unity and connection. The result was an emergent cultural space that cannot be understood purely as strategic history or purely as drug history. It was, in effect, a civilization-scale experiment in what happens when two powerful unreals collide and begin to steer the real.

1.1 Framing MAD and LSD as dis-realities rather than isolated events

To call something a dis-reality is to point to a constructed world that is not empirically actual yet exerts real causal force. A dis-reality is more than a fantasy or a delusion; it is a socially stabilized, repeatable pattern of imagination with institutions, practices, and feedback loops. Under this lens, MAD and LSD stop looking like an official doctrine and a pharmacological curiosity, and begin to look like two species of the same genus.

MAD is a dis-reality because it rests on a carefully elaborated scenario that, by design, is never supposed to occur. The quintessential MAD exercise is a simulated nuclear exchange: who launches, who retaliates, how many warheads are used, how many cities are destroyed. These are imaginations conducted with great precision. They generate casualty numbers, fallout maps, and second-strike calculations. Yet the simulated war remains a phantom. Its power lies in the fact that leaders and populations act as if this imagined sequence were a real, ever-present possibility. The dis-reality of MAD is therefore an institutionalized hallucination of future catastrophe that organizes budgets, foreign policy, and even popular culture.

LSD is a dis-reality in a more intimate sense. It directly alters perceptual thresholds, pattern detection, and emotional salience. Under its influence, otherwise stable distinctions between

subject and object, past and present, or self and world can dissolve or reconfigure. The user inhabits a world that is at least partially decoupled from ordinary consensus reality. This world is often rich in significance: colors intensify, sounds acquire depth, connections appear between previously unrelated phenomena. Afterwards, that temporary dis-reality can feed back into life choices, artistic styles, and philosophical commitments. The hallucinated world does not vanish without residue; it leaves grooves in the nervous system and in the cultural record.

Framing both MAD and LSD as dis-realities foregrounds their common structure. Each constructs an alternate world: one in the future tense, where everything ends in an instant; the other in the present tense, where everything is interconnected and malleable. Each world is unreal in the strict sense, yet each channels decisions, institutions, and identities in the world that is shared. The key move is to stop treating them as anecdotes and instead treat them as large, structured overlays that modulated what millions of people felt, feared, and hoped during the nuclear age.

1.2 Why the nuclear age is an experiment in collective imagination

The nuclear age is often described in terms of technology and geopolitics: fissile materials, delivery systems, arms races, and treaties. That story is necessary but incomplete. The existence of devices that can destroy cities in minutes forces societies into an imaginative posture that has no prior analogue. For the first time, human beings must routinely visualize the end of their own civilization as a realistic outcome of miscalculation or malice. The thought experiment of species suicide moves from metaphysics to policy brief.

This means that nuclear history is, inescapably, a history of collective imagination. Deterrence requires that leaders believe in the plausibility of scenarios they hope never to enact. Civil defense campaigns require that civilians picture their homes and schools as potential blast zones. Children's drills and popular films alike train people to inhabit, for at least a few minutes at a time, a world in which mushroom clouds are not abstractions but imminent possibilities. The nuclear age thus cultivates a population that is intermittently asked to live in two realities at once: the ordinary present, and the vividly imagined ruin that could replace it.

Against this backdrop, the spread of psychedelics is not just a separate cultural flourish; it is another way of reconfiguring imagination under unprecedented pressure. The same generation that learned to picture global annihilation also learned, some of them chemically, to picture the radical unity of all beings, or the plasticity of social norms. The nuclear age becomes an experiment not only in weapon design but in how far human minds can stretch to hold mutually incompatible pictures of the world. This experiment is not centrally planned, but it is real. The technologies of destruction and the technologies of altered consciousness both expand the

space of the thinkable, and the tensions between their respective visions animate much of the era's politics and art.

To see the nuclear age this way is to see that doctrines are not merely technical and drugs are not merely recreational. Both participate in a wider contest over what counts as a real future, a real self, and a real obligation to others. MAD insists that the most salient horizon is mutual annihilation; LSD suggests that the most salient horizon may be mutual absorption into some larger unity. The population caught between these images is forced into a kind of ongoing imaginative balancing act, often without explicit awareness that this is what they are doing.

1.3 Method: treating doctrines and drugs as coupled systems

The method of this paper is deliberately cross-border. Instead of confining nuclear strategy to international relations and psychedelics to psychology or cultural studies, it treats both as interacting systems that co-shaped a shared historical field. The core analytical move is to treat doctrines and drugs as coupled dis-real engines: each generates an alternate world, each has its own channels of diffusion, and each leaves measurable traces in behavior and representation. The question is how they interact when they occupy the same time, place, and generational cohort.

Practically, this means reading policy debates, memoirs, films, songs, posters, and personal testimonies as fragments of a single, multi-layered system. Command-and-control architectures and commune experiments are not equated, but they are examined as responses to the same underlying condition: the realization that humanity has built tools capable of instant self-erasure. Strategic doctrines are analyzed not only as technical equilibria but as scripts that invite large-scale participation in imagined catastrophes. Psychedelic practices are analyzed not only as interior adventures but as scripts that invite participation in imagined forms of unity and transformation.

Treating doctrines and drugs as coupled systems also means paying attention to feedback loops. Strategic tension amplifies the appeal of escape or re-enchantment; countercultural critiques feed back into public discourse about war and peace. Symbols, such as the peace sign or the mushroom cloud, migrate between elite and popular domains, acquiring new layers of meaning as they go. By following these loops, the paper aims to show how two different species of dis-reality can lock together, generating emergent ethical and aesthetic patterns that neither system, taken alone, can explain.

This approach does not claim completeness. It proposes a lens rather than a totalizing theory. Its usefulness lies in making visible a structure that is often intuited but seldom named: that a specific historical moment hinged not only on the existence of certain machines and substances, but on the shared hallucinations they made possible.

2. MAD as Macro-Level Dis-Reality

If LSD operates by altering the interface inside individual minds, MAD operates by altering the interface between states and populations. It is a macro-level construction: a set of concepts, formulas, and routines that lives in war colleges, ministries, think tanks, and command bunkers, then radiates outward through media, education, and culture. MAD does not describe something that has already happened. It describes a hypothetical chain of events so catastrophic that its realization would terminate the very order that gave rise to it. That paradox sits at its core. The more vividly the scenario is imagined, the more it must never occur. The doctrine makes its own non-occurrence the sign of its success.

As a macro-level dis-reality, MAD turns a particular imagined future into a permanent governing presence. It is not just that nuclear weapons exist. It is that the possible use of those weapons is run through models, wargames, and scenario trees until there is a stable narrative about what everyone would probably do if certain thresholds were crossed. MAD then freezes this narrative into an equilibrium: both sides accept that any major nuclear exchange would be suicidal, and act on that assumption. The result is a planetary thought experiment that never leaves the domain of imagination but still organizes alliances, budgets, and everyday fears.

2.1 From strategic doctrine to planetary thought experiment

At first, nuclear weapons were folded into familiar frameworks: bigger bombs, more destructive firepower, perhaps a decisive advantage in war. As arsenals grew and delivery systems improved, that framing broke down. Hiroshima and Nagasaki suggested one kind of horror; thermonuclear weapons and intercontinental missiles implied something qualitatively different. After a certain point, planners recognized that a general nuclear war would not produce victory in any traditional sense. It would produce a world so devastated that conventional metrics of success became meaningless. This recognition pushed doctrine toward a strange new territory where the primary use of weapons was to prevent their use.

MAD emerges from that territory. It is an attempt to formalize the idea that each side's capacity to devastate the other, even after absorbing a first strike, could stabilize relations at a terrifying equilibrium. The doctrine defines thresholds, required arsenal sizes, and survivability conditions under which rational leaders would refrain from initiating a nuclear exchange. It is intricate and technical, but what it ultimately does is stabilize a particular picture in the minds of decision-makers: if you launch, we both die.

What makes this a planetary thought experiment is its scale and its permanence. The hypothetical exchange is not just one possible scenario among many. It is treated as the defining horizon against which all other choices are evaluated. Defense postures, alliance commitments, crisis responses, and diplomatic gambits are all calculated with constant reference to this

imagined catastrophe. The thought experiment swells until it becomes the main mental environment in which high-level political action occurs. Even when negotiations aim at arms control and risk reduction, the implicit background image is still the global nuclear exchange that must be avoided. The doctrine thus trains elites—and through them, entire societies—to inhabit a counterfactual world as if it were always just one misstep away from becoming real.

The dis-real nature of this process is easy to miss because documents, command centers, and missiles are tangible. Yet the heart of the doctrine is something nobody has ever seen: a full-scale, strategic nuclear war between industrial powers. Everything depends on models and analogies, from smaller conflicts and from engineering tests. The macro-hallucination is systematic and disciplined, but it remains a hallucination: a meticulously calculated nightmare future that never arrives, and must not arrive, yet occupies the center of the strategic imagination.

2.2 Simulated wars that never happen but govern everything

To maintain MAD, states run endless simulated wars. These take many forms: tabletop exercises with maps and markers, computer models that track trajectories and yields, staff rides that walk through imagined crises step by step. Each simulation begins by positing a departure from the status quo—a crisis spirals, an early warning is misinterpreted, a leader chooses escalation rather than restraint. From there, the simulated actors move down branching paths of choice and consequence. Do they launch preemptively? Do they ride out a first strike? How many warheads do they aim where? How do surviving forces respond?

None of these wars actually occur, yet they drive real-world decisions. Simulation outputs feed directly into requirements for warhead numbers, basing modes, and command-and-control redundancies. They shape which cities are targeted, how submarines are deployed, and what constitutes an acceptable level of vulnerability or invulnerability. The simulated worlds are unreal, but the infrastructures they justify are made of concrete, steel, and human lives under orders.

This is the hallmark of macro-level dis-reality: an imagined sequence of events is run so often and with such institutional authority that it becomes a guiding reference point for action in the non-imagined world. Planners may know intellectually that simulations are imperfect, but in practice they must treat their results as if they captured the essential structure of possible futures. Budget cycles, procurement decisions, and alliance politics all get yoked to war games whose most important characteristic is that they never leave the tabletop or the computer screen.

At the same time, the existence of these simulated wars seeps into the wider culture. Literal details may be classified, but the basic idea—that governments possess elaborate plans for

fighting and surviving nuclear war—circulates in journalism, fiction, and rumor. People come to understand that somewhere, in some bunker, others are routinely rehearsing their possible deaths and the destruction of their cities. The population at large becomes, indirectly, part of the simulation. Their lives are among the variables in a giant but invisible game in which they have no active role. This contributes to the feeling, described by many in the nuclear age, of living inside someone else's nightmare scenario.

The simulated wars also exert a kind of gravitational pull on imagination. Once the image of entire continents burning is installed in the collective mind, it becomes a reference point even for those who oppose the whole strategic framework. Anti-nuclear movements, satirical films, and apocalyptic art all draw on the same imagery generated and refined inside classified simulations. The dis-reality spills out of its institutional containers and saturates the symbolic environment of everyday life.

2.3 Deterrence as a permanent rehearsal of annihilation

The declared purpose of MAD is deterrence: prevent war by making the consequences of war unthinkable. In practice, deterrence turns out to require that those consequences be not merely thinkable, but constantly thought about. The system must continually demonstrate both capability and willingness to carry out the horrible scenario if certain red lines are crossed. That demonstration takes the form of deployments, exercises, tests, and signals that collectively amount to a permanent rehearsal of annihilation.

On the military side, this means maintaining forces at various levels of readiness, running drills that practice launch procedures, and occasionally staging highly visible maneuvers. The point is to convince adversaries that, if necessary, the rehearsed actions will be performed for real. On the political side, it means repeating certain phrases about unacceptable aggression, vital interests, and guaranteed retaliation, until the pattern becomes predictable. Deterrence works only if the script is clear and credible. That clarity requires constant rehearsal.

From a dis-reality perspective, these rehearsals are ritual performances of the imagined catastrophe. They stop short of actual destruction, but they enact its first steps over and over. Missiles are rolled into silos, bombers fly predetermined routes, submarines slip silently out to sea. Command centers practice handling alarms and launch orders. Each exercise is a partial embodiment of the thought experiment, a way of keeping the imaginary scenario vividly present on the edge of actuality.

For those inside the system, this can produce a peculiar psychological climate. The workday consists of preparing, with painstaking precision, for an event that must never occur. Competence is judged by how smoothly the rehearsal unfolds, how faithfully it would translate into action if the order ever came. The more successful the deterrence, the more the rehearsals

recede into routine, yet the underlying possibility they model cannot be forgotten. The job is to inhabit a world in which instant planetary devastation is both rigorously planned for and perpetually deferred.

For the broader population, deterrence manifests as a steady background of alerts, news stories, and periodic crises in which leaders publicly contemplate “all options.” Even when people are not explicitly thinking about nuclear war, they live in a political environment structured by its possibility. Elections, alliances, and diplomatic incidents are all interpreted against the backdrop of the nuclear script. The rehearsal is ongoing even when it is invisible.

The paradox of deterrence is that it seeks stability through the continuous invocation of instability. It requires that annihilation be kept imaginatively close in order to keep it practically distant. That is why it fits so naturally into the frame of macro-level dis-reality. The system depends on a shared hallucination that is never consummated, but whose presence guides behavior at every level from war room to living room. The world rehearses the end of the world without ever quite performing it, and the rehearsal itself becomes a central feature of how people understand their era.

3. LSD as Micro-Level Dis-Reality

If MAD constructs an engineered unreality at the level of states and systems, LSD constructs an unreality at the level of individual perception. It does not redraw borders or move missiles; it redraws edges inside experience. Under its influence, the ordinary anchors of reality — stable objects, continuous time, a bounded self — can loosen or slip. The world does not change in its physical structure, but the way it is apprehended does. In that sense, LSD is a micro-level dis-reality: a temporary, chemically induced interface that departs from consensus reality while remaining vivid, coherent, and often deeply meaningful to the person undergoing it.

This altered interface is not random. It has characteristic patterns: intensified sensory input, unusual cross-talk between modalities, heightened suggestibility, and a reweighting of what feels significant. Those patterns shape what people bring back from their experiences: new metaphors, convictions about unity, insights about their own lives or about humanity at large. Over time, private trips accumulate into a shared vocabulary of images and ideas. The dis-reality becomes not only an internal event but a cultural resource. In the nuclear age, that resource interacts with the macro-dis-reality of MAD in ways that help give rise to new ethics, aesthetics, and forms of resistance.

3.1 The neurochemistry of altered perception and ego dissolution

LSD's characteristic effects begin at the receptor level. It binds strongly to serotonin receptors, especially in brain regions involved in perception, integration, and self-related processing. This binding perturbs the usual balance of signaling between top-down predictions and bottom-up sensory inputs. Under normal conditions, the brain uses prior expectations to stabilize perception and maintain a coherent sense of self moving through time. Under LSD, that stabilizing influence is weakened. The result is a state in which raw sensory data and internally generated associations can play a larger role in shaping experience.

One consequence is altered perception. Colors may appear more saturated, patterns more intricate, sounds more layered. This is not simply a matter of amplification; it is a shift in the interpretive filters that normally compress and simplify input. Another consequence is ego dissolution. The boundaries that delineate the self from the environment, and thoughts from perceptions, can soften or even vanish. People report feeling merged with others, with nature, or with abstract entities such as "the universe" or "pure consciousness." The brain's circuitry for self-representation is not destroyed, but its activity is reconfigured in a way that makes the self feel less central and less separate.

From the standpoint of dis-reality, what matters is not only the mechanism but the structure of the resulting world. The person is still awake, still aware, but the coordinates of awareness have been rearranged. Familiar objects can become uncanny or sacred; neutral stimuli can take on intense emotional valence. The altered receptor dynamics translate into an altered ontology, in which what counts as "me," "you," and "real" is renegotiated in real time. The micro-level interface that most people take for granted is temporarily suspended, and a different interface takes its place.

This neurochemical fragility is part of what makes LSD experiences so powerful in the long run. The person recognizes that their ordinary sense of reality is, at least in principle, modifiable. Once that recognition is in place, later interpretations of politics, religion, and personal identity can change. The dis-reality of the trip may fade, but the knowledge that "it can be otherwise" often persists.

3.2 Time, self, and significance under psychedelic conditions

Under LSD, time can lose its familiar linearity. Minutes may stretch into what feels like hours, or an entire afternoon may seem to collapse into a single, dense present. Past memories and imagined futures can appear in the same experiential space as current sensations, without the usual sense of sequence. People sometimes report cycles, loops, or spirals of experience, as if the flow of time had doubled back on itself or opened into multiple branches. This temporal

dislocation contributes to the feeling that ordinary life is only one possible way of arranging consciousness.

The self, as noted, is also altered. Ordinarily, there is a continuous internal narrator that organizes experience around “I” and “mine.” On LSD, that organizing center can fragment or disperse. Thoughts may appear without a clear author; emotions may arise without an obvious source. At the extreme, the distinction between self and world can collapse, producing states described as oceanic, boundless, or unitary. In less dramatic cases, people may simply feel more permeable and less defensive, more open to others and to their surroundings.

Significance, too, is redistributed. Under baseline conditions, the brain filters out most stimuli as irrelevant. Under LSD, that filtering relaxes. Details that would normally be ignored can become focal. A pattern in wallpaper, the tone of a voice, or a snippet of music may feel packed with meaning. This can be exhilarating or overwhelming. It can also be dangerous in unstable settings, where negative cues are amplified and interpreted as threats. But in supportive environments, the heightened sense of significance can be experienced as revelation: suddenly everything seems to matter, and connections between things appear that had never before been noticed.

These shifts in time, self, and significance turn the world into a different place without changing its physical substrate. For the duration of the trip, the person inhabits a dis-reality in which chronology is flexible, identity is porous, and meaning is everywhere. Afterwards, they must decide how to relate that world to the one they return to. Some discount the trip as mere hallucination; others treat it as a glimpse of deeper truth. In either case, the memory of having lived in such a world can alter how they understand their place in history and their obligations to others.

In the context of MAD, this matters because the nuclear dis-reality is also about time, self, and significance. MAD projects a specific future catastrophe back into the present and defines certain political choices as overwhelmingly significant. LSD offers an alternate way of stretching time and reallocating importance, one that can de-center nation-states and emphasize the continuity of life. The two interfaces do not simply coexist; they compete for authority over what counts as the most important thing that could happen.

3.3 Private visions, public myths, and the making of trip culture

LSD experiences begin as private events, but they rarely stay private. People talk about their trips, write about them, make art and music inspired by them, and build communities around shared interpretations. Over time, these activities produce a trip culture: a loosely organized set of stories, symbols, and practices that give collective shape to individual dis-realities. The spiral, the mandala, the cosmic eye, the flowing rainbow, the radiant human figure with outstretched

arms — all become part of a visual lexicon that signals altered consciousness and its associated values.

In trip culture, certain narrative motifs recur. There is the journey from fear to acceptance, from fragmentation to unity. There is the encounter with something larger than oneself, whether named as nature, the cosmos, God, or simply “everything.” There is the revelation that ordinary reality is only one layer among many, and that beneath or beyond it lies a more fluid, interconnected field. These motifs are retold in albums, posters, underground newspapers, and later, films and novels. The private dis-realities of thousands of individuals converge into public myths about what psychedelics mean.

These myths, in turn, feed back into future trips. New users come to LSD with expectations shaped by the culture: they anticipate visions of unity, insights into love, or confrontations with deep fears. The drug’s effects are modulated by these expectations, a dynamic often summarized as set and setting. The dis-reality becomes partly self-confirming: people see what they have been told is there, and then their reports reinforce the story for others. A micro-level pharmacological effect thus accumulates into a macro-level symbolic system.

When this symbolic system intersects with the macro-dis-reality of MAD, the result is a distinctive fusion. The mushroom cloud and the peace symbol share conceptual space with the mandala and the swirling galaxy. Apocalyptic imagery is paired with visions of rebirth and transformation. Anti-war demonstrations are infused with the aesthetics of trip culture: bright colors, fluid forms, slogans that merge personal and political liberation. The cultural output of the period is saturated with both the dread of sudden annihilation and the hope of sudden awakening.

In this way, LSD’s micro-level dis-realities help generate a countervailing field of meaning against the nuclear imaginary. The same faculties that can be trained to picture global destruction can be trained, under psychedelic influence, to picture global reconciliation or transcendence. Trip culture becomes one of the places where alternative futures are rehearsed, in parallel to the rehearsals of annihilation taking place in military simulations. Both are unreal; both move matter.

4. Boundary Conditions: Growing Up Under the Bomb

MAD and LSD did not meet in a vacuum. They interacted within the lives of people who had already spent years learning, consciously and unconsciously, what it meant to exist under the possibility of nuclear annihilation. For those born after the first detonations, the bomb was not an event; it was a condition. It framed childhood, shaped schooling, inflected entertainment, and haunted the edges of imagination. Before anyone tried a psychedelic or marched against

the bomb, they had been quietly trained by drills, films, news, and adult conversations to understand that the world could end not by plague or famine, but by human decision in a remarkably short time.

These boundary conditions matter. They define the baseline emotional climate into which both macro- and micro-level dis-realities are introduced. If the ordinary background feeling is that the future is both open and relatively secure, then doctrines like MAD and substances like LSD have one kind of impact. If the ordinary background feeling is that the future is radically contingent on a few buttons and misread signals, they have another. Growing up under the bomb meant that the imagination of catastrophe was never entirely optional. It was built into the architecture of collective life, even when no one talked about it openly at home.

4.1 Childhood, schooling, and popular media in the shadow of nuclear war

For many children, the first encounter with nuclear reality came not from abstract lectures but from rituals embedded in school. Air raid sirens, duck-and-cover drills, and civil defense posters turned the possibility of sudden destruction into a repetitive exercise. Teachers might not explain strategic doctrines, but they demonstrated procedures for surviving, or at least responding to, an attack. Classrooms became rehearsal spaces for an undefined disaster. The message, even without explicit commentary, was that something very large and very bad could happen quickly, and that children were expected to adopt certain postures in response.

Textbooks and educational films reinforced this message in more structured ways. Some offered simplified diagrams of blast radii and fallout patterns, suggesting that knowledge and preparation could mitigate danger. Others focused on the geopolitical conflict that supposedly justified the arms race, framing nuclear weapons as necessary deterrents against an implacable enemy. The result was a mixed pedagogical environment in which young people learned simultaneously that human beings had invented planet-destroying devices and that these devices were both terrifying and protective. Cognitive dissonance became part of the curriculum.

Popular media amplified these lessons, often in more vivid forms. News broadcasts referenced missile tests, crises, and summits with a steady, matter-of-fact tone. Feature films and television shows experimented with scenarios ranging from straight disaster narratives to dark comedy. Even when nuclear themes were not explicit, the underlying conflict between superpowers provided a constant narrative backdrop. Superhero stories, spy thrillers, and science fiction repeatedly staged the tension between apocalyptic danger and last-minute salvation. Children absorbed these tales alongside cartoons and advertisements, internalizing a sense that the world they inhabited was precarious by design.

At home, fragments of adult conversation filled in the remaining gaps. Parents discussed crises, elections, and foreign leaders in ways that granted them near-mythic power over global fate. Eavesdropping children might not understand the details, but they understood tone: anxiety, anger, cynicism, resignation. Even when adults tried to shield them, the emotional spillover was hard to contain. The bomb entered childhood not only as an object of information but as a subtle, omnipresent tension in the atmosphere.

4.2 Background dread and the normalization of potential extinction

Over time, the acute shock of learning about nuclear weapons could settle into something more diffuse: background dread. This was not necessarily panic. In many cases, it was more like a low-intensity hum of unease, punctuated by spikes during crises. The possibility of extinction was acknowledged, then placed back on a mental shelf where it remained within reach but not constantly handled. This oscillation between awareness and distraction became a common pattern in everyday life.

Such dread had to be normalized if people were to function. One way this normalization occurred was through humor and irony. Jokes about the bomb, sardonic remarks about superpower brinkmanship, and satirical portrayals of leaders allowed individuals to express fear indirectly. Humor turned omnipotent forces into objects of ridicule, granting a sense of symbolic control. Another way was through a kind of selective numbness. Many simply learned not to think too hard about the worst-case scenarios, except when events forced them to. The capacity to compartmentalize became a survival skill.

Normalization also took the form of fatalism. Phrases like “if it happens, it happens” or “we will all go together” expressed a resigned acceptance that some things were beyond personal influence. This fatalism could coexist with attempts at activism or meticulous personal planning; it was less a coherent philosophy than a coping mechanism. The key point is that the possibility of extinction moved from the realm of unimaginable horror into the realm of things one had to live beside. It became, paradoxically, part of the ordinary.

This background dread shaped how people evaluated other risks and opportunities. Careers, relationships, and political commitments were pursued under the shadow of an implicit question: how long will any of this matter? For some, that question undermined long-term plans and fostered a sense of futility. For others, it intensified the urgency of certain choices, leading to a “live fully now” ethos. In both cases, the potential end of the world was not just a remote abstraction; it was a factor in the calculus of everyday life.

4.3 The emotional economics of living with a short collective fuse

Living with the knowledge that one’s entire society has a short fuse alters the emotional economy of existence. Attention, hope, fear, anger, and love are all allocated differently when

the time horizon is uncertain. The nuclear age trained people to perform a delicate balancing act: care enough about the future to invest in it, but not so much that the possibility of abrupt annihilation becomes psychologically unbearable.

One effect of this balancing act was a heightened sensitivity to signs of escalation. News of missile deployments, changes in leadership, or diplomatic breakdowns could trigger disproportionate emotional responses, because they threatened to shorten the collective fuse further. Conversely, treaties, summits, and symbolic gestures of reconciliation could produce outsized relief, even if their concrete effects were limited. Emotional volatility around distant events became a rational response to a world in which those events might quickly cascade into catastrophe.

Another effect was the revaluation of meaning in the present. Some individuals gravitated toward intensification: if tomorrow was not guaranteed, experiences today should be as vivid, authentic, or transformative as possible. This could take the form of hedonistic pursuit, spiritual seeking, political militancy, or artistic experimentation. Others gravitated toward preservation: focus on family, community, and small, durable goods that might outlast crises. Both strategies were attempts to optimize emotional returns under conditions of radical uncertainty.

The short collective fuse also complicated intergenerational relationships. Parents had to decide how much to disclose to children, and children had to interpret adult behavior that was sometimes shaped by fears they did not fully understand. For those coming of age during particularly tense periods, there could be a sense that older generations had bequeathed them a rigged world, one in which technological prowess outran ethical restraint. Resentment, mistrust, and a desire to break with inherited norms could all be intensified by the feeling that the fuse had been lit long before they were born.

Within this emotional economy, the appeal of both MAD's promise of stability and LSD's promise of expanded consciousness becomes clearer. MAD offered a grim assurance that, as long as the rehearsals continued and the logic held, the fuse might not actually burn down to the detonator. LSD offered a way to reframe or temporarily escape the whole arrangement, to inhabit a world where boundaries softened and other kinds of unity were possible. Both were, in their own ways, responses to the same underlying condition: the experience of living in a civilization that had discovered a new, terrifyingly efficient way to end itself, and had not yet decided what meanings to attach to that fact.

5. Unity by Annihilation vs Unity by Consciousness

At a certain level of abstraction, MAD and LSD converge on the same structural motif: the collapse of boundaries into a state of oneness. In one case, the boundary collapse is physical

and terminal. Cities, nations, and bodies are fused into a single contaminated ruin by fire and fallout. In the other, the boundary collapse is experiential and reversible. Selves, times, and categories are melted into a felt unity of being that can, at least in principle, be integrated into ongoing life. Both are dis-real constructions that invite people to imagine a world in which separation is not the final word. The difference lies in the means and the aftermath.

MAD offers unity by annihilation. Its promise, if one can call it that, is that no one will stand apart as a victor above the ruins. The doctrine insists that in any full-scale exchange, fate is shared: everyone dies together, or at least suffers together beyond recognition of prewar distinctions. LSD offers unity by consciousness. Its promise is that one can discover a level of experience in which divisions between self and other, human and nature, or even life and death are softened or transcended. In the nuclear age, these two very different unities coexist in the same imaginative field. People learn, sometimes in the same decade of their lives, that humanity can become one body either by burning itself to ash or by awakening to its interconnectedness.

5.1 MAD as enforced unity: everyone dies together

MAD's unity is negative, coercive, and non-negotiable. It rests on physical facts about explosive yields, delivery times, and population densities. Once arsenals reach a certain point, no plausible configuration of shelters, defenses, or strikes can prevent massive, mutual devastation. The unity that results from a full-scale exchange is the unity of shared ruin: a planet scarred, irradiated, and economically shattered beyond any meaningful distinction between winners and losers.

This enforced unity has a peculiar moral structure. On the one hand, it can be seen as leveling. The doctrine insists that no nation, however powerful, can escape the consequences of its own aggression. On the other hand, it is indifferent to responsibility. Children, dissidents, and opponents of the regime suffer the same fate as those who ordered the first launch. Unity by annihilation treats humanity as a single body for the purpose of destruction, but not for the purpose of justice.

Even when the scenario is kept at the level of imagination, it exerts pressure on concepts of identity. If the worst were to happen, distinctions that structure ordinary life—citizenship, class, ideology—would be irrelevant in the face of firestorms and radiation. The underlying message is that, at the limit, all humans are equally vulnerable matter. This is a kind of ontological reduction: the complex tapestry of social identities is compressed into the simple category of beings who can be vaporized.

For some, this enforced unity functions as a deterrent ethical insight. Recognizing that an attack on the enemy is, in effect, an attack on everyone, they generalize: perhaps the enemy is less

alien than doctrine suggests. For others, the insight remains confined to the strategic domain, a grim calculation rather than a broadened empathy. Either way, MAD installs in the background of thought the idea that humanity is bound together, not by shared aspirations, but by shared exposure to an engineered catastrophe.

The unity offered by MAD is also temporally strange. It is unity in a moment, a single burst or series of bursts, after which human stories either end or continue in such radically altered conditions that comparisons to the prewar world are tenuous. The imagined convergence of all lives into a single terminal event compresses time: billions of trajectories intersect at once in flames. Deterrence depends on this compressed image. It asks leaders to hold in their minds the picture of everyone dying together, so that they will refrain from any step that could set the chain in motion.

5.2 LSD as elective unity: everyone is one being together

LSD's unity, by contrast, is elective, contingent, and interior. It is not guaranteed by physics; it emerges from a particular combination of brain chemistry, setting, and expectation. Under favorable conditions, the boundary between self and other softens, and the person may feel themselves to be part of a larger whole: humanity as a single organism, life as a single process, or reality as a single unfolding event. This unity does not erase physical differences, but it changes how those differences are experienced. Others are no longer simply separate agents; they are recognized as expressions of the same underlying field of being.

Unlike the unity of annihilation, this unity does not require anyone to die. It can be sampled and then set aside; it can be revisited and deepened; it can be integrated imperfectly into ordinary life. The person who has felt themselves to be one with others may emerge with increased empathy, or at least with a decreased appetite for rigid boundaries. The dis-reality of the trip becomes a resource for reinterpreting real relationships.

LSD's unity also has a different temporal structure. Experiences of timelessness, eternity, or cyclical time are common. Instead of compressing all lives into a single catastrophic moment, the trip may suggest that all moments are already interconnected in ways the sober mind cannot fully grasp. The fear that everything might end suddenly coexists with a sense that, at some deeper level, nothing fundamental can be destroyed. For some, this produces complacency; for others, a renewed sense of responsibility to care for beings with whom they now feel existentially linked.

Elective unity is fragile. It depends on context and can be overshadowed by paranoia, confusion, or despair if the trip goes badly. It can also be co-opted by ego, turned into a badge of specialness rather than a gateway to humility. But even in its failures, it points to a different

mode of being together than the one implied by nuclear doctrine. It suggests that human beings can experience oneness not only at the point of death, but in the texture of life itself.

At the level of culture, this elective unity gives rise to practices and symbols that embody a more affirmative togetherness. Communal living experiments, group rituals, music festivals, and shared trips are attempts to externalize the felt oneness into social form. Slogans that merge love and peace translate private experiences into public messages. The notion that “we are all one” becomes, for some, a principle of political and ecological ethics, not just a passing sensation.

5.3 Two different switches that collapse boundaries into oneness

Seen side by side, MAD and LSD function as two different switches that can collapse boundaries into oneness. The nuclear switch is external, mechanical, and binary. Either it is not thrown, in which case boundaries remain as they are, or it is thrown, in which case many boundaries vanish in a rush of destruction. The psychedelic switch is internal, organic, and graded. It can be turned partway or all the way, and even then its effects vary widely. The bomb’s oneness is enforced from outside; the trip’s oneness arises, however artificially induced, from inside.

Both switches, however, reveal something about the underlying system. MAD reveals that the separation of nations is more tenuous than it appears, because actions in one command center can end lives on another continent within minutes. LSD reveals that the psychological separation of selves is more tenuous than it appears, because a small chemical perturbation can dissolve the sense of individuality that ordinarily feels absolute. In this sense, both dis-realities expose hidden couplings: one in the domain of power, the other in the domain of consciousness.

The way a society responds to these switches is revealing. If the nuclear switch is treated purely as a technical problem, managed by experts, its ethical implications may remain abstract. If the psychedelic switch is treated purely as a pathology or a pastime, its ethical possibilities may be trivialized. When both are active in the same historical period, there is an opportunity, however fleeting, to see them in relation: the power to make everyone die together and the power to feel that everyone is already together.

In the nuclear age, this relation sometimes surfaces explicitly. Anti-war activists influenced by psychedelics speak not only in terms of geopolitical risk but in terms of spiritual violence: a nuclear exchange would not just kill millions, it would tear apart a unity they have directly experienced. Conversely, strategists and critics who recognize the enforced unity of annihilation may, without any chemical assistance, arrive at a sense of common humanity grounded in shared vulnerability. The two switches can reinforce each other’s warnings, even if they arise from different circuits.

Yet there is also tension. Unity by annihilation threatens to overshadow unity by consciousness, reducing all visions of oneness to premonitions of death. Unity by consciousness can, in some cases, dull the urgency of confronting nuclear danger, if it leads to a retreat into inner worlds divorced from practical action. The challenge, for individuals and cultures, is to hold both dis-realities in view without collapsing one into the other: to recognize that the capacity for shared destruction and the capacity for shared perception are distinct, and that neither automatically generates the ethical dispositions needed to navigate the age.

By treating MAD and LSD as two switches that collapse boundaries into oneness, this section prepares the ground for examining how their interaction shaped concrete movements, images, and institutions. The next step is to follow their joint imprint into the figure of the flower child, the politics of the peace movement, and the aesthetics of an era that tried, in its own chaotic way, to choose one kind of unity over another.

6. The Flower Child as Emergent Figure of the Coupled System

If MAD and LSD are the two dis-real engines of the nuclear age, the “flower child” is one of their most visible emergent figures. This figure is not just a fashion type (long hair, beads, bare feet) or a marketing niche. It is a human interface that tries to reconcile, in one body and lifestyle, the tension between enforced unity by annihilation and elective unity by consciousness. The flower child stands at the crossing point of the bomb and the trip, of strategic nightmares and psychedelic revelations.

In that sense, the flower child is not simply a rebel against mainstream culture; they are also a kind of intuitive systems engineer of meaning. Without formal doctrine, they select symbols from the global inventory of anti-nuclear activism, spiritual traditions, and pop aesthetics, and recombine them into a portable counter-script. That script says, in effect: if the official world rehearses killing everyone together, we will rehearse loving everyone together. The choices of clothes, slogans, and social forms are not random. They are low-tech, embodied responses to high-tech, disembodied threats.

The following subsections trace how this emergent figure draws on imported anti-bomb symbols, compresses two dis-realities into a single ethical slogan, and experiments with communal practices that ritualize alternative futures.

6.1 Peace signs, nuclear disarmament, and imported anti-bomb symbols

One of the most striking features of the flower child aesthetic is its symbol set. The peace sign, doves, rainbows, flowers, and hands raised in blessing or greeting all appear with high

frequency. Many of these symbols did not originate in the counterculture; they were imported and recontextualized. The peace sign, for instance, began as a specific emblem for nuclear disarmament—a stylized combination of semaphore signals associated with that cause. When flower children adopt it en masse, they are effectively wearing an anti-bomb demand across their chests and on their banners, even when the original semiotic details are forgotten.

This adoption transforms the symbol's scope. In its initial context, the peace sign is a focused protest against one category of weapons. In the hands of the flower child, it expands into a generalized icon of opposition to war, authoritarianism, and rigid social norms. Yet the nuclear referent never entirely disappears. The sign's origin embeds a ghost: every time it appears on a necklace or painted on a van, it carries with it the earlier insistence that the bomb is intolerable. The flower child thus walks around as a mobile, smiling reminder that something in the official order has gone fatally wrong.

Flowers themselves become anti-weapon symbols. Placing flowers in gun barrels, tossing petals at soldiers, and using floral patterns as quasi-uniforms reframe confrontation. A rifle with a flower in its muzzle is still a rifle, but the gesture insists that another use of hands and objects is possible. The flower child, by literally handling symbols of violence and inserting soft, living things into them, performs a kind of symbolic disarmament. The act does not change military doctrine, but it changes the image field within which that doctrine operates.

Other symbols—mandalas, swirling suns, third eyes—come from spiritual and psychedelic sources. These borrowings carry associations of inner exploration, transcendence, and nonduality. When they appear beside peace signs and anti-war slogans, they link opposition to external violence with a commitment to inner transformation. The resulting collage suggests that the bomb is not just a technical or political problem; it is also a symptom of a certain state of consciousness. Undoing it, then, requires changing how people see themselves and one another.

The flower child's symbol set is thus a networked import operation. Icons and emblems are lifted from British nuclear activism, Eastern religions, American folk traditions, and underground psychedelic art, then recomposed into a coherent visual language of dissent. This language speaks simultaneously to the macro-dis-reality of MAD and the micro-dis-reality of LSD. It says: we refuse your picture of the future, and we have seen another.

6.2 “Make love, not war” as ethical synthesis of two dis-realities

Among the many slogans of the era, “Make love, not war” stands out as a compressed ethical program. On one side of the equation is war: organized, industrial violence conducted by states under the shadow of nuclear escalation. On the other side is love: a word that, in this context,

deliberately blurs erotic, interpersonal, and universal meanings. The slogan does not simply oppose two activities; it opposes two ways of organizing energy and attention in a world with a short collective fuse.

From the perspective developed earlier, the slogan can be read as a synthesis of MAD's enforced unity and LSD's elective unity. War, especially nuclear war, is the ultimate expression of enforced unity by annihilation: everyone dies together, or at least suffers together, whether they chose that outcome or not. Love, especially as experienced or reimagined under psychedelic influence, is an elective unity: everyone is one being together in the sense of mutual recognition and care, and this unity is entered into as a value, not as an accident of weapons physics.

To say "make love, not war" is therefore to choose one switch over the other. It is to insist that if humanity is going to experience oneness, it should be through acts of connection rather than acts of extermination. The phrase is intentionally simple, almost childlike, to make it portable. But its simplicity hides a serious claim: that the energies driving conflict—desire, fear, aggression—can be redirected into forms that affirm rather than negate others' existence.

The flower child's emphasis on sexuality, affection, and bodily closeness is not merely hedonistic in this frame. It is strategic. If the bomb renders bodies fragile, disposable, and indistinguishable at scale, the counter-practice is to render bodies cherished, expressive, and unique at intimate scale. Making love becomes more than a private pleasure; it becomes an embodied refusal of the logic that reduces people to casualties in strategic calculations. Physical intimacy, shared joy, and sensual play are recoded as acts of resistance against a culture that treats bodies as collateral damage.

At the same time, the phrase broadens love beyond the sexual. Love of nature, love of music, love of community all become part of the "not war" alternative. The flower child, informed by trips that dissolve self-world boundaries, may speak of loving humanity or the Earth as a single entity. This rhetoric risks vagueness and sentimentalism, but it also channels an experiential insight: that harming others is, in some sense, harming a larger whole of which one is a part. In a nuclear context, where any conflict threatens to become suicide, this insight aligns with strategic reality, even if it arrives from a different direction.

"Make love, not war" thus condenses two dis-realities into a practical formula. It acknowledges, implicitly, that the capacity for mass violence is real and that the attractions of conflict are powerful. It proposes, explicitly, that these energies be transmuted into forms of connection that make annihilation less likely. It is a slogan, but also an ethic and a survival strategy.

6.3 Communes, festivals, and practices that ritualize alternative futures

Symbols and slogans alone do not constitute an alternative to MAD. The emergent figure of the flower child also participates in experiments with social form. Communes, festivals, and shared practices become living laboratories in which the counter-script is rehearsed. These spaces do not abolish the bomb, but they attempt to model what life might look like if the logic of unity by consciousness, rather than unity by annihilation, were scaled up.

Communes are one such experiment. Groups of people move to rural settings or urban enclaves and attempt to restructure everyday life around principles of shared ownership, collective decision-making, and mutual aid. These efforts are uneven, often fragile, and riddled with the same conflicts they aim to transcend. Yet their existence matters. They are attempts to withdraw, at least partially, from systems that are deeply entangled with nuclear militarism and hierarchical power. In place of rehearsing annihilation, commune members rehearse cooperation, conflict resolution, and alternative forms of labor and intimacy.

Festivals offer a different kind of temporary commune. Large gatherings centered on music, art, and communal experience create short-lived cities where normative roles are suspended or reworked. For a few days, participants inhabit a dis-reality in which strangers dance together, share resources, and experience mass synchrony without a common enemy. These events often involve psychedelics and explicitly anti-war messages, making them sites where micro- and macro-dis-realities intertwine. If military exercises are rehearsals for coordinated destruction, festivals are rehearsals for coordinated joy.

Everyday practices also participate in this ritualization of alternative futures. Shared meals, group meditations, “be-ins,” and spontaneous street performances all enact, on small scales, a world in which attention is not monopolized by fear and competition. The use of open circles rather than rows, consensus meetings rather than top-down directives, and improvisation rather than rigid scripts signals a deliberate move away from the command-and-control architectures associated with nuclear strategy. These practices are not purely spontaneous; they are shaped by an underlying theory, however loosely articulated, that different forms of social organization can cultivate different kinds of consciousness.

In this sense, the flower child is engaged in what might be called embodied foresight. Instead of drafting white papers on policy reform, they test, with their own lives, what kinds of communities feel viable and meaningful under the threat of annihilation. They may not frame their actions in terms of systems theory, but the logic is similar: if existing structures lead toward suicidal outcomes, then new structures must be prototyped, even if they are small and imperfect.

These experiments also serve an important psychological function. They offer respite from background dread and demonstrate that other affective climates are possible. Living, even briefly, in a space where trust and play are predominant can recalibrate what individuals expect from social life. For some, returning to the mainstream world becomes harder; for others, it becomes an opportunity to carry elements of the alternative ethos back into workplaces, families, and political movements.

The limitations of these practices are obvious. Many communes collapse under internal strain or external pressure. Festivals are episodic and easily commercialized. Flower child aesthetics can be co-opted by advertising, turning symbols of resistance into styles for sale. Yet even in failure and co-optation, the experiments leave traces: stories, images, memories, and infrastructures that can be reactivated in later cycles of dissent.

By treating the flower child as an emergent figure of the coupled MAD–LSD system, this section highlights that the counterculture was not merely an aesthetic or generational rebellion. It was a distributed effort to build, in symbolic and practical terms, a different way of being together on a planet that had learned how to destroy itself. Where official institutions ran simulations of war, communes and festivals ran simulations of peace. Both were dis-real rehearsals. The ongoing question is which rehearsals have left the deeper imprint on the collective capacity to choose among the futures still available.

7. Politics in a Dis-Real Field

The politics of the nuclear age unfolded inside a field already distorted by dis-realities. Official life was structured around the MAD hallucination: elaborate counterfactual wars, worst-case scenarios, and rehearsals for events that must never actually occur. At the same time, many individuals experimented with micro-level dis-realities through psychedelics and other consciousness-expanding practices. Politics in this environment cannot be understood solely as a contest over material interests or institutional designs. It was also a contest over which hallucination would be allowed to define what counted as “normal,” “responsible,” and “realistic.”

Anti-war and anti-nuclear movements arose as direct responses to the macro-dis-reality of MAD, challenging both its technical assumptions and its moral premises. Psychedelics, meanwhile, helped fuel a broader refusal of Cold War normality, linking opposition to the bomb with critiques of racism, sexism, consumerism, and rigid hierarchies. States responded with a mix of repression, co-optation, and controlled toleration, trying to manage dissent without abandoning the nuclear architecture that generated it. The result was a political landscape in

which disagreements about weapons and policy were also disagreements about which imagined world society should inhabit.

7.1 Anti-war and anti-nuclear movements as responses to MAD hallucination

Anti-war and anti-nuclear movements did not merely object to specific conflicts or particular weapons systems. They objected to the entire imaginative framework in which it seemed “rational” to threaten mutual annihilation as a way of preserving peace. Activists saw the MAD doctrine not just as a strategic equilibrium, but as a kind of collective psychosis: a situation in which leaders calmly discussed scenarios that, if realized, would destroy the very constituencies they claimed to protect. To them, the war games and deterrence models looked like hallucinations with budgets and uniforms.

In this light, marches, sit-ins, and teach-ins were not just attempts to influence policy; they were interventions in an ongoing hallucination. By publicly refusing the premises of deterrence—by insisting that no conceivable goal justified preparations for global suicide—protesters tried to break the spell. Signs, chants, and speeches often highlighted the absurdity of living under constant threat by one’s own government’s weapons. The movements offered an alternative narrative: that the true irrationality lay not in unilateral disarmament or negotiation, but in treating the ability to erase cities as a legitimate bargaining chip.

At the same time, anti-nuclear activism had to grapple with the fact that its own mobilizing imagery drew heavily on the MAD dis-reality. Posters and speeches invoked mushroom clouds, burned landscapes, and skeletal survivors. Fictional depictions of nuclear war were used to shock audiences into moral clarity. In opposing the hallucination, movements also amplified it, ensuring that vivid pictures of annihilation remained central to the public imagination. Their wager was that this amplification would lead to revulsion and demands for change rather than resignation.

The movements’ strategic choices reflect this ambivalence. Some groups focused on technical critiques: arguing that deterrence was unstable, that accidents and miscalculations were inevitable, that arms races made everyone less safe. Others emphasized ethical arguments: that planning to kill millions, even as a hypothetical, was incompatible with any humane values. Both approaches implicitly questioned the legitimacy of a political order that asked ordinary people to accept the permanent rehearsal of their own destruction as the price of security.

Importantly, anti-war activism did more than simply oppose; it sought to make different worlds feel imaginable. “Ban the bomb,” “give peace a chance,” and later calls for freeze agreements and disarmament summits were invitations to picture futures in which nuclear weapons were marginal or absent. In this sense, the movements tried to replace one dis-reality with another: a

counterfactual field in which resources flowed to education and health, cross-border cooperation became normal, and the bomb receded into a cautionary tale rather than a daily threat.

7.2 Psychedelics, civil rights, and the broader refusal of Cold War normality

While anti-war and anti-nuclear movements directly confronted MAD, a wider ecosystem of dissent emerged that questioned Cold War normality on multiple fronts. Psychedelics played a complex role in this process. They were never the sole or primary driver of civil rights, feminist, environmental, or anti-colonial struggles. Those movements had deep roots in injustices far older than the nuclear age. But psychedelics supplied metaphors, experiences, and sensibilities that helped some participants see connections between seemingly separate forms of violence and domination.

Under altered states, the familiar categories that organized Cold War society—race, gender, nation, class—could appear less fixed. Experiences of elective unity sometimes translated into political insight: if the boundary between self and other is porous, then structures that systematically degrade certain groups become harder to justify. An expanded sense of empathy could make segregation, colonialism, and environmental destruction feel not only wrong, but viscerally incoherent with the lived sense of interconnectedness. Even for those who never took psychedelics, the cultural diffusion of “expanded consciousness” ideas contributed to a more general suspicion of rigid roles and arbitrary authority.

This broader refusal of normality targeted not only spectacular threats like nuclear war, but the everyday arrangements that made MAD possible. Suburbanization, corporate conformity, gendered expectations, racial segregation, and religious dogmatism all came under critique. The same institutions that insisted on the necessity of the nuclear umbrella also presided over domestic inequities and cultural stagnation. For many young people, opposition to the bomb and solidarity with civil rights struggles felt like different fronts in a single campaign against a system that had lost moral legitimacy.

Psychedelic culture reinforced this holistic critique by offering alternative experiences of community and meaning. Group trips, shared rituals, and non-hierarchical gatherings provided embodied counterpoints to the bureaucratic, militarized structures of official life. Music, art, and literature shaped by altered states often portrayed the existing order as a narrow, brittle construction in contrast to a more fluid, vibrant field of possibilities. Lyrics and posters linked personal awakening to social transformation, suggesting that internal shifts in consciousness could undermine the psychological foundations of domination and fear.

This linkage could be naive or romanticized, sometimes underestimating the entrenched power of institutions and material interests. Yet it also captured a real insight: that MAD's credibility depended not only on hardware and treaties, but on a population willing to accept a particular story about enemies, threats, and what counted as "realistic." By changing what individuals found believable and meaningful, psychedelics and related practices contributed, in their own uneven way, to a larger reconfiguration of the political imagination.

7.3 State responses: repression, co-optation, and controlled toleration

States confronted this dis-real politics with a mix of hard and soft tools. On the repressive side, governments used surveillance, infiltration, and legal prosecution to constrain movements they saw as threatening. Anti-war groups were monitored; leaders were harassed or smeared; street demonstrations were met with police force. Drug laws were tightened, and psychedelics were aggressively associated with insanity, crime, or foreign subversion in official messaging. The aim was to delegitimize both the critique of MAD and the alternative consciousness practices that fueled it.

Repression was not only physical; it was also symbolic. Official narratives portrayed activists as naive, disloyal, or manipulated, contrasting their "unrealistic" visions with the sober, responsible realism of deterrence. The state framed itself as the guardian of order against the chaos allegedly unleashed by drugs and radical politics. In doing so, it tried to reinforce the MAD dis-reality as the only credible frame for thinking about security. Alternative imaginaries were cast as dangerous fantasies, even as the official hallucination of managed annihilation remained unmarked as such.

At the same time, outright suppression had limits. Liberal democracies, in particular, relied on some degree of visible pluralism to distinguish themselves from their adversaries. This led to strategies of controlled toleration. Certain forms of dissent were allowed as safety valves, demonstrations as long as they remained peaceful, "consciousness-expanding" art as long as it did not directly challenge key institutions. Universities became semi-protected spaces for critique; some media outlets were permitted to air anti-war or countercultural views alongside official perspectives. By allowing just enough alternative discourse, states could point to their openness while keeping nuclear and security policy largely insulated from direct popular control.

Co-optation was another key response. Elements of counterculture were selectively absorbed into mainstream consumer society. Fashion, music, and language associated with the flower child aesthetic were repackaged as marketable styles. "Rebellious" images sold clothing, cars, and soft drinks. In this process, symbols that once signaled refusal of MAD and its supporting

structures were stripped of much of their oppositional content. A peace sign on a mass-produced product no longer necessarily implied a commitment to disarmament; it could simply indicate a vague preference for “good vibes.”

Similarly, some of the broader critiques of Cold War normality were accommodated in moderated forms. Racial segregation was formally dismantled in many places; legal discrimination against women and sexual minorities was reduced; environmental protections were implemented. These changes were often the hard-won results of struggle, not gifts from above. But once in place, they also served to stabilize a revised version of the existing order. The nuclear apparatus, military alliances, and basic economic structures remained largely intact, now layered with reforms that addressed some of the most visible injustices without undoing the underlying strategic framework.

In this way, the state’s responses reshaped the dis-real field without abolishing it. Repression warned against pushing too far; co-optation domesticated certain symbols and practices; controlled toleration allowed enough dissent to maintain legitimacy while insulating core doctrines. The MAD hallucination persisted, albeit with more caveats and more critics inside the establishment. Psychedelics were pushed to the margins or into medicalized niches, even as their cultural afterimage continued to inform art and spirituality.

Politics in this landscape became a dynamic equilibrium among competing unrels. The official hallucination of rational deterrence, the countercultural visions of unity and liberation, and the everyday fictions of consumer prosperity and national destiny all vied for allegiance. Individuals and groups navigated among them, sometimes inhabiting several at once. Understanding this period requires seeing not only the visible clashes of protest and policy, but the underlying struggle over which dis-reality would be allowed to define what counted as acceptable risk, possible futures, and sane behavior on a planet that had discovered how to end itself.

8. Aesthetics of the MAD–LSD Coupling

The coupling of MAD and LSD did not stay in policy papers or private visions. It spilled out into a distinctive aesthetic field where imagery, sound, narrative, and humor all bore the imprint of living under simultaneous threats of annihilation and promises of awakening. The art of this era is often remembered as colorful, playful, and exuberant, but beneath the swirling surfaces runs a constant undercurrent of apocalypse. The same posters that celebrate cosmic unity often hint at planetary fragility; the same songs that invite transcendence also register dread; the same films that mock military logic also make its stakes unmistakable.

Aesthetics in this context are not simply decorative. They are tools for managing dis-reality. Psychedelic art helps give form to experiences that otherwise resist description; nuclear

imagery forces confrontation with scenarios that most people would rather not imagine. Together, they create a visual and sonic grammar for holding opposites at once: ecstasy and terror, hope and fatalism, unity and fragmentation. The MAD–LSD coupling becomes visible not only in slogans and marches but in album covers, light shows, novels, comedy routines, and cinematic set pieces that teach audiences how to feel their way through a world that could end in minutes yet keeps turning.

8.1 Psychedelic art as visual grammar of apocalyptic unity

Psychedelic art developed a recognizable vocabulary: saturated colors, flowing lines, fractal-like repetition, and images that blend human, animal, mechanical, and celestial forms. This vocabulary did more than illustrate altered states; it also provided a way to think visually about a planet-sized system on the brink. The repeated motifs of eyes, mandalas, and radiating energy fields suggested an underlying unity of perception and being. The frequent inclusion of skulls, suns, and explosions hinted at mortality and transformation. In many works, birth and death, creation and destruction, appear as phases of the same cycle.

In the shadow of the bomb, these images of cyclical transformation acquired an additional charge. A mushroom cloud and a blossoming flower are both expansions; a planet ringed with light can be read as enlightenment or incineration. Psychedelic posters, murals, and underground comics often leaned into this ambiguity. They presented worlds in which boundaries were fluid, where cities melted into landscapes and human bodies fused with galaxies. The viewer was invited to experience, at least superficially, the kind of unity that LSD could induce internally and that MAD threatened to impose externally by force.

The visual grammar of psychedelic art also disrupted conventional perspectives. Distorted scales, non-Euclidean spaces, and impossible juxtapositions undermined the illusion of a stable, ordered world managed by rational planners. Instead, everything looked in flux, vibrating and morphing. In an era when official imagery emphasized control—command centers, neat missile arrays, orderly parades—psychedelic images foregrounded uncertainty and interconnectedness. They implied that the world was already more like a trip than like a blueprint, and that attempting to impose rigid order on such a dynamic system might itself be a form of madness.

At the same time, this art offered consolation. By weaving death imagery into larger patterns of light and movement, it suggested that annihilation could be reframed as transformation. This was not a literal endorsement of nuclear catastrophe, but a symbolic move: even in the face of overwhelming threat, one might cultivate ways of seeing that integrate fear into a broader sense of meaning. The viewer was trained to tolerate complexity, to hold multiple

interpretations in mind, and to entertain the possibility that unity might emerge from apparent chaos.

8.2 Music, lyrics, and the sonic imagination of end-times and transcendence

If psychedelic art offered a visual grammar, music provided a temporal one. Extended improvisations, unusual time signatures, and layered soundscapes created sonic environments that mirrored the nonlinear experience of acid trips. Songs swelled, looped, and dissolved in ways that blurred beginnings and endings. This musical structure resonated with an age that felt both stretched to a breaking point and frozen under the threat of sudden termination. Listening could feel like riding a wave that might crest into revelation or crash into silence.

Lyrics often made the nuclear context explicit or implicit. References to fire in the sky, burning cities, and last chances coexisted with calls for love, peace, and awakening. Some songs adopted a prophetic tone, warning of impending judgment if humanity did not change its ways. Others adopted a more intimate voice, connecting personal transformation to global responsibility. The idea that a shift in consciousness might avert disaster, or at least redeem it, became a recurring theme. Even when the bomb was not mentioned, the sense that time was short and stakes were high lingered in the background.

The sonic qualities of the music also reflected the MAD–LSD coupling. Distortion, echo, and feedback created dense, immersive sound fields that could feel both overwhelming and enveloping. At high volumes and in collective settings like concerts or festivals, listeners experienced a kind of temporary fusion with one another and with the sound. This was elective unity in practice: a crowd becoming one organism through rhythm and resonance. Simultaneously, the sheer intensity of the experience hinted at overload and breakdown, mirroring anxieties about technological excess and systems pushed beyond safe limits.

Music thus became a vehicle for rehearsing both end-times and transcendence. Anthems that urged listeners to imagine a world without war, borders, or hierarchies functioned as counter-spells against the narratives of inevitable conflict. Ballads that grappled with loss and longing acknowledged the cost of living under permanent threat. Instrumental pieces that dispensed with words altogether invited direct immersion in sound as a form of refuge or revelation. In each case, the act of listening together under the open sky or in cramped clubs was a small defiance of the idea that the primary collective experience of the age would be shared death.

Moreover, the network of bands, venues, and fans constituted a kind of parallel infrastructure of feeling. Where official channels delivered news of crises and deterrence, this infrastructure delivered rhythms and stories that re-coded the same conditions as an impetus for empathy and exploration. To grow up with both early warning sirens and guitar solos was to internalize

two very different models of what a collective event could be: an instant of mutual destruction or an hour of mutual entrainment.

8.3 Film, literature, and satire under the regime of mutual suicide

Film and literature in the MAD–LSD era tackled the dis-real field with a wide range of strategies, from earnest warning to absurdist satire. Dramas and speculative fictions depicted nuclear war scenarios in harrowing detail, forcing audiences to confront the consequences of doctrines that were usually framed in sanitized language. Characters stumbled through blasted landscapes, struggled with radiation sickness, or navigated post-apocalyptic societies where old institutions had collapsed. These narratives made the hallucinated wars of planners feel concretely imaginable, translating abstract casualty figures into human faces and stories.

Alongside these serious treatments, satire emerged as a powerful aesthetic response. Comedies that lampooned military logic, political brinkmanship, and bureaucratic detachment exposed the surreal quality of treating global suicide as a matter of professional routine. Generals who spoke in acronyms, politicians who worried more about prestige than survival, and scientists who tinkered with doomsday devices all became targets. The laughter they provoked was uneasy, rooted in recognition that the absurdity was only a slight exaggeration of real attitudes. Satire functioned as a mirror that revealed the MAD hallucination in all its grotesque elegance.

Literary experiments, including works influenced by psychedelic experience, pushed further at the boundaries of narrative and realism. Nonlinear plots, multiple perspectives, and blends of science fiction, mysticism, and social critique reflected the fragmentation and recombination of consciousness that LSD could induce. Characters slipped between timelines, encountered alternate realities, or transcended their own identities. Nuclear imagery slipped in and out of these stories, sometimes as a literal threat, sometimes as a metaphor for inner transformation or societal collapse. The bomb and the trip both became devices for exploding conventional forms.

What ties these diverse aesthetic strategies together is their shared engagement with mutual suicide as a structuring condition. Even when not explicitly about nuclear war, many films and novels of the period revolve around themes of systems spinning out of control, authorities losing legitimacy, and individuals seeking meaning in unstable environments. The sense that the world might not be salvageable in its current form gives urgency to quests for new ways of seeing and being. Whether through dystopian cautionary tales or utopian imaginings, artists wrestle with the question of whether humanity can change course in time.

In this context, satire performs a double function. It punctures the solemnity of official rhetoric, revealing the ludicrousness of certain assumptions. At the same time, it offers a way to bear the

unbearable. Laughing at the prospect of mutual suicide is not the same as accepting it, but it acknowledges that the situation has already crossed into territory where conventional seriousness feels inadequate. Humor becomes a coping mechanism that preserves some autonomy in the face of overwhelming structural forces.

Together, film, literature, and satire make the MAD–LSD coupling visible in narrative form. They show characters and societies navigating between the poles of annihilation and transcendence, rational policy and irrational passion, control and surrender. They invite audiences to rehearse responses to crises that, in the best case, will never occur, and to consider the possibility that altering consciousness and altering institutions are intertwined tasks. Under the regime of mutual suicide, stories become one of the few places where different futures can be safely tried out, different dis-realities compared, and different kinds of unity imagined.

9. Ethical Rewiring: From Survival to Solidarity

The joint presence of MAD and LSD did not only reconfigure imagination and aesthetics; it also put unprecedented pressure on inherited ethical frameworks. Traditional moral reasoning assumes that individuals and communities can make choices that preserve their own survival, even if others suffer. Under MAD, that assumption breaks down. In a world where a handful of miscalculations could end civilization, individual or even national survival strategies become radically contingent. At the same time, psychedelic experiences routinely confront people with vivid impressions of interconnectedness that undermine narrow, self-centered ethics from a different angle.

The convergence of these pressures invites an ethical shift from survival to solidarity. Survival remains a basic concern, but it can no longer be pursued as an isolated goal. The nuclear condition makes it clear that there is no secure refuge for a privileged few. The psychedelic condition makes it feel, at least temporarily, that harming others is a kind of self-harm. Together, they nudge ethics toward frames that emphasize shared vulnerability, mutual care, and structural transformation over individual escape.

This rewiring is neither automatic nor uniform. Many respond to nuclear danger by doubling down on self-protection, and many who take psychedelics do so without any durable shift in values. But when the two dis-realities interact in receptive minds, they open up space for ethical experiments that challenge both the logic of deterrence and the logic of consumer individualism. The question is whether and how those experiments can be stabilized in institutions that outlast particular movements and generations.

9.1 When individual survival strategies are meaningless under MAD

One of MAD's most unsettling implications is the futility of purely individual survival strategies in the face of global nuclear war. Shelters, stockpiles, and escape plans may offer marginal advantages in limited scenarios, but in a full-scale exchange, the difference between "prepared" and "unprepared" often collapses. Firestorms, radiation, infrastructure collapse, and ecological disruption do not respect personal virtue or ingenuity. The doctrine itself is built on the recognition that there is no meaningful victory, no secure sanctuary, for any side.

This realization undermines a long-standing moral habit: the assumption that one can prioritize personal or national safety without considering planetary consequences. In earlier eras, it was at least plausible to imagine winning wars, securing borders, or emigrating to safer lands. Under MAD, the idea of "getting out" becomes suspect. The earth is too small, flight times too short, consequences too interconnected. The survival of any given individual or group becomes inseparable from the survival of large-scale systems—ecosystems, economies, public health infrastructures—that no one actor controls.

For some, this leads to denial. They cling to fantasies of bunkers, remote islands, or technological fixes that will grant them special immunity. For others, it leads to nihilism: if nothing I do can guarantee safety, why care at all? But for a subset of people, especially those attuned to systemic thinking, the implication points in another direction. If individual survival strategies are meaningless in the worst-case scenario, then the only realistic survival strategy is collective risk reduction. Ethics shifts from "how do I protect mine?" to "how do we prevent the situation in which none of us can be protected?"

This shift can be seen in the emergence of globalist moral vocabularies: talk of humanity as a whole, of species-level responsibilities, of planetary stewardship. These terms are not new, but under MAD they gain urgency. The idea that one might have obligations to future generations, to distant strangers, or even to other species acquires a hard edge: failure to honor those obligations may not just make life worse; it may end it. The logic of mutual vulnerability encourages an ethic of mutual restraint and care.

Yet the practical translation of this logic is difficult. Political systems remain organized around states, markets, and identities that reward short-term, local gains. The nuclear condition reveals the inadequacy of these structures without automatically providing alternatives. Ethical rewiring becomes a personal and cultural project rather than a straightforward institutional redesign. Individuals must learn to think and feel beyond their immediate horizons, often in spite of incentives that pull them back toward narrower concerns.

9.2 Psychedelic ethics: empathy, interconnectedness, and nonviolence

Psychedelic experiences, especially those involving ego dissolution and unity, offer a different route to ethical rewiring. Instead of confronting the impossibility of isolated survival, they confront the illusion of isolated selfhood. Under conditions of dissolved boundaries, the suffering or joy of others may be felt as intimately as one's own. The distinction between "my" interests and "their" interests, while not erased, is softened. Empathy becomes less an effortful projection and more a direct perception.

This felt interconnectedness does not automatically produce altruism. People can interpret experiences of unity in many ways, some of them self-indulgent or grandiose. But where conditions are supportive and interpretation leans toward humility, psychedelic experiences can reinforce ethical orientations that emphasize compassion, nonviolence, and care for wider circles of beings. Violence, in this light, appears not only morally wrong but ontologically confused: an attack on what is, in some sense, another aspect of oneself.

The emphasis on nonviolence that emerges from such experiences has resonances with older spiritual traditions, but in the nuclear age it acquires a specific political salience. If all beings are interconnected, and if weapons exist that can erase entire populations in moments, then the moral stakes of restraint become stark. Psychedelic ethics, at least in its more reflective forms, aligns with the MAD-induced recognition that aggressive uses of force can boomerang catastrophically. It adds a layer of experiential conviction to arguments that might otherwise remain abstract.

This alignment can be seen in the rhetoric of some activists who explicitly link inner transformation with outer nonviolence. They speak of "raising consciousness" as a prerequisite for disarmament, arguing that as more people experience themselves as part of a larger whole, support for institutions built on threat and domination will erode. Skeptics may view such claims as naive, but they capture a genuine intuition: that the psychological underpinnings of violence must be addressed, not just its hardware.

Psychedelic ethics also often extends concern to animals and ecosystems. Experiences of merging with nature, of feeling the vitality of forests, oceans, or the planet as a whole, can shift priorities. Environmental destruction, like nuclear war, appears as a form of collective self-harm. This supports a broader ethic of solidarity that encompasses not only other humans but the more-than-human world. Under this view, survival and flourishing are not zero-sum competitions between groups but shared projects.

Of course, the translation from trip insights to sustained ethical behavior is uneven. Without integration, powerful experiences can fade into memory or be compartmentalized.

Commercialization and fashion can flatten ethical content into aesthetic style. Nonetheless, the

repeated appearance of themes like empathy, nonviolence, and interconnectedness in psychedelic narratives suggests that these experiences can function as catalysts for ethical rewiring, especially when reinforced by community and practice.

9.3 The fragile institutional footprint of these ethical experiments

Despite their potential, the ethical shifts encouraged by MAD and LSD have left a fragile institutional footprint. On the one hand, the nuclear age has seen the development of arms control regimes, nonproliferation norms, and international agreements that reflect some measure of shared responsibility. On the other hand, nuclear arsenals persist, and doctrines rooted in mutual threat remain central to security policy. Similarly, psychedelic-influenced ethics have helped inspire movements for peace, civil rights, environmental protection, and alternative education, yet mainstream institutions continue to operate largely on competitive, growth-oriented, and hierarchical assumptions.

Part of the fragility stems from the mismatch between the scale of the ethical insight and the scale of available institutions. Realizations about shared vulnerability and interconnectedness are global in scope, but most organizations are limited in jurisdiction and mandate. A city council or a corporate board may have no formal mechanism for acting on insights about species-level risk or unity of consciousness. Individuals carry new ethical intuitions into old structures, only to find them blunted by rules and incentives designed for different problems.

Another source of fragility is the ease with which ethical innovations can be co-opted or diluted. Appeals to global solidarity can be repurposed to justify technocratic control or humanitarian interventions that reproduce power imbalances. Language of interconnectedness can be reduced to marketing slogans or self-help platitudes. Practices inspired by psychedelic ethics—such as communal decision-making or restorative justice—can be adopted superficially without addressing underlying inequities. The radical challenge posed by a world in which everyone can die together and everyone is felt as part of one being is often domesticated into less disruptive forms.

Moreover, ethical experiments associated with counterculture have often been dismissed by mainstream actors as impractical, naive, or tainted by excess. The visible failures of communes, the personal breakdowns of charismatic figures, and the chaotic aspects of psychedelic scenes have made it easy for critics to dismiss the values that motivated those experiments. In public memory, “hippie ethics” can be caricatured as irresponsible hedonism rather than recognized as serious attempts to respond to unprecedented conditions.

Yet the picture is not one of complete failure. Elements of the ethical rewiring have seeped into institutions in quieter ways. Concepts like sustainability, human rights, and intergenerational justice are now part of many official discourses. Educational curricula include discussions of

global citizenship and environmental responsibility. Nonviolent methods of conflict resolution have gained legitimacy in some arenas. Psychedelic-assisted therapies are being re-evaluated in clinical settings, sometimes accompanied by recognition of their capacity to foster empathy and reduce fear.

The key point is that these institutional footholds remain tentative and contested. The underlying tension between survival and solidarity has not been resolved. Policies continue to be made that prioritize short-term gains for some over long-term safety for all. Weapons systems evolve; ecological crises deepen. Ethical rewiring proceeds in fits and starts, often overshadowed by crises that pull attention back to immediate threats.

From the standpoint of this paper, the fragility of the institutional footprint underscores the importance of understanding MAD and LSD as ongoing dis-real forces rather than closed historical episodes. The pressures they revealed—a world in which isolated survival strategies fail, and a consciousness capable of perceiving deep interconnectedness—have not vanished. They continue to surface in debates over climate change, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and other domains where collective risk and shared identity are at stake.

Ethical rewiring, in this view, is not a one-time shift but a recurrent task. Each generation must decide how to respond to conditions that make narrow self-interest both tempting and untenable. The experiments of the nuclear age provide a record of what has been tried: movements, communities, therapies, and artworks that seek to tilt ethics away from mere survival and toward solidarity. Their successes and failures offer guidance, but no guarantees. The question remains open whether, and how, societies can build durable structures that embody the recognition that in a world of mutual destruction and potential unity, the only viable survival strategy is learning to treat others' lives as inseparable from one's own.

10. Dis-Realities that Move Matter

Calling MAD and LSD “dis-realities” risks misinterpretation if it sounds like they are merely illusions, floating above the hard substrate of real events. In practice, the opposite is true. Their power lies precisely in how thoroughly they penetrate matter: concrete, steel, land use, bodies, brain tissue, time allocation. They are unreals that become causal. The imagined nuclear exchange reorganizes continents; the imagined unity of consciousness reorganizes neighborhoods and nervous systems.

Once a dis-reality is collectively installed, it becomes a kind of invisible infrastructure. People act through it, budget through it, love and fear through it. MAD becomes the background assumption behind military procurement and alliance commitments. Psychedelic dis-realities become background assumptions for how certain communities think about selfhood, healing,

and conflict. In both cases, what “does not exist” in an empirical sense—the future war that never happens, the metaphysical unity that cannot be measured—ends up steering what does exist: silos, submarines, communes, clinics, laws.

This section examines three layers of that steering. First, at the macro level, how nuclear imaginaries reshape budgets, borders, and doctrines. Second, at the micro and meso levels, how subjective dis-realities reconfigure personal trajectories and subcultures. Third, how feedback loops between policy, culture, and altered states turn these dis-realities into self-sustaining, evolving forces.

10.1 How imaginaries like MAD reshape budgets, borders, and doctrines

If one traces the path from a nuclear war game on a planner’s desk to a line item in a national budget, the journey is entirely mental until the moment money moves. A scenario is modeled: adversary X might do Y under conditions Z. Analysts run variations, tally hypothetical casualties, and decide that only a certain posture will prevent disaster. That posture is then translated into specific hardware and deployments: this many submarines, that many missiles, these radar stations here, those air bases there. What began as an imagined catastrophe now dictates where steel is poured and where runways are laid.

These choices ripple outward. Budgets reflect threat models: funds channeled into strategic forces are not available for housing, healthcare, or education. Border policies reflect imagined invasion routes or needed buffer zones, and so shape visa regimes, trade patterns, and infrastructure. Doctrines, written in careful, often abstract language, encode assumptions about rationality and risk that end up determining which regions are deemed strategically “vital” and which populations become expendable in worst-case plans.

On maps, the dis-reality of MAD appears as arcs and ranges: circles of destruction drawn around cities, corridors of approach projected across oceans. These lines are not real in the sense that no bomb has yet traced them, but they become the basis for basing agreements, alliance structures, and local economies. A town with a missile plant is a town structured by an unreal scenario that may never occur. Workers, schools, and service industries align themselves around a piece of hardware whose main function is to participate in a threat that is never supposed to be carried out.

Doctrinally, imaginaries like MAD shape how leaders interpret almost every event. A regional conflict, a coup, an economic downturn, or an election in a distant country is read through the lens of possible shifts in nuclear balance. The dis-reality supplies the metric: does this development increase or decrease the probability of the catastrophic scenario we are always trying to avoid? Policy disputes become disputes about which imagined chain of events is more

likely, given partial and ambiguous evidence. The physical world is thus continually filtered through an unreal one.

Even when doctrines are revised—when policies shift from massive retaliation to flexible response, or from brinkmanship to détente—the revisions occur inside the same overarching dis-reality. The planet remains subdivided into zones of potential incineration; arsenals remain justified by reference to hypothetical moves and countermoves. The imaginary war is constantly being updated, never fought, yet always present as the hidden skeleton around which so-called “hard” decisions are made.

10.2 How subjective dis-reality reshapes personal lives and subcultures

On the other end of the scale, individual encounters with psychedelic dis-realities move matter in quieter but no less consequential ways. A single LSD trip does not redirect a national budget, but it may redirect a life. Someone who, prior to the experience, takes for granted a certain career path, social role, or set of loyalties may, afterwards, find those assumptions hollow. The alterity of the trip—its intense sense of “this is also possible”—can make previous routines feel insubstantial by comparison.

Concrete consequences follow. People change majors, quit jobs, end relationships, move to different towns, or join new communities. They may abandon consumption habits that once seemed natural, shift their diets, alter their use of time. They may take up meditation, political organizing, or artistic practice that they previously had no interest in. These choices accumulate into chains of causation: a changed career means different colleagues, different projects, different inventions or absences.

When enough such trajectories intersect, subcultures form. Shared narratives of dis-real experience—stories of unity, vision, terror, and transformation—provide common reference points. Members adopt certain practices: group discussions about meaning, collective living arrangements, shared rituals, modified parenting styles. They create spaces—cafés, bookstores, communes, concert venues—where the ethics and aesthetics of their dis-realities are normalized. Informal norms emerge: non-hierarchical decision-making, emphasis on emotional honesty, openness to experimentation.

These subcultures, in turn, create material artifacts. Architecture is influenced: houses with common rooms and shared kitchens; public spaces designed for gathering rather than surveillance. Clothing styles change, affecting local textile trades. Food choices affect agricultural patterns, however modestly. Practices around birth, illness, conflict, and death are reshaped—less reliance on certain institutions, more on peers and alternative practitioners.

Subjective dis-reality also interacts with technology. Psychedelic experiences inspire some to pursue careers in psychology, neuroscience, or pharmacology; others to explore music production, visual design, or digital art. New instruments, effects, and tools are invented to recapture or facilitate certain states of mind. The desire to express or induce dis-real experiences drives innovation in light shows, recording techniques, and interactive media. What began as a private hallucination becomes a spec sheet or patent drawing.

All of this is fragile and uneven. Many people have intense experiences and change nothing. Others reorganize their lives without ever touching a substance, influenced instead by the cultural echoes of those who did. But the pattern is clear: subjective dis-reality does not stay confined to “inside the head.” It leaks into decisions, habits, built environments, and networks of association, gradually bending matter and time around unreal visions.

10.3 Feedback loops between policy, culture, and altered states

The most interesting dynamics arise where macro- and micro-level dis-realities feed back into each other. Policy shapes culture; culture shapes who seeks altered states and how; altered states reshape culture; culture eventually exerts pressure on policy. The loop is messy, but it is real.

On one side, MAD-era policy generates specific cultural responses. The omnipresence of nuclear threat in news, education, and entertainment primes certain anxieties and questions. Why should a handful of people have the power to end everyone’s story? Why do institutions that appear civilized build and maintain devices of mass extermination? These questions push some toward political activism, others toward existential searching. For a subset, psychedelics appear as tools for probing deeper: if the world is this insane, perhaps reality itself needs to be re-examined from the ground up.

On another side, the diffusion of psychedelic culture feeds back into how societies talk about risk and responsibility. As ideas of interconnectedness and unity percolate—from trip circles into music, art, therapy, and soft spirituality—they provide alternative metaphors to those of “balance of power” and “containment.” Phrases like “we are all one” or “the Earth is a living organism” become clichés, but clichés that carry a subtle challenge to doctrines premised on rigid separations. Even people who never alter their consciousness chemically may absorb these metaphors and find purely adversarial models of security less persuasive.

Policy responds to these shifts in various ways. Sometimes it hardens: doubling down on deterrence language, criminalizing substances, framing alternative worldviews as threats to order. Sometimes it adjusts: incorporating environmental concerns, public participation, and human rights rhetoric into official documents, or exploring controlled, medical uses of

substances once demonized. In both cases, policymakers are reacting not only to economic or military pressures, but to changes in what their populations find acceptable or thinkable—changes partly driven by dis-real experiences and their aesthetic and narrative expressions.

The feedback is not automatically progressive or benign. States can co-opt unity language to justify paternalistic or authoritarian measures; they can instrumentalize psychedelic research for narrow performance enhancement or coercive goals. Subcultures can drift into cults or insularity, losing their capacity to exert constructive pressure on broader systems. The loop amplifies whatever values it carries, whether solidaristic or destructive.

Yet, even with these caveats, the feedback loops show why dis-realities must be taken seriously as political forces. They are not just personal diversions or professional abstractions. They are generators of meaning that, once installed in enough minds and institutions, create paths of least resistance for matter and energy to follow. A budget that favors weapons over welfare is guided by an imaginary of threat and necessity. A community that favors mutual aid over competition is guided by an imaginary of shared being.

Over time, these paths can deepen into grooves: standard operating procedures, legal precedents, architectural norms, family traditions. Changing them requires more than data; it requires shifting the dis-real frameworks that tell people what futures are plausible, what selves are real, and what kinds of unity are worth pursuing. MAD and LSD, in their different registers, demonstrate both the danger and the possibility of such shifts. Each shows how a powerful unreal can move matter; the open question is whether future dis-realities will be chosen and cultivated with greater conscious care.

11. Lessons for Later Eras of Engineered Unreality

Treating MAD and LSD as dis-realities is not just a historical curiosity; it offers a template for understanding later phases of engineered unreality. The nuclear age was an early trial run in something that has since become more pervasive: the deliberate construction of large-scale imaginaries and intimate, micro-level experience technologies that together steer behavior in ways out of proportion to their empirical grounding.

Today, nuclear annihilation is no longer the only—or even the most salient—macro-hallucination on offer. Climate breakdown, global pandemics, systemic financial collapse, and runaway artificial intelligence all populate a crowded field of catastrophic scenarios. Each blends hard physical constraints with layers of narrative, model-based extrapolation, and institutionalized fear or denial. At the same time, new micro-dis-reality technologies have emerged, from algorithmic social feeds and virtual reality to neuropharmacology and targeted persuasion systems. They may not alter consciousness as abruptly as LSD, but their continuous,

fine-grained modulation of attention and emotion can, over time, transform how people inhabit reality.

The MAD–LSD coupling thus reads, in retrospect, like a prototype: a first demonstration that unrels—future wars that never happen, inner worlds that do not map directly onto shared space—can become primary drivers of material history. The lesson is not that we should distrust all imaginaries or avoid all altered states, but that we need better ways to recognize when dis-real constructs are silently taking the helm.

11.1 Beyond nukes: climate, AI, and new macro-hallucinations

The nuclear age familiarized societies with a specific kind of macro-hallucination: a technically detailed, low-probability, high-impact scenario that must be imagined constantly to be avoided. That structural pattern now appears in multiple domains.

Climate imaginaries take the form of emissions trajectories, temperature pathways, and impact models. Here, the underlying physical process is not dis-real—greenhouse gas accumulation and radiative forcing are measurable—but the future worlds we picture on the basis of these processes are still counterfactual constructions. Flood maps of cities not yet submerged, timelines of crop failures, diagrams of climate refugees’ routes: these are scenarios designed to move matter now, long before they “come true.” Like MAD, they demand that we act as if certain futures are plausible enough to justify present sacrifice.

AI risk imaginaries, in their different variants, also function as macro-level dis-realities. They extrapolate from current architectures and incentives to worlds in which automated systems mediate almost all interactions, or in which misaligned, opaque intelligences wield decisive power over critical infrastructure. These futures—collapse into digital authoritarianism, runaway optimization that tramples human values, or subtle erosion of agency under ubiquitous surveillance—are not direct extrapolations from a single physical law. They are structured stories built from technical insight, economic trend lines, and philosophical concerns. Yet they now guide research agendas, funding streams, and regulatory designs. Hardware build-outs, data center locations, and legal codes shift in response to imagined conditions that do not yet exist.

Financial and epidemiological imaginaries join the list. “Too big to fail” scenarios or contagion models of banking crises are simulations that, like MAD war games, drive decisions about regulations, bailouts, and austerity long before worst-case events materialize. Pandemic preparedness plans, viral spread models, and projected death curves function as visualized futures that compel lockdowns, vaccination campaigns, and resource allocation. In each case, model-based unrels act as governing presences.

The common lesson is that macro-hallucinations are no longer rare, and they are not confined to military elites. Entire policy domains now rely on anticipatory modeling of low-frequency, high-impact events. Living in such an environment means being continually addressed by dis-real futures that claim a right to shape present reality. The MAD era shows both the necessity and the danger of this regime. Necessity, because some threats are indeed catastrophic if ignored. Danger, because once a particular imaginary becomes institutionalized, it can crowd out alternatives, justify its own costs, and resist revision even when conditions change.

Learning from MAD means asking, for each new macro-hallucination: Which parts of this scenario are grounded in robust constraints, and which parts are speculative overlay? Who benefits from treating this particular unreality as the main organizing horizon? What material and ethical tradeoffs does that choice entail for other domains of life?

11.2 From psychedelics to digital media: new micro-dis-reality technologies

If LSD was a blunt instrument for altering consciousness—sudden, intense, episodic—today’s micro-dis-reality technologies work more subtly and continuously. They may not induce kaleidoscopic visions or ego dissolution on command, but they do shape perception, salience, emotion, and self-concept in pervasive ways.

Algorithmic feeds on phones and computers construct individually tailored dis-realities: curated streams of news, images, and commentary that present each user with a slightly different world. The events are real, but their selection, framing, and ordering are not neutral. Attention is steered toward certain threats, grievances, aspirations, and identities, creating ambient hallucinations of importance and danger. For one person, the world may appear as an endless series of existential political battles; for another, as a lifestyle catalogue; for a third, as a cascade of conspiracies. These micro-worlds influence real decisions—votes cast, friendships ended, purchases made, risks taken—without ever presenting themselves as anything other than “what’s happening.”

Virtual and augmented reality environments take a more literal approach to unreality. They overlay or replace the sensory field with engineered scenes in which physics, identity, and social norms can be tuned. Time can be slowed, sped, or looped. Avatars can be modified, multiplicity explored, cultural scripts rehearsed or inverted. As with LSD, these experiences can be playful, therapeutic, or manipulative, depending on design and context. Unlike LSD, they can be iterated with precise control: the same simulation can be run thousands of times, tweaked slightly for different users, monitored and optimized for engagement or compliance.

Neuropharmacology and neuromodulation add another layer. Substances and devices that do not radically scramble perception can still shift mood, focus, risk appetite, and social openness.

A population with widespread use of stimulants, sedatives, antidepressants, or nootropics inhabits a subtly altered baseline reality. Certain worries are damped, others intensified; certain tasks become easier or more emotionally palatable. The “set and setting” for political and economic life changes when large numbers of people live under continuous chemical or electrical modulation.

The lesson from the LSD era is that such micro-dis-reality technologies will generate their own ethics, aesthetics, and subcultures. Experiences of flow, immersion, or algorithmic affirmation will be interpreted and mythologized; practices will emerge around their use; narratives will proliferate about what they reveal or conceal. And, as with psychedelics, the dis-realities they produce will not stay confined to leisure. They will bleed into work, education, intimacy, and governance.

Recognizing this means treating digital and neurotechnological infrastructures not just as tools but as generators of engineered unreality. Instead of asking only whether they are accurate, efficient, or profitable, we must also ask what kinds of selves and worlds they make feel “normal” or “inevitable.” If LSD could tilt some people toward empathy and nonviolence, social feeds can tilt others toward outrage and zero-sum thinking. Both are dis-real levers on ethical orientation.

11.3 Recognizing when unreal constructs begin steering real history

The deepest lesson of the MAD–LSD coupling is diagnostic: it teaches us to notice when constructed unreals have quietly taken the wheel. In retrospect, it is obvious that war games most people never saw were steering budgets and borders, and that inner experiences most institutions dismissed as hallucinations were steering art, activism, and community-building. The challenge in later eras is to develop live criteria for recognizing similar patterns before their consequences become unmanageable.

One signal is disproportionate material response to hypothetical states of affairs. When large fractions of a society’s resources are devoted to preparing for situations that have never occurred—and may be poorly understood—the dis-real tail is wagging the real dog. This can be prudent, as with some forms of climate adaptation or pandemic preparedness. It can also be pathological, as with bloated arsenals or security architectures that exacerbate the very instability they are meant to contain. The key question is not whether we should plan, but whether the imagined scenario has become immune to challenge even as conditions change.

Another signal is the emergence of affective regimes disproportionate to immediate experience. If people are terrified of threats they have never personally encountered, or indifferent to harms unfolding directly around them, dis-real narratives are likely mediating perception. This

was true of children growing up under the bomb; it is true of citizens whose primary sense of politics or ecology comes through screens. Tracking shifts in collective mood—waves of anxiety, rage, euphoria, apathy—becomes a way of tracking the ascendance of particular dis-realities.

A third signal lies in language. When certain metaphors, slogans, or storylines become ubiquitous, they often reflect underlying imaginaries that have stabilized enough to guide action. Phrases like “mutual assured destruction,” “war on terror,” “climate emergency,” or “singularity” condense complex scenarios into portable mental handles. Their spread is both an outcome and a driver of dis-real influence. To ask “what work is this phrase doing?” is to begin mapping the unreal constructs behind it.

Finally, we can look for misalignments between professed reality-tests and actual behavior. Institutions may insist that they are data-driven and pragmatic, yet cling to policy frameworks that no longer match present evidence because those frameworks are anchored in older imaginaries. Individuals may know, intellectually, that certain threats are distant or manageable, yet structure their lives around them because the dis-real narrative feels more compelling than the dry statistics. Recognizing these gaps is the first step toward rebalancing.

The MAD–LSD era suggests that we cannot simply choose to live without dis-realities. Imaginaries and altered states are intrinsic to how humans navigate uncertainty and meaning. The task is not to eliminate unrels, but to cultivate them consciously: to design macro-hallucinations that track real constraints without collapsing into fatalism or militarization, and to design micro-dis-reality technologies that expand empathy and understanding rather than narrow them.

In other words, the lesson is double. First, treat engineered unreality as infrastructure, not ornament: it shapes what gets built, who gets hurt, and what futures stay politically imaginable. Second, take responsibility for which dis-realities we amplify. The nuclear age shows that allowing a single catastrophic imaginary to dominate can stabilize peace while also imprisoning imagination. The psychedelic counter-response shows that subjective dis-realities can open ethical and aesthetic possibilities, but also scatter attention and invite exploitation.

Later eras of engineered unreality—defined by climate modeling, AI forecasting, immersive media, and continuous neuro-modulation—will need more mature ways of holding both kinds of unrels at once. The essential question, carried forward from MAD + LSD, is no longer “Is this real?” but “What happens if we collectively act as if this were real—and who, or what, will we become if we do?”

12. Conclusion: Living with Our Own Dis-Real Creations

The story of MAD and LSD is not simply a tale of weapons and drugs, states and subcultures. It is a story about what happens when a species discovers that it can end itself, and simultaneously discovers new ways to rearrange its inner world. Nuclear doctrine and psychedelic experience are very different technologies, but they share a structural role: each builds a carefully sustained unreality that people then inhabit as if it were a second atmosphere.

MAD constructs an imagined future war that must never happen yet governs everything. LSD constructs imagined worlds of unity and transformation that never quite map onto consensus reality yet alter how people live. Taken together, they form a joint emergent phenomenon: a coupled system of macro- and micro-level dis-realities that tried, for a time, to metabolize the shock of living with the bomb.

The question that remains is not whether such dis-real constructs will continue to arise. They already have, in new forms. The question is whether we can learn to live with them more consciously: to see when imaginaries and altered states are steering history, to evaluate what kinds of selves and solidarities they support, and to design institutions that can hold their power without being overwhelmed.

12.1 Summary of MAD and LSD as a joint emergent phenomenon

This paper has treated MAD and LSD not as isolated chapters but as intertwined responses to the same condition: a world in which human beings had, for the first time, credible means of rapid global self-destruction.

On the macro side, MAD emerged as a strategic doctrine that turned nuclear weapons into a permanent, unrealized catastrophe. It organized war games, budgets, borders, and political decisions around a hypothetical exchange so devastating that its non-occurrence was taken as proof of success. MAD functioned as a macro-level dis-reality: a system of simulations and rehearsals that never left the realm of imagination, yet shaped material infrastructure and everyday life.

On the micro side, LSD and related psychedelics opened up dis-real inner landscapes. By disrupting ordinary patterns of perception and self-representation, they induced states in which time, identity, and significance were rearranged. Individuals experienced elective unity—feeling themselves to be continuous with others, nature, or the cosmos. These experiences seeded trip cultures, symbols, and narratives that filtered outward into art, music, spirituality, and politics, offering an experiential counterpoint to the enforced unity of annihilation implied by MAD.

Between these poles, a series of emergent figures and practices appeared. The flower child, with peace signs and psychedelic imagery, embodied the attempt to synthesize unity by

consciousness against unity by destruction. Communes and festivals enacted alternative futures in miniature, while anti-war and civil rights movements translated both nuclear dread and psychedelic ethics into demands for systemic change. Aesthetics and satire gave form to the MAD–LSD coupling, revealing both the absurdity and the gravity of the age.

Ethically, the joint phenomenon pressed toward solidarity. MAD exposed the futility of purely individual or national survival strategies; LSD offered visceral experiences of interconnectedness that made narrow self-interest feel incoherent. Together, they pushed some people to reframe survival as a shared project rather than a competitive race. At the same time, state responses—repression, co-optation, controlled toleration—limited how far these ethical experiments traveled into durable institutions.

The central claim has been that MAD and LSD should be understood as dis-real systems that move matter. They installed imaginaries and experiences that redirected money, labor, attention, and care. The fact that the apocalyptic war never came and the permanent psychedelic utopia never arrived does not make them trivial. It makes them paradigmatic examples of how unreals can steer real history.

12.2 What this episode reveals about human meaning under existential threat

The joint MAD–LSD episode reveals several things about how human beings seek meaning when they know, concretely, that their world can end.

First, it shows that existential threat is not only a technical or strategic problem; it is a meaning problem. The bare fact that everyone could die together in a nuclear exchange is intolerable as a mere datum. It demands narrative. MAD supplies one story: a grimly rational account in which the same weapons that make annihilation possible also prevent it, provided deterrence is carefully maintained. Countercultures supply another story: that the same knowledge of shared vulnerability can catalyze a shift toward unity, nonviolence, and new forms of communal life.

Second, it shows that meaning-making under threat tends toward extremes of unity. At one pole lies unity by annihilation: the image of all distinctions collapsing in a single catastrophic event. At the other pole lies unity by consciousness: the experience of boundaries dissolving in a sense of shared being. Both are attempts to metabolize the knowledge that separateness is fragile. One imagines its end through fire; the other, through insight. The tension between them runs through the politics, art, and ethics of the era.

Third, it suggests that humans respond to existential threat by building rehearsal spaces. War rooms, command centers, and exercises rehearse annihilation so that it will not happen. Communes, festivals, and rituals rehearse peace, love, or awakening so that they might become

thinkable alternatives. Neither rehearsal is fully real; both are dis-real stages on which imagined futures are played out in partial form. Yet each rehearsal feeds back into action, creating expectations, habits, and dispositions that persist long after specific crises pass.

Finally, the episode reveals both the power and the limits of individual transformation in the face of structural danger. Psychedelic experiences genuinely altered many people's ethics and priorities, nudging them toward solidarity and care. But these shifts were often outmatched by the inertia of institutions built for competition and control. Personal dis-realities proved necessary for imagining alternatives, but insufficient on their own to reconfigure systems that embodied the MAD hallucination in concrete and steel.

Altogether, the nuclear–psychedelic age demonstrates that human meaning under existential threat will always be double: haunted by images of shared death, and haunted by longings for shared life. Our dis-real constructions are the instruments by which we try to navigate that double haunting.

12.3 Open questions for ethics, politics, and future dis-real regimes

If MAD + LSD is an early case study in living with engineered unreality, it leaves behind a set of open questions for later eras.

Ethically, the central question is how to stabilize solidarity in structures that were not designed for it. MAD revealed that isolated survival is fantasy; psychedelics revealed that isolated selfhood is, at minimum, incomplete. But the institutions that govern weapons, markets, and media remain largely optimized for narrow advantage. How can we design education, law, and economic systems that treat shared vulnerability and interconnectedness not as marginal insights but as basic operating assumptions? What kinds of rituals, narratives, and practices are needed to make an ethic of solidarity emotionally sustainable, rather than an intermittent ideal?

Politically, the question is how to democratize the governance of dis-realities. In the MAD era, crucial imaginaries were crafted by small elites in classified spaces. In the psychedelic era, powerful micro-dis-realities were explored in relatively unregulated margins. Today's macro-hallucinations around climate and AI, and micro-dis-real technologies of digital media and neuro-modulation, raise parallel issues at larger scale. Who sets the scenarios that drive planetary investment and regulation? Who designs the attention architectures that shape everyday perception? Can there be institutions tasked specifically with scrutinizing dominant imaginaries—not just their factual assumptions, but their ethical payloads and distributional effects?

There is also the question of pluralism. The nuclear age flirted with a single dominant macro-dis-reality. Future eras will likely be more crowded: multiple catastrophic imaginaries, competing models of salvation, and divergent micro-level experience economies. How do we live together when different groups inhabit different dis-real regimes that each claim to be urgent and total? What principles of coexistence can be articulated when some imaginaries are mutually incompatible, yet all have material consequences?

Finally, there is a deeper philosophical question: whether humans can ever step outside dis-real constructs altogether. The MAD–LSD episode suggests that we cannot. Our contact with the future is necessarily mediated by models and stories; our contact with ourselves is necessarily mediated by interpretive frameworks that can be shifted by chemicals, media, and practices. The goal, then, is not a pure, dis-reality-free realism. It is a more reflexive relationship to the unrels we create.

That reflexivity would involve at least three commitments. First, to track how imaginaries and altered states move matter—where budgets go, where empathy flows, who pays the costs when particular unrels are privileged. Second, to cultivate dis-realities that widen the radius of concern and possibility rather than narrowing them—imaginaries that encourage cooperation under constraint, and micro-experiences that deepen rather than erode ethical responsiveness. Third, to accept revisability: to recognize that our current dis-real constructs, however compelling, will someday appear as historically specific as MAD and the first wave of psychedelic culture do now.

We will continue to live with worlds that do not yet exist and worlds that exist only in our heads. We will continue to build bunkers and communes, simulations and ceremonies, algorithms and altered states. The lesson of the nuclear–psychedelic age is not that this is a mistake, but that it is dangerous to forget what we are doing. Dis-realities are not mere fantasies. They are tools that can imprison or liberate, deaden or awaken, annihilate or bind together.

Living with our own dis-real creations, then, is itself an ethical and political art. It requires the discipline to ask, again and again: If we act as if this unreal were real, what futures are we making easier, and which are we making impossible? And it requires the humility to remember that, in any age of engineered unreality, the most consequential decisions may be made in the name of worlds that exist only in our collective imagination—worlds that, precisely because they are unreal, have the freedom to change.

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