**DREAMING TOGETHER: THE FUTURE DEPENDS ON IT!!**

**A shared imaginary for a loving future**

In the face of unprecedented global challenges, humanity stands at a critical juncture. The polycrises of our time—climate change, social inequality, political polarization, and technological disruption—demand not just innovative solutions, but a fundamental reimagining of our collective existence. This essay explores a powerful yet often overlooked resource in our quest for survival and flourishing: the shared human imaginary.

The concept of a shared imaginary explored by transcends collective thinking; it encompasses the, interconnected web of ideas, symbols, and visions that shape our understanding of the world and our place within it. It is the wellspring from which cultures emerge, societies evolve, and futures are built. In an era where the boundaries between nations, cultures, and even realities are increasingly blurred, the potential of this shared imaginary to unite and inspire has never been more significant. From the whispered stories passed down through generations to the global narratives shaped by modern media, I will explore how the shared imaginary manifests and evolves. Central to this exploration is the recognition that our survival as a species hinges on our ability to harness the power of collective imagination. Radical collaboration across disciplinary boundaries, dreaming and making together, and communal embodied experiences can serve as conduits for accessing and shaping our shared mental landscapes.

As we navigate the turbulent waters of our current global predicaments, I propose that our greatest hope lies in a deep, rooted co-dwelling within the human imagination. By understanding and actively engaging with our shared imaginary, we can unlock new pathways to resilience, invention, and mutual understanding. The journey ahead is both daunting and exhilarating. It challenges us to reconsider the boundaries of what is possible and to reimagine our relationships with each other and with the world around us. As we embark on this exploration, we invite you to open your mind to the transformative power of our collective dreams and to envision a future where the strength of our shared imagination forms the basis of our shared reality.

The idea of a shared imaginary is a complex and multifaceted concept that lies at the heart of human culture, society, and structures cultural and therefore political progress. This is not a new idea, plenty of people, such as Hans Furth1 and Charles Taylor2, have written about a societal level imagination, sometimes referred to as the social imaginary or the radical imaginary. What I mean to imply by the term shared imaginary is a form of imaginative togetherness that leads to action and change. It represents the collective mental space where ideas, beliefs, myths, and visions of the future coalesce and interact, shaping our understanding of the world and our place within it. To fully grasp the power and potential of the shared imaginary, we must first explore its nature, origins, and the various ways it manifests in human experience. At its core, the shared imaginary can be understood as the sum total of the mental constructs and visions that a group of people hold in common. It encompasses everything from foundational myths and cultural narratives to shared hopes for the future and collective understandings of how the world works. French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis3, who extensively explored this concept, described it as the "imaginary institution of society," emphasising how our shared mental landscapes fundamentally shape our social realities.

The shared imaginary is not static; it is a dynamic, ever-evolving entity that responds to changes in society, technology, and the environment. It is both a product of our collective experiences and a force that shapes those experiences. In this sense, it operates in a feedback loop with reality, constantly influencing and being influenced by the world around us. It incorporates the speed and inventiveness of street fashion, the formal qualities of Instagram videos and the programming priorities of music festivals. A shared imaginary contains other various aspects of human culture; memory, myths, archetypes, shared norms, collective knowledge etc. These are bound up in the mitochondrial fire of human development, our unceasing relationship to the natural world, the emergence of consciousness and its constant reciprocal balancing oscillation with our bodies. We are more alike than we know.

The concept of a shared imaginary has roots in various philosophical and sociological traditions. Émile Durkheim's notion of "collective consciousness" and Carl Jung's idea of the "collective unconscious" both touch on aspects of this shared mental space. However, the modern understanding of the shared imaginary goes beyond these earlier concepts, incorporating insights from fields as diverse as cognitive science, anthropology, and media studies. In the realm of political theory, Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" provides a powerful lens through which to view the shared imaginary. Anderson argued that nations are socially constructed communities, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. This idea can be extended to other forms of collective identity and shared vision, highlighting how the imaginary shapes our sense of belonging and collective purpose.

The digital revolution has brought about unprecedented changes in how the shared imaginary is formed and disseminated. The internet and social media platforms have created a global network where ideas can spread virally, crossing geographical and cultural boundaries with ease. This has led to the emergence of new forms of collective identity and shared vision that transcend traditional national or cultural lines. Political movements of left and right are adept at deploying these technologies for transnational collectivity. The splintering of the shared imaginary into these isolated pockets of belief and perception poses significant challenges for local politics and for addressing global issues that require collective action and shared understanding.

We could dare to think of big data as ‘being together’ in new and syncretic ways. At the moment big data involves the relentless algorithmic capture of our thoughts, feelings, desires, physical and social attributes with scant regard for the spiritual or political consequences of that process. This is why AI is really just a brand masquerading as a technology. But we could just as well imagine and bring about another kind of big data where radical, delightful, provocative meanings that inform human development are produced. A tireless shifting pool of human characteristics, a restless cultural Ocean of Solaris. It really wouldn’t be too hard to fade out the soulless extractive profiteering we have somehow been hypnotised into imagining and de-instrumentalise The Stack towards justice, equity and dreaming.

I’m not suggesting here a *collectivised* imagination, more a way of imagining together, a looking towards, an orientation. What David Graeber4 called the “immanent imagination’ one defined by its drive to conceive new ways of being in the world. This is the basis of what he said constitutes the political. Digital technologies consume our attention, our drives, our ambitions, they colonise our individual imaginations but they don’t *have* to. What Paul Dourish5 describes as the ‘materiality of information’ does have certain structural characteristics but these are not immutable. They can be shaped and configured in new ways, they can deliver any kind of content at any kind of frequency and intensity we want them to.

We remember things as individuals but also as families, institutions, and nations. We pass on stories about our memories that shape our understanding of the people and society around us. Over time these memories can become debased, exploited, misrepresented. Look at how a deeply held and felt part of British collective memory, the London Blitz of 1940-41, is mythologised and repurposed into a kind of little-England island mentality, us against the world. It’s not hard to see how easily that sentiment can be turned to the idea of patrolling national waters to try and deter desperate people fleeing persecution and death. Collective memory is powerful, those who seek to manipulate or exploit it (our popular press are experts at this) tap into barely acknowledged fears lurking in the recesses of the national amygdala. It doesn’t usually work to dismiss or try to reason them away. Rather we should seek to hybridise, to layer, to adapt, to filter collective memories through the lens of a longer history. This is where myths and narratives do their work.

Myths and narratives in the collective imaginary allow us to to structure a common understanding of human experience by rehearsing trials and challenges in the form of stories. In the collective imaginary, myths embody archetypal characters and situations that resonate with the human psyche. These archetypes, such as the hero's journey or the trickster figure, appear across cultures and time periods, suggesting their universal appeal and psychological significance. By engaging with these stories, individuals can explore complex emotions, ethical dilemmas, and existential questions in a relatable context. Narratives, whether in the form of folklore, religious texts, or modern media, contribute to the formation of cultural identity and social cohesion. They can reinforce shared values, establish norms, and define a group's place in the world. At the same time, narratives have the power to challenge existing beliefs and inspire social change by presenting alternative perspectives and possibilities.

Shared visions of the future play a crucial role in shaping society's trajectory and influencing collective action. These visions represent a synthesis of hopes, fears, and expectations about what lies ahead. They are formed through a complex interplay of cultural narratives, scientific predictions, artistic expressions, and societal discourse. The collective imaginary acts as a powerful force in guiding technological development, policy decisions, and social change. When a compelling vision of the future takes hold in the public consciousness, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. For instance, the space race of the 1960s was driven in part by science fiction narratives that had captured the popular imagination for decades. The shared dream of reaching the stars helped mobilise resources and public support for ambitious space programs.

However, these shared visions are not always positive. Dystopian futures portrayed in literature and film can also shape collective expectations and behaviours. The fear of authoritarian surveillance states has influenced debates around privacy and government power. Similarly, visions of environmental catastrophe have spurred the growth of the environmental movement and pushed for policy changes. The collective imaginary is not monolithic; it often contains competing visions of the future. These different narratives reflect varying ideologies, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic realities. The tension between techno-utopian visions of abundance and warnings of technological peril is illustrated by the competing ideologies of, say, the billionaire space race and the rewilding or degrowth movements

In the digital age, the formation and dissemination of these shared visions have accelerated. Social media and online communities allow for rapid spread of ideas and the emergence of new narratives. This democratisation of futurism has led to a proliferation of visions, from solarpunk utopias to crypto-libertarian dreams, and afro-futurist world building. Importantly, those who can shape the collective imaginary wield significant influence. Science communicators, futurists, and tech leaders often play outsized roles in crafting narratives about tomorrow. The influence that people like Elon Musk or Peter Thiel wield in this context is a profound risk to the human imagination only because the ideas they propagate lack collective input or deliberative consensus. This serves to highlight the need for diverse voices in conversations about the future to ensure that shared visions are truly representative and inclusive.

**Raves, Football and Suturing**

Large scale group experiences such as sports events or stadium concerts can often deliver transformative experiences for people caught up in the drama of their team or their favourite band. In the UK Celtic and Arsenal fans have become well known for expressing immigrant friendly sentiment in the stands. Fans of clubs like AEK in Greece, Alaves in Spain and Aachen in German display similar pro-immigrant banners in their stadia. Feelings in France, Poland, Czechia, Hungary can be very different however. The development of this argument takes a more moral slant here. The collective feeling that populates the imagination of a crowd of football fans proudly holding overtly racist signs is certainly a form of shared political imaginary, but one perhaps based on a distorted and manipulated polity. In other words there is a form of the collective imaginary that leads to empowerment, participation and an opening of possibility. This positive version sits alongside, sometimes intertwined with, its dark twin. The Reform Party in the UK, Chega in Portugal, Vox in Spain and the AfD in Germany among others all have a powerful appeal for people who feel abandoned, who have not seen any of the benefits of Neo-liberal capitalism, or who simply do not have the will to see beyond the lies and distortions of their politicians.

Rave culture, as explored by Jeremy Deller6, Sheryl Garratt7 and many others still manages to convene young people in informal and often illegal spaces all over Europe in a form of ecstatic transcendence. The energy of a crowd of people, dosed up to their eyeballs on external stimulants, dancing until they drop is as old as humanity. In fact, along with fireside storytelling, and caring for the young, infirm and elderly it could constitute the *ur* pattern of human culture. (Anthropologist Margaret Mead said the oldest evidence of human culture were the ancient bones of a person who had died in old age that showed signs of a healed broken leg). I’m not the first to point out that art and design has not exactly pulled its political weight in this respect. Too often it works to alienate people, to promote individual expertise or as a financial asset class. Likewise, the promise of speculative design crashed on the shores of curatorial decision making and scientistic artefacts. The world of futuring or foresight now seems confined to a service proposition consultants offer to corporations to help them survive for another hundred years of extraction and profiteering. Of course there are some remarkable exceptions; the theoretical work Stuart Candy8 (2010) has done to position creative futures thinking in the public imagination has been important. Artist groups like Array Collective, Black Obsidian Sound System, and Cooking Sections also show a radical alternative for collective cultural practitioners.

**Cosplay, Direct democracy and Dream Machines**

The world of Cosplay such as at ComicCon or Gamescom offers the possibility for people to identify with fictional characters from films and computer games. This involves making their own costumes and often culture-jamming multiple identities into one. An important aspect of this world is making, more specifically pattern cutting, sewing, and knitting garments, and sculpting accessories such as weapons and helmets. As a form of shared imaginary Cosplay shows how people can customise and hybridise creative outputs from one field into another. Cosplay is an entirely amateur, home made and informal enterprise, often very far from the industrial character production seen in computer game studios or film industry art departments. During the 2020 Covid pandemic many Cosplay events were moved online eliciting even more radical and playful experimentation with digital character avatars and a flourishing of creative collective imagining. People made more extreme human/animal hybrid digital identities for themselves and used the opportunity to express fluid gender boundaries in online self presentation. Going further, the more-than-human online zeitgeist gave rise to the wildest plant/animal/human mash ups imaginable. Alongside this outpouring of the weird and the wonderful in the context of digital avatars came a political commitment to independence and deliberate avoidance of platform capitalism. Cos-players went so far as to insist on coding their own event booking platform, finding the expertise within their own community.

Citizen’s assemblies are a way of seeking consensus around difficult or divisive issues in society. A form of deliberative democracy, there have been a few famous examples which include the Ireland assembly on abortion. 99 people were chosen at random using standard sortition methods to ensure a range of views on the topic and diversity in terms of age, gender, social class, and regional spread. This group met during five sessions between November 2016 and April 2017. They listened to 25 experts and looked at 300 submitted documents and responses from members of the public and related organisations. This process is not a formal debate, nor does it feature political speeches or legislative scheduling. Instead the aim is to provide a carefully facilitated space for different opinions, and where reasoned argument can be considered. Expert input is essential and the principles of equality and respect fundamental. The result of the assembly in Ireland was an 87% agreement in the group that the restrictive abortion laws should be adjusted. This finding was then reflected in the national referendum in 2018 in which a 66.4% majority paved the way for a permanent change in the law. The point I want to take from his is the care with which the collective political imaginary can and should be nurtured. Creating safe spaces, ensuring diversity and inclusion, inviting members of the public to deliberate on morally complex issues has been repeatedly shown to deliver a widening of what is usually considered politically possible.

Finally, and a bit more literally, I want to think about Dreamachine, an immersive artwork in which Brion Gysin and Ian Somerville’s famous device is used to provide a collective experience of visual hallucination. Flickering light flashing at between eight and 13 flashes a second synchronises with the brain’s alpha waves to create colours, shapes, structures patterns. It has been described like watching a movie with your eyes closed, an illusion created by your own brain, a communal dreaming experience of colour and light. While each individual person may be ‘seeing’ and experiencing quite differently, the power of aligning alpha brain waves has been known by dancers, artists and musicians for centuries in various forms. As Michael Pollan9 explores in depth in his book *How to Change Your Mind* we are still at the very beginning of understanding what might be possible to unlock in our brains. Neural patterning is only measurable in low resolution, revealing as yet very little of the structure of consciousness or what may lie beyond the so-called default mode network. Dreamachine10 opens the doors of perception (as Aldous Huxley might say) to a collective imaginary, not instrumentalised to political decision making or emergent from a sub cultural community, but working transversally across all human minds. That feels like a strand of inquiry worth exploring further.

**Designing dreaming places**

Dreaming together and exploring collective visions, however explicit or tacit, are powerful processes that can help us shape our shared future. These collaborative approaches to imagining and planning can lead to transformative change. By tapping into the collective wisdom and creativity of a group, these practices can generate more robust, inclusive, and achievable visions than individual efforts alone. Collective visioning often begins with creating a safe and inclusive space where diverse voices can be heard. This may involve bringing together people from various backgrounds, disciplines, and perspectives to engage in structured dialogues like a citizens assembly or creative making like a cosplay community. Techniques such as future workshops, scenario planning, and appreciative inquiry can be used to facilitate these processes. One key aspect of dreaming together is the suspension of disbelief and the temporary setting aside of perceived limitations. This allows people to explore bold ideas and imagine radical possibilities without being immediately constrained by current realities. However, the most effective collective visioning processes balance this expansive thinking with pragmatic considerations, gradually bridging the gap between aspirational futures and actionable plans.

The power of collective dreaming lies not just in the outcomes, but in the process itself. As people share their hopes, fears, and ideas, they develop a deeper understanding of each other's perspectives. This can lead to increased empathy, stronger community bonds, and a sense of shared purpose. The act of co-creating a vision can be as important as the vision itself in building the collective will and energy needed to bring about change. Digital technologies have opened up new possibilities for collective visioning at scale. Online platforms and tools enable geographically dispersed groups to collaborate in real-time, sharing ideas and building on each other's contributions. Virtual and augmented reality technologies offer immersive ways to prototype and experience potential futures, making abstract concepts more tangible and relatable. Big data as outlined earlier offers a way for a more human togetherness should we wish to insist on such a thing.

My wish is for a recognition that the collective imaginary, enriched by common experience, augmented by technologies, inclusive of all organisms and entities, framed and guided by love and care is really all we have. Everything else is either analysis or exploitation.

**Footnotes/References**

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David Graeber was a key figure in the global justice movement, an academic and professor, and one of the people behind the Occupy Wall Street protests. He was considered by many to be the leading anthropologist of his generation. He died tragically in 2020 while on holiday in Venice but not before completing work on The Dawn of Everything in which he and archaeologist David Wengrow in which the y counter the prevailing view of human development as being historically determined.

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