

The Future is Our Business: A Visual History of Future Expertise

Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) 'Care for the Future' Exploratory Awards

[[inline link: http://careforthefuture.exeter.ac.uk/](http://careforthefuture.exeter.ac.uk/)]

Summary Project Report

Background

This AHRC-funded exploratory research project investigated diverse of forms of expertise in projecting and predicting the future across centuries and cultures, with a particular focus on the visual [[inline link: 'The Future is Our Business' project summary on V&A website](#)].

Led by the V&A, in partnership with the University of Sussex, the Royal College of Art, the Universities of Leeds, the research progressed from medieval depictions of the future as divinely revealed, through increasingly instrumental and secular attempts to control the future, to contemporary future-orientated works of art and design. The project initiated a number of cross-disciplinary avenues of research through a series of workshops and podcasts.

Activities

Following six-month's preliminary research between members of the core team, three multidisciplinary workshops between June and September 2013 promoted wider debate, collaboration and engagement. Invited participants included museum professionals, academics, postgraduate students and early career researchers from a range of disciplines, and artists and designers.

Each workshop was open to the public and took place at a different cultural institution, including the Wellcome Collection, the Royal Society, the Italian Cultural Institute, and the Goethe Institut.

The workshops were structured chronologically from the early modern period to the present day:

Early Modern 'Projectors' and Technologists [[inline link to programme abstracts](#)] investigated the visual output of in Europe and the Islamic world from the Renaissance through the rise of capitalism. Topics included astronomy, astrology and eschatology, utopian authors of the 16th and 17th centuries and visions of the future in early modern natural philosophy.

An additional workshop hosted by the Royal Society in collaboration with the V&A, the University of Manchester and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin, provided a multi-disciplinary study of the role played by models in the production and

circulation of knowledge in the early modern world. This workshop also considered the use of models as investigative tools for testing ideas and as a means for materialising future scenarios. [[inline link: https://royalsociety.org/events/2013/models/](https://royalsociety.org/events/2013/models/)]

The Rise of the Futurologist in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries

[[inline link to programme abstracts](#)] considered the proliferation of a new kind of futurologist, whose often utopian promises were underpinned by systematic presentations of data and prophetic images buttressed with ‘scientific’ visual rhetoric. During this period, many new professions devoted to the study of tomorrow were born, each with its persuasive techniques. It is not a coincidence that this was also the period in which science fiction as a genre was born. Contributions included exploration of cinematic visions of the future city, Russian futurists and space flight, state-sponsored instrumental futurology in relation to cold war politics, trend forecasting and futures trading.

The Future of Future Expertise [[inline link to programme abstracts](#)] brought together the core workshop themes of expertise, and the rhetoric of persuasion and visualisation. A diverse group of contemporary experts in the future – designers, curators, scientists, economists, entrepreneurs, investors, trend forecasters and museum curators – debated the future of their own branch of expertise, describing the visual dimensions of their predictive methodologies.

An edited selection of workshops presentations is available through podcasts on the V&A website, developed in partnership with *Future Human* ([inline link: http://www.futurehuman.co.uk/2014/03/future-human-and-the-va-launch-visionaries-a-podcast-dedicated-to-futurological-thought/](http://www.futurehuman.co.uk/2014/03/future-human-and-the-va-launch-visionaries-a-podcast-dedicated-to-futurological-thought/)). The exploratory project will also result in further outputs including digital and print publications currently underway.

Findings

Investigation of the fundamentally speculative dynamics of future expertise in the exploratory workshops led to new research on cross-disciplinary methodologies for future thinking and imagining based in the visual and material. These included:

- cross-cultural comparison of religious art (eschatological imagery);
- material culture (divination and fortune telling tools);
- visual representations of dystopias and utopias as a means of political expression (architectural renderings, film);
- object typologies (prototypes, renderings, data visualisations);
- mathematical and computational models, brain imaging, humanoid robotics;
- science fiction and less canonical visual material as an alternative, and sometimes anti-authoritarian view of the future (drawings, film and video games).

Museum ‘futures’ displays are routinely characterised by technocratic or science fiction style speculation, or by a sense of developmental progress from past to present. The project’s research-driven exploration of imaginary projection as a historical phenomenon across the globe also resulted in the development of alternative intellectual contexts for future-themed exhibitions at national museums and galleries.

Historical consideration of different temporal structures and competing philosophical futures in the workshops included the work of designers who express their visions for the future by turning to a pre-industrial past; and included debate about the exhibitions that motivated people towards the future such as the Great Exhibition of 1851 or the Festival of Britain one hundred years later. Wider questions of expertise within the cultural sector and speculation on the future role of the curator resulted in new ways of thinking about temporality in the context of the museum learning, interpretation and display.

The multidisciplinary scholarly network developed through the workshops demonstrated the benefits of visual research for the exploration of broader cultural, aesthetic, economic and political developments. The network also brought together new dynamic ways of looking at history and historical fields through critical thinking about material forms and about the nature of making. The notion that ‘futures’ can be told through the formulation of expert judgement led to close analysis of methods for systematising future expertise: for example, in the iconography of signs and systems in divination or science; and in artefactual, architectural and anatomical models and prototypes.

The project also demonstrated new research fields within the developing disciplines of futures studies, which have been primarily text-based to-date, such as the connections between visual culture and science in scholarly debates around the history and philosophy of science; or the emergence of new knowledge through analysis of the visual methodologies for how futures are shaped, known and told.

Lesson Learned

In addition to showing the value of collaborative and interdisciplinary working practices, lessons learned from the project also included the need in retrospect to build in more time for reflection and debate, and more overlap between each of the separate groups of workshop participants. We would also have liked to reach a larger audience and to include consideration of activist use of historical materials and alternative technologies, and for debates around instrumentality.

Further time for follow up after the core research and the workshops would also have been valuable, with less scoping research (perhaps three months only) to allow a further three months to draw the threads together at the end. We would also have benefitted from the opportunity to engage with and other AHRC groups and networks: for example, the workshop

on new methodological approaches to researching conceptions of time run as part of the Sustaining Time project. [\[inline link to http://www.sustainingtime.org/\]](http://www.sustainingtime.org/)

Future Plans

We will continue to develop the exploratory project's findings and to disseminate these across a variety of platforms. Co-Investigator Professor Blaszczyk is developing a series of podcast debates on the implications for today's economy of the historical study of advertising, marketing, and design practice from the 1930s to the 1990s.

Meanwhile, the V&A has developed a new collaborative project with a diverse range of partners to further explore ways to innovate thinking about questions of temporality, and about concepts and imaginations of the future, in the context of museums and galleries. This research will investigate new ways of 'using' and thinking about the future in material cultures and collections, and new ways for museums to shape their conversations about the future with their visitors. How can heritage and the past differently inform the future? [\[inline link to 'Scenario' research project\]](#).

Professor Sandra Kemp

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