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Design by Anticipation?

Collective Scenarios: rehearsing, predicting, and speculating on climate futures

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Abstract

The paper introduces the *Collective Scenarios* project, which places scenarios of climate change in their historical, institutional and cultural contexts. It will discuss research into the scenario mode at the root of the Anthropocene discourse and the potential of improvisational modes of constructing collective futures. It will thus question the possibilities for more collective modes of **design by anticipation**.

In the context of a future perceived to be in crisis, the paper will explore scenarios as a mode of storytelling for ‘troubled times’ (Haraway, 2016), that acknowledges the ‘collective experiments’ of climate change (Latour, 2003). It will bind together strands from anticipation studies (Anderson, 2010; Poli 2017), the relationship between speculative design thinking (eg. Dunne & Raby 2013) and participative modes of action on and engagement in urban futures (eg. Blundell-Jones, Petrescu, & Till, 2005). It will also acknowledge and respond to some of the particularities of the cultural politics of climate change – above all shifting and contested responsibilities and vulnerabilities across space and time (Hulme, 2017; Smith 2016).

Scenarios are proposed as a ‘rehearsal space’ for more collective modes of acting on and thinking about uncertain futures (Tyszczyk & Smith, 2018). The paper will describe a series of interdisciplinary workshops and design projects that engaged with the scenario mode, of **design by anticipation**. Collaborative scenario-making was explored as a way of opening up civic space in the face of the high levels of uncertainty, global risks and collective action problems associated with climate change, unknown urban futures and societal transformations. The paper suggests that thinking and practicing the future otherwise involves considering responses and responsibilities in the present day as well as reconfiguring modes of imagining the future. This also provokes a questioning of **anticipation by design**. Ultimately the paper considers the possibilities for *collective scenarios* that can support a more vibrant and imaginative sense of how societies can be prepared for uncertain futures.

Key words

Scenarios, climate futures, improvisation, speculative design fictions, collective design practices

Scenarios are a common method for getting a better grip on the future, particularly when the future is understood to be in crisis, malfunctioning or uncertain. Scenario thinking has long been a prominent strand in climate science and policy, where it draws on predictive scientific knowledge, based on computer models and simulations to present potential future climate risks. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) has worked through scenarios of up to 6 degrees of climate change by 2100: a world where most of the planetary surface is uninhabitable, the oceans have stratified and mass species extinctions have taken place. The paper thus asks, 'what are the prospects for imagining alternative futures in conditions of planetary unsettlement'? In other words, how can we anticipate, through design practices, ways of inhabiting the Anthropocene otherwise? (Tyszczyk, 2017)

The paper will engage with the history of scenarios, their current use in climate research, and the potential of collective and speculative practices of scenario-making for shaping uncertain futures. It will chart the use of the term 'scenarios' from its origins in the improvisational practices of *commedia del arte* theatre, through the screenplays of the film industry, Cold War strategies, environmental systems thinking, and business planning, in the 1940s to the 1980s. It will identify the continuity with scenario techniques in the present day, for example Shell Scenarios, the EU Energy 'Roadmap 2050', the work of the UNFCCC and IPCC, as well as speculative design practices and projects for urban futures. What emerges in this history is an account of diverse attempts to comprehend and deal with situations with-out precedent. As 'anticipatory practices', scenarios are enrolled in varying ways of calculating, imagining and performing uncertain futures, in often disputed modes of 'pre-emption, prefiguration, and preparedness' (Anderson, 2010). Scenario practices thus contribute to processes through which the present is transformed, intervened in and ultimately governed in the name of the future. Scenarios, cautionary tales included, understood as stories of change are imaginative responses to unknowable climate-changed futures.

The *Collective Scenarios* project is exploring more collective and improvisational responses to climate futures as a way of working through the 'tension between the assumed predictability of the climatic future and the necessary openness and malleability of the social future' (Hulme, 2010). Scenarios are proposed here as a mode of storytelling for the present, and in Haraway's terms, of 'staying with the trouble' (2016). The framing of the project as 'collective scenarios' draws on Bruno Latour's observation that in the context of climate change, 'we are all engaged in a set of collective experiments' in the 'confusing atmosphere of a whole culture' (2003).

A pilot case study for *Collective Scenarios* research was the Culture and Climate Change: Scenarios project. Participants in this interdisciplinary project engaged with a range of approaches to climate scenarios – including the models of research scientists, the projections of urban planners, the forecasts of policy makers and the speculative design fictions of artists

and designers. The experimental and co-productive elements of the project ranged from collaborative scenario making, prototyping, game-playing and ad-hoc performance in workshops with climate researchers, through urban design projects, academic seminars and creative writing, to interactive documentary, film and theatre work. It explored the possibilities for design practices to test imaginative tools for 'world making' (Le Guin), develop collective understandings of 'matters of care' (Puig de la BellaCasa, 2017), acknowledge indigenous modes of being with the Earth (Tsing, 2015) as well as imagine ways of inhabiting futures through 'speculative design fictions' (Dunne & Raby, 2013). The paper will describe the different ways the project engaged with the scenario mode, of **design by anticipation**, and will discuss the potential of scenarios of climate-changed futures as a shared and necessarily contested cultural endeavor.

The *Collective Scenarios* project is exploring the ways in which society's emphasis on uncertain climate-changed futures shapes and is shaped by specific orientations to and perceptions of the present. It thus involves a way of questioning **anticipation by design**. Moreover, it proposes scenarios as a cultural form that can provide space for collective, improvisational and reflexive modes of acting on, thinking about, designing for, and inhabiting uncertain futures.

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