The House of Futures: Cabinet of Speculative Curiosities

Sadegh Mirzaei[1] (✉)
with Sabine Ammon, Steve Fuller, Merle Genc, Lia Nordmann, Jonathan Tel, and
Cheryce von Xylander
[1]Technical University of Darmstadt, Karolinenpl. 5, Darmstadt, 64289, Germany,
sadegh_mirzaee@yahoo.com

Abstract
This article examines the paradox of imagining and encountering the future – a concept that, while not directly graspable, is persistently invoked across disciplines. From technological forecasts to speculative fiction, future scenarios proliferate, but the challenge is determining which of these imagined futures deserve our attention. Given our finite cognitive and ethical resources, it becomes crucial to sift through the noise and focus on futures of meaningful relevance. The *Futurium*, a museum of speculative futures in Berlin, promises to provide a space for engaging with these questions. This article assesses the types of futures presented and their feasibility and desirability. Are these futures genuine possibilities, or merely nostalgic projections of a romanticized past? The article also explores how the exhibition shapes its visitors, ultimately asking whether the *Futurium* provides a stable platform for envisioning a better world or if it leaves us unmoored in a sea of disconnected and questionable possibilities.

Keywords: Speculative Objects, Future Studies, Technology Assessment

Дом будущего: Кабинет спекулятивных диковинок

Садег Мирзаи 🆔 (✉)
совместно с Сабиной Аммон, Стивом Фуллером, Мерл Джин, Лизой Нордманн,
Джонатаном Тэлом и Черис фон Ксайландер
Дармштадский технический университет, Каролиненплац 5, Дармштадт, 64289, Германия
sadegh_mirzaee@yahoo.com

Аннотация

В этой статье рассматривается парадокс воображения будущего и встречи с ним лицом к лицу – концепция, которая, хотя и не поддается прямому пониманию, постоянно используется в различных дисциплинах. От технологических прогнозов до спекулятивной фантастики, сценариев будущего множество, но задача состоит в том, чтобы определить, какое из этих воображаемых будущих заслуживает нашего внимания. Учитывая ограниченность наших когнитивных и этических ресурсов, становится крайне важным разобраться в этом шуме и сосредоточиться на будущем, имеющем существенное значение. Музей спекулятивного будущего Futurium в Берлине обещает предоставить пространство для обсуждения этих вопросов. В этой статье рассматриваются представленные варианты будущего, а также их осуществимость и желательность. Являются ли эти варианты будущего реальными возможностями или просто ностальгическими проекциями романтизированного прошлого? В статье также исследуется, как выставка формирует своих посетителей, и, в конечном счете, ставится вопрос о том, обеспечивает ли Futurium стабильную платформу для создания лучшего мира или же оставляет нас без присмотра в море разрозненных и сомнительных возможностей.

Ключевые слова: Спекулятивные объекты, Исследования будущего, Оценка технологий

PROPS FOR THE PROLIFERATION OF FUTURES

When and where is the future? Can it be housed somewhere? This question carries a deep paradox, as the future is, by definition, something that has not yet come to pass, thus seemingly unreachable and unknowable. „Future" is a non-referring reference, something we gesture toward without ever encountering it directly.

Yet, despite this air of paradox, the future is continuously entertained and invoked in various disciplines – whether by technologists predicting advancements, science fiction writers imagining distant societies, or ethicists contemplating the moral dilemmas of technology. Each scenario of the future is, in a sense, a speculative map of an unknown territory.

The challenge lies in discerning which futures merit our attention, a question that becomes particularly urgent in a world where resources – both cognitive and ethical – are limited. With the proliferation of the imagined futures, one issue is to sift through the noise of possibilities and focus on those that hold meaningful relevance. But how or where can we do that? Can the *Futurium* provide such a space?

The *Futurium* is advertised as a place for housing possible futures – a science center, on the shores of the Spree River in Berlin, near the *Reichstag* and government district. It was initiated by the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and is supported by the BMBF, along with numerous research institutions, funding agencies, and business partners. Since opening its doors in 2019, *Futurium* offers a permanent exhibition, a citizen's lab, and a forum for discussion. By providing props for the imagination, it gives visitors a chance for interaction, discussion, and occasions for "trying things out," providing "a glimpse into the world of tomorrow."[1] It presents itself as "The House of Futures" [*Haus der Zukünfte*], offering not just one but many prospective futures.

What does it mean to have "a glimpse" into the future – given that the future is not an already shaped totality of things that lies out there, waiting to be discovered? How can we have a grip on it given that it is a speculative world under constant construction, responding to our fears and desires? Not only is it under constant construction and destruction, but it also reshapes us in unpredictable ways. Even the pronoun "we" is neither monolithic nor universal. We are not detached or static spectators but active participants, changing and being changed by the futures we envision. Our glimpse into the future is, therefore, not just a passive act of discovery but also an active process of creation. By imagining a future, we also discover and re-engineer ourselves – our hopes, anxieties, and the principles we hold dear. The way we envision the future reflects the kind of people we are today, meaning that every depiction of the future is at once a self-portrait of the present. When we look at the future, we are not just seeing "us" in some distant time; we are seeing ourselves as the ones creating and shaping that vision in the present moment.

---

[1] *Futurium*. https://futurium.de/en/about-us

Against this backdrop, we encounter the *Futurium*'s overarching question: "How do we want to live?" The answer provided aims to be pluralistic: "There is no 'one' future. There are as many conceivable futures as there are people on this earth who dream about tomorrow and beyond. Our decisions in the present point the way forward to one future or another" (Our View of the Future is Open, 2019). Scenarios in this House of Future are not finished ready-made plans, but possible building blocks. Everyone is invited to engage on their own terms. Ultimately, the question can be directed at each individual: How do *you* want to live? What are *your* decisions?

This "House of Futures" is a house of speculative technologies and, as with any museum, it provides objects and props that spur the imagination. However, there is a difference. When visiting an ethnographic museum, the primary question is not "How do we want to live?" but rather "How did we use to live?" In a typical museum, visitors are encouraged to imagine how artefacts condense and reflect a time past or present - artworks, an excavated vessel, a burial site, a warrior's shield, or some sacred object. These artefacts were not designed for the sake of being displayed in a museum. By contrast, at the *Futurium*, the objects are fabricated for the sole purpose of stimulating, or perhaps nudging, the imagination. The *Futurium* presents visitors with objects that are explicitly branded as speculative objects or „possibilities for thinking":

> Robot people, green skyscrapers, communal economies: There are endless possibilities for thinking about the future. Three forces always play together in the *Futurium* exhibition: Human, Nature, and Technology. You can discover them in three large thinking spaces. (Exibition, n.d.)

These are not only meant to serve as thought experiments but also as aids for making decisions. Objects and scenarios are presented as *options* for the future. But what exactly is an option in this context? Are the items on display soon to be found on market shelves, to be bought or ignored? Do they embody politics and ideologies that should be interrogated? Or perhaps they are not so much *optional* as transformative possessing a power that will inevitably shape our lives. Do we really have a choice? In this sense, objects and scenarios are already contested, laden with implications that stretch beyond mere consumer preferences or technological trends.

One can enter the *Futurium* twice – through the website and through its physical doors. On the website one encounters its self-presentation - how it understands itself, what it wants to achieve, how it conceives the movement from the many futures in each of our imaginations to the one future which we will collectively create. The website is firmly grounded in the shared reality of the mostly German visitors, as such rather traditional, rich in content and highly explorable.

Against this backdrop, a diverse group of curious investigators entered the physical doors of the *Futurium* on August 21, 2024, to ask: What types of futures are presented here? How feasible or desirable are they? Are they „about the future," or mere wishful projections of a romanticized past? The following is a recap of that visit. It addresses not only the futures presented but also how these presentations construct the visitor. Can we stand on firm ground to take on the task of shaping a better world, as the *Futurium*

promises, or do we become unmoored, unsettled, disturbed, or even lost in a vast space of disconnected possibilities?

THREE ENCOUNTERS

Upon entering the spacious exhibition area on the second floor, visitors are greeted by a welcoming station that provides an overview and a timeline depicting recent history as a series of accelerating technological advancements. This presentation encourages them to leap into the space of possibilities, where almost any problem is framed as having a technological solution. As we will discover, this narrative of exponentially accelerating technological progress is implicit in many of the imagined scenarios.

Additionally, visitors are offered the chance to try on a digital wristband which tracks interactions with the objects in the exhibition, saving visitors' *choices* and ultimately feeding the data to the Future Machine of the *Futurium* to reveal something – perhaps surprising – about visitors' attitudes and tastes. Moreover, a code is given by the Future Machine to each individual with which the visitor can track their footprints in the *Futurium* and find out more about their topics of interest through the website. While the technology of the wristband is a trivial feat in our contemporary lives, it hints at a possible future where our data is continuously collected and analyzed. This raises concern: Though the *Futurium* assures us that it does not collect data about us, it would be interesting to know whether or not the data is "anonymized" that might even feed into design or policy processes. The mere fact of putting the visitors through the paces of data collection normalizes and habituates them to this constant monitoring of their movements and choices – which is, in performative terms, a choreographed suasion. Is this an elaborate data scheme or simply another prompt for the imagination?

I. Hall of Questions

Beyond these implicit worries brewing in the visitors' minds, there is also a hall of explicit questions posed by the *Futurium* (fig. 1). These are written on the wall, flashing on and off with beams of light, catching visitors by surprise, carrying them forward from one to another, for example:

How will I celebrate my 130th birthday? [*Wie werde ich meinen 130. Geburtstag feiern?*]

What kind of future do I want to live in? [*In welcher Zukunft will ich leben?*]

Will I and my robot grow old together? [*Wird mein Roboter mit mir alt?*]

How does it feel to know everything about myself? [*Wie fühlt es sich an, alles über mich wissen?*]

What kinds of secrets will we still have? [*Welche Geheimnisse werden wir noch haben?*]

What novel lifeforms will come into being? [*Welche neuen Lebensformen werden entstehen?*]

Will I still have to get a job in the future? [*Muss ich in Zukunft noch arbeiten?*]

What kind of happiness will tomorrow bring? [*Wie sieht das Glück von morgen aus?*]
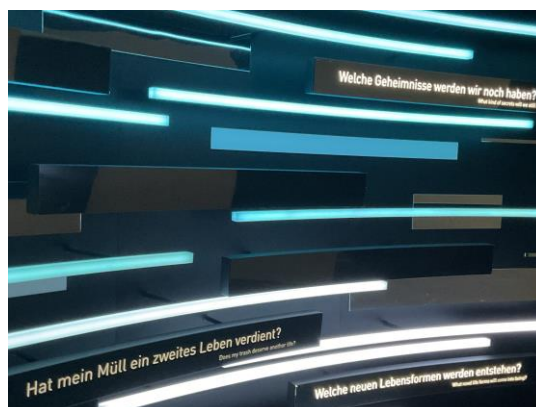
Will cities be as green as pristine forests? [*Werden die Städte grün wie ein Urwald?*]
What ideas will change the world? [*Welche Ideen werden die Welt verändern?*]
Will the world reorder itself anew? [*Wird sich die Welt neu ordnen?*]
What comes after the Internet? [*Was kommt nach dem Internet?*]

Figure 1. Hall of Questions

Naturally, everyone doesn't have a similar take on these (im)posed questions. Some seem answerable, others only by making far-fetched assumptions, yet others overtax the visitors and might evoke total rejection. Inevitably, a reflexive perspective emerges for a group of reflexive investigators, leading to meta-questions. On one hand, we reflect on ourselves: What limits are we encountering? Are these epistemological limits regarding our ability to know the future, or are these grammatical constraints, in other words, ill-posed questions that violate the very conditions of answerability? On the other hand, we reflect on where the questions come form, what demands they make: Why should we take their conceptual framework for granted?

Another meta-question is the issue of predictability and comprehensibility. Some of these possible futures are close to our present lives, while others are distant and abstract. This contrast is itself intriguing: how should we begin to think about our future? Should it be seen as a continuation of the present, a disruption, or something entirely new? How far can we project into the future? The further we deviate from the present, the harder it becomes to predict and comprehend. The further we look, the less we can see. Thus, there is a trade-off in our speculations.

Confronting these questions evokes the so-called Collingridge Dilemma where technology assessment is either too early – because we do not yet know the implications – or too late – because it has been already embedded and entrenched so we cannot do very much about it (See Collingridge, 1980; Liebert & Schmidt, 2010). How can we assess these scenarios of the future from the standpoint of the present?

Some scenarios seem to be more continuous with the present. For example, instead of going beyond our standpoint in space and time, we are invited to turn inward and ask: "How does it feel to know everything about myself?" This is an example of an impossible question: Even if it were possible, incredibly enough, now or in the future to know

„everything about myself" – what knowledge could I now have of what it feels like to have this knowledge which I evidently don't have now? But the question might be taken in quite another way. Even in our present world, we are already worried that businesses or governments learn „everything about ourselves" – in the sense of generating complete data-sets of what we do, what we look at, etc. What is called into question, then, is whether we think of „ourselves" as a cavernous inner space with deeply hidden, super-private, inaccessible regions, or whether we accept that we are data-sets, always publicly on display. How does it feel to conceive myself this way or that, e.g., to understand ourselves as nothing but a relational database with different *data types* like numbers, binary states, exact timestamps, chunked strings, and digitized pictures – as if we are just "likes," "visits," and "clicks." These latter versions of the question may well be answerable – though it takes some work and some twisting of standard German to create this condition of answerability.

Engaging with the questions in such a manner drags us to their overall conceptual and normative framework, all the while wondering whether we are at the same time neglecting other, probably more pressing, problems.

The overarching meta-question is how to navigate this vast space of possibilities without falling into traps that might paralyze our imagination instead of empowering it. One cannot – and perhaps should not – think about "enjoying a job-free future" without reflecting on the present reality of job scarcity. Likewise, one cannot – and perhaps should not – speculate about the fate of our secrets in the future without considering the current issues surrounding privacy. Given the finitude of our human abilities – not only in terms of the material or scientific resources but also our limited attention, bounded rationality, and scarce emotional stamina for tackling ethical issues – posing questions about vivid scenarios turns out to carry considerable intellectual responsibility.

The Hall of Questions is designed to provoke thought, but its rapid-fire presentation of ideas can be disorienting. Visitors are confronted with so many flashing questions that it becomes difficult to hold onto any single thought long enough for sober reflection. In this undifferentiated space, we might instinctively cling to familiar stereotypes and clichés as a way of finding stability. But reflecting too deeply can also lead to a kind of mental dizziness or numbness, overwhelmed by the sheer number of possibilities.

Leaving the Hall of Questions, we move cautiously through the rest of the exhibition, aware of the need to navigate between two extremes: for one, the Scylla of falling back on tired clichés, and for another, the Charybdis of losing ourselves entirely in endless and pointless speculations.

II. Sheep on the Roof

The Nature section of the exhibition is dominated by a spectacular work of art, technology, and nature. In order to assemble the thousands of wooden pieces which symbolize complexity and growth, workers had to wear virtual reality 3-D goggles. Associated with this spectacular structure are several invitations to enter the future in a speculative manner. Consider this depiction of a very mundane dialogue between two people waiting for the elevator in an urban high-rise (fig 2):

- What's taking the elevator so long? [*Was braucht denn dieser Fahrstuhl so lange?!*]
- Sheep. [*Schafe*.]
- What? Say that again. [*Bitte was?*]
- Sheep have been grazing on the roof for the last few weeks. [*Die letzen Wochen haben doch die Schafe auf dem Dach geweidet.*]
- So — ? [*Und?*]
- Today they're moving to the building next door – by elevator. [*Heute geht's aufs Nachbargebäude – mit dem Fahrstuhl*]
- See there, the things that happen … ? [*Ist das zu glauben?*]

This scenario invites the viewer to respond in one of three ways, recording their choice with the wristband:

- At last, a bit more life in the concrete jungle! There's a rooftop terrace on the *Futurium* as well, isn't there? How about adding some greenery or a few goats? [*Endlich mehr Leben in der Betonwüste! Hier gibt's doch auch eine Dachterrasse, oder? Wie ware's mit etwas Grun ode ren paar Ziegen*?]
- I'll be glad to eat the cheese from the milk, but my own roof terrace I'd rather use for sunbathing. [*Den Schafskäse nehme ich gern. Aber die eigene Dachterrasse nutze ich dann doch lieber zum Sonnenbaden*.]
- I didn't move to the city to have the countryside move in with me. [*Ich bin doch nicht in die Stadt gezogen, damit das Land hinterherzieht!*]

Figure 2. Sheep on the Roof

Sheep on the roof is an attractive idea, and seems easy enough to implement, elevators included. As a vision of a possible future, it does not appear especially futuristic. The charm of this conceit is that it is lo-tech. It might evoke a spontaneous response of

"why not?" But what if this scenario reinforces outdated stereotypes rather than challenging them? What if alternative options are concealed rather than revealed?

The group discussion revealed that the famous Crystal Palace Exhibition in London's park displaced a flock of sheep. The first World Fair of the Industrial Age exacted a price that today's industrial sheep are still paying as urban planners are seeking to make amends. These sheep grazing on our rooftops offer more of a pastoral scene, than a scenario for the future.

Taking up these points about the sentimental, if not pastoral prospect of a future which harmonizes past and present, nature and technology, urban and country living, Steve Fuller evoked George Orwell's critique of euphemisms and convoluted phrasing. In *Politics and the English Language*, Orwell (1946/2013) accuses politicians of "defending the indefensible": Villages are bombarded but it is called "pacification." Peasants are robbed of their farms but it is called "transfer of population." He notes that "Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them" (p. 14). Orwell expands his critique in *1984* where the ideological tweaking of language – in the forms of "Doublethink" and "Newspeak" – are used by the Party to justify manipulations and to rectify deviations from the established ideology. In the scenario of sheep on the roof, there is the danger of pacifying a horrible situation through careless fantasizing – creating an appearance of harmony while masking underlying conflicts. This evoked a variety of responses from the group:

- Sheep are presented here as a really manageable bit of nature. You get like two or three sheep and you think, "oh, yeah, I have an experience with nature." But the difference is so huge. This scenario is a bit like people's enthusiasm about urban gardening, and the difference between having an easy garden on your balcony – manageable and contained in wooden boxes – and doing actual gardening where there are slugs and things that are not so easy to deal with. This scenario presents nature as something that can easily be taken care of in leisure time – which defies the idea of a materially given nature that escapes human designs, that is acknowledged as *unverfügbar* [recalcitrant].

- There are now flocks of sheep in Berlin with further plans for integrating them into the city. However, is this truly about envisioning the future, or is it merely a sentimental repetition of the past? Can we heal these wounds with romantic solutions? It is assumed that we can restore nature simply through more technology. But it seems more like repeating our previous mistakes, than a fresh solution.

- This looks like a small intervention that goes in the right direction. But rather than bringing country-life into the city, it might reinforce the division between country and urban life, and perhaps there is a value in that. Thinking it through, we are confronted not only with sheep riding elevators but also with urbanites stepping into a barnyard. It is telling in its own right that we come up with so many reasons why such a minor, low-threshold intervention is a bad idea. The sheep as a cipher for the greening of cities paradoxically distracts from the issues of roof-top grass-covers and their overall contribution to, say, insect biodiversity, especially when we add the sheep-dung. The sheep, in other words, may do far more profoundly transformative work than we imagine, if only we open for them an elevator door.

- I can't help picking up on the role of sheep in our current world, for example in New Zealand where the economy is massively based on sheep cultivation. The best versions of lamb meat are from New Zealand, and cheap. The meat is transported all over the world, either frozen or by other large-scale industrial techniques. If you're going to have sheep in urban settings and have them completely denatured, then there is nothing nostalgic or pastoral about this scenario. We should rather analyze the Freudian connotation of sheep on our rooftops and the neurosis this dream is responding to!

- This version of the future reminds me of the way the future was projected when I was a kid in the 1960s. There was a lot of this kind of talk back then, about this idea of containing nature within the urban environment. That's why I found it dated actually. It's a retro-future.

Looking back into the past, we can see that the idea of integrating nature into urban environments has evolved alongside the development of modernity and urban life, especially in Germany. Here, a notable example is the so-called "Schreber Gardens." These are colonies of allotments on a larger piece of land, run by the gardeners as members of an association with membership being a coveted, often heritable privilege to tend to a garden for flowers and vegetables and as balsam for the soul. This can be interpreted as a socially and environmentally progressive idea – industrial working class urban residents having their own slice of land to cultivate – but it is also born from a peculiar mindset of social coercion and control. One of the promoters of the movement, Moritz Schreber and the sad history of his son provide the best example of this pathological desire to reform the soul (see Freud, 2003). Does the *Futurium* offer a homeopathic dose of the same therapy?
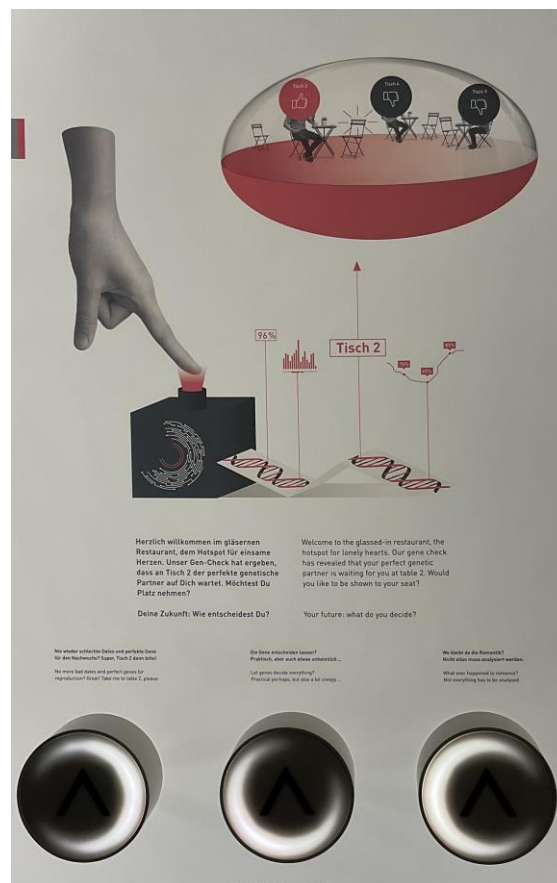
III. Meeting the Genetically Perfect Mate

The Technology section of the exhibition is deeply permeated by information about various emerging technologies and the promises they hold. In an area titled "Deciphering the Code of Life," for example, visitors are invited to respond to a fairly remarkable, highly specific long-term vision (fig 3):

Welcome to the glassed-in restaurant, the hotspot for lonely hearts. Our gene check has revealed that your perfect genetic partner is waiting for you at table 2. Would you like to be shown to your table? [*Herzlich willkommen im gläsernen Restaurant, dem Hotspot für einsame Herzen. Unser Gen-Check hat ergeben, dass an Tisch 2 der perfekte genetische Partner auf Dich wartet. Möchtest Du Platz nehmen?*]

- It is your future: so how do you decide? [*Deine Zukunft: wie entscheidest Du?*]
  - No more bad dates and perfect genes for reproduction? Great! Take me to table 2, please. [*Nie wieder schleshte Dates und perfekte Gene fur den Nachwuchs? Super, Tisch 2 dann bitte!*]
  - Let genes decide everything? Practical perhaps, but also a bit creepy… [*Die Gene entscheiden lassen? Praktisch, aber auch etwas unheimlich…*]

o   Whatever happened to romance? Not everything has to be analyzed. [*Wo bleibt da die Romantik? Nicht alles muss analysiert warden*.]

Figure 3. Meeting the Genetically Perfect Mate

This scenario outlines a scientific and technical vision and yet it is the line „no more bad dates!" that seems to have the strongest impact. To be sure, a more thoughtful response would consider the *likelihood* of having "good dates" on the basis of one's genetic make-up. It would also question their *desirability*, that is, whether these „good dates" are good. Both of these, likelihood and desirability, are taken for granted in this scenario. Scientifically, it is also presupposed that genetic determinism holds and that we can better organize our daily lives if we take genetic information into account - part of knowing everything about ourselves.

All of these are very contentious presuppositions. And even if we put aside such principled considerations, what about the relation between DNA matches and intuitive romance? Are biology and romance mutually exclusive, or do they provide mutually reinforcing principles of attraction?

In response to this scenario, the group of curious investigators witnessed two opposing strategies – also within its own ranks. One rejects the scenario because it is deeply dishonest in that it doesn't seduce but traps the viewer by imposing a future which

supposedly demands not only that we take a stance towards it but position ourselves inside it. By playing the game and contemplating the question, viewers are buying into things that they do not seriously believe (see Nordmann, 2007). Moreover, anyone who rejects or opts out of the imposed scenario will appear as a kind of Luddite. By not believing that "technology can do just about anything"[2] visitors have to worry that they will be branded as being anti-technology.

The opposite strategy is to accept the invitation, fully immerse ourselves in the scenario, and explore every corner of this fictional restaurant. Cheryce von Xylander found such a hermeneutic entry-point as she expands on a telling detail of the scenario, namely, the reference to a "glassed-in" restaurant even though, on the face of it, the scenario does not require walls of glass, just tables and chairs:

> The place for hooking up was conceived as a »glass restaurant« (*gläsernes restaurant*). This strikes me as an odd choice. Spectators are asked to imagine what it would feel like to be paired up with a partner according to DNA matches, instead of animal attraction. Are we prompted by biology or romance? Perhaps these are mutually reinforcing principles of attraction. Be that as it may, my experience of this panel was dominated by a different question, one that hardly registers at first glance, namely how did we arrive at the »glass restaurant«? The *restaurant* per se seems a perfectly good setting for future humanity to organize its mating rituals. But what contribution was the trope of *transparency* making to the thought experiment? Why invoke a »glass restaurant«? I found myself wondering if the *Tinder* transparency of choosing partners by physical »type« had somehow infected the layout of this imagined future. The conditions of app-driven dating seemed to permeate the atmosphere of the communion as a whole, including the glass environs in which such coupling would be made possible. But then a more menacing connection came to mind, a famous museum exhibit from the 1930s, namely the glass humans – male and female – of the Dresden Hygiene Museum.[3] These gendered idealtypes map perfectly onto the question here put forward (although it is far from obvious that "gender" will be the defining modality of future procreation). The skeleton, blood vessels, nervous systems, and organs were installed in a transparent carcass and lit up, separately, at the push of a button. These transparent figures were also exemplars of an idealized Aryan humanity; in terms of weight, posture, and size, they were impeccable physical specimens. They teach spectators about the anatomy of the human animal while also conveying an appreciation for the ideological aggrandizement of the »*Übermensch*.« In this sense, the social engineering that informs this panel is not merely loaded with repugnant resonances concerning the aspirations of match-making in coming generations. It directly quotes and thus resuscitates a history of philosophical anthropology that is now thoroughly discredited in the German context. And it does so within spitting distance to Germany's houses of parliament and governance.

---

[2] On *Futurium* website, one of the ones on AI possibilities.
[3] See *www.dhmd.de/en/exhibitions/permanent-exhibition/the-seven-theme-rooms#c4248*

Witnessing this display in the year of the 300th anniversary of Kant's birth, it is also striking that the classical locus of communal dining and moral education — the much-cited »*Tischgesellschaft*« championed in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Perspective* (Kant, 1798/2006) – made not even a liminal appearance in this envisioned factory for the production of future citizens. Eating in a restaurant is commercial by definition. It commodifies a convivial form and bypasses the ritual communalism of shared meals in families. Even though we have already established that the family is the core social unit reified by the displays of the *Futurium*, the family as an agent of moral education is here invisible. These citizens emerge as monads. Their reproduction takes place in something resembling an incubator, which again legitimates the trope of transparency. What might the people in this restaurant be eating? If the meat served up in this restaurant follows the same principle of transparency as the union to be forged, then hamburger paddies made of »glass cow« hash would be suitable items on the menu as would be »glass horse« steaks – both animals were on display in models of vitreous anatomy at the Dresden Hygiene Museum. Presumably, the blind dates coming together in this glass restaurant would be served by a robo-waiter very much resembling the automaton that meets and greets visitors upon entry to the *Futurium*. And I can't help but notice that its museum cafe is a "glass restaurant" as well. It opens onto the sidewalk, well-appointed to enable these visions of tech-orchestrated dating. All things considered, the transparency here invoked ceases to present as entirely innocent when we consider that »glass human« (*gläserner Mensch*), in German, has become a catchphrase referring to the lack of digital privacy and data protection in the networked online condition we have come to inhabit, especially regarding medical and genetic data.

A SAFE PLACE TO GET UNSETTLED

Our visit reveals several recurring themes and tropes in the House of Futures. Common to all three of our exhibits is that visitors are treated as "judges on all things." We are encouraged to imagine challenging scenarios and make decisions accordingly. Our choices are valued and recorded, but it remains unclear if there is a matter of choice here, if the summing up of attitudes has anything to do with the dynamics of technological development. In the meantime, the visitors comfortably inhabit the all-too-familiar role of rating products of all kinds.

The counterpoint to being treated as judges come from the "paternalistic voice" that is pervading many exhibits. It reassures us that transitioning to a better world is within our grasp. The recurrent message is: "It is your future, so how do you decide?" In other words, „It is your future, it will be granted to you, we would love to know how you will accommodate yourself to it." Steve Fuller offered an anecdote to illuminate the power of paternalism in technological narratives:

> A few years ago I actually went to a science fair and talked about transhumanism to kids and I gave them surveys. I had lots of postcards, which had futuristic

images. And the parents were looking at and interpreting them. The kids would start saying something that's kind of interesting but also a little provocative, something like: "Would you like to live to be 90 or so?" And the kid who still thinks in single digits starts saying, "I think 60 would be enough for me!" and the parent is trying to rectify things. To have interesting responses, I tried to keep the parent away and have the kid keep on talking. I do think the parents hovering over the kids and somehow moderating their speech and not letting them go down certain sorts of roads, could be diabolical, actually, if you're really wondering how kids respond to stuff in this situation,

Entering the fictional world of the *Futurium* can be a richly suggestive adventure, yet risky. We are anchored in familial, pastoral, nostalgic, or romantic conceptions and reference points. Yet, these anchors can keep us stable but also paralyzed. At the same time, we are unmoored by the vast and overwhelming expanse of possibilities. In the beginning, the question is "How do we want to live," as if we are accelerating toward a promised utopia where anything is possible with the help of technology. But where anything is possible, how does one orient oneself, set priorities, remain focused on urgent concerns?

In this ambivalent situation, future, present, and past are intertwined. While we often treat the past as something concrete and fixed, our access to it is just as speculative as our access to the future. The objects, events, and experiences of the past are mediated through narratives, interpretations, and reconstructions – much like the speculative scenarios we create for the future. We interact with history through the lens of our present understanding, just as we project the future based on current trends, desires, and fears. We do not have any direct access to the past or future.

The past is not a finished story that we can just know. The future is not something we can simply design and build by technology. By wandering uncritically through the uncharted territory of the future, we are at risk of losing our grip not only on the future but also on our present and the past. Ideally, the House of Futures should be a playground for *developing* such a grip. It can be a safe place to become unsettled.

REFERENCES

Collingridge, D. (1980). *The Social Control of Technology*. St. Martin's Press.

Exhibition. (n. d.). *Futurium*. https://futurium.de/en/exhibition

Freud, S. (2003). *The Schreber Case*. Penguin Publishing Group.

Kant, I. (2006). *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (R. B. Louden, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1798 in German)

Liebert, W., & Schmidt, J. C. (2010). Collingridge's Dilemma and Technoscience. *Poiesis and Praxis*, *7*(1–2), 55–71. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10202-010-0078-2

Nordmann, A. (2007). If and Then: A Critique of Speculative NanoEthics. *NanoEthics*, *1*(1), 31–46. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11569-007-0007-6

Orwell, G. (2013). *Politics and the English Language (Penguin Modern Classics)*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1946)

Our View of the Future is Open. (2019, August 27). *Futurium*. https://futurium.de/en/press/our-view-of-the-future-is-open

СВЕДЕНИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ / THE AUTHOR

Садег Мирзаи, sadegh_mirzaee@yahoo.com,
ORCID 0000-0003-4854-0199

Sadegh Mirzaei, sadegh_mirzaee@yahoo.com,
ORCID 0000-0003-4854-0199