Prospective films: When a strategic vision meets the diversity of human experience

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PROSPECTIVE FILMS, WHEN A STRATEGIC VISION MEETS THE DIVERSITY OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT
Through the medium of corporate vision videos, foresight has become a vehicle for companies to communicate on their vision of the future. These films are of strategic importance and should be both watched and designed with awareness of such purposes. Mobilized on an action research project in the mobility sector, our design team accompanied a company towards defining and formalizing their vision of the future mass transportation system. In this context, we proposed a filmic analysis that served as a basis for recommendations. This exploratory article reports on this process and framework. A typology of corporate videos is presented, which was used by our team to story-board a prospective film. Our concern was to highlight the diversity of human experience rather than conveying simplistic or standardized perspectives on user interactions with specific technologies. Finally, the generative potential of this working framework is discussed.

INTRODUCTION
The field of foresight was born in France in the 1960s, from a critique of political decision-making being based on extrapolating the past. For its founder Gaston Berger, it was necessary to take into account human ends, that is to say, to think about the ends before the means and to question the “why” before the “how”. “See far, see wide and analyze in depth” (our translation from French), said Gaston Berger. Thus, “foresight responds to a need to broaden the spectrum, to consider other ways of seeing, even to the speculative register” (Berger & al., 1959). Going further, the ultimate goal of a prospective approach is “to reconcile wisdom and power, ethical reflection and action” (Durance, 2011), which reaches beyond the scope of political decision. Foresight integrates technoscientific and humanistic perspectives in tangible visions of the future, which inevitably embed designers’ own culture, beliefs, and views of the world. A challenge within this approach is hence to acknowledge and make explicit the decision criteria which led to the final forms, especially since future projections have a performative power in the present (Kinsley, 2010). This broader view is therefore not passive. As (Amar, 2005) points out, that even though this view is “contemplative; it must allow for action; that is, action that is carried out in the present with a view to a future that depends on it, but also the way in which it is carried out and how it transforms the person carrying it out” (Amar, 2005). This is where foresight
meets design research that also focuses on “something that does not yet exist: it is projective in character, dealing with products of imagination” (Koskinen et al, 2008).

Within the foresight discipline, prospective films propose embodied visions of the future and they are also an interesting format to look at for design researchers interested in projecting, anticipating and inventing new futures. This format has a long history in the Information and Telecommunications sector, where videos have been used to help disseminate research beyond corporate seminars or press conferences (Kinsley, 2010). Over time, they have become of strategic importance in companies’ efforts to demonstrate their technological know-how and visions. They are a genre of moving images that present a company’s strategy through a specific and often futuristic scenario to show what that value proposition might look like if the strategy is followed (Buur & Yliriskyl, 2007, Bergman et al 2004). As such, a scenario is grounded in plausible reality and targets the possible effects of actual or intended strategic choices. However, these films do not necessarily consider accurate technological development of the applications showcased. They are rather oriented towards forms of anticipated knowledge in the present, a logic of "seeing to believe" underlying their production process (Kinsley 2010). The films themselves become prototypes, their content and images conveyed being equally important in the representation of a possible future (Kinsley, 2010).

The targeted public has also become an issue for prospective films. Indeed, not only are they professional design outcomes, but they also can be used as design fiction diegetic prototypes, to apprehend the notion of change (Sterling, 2013). In this line, movies spread beyond corporate boundaries, becoming public objects. The possibility for multiple stakeholders to comment, appropriate or critique on platforms like Youtube, Vimeo, and Twitter raises ontological and political concerns. What should be released or not by corporate actors? To what ends, and with what expectations on the audience?

**METHOD**

In 2022, our design research team composed of three design researchers and an art-historian specialist in animation films was mobilized on a 3-months design research project for a leading actor of mobility. Following an action-research approach, we accompanied a multi-disciplinary team composed of different business units (Innovation, Strategy and Design). The aim was to reflect and formalize elements for a strategic vision of urban mass transportation systems in 2035. The expected outcome was a detailed story-board for a corporate vision video accompanied by filmic recommendations. The video story-board was expected to be a combination of:

- scenarios and a technological catalog produced by the company within their strategic roadmap,
- design scenarios resulting from a 3-month prospective project with 15 students in a Master program in design.

In order to discuss the role of such video vision of the future for the company, we conducted an exploratory study on 22 corporate vision videos from France, China and the United States. These videos were created to be distributed internally and externally, their role being both promotional for future clients, and vehicles exposing the company’s vision and values. This corpus does not pretend to be exhaustive, but at least a representative sample of the strategic issues, representation formats and narrative scenarios existing in this filmic genre.

Our study aimed at providing an analytical framework that was also used a projective grid in order to propose filmic recommendation for a specific project. Consequently, our role was twofold. On the one hand, as researchers, we wanted to pursue a critical reflection on corporate visions and their communication through the video format. On the other hand, as designers, we were expected to accompany our client in shaping their own forward-looking scenario, which involved intertwined strategic and esthetic choices. Our ethical requirement was to succeed in conveying an embodied and experience-oriented perspective, in line with the way of thinking and storytelling purported by designers. This research can hence be read as an analytical exercise, as well as an outline of recommendations for prospective films open to the diversity and grain of human experience.

Prospective films, as defined above, embody certain visions of reality. Thus, insights from the film analysis served us to define a five dimensions framework for analysis. This structure allowed us to find common characteristics and compare the 22 films of our corpus:

- **Medium**: techniques of representation, special effects;
- **Camera**: points of view, camera movements;
- **Narrativity**: purpose of the film, vision of the future conveyed, metaphors etc.
- **Atmosphere**: ambient sound, music, chromatic palette;
- **Interactions & relations**: realtionships between bodies, objects and environments, but also representation of social phenomena.
From this structured analysis, the study led us to identify four types of videos, ranging on a continuum between the showcase of technical solutions and the communication of strategic visions. The following section displays this typology, cross-referenced with the analytical grid and insights from the literature.

Table 1: Typology of the films studied.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of films</th>
<th>Corpus</th>
<th>Title of the movie (company/designer, year): short link to access the film</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Prototypes in motion</td>
<td>- The train that never stops at a station: (Ebin Linson Issac, 2010): shorturl.at/fC901</td>
<td><em>Corporation</em> Title of the movie (company/designer, year): short link to access the film</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- SpaceX Interplanetary Transport System (SpaceX, 2016):短url.at/hsKLK</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Tesla Autopilot Full Self-Driving Hardware (Tesla, 2016): shorturl.at/coCJT</td>
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<td>- SkyTran Urban Integration Concept (NASA, 2012): shorturl.at/dW46</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Essaye la navette autonome sur les berges de Seine (RATP / Easymile): shorturl.at/cBHL3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Designing the Future of multimodal Mobility - One for all (Siemens Mobility / Moodley): shorturl.at/hlQW0</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- A Day Made of Glass... Made possible by Corning (Corning Incorporated, 2011): shorturl.at/pyIM2</td>
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<td>2. The big picture - urban planning</td>
<td>- Shared Innovation (Bouygues Construction, 2020): shorturl.at/ahG68</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Vinci Construction (Vinci Construction, 2019): shorturl.at/kBOY2</td>
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<td>- Building differently (Effage, 2014)</td>
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<td>- Soft swift ecomobility (Effage, 2014)</td>
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<td>- Haguenau square (Effage, 2014)</td>
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<td>- The gateway of the station (Effage, 2014)</td>
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<td>- The Gare Basse neighborhood (Effage, 2014)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- The Wacken neighborhood (Effage, 2014)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>All Effage videos: <a href="https://www.eiffage-phosphore.com/visite-strasbourg-2030">https://www.eiffage-phosphore.com/visite-strasbourg-2030</a></td>
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<td>- Decisive moment in defence (Thales, 2017): shorturl.at/oNZ06</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Guerre écologistique (Agence de l’innovation de défense / Red Team Défense, 2022): shorturl.at/aBkXJ</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Après la nuit carbonique (Agence de l’innovation de défense / Red Team Défense, 2022): shorturl.at/awYiS</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Jewell - For a Healthy Lifestyle (Paradigm Films, 2019): shorturl.at/louLOU</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Air Pollution Revealer (Paradigm Films, 2019): shorturl.at/xcJ24</td>
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1. PROTOTYPES IN MOTION

Vistisen & Poulsen (2017) show that corporate vision videos are a way to prototype the future by exploring the strategic potential of a new technology. As shown in Apple’s Knowledge Navigator videos (1987), animation techniques might indeed be used to depict the future uses of a new technology. Thus fiction is used to show

the potential of emerging technologies “as if they were products while attempting to make a future present” (Kinsley, 2010). The videos from our corpus which display such technical developments (a new vehicle prototype for example), are mostly 3D-animated. This medium allows to simulate advanced interfaces and user interactions in a context of use aiming for realism, as if the concept existed and the scenario was really happening.

In this category, staging technologies takes over users’ experiences. Indeed the films from this typology focus on the technology and how it works. People are represented in an abstract way, simply witnessing a smooth-running system. The aesthetic dimension may seem simplistic with a minimalist decorum (everyday life objects, urban elements in the city, ...). It seems that the role of this decorum is to arrange the scene or at best to give a notion of scale. The global aesthetics and narrative are smooth and fluid in order to show a technology that works seamlessly. Yet within this category, some videos use emotional triggers, such as *SpaceX Interplanetary Transport System* that shows natural elements like sunrise while inducing and describing the technology.


*A day made of glass* attempts to include the company’s technological showcase in a real-life context. A family is shown, enjoying a happy life with high-tech appliances. The scenes shot with real actors and environments are still extremely simplistic focusing on a normalized, perfect and smooth usage of the technology, with omnipresent special effects and caricatured characters. This echoes Kinsey’s critique of corporate videos: “technologies are represented being used by (Western) people “like us” in a familiar environment in order to contextualize and normalize the idea of their use” (Kinsley, 2010). Finally, the camera angles and modes of cutting are arranged to direct the viewer's eye toward the devices being used. In this way, the video acts as an “augmented prototype”, a technology that is functional in a fictional, designed context. Indeed, as proposed by Kinsley, such examples show that the credibility of the video is related to how the story around the technological prototype and its usage in a naturalistic context are designed. In our
cases, the design fiction hardly relates to “the present we occupy”, our life conditions with all the tensions and paradoxes involved.

2. THE BIG PICTURE - URBAN PLANNING

The second category mainly groups films produced by construction and public works companies. They aim at describing projects that are tightly connected to a site or a region. Therefore, they are much more specific and thus more “credible”. For example, Eiffage, the European leader in construction and public works, has developed a series of vision videos that show how the company responds to specific territorial issues. Each video simulates an overall experience of the future project. The territorial issue is treated in a didactic way by mixing bird's eye views, 3D modeling representations with superimpositions of photos, and voice-over to describe the project. All these elements are well articulated. The characters, on the other hand, are limited to neutral silhouettes moving slowly in the same direction. What matters is to show a smooth, “perfect” system functioning. Though situated and addressing social and territorial issues, these videos remain disembodied by design, leaving aside the diversity and complexity of human behaviors and paths. Indeed, humans’ representation in vision videos is not neutral but part of a socio-technical “politics of anticipation... forms of action that mark and code prospective practices” (Kinsley, 2010). The scale of the body is hence sufficient to produce an idea or a sense of “the future”, and how it shall be inhabited.

3. BRANDING & IDENTITY

The third type of films appears more expressive and even “creative”, since it focuses on brand identities at large. Narrativity is richer, and rooted in more global experiences, imaginaries, and values. Eclosia group’s film, for example, uses a technique of animated white origami to invite the viewer into a cinematographic experience. The dreamlike atmosphere thus created allows for deeper immersion. The corporate services showcased are narrated through artistic techniques, mixing content and form. The choice of animation, towards a certain amount of abstraction, is thus important for the viewer to freely appropriate the story and universe of the film, in their own subjective space.

4. FICTIONAL STORIES

Films of this last category simulate an a priori futuristic world, from a polarized vision showing a bias. They thus have an even closer relationship to fiction. The vision videos produced by Red Team Defence are an
example of this trend. They are indeed designed for the French Army by science fiction authors, designers and scriptwriters working closely with scientific and military experts. Prospective is used for “serious” purposes: anticipating technological, economic, societal, and environmental factors potentially leading to future conflicts. The videos, shared to a large audience, immerse the viewer in a near-future context through episodes staged in the manner of a series like Black Mirror. Such use of fiction, up to dystopia, can also be found in speculative design. For example, SuperFlux studio describe this format as “tools, in the form of visceral experiences, leading to pertinent strategies for understanding both the present and the future”.

Therefore, the visions embedded in such videos are multiple and conflicting, driving a “shift from thinking about applications to implications” (Dunne & Raby, 2013). Implications go beyond solving a local problem or proposing solutions that can be consumed and used today; they address broader societal issues and sometimes present uncomfortable scenarios, narratives that incorporate the repercussions of technological developments. Rather than “predict[ing] or anticipat[ing] the future, [they] help us understand and debate the kind of world we want to live in” (Dunne & Raby, 2007).

In a slightly different style but with a similar purpose, the design fiction project Jewell features a connected jewel that can identify health concerns. The particularity of this film lies in the fictitious street interviews that provide feedback on the artifact, thus giving it credibility (as well as to the film). This demonstrates the strong way in which design fiction connects to reality, through “the use of diegetic prototypes to suspend disbelief about change” (Sterling, 2013). However, the viewer of a fiction then returns to the here and now and form their own opinion on the consequences and the promises of the diegetic prototype depicted. Thus, these movies don’t aim to familiarize people with a vision of the future (whether positive or negative), they rather momentarily capture attention and imagination for only a short time, in order to stimulate active thinking (Vistisen & Poulsen, 2017).

Towards Recommendations for Experience-Based Prospective Films

Our typology-based analysis did not aim at promoting one kind of video over the others. It rather intended to uncover how strategic issues are embodied in the filmic language and how they are transmitted and perceived by the viewer. All ingredients need to be dosed and combined according to a specific purpose. In our case, the mobility company wished to convey an experiential take on urban transportation. We hence used the analysis to outline a few recommendations to acknowledge in the best possible way the diversity and grain of human paths and more broadly the environmental reactions and situations. Living beings and the terrestrial environment are not just users of a technical system. Therefore, taking into consideration unexpected events, behaviors, even incidents are fundamental in order to produce a projective credibility that was discussed before. All along our analysis, the framework built showed a way in which to understand these elements. Finally, the four types of film complement one another. Within this complementary and using our analytical grid, we tested its generative potential within the project. This intention brought us to formulate design guidelines, that we used to pilot the proposition of a detailed scenario. Sharing this outcome here would be too specific, though the guidelines may have a general scope for our research and practice community. Here are some insights for the design of prospective films, regarding each of the five dimensions of analysis:

- **Medium**: Rather than relying on a single technique, combining several of them creates a more vibrant account. For example, back and forth between realistic images and more sensitive ones makes the best of both worlds, both to represent functional prototypes as well as the organicity of the living being in their environment.

- **Camera**: Diversify points of view, in order to tactify enrich the script with different experiences, focusing on subjective or overhanging perspective. Everyone has their own way to stand, move and relate, all combining in the context of the situation. Varied & imperfect framing evoke images taken on the spot. Arrange sequences to take the viewer from a bystander to an actor’s perspective.

- **Narration**: Music and voice-over are hardly conducive to immersion and active engagement of the viewer. The script should feel as subtle as possible to leave space for life. Characters can be heard talking, along with background and nature sounds... in a seemingly spontaneous way.
• **Atmosphere:** Give a special attention to the haptic feel of materials (texture, light effects...) to convey an organic feel.

• **Interactions & relations:** Urban and natural environments should not be objectified, rather be treated as characters of the film, with their own identities and behaviors. A special emphasis on tactility (among people, objects, surfaces) better expresses the richness of experience. All scenes happen in a global flux of life, which can be sustained by other means (blurry image, ambient sounds, changing colors and points of view).

**CONCLUSION**

As argued by Kinsely (2010), vision videos are artifacts of self-representation due to their ambiguous status. They use techniques to embark the viewer and make a link between corporate strategic intentions and viewers’ feelings. As imaginaries meet, an aesthetic experience is born. It is indeed an impossible mission for design as Mark Blythe points out this experience “cannot be guaranteed even with Hollywood budgets”. As expressed in the literature and seen in our examples, this is done in part through representations of gestural interaction that the viewer can physically apprehend. That makes it possible to create a “technological unconscious”. To put it differently, by visualizing a technical prototype and the ecosystem in which it will be deployed, viewers rely on their own experiences, values and beliefs to appropriate - or not, the vision propelled by the film. Moreover, typology-based analysis aims at bringing the richness of “critical theory” in video design, by acknowledging their paradoxical status, between fiction and reality. As experiences can only be “designed for” (McCarthy & Wright, 2008), interdisciplinary collaboration with critical theorists, specialists on literature, drama and film would be key to deploy the open-ended potential of such formats.

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http://dunneandraby.co.uk/content/bydandr/36/0


