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-
- **BROCHURE**
 - **EXHIBITION TEXTS**
-

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LA GRAN IMAGINACIÓN

HISTORIAS DEL FUTURO

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Main menu



Fundación Telefónica

THE GREAT IMAGINATION. HISTORIES OF THE FUTURE

The Great Imagination. Histories of the Future proposes a journey through a universe of fictions and daydreams that at different times in history have evoked what a future time might be like by means of literature, film, comics, design, and architecture, among other disciplines. In order to organise this journey, the exhibition starts from a particular premise: the imagination of the future is a cultural phenomenon that becomes possible and necessary under certain material, social, and economic circumstances on which it acts, in turn, generating a process of feedback and accelerated historical change. In a century beset by multiple crises whose future may be crucial for the history of our planet, is it still valid to speculate about idealised futures such as those imagined in the past? What alternative futures can we imagine in order to respond to the challenges we are facing? Unleashing the transformative power of the imagination to think about "radically different" worlds is perhaps more necessary now than ever.



Olalekan Jeyifous. *Afro/Eco/Agro Brooklyn*, 2021 © Olalekan Jeyifous

From our current, forward-looking perspective, it is easy to think that our capacity to speculate about the future is a characteristic feature of our human nature. This was recently claimed by a group of psychologists led by Martin Seligman, who in their book *Homo Prospectus* argue that “the unparalleled human capacity to be guided by imagining alternatives stretching into the future (“prospecting”) uniquely describes *Homo sapiens*”. However, while it is clear that this capacity has surely played a central role in the daily lives of all human beings, it is valid to ask: have we always imagined, as we do now, distant futures radically different from the present?



Javier Sáez Castán. *Utopia. Thomas More*, 2021 © Javier Sáez Castán

In reality, for most of our history, and for the vast majority of people, this ability to foresee was limited to exploring the immediate environment in the short term. There were not enough radical changes, both socially and technologically, in people’s lives to make it necessary or attractive to imagine what things might be like decades or centuries later. At the dawn of modernity, utopian narratives and satire could be considered the most immediate precursors of the futuristic imagination. However, even in the 17th century it is still difficult to find stories that properly refer to the future. Inspired by the discovery of unknown territories such as the American continent, distant islands with fantastic realms served various authors to project models of

ideal societies which, in a sort of negative mirror, in turn enlightened the flaws of the European societies of the time.

It is necessary to wait until the 18th century for the emergence of the first properly futurist narratives: Samuel Madden's *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* (1733) and, particularly, Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440* (1771). The latter's imagined uchronia initiated a new paradigm by imagining a future time chronologically and, more importantly, causally connected to its present. Thus, the 18th century uchronias opened the doors to 250 years of imaginative explosion oriented towards the future. Is it a coincidence that the imagination of the future was unleashed at precisely the same time as the growth of cities, the explosion of mobility and the emergence of communication technologies? Does the futuristic imagination bloom within a context of material progress or is it precisely the outburst of a creative fantasy that drives and guides the myriad of innovations that appear at this time?

To answer these questions, the exhibition echoes the concept of the Great Acceleration proposed by the Earth Sciences. In the context of current debates on the Anthropocene (a geological era that



Albert Robida. *La vie électrique. Un quartier embrouillé*, 1893
© Archivart / Alamy Stock Photo

signals the impact of humans on the planet), the Great Acceleration refers to the exponential growth of human activity accelerating in the second half of the 20th century, often traced back to the mid-18th century. The Great Imagination suggests a feedback process between, on the one hand, such socio-economic and environmental changes and, on the other, the proliferation of stories and concerns about the future that occurred during the same period.

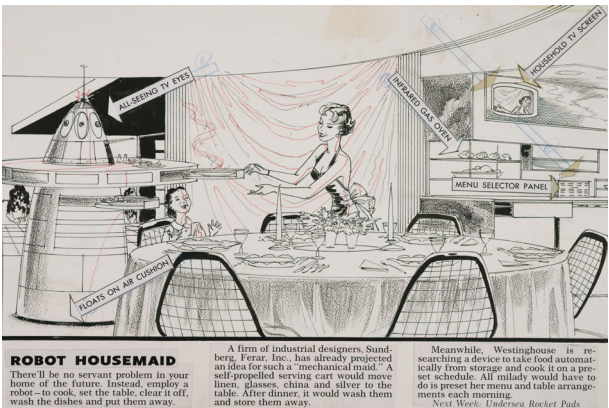
There is probably no other space like the city itself to demonstrate more clearly the feedback that has occurred between images of the future and the material change that makes them possible. The visions created by Fritz Lang, Horst von Harbou and Hugh Ferriss, among others, become in a very real way the plans for constructing an industrial and urban modernity that functions as an engine for the Great Imagination. Similarly, some of the most appealing and attractive images ever produced have revolved around the automobile, trains, aeroplanes, and other experimental forms of transportation. Unfortunately, there have been few occasions when those who imagined these wondrous forms of transport anticipated their



Harvey Wiley Corbett. *New York Tribune*, 16th of January of 1910
© Library of Congress

unintended and negative consequences. As Frederik Pohl wrote: "A good science fiction story should be able to predict not the automobile but the traffic jam".

Almost in parallel with concerns about urban organisation, the 19th century witnessed the emergence of attempts to imagine how the scientific and technological advances of the time might change our daily lives. Where will we live in the future? What will we eat? How will we learn and work? How will we communicate? Many of these images had a much wider circulation than other speculations about the future because they took the form of illustrations, photographs and, later, films for the popular media and advertising. It is perhaps in the second half of the 20th century that the aspiration for a modern, comfortable life reached its peak and, one must acknowledge, its greatest degree of innocence. Even in the 1960s, images of a future 21st century still speculated about radical technological transformations in our homes without considering the possibility of women being liberated from their traditional roles in the household economy.



Arthur Radebaugh. *Closer Than We Think! Robot Housemaid*, 1959
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If futurist fiction was born with the 18th century uchronias projecting the dreams of progress into

a future time, we could say that it reaches its peak during the 20th century, as the nightmares of modernity begin to take an increasingly prominent place in the Great Imagination. First literature and then dystopian films (as well as other means of expression) have been used to warn humanity about the risks of extreme rationalisation devolving into social control, the unexpected consequences of technological change, the ecological impact of our ways of life, and the possibility of a final war.

We are currently at a crossroads that involves not only dealing with a pandemic and an economic recession, but also the huge civilisational threat posed by climate change, the crisis of democracies and the great challenge of digitalisation and artificial intelligence. Everything is at stake, and the ability to generate new visions that help us think about viable, alternative worlds is more necessary than ever. To assist in this mission, the exhibition closes with a set of installations originally



Denis Villeneuve. *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017

© Columbia Pictures / Entertainment Pictures / Alamy Stock Photo

commissioned to show four alternative visions for the coming decades. The challenge was posed from the theory of one of the pioneers of Futures Studies, Jim Dator. According to him, the millions of prospective visions that exist can be grouped around four archetypes or “generic images of the future”. These are: Growth, Collapse, Discipline and

Transformation. Rather than four neatly delineated categories, they suggest four cardinal points—each with its own subjects, hopes and concerns. This conceptual framework is useful not only for sorting through the millions of existing images of the future but also for generating new visions. Moreover, it functions as a sort of compass to guide us in the current debates in different fields of scientific knowledge—political economy, science and technology studies, ecological economics, among others—that propose alternative ways out of the crossroads at which we find ourselves.

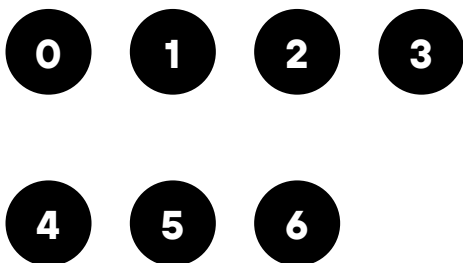
The four installations are the result of collaboration between futures theorists and designers who are at the forefront of their fields of research. Together they have conceived proposals that take Dator's archetypes as their starting point, turning abstract ideas and possibilities into real time machines that transport us to four alternative scenarios set in the year 2050. Carlota Pérez and the team of Jacques Barcia and Jake Dunagan of Institute for the Future transport us to a new era of sustainable, global and equitable growth. Raphaël Stevens and N O R M A L S raise the question: is the collapse of our civilisation not only inevitable but desirable? Giacomo D'Alisa and *Becoming* invite us to get to know a form of discipline in which we learn to be earthy and enjoy simplicity. And finally, Holly Jean Buck and OIO Studio present us with a world in which technological transformation has created a new excitement for a new nature.

While the imagination of alternative futures is more important than ever, it will only be useful if within those alternatives we can recognise at least one image that will inspire us through its magnetism to live differently in the present. These debates will surely be central to our lives for years to come. For this reason, it is far beyond the scope of this exhibition to propose an unambiguous answer. Even so, through a final experience created by Domestic Data Streamers, we will be able to

assess not only our individual stance but also the convergences or divergences that exist, among those who visit the exhibition, with respect to their aspirations for the remainder of this century. Ultimately, this journey through more than 250 years of futuristic imagination aims not only to trigger a reflection on the future but to actively contribute to the feedback process that it has itself already explored.

THE GREAT IMAGINATION.
HISTORIES OF THE FUTURE

EXHIBITION TEXTS



0 INTRODUCTION

From *Mad Max* to *Blade Runner 2049* and *Star Trek*, to name just a few examples, it seems clear that we live in a culture saturated with images of the future. From this forward-looking perspective, it is easy to think that this capacity to speculate about the future is a defining feature of our human nature. This was recently claimed by a group of psychologists led by Martin Seligman, who in their book *Homo Prospectus* argue that “the unparalleled human capacity to be guided by imagining alternatives stretching into the future (“prospecting”) uniquely describes *Homo sapiens*”. However, while it is clear that this capacity has surely played a central role in the daily lives of all human beings, it is valid to ask: have we always imagined, as we do now, distant futures radically different from the present?

As the philosopher and futurist Fred Polak explained, images of the future are “crystallised expectations that picture a radically different world in another time”. The stories and narratives we humans construct allow us to understand and recognise ourselves as a society, but also to venture shared visions and aspirations. The exhibition *The Great Imagination. Histories of the Future* proposes a journey through a universe of fictions and dreams that at different times in history have evoked what a future time might be like through literature, film, comics, design, and architecture, among other disciplines. Weaving a dialogue between imaginaries ranging from the 18th century to the present day, the exhibition explores to what extent our current vision of the future remains anchored in ideas and values of the past, and what role can imagination and creativity play in the

production of possible alternatives. In a century beset by multiple crises, whose outcome may be crucial for the history of our planet, is it still valid to speculate about idealised futures such as those imagined in the past? What alternative futures can we imagine in response to the challenges we are facing? Unleashing the transformative power of the imagination to think about “radically different” worlds is perhaps more necessary now than ever.



1 PRESENT FUTURES

Jim Dator, one of the pioneers of futurology, promulgated a fundamental rule: the future cannot be known or predicted because, in reality, “the future” does not exist. What does exist, in fact, are millions of images of futures that are created and used to guide us in a rapidly changing world. We are currently experiencing a real explosion in our interest in the future; an explosion that is not only quantitative but also qualitative, and which invites us to ask ourselves why, how and for whom we generate these images of the future. This eagerness to give form to our desires and fears has, in recent decades, been expressed in an increasing variety of disciplines and media ranging from literature and films to series, architecture, design, and advertising.

Another interesting aspect of our prospective imagination, proposed by Dator himself, is that the millions of visions we have created can be grouped around four archetypes or “generic images of the future.” These are: Growth, Collapse, Discipline and Transformation. Rather than four neatly delineated categories, they suggest four cardinal points—each with its own subjects, hopes and concerns. None of these generic images, by itself, is positive or negative, utopian or dystopian, because even collapse can be a window of opportunity into new worlds. Can we find, today, a common pattern in the issues and concerns that are giving rise to the imagination of futures?

1.A From Future to Futures

Although the future in singular does not exist, what does exist and what we can explore through the so-called prospective or forecast methodologies is the enormous space that expands from the present towards a horizon of potentially infinite possibilities. For this reason, we no longer speak of a future, but of possible futures subject to a multitude of factors that depend on both collective endeavour and conditionalities beyond our control. Some futurists have expressed this realm of possibilities with the "cone of futures", a graphic representation that encompasses possible, plausible, probable and even improbable outcomes, expressing the idea of open and fluctuating futures as opposed to the conception of a linear and almost inexorable tomorrow.

2

BEFORE THE FUTURE

The fact that humans have a kind of innate foresight capacity does not mean that we have always produced images of the future in the sense that we do now. In fact, we could say that for most of our history, and for the vast majority of people, this ability to foresee was limited to exploring the immediate environment in the short term. There were not enough radical changes, both socially and technologically, in people's lives to make it necessary or attractive to imagine what things might be like decades or even centuries later. Dator uses the metaphor of an old film reel to define that state prior to the explosion of futuristic imagination: "We look down and see the scene in the frame in which we are standing, and we look forward, and as far as we can see, the scene in each frame seems the same as it is where we stand now. And if we look backwards, we see the same thing: not much change that we can see from the past to now". If today's imagination of the future allows us to look critically at the present, to anticipate threats and opportunities, and to formulate visions of what is preferable, what forms of imagination were able to fulfil these functions before our interest in the future was aroused?

2.A Utopias

At the dawn of modernity, utopian narratives and satire could be considered the most immediate precursors of the futuristic imagination. Even in the 17th century it is still difficult to find stories that properly refer to the future. Inspired by the discovery of unknown territories such as the American continent, distant islands with fantastic realms served various authors to project models of ideal societies which, in a sort of negative mirror,

in turn enlightened the flaws of the European societies of the time. The utopias of Tommaso Campanella, Francis Bacon and Thomas More are set in imaginary places which are geographically and historically disconnected from our world, while Jonathan Swift used the travel narrative to achieve some of the discursive and psychological effects that are achieved today with the creation of images of the future.

2.B Uchronias

As Paul K. Alkon claims, it is necessary to wait until the 18th century for the rise of the first properly futurist narratives: Samuel Madden's *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* (1733) and, particularly, Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440* (1771). The latter's imagined uchronia initiated a new paradigm by imagining a future time that was chronologically and, more importantly, causally connected to its present.

Following Mercier's lead, between the late 18th and early 19th centuries, other authors began to imagine idealised, utopian futures set in a time to come. Several of these narratives used the same mechanism of travelling through space-time: the protagonist falls asleep and wakes up in the future, and so the imagined social perfection takes place only in a dream.

2.C Timeline of the Future

The 18th century uchronias opened the doors to 250 years of a future-oriented imaginative explosion. The transcendence and swiftness of technological advances, coupled with studies that extended the age of the Earth, the cosmos, and the human being at a dizzying rate, led to the projection of much larger temporal dimensions, both

backwards and forwards. As this timeline shows, literature was initially the main vehicle through which the fears and hopes for the future of a world undergoing a profound process of change were expressed. Then film, comics, and television joined in to show us with increasing realism the wondrous and terrible possibilities that tomorrow could bring. Some of these fiction works looked just a decade or two ahead to reveal imminent transformations, while the more daring, such as H.G. Wells, travelled hundreds of thousands of years in time to show us the finitude of our humanity.

3

THE GREAT IMAGINATION

Following the metaphor that compares the experience of change to a film reel, Jim Dator explains the turning point at which the frames cease to appear static: "It was as though someone had picked up the old movie film off the floor, placed it in a motion picture projector, and turned on the switch. Suddenly we saw that we could no longer predict the future on the basis of the present or past. None of us could be sure what was coming next".

Towards the middle of the 18th century, coinciding with a process of profound social, economic, and technological transformations, a change began to take shape in the way of thinking about the future that would culminate in the 20th century with a true revolution: instead of waiting passively for future things to come inexorably, human beings positioned themselves as the main architects of a future that could materialise in different ways depending on a multitude of variables.

The Industrial Revolution and the concept of technical progress unleashed imagination and speculation about the time to come. From then on, and particularly from the 19th century onwards, stories with futuristic images began to increase in quantity and quality until the 20th century, when it strongly culminated in the idea of the future as an unwritten temporal space whose emptiness could be filled with attainable expectations. What hopes and collective fears were contained in these images of the future that filled popular culture with flying cars, automated homes, and interplanetary travel? Does this collective imaginary, which for many still represents the maximum expression of the future,

continue to respond to the needs and challenges of the 21st century?

3.A The Great Acceleration

Earth scientists speak of the Great Acceleration to refer to an exponential increase in the growth of a wide variety of parameters resulting from human activity and its impact on the planet's ecosystems. This increase, fuelled by the advent of the Industrial Revolution, began precisely in the middle of the 18th century, and accelerated dramatically during the second half of the 20th century. Of course, this Great Acceleration involved much more than mere material changes.

Is it a coincidence that the imagination of the future was unleashed at precisely the same time as the growth of cities, the explosion of mobility and the emergence of communication technologies? Does the futuristic imagination bloom within a context of material progress or is it precisely the outburst of a creative fantasy that drives and guides the myriad of innovations that appear at this time? What impact have certain aspects of this progress had on the planet?

3.B The City

One of the most fruitful spaces for the futurist imaginary is undoubtedly the city. This meeting point of people, technologies and nature, whose dynamism generates vital experiences, in turn enriches the great questions about tomorrow. There is probably no other space in which the feedback between the images of the future and the material change that makes them possible is more clearly demonstrated. The visions created by Fritz Lang, Horst von Harbou and Hugh Ferriss, among others, become in a very real way the plans

for building an industrial and urban modernity that functions as an engine for the Great Imagination.

3.C Mobility

If the awakening of the Great Imagination directly accompanies the material changes unleashed by the Industrial Revolution, it is not surprising then that the first images of the future were created to speculate on the changes that might come in the way we transport ourselves, after incredible innovations, such as the railway and the hot air balloon, which appeared at the end of the 18th century. Since then, some of the most appealing and attractive images have revolved around the automobile, trains, aeroplanes, and other experimental forms of transport. If we could blame those who imagined the mobility of the future for anything, it would be that they failed to warn us persuasively enough of the possible unintended consequences of some means of transport. As Frederik Pohl once wrote: "A good science fiction story should be able to predict not the automobile but the traffic jam".

3.D Everyday Life

Almost in parallel with concerns about urban organisation, the 19th century witnessed the emergence of attempts to imagine how the scientific and technological advances of the time might change our daily lives. Where will we live in the future? What will we eat? How will we learn and work? How will we communicate? Many of these images had a much wider circulation than other speculations about the future because they took the form of illustrations, photographs and, later, films for the popular media and advertising. It is perhaps in the second half of the 20th century that the aspiration for a modern, comfortable life

reached its peak and, one must acknowledge, its greatest degree of innocence.

3.E Other Planets

Beyond speculation on the future of more everyday spheres such as the city, dwelling, communication, and work, from the very beginning the futurist imagination was also attracted by much more remote settings and immensely larger space-time scales. This section looks at the ways in which different creators tried to imagine the future of the planet and our life beyond it. It is here that we encounter perhaps the deepest and most daunting existential concerns, which confront us with the absolute limit: our own finitude.

4

DYSTOPIAS

If futurist fiction was born with the 18th century uchronias projecting dreams of progress into a future time, we could say that it reached its peak during the 20th century, as the nightmares of modernity began to play an increasingly prominent role in the Great Imagination. First literature and then dystopian films (as well as other means of expression) have been used to warn humanity about the risks of extreme rationalisation devolving into social control, the unexpected consequences of technological change, the ecological impact of our ways of life, and the possibility of a final war. After at least two centuries of receiving warnings through the dystopian and post-apocalyptic imagination, have we really understood the message or are we just getting used to living in a world that increasingly resembles our worst nightmares?



5

FOUR ALTERNATIVES: THE WORLD IN 2050

Although very unevenly, over the last 250 years, humanity has undergone a process of radical growth and transformation that we relate to the Great Acceleration. The prosperity that had developed in a linear fashion until the Industrial Revolution grew exponentially from that time onwards in the wake of unprecedented material advances. At the same time, a kind of Great Imagination focused on speculating about future possibilities fuelled and inspired this process of innovation, which in many cases ended up becoming a reality.

We are currently at a crossroads that involves not only dealing with a pandemic and an economic recession, but also the huge civilisational threat posed by climate change, the crisis of democracies and the great challenge of digitalisation and artificial intelligence. Everything is at stake, and the ability to generate new visions that help us think about viable, alternative worlds is more necessary than ever. As noted above, Jim Dator has proposed four archetypes that recur in our efforts to imagine futures. What is interesting is the way in which this conceptual framework also serves to guide the contemporary discourses that have emerged from different scientific and philosophical spheres to speculate and promote alternative routes to overcome our multiple crises.

This section presents four installations created specifically for the exhibition. They are the result of collaboration between theorists and designers of futures who are at the forefront of their fields of research. Together they have conceived four proposals that coincide with one of the four Dator archetypes, turning abstract ideas and possibilities



into real time machines that transport us to four alternative scenarios set in the year 2050.

5.A Growth

What would happen if, in thirty years' time, we had transformed the current unequal and unsustainable growth paradigm into a new type of growth that is green, innovative, and more equitable? This is the theoretical and political proposal of Carlota Pérez, Honorary Professor at the Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (University College London, United Kingdom), and one of the world's most renowned experts on the relationship between technological innovation and social change.

Jacques Barcia and Jake Dunagan, researchers at the Institute for the Future and experts in futures design, materialised this possibility to transport us to the first final of the Regeneration Cup. Today, the Verde y Oro FC team competes for the trophy that celebrates the mitigation of climate change and the process of regenerating our ecosystems without having to sacrifice a global economic prosperity that has never been more equitably shared.

5.B Collapse

For Raphaël Stevens, collapse is the horizon of our generation. Stevens is a researcher and specialist in ecological transition, one of the initiators of the intellectual movement known as "collapsology", whose ideas he reflected together with Pablo Servigne in the book *How Everything Can Collapse*, which explores the real possibility of a civilisational collapse. N O R M A L S, a studio formed by Cedric Flazinski and Régis Lemberthe, takes this idea as its starting point to offer us a fabulous provocation: faced with the imminence of collapse, and following the overwhelming victory of a referendum, the government of Pyria decides to wipe out itself

as a state in order to guarantee the survival of its inhabitants. All the efforts of the government and the country's economy are put at the service of its own destruction in order to safeguard the future: a desperate, stateless and yet liveable future for all its citizens.

5.C Discipline

Would it be possible to avoid the collapse that many believe will be the inevitable consequence of unbridled economic growth? An increasingly prominent global intellectual and political movement offers a possible way out: living comfortably with less, while prioritising well-being, equity, and sustainability. Giacomo D'Alisa is a political ecologist at the Centre for Social Studies (University of Coimbra, Portugal) and one of the world's leading experts on degrowth. For this installation he has collaborated with Becoming, a research studio that explores emerging scenarios for rethinking the world. Together they invite us to visit the headquarters of the ERRES, an intergenerational group of people who come together to have fun and participate in the regeneration of human and urban ecosystems. Their anthem celebrates a new philosophy of life: "Life wanted to live... And we learned to be Earth... To enjoy in simplicity... To dance with balance...". Their headquarters are located in a former shopping centre that in 2050 has been converted to house other services focused on the wellbeing of the community and the planet.

5.D Transformation

Simple, relocated life in balance with the Earth may be attractive to some people, but essentially dull to others. Where would the adventure of discovering new worlds be? What if, to mitigate climate change, we were to transform the planet and its ecosystems? Wouldn't it then be attractive to rediscover it? This is the future depicted in *Blue Marble Travels*, the result of a collaboration between Holly Jean Buck and OIO Studio. Buck is a professor in the Department of Environment and Sustainability (University at Buffalo, United States) and author of the book *After Geoengineering* in which she studies the best and worst case scenarios for the deployment of geoengineering. OIO Studio is a creative firm composed of designers, technologists and bots developing future products and interactions. Together they present a world in which the blend of geoengineering and mitigation has impacted our environment, creating exciting emotions for a new nature.

6 YOUR FUTURES

The rule that Jim Dator enacted to disassociate the study of the future from any predictive claims (the future cannot be predicted because it does not exist) contains two important nuances. Firstly, it is possible to predict and, as the previous installations have demonstrated, to experience alternative futures. Secondly, it is possible and necessary to visualise and continuously evaluate our desirable futures, that is, those we would like to see happen. Venturing futures prepares us for them and gives us tools to try to bring them into reality. How is the future you imagine?



The exhibition ***The Great Imagination. Histories of the Future*** is complemented by free workshops for all kinds of audiences (schoolchildren, families, young people, adults...) in both digital format and in person at the Espacio Fundación Telefónica, as well as a programme of free guided tours for individuals and groups with prior reservation.

For further information, booking and registration for the activities, please visit our [website](#).

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