

“Utopian” and “Dystopian” in the Context of Visual Arts



„Utopijsko” i „distopijsko”
u kontekstu
likovnih umjetnosti



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SAŽETAK

Rad istražuje interdisciplinarnu putanju termina „utopijsko” i „distopijsko”. Polazi od činjenice da su „utopija” i „distopija” izvorno književnoteorijski termini koji se odnose na specifične književne žanrove. U svjetlu recentnog proboja termina „distopijsko” u rječnik likovne kritike (u osvrtima na izložbe i u katalozima izložbi), kao i u posljednje vrijeme učestale kustoske prakse koncipiranja izložaba na temelju binarnih suprotnosti „utopijsko – distopijsko”, ovaj rad nastoji odrediti spektar značenja, denotacija i konotacija povezanih s terminima „utopijsko” i „distopijsko” u likovnoj umjetnosti razmatranjem specifičnih konteksta u kojima se upotrebljavaju. Razmatra se uporaba termina „distopijsko” u kontekstu umjetničkih izričaja Alexisa Rockmana, Michaela Kerbow, Alice Tye, Kushala Tiklea, Fabricea Monteira, Jona Rafmana te, u kontekstu hrvatske umjetnosti, Jasenka Rasola i Sebastijana Dračića. Termin „utopijsko” razmatra se u kontekstu teorijskog promišljanja avangardne umjetnosti, socijalno angažiranih umjetničkih akcija umjetnika u drugoj polovici 20. stoljeća (napose Josepha Beuysa) te, u kontekstu hrvatske umjetnosti, slikarstva Ivana Rabuzina. Rad zastupa tezu da, unatoč tome što su „utopijsko” i „distopijsko” transmedijski termini, spektar njihova značenja promjenjiv je ovisno o vrsti umjetnosti na koju se odnosi.

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the interdisciplinary trajectory of the terms "utopian" and "dystopian". It acknowledges the fact that "utopia" and "dystopia" are originally terms from literary theory that refer to specific literary genres. In the light of a recent crossover of the term "dystopian" into the vocabulary of art criticism (exhibition reviews and catalogues), as well as a current curatorial fashion of devising exhibitions on the basis of binary opposites of "utopian" and "dystopian", the paper aims to define the range of meanings, connotations and denotations of the terms "utopian" and "dystopian" in visual arts, by means of discussing the particular contexts in which they are used. The use of the term "dystopian" is discussed in the context of the following artists: Alexis Rockman, Michael Kerbow, Fabrice Monteiro, Kushal Tikle, Alice Tye, Jon Rafman, as well as in the context of Croatian artists Jasenko Rasol and Sebastijan Dračić. The term "utopian" is discussed in the context of theoretical discussions about avant-garde art, the socially engaged artistic actions of artists from the second half of the 20th century (in particular, Joseph Beuys), as well as in the context of Croatian art, specifically of Ivan Rabuzin's paintings. The paper argues that, though the terms "utopian" and "dystopian" are transmedia terms, their range of meaning differs in relation to a particular kind of art they refer to.

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LITERARNO I SLIKOVNO – TRANŠPOZICIJA I RAZMJENA | LITERARY AND PICTORIAL – TRANPOSITION AND EXCHANGE

Svjetlana Sumpor

Termin „utopijsko” upotrebljava se u teorijskim promišljanjima za opise umjetničkih pravaca, umjetničkih praksi i samih umjetničkih djela u proteklih više od stotinu godina. Ponekad se odnosi na specifičnu vrstu načela umjetnosti, odnosno na umjetnički „impuls” ili namjeru, pri čemu implicira želju za društvenom promjenom putem umjetnosti; ponekad se odnosi na vizualni aspekt nekog djela, pri čemu implicira idealističko i/ili idealizirajuće zamišljanje i vizualizaciju. Termin „distopijsko” upotrebljava se u kontekstu likovnih umjetnosti tek odnedavno, posljednjih desetak godina. Upotrebljava se u cilju opisivanja određenog raspoloženja ili ugođaja. Uglavnom ga se povezuje sa specifičnim vizualnim, ikonografskim aspektom likovnog djela. Likovna djela koje se opisuje kao „distopijska” najčešće tematiziraju ekološka pitanja, konzumerizam, ugnjetavačke društveno-političke sustave, odnose moći i odnose među vrstama. I utopijska i distopijska umjetnost nastaju kao kritički odgovor na društvenu stvarnost.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

utopijsko, distopijsko, likovne umjetnosti, transmedijska terminologija

During the approximately last one hundred years, the term "utopian" has been used in theoretical considerations as a means of describing art movements, practices and works. Sometimes it refers to a specific artistic principle, that is, an "impulse" or intention of art that implies a desire for social change through art; at other times, it refers to the visual aspect of an artwork, implying idealistic and/or idealising imagining and visualization. The term "dystopian" has been employed in the context of visual arts only recently, that is, approximately in the last ten years. It is used with the aim of describing a certain mood or atmosphere. It is usually related to the specific iconographical aspect of a work of art. Art works described as "dystopian" most often explore the themes of ecology, consumerism, oppressive social and political systems, power relations and inter-species dynamics. Both utopian and dystopian art is created as a critical response to social reality.

KEYWORDS

utopian, dystopian, visual arts, transmedia terminology

INTRODUCTION: ORIGIN OF THE TERMS

Utopia is a word coined by Thomas More in 1516 to baptize an island described in his book of the same name. More's neologism, which came into being as an allusion to imaginary, paradisiacal places, subsequently began to be used to refer to a particular kind of narrative, which became known as utopian literature. As a literary form, it relies on a more or less rigid narrative structure. It describes the journey to an unknown place, where the traveller is offered a guided tour of the society and given insights into its social, political, economic and religious organization. The journey typically implies the return of the traveller to his/her own country, in order to be able to take back the message that there are alternative and better ways of organizing society.¹

The first recorded use of the term dystopia (which is another derivation neologism) dates to a 1868 parliamentary speech by John Stuart Mill, in which it was used for naming a perspective oppositional to that of a utopia.² In the 20th century, the term was widely accepted in the literary theory for designating a particular literary genre. The novel *We* (1924) by Yevgeny Zamyatin is considered the first dystopia, while the most widely recognized examples of the genre are *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell. Typical narrative structure of a dystopia consists of narrating the adventures of a protagonist who, in the beginning of the story, seems to fit perfectly in the society and its institutions but who gradually alienates himself/herself from dominant values, eventually arriving to the point of an open conflict with the oppressive government. Dystopia first appeared in the literary form and then dystopian literature subsequently influenced the emergence of a dystopian film. The term was firstly adopted in relation to literature, referring to a particular kind of narrative structure, and was afterwards — by means of film adaptations of literary works — transferred to film, where the logic of the film medium conditioned that a particular narrative structure should be supplemented with a particular iconography.³ The split in the meaning of the term dystopian pointing in one direction towards a genre and a narrative structure, and in the other towards an iconography and an atmosphere has recently enabled the transference of the term to the realm of visual arts (after 2010) and its use in art criticism has been increasing ever since.

The distinction between a dystopian narrative structure and dystopian atmosphere and iconography thus came about mainly because of the particular, media specific characteristics of literary fiction and visual arts; science-fiction film played a significant role as a sort of "catalyst" of that process. Literary oeuvres of the few writers working at the intersection of the genres of science-fiction, dystopia and speculative fiction in the late 20th century — e. g. Philip K. Dick, J. G. Ballard, William Gibson — with their typical *post-humane* motifs and imagery (*cyberpunk*, cyborgs and androids, corporative surveillance and control, climate

¹ Vieira, "The concept of utopia", 3, 7.

² *Ibid.*, 16.

³ See more in: Sumpor, *Ironijske strategije distopije*, 102–109.



Sl. / Fig. 1 Alexis Rockman, *Manifest Destiny*, 2004, oil and acrylic on wood / ulje i akril na drvu, 243.8 × 731.5 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C. Courtesy of the artist / Ljubaznošću umjetnika

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change, postapocalyptic scenery, etc.) have inspired numerous film adaptations and, in recent time, also artistic practice.

THE DYSTOPIAN IN VISUAL ARTS

One of the earliest uses of the term "dystopia" in the context of visual arts was in the title of an exhibition that took place at the CAPC, Museum of contemporary art in Bordeaux, in 2011: *Dystopia*, devised by American SF writer and theoretician Mark von Schlegell and curator Alexis Vaillant. The exhibition comprised sculptures, installations, paintings, performances, films and publications of forty-six international artists.⁴

In regard to the work of individual artists, one of the earliest applications of the term "dystopian" was related to the work of American painter Alexis Rockman.⁵ Paintings that would subsequently (in 2013) be labelled "dystopian", or more precisely "biodystopian", were created by Rockman starting from the 2000s. His *Manifest Destiny* (2004; Fig. 1), *Miami* (2006) and *Washington Square* (2005) have been compared with postapocalyptic and/or dystopian fiction (Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, 2003) and films (Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend*, 2007; Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later*, 2002), especially in their exemplifying the trope of the "Last Man on Earth".⁶ Rockman is preoccupied with the themes of genetically modified organisms, decline of the current civilization and prevalence of new bio forms, not only in the mentioned paintings but also in his other works, even those that have been executed during the 1990s. There is also a prominent motif of waste, which symbolises the remnants of the contemporary civilization and transforms the present into the past of the future; in other words, it presents the world as seen from the *post-human* perspective. Paintings from the *American Icons* cycle depict real historical sites, the ones that usually function as symbols of American power, but they are presented in fantastically changed circumstances: as deserted places overtaken by natural elements (water or wild vegetation). His watercolours cycle *Lost Cargo* (2020) investigates "the impending climate disaster and resulting crises in human migration and social/political responses and offers an apocalyptic vision of the ecological state of the planet".⁷ It presents emblematic images in which city vistas (Istanbul, Hong Kong, etc.) are combined with motifs of a particular animal species (rats, bats, etc.) that have been blamed for spreading diseases (plague, Covid-19, etc.), pointing to the fact that animals which are widely perceived as spreaders of dangerous diseases are in reality victims of displacement from their natural habitats, as well as of other mistreatments and manipulations by humans.

The artist whose work has been unanimously labelled "dystopian" is American painter Michael Kerbow.⁸ Kerbow's favourite motifs are imaginary city vistas and



Sl. / Fig. 2 Michael Kerbow, *Hollow Pursuits*, 2013, acrylic on canvas / akril na platnu, 54 × 54 inches, owned by the artist / vlasništvo umjetnika. Courtesy of the artist / Ljubaznošću umjetnika

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4 *Dystopia. An exhibition written by Mark von Schlegell*, CAPC – musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux.

5 Insight into Alexis Rockman's work available at the artist's website.

6 Ferreira, "Biodystopias Matter: Signposts of Future Evolution", 49–53.

7 Creahan, "New York — Alexis Rockman: 'Lost Cargo' at Sperone Westwater through January 16th 2021".

8 See, for example: Miller, "These Dystopian Paintings Portend the Terrifying Near Future of Our Cities"; Pangburn, "An Artist Visualizes the Terrifying, Dystopian Metropolises of Tomorrow".

9 Artist's statement available at his site.

10 Images available at the artist's site.

11 Chaudhuri, "Mumbai 2098: Images of a post-apocalyptic horror show"; Joshi, "A graphic artist's vision of Mumbai in 2098 is dark and dystopian".

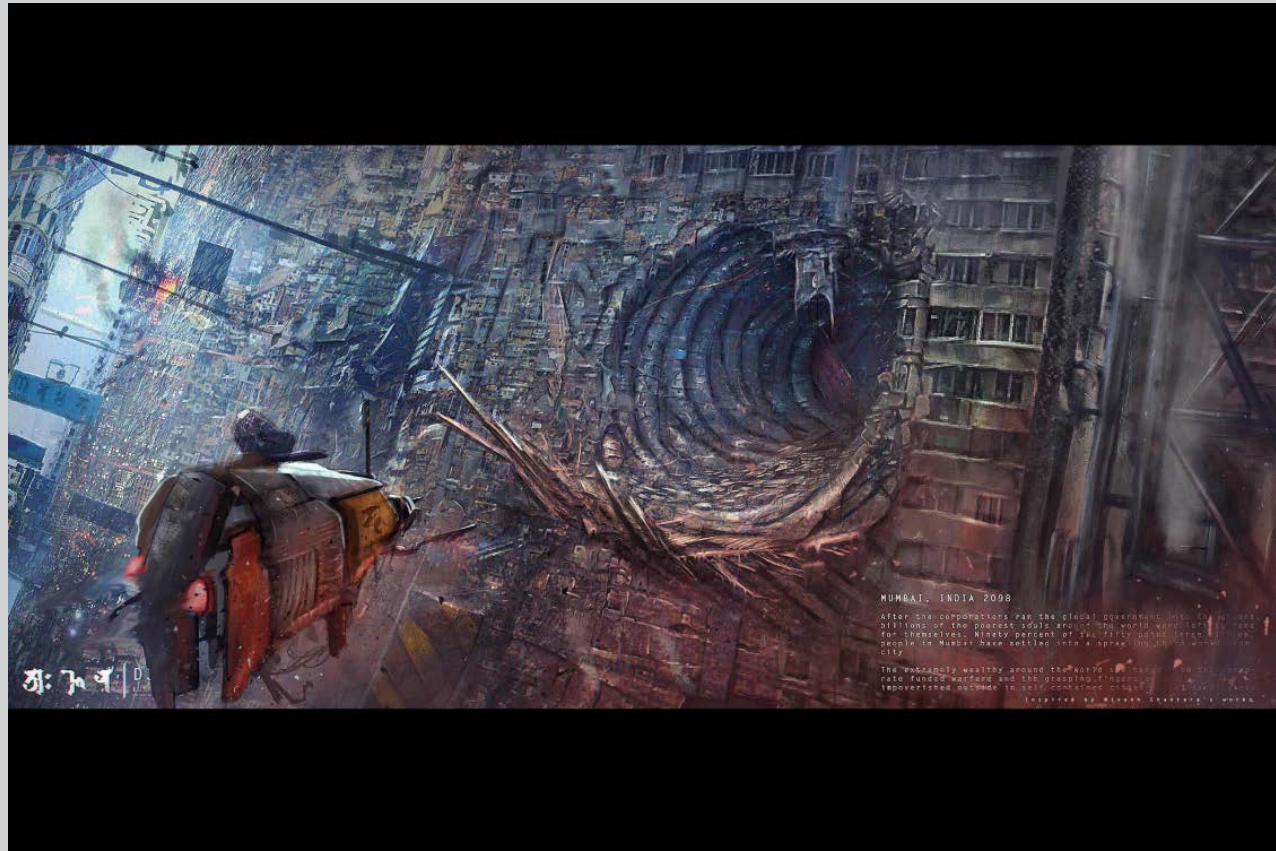
12 Tikle, in interview with Vaishampayan, "A Glimpse Into Post-Apocalyptic Mumbai".

13 Cowan, "Dystopian paintings by Alice Tye that imagine American cities transformed by climate change"; D'Angelo, "Alice Tye's dystopian illustrations of climate change".

fantastic visions of Earth — as if seen from space — that present a world in which human buildings, architecture and infrastructure have taken on absurd proportions. The accumulation of skyscrapers, billboards, rubbish, cars, highways, overpasses and road loops in Kerbow's paintings takes on grotesque proportions as these artificial structures take up all available space, leaving literally no room for anything else (*Hollow Pursuits*, 2013 (Fig. 2); *Circuit*, 2015). In paintings from the *Late Capitalism cycle* (2019–2021), Kerbow combines motifs that symbolize the contemporary civilization (cars, shopping carts, gas stations, fast food restaurants) with the motif of dinosaurs. The world in which these coexist is a world of reverse evolution: in Kerbow's paintings, dinosaurs are not an extinct species; on the contrary, it is our civilization that is extinct. Piles of cars make up just one archaeological layer of land that dinosaurs walk on; urban service centres have been abandoned by humans and occupied by animals. According to the artist's statement, these paintings are "allegories about our world, and visions of our possible future", and climate change is their major theme.⁹

Singapore-based graphic artist Kushal Tikle is the author of the *Mumbai 2098* cycle (2015; Fig. 3),¹⁰ which has been described as "dystopian" and "postapocalyptic" in numerous reviews.¹¹ The cycle depicts a vision of the future in which overpopulation of the city has become particularly acute, making poverty more intense and the lack of living space more obvious. Scenes are filled with imagery of awkward buildings of monstrous proportions, scrappy technology and heaps of rubbish. Apparently, new living circumstances in 2098 lead to the development of some kind of vertical slums. Tikle's work bears a strong influence of cinema, which is particularly visible in the format of the paintings and in the viewpoints of the scenes, as well as in the abundance of the motifs familiar from films of the SF and dystopia genre: large commercial video panels and a fantastic aircraft that looks like it was improvised from scraps. About his inspiration for *Mumbai 2098* the artist said: "I wanted to recreate the post apocalyptic environment depicted in movies like *Blade Runner*; but with a more earthy, Indian colour palette. [...] For the moods, I relied heavily on the imagery of slums of Mumbai."¹²

British artist Alice Tye is also a painter whose work has been described as "dystopian" by art critics and journalists, which particularly applies to her *Hello America* cycle (2019; Fig. 4).¹³ In numerous autobiographical statements as well as interviews, the artist herself has declared that her work had been profoundly inspired by dystopian films and literature: "Cinema is also a huge influence on my work: the lighting, the widescreen format and the idea of conveying a narrative through a still — as if the painting was just a frozen image of a film scene [...] My current personal project is based on J. G. Ballard's book *Hello America*. The book focuses



Sl. / Fig. 3 Kushal Tike, *The Hideout*, from the cycle *Mumbai 2098*, part of the project / dio projekta *Slumdog*, 2014, digital art / digitalna umjetnost, owned by the artist / vlasništvo umjetnika. Courtesy of the artist / Ljubaznošću umjetnika

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Sl. / Fig. 4 Alice Tye, *The Capitol*, *Washington D.C.*, from the cycle / iz ciklusa *Hello America*, 2019, oil on oil paper / ulje na uljanom papiru, 28 × 42 cm, owned by the artist / vlasništvo umjetnice. Courtesy of the artist / Ljubaznošću umjetnika

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on the dystopian landscape of an America that has been transformed by climate change: New York is a desert with rolling sand dunes and Las Vegas is a humid jungle which glows pink from all the neon lights."¹⁴ Tye's paintings present a vision of the world in the aftermath of some huge ecological catastrophe, a pretext for imagining American cities without humans, taken over by wild animals and plants; a civilization taken over by nature.

All four artists whose work has been discussed so far — Rockman, Kerbow, Tikle and Tye — are preoccupied with some of the central themes of contemporary critical theory: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Wasteocene, and the related notions of ecology, ecoprecarity and posthumanism. While the theoreticians reflect and make projections of the probable future on the basis of observed facts of irreversible change that mankind has so far brought about on Earth, the artists use the medium of painting to imagine how the world and the inter-species dynamics would look like if the present way of human (mis)treatment of nature as well as the present socio-economic systems continue into the future. Therefore, the artists adopt a typical strategy of dystopia, which consists of extrapolating a negative tendency already present in the reality and then imaginatively constructing a new world (of an art work) upon it. Obviously, imagining a new, different world entails the visualization of many details, which prompts artists to embrace figurative painting. Emblematic details, suitable for conveying symbolic meaning or big ideas, have a major role in these paintings — whether they are accumulated in exaggerated quantities (as with Kerbow and Tikle), or contrast each other in surprising combinations (Rockman, Kerbow, Tye). While dystopian literature and films narrate the conflict of the individual with the corrupt society, painting and other visual arts can focus solely on the setting or the landscape of the catastrophe or the social, human actions gone wrong. While dystopian literature and cinema present the mechanism of a corrupt system at work, visual arts present its consequences or aftermath. That is the reason why the term "postapocalyptic" would perhaps serve even better to describe these paintings than "dystopian"; with due notice that "postapocalyptic" and "dystopian" are often used interchangeably, as synonyms.

Apart from referring to painting, the term "dystopian" is used in discussing photography and video-art. The Belgian-Beninese photographer Fabrice Monteiro¹⁵ is widely recognized as an author whose work is characterized as "dystopian"; this particularly applies to his photo series *The Prophecy* (2014), both in his own words and in others' reviews of his work.¹⁶ The photos, taken in Senegal, Nigeria, Colombia and Australia, tackle various environmental problems, like oil spills, garbage dumps, slaughter of wild animals, pollution of air, rivers and seas, deforestation, shore erosion, dying reefs, and other human-made disasters. They are a peculiar

combination of the found and the arranged: in each of these photos, a (human, female) model, dressed in extravagant clothes made up from various found materials — or outright garbage — is posing in a strikingly devastated landscape. The model represents a djinn, a spirit sent to Earth to witness humankind's destruction. While the models and their clothes are arranged, the captured landscapes are authentic — a combination which makes these photos eerily strange: compellingly fantastic and real at the same time. Monteiro's photo series *The Prophecy* demonstrates that dystopian projections of the future are based on the reality of the world today.

Canadian artist Jon Rafman's short animation *Disasters under the Sun* (2019)¹⁷ has been described as a "post-human dystopia featuring faceless 3-D avatars continuously tortured in abstract digital space, a terrifying image of a future where all humanity is uploaded to a virtual purgatory and endlessly abused".¹⁸ It was exhibited together with the animation *Dream Journal* (2016–2019) by the same artist at the Venice Biennale 2019, where both works were labelled "dystopian" in the exhibition catalogue.¹⁹ In contrast to the previously analysed dystopian still images, Rafman's animations entail narration; their story-telling, though rudimentary and fragmentary, engages with power dynamics and thus brings these works closer to the original notion of dystopia as a narrative genre focused on the conflict with a corrupt system or with an oppressive hegemonic regime.

In the context of Croatian art, the term "dystopian" is particularly often applied to the paintings of Sebastijan Dračić.²⁰ Moreover, in numerous interviews the artist explicitly stated that he found the concept of dystopia exceptionally relevant for our time, and that he drew extensive inspiration from it.²¹ In his paintings, Dračić depicts deserted places, both natural (like forests: *The beginning and the end of the world 3*, 2011; Fig. 5) and artificial (like supermarkets: *Concentrated animal feeding operation*, 2017), whose air of eeriness and anxiety is created by dimmed lighting, elevated and distant viewpoints and cryptic titles. His favourite themes are also mass media, consumerism and technology. In addition to his paintings, Dračić dealt with this theme in his inaugural lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, entitled *Utopia and Dystopia in Painting*, in which he used the term "dystopian" retroactively, to describe a selection of paradigmatic paintings made in the period between the 15th and the 20th century.²²

Croatian artist Jasenko Rasol is the author of the *Dystopia* photo series (2016; Fig. 6), in which he registered a dystopian reality of a utopian project. He photographed the Haludovo hotel complex on Krk, a project devised as modernist architecture for elite tourism, which went through a turbulent history of many ideologically charged conversions and changes of purpose, all the way from mass tourism through accommodation of war refugees to the present state of being left to decay. The photos

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Tye, in interview with Hanoun, "Getting paid to paint — that's the dream, right?" We meet illustrator Alice Tye".

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Images available at the artist's site.

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Davidson, "Future shock: Fabrice Monteiro's prophetic spirits warn of keeping complacent"; Muckian, "Dystopia is Now"; "The rise of dystopian art".

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Animation available at the artist's site.

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Storyline at the IMDb website.

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May You Live In Interesting Times. Short Guide.

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Zajović, "Distopijski pejzaži mogućih budućnosti u MSU".

21

Hrgović, "Nitko nam nije rekao da je nastupila Orwelova distopija pa mislimo da smo još slobodni". D. Su. "Sebastijan Dračić nakon sedam godina stanke izlaže u MSU: 'Oduvijek su me inspirirale ideje distopije i utopije... To će se vidjeti u Kobi'." Zajović, "Distopijski pejzaži mogućih budućnosti u MSU". J. B. / Hina, "Izložba slikara Sebastijana Dračića otvara se u MSU".

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Dračić, *Distopija i utopija u slikarstvu* (unpublished).



Sl. / Fig. 5 Sebastijan Dračić, *The beginning and the end of the world 3*, 2011, oil on canvas / ulje na platnu, 163 × 253 cm, privately owned / privatno vlasništvo. Courtesy of the artist / Ljubaznošću umjetnika

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Sl. / Fig. 6 Jasenko Rasol, from the photo cycle / iz fotografskog ciklusa *Dystopia*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist / Ljubaznošću umjetnika

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document giving in of once magnificent architecture to forces of nature, and its vanishing under lush vegetation. Rasol's photos testify to the fact that dystopia is not only a concern of the imaginary future but a condition that we already face in the present, as well as to the ironical clash of a grandiose idea and a disappointing, grotesque reality.

UTOPIAN IN VISUAL ARTS

Where the term "utopian" is concerned, one should note that despite its being in use since the 16th century, in the context of visual arts it became particularly popular in the 20th century. Lyman Tower Sargent identified three broad directions in utopianism (the "three faces of utopianism"): utopian thought or philosophy, utopian literature, and the communitarian movements.²³ German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch is well known for his thesis on the utopian function of all art and literature; according to Bloch, all artistic activity is based on the idea that art makes the world a better place. Utopia is a "not-yet", in the sense of being a possibility. The essential function of utopia is to serve as a critique of what is present. The active substance of hope is the positive Utopian function (defined as "a transcending one without transcendence"); the historical substance of hope is the human culture with respect to its concrete Utopian horizon.²⁴ The movement that is traditionally seen as being inherently linked with utopian visions is the Avant-Garde, whose manifestoes brought blueprints for a new life order. Project of the historical avant-garde movement was often driven by a praxis-oriented notion of utopianism, which aimed at the construction of a new society, a new culture and a new humanity. According to David Ayers and Benedikt Hjartarson, one could say that the utopian impulse was "the driving force of the avant-garde process". The Russian revolution played a key role in the utopian turn of the early 20th century, while World War I marked the end of the utopian notions of cultural progress but also triggered new utopian visions.²⁵ In recent years, the scope of utopia studies has been drastically expanded; from focusing on the genre of literary utopia, it has opened up to what Ernst Bloch has called "the utopian impulse". In modernism studies, this has led to a renewed attention to the spectre of political energies that informed projects of the early 20th century.²⁶

According to Richard Noble, the term utopian can signify the impulse or aspiration to make the world better, either by imagining a better way to be or by actually attempting to make it so. Utopia and utopian can mean naïve, idealistic, pie-in-the-sky dreaming, an imaginary but ultimately futile attempt to escape the immanent reality. The utopian strategies range across: aspirations to build shining cities on the hill, small scale micro-utopian projects, full-on activist engagement with social problems, reconstructions of historical utopian

monuments, parodic manipulations of utopia as an aesthetic form, and even dystopian imaginings intended to critique current social conditions. While admitting it is hard to identify a single aesthetic strategy common to all utopian art, Noble finds that the following occur particularly often: the use of the architectural model (Constant Nieuwenhuys, Dan Graham, Bodys Isek Kingelez, Nils Norman), the use of the manifesto (Guy Debord, Joseph Beuys, Liam Gillick), references to design and technology (Mark Titchner, Pil and Galia Kollektiv, Goshka Macuga) and collaborative actions (J. Beuys, Agnes Denes, Antony Gormley, Jeremy Deller, Rirkrit Taravangja). Noble claims that all utopian art is political and singles out Beuys's utopian aesthetic as the one that had the most influence on contemporary art's current obsession with the importance of participation.²⁷

Joseph Beuys's artistic practice encompasses performance, sculpture, ambient installation, works on paper, photography, video documentation and manifestos. In his manifestos, he identifies military threats, ecological crisis, economic crisis, and crisis of consciousness and meaning as symptoms of the general social crisis.²⁸ He considered art to be capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a dysfunctional social system, which is why he devised the concept of a "social sculpture / social architecture" as an art discipline in which every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor or an architect of the social organism.²⁹ It is precisely this wish, or intention, to change society through art that has ensured his art would be recognized as "utopian" by many art historians and critics;³⁰ and the artist himself did not refrain from using the term in this sense in reference to his own art.³¹

In the context of Croatian art, the work of internationally renowned naïve painter Ivan Rabuzin has often been described as "utopian" by art historians and critics.³² Other synonyms for an ideal place were also used abundantly in reference to his art: he was recognized as the painter of "paradise",³³ "Eden",³⁴ "idyll"³⁵ and "Arcadia".³⁶ Art historian Ivan Sedej particularly emphasised the utopian quality of Rabuzin's landscapes and called the artist a "creator of paradisiacal landscapes and Zagorje Utopias".³⁷ He wrote that Rabuzin chose to construct "fantastic versions of ideal landscapes — rural Utopias". While emphasising that "Utopia is a human projection", he observed that the nature Rabuzin presented on his canvases was "utterly perfect", and that "each element in it submits to a higher order made visible in geometric forms, symmetry, and concentricism".³⁸ Rabuzin himself referred to his own art as utopian: "My paintings, as is indeed the case with all art, are fantasies about a possible world and about a man in that world; therefore, about the future man. [...] If, one day, in the far future, fondness for beauty of the intact nature prevails, and if human wish to live in such nature comes true, may my images serve as a model for a new world to a utopian man."³⁹

- 23
Sargent, cited in: Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science-Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, 70.
- 24
Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays. Studies in contemporary German social thought*, 3, 12, 107.
- 25
Ayers, Hjartarson, "New People of a New Life", in: *Utopia: The Avant-Garde, Modernism and (Im)possible Life*, 3, 7, 8.
- 26
Van Dijck, Posman, Demoor, "World War I, Modernism and Minor Utopias", in: *Utopia: The Avant-Garde, Modernism and (Im)possible Life*, 33.
- 27
Noble, "Introduction // The Utopian Impulse in Contemporary Art", 12–19.
- 28
Beuys, "An Appeal for an Alternative // 1982", 116–121.
- 29
Beuys, "I am Searching for a Field Character // 1973", 114.
- 30
For example, Kuspit, "Beuys: mast, pust i alkemija", 129; Honnef, "Beuys – Warhol", 216; in: *Dossier Beuys*.
- 31
Beuys, in interview with Hamilton, 394–395.
- 32
Škunca, *Nepomućeni krajolici*; Sedej, *Ivan Rabuzin*; Depolo, *Lirika palete*; Zidić, *Rabuzin*.
- 33
Bihalji – Merin, "Ivan Rabuzin: Priroda kao raj" [Ivan Rabuzin: Nature as Paradise]; Vigorelli, *Il paradiso di Rabuzin* [Rabuzin's Paradise].
- 34
Dimitrijević, "Ivan Rabuzin / Slikar zemaljskog raja" [Ivan Rabuzin / Painter of Eden], 83–93; Zidić, "Rabuzin, Ivan", 668–669.
- 35
Šola, *Ivan Rabuzin*.
- 36
Paić, "Rabuzinov Arkadijski vrt" [Rabuzin's Arcadian Garden].
- 37
Sedej, *Ivan Rabuzin*, 1.
- 38
Ibid, 20.
- 39
Depolo, Josip, Rabuzin, Ivan. "Duboka povezanost japanske i moje umjetnosti", 206. [Trans. by SS.]
- 40
Soyer Tangen, "Between Utopia and Dystopia // University Museum of Contemporary Art, Mexico City".
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"Utopia/Dystopia: Construction and Destruction in Photography and Collage", The Museum of Fine Arts, Huston.
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"Group Exhibition // Utopia / Dystopia // Architecture, City, Territory", Mestna galerija Ljubljana.
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"Utopia/Dystopia", MAAT – Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology.
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"Utopia/Dystopia", Fellini Gallery.
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"FUTURE MEMORIES. Utopia Dystopia Nature", School of Creative Media, Hong Kong.
- 47
"Utopia Dystopia: the myth of progress seen from the South", Museo Madre, Napoli.



Sl. / Fig. 7 Ivan Rabuzin, *On the Hills — Primeval Forest*, 1960, oil on canvas / ulje na platnu, 69,2 × 116,7 cm, Hrvatski muzej naivne umjetnosti, Zagreb. Courtesy of the museum / Ljubaznošću muzeja

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CONCLUSION

"Utopian" and "dystopian" are transmedia and multidisciplinary terms that are occasionally used in the context of visual arts. Although they have lately been habitually brought together in concepts of various group exhibitions, where they function as binary opposites (with connotations of ideal vs. reality; hope vs. despair), their range of meaning is not quite symmetrical.

"Utopian" is used in descriptions of art movements, artistic practices and art works. Sometimes it refers to a special kind of principle that underlies art, as an "impulse" or intention, usually implying a desire for social change through art; at other times it refers to the visual aspect of an art work, usually implying idealistic and/or idealized imagining and visualization. In the context of visual arts, the relevant use of the term covers over one hundred years: from the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century — paradigmatically associated with "optimal projections" — all the way to contemporary art activism of the first two decades of the 21st century.

"Dystopian", on the other hand, started to be used in the context of visual arts only recently, during the last ten years or so. It is distinctly used to describe a certain mood or ambience; more often than not, it is associated with a specific visual, iconographic aspect of an artwork. Artworks described as "dystopian" are often thematically concerned with environmental issues, consumerism, oppressive socio-political systems, power relations and inter-species dynamics, therefore exhibiting awareness of the most urgent ecological conditions and socio-political problems the humankind is facing today. In envisioning a possible future, these artworks often present the world as if seen from a *post-human* perspective, from a time when humankind has ceased to be the dominant or even an existent species. The popularity of dystopian literature and films has undeniably influenced the rise of "dystopian" visual art in the recent years; especially apparent is the influence of film dystopias (for example, in typical motifs, formats, angles). Unlike the idea of a "utopian impulse" in art, there is no (nor could there possibly be) such thing as a "dystopian impulse" in art, as any such ultimately destructive endeavour would cease to be art. Both utopian and dystopian art is made as a critical response to social reality. The recent rise in the popularity of dystopia (in all art forms) has induced a re-actualization of the term "utopia" in the discourse of art critics and curators, offering a possibility for an intriguing comparison of opposites.

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Sl. / Fig. 8 Joseph Beuys, *Incontro con Beuys*, from / iz 21 signed postcards, 1974, 14.5 × 10.7 cm, Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, Zagreb. Courtesy of the museum / Ljubaznošću muzeja

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