



UTOPIAN AND DYSTOPIAN CULTURE IN FUTURISTIC FICTION DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

There are many works of art that can be considered as futuristic. The term in itself covers a large area of any design discipline while it also has many sub-genres (Juan and Ya-Li 2018) (Poggemeyer 2019). This research focuses on the usage of two different concepts which are utopian and dystopian cultures of selected futuristic fictional works of art. Five different works and three different samples from those five were taken for inspection resulting in a total of fifteen different images representing the example works and were analyzed by the researchers in order to gather enough information to make deductions and suggestions for any reader who aims to create a futuristic work of art with a concept of utopia or dystopia. Key differences were also noted and presented to the reader for comparison and base their future work on. In conclusion, definitive key points of both concepts were highlighted and major aspects were listed to help the reader better understand the two cultures.

Keywords: Futuristic fiction, utopia, dystopia, design choices

INTRODUCTION

Utopia and dystopia are two different, major concepts which are widely referred to or used in diverse disciplines including any style of artistic design (Moylan 2018). In this research, we focus on the definitive choices, styles, consistencies and similarities found in products of art which are considered to be in futuristic style under utopian and dystopian concept. How exactly is utopia or dystopia defined generally depends on the creator of the artistic product but there are a few clear definitions on both concepts (McBeath and Webb 2000) (Yegen 2018). While a utopia is considered to be a near-perfect state for human-kind to live in, dystopia mainly consists of the opposite, near-worst state for human-kind to live in (SARGENT 1994). The term does not define being set in the future as a rule but many utopian writings like Samuel R. Delany's *Triton* and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* are in fact, set in the future in their times of writing (Moylan 2018). That also seems to be true for dystopian works of art as well like the videogame *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* by Square Enix or *Cyberpunk 2077* by CD Projekt S.A. (Square Enix, Inc. 2016) (CD Projekt SA 2020) (Foith 2013).

Futurism is also a term which is widely used in many works of art utilizing different disciplines just like utopia and dystopia. Shortly, as an archetype of its sub-genres, futurism is a style where representations are created in an imagination of a future time with a clear impact of heavily advanced technology regardless of being existent or non-existent today. A few examples for futuristic work of art would be the *Star Wars Universe* as a whole including

novels, movies and videogames made under its hood, Batman series, Mass Effect series by BioWare in the same manner (Gilliland 2016) (Dutton, Consalvo and Harper 2011). When we delve into the sub-genres however, differences might be drastic. In our work, obviously, the two sub-genres considered are dystopian futuristic design and utopian futuristic design where such is the case.

No matter the sub-genre however, technology has its dominance over the style. The idea generally comes from augmenting or improving what we have today and applying it to a concept in future time. Reasonably, it's safe to think that future will hold more and better technological advancements than today, hence the said dominance (Yegen 2018) (Poggemeyer 2019).

Throughout this study, we will be sampling, examining and analyzing different examples by deduction and comparing them in certain aspects of their respective design disciplines. Some of those examples include 'The Jetsons' cartoon, 'Black Mirror' television show, 'Deus Ex: Human Revolution' videogame, 'The Matrix' movie series, 'Bicentennial Man' as in both the 1999 movie directed by Chris Columbus and 1976 novella by Isaac Asimov.

After the analysis, the findings will be presented and key points of utopian and dystopian futuristic design will be highlighted. This research, aims to be a helpful asset to designers of any work of art which has futurism, utopia and/or dystopia as its basis. Therefore, for that very aim, suggestions derived from findings will be made in order to help the design process for any reader.

METHOD

The method of this research is, as an archetype, analysis. First, samples of example media and works of art will be picked and experienced in corresponding medium by the researchers. Then the researchers will take notes of any parts related to the three terms defined in introduction. How that part is used will be inquired by the researchers and possible answers or leads will be envisioned and written down as findings. To be more specific, first the samples' futuristic features will be determined, then whether the image represents a dystopian future or a utopian future will be asserted and then key points leading to that decision will be noted. Finally, based on which style is used in which example, the researchers will make suggestions to the reader to be used as a potential guide in design process.

Utopia and dystopia

While many similar explanations and definitions have been given by philosophers, researchers and literature experts about the two terms utopia and dystopia, we will base our research on Sargent's detailed and thorough explanations of utopia and dystopia as he is also accepted as the founding father of contemporary utopian studies (Kłosiński 2018) (SARGENT 1994). The definitions made by Kłosiński this research takes as a base are listed below.

Eutopia or Positive Utopia: A non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lives.

Dystopia or Negative Utopia: a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lives.

While there are more and broader sub-types of utopias, we will only need these two and for ease of reading, this research only refers to them as utopia and dystopia.

Utopian examples in futuristic design

The Jetsons

Let's take our first example that consists of styles and parts that can be considered as fitting for utopian futuristic design. We will start with the well-known cartoon The Jetsons. The series aired in 1962–63 and was created by William Hanna and Joseph Barbera for American Television at first but later in 1985-87 it was distributed worldwide and translated to numerous languages (Tumlin 2014). Shortly, the cartoon tells the daily stories of an above-average family in a future where every aspect of daily life is improved drastically via technological advancements and countless acts are automated like wearing clothes, brushing teeth or even taking a shower. It also generally outputs a bright and happy state for the future where everything works in a near-perfect manner, thus we may consider this as a utopian approach (Yegen 2018) (McBeath and Webb 2000). Almost immediately, from the intro animation of the cartoon, our eyes catch a lot of different designs that could be considered as both futuristic and utopian. We see the family driving in a 'flying car' and leaving the car when they're close to the place they need to go in smaller, mini-flying-cars which are designed in circular, dome-like manner and then get on to a self-moving platform to get to work or school without even having to walk. From waking up to arriving at work, almost everything is automated and works just as expected.



Figure 1: A frame from the cartoon, The Jetsons showing the design approach

Also, a general positive feeling is present throughout the entire series where there are a lot of happy, fun and optimistic moments without any major problems (Rollin 2006) (Tumlin 2014). As described briefly before, this kind of artwork reasonably fits under utopian concept along with its futuristic aspects.

Let's have a look at some highlights of technological advancements that compliment human life pushing it further to an effortless, problem-less routine and a relaxed state-of-mind about life and future without any kind of stress. Flying cars, eliminating or drastically reducing the rate of crash based life loss, are one of the most aspired technologies by any futuristic media. Self-moving roads which eliminates the need of walking or running to get to a place in time. Auto waking up bed with also self-moving platform which brushes teeth and prepares

clothing for the person too which is also something highly aspired by humanity to make life easier and happier.(Poggemeyer 2019)(McBeath and Webb 2000)(Yegen 2018). These improvements, along with many others throughout the show like the existence of Rosie the robot maid, auto-moving chairs, dinner making machines, make life much easier but more importantly, the show never touches the negative sides of these advancements. For example, self-moving platforms which eliminate the need for walking could also lead to excessive weight gain due to effortless and no movement life style. Another example would be dinner making machines could cause -with enough time- humanity to completely forget how to cook food. Another question that comes to mind is that how is all this powered exactly? Solar panels? What happens if the source cuts off for some reason? Entire human race collapses?

As it is clear, these questions or negative aspects are not considered within this shows design choices. There's always a solution and not a single problem, thus the utopia. One more thing to note could be the dominant presence of spherical, orbital and oval architecture and furniture. This resembles with the design choices in General Motors World's Fair 'Futurama' exhibit which took place in 1939 in Chicago, New York. Dome-like buildings and aerodynamically designed cars seem to have heavily influenced the series (Tumlin 2014)(Myrick 2020).



Figure 2: Another frame from The Jetsons cartoon showing happy faces and the iconic flying car figure

Black Mirror

While this television show depicts highly different states in each episode and all episodes tell a separate story from one another, all of them take place in near-future. Some are highly dystopian, imagining a very dark future for humanity, but there a few episodes which focus on positive aspects of a utopian world where everybody again lives in a near-perfect state(Scolari 2019). During the first 20 minutes of the episode named "Nosedive" of season three, maybe not as advanced as the prior example but still improved and future technology is shown in a euphorically positive way. An ideal social status is kept under control by society itself by rating and voting a person as a whole. These first 20 minutes, have definitive design choices

that affect the entire utopian part of the episode. Colors are in pastels and mainly consist of bright pink and white shades which envisions happiness, softness and a relaxed state-of-mind.



Figure 3: A frame from Black Mirror TV Show.

Also there are glass-like transparent, thin computers without any more parts than the screen itself operated mid-air, with touch and from one device to another in close range by performing gestures(Thomas and Rajan 2019)(Scolari 2019).

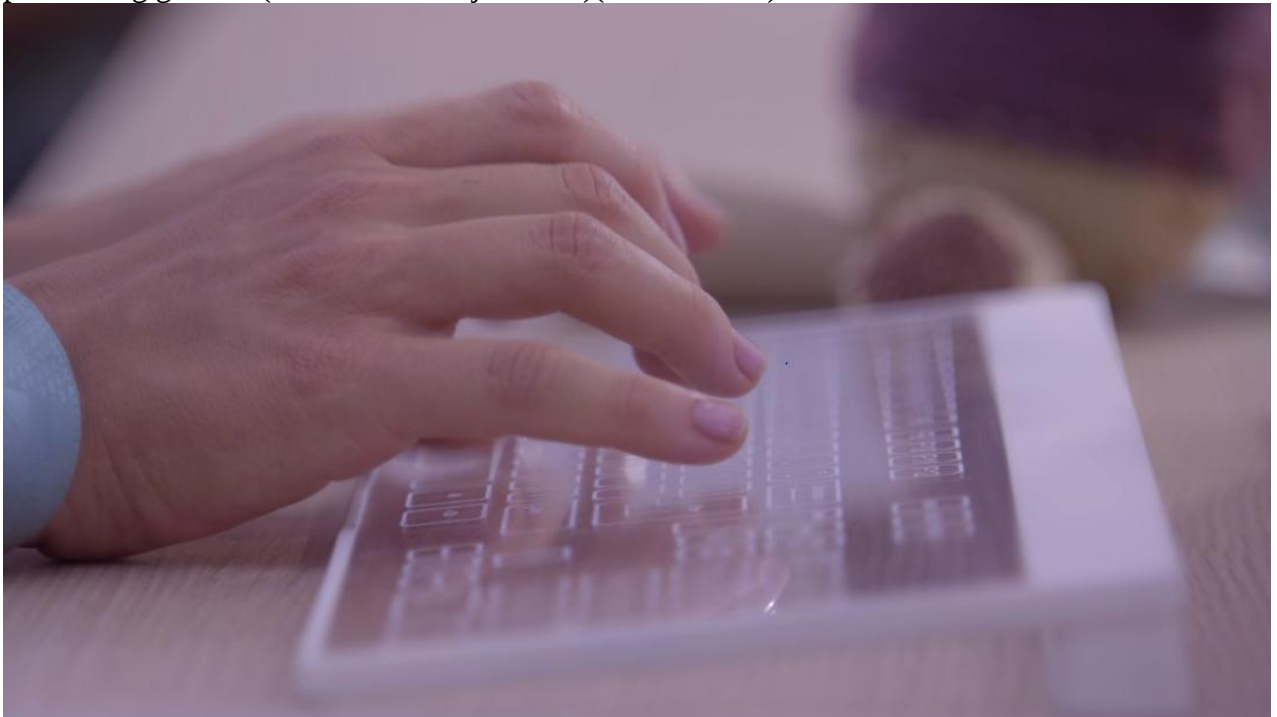


Figure 4: Another frame from Black Mirror TV Show showing a transparent, touch operated keyboard design.

Aside from the main sub-text of the episode as a whole, these parts form a utopian future where everybody lives in the same standard and almost in the same routine while still having the power of choice and identity. Also, obviously by again advanced technology, specifically screen-wise, the life is made a lot easier for people with high social score. If one has a high

social score, many things are solved without any hassle. We also see eye implanted contact lenses with analysis capabilities of human body and a form of wireless, easily attachable virtual reality googles.

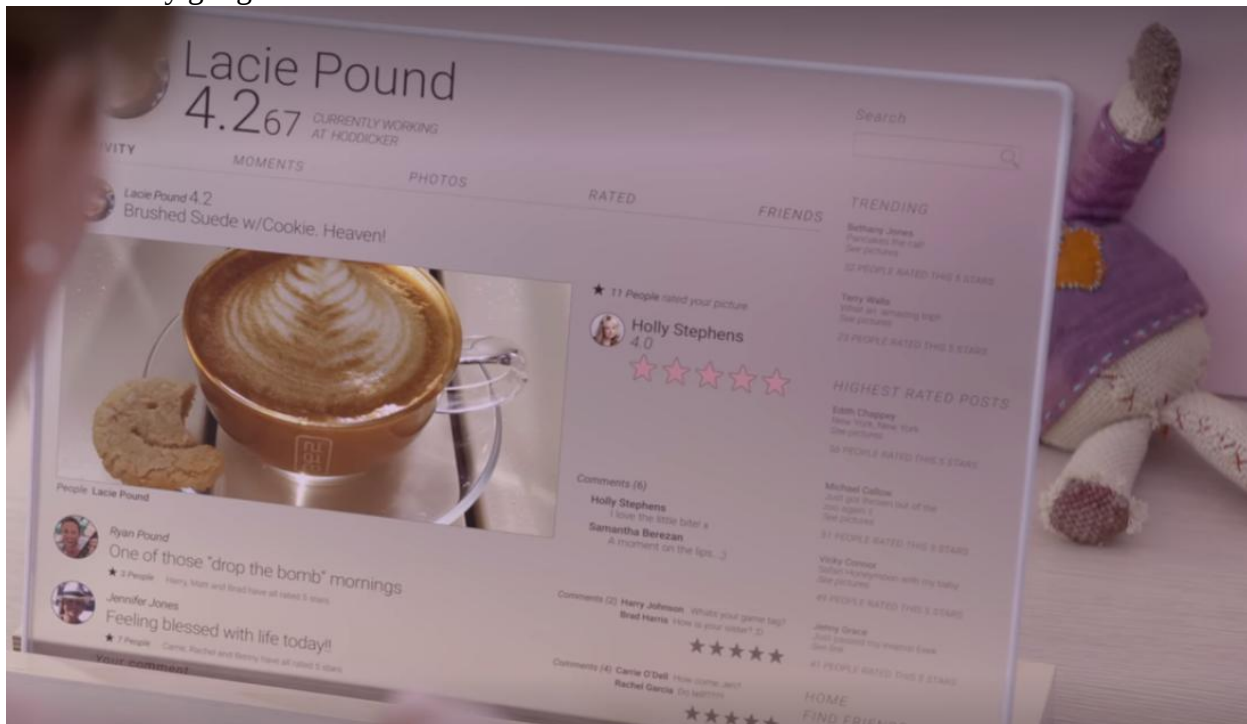


Figure 5: Another frame from Black Mirror TV show, the glass-like screen with pink washed colors.

Both this fictional, highly-advanced technology integrated into daily life and the almost-perfect living standard with monotonous but optimistic routines leads this 20 minute part to be considered as futuristic and utopian which makes it a great fit for this research(Poggemeyer 2019, 33-36).

The episode also dives down deep (hence the name of the episode) to the quite opposite side of the world in the following parts. While still it keeps the futuristic subtleties everywhere, the bright pink, happily optimistic and ideal utopia disappears in almost seconds due to wrongful decisions made by the protagonist. So to conclude this example in its entirety, we might say it mixes both utopian and dystopian aspects with futurism but the focus of this work is the first 20 minutes of the episode mentioned before.

Bicentennial Man

This is actually a science fiction novella written by Isaac Asimov and then later was adapted to big screen with Chris Columbus as the director. The main plot of the entity is the evolution of the protagonist Andrew Martin from an android robot to a sentient human being. The movie, debates and presents massive questions and discussions about ethics, humanity, machine ethics, codes of programming, humanitarian benefits and most importantly about what does it actually mean to be a human being and how exactly is a being considered human(Kahambing and Deguma 2019)(KOWALCZYK 2018). From the perspective of futuristic design and utopia, we have android robots made in a holding that is at the edges of future technology and experimenting with a lot of robotic advancements to ease human life to achieve a perfect utopia where everybody is happy and all the problems of the world are solved but those very robots which are served to our door by that company. Reasonably, as we have already seen in the Jetsons example too, helpful robot workers are generally

considered a big part of any utopian futuristic design(Foith 2013)(Kahambing and Deguma 2019)(Myrick 2020).

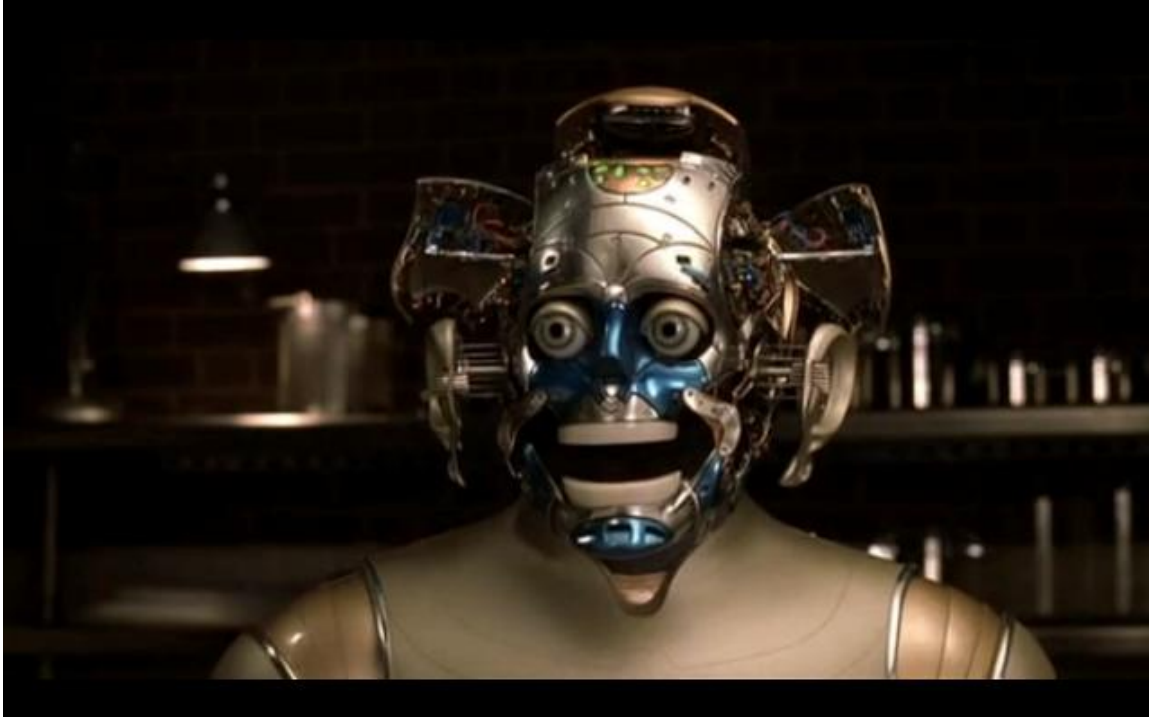


Figure 6: The protagonist Andrew Martin from the movie Bicentennial Man

Such is the case in this movie too. Throughout the entire movie, we see a few places with augmented tech devices, vehicles and these robots serving humanity. One thing to note, contrary to the previous examples of a utopian world, *Bicentennial Man* takes a more realistic looking approach rather than bright, beautifully enhanced colors and euphorically happy faces. Instead, the movie has a brown-orange oriented bleak color palette with a touch of gray on any tech device. This touch, is significantly dominant in any futuristic technology design in many of the examples we may inspect including the previous and latter ones found in this research(Juan and Ya-Li 2018).



Figure 7: The World Congress building and city-scape from the movie Bicentennial Man

We also see the ‘Flying Car’ concept from before. In addition, unusual materials, even sometimes non-existent ones are quite common in the movie. Just like the examples before but with a different material structure, all tech devices, buildings and vehicles are washed up with a metal looking, aluminum or titanium resembling textures. Considering the general color palette of the movie, these choices correspond with it. As we already mentioned the movie is in the more realistic look, it is safe to think that many polished and clear metal surfaces, unless specifically customized for otherwise, look just like in the movie.



Figure 8: A frame from the movie Bicentennial Man showing the futuristic design.

As seen in Figure 8, the future home is designed with a lot of technological devices and parts involved. The big cone-like heating device seems to be also a lightning source for the home while the armchairs have lightning inside their bottom parts. Also the gray metal look is again dominant in those tech too.

In conclusion to utopian examples in futuristic design, while more example work can be given for the same definitive design choices like Tomorrow Land (2015), Minority Report (2002) movies or The Citadel from the Mass Effect videogame, some important principles seem to be present in nearly all of them (Juan and Ya-Li 2018) (Moylan 2018) (McBeath and Webb 2000). Findings section of this research will cover more in detail but a few key points to look for when designing a futuristic artwork with a utopian approach would be an almost-singular distinct color scheme with more on the bright and happy side, heavily advanced tech devices and vehicles with somewhat unusual but solid and clean materials, symmetrical or specifically ordered shapes, neat and clean looking objects along with happy and relaxed faces/bodies according to the analysis deduced from the sample artwork.

Dystopian examples in futuristic design

Deus Ex: Human Revolution

This is a video game telling the story of Adam Jensen who is an ‘augmented’ person and also the protagonist of the entire series. Though the story has multiple parts, is long and the world setting is ever-changing, design principles and decisions are nearly always the same. The world is set in 2027 and is in a highly distressed state. Ethics of human biology advancements, life extending, body improving technology like faster and more powerful

prosthetic arms which are called augmentation are a big debate and people are divided among different groups. While some are pro-augmentation, some are against it and some are in-between. The technological improvements are at the center of the story all the time and the world is very far from being perfect(Foith 2013).



Figure 9: A Concept Art for the video game Deus Ex: Human Revolution by Eidos Montreal

Clearly enough, one of these so-called augmentations can be seen near the forehead of the protagonist in Figure 9. But more importantly, the backdrop is what we need to observe to determine what makes it a dystopia. First of all, the overall imagery is rather chaotic and hectic compared to the utopian distinct, solid and almost-perfect ones as expected. As the term suggests a considerably worse situation than now, the design fits to that suggestion with armed police and some people, even children fighting against each other with a clearly overpowered force on prior. There also seems to be big machinery or robot like figures who also are on the side of the police force and some extreme situations are also present like the people lying on the floor either can be considered dead or unconscious(Foith 2013)(Kłosieński 2018). The lightning and coloring seems pretty dark and complex with heavy yellow-green overlay. The city-scape behind is not that distinct but it looks like there are tall skyscrapers with many different lights which also add to the chaos of the scene. Intense smoke creates a dense fog and light coming through that fog just blurs the image and makes it even more chaotic.



Figure 10: City-scape scene from the game.

The Hengsha city in the game share the same technological advancements and styles put in everywhere. In Figure 10, a poster featuring an augmented human is on the left wall, a place with apparent holographic yellow light windows are the two most upfront figures but all the chaos, dense and messy structures, garbage on the streets, broken tiles, stains and heavy bright light on each building to compete with other places of interest, depict a complex and hectic picture. One important point to mention could be that the sky is almost non-existent or is not visible to eye easily which may be considered as depressing and claustrophobic. Also, symmetry is again almost non-existent in this picture.



Figure 11: The physical divider of the entire city separating the sky from the part below.

There is a big physical separation of the city vertically by numerous structures and buildings as seen in Figure 11. This leaves the city at the bottom almost without direct sunlight which could cause a lot of problems on different levels. There is already not much sunlight from the dark sky and when we add the separator to that, the bottom part should be suffering heavily from many diseases and depletions of sources that come with sunlight. This supports the general dark and unhappy state of any dystopia as the term also suggests(Square Enix, Inc. 2016)(Malak 2019).

The Matrix

The first film of the series was released in 1999 and is set in a simulation world in which humans believe it to be real. Most of humanity does not even know that they are living in a simulated world built by artificial intelligence and their real bodies are used for source of power in the real, extremely dark dystopic world. The protagonists are the humans that are uniquely able to realize the simulation around them and ‘wake up’ in the real world. Only one city of humans remains while all the other parts of the world are owned and governed by machines which are powered by artificial intelligence. That city has very limited resources, is barely standing and does not have a big enough army to fight against machine power. Life is extremely hard and dangerous, no good food or drinks or no relaxing and happy places exist. Basically, almost nothing in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is satisfied(Maslow 1943)(Trifonas 2019)(FRIGERIO 2017).



Figure 12: Zion's top layer in the movie The Matrix

We see Zion, the last city of humanity in Figure 12. Hardly to be called a city that we know of today, it is built underground and is protected by a huge, metallic dome with a correspondingly big gun turret attached to the very top of the city structure. Similar to the samples before, the technological advancement is heavily dominant and yet again we see the ‘flying car’ or rather a ship-like car here as well. Dark, mostly gray, bleak and light-lacking color scheme is present. Every part looks almost like a facility as survival depends on the work of every single human alive. Houses and many other structures are built from the same material for efficiency and survivability. Also the chaotic look from before is present in this city too. One main difference from the previous samples is that this movie has either heavy bleak blue or dark brown color palette depending on the scene and situation when in Zion(Trifonas 2019).



Figure 13: Machine city in The Matrix

As Zion looks chaotic but there is still some level of order to how the city works and functions itself, machine city is even more hectic than Zion. Sky and sun blocking darkness covering the atmosphere plays an important role here as well. Many strange machinery, self-moving robots, flying cars, machine operated buildings and many auto vehicles are seen through the scene. A heavy fog is also added to overall design. One reasonable thought is that artificial intelligence, would not have any need for colors that would set a certain mood, thus, just cold and bleak colors are picked(Juan and Ya-Li 2018)(FRIGERIO 2017)(Moylan 2018).



Figure 14: Human farm power plant in The Matrix

What is depicted in Figure 14 is the power plant that provides electricity to machine city via consuming the energy produced by human bodies that are brain-fed a simulated world called The Matrix unconsciously. Essentially, unless somehow awoken, humans born and die in a single cell like pod to feed machines with electricity throughout their entire lives(FRIGERIO 2017). The image however shows the farm in its entirety along with the collector like robots patrolling the area for keeping the farm operational. There is a distinct overlay of ice blue color that resembles with electrical energy to the whole look. Also the only two considerable light sources seem to be the radiating energy from the plant and the lightning strikes from the dark sky. Again following the dark design, even the farm is quite ordered, chaos still exists in the scene as it is still a complex image.

FINDINGS

From both the visual design and written work or studies, key points for futuristic design that inherits a utopian or a dystopian concept have been noted. Considering the utopian approach, we found out that there are a few major shared ideas among different designs. These common choices for a more utopian culture in futuristic design are listed below;

- Color Scheme
 - Bright, clear, distinct and mostly eye-candy color palettes.
 - Either almost monotonous, singular color shades or as in opposite, heavily saturated, intense colors.
 - Colors that are often used to induce happiness, warmth and relaxing feelings.
- Material choices
 - Clear cut, clean looking and bright or distinctive materials like aluminum, platinum or glass and plexi
 - Soft or at least not eye-disturbing, easy to touch, non-intimidating and high quality looking materials.
- Object and Shape design
 - Almost always symmetrical or has a pattern or order on its own.
 - Soft edged, circular or rounded or even oval shapes in general
 - Would not be considered possible to create easily with today's technology.

Also as a side note, the general mood is happy –almost euphoric- and relaxed. Everything is almost perfected in its own way and the feelings are always up, not down. From these key points, it is safe to think that utopian culture in futuristic design is more of an impossibly euphoric state for humanity to live in and the design choices always seem to support that idea. When it comes to the opposite, dystopian approach to futuristic design, although at first the shared ideas seem almost directly opposite, they are just different choices, not quite opposite. These common choices for a more dystopian culture in futuristic design are listed below;

- Color Scheme
 - Dark, muddy, cold, almost indistinguishable, light-lacking or with too much light and sometimes even harder to read colors.
 - Revolving around one or two color palettes centered on the shades of each one. Intense but generally de-saturated colors. More on the realistic side.
 - Stress, distress, worrying and nervous feelings inducing colors. Almost always corresponds with chaos.
- Material choices
 - Mainly dark, cold, dirty or damaged, more realistic materials without much emphasis on what the material is actually made of.
 - Hard looking, solid, sometimes dangerous to touch, rough looking materials.
- Object and Shape design
 - Chaotic, complex and detailed objects, many variations and more realistic touches on every part. Resembles the current real world but in a much worse state in general.
 - Glowing shapes seems to be an important feature. Fog is also a main source for covering things and mudding the picture more.

The general mood for a dystopian culture is unhappy, distressed and desperate. While nearly all the mood is down, many basic needs lacking and life standards are way too low, the future is not bright either. It seems dark and looks like most folk have given up on life.

From these key points, it is safe to think that utopian culture in futuristic design is more of an impossibly euphoric state for humanity to live in and the design choices always seem to support that idea.

These key points are the results of the researchers' observations. Deducting from the samples given, also including the entire medium, not just the sample, these lists have been created. Of course, by analyzing more and more samples from the field, these lists might have additions to them but to conclude this research, we consider them sufficient.

CONCLUSION

Utopia and dystopia culture in futuristic works of art differ almost contrastingly but also contain some similar concepts which can intersect one another. By bringing the findings together, it is safe to state that a utopia in a futuristic work of art, is represented with almost-impossibly advanced technological devices which has clear and clean materials like glass or perfect metal like chrome, aluminum or titanium. Also the state of the world and humanity is nearly perfect for a human to live in where most problems are eliminated by the advance of technology. To set the mood, intense and colorful, saturated palettes are used to express happiness, joy, freedom or positive helpfulness of future technology. Most colors included but not limited to are the shades with an emphasis to bright and pastel ones of pink, blue, lime and tan. Order is also an important feature. Either by symmetry or by numeric, physical or any order actually, perfect state is aspired to be achieved. Routines and same mannerisms seem to be present in all utopias as well.

Using all these features as a base, one can create a utopian concept for a futuristic design. One thing to note is that these are not definitions or rules to use as a base. These are only guidelines that aim to help the designer or reader to have a consistent idea on the imagery and concept of utopian culture in futuristic design.

Moving on to the dystopian side, it is also represented with heavily advanced technology whether it got destroyed and wiped out or still present not being important. One key difference is that technology is often not always helpful and is up for debate in ethics or morality on humanized choices. These technological machines or devices have a rather cold and bleak design or have dirt, scratches and some form of aging like rust on them to give the impression of a more realistic world. Even immortality, which is the concept of eliminating death entirely, is questioned when it comes with technology, thus, it is never accepted as always positive and helpful, also affecting the design in a darker way. Dark colors and shades, insufficiently or overly lit places, foggy nights, chaotic and complex imageries and overall bleakness are key in color palettes. Dramatic effects also play an important role here which increases the impact of the overall desperate mood. High, tall structures, sky and sun blocking objects, generally dark or cold weather and claustrophobia inducing spaces, anxiety inducing situations are imaged often. This generally comes from many definitions of dystopia as most explain the situation being 'considerably worse' than the current standard. The sun and thus the sky is a big influence on daily life. Removing that, reasonably would cause a lot of catastrophic outcomes and open an easy way to creating a dystopia.

To create a dystopic design that is also a futuristic one, any designer or reader can take these key points as their basis and move on from there to create the concept. The same note from before also applies here. These are only guidelines that aim to help the designer or reader.

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