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## Exiles in Digital Cities: The Philosophy of Migration in Cyberspace

### ABSTRACT

The article explores the application of migration studies to the study of cyberculture. Especially, it is interested in the figure of the exile as a metaphor for human condition in cyberspace with reference to the framework of the philosophy of migration developed by Donatella Di Cesare (2022) and the studies of exilic condition by Madelaine Hron (2010) and Abdelmalek Sayad (1999). The first part of the article discusses the experience of exile from the body, i.e. the disconnection from physicality (Sisto, 2022), while the second part deals with the exile from modernity, understood as a stable set of reference frameworks and metanarratives, and entering a symbolically disordered space (Roscoe, 2024). Both of these experiences, it is argued, are akin to the experience of migrants. Thus, migration studies bring relevant insights for the philosophy and politics of the digital spaces.

**KEYWORDS:** migrations, digital, city, philosophy, cyberculture, metaphor, exile

### STRESZCZENIE

Wygnańcy cyfrowych miast: filozofia migracji w cyberprzestrzeni

Artykuł dotyczy zastosowania badań nad migracjami do badań nad cyberkulturą. W centralnym miejscu znajduje się postać wygnańca jako metafora kondycji ludzkiej w cyberprzestrzeni, w odniesieniu do filozofii migracji opracowanej przez Donatellę Di Cesare (2022) oraz badań nad kwestią wygnania autorstwa Madelaine Hron (2010) i Abdelmaleka Sayada (1999). Pierwsza część artykułu omawia doświadczenie wygnania z ciała, tj. odłączenia od fizyczności (Sisto, 2022), podczas gdy druga część dotyczy wygnania z nowoczesności, rozumianej jako stabilny zestaw ram odniesienia do metanarracji, i wejścia w symbolicznie nieuporządkowaną przestrzeń (Roscoe, 2024). W artykule twierdzi się, że oba te doświadczenia są zbliżone do doświadczeń migrantów. Badania nad migracjami dostarczają zatem istotnych spostrzeżeń na temat filozofii i polityki przestrzeni cyfrowych.

**SŁOWA KLUCZE:** migracje, cyfrowy, miasto, filozofia, cyberkultura, metafora, wygnanie

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## Introduction

The world as we know it is made up of metaphors (Gottschall, 2013; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Napiórkowski, 2022): they help order reality and speak about the intangible or little understood experiences or liminal states. This statement holds true also for the cyberworld, describing the new ways in which we interact there, and reflecting the social organization designed and managed with the help of semi-autonomous agents. Quite frequently, it is underlined that we live in bubbles or in tribes, which is supposed to perpetuate the conceptual scaffolding of the times of liquid modernity. What seems a sort of *l'écume de jours*—froth on the daydream, to borrow Boris Vian's phrase—an ephemeral and delicate lace on the deep dark ocean of the digital unknown, may in fact be more akin to the structure of a crystal: organized in separate wholes, preserving the fossilized forms of the days past. As we are diving more and more deeply into the silico, we—as humans—are transforming, and the change that affects us on the deep level, affects also the worlds we build.

Currently, voices are raised in favor of or in opposition towards creating digital communities that would go a step further from the nomadic social organization, and an effort to settle in the digital world is made (Roscoe, 2024; Zuboff, 2019). Attempts to construct a Metaverse or an Omniverse, and the abundant use of digital modeling to create digital twins and digital urban doubles, testify to the need for the re-creation of the order brought about by civilization. City as an archetype is linked to the imagination of the state, to that—frequently an ideal state, and a utopian social and political organization; the passage from isolation to community, the development of culture and technology, the conscious effort at giving structure to dreams and desires, and to develop a civilization. As Di Cesare writes in her book *Resident Foreigners* (2022), the models provided by Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem, teach us about the key role of the metaphor of the city in our treatment of others, and in the construction of the global political relations.

While the tribal and nomadic social structure is one in which migrations are natural, the conditions of non-permanence and reversibility of actions obfuscate the subtle changes that people undergo in the process of movement. The psychological effects of transition from one environment to another become more and more visible, and are worth looking into. In the conditions of liquidity, it is difficult—although not impossible—to speak of certain types of movements or migrations; however, together with the emergence of more stable structures, the experiences of belonging or lack of belonging begin to come into play, dripping into the veins of the newly created civilizations. This is where the migration studies, and—in particular—the philosophy of migrations—appear as a helpful aid in understanding the digital crucible and its mechanisms.

Migration studies are not a uniform discipline with one particular methodology. They are represented mostly by the scholars within the fields of sociology,

history, law and ethics. Thus, the approaches to the object of study are manifold, depending on a particular focus, and are mostly geared towards some sort of applicability in the solution of the issues raised by movements of humans in space. For this consideration, the perspectives of Madelaine Hron and Abdelmalek Sayad would be crucial, deriving from their interest in human rights and their focus on the psychological costs of migration, which translate into the social and political costs. They draw attention to the person of the migrant in its many guises (e.g. immigrant, emigrant, exile, refugee) and disclose the pain of *déracinement* (“uprooting”) which challenges the overwhelming utopian imagination, idealizing the life in the host country.

It is worth noting that Sayad’s approach is heavily influenced by Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological considerations, and thus displays sensitivity towards the issues of symbolic violence, the fluctuations of power and the role of the social agent. This provides important links to the philosophy of migration,<sup>1</sup> developed by Donatella Di Cesare (2022), which also focuses on the migrant and their biopolitical presence in the host society, as well as on the notion of hospitality. Especially in the second chapter of *Resident Foreigners*, “The End of Hospitality?” she provides a helpful discussion of the varieties of being foreign within a country, and the category of a “foreigner who lives within.” This latter category fits well the purposes of this article as it highlights the inherent Otherness as part of self: the foreigner is not only the Other that lives outside, but we are strangers (*stranieri*) also to ourselves. Focusing on the models of three cities—Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem—she points out that everyone may consider themselves a foreigner and an exile: the origin of human lies elsewhere, whether in some distant part of an empire providing a common identity (like Rome, allowing a citizenship regardless of the origin) or in the original pre-lapsarian Paradise: “The inhabitants of the Earth, to which the Earth does not belong and who do not belong to the Earth, are *gerim vetoshavim*, foreigners and temporary residents” (Di Cesare, 2020, p. 163).

As can be seen from the above short introduction, talking about migrations is rife with metaphors and images that are supposed to help one tackle the elusive notion of Otherness. Importantly, migrations themselves function as metaphors for talking about the human experience in the digital spaces. An example of this approach is talking about digital natives vs digital immigrants (Dickel & Scharpe, 2017), the frontier metaphors typical for American culture (e.g., Hillis, 1999) or hybronauts (Beloff, 2013), modeled on mythological Argonauts on the quest to find the Golden Fleece.

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1 Philosophy of migration exists as a subfield of migration studies, and is largely focused on the ethical entanglements of the migrant experience, I-you distinction, and critical discourse analysis (linking linguistics, political science, and culture studies). Thus, it overlaps—to a certain extent—with political philosophy (worth noting Edward Elgar series on migrations).

Of course, the application of migration studies to cyberspace has its limitations, and it is not a frequent approach (cf. Zuboff's metaphor of looking for the lost home) – be it only for the fact that, despite the phrasings of the popular discourse, we can hardly talk about digital natives. Even if we could attempt it, the natives of the cyberworld are not human, but algorithmical, with their own inscrutable nature. The efforts of the non-human turn, and other varieties of new materialism, for now, have not provided us with the satisfactory answer to the question of what it is like to be a thing. Part of the problem is that those natives are created by humans, are made up of our imaginations and cultural-technological productions. We could say that in some respects it is like entering a fantasyland, and in this manner we could just as well call Carroll's Alice a migrant, which would probably mean going too far into the speculative rabbit hole.

However, there are multiple justifications and uses of the philosophy of migration for the understanding of human experience in cyberspace. For one, the imagery of movement from-to is already a frequent device while talking about digital worlds. We speak of escape to the cyberspace or of “digital immigrants” (Dickel & Scharpe, 2017). The cyber- and virtual worlds are called the “promised land” and “electronic frontiers” to which we “migrate” or where we “go on the road” (Hillis, 1999): sometimes donning the guise of the Pilgrim Fathers, sometimes dressing up as Beatniks, and sometimes playing explorers. The key perspective is derived from the prevalently utopian symbols and images, usually downplaying the painful parts of migration, and of the wrongs that it sometimes entails. The intuitions suggested by the metaphorical use of the migration-related images can be surely analyzed with the tools provided by linguistics, such as discourse analysis, which should be fruitful. Here, though, they will be treated as semiological invitations to delve deeper into the socio-psychological realities of migration: as signs pointing to a particular phenomenon, inviting philosophical reflection.

In the present article I would like to focus on the experience of exile, although it is rare to encounter this particular metaphor in the literature of the subject devoted to digital spaces. Rather, the general picture of the cyberworld is still one akin to the immaterial paradise of liberty: freedom to shapeshift, to speak one's mind, to defy the boundaries of space, race, and gender; in a word, to boldly go where no man has gone before. This liberty often extends to the willing immersion into the digital. Exiles, on the other hand, are those expelled from their homeland, and are unwilling entrants into this land of plenty.

The experience of exile is traditionally understood to derive from some kind of social rejection, ostracism and persecution. It is a type of forced migration, unlike the typical one, caused by strong economic or social incentives. It encompasses the feeling of loneliness and enforced loss of connection with one's native system of reference values. It is often connected with retaining intellectual sovereignty and the freedom of expression. As Hron (2010, p. 12) details, referring

to Said's *Reflections on Exile* (1990), it results in a particular internal separation that can be called an "inner exile": it does not necessarily assume geographical displacement. However, it does assume a radical break and a tortured relation to both the home and the host country and culture. This category seems to be close to what Di Cesare called a "foreigner that lives within."

The willingness of the participation in the increasingly digitalized culture, and the utopian vision of the life with no boundaries, are—of course—subject to debate, and are—in fact—frequently debated. However, there is no denying that the movement of techno-utopianism frequently reposes on the same hopes that enticed the migrants to head for the Golden Door (Di Cesare, 2022; Hillis, 1999). The hero, crossing this Door, is usually "a resourceful loner" (Hicks, 2016, p. 1), who can leave their past behind: both the history of their community, and their individual history, and to "make all things new." Sometimes, the story is actually parallel: the rights of people born into the physical world are not recognized, or they are limited in some ways, and the digital world appears to be one that provides them with the opportunities they lack. This kind of exile can be called "inner exile" (Hron, 2010, p. 12), with the psychological, social and political consequences similar to the actual exile. This particular experience will be analyzed in the following parts with the reference to two realities: human physicality and the patterns and symbols of modernity. These have been chosen in particular for their relevance to the description of the exilic condition, as well as for the links existent in speculative fiction and philosophy of technology, fruitfully exploring these metaphors, and displaying striking similarity to the problems noticed by today's commentators of the cyberspace, like Byung-Chul Han and Davide Sisto.

### Into the Cyberspace: An Out-of-Body Experience

Despite its being a rarely used metaphor, it would not be true to state that there are no intimations of the "exilic condition" (Hron, 2010, p. 12) in relation to cyberspace. Science fiction, and the philosophy of technology, too, provide numerous examples of human anxiety when faced with the digital unknown. One especially good example comes from science fiction. In Jacek Dukaj's convergent novel, *Starość aksolotla* (*The Old Axolotl*, 2019), the plot revolves around a handful of people who—to escape imminent death of all protein-based life—upload their minds into mechanical bodies. They did secure the survival of their selves; however, they struggle to build their identity in isolation from their human bodies. It is visible, for example, in the scenes with sex robots, or on realizing robots cannot get drunk.

The longing for the body in the book is expressed with the words: "Body! My homeland!", which is an intertextual reference to the most famous Polish epic, *Pan Tadeusz* (1834), written by one of the bards of Romanticism, Adam

Mickiewicz, during the time of Partitions when Poland was not on the map. In the epic, the words “Lithuania! My homeland!” are uttered by an exile Pole living in France, after the failure of the Napoleonic wars that were hoped to bring a change to the then situation of Poland. It is very clear for the reader that Dukaj considers body as a kind of anchor of identity, and perceives digitalization of self as akin to the experience of an exile. His characters despairingly state that they long for the finality of their bodies as they are caught in the circle of somnambulant eternal return, in which nothing changes and nothing new can be learnt. All in this seems to them a pseudo- and quasi-life, with less than real families, salaries, jobs and professions. The rituals of old, repeatedly performed by the mechs, provide just a simulation of meaning to the bodiless existence.

Similarly to the migrant ethos, in which the newcomer has to “earn” their place in the new society (Rostek & Uffelman, 2011, p. 317; cf. Hron, 2010; Sayad, 1999), Dukaj’s transformers feel the urge to redeem themselves through labor, which echoes the exploitative nature of the contemporary system, with such phenomena as invisible labor or emotional labor that no one wants to account for. Mechs live in order to work, and are tragically conscious of this fact. Besides rituals, which lose their meaning with no reference to the temporality of the body, only work justifies their existence. Otherwise, similarly to Čapek’s robots, and in line with the telic condition of technological artefacts made in order to do something, they could consider themselves dead. Passivity and doing nothing do not belong to the bodiless condition. Somehow, this workaholic trance replays the human condition from before the catastrophe that hit the Earth and moved the few survivors into the digital “paradise” of immortality.

The lack of new rituals and relevant set of symbols, which would signify an advent of the new civilization, make the digital exiles cling to the past, and to seek escape in incessant activity, which is precisely what happens all too often in contemporary world. The resultant burnout, described in *Psychopolitics* by Byung-Chul Han (2014), derives to a large extent from the mechanism governing the cyberspace. Dukaj’s digital exiles from the body suffer because of the loss of the point of reference provided for them by the physical bodies, and the wrongs of the political and economic system that produced them, are laid bare the moment they are torn from their “mortal flesh.” The perishability of the biological bodies can be juxtaposed with the seeming untouchability of the digital bodies. In the words of Davide Sisto (2022, p. 18; translation mine):

we must not forget that, if we recognize a certain intangibility in our digital bodies, never scratched by the perennial technological metamorphoses to which they are subject, this intangibility is not absolute, but subordinate to some specific and unavoidable conditions: for example, the constant adoption of diversified strategies aimed at limiting their precariousness, the primary effect of the programmed obsolescence typical of every technological innovation.

Sisto's remarks on the psychological effects of the separation from the individual body, and from other bodies, and the replacement of face-to-face interaction with digital encounters, led him to reconsider Schopenhauer's porcupine dilemma. Apart from his main thesis, in his book he makes some interesting remarks on the nature of digital bodies. He notices, among others, and following Günther Anders, that apart from the dispersion of identity, the digital body is stretched, separated, and divided according to the functions it fulfils, in a kind of extreme mechanistic-naturalistic paradigm. For instance, eyes are glued to the text we read, while ears "strain to listen to the football match" or another song on Spotify (Sisto, 2022, p. 21). Thus, the digital body becomes stretched between different objects, and cannot be separated from the techno-prosthetic tools. Sisto says that in this manner we achieve the "forbidden dream of the biological body": ubiquity (Sisto, 2022, p. 51). In fact, he seems to argue for the inseparability of the two bodies:

A perfect facsimile of living flesh, digital flesh is filled with meanings, suggestions and contents, as we shape our social profiles with written texts, photographic images and audiovisual documents, making the depictions of the tones, gestures, behaviors and movements that define us in an inconsistent manner increasingly personal. These articulate and, at the same time, never stop renewing the narrative and communicative processes that, created in the various online environments, then profoundly affect our offline existence. In this way, digital bodies are carnal, therefore soft and visceral, since they influence from an emotional, psychological, cultural and social point of view our current way of being in the *onlife* world or in the post-digital society, if you will (Sisto, 2022, p. 66; translation mine).

What happens, though, if we lose the connection with the biological body, the rootedness in a certain reality? The great divorce from the flesh affects the aforementioned "emotional, psychological, cultural, and social" dimensions of existence, making us, effectively, exiles. It is similar to the exilic condition in the fact of the radical separation from the former set of reference values, and an uneasy relation to both the old and the new types of existence. Considering that exiles function as insurgent rebels or—conversely—inert, self-absorbed tormented heroes, trapped in the past (Hron, 2010; Sayad, 1999), entrusting them with the creation of the new civilization seems a risky enterprise. The more so, if the experience of the exile runs not only skin-deep, but also mindset-deep: affecting the reservoir of symbolic forms and metaphors that give meaning and shape to the new environment.

Following Di Cesare's philosophy of migrations, and the notion of "foreigner within," one can discern the estrangement that the human subject encounters as a result of hybrid or fully digital existence. In a sense, they are doubly estranged—taken out of their body and moved into a digital unknown. It is difficult to talk about the hospitality of bots or algorithmic natives that

would be able to teach the former human beings the native ways of existence as they are also, somehow, the products of human design. Thus, a human being becomes a host for oneself, and our notions and approaches to Otherness and hospitality in real life will translate into a more or less hospitable digital space. The philosophy of migrations allows to see the body as the anchor of identity, akin to one's homeland. The effects of breaking from the flesh would be then similar to the effects of leaving one's country: they may in the end make it impossible to adapt as some of the reference points would be lost. In this way, humans would find themselves in a paradoxical position similar to exiles: with no possibility to return home, and not being able to fully immerse themselves in the world that is human, but strangely foreign to them.

### Away from Modernity

As Hicks writes in her book about “modernity beyond salvage,” we find ourselves in the “culture saturated and disoriented by simulacra” (2016, p. 5). The Golden Door has been called not only the “Mother of Exiles,” but also the “Eldorado of modernity” (Di Cesare, 2022, p. 7), in the symbolic sense standing for the promises the modern culture had to offer to the modern man. The digital, as it seems, could be seen as the expression of the post-modern, although, admittedly, we can see the algorithmic space as the realization of modernity which could lead to technological totalitarianism. However, what goes for calling it a post-modern digitality are the statements to the effect that digitality is “symbolically messy” (Roscoe, 2024) and in need of the new rituals that would bring order to the fragmented reality, which echo the sentiments present in the literature of the subject (e.g., Han, 2017; Hillis, 1999; Sisto, 2022). The exhilarating feeling of liberation from the metanarratives and uniformizing projects associated with some types of modernity is underpinned by a nagging anxiety, provoked by the lack of reference points. In fact, one can detect the longing for the form and structure of modernity. In *The Old Axolotl*, the words in which the characters express the disenchantment with digital Paradise are telling: it is recognized as a “curse” and compared to a Hollywood-made dream, a kitschy Disney, a cartoon for kids—in a word, an infantile vision remote from anything the mechs would recognize as the truth about humans they long for.

The first element of this longing is reaching, in an exilic, retrotopian movement, to the past homeland of a world that had a certain coherence and—it would seem—originality. Transformers can only repeat what preceded their advent, even with full knowledge that from the ruins of the previous world nothing can be scavenged. In fact, the axolotls they meet on their way demand them to “build them a civilization” —the problem is their own conflicted relation with modernity, and post-modernity, which does not allow them to move

forward. As is frequent in post-apocalyptic narratives, and in the literature that concerns them, looming on the horizon is “la quiebra de la imaginación”—“the bankruptcy of imagination” (Martorell Campos, 2021, p. 43). The simultaneous rejection of modern forms, and the longing for the form and coherence seems to be in line with the experience of the exile: “a double exteriority” of a person who “lost his country without thereby acquiring another” (Todorov, 1984, p. 249). Instead of Paradise, the digital exiles land in the limbo of cute (May, 2019), further incapacitating their imaginative powers, without really providing them with the release from the existential pain and the psychological consequences of loss.

Thus, the digital exiles find themselves estranged not only from their bodies and the reference to physical sensations—the foundations of imagination—and to their temporality, but also with no stable cultural and social reference. The reality becomes malleable and its set of symbols and values to be decided upon. Of course, the “virginity” of the digital unknown is only promissory: it has been pre-constructed and its limits are delineated by the limits of human mind and the use it can make of technology. The apocalyptic scenario of Dukaj shows the gradual degradation of the symbolic space with no way out as it provides no access to new experiences. Paradoxically, the unknown digital world seems to provide only what is known; however, devoid of meanings attached to the original world the values and symbols were sourced from. This is similar to Di Cesare’s idea of *gerim vetoshavim*, who live on Earth in constant longing for the lost home from which meanings and identities are sourced from.

## Conclusions

The acceptance of the digital condition, as it seems, is the acceptance of the fact that “everyone is an exile” (Di Cesare, 2022, p. 129), and everyone’s bodies are made up of at the very least two layers (Sisto, 2022): the digital, still not fully understood, and biological—symmetrically, not understood enough. However, one should be wary of such totalizing visions. Rather, the takeaway from what we know about the exilic condition should be the realization of the underlying need for a certain structure, and the realization of emotional distress that accompanies the transition to the digital world. Much of this distress comes from uprootedness, and from the loss of the symbolic security tied to the previous homelands. This, in turn, can translate into the disruption of the political order, and/or political inertia of the individuals. Such processes are noticed in relation to the current digital world of tribes and bubbles; however, we can notice more and more frequent attempts at overcoming the initial post-modern condition carried through to the cyberspace. The image of the city and the obligation to create a new civilization seem to supersede the real life that we start

to lose and forget. In spite of the nostalgia we feel for the lost homelands, the obligation to create becomes not only an abstract moral duty, but a condition of survival. “For this is a city,” says Di Cesare, “where no one resides except as foreigners” (2020, p. 216). From this condition of the migrants, foreigners, exiles from Paradise and from our biological contexts, we must make our starting point. Here, the words of an American historian Oscar Handlin from *The Uprooted* ring relevant, and although they speak of the USA, they can be well applied to the digital promised land:

In their painful flight, their thoughts turned to the America never seen, land of promise, sweet land of liberty—which would reward all sufferers, redress all grievances. America (...) which they would come to love not because of its streets paved with gold, but perversely through the pain it caused in thrusting upon them the obligation of becoming an individual (quoted in: Hron, 2010, p. 3).

This obligation of becoming, defining, and concretizing one’s identity should translate not onto the emotivist and subjectivist uncertainty, but onto the more effective building of a lasting agreement. As we read in the *Digital Civilization Manifesto* (Roscoe, 2024): “urbanity is not ordered, nor is it constructed by individuals, companies, or institutions but rather through the agreement between these parties.” The alternative to this civilization of digital cities is to be ruled by the IT experts who, as Dukaj writes, will be the game masters of the virtual realities they create, seemingly safe and painless, free from the toils of materiality, but at the same time turning the users into playthings for their consoles. To satisfy the demands of the new civilizational effort, we have to bring to agreement various realities: come to terms with our internal anxieties and nostalgias, learn to live with the actual—not discursive—digital natives, and to learn to recreate the sense of community from the individualization, atomization, and bubblicization of experience. Only then will we be able to create something more stable than “froth on the daydream” about the perfect digital city and civilization.

The philosophy of migration brings valuable insights into the debate about the transformations of self and the existential dilemmas one can encounter in the digital spaces. What is more, thanks to its rich empirical background, building on sociology, history and psychology among others, it can help generate foresight as to the possible effects the digitalization of human life can have not only on individuals but on whole societies. It becomes pertinent to the study of an increasingly hybrid life, and a necessary angle of reflective response to the challenges of contemporary times.

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