



Becoming Porcupine: Migratory Identities in Digital Utopia

Abstract: The aim of the article is to draw attention to and discuss the relevance of the migration studies to the better understanding of the transformation of the human identity on entering the digital spaces, in consideration of the fact that the latter are frequently presented as a utopian destination. It is argued that the said transformation and fragmentation of the human self and identity can be compared to the one experienced by migrants. Drawing parallels between the insights of Hillis (1999), Hron (2009), Zuboff (2019), and Sisto (2022), one can discover numerous common points between the utopian studies, migration studies, and digital culture, which allow taking a new perspective on the experiences of increasingly digitalized, post-pandemic society.

Keywords: utopia, digitalizations, migrations, trauma, identity

Digital¹ utopianism has been increasingly present in the debates over the technological development in the last decades, and it has been used to relate to the new world order that possibly could be instituted by the reconfiguration of the social and political landscapes in the face of the rise of the new centers of power, or – perhaps more accurately – in the face of decentralized power, relegated to the individuals. Hailed as the new land of the free, the Internet, the virtual and the “dataified”² spaces became the new frontier, replacing the imagery linked to the paradisaical Western Coast of the USA in the globalized imagination. As writes Ken Hillis in his book *Digital Sensations*, “[i]f an escapist movement in real space toward an unpopulated and virgin promised land is now problematic or unavailable, for many, seeking out and creating “information superhighways” that permit “migration” to new “electronic frontiers” offers an imaginative and

1. For clarity, in the article I prefer to use the word “digital,” while reposing on sources that speak sometimes of virtual, sometimes of cyber-spaces. These are not quite synonymous; however, their features frequently overlap and are useful in the understanding of the studied phenomenon. By choosing the word “digital,” I would like to underscore the primary importance of works such as Sisto’s *Porcospini digitali* (2022) and Stoke’s *Digital Souls* (2021) for the present reflection.

2. The word is coined in reference to Yuval Noah Harari’s “dataism”: not so much the digitalization of the everyday life of human beings, but a certain take on the anthropological model that is becoming typical for the philosophy and politics of digital spaces.

apparently compelling Utopian alternative to physically going “on the road.”³ The utopian imagination is frequently linked to unlimited freedom and pleasure⁴ and “pursue[s] a rhetoric of potentiality,” of a “future yet to be arranged.”⁵ However, since the beginning of digital utopianism these visions have been subject to criticism. Most often, digital utopias have been seen as utopias of media and communication with the disruptive potential as far as the social and political order is concerned, or – conversely – as means to lull the users and effectively dissuade them from taking up any action, and thus preserve the status quo. Dickel and Schrape (2017) pointed to the notion of freedom as commodity, Simanowski (2017) underlined that society was not prepared for the arrival of the digital means of communication, and Rendueles (2017) sees digital utopias as the expression of sociophobia: a situation in which “a public [is] broken down into very small groups, groups that are scarcely willing to consider anything that exceeds the compass of their smartphones.”⁶

As can be seen, the edge of the critique has been directed mostly at the political and social consequences of the promised digital lands, in the first place taking concern in the ease of communication, its transformation, and the lack of control over cyberspace. At the same time, though, many theorists, notably Sherry Turkle (2011), Philip Zimbardo (2015), and Davide Sisto (2022), have discussed the psychological consequences of highly immersive environments, especially in the recent pandemic and post-pandemic years. They have noted the transformation and, to a certain extent, evolution of the human being towards new ways of living through and expressing emotions, and of forming relations with other agents in the digital spaces. What is more, the fragmentation of the self and the digitalization of the body has been noted, and currently generates issues, for example, of legal nature.⁷ The matter has become even more salient with the visible drive towards the transfer to the virtual worlds such as Metaverse.

However, despite the existence of these studies and the clear link between digital utopianism and migrations, not much has been said about the effects

3. Ken Hillis, *Digital Sensations: Space, Identity, and Embodiment in Virtual Reality* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xvi–xvii.

4. Hillis, *Digital Sensations*, xxxi.

5. Sasha Dickel, and Jan-Felix Schrape, “The Logic of Digital Utopianism,” *Nanoethics* 11 (2017), 47–58.

6. Roberto Simanowski, “Foreword: Culture Industry 2.0, or the End of Digital Utopias in the Era of Participation Culture,” in *Sociophobia: Political Change in the Digital Utopia*, César Rendueles, trans. Heather Cleary (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), viii.

7. See, for example, Michael C. Kearl, “The Proliferation of Postselves in American Civic and Popular Cultures,” in *Postmortal Society: Towards a Sociology of Immortality*, ed. Michael Hviid Jacobsen (London: Routledge, 2017), 216–233.

of the transition to the digital spaces in the light of the migration studies, while the latter do offer ample research for consideration of emotions accompanying transfer from one place to another. Of special interest can be the moment of border crossing, where the utopian studies and the migration studies converge. Not only is utopia a borderland in itself, suspended between fiction and reality, but it frequently reports the trauma of the main character crossing the border between the worlds: the new, ideal one, and the old and faulty one (to mention the main hero from *A Modern Utopia* (1921) by H. G. Wells). Also, migration studies are very much familiar with the notion of the fragmented identity, and the coping strategies migrants⁸ adopt to construct their new identity out of various layers.

Thus, the aim of the article is to provide a preliminary analysis of the compatibility of the reflection and conceptual apparatus developed in the migration studies for the better understanding of the said “evolution” of the human being that participates both in the physical and the digital realities. It is hypothesized here that crossing the border between the physical and the digital is linked to the experience of a specific trauma, and results in the development of multiple identities, and an altered perception of one’s body and self. These identities could be called “migratory identities” to signal the connections between the migration studies and the digital utopianism, but also to underline some of their inherent features, like fluidity, decentralization, and constant movement. It is also hypothesized that the development of these identities is linked to the experience of pain, which is oftentimes negated in the popular discourse about digital utopia, much like in the case of migrants who are denied their right to suffer, having reached their desired goal: the host country. Further, following Davide Sisto (2022), it is sustained that the existence in the digital sphere calls for the development of a “porcupine” identity, that is: on the one hand, mastering of the management of the distance and proximity in relation with other semi-digital and fully digital beings, and on the other, a partial change in the way in which humans experience reality as such. “Porcupine” here would signal new ways of being human, as part of the anthropological evolution which is mentioned by the Italian thanatologist. Finally, it is claimed that digital utopia is not free from a certain “pedagogy” promoting one culture over other cultures, thus putting in doubt the belief in the cultural neutrality and virginity of the newly conquered frontier. In the following parts of the article, the migratory identities will be discussed in relation to self,

8. The term “migrant” has its definition in the migration studies; however, in the body of literature linking migrations to the digital or virtual worlds, it is often used interchangeably with “immigrant,” which is not strictly true: it would imply a complete and permanent transfer to the digital utopia as a place of residence. In the present article, the term “migrant” is preferred, albeit the terms “immigrant” and “exile” will be also used where they cannot be avoided.

the body, others, and the home and the host culture. The adoption of such lenses should allow to paint in broad strokes the transformations of the human in the times of digital progress, and point to the relevance of the migration studies for the discussion of the said transfer.

Migratory Identities: Digital Selves and Digital Bodies

There can be little doubt as to the transformative power of travelling, impacting the modes of being of an individual and the ways of functioning of whole social groups. Like any journey, the journey to digital utopia would ideally result in the creation of a more coherent and richer self; however, this does not come without a price. As Kristeva lucidly asked in her essay from 2000, “Y a-t-il des étrangers heureux?”⁹ “Are there any happy foreigners?” Picking up on that, Madelaine Hron (2009) discussed how there is a certain pressure for the migrants – especially economic migrants – to be happy. As they have reached utopia, they should want for nothing. In the world which lauds mobility, diversity, difference, uprootedness, hybridity, and plurality, the suffering associated with these phenomena tends to be overlooked.¹⁰ The arrival in the idealized, desired environment forms one facet of utopia; another would be the assumption of the achievement of integration into the host society. Neither is the arrival easy, nor is the integration as smooth and unproblematic as it would be expected even in the societies of high multiculturalism and much experience with the integration. It can be questioned whether the integration is fully achievable.

When it comes to the digital utopia, the matters get even more complicated. In the case of movement in physical space, it is easily noticeable, and there are certain challenges and hardships that can be thought of prior to the change of the place of residence. The passage from the physical to the digital, however, is currently either overlooked or seen in positive light. First of all, digitalization is almost imperceptible, and certainly hardly visible; what is more, it does not necessitate physical movement. Frequently, it is enough to have one's proxy – like an avatar – join a meeting remotely, or use emoticons as stand-ins for physical gestures. Secondly, even if digitalization becomes a subject of debate, it is usual that it is presented as something unavoidable and desired, and the ways in which it facilitates everyday existence are underlined, without even mentioning the possible hardships that may accompany the process. The difficulties, if they are

9. Julia Kristeva, “Y a-t-il des étrangers heureux?,” in *Migrations et errances: Forum international. Proceedings of UNESCO conference, 8/9 June 2000* (Paris: Grasset, 2000), 53–66.

10. Madelaine Hron, *Translating Pain: Immigrant Suffering in Literature and Culture* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

referred to, are only of technical nature, and they can be overcome by education and adjustment of one's habits. Worth mentioning, there exists a term "digital natives," which is a value-added term, juxtaposed with much less frequent "digital immigrants"¹¹: those not quite in their place. Most often, these terms are used for the people who become acquainted with partially digital existence early on and those who had to learn it later in life, and do not fully identify with the modes of existence digitalization requires. The fact is, though, that none of us is actually born in the digital world, and despite being surrounded from our infancy with digital media, all of us have to make the leap and transfer sooner or later, and develop a hybrid identity.

One of the chief problems nowadays is the difficulty with achieving this hybridity. Already in 2009 Laura Beloff spoke of hybronauts, to a degree extolling, like Kristeva would, the benefits of the fluid, undefined, protean New Man. As she defines it, "the Hybronaut is a space traveler roaming in hybrid space and developing alternative ways to use, perceive, and exist in the hybrid space."¹² After more than a decade of this fluidity and hybridity, we tend to speak more of fragmentation and proliferation rather than integration through dissolution and constant change. Each of us can enumerate many ways in which we exist in the digital realm: various avatars, icons, emoticons – with a slightly different set per each social medium – our selfies, AI-altered images, profile pictures, email and social media accounts, pseudonyms, voice messages, medical data, so-called mindfiles,¹³ etc. All of them form our digital bodies and digital selves, with an uneasy relation to the "original," which by no means remains in the center. After we die, we leave behind us a huge pile of data that can be "resurrected" by one of the startups specializing in raising you from the ashes to one of the new forms of digital immortality. The postmortal digital remains are often called post-selves.¹⁴ Thus, it is clear that our identity starts to be dispersed between many selves and bodies, and it is worth investigating the possible consequences of such fragmentation of the already complex identity of an individual on entering the digital utopia. The hypothesis here is that the spreading, division, and shattering

11. Dickel and Schrape, "The Logic of Digital Utopianism," 53.

12. Laura Beloff, "The Hybronaut, an Early Protonaut of the Future – On Wearable Technologies as Cultural Artifacts," in *Apropriations of the [Un]Common: Public and Private Space in Times of Mobility*, ed. Giselle Beiguelman, Lucas Bambozzi, Marcus Bastos, and Rodrigo Minelli (Sao Paulo: Instituto Sergio Motta, 2009 [2043]), <http://www.realitydisfunction.org/papers/Protonaut.pdf>.

13. Versions of self that is created, stored and shared as video, audio, image, text, in the form of personalized avatar (Patrick Stokes, *Digital Souls: A Philosophy of Online Death* (London: Bloomsbury Academic), 164).

14. Kearl, "The Proliferation of Postselves."

of identity would be connected with pain, similar to the kinds of pain spatial migrants experience in their journeys.

The body – the new locus of utopia as it is presented in newer theories, like evantropia¹⁵ – can be considered a new island, an essential element of utopian thinking.¹⁶ Often it is discussed in these terms while considering the human enhancement movement and the focus on various practices of *sousveillance*, or the constant self-monitoring. It is important to notice that the perception of the body in contemporary philosophy and biopolitics has radically changed in comparison to the earlier beliefs, which sustained that just like an island is separated from other lands by a body of water, the human body forms an integral whole. Currently, this vision, in accordance with the tenets of “molecular politics,”¹⁷ is supplanted with the vision of the body that is spread and that distributes the individual identity over a number of items previously not thought about. One can mention the considerations of the self-ownership problem made by Waldby and Mitchell in *Tissue Economies* (2006), or the issues raised by the rise of genomics and bioart.¹⁸

Misseri, in his chapter “Desplazamientos espaciales de la utopía: de la isla al cuerpo utópico,” claims that the body is the focal point of utopian thinking and that “there is no utopia without the body”¹⁹ (translation mine). However, what does it mean for the utopian studies if the boundaries between this “island” and its digital counterpart become increasingly porous, to the degree where it is difficult to deny the link we create between our physical bodies and the avatars, the emoticons we use, or the digital twins that are treated by the physicians in our stead? Together with the transfer of utopian geographies to the digital realms, the bodily geographies are also removed or mapped to the digital sphere. In a sense,

15. Lucas E. Misseri, “Evantropia and Dysantropia: A Possible New Stage in the History of Utopias,” in *More after More: Essays Commemorating the Five-Hundredth Anniversary of Thomas More's Utopia*, ed. Ksenia Olkusz, Michał Kłosiński, and Krzysztof M. Maj (Kraków: FactaFicta Research Center, 2016), 26–43; Anna Bugajska, *Engineering Youth: The Evantropian Project in Young Adult Dystopias* (Cracow: Ignatianum University Press, 2019).

16. Michel Foucault, “Utopian Body,” in *Sensorium. Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones, trans. Lucia Allais (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), 229–234; Lucas E. Misseri, “Desplazamientos espaciales de la utopía: de la isla al cuerpo utópico,” in *Lugares de utopía: tiempos, espacios y estrías*, ed. Juan Pro, Pedro José Mariblanca Corrales (Madrid: Polifemo, 2019), 117–142.

17. Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction: Biopolitics: Medicine, Technoscience, and Health in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 94–96.

18. Eva Amsen, “These 3D Portraits Are Created From Strangers' DNA,” *Forbes*, September 4, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/evaamsen/2019/09/04/these-3-d-portraits-are-created-from-strangers-dna/>.

19. Misseri, “Desplazamientos espaciales,” 133. “No hay utopía sin cuerpo.”

it can be close to the reality imagined by Foucault in his essay on utopian body: a phantasmagorical body, “captured by a kind of invisibility,” “always elsewhere.”²⁰ This dislocation and decentralization lie at the foundation of the migratory identity in the digital utopia. It seems that to live there is to embrace this multibodiliness, which seems in itself a utopian endeavor: a reality that may be desired, but not necessarily attainable.

The crossing of the border between the digital and the real, and – within the digital – passing from one digital form to another, can, therefore, result not so much in the development of a hybrid identity, but dissociation. The pain of fragmentation and the effort of maintaining coherence between different versions of self is as great as the feeling of exhilarating freedom from the limitations of physicality. Out of many sources of immigrant suffering, in the digital world this comes in first: the trauma of fragmentation and the partial loss of the previous identity as the users are switching between many different personas and digital bodies. Unlike in the case of migrants that move in space, in the digital world the loss is not so apparent and the identities one chooses seem to be unlimited. It is worth noting that these features of the digital utopia can at least partially dull the pain, but they do not cancel the problem of dissociation.

The latter phenomenon can also result in “double absence” (*la double absence*²¹): alienation both from home and from the host “country,” “a virtual existence between two worlds.”²² The characterization of the phenomenon, provided by Hron, remains in line with the diagnosis of the digital utopia given by Rendueles (2017). As Hron states in her book *Translating Pain*, “This ‘in-between,’ wheretime and space become chaotic, often becomes a locus of impotence for immigrant subjects, where little agency, voice, or movement is possible. Contemporary immigrants, many of whom can return to their homes for visits, often find themselves trapped in a liminal locus of inertia.”²³ In the case of digital utopia, the double absence would mean either multiple absence or dispersed presence, resulting in much the same. Rendueles argues, in fact, that the immigrants in the digital utopia are pushed towards inertia and sociophobia.

What is more, Hron²⁴ draws our attention to the fact that being a migrant, precisely: an exile, does not assume geographical displacement, but it entails the search for the space of freedom of expression, accompanied by the feelings of unease and alienation. Thus, it is even more valid to draw a parallel between

20. Foucault, “Utopian Body,” 231, 233; Misseri, “Desplazamientos espaciales.”

21. Abdelmalek Sayad, *La Double Absence: Des illusions de l’émigré aux souffrances de l’immigré* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

22. Hron, *Translating Pain*, 26.

23. Hron, *Translating Pain*, 26.

24. Hron, *Translating Pain*, 12.

migration and digitalization: while our physical bodies remain in one place, we can be simultaneously displaced. The status of an exile, in fact, can be to a certain extent desired and romanticized, as in the case of displaced intellectuals and freedom fighters. Thus, the migration to another sphere can be a sign of rebellion, a utopian movement towards the ideal; however, it can also be a form of irresponsible escapism. No matter which option it is, the digital worlds and identities, in their plurality, seem to cancel both the possibility of rebellion and of escape: the movement never ends and the sanctuary is never reached. In the words of Bauman, the walls of the caves of the present-day nomads are always “porous,” “pierced all over by the countless wires,” so that these nomads can never be truly “*chez soi*.”²⁵ Shoshana Zuboff in *Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) states openly that there is no way out. She claims that the virtual worlds utilize our need to belong and the need for “a new home, in which our hopes for the future can nest and grow.”²⁶ Instead of a sanctuary, though, digital utopias provide the worlds with “no exit,” in which individuals are “herded, organized and tuned to achieve a social confluence, in which group pressure and computational certainty replace politics and democracy, extinguishing the felt reality and social function of an individualized existence.”²⁷ Zuboff²⁸ also warns of digital migrants’ emotions becoming prey to hungry algorithms: she says that especially difficult emotions like anguish and pain are important only insofar as they provoke certain behaviors that can be monetized, becoming a new facet of biopolitics, or – to borrow the term of Byung-Chul Han (2014) – psychopolitics. Whereas this vision comes across as unnecessarily alarmist, the fact is that it is often that the participants of the digital space that experience the facets of this new reality that can hardly be called utopia would be deemed naïve, ignorant, or lacking in necessary skills to achieve success in the better digital tomorrow. We can compare it to what Hron calls a “deficient hero status”²⁹ in immigrant narratives, which makes it easy to put the blame for the hardships on the migrant to the utopian world, and to minimize the deficiencies of the proposed ideal model.

25. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press), 155.

26. Shoshana Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019), 5.

27. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 21. Quote slightly modified.

28. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 360.

29. Hron, *Translating Pain*, 44.

Becoming Porcupine: Myself, the Other, and the Digital

Apart from the body and the relation to “homeland,” what is formative of digital identities are relations with others. Davide Sisto, an Italian thanatologist, notices that, on the surface, the online existence provides a truly utopian resolution to Schopenhauer’s porcupine dilemma. In *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1851) Arthur Schopenhauer offered a parable in which porcupines, to get warm in winter, wanted to get close, but when they tried approaching one another, they got pricked by one another’s quills. To be able to maintain warmth, they had to find the middle distance, and to learn to live with the pain that closeness brings with itself. Similarly, human beings, to survive, need the closeness and emotional warmth of another person, but in the process of forming relationships they suffer because of the inherent Otherness of their partner. Sisto goes as far as suggesting that, with the advent of digital utopia, we could consider Schopenhauer’s porcupine dilemma as solved: in the original dilemma people have to choose between proximity and pain on the one hand, and distance and self-contained happiness on the other. Currently, it seems, people can be both close – via digital means of communication, virtual spaces, and haptic suits – and maintain distance from the Other: the Other that is needed for survival and for building our identity, but also the dangerous one, the carrier of death, the originator of pain, which was especially well visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital utopia allows people the opportunity to become what Sisto calls “digital porcupines”: protected from harm by the multiplicity of identities, by spatial distance, and the flexibility of digital bodies, promoting constant movement and change. In this “sacred place of hope,”³⁰ where loneliness does not exist, “[r]ootedness’, if any, can ... be only dynamic: it needs to be restated and reconstituted daily – precisely through the repeated act of ‘self-distantiation’, that foundational, initiating act of ‘being in travel’, on the road.”³¹ While Nuccio Ordine³² believed that the technologically-mediated communication denies the existence of true communication, Sisto notices that, in a sense, this mediation becomes a new norm.

The portable house (with its dual movement to and from a place), the disjunction between presence and location, multiple identities and digital flesh, digitally integrated urban spaces and the global digital city that arose during the emergency period and marked

30. Sisto, *Porcospinidigitali*, 80. “Illuogo sacro dellasperanza.”

31. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 209.

32. Nuccio Ordine, “Nuestra sociedad desprecia los saberes que no producen beneficio económico,” interviewed by David Lorenzo Cardiel, *Ethic.es*, Abril 13, 2023, <https://ethic.es/2023/04/entrevista-nuccio-ordine-individualismo/>.

by real and symbolic epidemics, the constant metamorphoses of the concept of being alive and the innovations in the field of digital death: all these elements, united together, highlight the peculiarities of the current dialectic between proximity and distance, between presence and absence, peculiarities that more than ever turn us into digital porcupines in the perpetual search for the least painful way of intersubjective sharing of public space.³³ (translation mine)

This process of transformation, provoked by the rise of the new media, is by no means a new phenomenon (as noticed by Bertold Brecht in the case of radio,³⁴ or by Italo Calvino in his short story *Prima chetudica «Pronto»*, 1985, in the case of intercontinental phone calls). While it seems logical that the new forms of mediation will result in new ways of bonding, one should be careful not to confuse real work on relationships on the personal, social, and political level, with collective self-delusion which would in the end bring about painful loneliness. The transformation into a “digital porcupine” can be understood on many levels. On the one hand, the human-porcupine would need to evolve to somehow incorporate into one’s self and one’s identity the medium that they use to maintain the contact with the Other. In the case of the protagonist from Italo Calvino’s short story, it required the development of “relationship” with the telephone, and the tacit agreement that part of the communication is directed not towards a live person but towards the medium. When it comes to the telephone, this extension of self via cable and redirecting part of affection and attention to the inanimate participant of the communicative process sounded more unusual. In the digital utopia, we can interact with a variety of digital bodies and digital selves, thus facilitating the process of adaptation to the new mode of being. However, this process also assumes an altered understanding and conception of one’s body, and the agreement to the extension of one’s identity and responsibility for one’s actions onto many digital forms we can create to form relationships with Others.

To a certain extent, the mediation on such a high level of complexity can be dangerous, as it modifies, personalizes and domesticates the Otherness which, in its essence, refuses to be controlled. It is useful to recall here the analysis of grief

33. Sisto, *Porcospinidigitali*, 160. “La casa trasportabile (con il suo duplice movimento da e verso un luogo), la disgiunzione tra presenza e localizzazione, le identità plurime e le carni digitali, gli spazi urbani digitalmente integrati e la città digitale globale sorta durante il periodo di emergenza e segnata da epidemie reali e simboliche, le costanti metamorfosi del concetto di liveness e le innovazioni nell’ambito della morte digitale: tutti questi elementi, uniti insieme, mettono in evidenza le peculiarità dell’attuale dialettica tra vicinanza e distanza, tra presenza e assenza, peculiarità che ci rendono più che mai porcospini digitali alla ricerca perpetua della modalità meno dolorosa di condivisione intersoggettiva dello spazio pubblico.”

34. Simanowski, “Foreword,” vii, x–xi.

from C. S. Lewis's book *A Grief Observed* (1961), written after his wife's death. He observed that during the process of mourning, his wife's actual self was replaced in his memory with a tamed, static and predictable imagination of how she would behave or what she would do. This imagination was never able to surprise him in the way the real person did. Similarly, in the digital utopia, which may seem a safe place for any type of Otherness and alterity, but at the same time tends towards being aseptic as far as unwanted emotions. They can be filtered, switched off, displaced, denied – in a word, the digital utopia's danger is closing oneself in a fantasy world built out of one's own fears and desires, never really confronting it with actual Otherness that poses a challenge to what is safe and known.

Cultural Identities in Digital Utopia

Otherness can be conceived of not only in terms of individual differences between people, but also in cultural terms. Digital utopia is frequently understood to realize the dreams of globalization and multiculturalism, and – understandably – would suffer from similar problems as these processes experienced in reality. It seems to offer an easier way out of the socio-political conundrums we face in the interaction with the actual cultural Other, because of the aforementioned features of the digital lives. However, what is often overlooked is the false assumption that the digital utopia is a virgin territory, a completely a-cultural, neutral place of interaction; rather, it is a space that grows out of and realizes the earlier dreams, characteristic of the American visions of how to construct the new world. The confusion between the virgin nature and the digital world does not simply stem from the illusion brought about by virtual landscapes (as described by Hillis). The collapse of the strict boundary between nature and culture in the digital utopia takes the form of the actual extension or overlay of one reality over another, thus making it easy to think of cyberspace in terms of natural space. The imagination of the original frontier, already culturally problematic, frequently reposes on the assumption that the territories that are conquered are devoid of culture previous to the conquest. The digital frontier, although it shares a lot with the physical reality, cannot be treated in the same way. From the very start it is constructed on the basis of an existent cultural context. It has been noticed that the digital space is already unequal as far as language.³⁵ It privileges English-language speakers, and from this perspective, the multilingual utopia of equality in diversity is still

35. Gretchen McCulloch, "Coding Is for Everyone – As Long as You Speak English," *Wired*, April 8th, 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/coding-is-for-everyone-as-long-as-you-speak-english/>.

a long way off. To enter the digital land of the free, the knowledge of English is at a certain point necessary.

Still, in the online existence which seems to be a melting pot of different cultures, we tend to forget whose culture we adopt and whose skin we are donning. Taking into account the fact that the digital utopia is said to be mostly an extension of the model offered by American utopianism, does it somehow condition the freedom and pursuit of happiness to align with a predetermined model? As Hron writes, “the *telos* of the immigrant narrative – acculturation into a pluralistic society – in fact, reflects the pedagogical narrative of the host country.”³⁶ Thus, the immigration to the digital utopia would follow the narratives written by the culture that created it, and would contain implicit demands on the migrants to accept a predetermined vision of digital happiness and the organization of its pursuit.

Ironically, in the space that seems to transcend the basic categories of nation, ethnicity, and race, the insights from the studies on multiculturalism, transnationality, negotiated ethnicity and mixed race, may prove themselves useful. They also assume the good knowledge of what preconditions the digital utopia, and the links it has with other forms of utopianism, so that the freedom it offers becomes the freedom to act, and not the illusory freedom to be who I want to be, negating the history and the past. As stated by Hillis:

Immersive virtual environments can be thought of as a form of cosmographic mapping, and within this understanding, cyberspace and VR are, respectively, a frontier metaphor and a technology offering both the promise of an escape from history with a capital H, and the encrusted meanings it contains, and an imaginary space whereby to perform, and thereby possibly exorcise or master, difficult – even contradictory – real-world historical and material situations. Cyberspace and VR promoters and enthusiasts, however, tend to deny the meanings, contexts, social relations, and political implications that inform and attend the move to virtual living – a move of which I remain skeptical. Cyberspace not only suggests that an ideal existence is one that is technologically mediated; it also continues and intensifies a long-standing project to alter, via the use of technology, subjectivity and the meaning of what it is to be human.³⁷

Thus, entering the digital utopia we are, in fact, entering a metaphor firmly rooted in American culture: the one of frontier and of its conquest. While for the users originating from this culture the metaphor can serve as a space for the reworking of the historical traumas and for the return to the origins of their collective identity, for the users coming from different cultures, it would definitely

36. Hron, *Translating Pain*, 45.

37. Hillis, *Virtual Sensations*, xvii.

serve different functions. Hillis draws attention to the fact that only the previous knowledge of the cultural context would allow for the mastery of two worlds: the physical and the digital, the historical and the technological. It would indeed allow for the forging of the new identity and a more coherent self. However, for the digital migrants, twice removed from the cultural framework of the digital utopia, the hero's journey will be different, and the experience of diving into an alien cultural context would be burdened with the traumas of acculturation, not only of digitalization.

Conclusions

These nomadic, migratory, and, finally, porcupine identities of the inhabitants of digital utopian space call for a better understanding. The answer to the question “who am I?” in the digital utopia is problematic on many levels. It seems, then, that instead of light, the migration studies cast a long shadow on the ideal of digital utopia, disclosing many dimensions that may generate issues in the process of the transition to the digital worlds. The rise of bodies that are digital or partly digital is a relatively novel phenomenon that is still being studied, and that creates much confusion as far as individual identity and collective responsibility, as well as about the clear-cut separation between the physical and the technological, the natural and the artificial. The proliferation of digital selves changes the way in which the users form relationships both with humans and non-human elements of the digital utopia. Finally, the cultural assumptions on which reposes this type of utopia create a double barrier for the users from the outside of the “host” culture, making them double migrants: both to the digital world and to a very specific cultural imagination of utopia. Out of these factors, of special concern seem to be the problems of self and identity of the hybrid actors in digital utopia. While most of the observations and insights provided by juxtaposing the utopian studies, the migration studies, and the digital culture studies may understandably awake anxiety, at the same time, there is some hope that is offered. As Sisto and Simanowski concur, the adaptation of the individuals and societies to the new living conditions takes time, and – if we were to believe Bruno Latour – it may end up in the expansion of the ability to form bonds and build self-understanding, which should be the basis for building the good society of the future. For that to be successful, though, it is worth acknowledging the similarities between the processes of spatial migration to utopian lands and the digitalization of our bodies and of selves.

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