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Chrysoula Titi
Independent scholar

THE MACHINE MUST BE STOPPED: E. M. FORSTER'S "THE MACHINE STOPS" AS A LOOKING GLASS INTO MODERN TECHNOLOGICAL WORLD

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Introduction

"The Machine Stops" is a science fiction short story by the English author E. M. Forster (1879–1970) published in 1909. It is set in a futuristic world where the humanity resides underground, having lost the ability to live on the surface of the Earth, and relies on an omnipotent global Machine to cater to all its needs. There is no concept of family or community, so each individual lives in isolation in private rooms, and there is minimal physical contact, as travel has become unnecessary. Communication is almost exclusively virtual, through what is today known as video conferencing and online interaction. People's main activity is the sharing of "second-hand" ideas (Forster 28) which essentially consist of pieces of information and dry knowledge, the function of which seems to be constant distraction. Individuals are permanently virtually connected to each other, almost always available, and yet there seems to be no real, in-depth communication.

The two main characters, Vashti and her son Kuno, who live on opposite sides of the world, are introduced at the very beginning of the story by an anonymous narrator. The stark difference in their perspectives becomes immediately clear. Vashti is content with her life, whereas Kuno is a skeptic and

a rebel; he has visited the surface of the Earth, which is considered a dangerous endeavour as it is uninhabitable. This has resulted in his becoming disenchanted with the sanitised, mechanical world, and so he tries to alert his mother that life on Earth, in a world free of the Machine, is possible. Most importantly, he wishes to warn her "that it is we that are dying, and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine" (24). In order to do this, he persuades her to visit him in person, a request which Vashti reluctantly accepts. This is also an attempt at protecting himself, as his clandestine visits on Earth could mean his expulsion from their underground society and thus, presumably, death—what is referred to as "Homelessness" (13)—should he be apprehended again by the Mending Apparatus. Believing her son's deviations to be unforgivable, Vashti dismisses his concerns as dangerous madness, and returns to her room, never to see his face again.

Years later, two important developments occur: "the abolition of respirators" (28), which makes visits to Earth impossible, and the "re-establishment of religion" (29). Though the term itself is "sedulously avoided," individuals are essentially forced to adhere to "undenominational Mechanism," believing the Machine to be "omnipotent, eternal" or face Homelessness (30). This confirms Kuno's early realization that the Machine is worshipped as a deity. Having been transferred to a room near that of his mother, Kuno makes another attempt at communicating with Vashti to warn her that the "Machine is stopping" (32), which she once again dismisses, but defects to the system soon start appearing and become increasingly worse, sparking panic. It is revealed that the Mending Apparatus that sustains the Machine has been broken, but the knowledge of how to repair it has been lost and so the collapse of civilization is imminent. Disaster finally strikes, the Machine stops entirely and the underground city crumbles "like a honeycomb" (39). Vashti and Kuno reunite in the darkness, touching and talking "not through the Machine" (38), before they both perish. There is a glimmer of hope, however, as Kuno believes that

"humanity has learned its lesson" (39), the Machine will not be restarted and the Homeless on the surface of the Earth will rebuild the world.

This short story can be seen as a cautionary tale against humanity's increasing reliance on technology, highlighting the dangers of this becoming the ultimate controlling force. The story depicts the last days of "decadence" which this society is "quietly and complacently" sinking into (31). As Gorman Beauchamp puts it, Forster sets the story in the "twilight of the deus ex machina" (57) and draws a "technophobic moral" that technology "should be made for man, not man for technology," questioning whether it is possible to "keep the slave from becoming the master" (58). This is a question that "haunts dystopia" (58) as well as modern society, which very much resembles Forster's futurist, "market-driven and technophilic" world, obsessed with "informational texts and information systems" (Lynch 297). It is "probably the first modern dystopia" that reveals what a "true technotopia," a "push-button paradise of mechanical marvels" (Beauchamp 57), could be like. It raises important questions concerning modern society and what can happen when humanity disengages itself from its physical and emotional existence, becoming incapable of adapting to changing environments as a result of the "dehumanizing and destructive effects" of technology (54).

"The Machine Stops": Dystopia and Technology

Dystopian fiction "emerged as a distinct genre at the beginning of the twentieth century," though the term became more widely used later on, and it stood against its opposite, utopia, meaning the good place that exists nowhere (Horan 54). This distinction can be called into question depending on whose perspective is taken into account; in other words, Thomas Horan argues it is "inherently subjective" (54): what might seem like a dystopia to one character might be a utopia to another. Taking the short story in question as an example, for Kuno the underground world is a dystopia, a terrible place which prevents him from exploring the world above, but for Vashti it is a utopia which she fully

embraces, accepting its values and lifestyle, and overall being perfectly content with the comforts she enjoys in her small, underground room, "hexagonal in shape like the cell of a bee" (Forster 3). At least, this is the case until the collapse of the Machine, which transforms her worldview altogether, so that she finally comprehends Kuno's words about the vulnerability and destructiveness of the Machine that ultimately brings about their demise.

In a sense, dystopian fiction is "one of the most revealing indexes to the anxieties" of the time during which literary works such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) were written (Hillegas 3). Such works have also been called anti-utopias as "they seem a sad, last farewell to man's age-old dream of a planned, ideal, and perfected society" (3–4). Forster's short story was written at a time during which technology was developing rapidly and people had already invented the telephone, the radio, cars, and even airplanes. Similar, but more advanced features are found in the underground society of "The Machine Stops:" namely the long-distance video calls, unlimited entertainment options and air-ships, which to readers at the time might have sounded too far-fetched; to readers today, however, the core principles of many of these amenities and comforts are taken for granted. Forster takes rudimentary innovations of his time and imagines how they might evolve and what effect they might have on people and society. In this respect, the short story is a pessimistic reflection on the dramatic transformations society underwent during the Second Industrial Revolution (1870–1914).

Apart from the technological changes, there were also ideological ones. Technological advances brought about the questioning of older belief systems and ways of life which gradually gave way to rationality and efficiency. These transformations are most notably reflected in the story in the way this futuristic society is structured. In-person interactions are deemed unnecessary, thus discouraged as being "contrary to the spirit of the age" (Forster 6); communication is exclusively carried out virtually, and individuals are

completely isolated in their rooms, with "buttons and switches everywhere" (6) ready to respond to any physical need as well as provide entertainment. There is no concept of family, as parental duties "cease at the moment of birth" (10) and infants are moved to "public nurseries" (10). Religion in the traditional sense does not exist in such a rational and technology-dependent society, and yet the Machine is worshipped very much like a deity, as Kuno recognises. But for this complex technological system, humanity would have apparently gone extinct. People created the Machine in order to survive, but with time it became too complex, to the point that few could truly understand how it works, and so the increased mystery around it and their absolute dependence on it transformed it into a deity, though few would care to acknowledge it. Indeed, Vashti, who denies that she worships the Machine when Kuno challenges her, performs a nightly ritual during which she takes her Book of the Machine "reverently in her hands" sitting up in her bed and "half ashamed, half joyful" murmurs "O Machine! O Machine!" and raises it to her lips, kissing it and inclining her head three times (8). Therefore, humanity has not managed to rid itself completely of what it has come to consider irrational; the urge to believe in a higher force is still there, as is motherly love. Despite understanding and accepting the values set forth in the Book of the Machine, Vashti still experiences these ostensibly primitive emotions. She desires to believe in something and loves her children; she thinks "there was something special about Kuno" just like "there had been something special about all her children" (10). This could explain why she accepts Kuno's request to visit him in person, in spite of her dislike of air-ships.

"The Machine Stops" offers a commentary on Forster's own time and an admonition against what humanity could become should it rely too much on technology, forgetting that it is its own creation. As Kuno reminds Vashti, men made the Machine, "great men, but men" and, while it "is much," "it is not everything" (4). Similarly, people may revel in the new comforts provided by technology, but becoming complacent and uncritically accepting of these

advancements can have undesirable effects. Naturally, there would have been a sense of optimism in light of such developments that would give the impression of a utopian society about to be formed. This hope for a better world can be seen in the work of H. G. Wells (1866–1946) who, in fact, had a significant impact not only on works such as *We*, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but also on "The Machine Stops" (Hillegas 12–13). A preoccupation with the future is central to much of Wells's writing, given that he was a "supreme rationalist and believer in science and the scientific method" (14). Mark Robert Hillegas argues that Forster's work presents "a vision of man's nature, his place in the universe, and the power of science which is the complete antithesis of the vision that by the 1930's was commonly considered Wellsian"; in other words, "a utopia filled with super-gadgets, mechanical wonders, run by an elite of scientists and engineers for the good of the people" (16).

Nevertheless, there is a "darkness which actually permeates" much of Wells's early work, Hillegas continues (17). Wells set about to attack vigorously the "late Victorian complacency" as he believed "there was no greater enemy of progress than a belief in inevitable progress" (18). From this perspective, Forster is in agreement with Wells as they both seem to consider complacency a fatal flaw. The inability to evolve, either through "knowledge of man himself and of man in relation to the things about him" (15), following Wells's views, or through an introspective rediscovery and acceptance of emotion according to Forster's idea, can have dire consequences. Evolution and adaptation require freedom of thought, curiosity, and even an element of rebellion that makes one question the norm. Ultimately, it is the desire and willingness to learn that leads to progress, rather than strict adherence to a set way of thought and behaviour based on accepted principles. The latter can give rise to something more akin to a repressing kind of religion, which is evident in the world of "The Machine Stops."

As Horan points out, speculative fiction in general "anticipates what transpires when societies are put under extreme pressure" (71). Indeed, there

seems to be a "certain turn towards pessimism in modern culture," as M. Keith Booker notes, which he believes starts at the end of the nineteenth century with the notion of degeneration, a theory according to which "far from moving inexorably forward in its social and biological evolution, the human race could quite possibly move backward toward savagery" (2). The examples of dystopian fiction mentioned so far attest to this concern over retrogression not necessarily seen as following a lack of technological development, but often leading to it. The sense of crisis in this type of fiction becomes all the more intense considering it is "a reaction to frustration at the outcome of centuries of utopian dreams related to the coming of the Enlightenment in the West" (4). Booker adds that the emphasis on the "capabilities of individual human beings" and their ability to "comprehend their world through the application of reason and rationality" gave readers hope that they could eventually build "better or even ideal societies" (4). Change, however, brings uncertainty, which can be fearsome, and the advancement brought by the Enlightenment could lead to "dystopian nightmares" rather than "utopian dreams" (4). In "The Machine Stops," the fruits of the intellectual curiosity and ingenuity of previous generations that sought to address pressing societal issues have become products that individuals take for granted; the Machine has not only replaced the initial interest in what gave rise to it, but it has also undermined the engagement with principles on which it was created, meaning curiosity and experimentation. The period of Enlightenment that the Machine has helped bring about cannot be sustained without the courage and willingness to question, to learn, to change and finally to adapt, resulting in social stagnation and eventual destruction.

"The Machine Stops" perfectly illustrates how absolute faith in technology and progress is not by definition the way to create a better world. Given that technological developments will almost always outpace social changes, as the latter require time, it is imperative that the fear of stagnation does not lead to a rigid social, mechanical social structure. It seems that a more humanist

approach that is "grounded in art, emotion, and imagination as well as critical thought" (Horan 71) is what Forster is advocating in his short story. Although people in their underground society perish and the Machine finally stops, the remaining people on the surface of the Earth, "the Homeless" (Forster 38), who are freed from that civilization, can start to reconstruct the world "to-morrow" (38). There is hope at the end of the story despite the bleak images that can "lead the reader to despair" (Vieira 17). This is the case with most writers of dystopian fiction, who seem to "expect a very positive reaction on the part of their readers," who in turn are presented with a possibility of what "they have to learn to avoid" rather than an inescapable future reality (17). This is what can prompt readers to take such warnings seriously and strive for social improvement. A utopia is impossible, but a better society that can develop and adapt is attainable.

The Beehive and the Bee: Two Opposing Forces

It seems clear from the beginning of the story that the two main characters represent opposing perspectives; on the one hand, complacency which can lead to stagnation, and on the other hand, curiosity and critical thinking. In a world where each citizen is "cocooned in an identical private chamber," a "totalizing social system" controls every aspect of life and "cultural variety has ceded to rigorous organization" (Adams & Ramsden 722), Vashti seems more than content with this way of life. She has accepted the norms of this society so much so that Kuno's concerns about their overreliance on and quasi-religious worship of the Machine only drives them further apart. Her son's transgressions, curiosity and original ideas—as opposed to the second-hand ideas of the rest—vex her and she takes offence at anything he says that might be remotely critical of the Machine. She is presumably a representative of the majority of the people in this society who have become complacent, "hopelessly reliant" on "the efficient operation of the Machine" (722). The result is the total collapse of their world, which is Forster's "condemnation" of a world that

adopted the "social structure of the bee" (723). Though bees are social insects, Forster's beehive world traps its inhabitants into "social isolation and zero-diversity conditions," effectively leading to stagnation rather than development, and so the result is a "curiously asocial man" (723).

Vashti stands for the prioritisation of the collective beehive where the individual bees are interchangeable, but the whole beehive structure has to survive for the benefit of the group. The individual bee here is represented by Kuno, who is inquisitive, critical towards the Machine and seems to crave genuine human contact. He insists on his mother visiting him "so that we can meet face to face, and talk about the hopes that are in my mind" (Forster 5), as he begs of her in the beginning of the story. This need sets him apart from the "sickly passivity" (Caporaletti 35) of the rest and their adherence to their "hypertechnological world"; he is dissimilar from those who are "unaware of their unnatural condition" and "completely forgetful of their true human dimension" (33). As Emelie Jonsson points out, Kuno is "the only anomaly in the uniformity that reigns absolute in the world of the Machine" and it is telling that he is the one to denounce the dangers of materialism and conformism "imposed by rigid social conventions" that expose the "spiritual barrenness" and "emotional impoverishment" of such a world (Caporaletti 36). Belonging to the youngest generation that is supposed to represent the future, it makes sense for Kuno to be the one who embodies such ideals. It is not only his way of thinking, but also his actions that are significant. His visits to the surface of the Earth are a behavioural transgression, as Earth has been designated as a "place of non-desire" rather than a forbidden one, and so the fact that he found a way there by himself, using "his own poor muscles to emerge to the surface," rather than applying to the Machine, is defiant (35). His very desire to visit Earth is a lapse on his part; in the beginning, it is considered an oddity but, in light of the failing Machine, it is perceived as an offence, a danger to the beehive.

It can be argued that Kuno serves as Forster's voice (Jonsson 165). Through this character, the writer warns against turning away from "core human

concerns" and being "strangled by the mechanical garment it has woven" (165). Yet Kuno is still part of that beehive world, and so he remains limited by the constraints of his environment (165). In the end, he does not really manage to bring about any significant change other than making Vashti see beyond the narrow world of the Machine. Even that is accomplished at the end of the story, just before they both perish, when it is too late for them and their underground world. It seems like Kuno has played his part, however small, in challenging someone's set worldview, which could potentially lead to a better future world for the survivors on Earth, though that is again quite vague and there is no guarantee that "some fool" will not "start the Machine again, tomorrow" (Forster 39), as Vashti fears. It would have been interesting to see Kuno's individual rebellion translate to collective action, though it is questionable whether he would have been successful given the steadfastness of this society. In essence, Kuno is meant to represent the hope of change for the better, no matter how slim that might be. Readers are indeed left with a hopeful message: should they heed the warning against the "folly of adapting to tools and technology rather than adapting them to human use within an environment" (Jonsson 173), they can prevent this dystopia from realising itself.

There is, however, a caveat to this which is not all that evident in the short story. As Jonsson points out, in the attempt to avoid becoming too dependent on tools and to regain an appreciation for direct experience (169), one should not romanticise "natural man encountering nature" without "addressing the reality of a struggle for survival" (174). That is to say, one should not forget society's "dependence on cultural inventions," including tools (174) like the Machine in the story in question, or any other sort of technology that enables survival. The right balance is crucial, seeing that becoming complacent can lead to torpidity and eventually destruction. Within an overly rationalised existence, the need for imagination is critical (March-Russell 56), as is the need to nourish the inquisitive human spirit and cultivate communal bonds in order to maintain this balance.

Much like the main characters in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Kuno seems to be more perceptive than others who surround him and dreams of setting humanity free (Lisboa 136). This could explain why he tries to make Vashti aware of the dire situation they are in, though for meaningful change to occur, more people would have to be liberated from the Machine and motivated to think differently. It is not clear exactly what enables Kuno to think in this way to begin with, meaning, how he arrives at the conclusion that "the universe should be at least partly man-shaped" (Meyers 8). Ultimately, the Machine breaks down on its own, a result of wear and tear rather than his actions. The fact that he is able to see beyond the narrow scope of their beehive world, while hopeful, leaves room for doubt about whether the emerging new society will not "exaggerate the factors that resulted in cataclysm in the first place" (Lisboa 137) and repeat past mistakes; namely, an excessive dependence on tools which can stand in the way of adaptation and evolution, a "kind of binary thinking" and a "lack of critical self-awareness" (March-Russell 58) that can keep individuals in the dark.

The allusion to Plato's allegory of the cave is unmistakable, as Paul March-Russell points out (58). Doris Meyers explains that in this allegory the people in the cave, whose knowledge consists of "shadows of reality," refuse to believe that there is a real sun outside which lights real objects that cast the shadows they see in the cave (7). This is a closed universe, in which some live contentedly, while others attempt to escape (7). Similarly, in "The Machine Stops" readers are introduced to the closed universe of the underground technologically advanced world of Vashti and Kuno, where the "general idea" of something, including people, was "good enough for all practical purposes," and the "imponderable bloom of the grape was ignored by the manufacturers of artificial fruit" (Forster 5). In this way, Forster portrays how technology causes "the alienation of human beings from one another," reinforcing the idea that such a closed system, with all its technological marvels, can also create a trap for those in it (Meyers 7). In other words, people in this world built the Machine

to enable life and make it comfortable but then had to find ways to adjust to the Machine's limitations (8), rather than to those of their environment. As a result, they have now found themselves imprisoned and dehumanised within a system that "severs human connections while apparently facilitating communication" (8).

This relates to Forster's views as a "secular humanist" who believes that life's meaning derives from "the capacity of human beings to love and communicate with one another" (7). This is most evidently illustrated through Kuno, who seeks connection and genuine communication with his mother. Having understood how the Machine has come to take over all physical human activities, he refuses to talk to Vashti through the Machine (11) and treasures the fact that his wish is granted, albeit right before their death. According to Philip Stevick, the story's ending affirms that "mankind endures" (233). That final scene reinforces the possible interpretation that Forster is in agreement with Kuno's hopeful message; otherwise, the author would have included something that would demolish this hope instead of allowing Kuno's words to "stand, without confirmation or denial, content with the irony that they have learned too late" (233). Therefore, despite the "unanswered questions" (Meyers 8), Forster presents "a calculated 'way out'" (Stevick 235) through human interaction occurring through language that goes beyond sophisticated communication systems which, in fact. "discourage people from speaking" as they are detached from "the physical nature of the human being" (Meyers 11).

Conclusion

"The Machine Stops" elicits a "specific *aesthetic (ethical) response*, which is that of a *warning*" which "underlines the potentiality of the depicted" while ensuring that it still "remains fictional" (Farca 71). Readers today can recognise elements that bear a striking resemblance to how contemporary society operates, including the way individuals interact with each other and the world, and how they communicate with others, inform and entertain themselves, while being a

part of an interconnected society. Technology is ubiquitous and virtually everyone seems to be connected to the world wide web, very much like the hyperconnectedness sustained and promoted by the Machine. In fact, Forster has created a world technologically superior to that of the modern world in the sense that everything is provided to each individual in their own private space so that one does not even have to venture out. To some extent, this holds true for contemporary readers as well, which is why the messages in the story still resonate with people today. Indeed, as a result of the "effect of estrangement" that the short story produces as it proposes a "perverted and paradoxical version of future reality" (Caporaletti 43), it poses some "disquieting questions on the ethical and social evolution of a civilization that expects to find in science an answer to many of its problems" (37).

Forster's short story urges readers then and now to reflect on their own circumstances and question to what extent technology serves or enslaves humanity. More specifically, it highlights "the level of physical comfort as part of what keeps people imprisoned," juxtaposing the closed, safe environment of such a world to breaking out of it and "accepting some discomfort" (Meyers 11). The story effectively reflects the anxiety of the era regarding automation (Shriver 155), which is also becoming a growing concern for the modern world, especially given the rapid technological advances of technologies that most people do not fully comprehend yet depend on. Technology outpacing the ability of individuals and societies to adapt is even more evident today, which heightens the fear of stagnation, of not keeping up with the latest development and of constantly seeking to acquire the next best product that will make life more comfortable. Physical comfort and progress take precedence over the long-term survival of the collective. The idea that a machine which can tend to every human need eventually creates "a race of biological incompetents" who are doomed once the machine breaks down and no one can repair it (155) seems like a tangible threat for modern readers. Forster's denouncement of technological overdependence in "The Machine Stops" demonstrates what can

happen when the survival of the collective hinges on the rigid worshipping of technology; this results in a society which functions much like a beehive, and is believed to be autonomous, but it "absolutely shuts out the rest of the environment" and so "eliminates even the possibility of an adaptive response to the environment" (Jonsson 170).

This story is the author's warning against "the maladaptive adaptation to a narrow and unreliable niche," ultimately proving that it is necessary to adapt to and be aware of the larger environment (162). Individual qualities, namely, freedom of thought, curiosity, courage and willingness to change, are essential for the collective to not only survive, but also thrive (Lynch 297). These qualities are found in Kuno, who has experienced "first-hand ideas" and has engaged in "direct observation" (Forster 28). His visits to the surface of the Earth and his contact with the people above, "hiding in the mist and the ferns," (38) have sparked his curiosity. He is no longer mentally reliant on the Machine and can think more critically, free of its yoke and the fear of living without it. His doubts and rebelliousness are the necessary link for the transition to an improved world, more in tune with nature. Although Kuno does not see this new world, the next generation, the Homeless who survive on Earth, have a chance to do so. By the end of the short story, readers may ultimately find themselves identifying not with the main characters, but with those remaining on Earth, the surviving individuals who will have to adapt to the circumstances and reconstruct a community.

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Abstract

"The Machine Stops" is a science fiction short story by English author E.M. Forster, set in a world where humanity resides underground, relying on an omnipotent global machine to fulfil all its needs. The two main characters, Vashti and her son Kuno, represent two opposing worldviews, giving rise to questions regarding the survival of the collective as opposed to the freedom of the individual. The Machine has become essential in the preservation of this society, which later proves to be incredibly fragile: a society which has come to solely rely on the comforts provided by the Machine and has renounced the physicality of its inhabitants. Forster predicts humanity's increasing reliance on technology, highlighting the dangers of this becoming the ultimate controlling force, a concern that is also relevant in modern society. The futurist, information-oriented world presented reveals what can happen when humanity disengages itself from its physical and emotional existence, becoming incapable of adapting to changing environments. Examining this world through the lens of the beehive metaphor, the objective is to explore the danger of complacency which leads to

stagnation. By delving into how individuals can resist the tendency of the collective to numb their inquisitive human spirit, the necessity of adaptation is revealed. The story delivers a warning and a hopeful message about growth in new global realities, which may resonate with readers to this day.