

The Machine Whimpers

by [Robert Gear](#) (June 2024)



Dynamo-machine –Natalia Goncharova, 1913

The ability to perceive satire is not shared by all, even by those who speak the same language as an author in that genre. I sometimes remind myself of an acquaintance, a non-native but competent speaker and teacher of English, who did not appreciate Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* because she thought that eating babies was wrong. Since too that individual was a supporter of the so-called 'Palestinians' perhaps she considered *eating* babies a step too far—if you get my point—like the proverbial chef who would not taste his own culinary preparations.

And so we should not be surprised that a satire site such as *The Babylon Bee* is often 'fact checked.' This quasi-autistic outlook is shared by some readers of Orwell and Huxley and of other earlier dystopian works. At the risk of promoting yet another 'How To' manual for the DEI crowd in the unintentional manner of Orwell or Huxley, I present here some observations of how facets of the modern world were imaginatively foreseen by E. M. Forster in his short(ish) story "The Machine Stops" (1909).

The tale is prescient and is indebted (as so much of our mental lives still is) to Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Although Forster may not have been extrapolating public sentiments of his own times, the themes of the story resonate with us more today than they could have at the time of writing; in some ways aspects of his novella are already with us. A reader of Edwardian times may have appreciated the fictional elements but would not have conceived how Forster was untangling the threads of disruption which have latterly taken on such an ominous presence. This tendency has been admirably laid bare by Iain McGilchrist in his writings on left brain dominance—a tendency which has produced 'a drive that is implacably opposed to the human.'

Of course, the Orwell and Huxley dystopias have been much

considered, both by scholars examining their literary value, and now by elements of the radical left who seem to consider the themes and plots as blueprints for our possible futures. Some readers may remember the spate of discussions in the early 1980s centering around whether or not Orwell's warnings had or would come true, and which was more prescient—*Brave New World* or *1984*. Only forty years ago, most readers would have understood that these dystopias were not so devoutly to be wished. But the anointed visionaries of our own day have moved stubbornly towards encouraging or forcing others to live in a version of these imagined worlds.

In which ways does "The Machine Stops" allude to Plato's allegory? The two main characters are Vashti and her son, Kuno, who both live deep underground. Like all of humanity, they inhabit the cave-like and profoundly curated existence in which all their needs are met at the touch of a button. Vashti is, in effect, what we now call 'a couch potato' who receives and expounds ideas and meaningless scholarship not unlike today's social media frivolity. But Kuno has understood somehow (like Winston Smith and Huxley's John the Savage) that their existence is inauthentic, stultifying, and meaningless, and his curiosity leads him to find a way out of the underground cubicles onto the surface of the planet. He returns to his dwelling place like Plato's prisoner and attempts to inform and persuade his mother whose subterranean cubicle is on the other side of the world. His efforts are in vain; she rebuffs him, horrified at his heretical ideas.

There are other ways, no doubt unintended or unforeseen by Forster, in which this story reveals current and age-old forms of hysteria flowing along the distributaries of history. For example, Vashti, in her frailty and fear of human contact, exemplifies a type of delusion close to the psychiatric disorder sometimes known as 'The Glass Delusion.' Sufferers from this disorder were mainly from the wealthier and more educated sectors of medieval fiefdoms. They imagined that they

were made of glass and therefore liable to fracture at the slightest physical provocation even though not one had graduated from university. An example of this mania was exhibited by the French King Charles VI, (r. 1380-1422) who purportedly wrapped himself in blankets to prevent such misfortune. But more to the point, the easily offended of our own day, those who take offense at the slightest affront whether micro, nano, or pico and, whether real or imagined, work themselves into a similar frenzy. These new Puritans can even be 'triggered' –to gloss H.L. Menken–by the haunting fear that someone, somewhere might *not* be wearing a Wu-flu face-nappy. Perhaps fear of human contact morphs rather easily into the fear of being offended, as Vashti is fearful of human contact and offended by the heretical beliefs of her son.

The Machine that regulates all life may be likened to a prophetic antecedent of the Internet and AI—not that Forster could have had any notion of such futures, the story having been written before the advent even of the television age. But the Machine can be considered as a new, a substitute God, one to be worshiped as 'the spirit of the the age' as Vashti puts it.

What else will today's globalist visionaries find useful in this story? Could it be the necessity of prohibiting travel because of the curious belief that carbon dioxide is destroying the planet or something? '[Is your journey really necessary?](#)' they fondly ask, echoing World War II necessary propaganda. Prohibiting travel is a climate alarmist's dream (although our current global 'hegemons' and bunker-billionaires who help promote this belief system avail themselves of such luxury). In "The Machine Stops," travel above ground by airship is engaged in, albeit reluctantly, *not* for reasons of saving the planet, but because humanity has become habituated to living underground, blind as moles to the reality of another existence; a world of people living like Plato's prisoners in the cave—chained mentally to their round

blue plates—a primitive forerunner of laptop and mobile connectivity.

The Machine has taken on god-like meaning for these underground dwellers. Vashti, alarmed by her son's heretical beliefs cautions and chastises him, 'Oh Hush! ... You mustn't say anything against the Machine.' She prays, 'Oh Machine! O Machine,' to which Kuno replies, 'Why not? ... You talk as if God had made the Machine ... I believe you pray to it when you are unhappy.'

As an aside though, some might argue that Forster's brand of agnostic humanism somehow contradicts the apparent thrust of the story. For example, what are we to make of the following?

Man, the flower of all flesh, the noblest of all creatures visible, man who had once made god in his image (underline added) ... was dying, strangled in the garments that he had woven.

But perhaps it just because man has *made god in his image* that he could (and did) stumble on to worshiping the Machine. The Circean allure of technological mastery may well be leading to the replacement of the human with the Machine and the dominance of what has been called 'the algorithmic mind.'

Kuno's thoughts are of a type with what the elite controllers now call 'hate-crimes,' and are well on their way to encouraging acquiescence in the once satirical notion of 'thought-crimes.' He even grows a mustache, evidence of a return to the primitive. Forster writes, 'On atavism the Machine can have no mercy.' The past is not just another country, it has been abolished; a tendency we are seeing around us increasingly. And yes, Kuno has been threatened with 'Homelessness,' a euphemism for being condemned to death or

even—perish the thought—cancelled.

The underground-dwellers' belief system favored by Vashti confirms Chesterton's adage that when Man stops believing in God he believes not in nothing but in anything. Anything can become a god, even a secular book, like the *Book of the Machine*. As the breakdown of the Machine inevitably approaches and the 'end is nigh' as they used to say, Vashti 'whirls around like the devotees of an earlier religion, screaming, praying, striking at the buttons with bleeding hands.'

Forster also manages to foreshadow Communist insanity and bureaucratic manipulation. The world is overseen by *The Central Committee*. I imagine this must have been a lucky coincidence of labels since at the time of publication (1909), this term with its terrifying connotations had not yet become known in the English-speaking world. A committee so named was of course exulted as the 'highest organ' of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. And likewise all life is managed in this future world: an equity and inclusion-managers target made manifest.

The cubicles in which people exist are identical down to the smallest detail. For example, Vashti does not find her bed comfortable, but one size fits all 'for beds were of the same dimension all over the world.' And tellingly, 'What was the good of going to Pekin (sic) when it was just like Shrewsbury;' just as modern corporate architectural design—the same everywhere and mostly characterless has made inroads into urban centers the world over.

This universal sameness is encouraged by allowing unregulated migration into the developed world for reasons of maintaining political control. Perhaps not coincidentally this policy is an attempt to push Western cultures to *conform* to universal cultural diversity; although the attempt at homogenization is paradoxically leading to the reemergence of tribalism, whether intended or not. The wokists' dream of ushering in global

‘equity’ is also seen in the strange belief that the two sexes are not substantially different. Devotees believe that people can transition from one sex to another. And yet these same wokists simultaneously find subjective differences in a host of what they coin as ‘genders.’

In Orwell’s masterpiece, the aspiration of the rulers can be summed up in O’Brien’s words as ‘a boot stamping on a human face forever,’ and in *Brave New World* with the death by suicide of John the Savage. In contrast, “The Machine Stops” does end with a hint of salvation or rebirth. Forster couldn’t resist implying that there could be a new and better world born out of the destruction of the old Machine world; remember that this was written before the last century had really got underway, let alone before the worst of its cultural debris had fastened onto our own one. As mother and son are dying they see ‘scraps of the *untainted* (italics added) sky,’ and Kuno assures Vashti that ‘humanity has learnt its lesson.’

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