

# **Dystopian Space in E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops"**

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## **Abstract**

E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" (1909) is an anomaly in his literary career. Not only is this story one of his very few science fiction works, but it is also one of the first dystopian science fiction works in the English language. Nonetheless, until recently it has received rather scant critical attention. Among the critical studies to date, the spatial environment in this short story has received no critical consideration. This study attempts to illustrate the possibilities of approaching this narrative in more spatial terms. Specifically, it seeks to explore the spatial configurations and how they relate to dystopian aesthetics, how corporal disintegration as represented in this short story is correlated to a loss of self-identity. The theoretical backdrop of this study falls within the purview of the so-called "spatial turn" in literary studies and will partially draw on postmodern aspects of spatiality developed by Fredric Jameson.

**Keywords:** E.M. Forster, Fredric Jameson, spatiality, dystopia

It should perhaps come as little surprise that in a period of lockdowns and quarantines, of travel restrictions and social distancing measures, a short dystopian story from a century ago depicting isolated humans living in closed quarters connected to each other only by way of a television network should make a resurgence as one of the most prescient, if not outwardly prophetic, stories in the dystopian cannon. “The Machine Stops” was one of two science fiction works – or what at the turn of the century was referred to as “scientific romance” or “scientific fantasy” – that E.M. Forster wrote in his long career; the other one was his last short story, “Little Imber” (1961). First published in 1909 in *The Oxford and Cambridge Review*, when the term “dystopia” had no application to literature, the short story was included almost ten years later in the collection *The Eternal Moment and Other Stories* (1928). Since then, it has been relegated to the marginalia of Forster’s literary output, receiving only scant and sporadic critical attention.

The reasons for its obscurity were at least twofold. Not only was it out of character from Forster’s more “serious” literary creations, but it also suffered from the stigma commonly associated with the science fiction genre, considered until relatively recently as a less-than-respectable literary form. This certainly did little to promote “The Machine Stops” as a work worthy of academic consideration. The first major study of “The Machine Stops” can be found in Mark R. Hillegas’s *The Future as Nightmare: H.G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians* (1967) and it was not until much later, in Tom Moylan’s *Scarpes of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000), that an in-depth analysis of the story was published. Both authors stress the seminal role “The Machine Stops” has in twentieth-century dystopian fiction, with its anti-Wellsian and neo-Luddite purport attracting particular interest. Recently, the text has garnered recognition for its almost prophetic depiction of our socially destructive overreliance on internet technology (Seabury 1997; Caporaletti 1997) and its relevance in relation to ecocriticism (Seegert 2010).

Seeing that relatively little critical consideration has been given to the spatial environment in “The Machine Stops,” this study aims to present this narrative in more spatial terms. Specifically, it seeks to explore the spatial configurations and how they relate to dystopian spatial aesthetics, how corporal disintegration as represented in this short story is correlated to a loss of self-identity. The theoretical backdrop of this study falls within the purview of the so-called “spatial turn” in literary studies.<sup>1</sup> Though

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of geocriticism and spatial theory in literature, see the introduction to Robert T. Tally’s *Spatiality* (2013).

criticism working from within this theoretical context usually takes as its object of research narratives depicting "real" spaces, a case has been made to extend this line of inquiry to the work outside the mimetic and realistic convention. In his discussion on the romance aspects of SF, Jameson suggests "[w]e need to explore the proposition that the distinctiveness of SF as a genre has less to do with time (history, past, future) than with space" (Jameson 2005, 313). The possibility of extending the reach of geocritical studies to science fiction and fantasy literature was also indicated by Robert T. Tally Jr. in his conclusion to *Spatiality* and later considered more extensively in the publication of *Popular Fiction and Spatiality: Reading Genre Settings*.

While there already had been a rich history of dystopian-themed literature prior to "The Machine Stops," this was one of the first works to shift attention away from economic and political considerations occupying the works of William Morris and H.G. Wells towards the impact of technology on social life. It was not until the early twentieth century that scientific themes became more prevalent in dystopian works, which is why Gregory Claeys concedes that "The Machine Stops" could be described as "dystopian science fiction" (2017, 333) and is certainly one of the first technologically-centered dystopian narratives to have come out of this period. Other prominent works that deal with similar issues are Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* (1920) and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924). All of these works share a similar apprehension with regard to the possible long-term consequences of surrendering social change to technological development. These consequences usually take the form of technocratic dystopias, which have successfully erased the values in the defense of which the abovementioned writers created their literary dystopias. The critique of emergent totalitarian social systems in the abovementioned works underscores the centrality of such notions as individuality and agency. The task for the author then becomes to illustrate the shift away from ideological enslavement, automation, totalitarianism, and collectivism towards individual freedom, free will, and self-determination. "The Machine Stops" exhibits some of the anti-fascist and anti-totalitarian themes that would find their fullest expression in later works of dystopian fiction inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution, most notably Zamyatin's *We*. Forster's anxiety was incited not so much by totalitarian regimes as by the encroaching tide of modernity, which is why Tom Moylan sees "The Machine Stops" as going "against the grain of an emergent modernity" (2000, 111). Going against this grain meant resisting the optimism characterizing modernism at its nascent stage. Instead of being a force for the advancement of society and a tool for fulfilling the potential of humanity, technology is presented as extracting a price for the optimization of comfort.

In line with the conventions of the dystopian genre, “The Machine Stops” thrusts a rebellious protagonist into a fictional world where social politics are aligned in such a way as to project stability and utopian perfection, but where the protagonist alone sees that something is amiss, that is, the protagonist begins to question the assumptions underlying the integrity of the whole social system. This is the beginning of the journey towards self-realization for the protagonist, who during its course discovers the value of what he has been denied. At worst, such narratives fall victim to sanctimonious pedagogy, at best they are able to avoid that pitfall and offer by means of extrapolation a more nuanced commentary on the flaws of contemporary culture. It is into this latter convention that “The Machine Stops” falls.

This story presents Forster’s bleak vision of the future world dominated by technology, which in the story takes the metaphorical shape of the all-encompassing, all-seeing “Machine.” All these subterrestrial inhabitants are consigned to living solitary lives in their cells, spending their time exchanging intellectual thoughts through a computer network resembling Skype. Forster enjoins us to image this world:

Imagine, if you can, a small room, hexagonal in shape like the cell of a bee. It is lighted neither by window nor by lamp, yet it is filled with a soft radiance. There are no apertures for ventilation, yet the air is fresh. There are no musical instruments, and yet, at the moment that my meditation opens, this room is throbbing with melodious sounds. An arm-chair is in the centre, by its side a reading desk—that is all the furniture. (Forster 1997, 87)

We find ourselves in an artificial, isolated space, where every convenience and need is immediately satisfied by the omnipresent Machine. The rooms can generate music, fresh air, videos, access to lectures, and the inhabitants can participate in lectures, social activities without ever having to leave the comfort of their arm-chairs.

In fact, the mere thought of leaving this safe space and see other people incites horror in Vashti. When the protagonist, Kuno calls his mother, Vashti, with an unusual invitation that she embark on a trip to see him so he can tell her of his recent experiences in person, “not through the Machine [...] not through the wearisome Machine” (88), she is mildly irritated that he is interrupting her routine and hesitantly gives him five minutes of her time. We can see that not only are all types of physical human contact and displays of affection frowned upon, but also the maternal and familial bonds are deemed undesirable and obsolete, replaced by self-isolation and intellectual

self-actualization. Kuno feels somehow out of place in this world, at odds with the worship that is accorded to the Machine, with the rules that everyone seems to be following blindly and so he decides to find his way outside, onto the surface, where it is believed that survival is impossible. He begins to rebel against what he recognizes as zealotry and worship for the Machine:

You talk as if a god had made the Machine [...]. Men made it, do not forget that [...]. We created the Machine, to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now. It has robbed us of the sense of space and of the sense of touch, it has blurred every human relation and narrowed down love to a carnal act, it has paralysed our bodies and our wills, and now it compels us to worship it. (88)

In an effort to prove to himself that life is possible on the surface of the planet, he took initiative to find a way without government approval. For this he was threatened with "homelessness," which is the same as being exiled to the supposedly toxic surface. Though travelling to the surface is not technically illegal, doing so without any purpose and without going through the official channels to receive permission is denounced. Kuno's desire to discover the surface on his terms puts him on a quest for knowledge of what lies beyond his preserved confines. None of the other inhabitants share this desire, compelled by fear or habitual passivity to remain content to live out their lives in their small cells. This is where Moylan locates Forster's "romantic humanism and privileged individualism" (Moylan 2000, 113).

Much of the criticism on "The Machine Stops" revolves around the issue of technology, this being the obvious target of Forster's narrative. What have humans done with the conveniences afforded to them by the Machine? It would seem that with the provision of all necessary accommodations and comforts, humans will be able to focus their undivided attention on self-actualization. What readers find, however, is a perverted version of this dream. With the sole purpose being the pursuit of knowledge, which takes the form of exchanging, or rather recycling, second-hand knowledge with the help of short lectures through televisual devices. Vashti's engagement in these lectures and her obsessive desire to "have ideas" are absolutely of no relevance outside the theoretical realm, as the title of her lecture is meant to indicate: "Music during the Australian period." What might have been intended as a delicate nudge away from intellectual posturing towards more practical intellectual pursuits can now be construed as a warning of the dangers of virtual reality and Internet addiction.

Ideally, technology allows for the transcendence of corporeal demands and obligations, opening the possibility of fully devoting oneself to intellectual pursuits. On the other hand, increasing the reliance on technology to mediate reality comes at a price. Forster satirizes the optimistic view of technology being a saviour of humanity when depicting the bodies of our protagonists as having degenerated into “swaddled lump[s] of flesh” (87), with their muscles atrophied from inactivity. Excessive reliance on technology separates us from our bodies and it is Kuno’s awareness of his body that brings about a change in his perspective. This idea of physical strength being a counterweight to decadent intellectualization was signalled earlier with the Machine’s preference for physical weakness. In a reverse Spartan manner, the strong-bodied infants are cast away, as they might be less likely to conform to the mandated docility defining the culture of Forster’s dystopia. Having been deemed in possession of excessive physical strength, Kuno barely survived this postnatal selection process. This would later come to affect his attitude; he would start to pose questions, exhibit doubt.

Dystopian fiction provides fertile ground for explorations of spatial and architectural constructions, as it greatly relies on world creation as a means for externalizing ideological content. Attention to architectural detail and spatial aspects not only generates the appropriate mood of dread and despair but also gives voice to the ideological tenets governing the described dystopian society. I would argue that in “The Machine Stops” Forster is not only, in a somewhat reactionary tone, decrying the loss of a mode of living altered by modernity as described above; he is also tracing the contours of phenomena that would take form years after his death, namely, postmodernism, and more specifically “that new spatiality implicit in the postmodern” (Jameson 1991, 418). It should be remembered that postmodernism was initially an architectural concept and has always been tied to spatiality as opposed to modernist literature’s concern with time. Michel Foucault in his famous “The Other Spaces” emphasizes this point by stating that twentieth-century philosophy has shifted from concerns of time to concerns of space, and by declaring the present as the “epoch of space” (Foucault 2008, 14).

It is important to realize that Kuno’s environment is placeless. This quality is reinforced by the Machine’s lack of a specific location or any material presence for that matter; it is presented as a ubiquitous multimedial network looking over the functioning of the whole system of civilization. It does not matter where one is as long as the Machine is present. Geographically, the underground network is also placeless. Though we learn from the narrator that the underground network of cubicles is located in Wessex, this

location does not mean anything to the current inhabitants. The underground facilities are not located anywhere specific for the characters, for whom the whole world seems to have become an interconnected monolith of identical cubicles. Each individual is confined to their quarters in this elaborate beehive structure which ensures their physical separation despite close proximity. And without the need to commute, as physical interpersonal contact has become obsolete; without the need to be anywhere specific as one's life is lived from the arm-chair and through an internet link, it no longer matters where one is and the idea of place loses its meaning. To reverse Tally's assumption,<sup>2</sup> if human beings are no longer "social animals"—Aristotle's *zoon politikon*—they are no longer spatial animals. The idea of space ceases to have meaning.

Kuno's indictment of this state of affairs often involves the way in which he feels separated from the space around him:

you know that we have lost the sense of space. We say 'space is annihilated', but we have annihilated not space but the sense thereof. We have lost a part of ourselves [...]. 'Near' is a place to which I can get quickly on my feet, not a place to which the train or the airship will take me quickly. 'Far' is a place to which I cannot get quickly on my feet [...] though I could be there in thirty-eight seconds by summoning the train. (100)

He tells his mother that the Machine

has robbed us of the sense of space and of the sense of touch, it has blurred every human relation and narrowed down love to a carnal act, it has paralyzed our bodies and our wills, and now it compels us to worship it. (105)

As the characters are immobilized in their cubicles, they experience a certain sense of spatial disorientation and dread when they allow themselves to diverge from the routine prescribed by the Machine. It is this loss of bearings that is a defining feature of postmodern space as described by Fredric Jameson in *The Postmodern Condition*. Drawing on David Lynch's *The Image of the City*, Jameson develops the idea of "cognitive mapping," the process of orienting oneself spatially in increasingly discombobulating urban spaces.

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<sup>2</sup> "To the extent that human beings are "social animals" – Aristotle's *zoon politikon* – they are also *spatial* animals" (Tally 2013, 16).

Disalienation in the traditional city, then, involves the practical reconquest of *a sense of place* and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories. (Jameson 1991, 51; emphasis mine)

The ambiguous idea of the “sense of place” is central to both “The Machine Stops” and Jameson’s analysis. What do we mean by “sense” and what do we mean by “space” or “place”? Neal Alexander in his article “Sense of Place” (2017) goes some way towards offering an explication of these terms by tracing their origins in the Roman idea of *genius loci* to the modern notion of sense of place. In his article, he argues “that sense of place (in the plural) emerge from the engagement of our five sense not only in apprehending but also in actively making places, and in making sense of the worlds in which they take place” (39). An important observation regards viewing the dual meaning of “sense” as both sensory perception and a conceptual self-awareness of where one is. If Kuno’s physical involvement with the space around him is non-existent, then there can be no way of him making sense—or cognitively mapping—the world around him. The scope of this article does not allow for a detailed explanation of the difference between the concepts of “place” and “space.” Suffice it to say for the purpose of this analysis, relying on Yi-Fu Tuan’s *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), space is more abstract and undifferentiated, whereas place is more static, immediate and familiar.

As Moylan observes, Kuno’s quest is to map his surroundings and “to assert his agency by enhancing his cognitive map of his personal space and the space of his society” (Moylan 2000, 115), which would put him in a similar spatial environment as that described by Jameson; however, what is not mentioned by Moylan is that by mapping his environment, Kuno gains not only agency but also identity. Recognizing oneself in a defined space is, as Jeff Malpas argues, intrinsic for constructing a sense of identity, but as he emphasizes this is impossible without active engagement, something which Forster deliberately denies his characters. Malpas explains that

we are the sort of thinking, remembering, experiencing creatures we are only in virtue of our active engagement in place; that the possibility of mental life is necessarily tied to such engagement, and so to the places in which we are so engaged [...] our identities are, one can say, intricately and essential place-bound. (Malpas 1999, 177)



Kuno's predicament extends further than a lost sense of place, as the comforts of the cubicle seem to supply this need to the rest of the population, but only on condition that they forgo attempting to develop a sense of space, a sense of being in the world in relation to others.

Forster's decision to locate this world underground influences the narrative in a number of ways. Firstly, it puts the protagonist on a trajectory of moving upward from the interior of a womb-like environment to the surface of the earth. Kuno's journey through a ventilation tube is evocative of being expelled through the birth canal, of being reborn, which ultimately is Kuno's desire, thus casting the secondary quest to confront his mother in an ironic light. Also, being underground severs the inhabitants from any external means of orienting themselves (the sun and the geographical features), allowing the created civilization to develop uniformly.

Beneath those corridors of shining tiles were rooms, tier below tier, reaching far into the earth, and in each room there sat a human being, eating, or sleeping, or producing ideas [...]. thanks to the advance of science, the earth was exactly alike all over [...]. The buttons, the knobs, the reading desk with the Book, the temperature, the atmosphere, the illumination – all were exactly the same. (95)

Uniformity reinforces the indistinctive quality of Kuno's environment. Vashti travels to the other end of the world to visit Kuno, but her environment remains unchanged. This spatial indistinctiveness is mirrored by the uniformity of the population, as everyone everywhere is the same.

Society in "The Machine Stops" functions on the basis of separation not just from one another but also from knowledge. The short lectures absorbing Vashti are representative of a larger mechanism at play.

Beware of first-hand ideas! [...] First-hand ideas do not really exist [...] Let your ideas be second-hand, and if possible, tenth-hand, for then they will be far-removed from that disturbing element—direct observation" Indeed, Vashti is "seized with the terrors of direct experience. (95)

Direct experience has been eschewed in favour of mediated "second-hand" experience, evocative of the Baudrillardian image of simulacra and endlessly deferred "first-hand ideas" representing original thought, or thoughts of the origin. Losing sight of anything

believed to be original or authentic, separated from one another and any objective physical reality, the inhabitants have become docile, unable to anchor their actions in anything resembling personal agency. The dismissal of direct experience, especially that of touch and personal contact, reinforces this docility.

Secluded and quarantined enclaves are the trademarks of utopian and dystopian societies. Jameson believes that “all SF of the more ‘classical’ type is ‘about’ containment, closure, the dialectic of inside and outside, [...]” (Jameson 2005, 312). Elsewhere he writes that, “Closure is initially motivated by secession and the preservation of radical difference (as well as the fear of contamination from the outside and from the past or history). (Jameson 2005, 204). This was the case in both Orwell’s and Huxley’s dystopian worlds, and this is the case today of suburban gated communities being approached through the lens of dystopian aesthetics. These strictly enforced borders support the examination of utopias in carceral terms, as the interdiction against leaving the designated underground areas is maintained by coercion and fear. Any attempt to defy this interdiction is punishable by “homelessness,” or in other words exile, disconnection from the Machine.

This anxiety is maintained through the stories of “The Great Rebellion,” when rebels were exiled to die on the surface as a warning to the rest of the population. Compliance with the rules set forth by this technocratic system ensures its own survival and preserves the status quo. This is in line with Jameson’s understanding of the function that closure plays in anti-utopian fiction: “[...] the system develops its own instinct for self-preservation and learns ruthlessly to eliminate anything menacing its continuing existence without regard for individual life” (Jameson 2005, 205). This sentiment is echoed by Kuno, when he implores his mother to understand the inflated position of the Machine in relation to humans: “that it is we who are dying and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine [...]. The Machine develops – but not on our lines. The Machine proceeds – but no to our goal” (105–106). It is the idea of the Machine as a global entity uniting everyone that must be maintained in order to conceal the inherent isolation of the population.

In conclusion, it has been established that the central theme of “The Machine Stops” explores the consequences of what might happen if society were to give full rein to unfettered technological progress, an issue that was understandably compelling in Forster’s time, considering the rapid pace of technological, urban, scientific development at the start of the twentieth century. The anxieties accompanying the awareness of what must have seemed as unrestrained change certainly had a formative influence on the

development of science fiction and dystopian literature, and perhaps it is this anxiety that is responsible for this narrative's slightly reactionary tone. However, aside from giving shape to these anxieties, Forster in "The Machine Stops" was also able to illustrate in spatial terms the mechanisms responsible for the mental enslavement of the population. The claustrophobia evoked by the description of the living quarters is linked to the agoraphobia experienced by the inhabitants, in this case Vashti. Such enclosed spaces reaffirm the superiority of the governing system over the governed inhabitants. In postmodern terms, the loss of spatial bearings is linked to the inability to create a "cognitive map" of one's surroundings, which in effect leads to a state of alienation. This state can be remedied through active participation or engagement with the physical surroundings, a point that Forster narrativizes in Kuno's illegal acts of physical engagement with his surroundings. All these implications and conditions are evoked through a careful description of the spatial environment, which if elaborated in those terms, reassert the importance of space as a fertile context for literary studies, especially in relation to works hitherto ignored on account of their generic pedigree.

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