

Melissa Marie Bruno

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Enframed and Suffocated in the Garment of Technology: An Analysis of Forster's "The Machine Stops"

Forster's "The Machine Stops" is a classic example of the 'dystopian imagination,' creating an "image of the future [as] an advanced totalitarian state dependent upon a massive technological apparatus—in short, a technotopia" (Beauchamp 54). Specifically, Forster depicts a society in which man is isolated in an artificial habitat, imprisoned within the shackles of technology, and consumed by his own creation: the Machine. Forster's work elicits an extreme reading of Hobbes's *Leviathan* – the institution of the machine as sovereign, binding man within a mechanical 'social contract.' Man forfeits his freedom, surrenders his autonomy over to the machine, which in turn provides him security beyond his wildest dreams. Moreover, Forster's technotopia is also a manifestation of Heidegger's threats of modern technology: in attempts to master both human and non-human nature, man's design—the Machine—progresses beyond his understanding, and ultimately subjects him to his self-imposed domination. As such, man is dominated and literally enframed¹ by his own exploitative modes of thought. In other words, as Worrall so eloquently states, "[i]f this is a tragic tale, here may be found hubris--the supreme creation blinded by its supremacy, destroyed by its own sense of superiority" (27). As such, technological progress is attacked insofar as through the advances of technology, man becomes idle and static, a submissive 'standing-reserve' subservient to technology. In surrendering his control, man's

¹ In brief, enclosed and framed. A term I will explain in more detail.

suffering is twofold: by engaging in and submitting to a mechanical social contract; and, more bleakly, by being products of a time when modern technology is a mode of thinking rather than merely a mode of operation. As such, this is a dystopian tale cautioning modern man against becoming technologically complacent (if it isn't too late already).

Caporaletti describes contemporary civilization as an "epoch, so heavily characterized by social instability, conflicts and ferocious cruelties, [that] the safety and protection ensured by a uterine existence, wholly consumed within the sterile "womb" of a superior and all-providing authority, might appear to some perversely ideal" (Caporaletti 42). The imposition of an all-mighty power can be likened to an extreme reading of Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Hobbes describes how when "men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man against every man" (Hobbes 185). As such, man left to his own devices is assumed capable of all sorts of atrocities, living in a state of "continual fear" (186), "without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal" (186). Therefore, the submission to a social contract is a means/attempt to tempter and control the aggressive, savage, ways of man. As such, in order to prevent man from being in a continual state of war, he must "confer all [his] power and strength upon one man" (245).

In "The Machine Stops," the people of the Machine confer all their power and autonomy onto the Machine; therefore, the Machine, by assuming and usurping their power, can be viewed as a materialization of the Hobbesian Sovereign. The people of the Machine have conferred all their power onto the Machine and have "submit[ted] their wills, everyone to his will, and their judgments, to his judgment. This is more than consent, or concord; it is a real unity of them all, in one and the same person" (Hobbes 227). *In extremis*, by forfeiting

their autonomy, the people of the Machine, in turn, forfeit all their individuality and humanity. As such, through this contract, the Machine “has gradually and inadvertently deprived human existence of all significance” (Caporaletti 38), thus reducing the people of the Machine into mere occupants residing in the “vomitories” (Forster 235) of the Machine itself. ‘Vomitory’ is a neologism, a hybrid term fusing together ‘vomit’ (within this technological social contract, man has purged all autonomy, independence, freedom, individuation, substance, significance, and ultimately, humanity itself) and ‘dormitory’ (a place of sleep, complacency, and inanition—a comment on their dormant, comatose, static existence). The people of the Machine live a debilitated and compartmentalized existence within the vomitories of the machine; they are isolated, secure, safe, and static.

Within this ‘contract,’ man is subordinate to the Machine, subsumed within this technological leviathan. The Machine, as sovereign, is elevated and praised above man making it the physical force that unites them all by mediating and controlling not only the will of man, but mankind himself. This union is “the generation of that great Leviathan, or rather (to speak more reverently) of that *mortal God*” (Hobbes 227) [my italics]. Taken literally, the Machine is not only idolized, it is deified, “worshipped [...] as divine” (Forster 251). The Machine is exalted as “omnipotent” (250) and “eternal” (250), and is treated and revered as a supreme being—one who gives life to the people of the Machine. For example, the Machine “feeds” (251) “clothes” (251) and “houses” (251) the people of the Machine; “through it [they] speak to one another, through it [they] see one another, in it [they] have [their] being” (251). They even clutch the Book of the Machine like a holy text, hold it “reverently” (232), and are comforted when they caress it (236), for “while there was the Book there was security” (Forster 255). Therefore, the Book of the Machine holds the keys to

their physical existence just as a holy text lays the path to a spiritual existence—the Word of the Machine is like the Word of God. The Book contains “instructions against every possible contingency. If [they were] hot or cold or dyspeptic or at loss for a word, [the people of the Machine] went to the book, and it told her which button to press” (Forster 232). As such, the Book is a manual enabling complacency, containing and providing the rules and answers to man who is no longer capable of thinking for himself. It is the roadmap that charts the people of the Machine’s [artificial] existence. In guaranteeing a secure life, man now leads a static one.

The people of the Machine live a static life, secured by the Machine, and held captive by their own complacency. According to Hobbes, the “final cause, end, or design of [man] [...] is the foresight of [his] own preservation and of a more contented life” (223). What better preservation than the consistency of a static existence? How better to protect man from any threat, any irregularity, than to insulate and contain him? Moreover, “there is no way for any man to secure himself, so reasonable, as anticipation” (Hobbes 184). What better anticipation than stasis, uniformity, and monotony? Returning to the Hobbesian paradigm, man, by nature, is harsh and violent; therefore, what better way to secure man than secure him from himself, isolate man from man? As such, the Machine provides the people of the Machine security by incarcerating² them within their quarters, their “cell[s]” (Forster 228). Caporaletti delineates how human life in the Machine “evolves entirely in this artificial space: every cell is a protective and impenetrable receptacle that contains one individual ensuring him or her an easy existence, free of worries and need” (34), thus quenching any desire to vacate his or her insular chamber.

² Although man has the ability to leave his cell should he please, considering that all his needs and desires are met, there is no longer a reason for him to leave.

The Narrator describes how “the room, though it contained nothing, was in touch with all [that the people of the Machine] cared for in the world” (Forster 231), suggesting that the Machine itself is the only thing that they have any desire of remaining in direct contact with. The Machine serves as the medium and means of communication: in order to communicate with one another, man must communicate with the Machine. The narrator comments on how earlier civilizations “had mistaken the functions of the system, and had used it for bringing people to things, instead of for bringing things to people” (233), thus immobilizing, isolating, and entrenching them within the confines of complacency. The apathetic the Machine provides man, with all the conveniences of the world, satisfies and sedates any and all latent deviant desires of the masses³. The Machine contains everything that man needs as well as containing man himself. Man is given no reason to do anything as it is all done for him. Man is immobile, and this immobility immobilizes both him and his will to do anything else. As such, the Machine anticipates every need of mankind and is the tool for sedating both the body and mind of man – a very frightening thought.

“The Machine Stops” is also unsettling because it is a literal manifestation of the mentality of modern man actualized through the Machine. As such, the Machine is the metaphorical doppelganger of modern man. Through the Machine, modern man is given a dose of his own reality, exposing him to the chilling domination that man projects onto nature. The Machine inverts the lens on man reflecting his highly exploitative perception and outlook on life. It places man in the seat of subservience completely at the “mercy” (244) of the Machine. As such, the Machine is the measure, and any offence against it is considered “contrary to the spirit of the age” (231); in other words, “contrary to the Machine” (231). Man’s exploitative nature is magnified when he is exploited by his own design. As such,

³ Kuno is the exception--a dissident and anomaly of the system.

“The Machine Stops” provides a literal template of Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology.”

In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger explores man’s relationship with and orientation to technology. Technology stems from the Greek word *Technikon* meaning “that which belongs to *techne*” (12). Heidegger states that “*techne* is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts” (13). In other words, *techne*, as a technique, refers to both producing and manufacturing, as well as to the arts: “*Technë* belongs to bringing-forth⁴, to *poiësis*; it is something poetic” (13). Moreover, “bringing-forth brings out of concealment into unconcealment” (10); “[i]t is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth” (12). However, as Heidegger explains, this is all complicated in *modern* technology. Modern technology’s revealing is not poetic⁵; rather, it is a “challenging.”⁶ This way of ‘revealing’ “rules throughout modern technology [and] has the character of a setting-upon, in the sense of a challenging-forth⁷” (16). The act of setting-upon nature our demands is a method of commodification. Modern technology alters what nature reveals insofar as nature is now seen as something to be exploited, and is only meaningful insofar as it can serve some purpose, reveal a relative instrumentality. However, in “The Machine Stops,” the people of the machine are so far removed from nature, so inundated by technology, they cannot see any use value in it at all. The protagonist looks out at nature and comments on how the “mountains give [her] no ideas” (238) and is thoroughly repulsed by the “horrible brown

⁴ I have understood bringing-forth as the process in which something that was not present is made present.

⁵ Poetic revealing reveals something for what it is; it reveals its essence.

⁶ Challenging insofar as it “puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such” (Heidegger 14)

⁷ That challenging happens in that the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew (16)

earth, and the sea, and the stars” (230). Through the technological gaze, because nature has no use value, it can have no value. Instead of seeing a river and seeing it as a means of travel or producing hydroelectric power, the people of the machine choose not to look at rivers at all. The opaque lens of technology has not only altered perceptions, it has shifted the focus entirely on the Machine itself. The Machine is literally the only instrument of use-value to the people of the Machine; and inversely, man becomes the instrument of the Machine as well.

Heidegger cautions that “man will reach a point where the ‘revealing of truth’ “no longer concerns man even as an object, but does so, rather, exclusively as a standing-reserve⁸, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the ordering of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve” (25-6). As tool/resource of the Machine, the people of the Machine are literally reduced to being a “standing-reserve.” This is a little clearer in light of modern metaphysics insofar as “being is understood as something represented (*vorgestellt*) and visualized so as to be made available for manipulation and domination by a subjective will” (Ruin 8). In other words, within the technological paradigm, being exists only to be exploited. And man, as standing-reserve, is merely the battery pack to power the machine. Moreover, Heidegger cautions that the supreme danger associated with technology is “when destining⁹ reigns in the mode of

⁸ Heidegger defines a ‘standing-reserve’ as “everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering” (17). It is important to note that man, when “investigating, observing, ensnares nature as an area of his own conceiving, he has already been claimed by a way of revealing that challenges him to approach nature as an object of research, until even the object disappears into the objectlessness of standing-reserve” (19). Therefore, through this challenging-forth, everything is subjective and takes on meaning based on how it can be used: objects no longer reveal themselves as truthfully, no longer reveal themselves as selves---everything is reduced to subjective relativity.

⁹ I have understood “destining” to mean purpose, an end.

Enframing¹⁰” (26). In other words, instead of man using technology, technology uses man.

No where is this clearer than in the following passage:

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 had 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. The Machine develops—but not on our lines. The Machine proceeds—but not on our goal. We only exist as the blood corpuscles that course through its arteries, and if it could work without us, it would let us die. (Forster 246)

Therefore, man becomes nothing more than a resource that serves at the imperatives that the Machine dictates and is a literal standing-reserve who exists only to [em]power it. There is no room, or need, for man to be anything other than alive. Man is “robbed” of all humanity and is near suffocated to breathe life into the machine.

In addition to stripping the people of the Machine’s humanity, the Machine has obstructed their ability to think freely. Moreover, man cannot think outside the technological paradigm. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger explains how

in all areas of his existence, man will be encircled ever more tightly by the forces of technology. These forces, which everywhere and every minute claim. Enchain. Drag along, press and impose upon man under the form of some technological contrivance or other—these forces...have moved long since beyond his will and have outgrown his capacity for decision. (Heidegger 51-52)

¹⁰ Enframing means the “gathering together of the setting-upon that sets upon man, i.e. challenges him forth, to reveal the actual, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve” (20) “the way in which the real reveals itself as standing-reserve.” (22), and only as standing-reserve.

Man is enframèd in a technological frame of mind, being unable to escape it or think outside it, never mind think independently. Man is so entrenched within technology, that nothing is intelligible outside the machine. For instance, when faced with the threat of the Machine stopping, the people of the Machine respond saying “What does that mean? The phrase conveys nothing to me” (Forster 252). Nothing outside the Machine makes sense. Veblen explains how “mechanical technology [is] the tone-giving factor in [modern] man’s scheme of thought” (168), and this concept is echoed in Kuno’s exclamation that the Machine’s “hum penetrates our blood, and may even guide our thoughts” (Forster 243).

As the Machine manipulates the minds of the people of the Machine, it too manipulates their bodies. Forster describes how “the human tissues in that latter day had become so subservient, that they readily adapted to every caprice of the machine” (Forster 253). Therefore, the theoretical connective tissue of man and Machine is made flesh. As man has mentally adapted himself to conform to the demands of the machine, the next step is the human body itself. As such, man can no longer divorce himself from machine, creating a genre of symbiosis. This is no more evident than when one of the Machine people proclaims that she can no longer tell whether noises were “inside [her] head, or inside the wall” (Forster 253). The Machine, which was originally sought to fulfill the demands of man, as an extension of his will, literally becomes an indistinguishable extension of the self whereby attempts to differentiate, isolate the one from the other is utterly inconceivable.

Jacques Ellul cautions that “[a]s long as technique was represented exclusively by the machine, it was possible to speak of ‘man *and* the machine’” (6), so long as the “machine remained an external object” (6); however, “when technique enters into every area of life[,]”

[...] it ceases to be external to man and becomes his very substance” (Ellul 6). This concept is clearly elucidated by Forster’s metaphor of the garment of technology. He describes how the garment had seemed heavenly at first, shot with the colours of culture, sewn with the threads of self denial. And heavenly it had been so long as it was a garment and no more, so long as man could shed it at will and live by the essence that is his soul. (Forster 257)

however, now technology enframes man’s being, robbing him of his essence, by setting-upon him its demands and technological imperatives. Man is literally enframed by the garment of technology; he cannot divorce himself from it. The technological garment melded and fused into the flesh of man, perverting him into mechanization, penetrating, pervading, and trespassing the threshold of human autonomy. Man cannot exist naturally within this paradigm. This is ultimately the loss of humanity itself as “beautiful naked man was dying, strangled in the garments that he had woven” (Forster 257). Therefore, technology has not only suffocated mankind, it has forced him to breathe the artificial air of technology to exist. Man’s being, his humanity, his essence, is no longer available to him as he has inhaled and digested the technological sustenance. The people of the Machine are subjects of and subject to the Machine.

Forster describes how man’s “desire for comfort, has over-reached [himself]. [He] had exploited the riches of nature too far. Quietly and complacently, [he] was sinking into decadence, and progress had come to mean the progress of the Machine” (Forster 251). As such, in order for man to thrive within the technological paradigm, he must hold on to a strong sense of being. Mankind must preserve his humanity and humility. Caporaletti cautions that “science will not lead to the elevation but to the degradation of mankind” (40)

“if not counterbalanced by a careful preservation of spiritual values” (40), for “the Machine era may have eliminated hardship and injustice, but it had dehumanized people” (40). By investing too much into technology, man divests himself of himself. Through each advancement of the Machine, man loses a part of himself. Man needs to remain faithful to his humanity. Man needs to honour man, not Machinery/technology.

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