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**Will the Machine  
stop?**

E. M. Forster's *The Machine*  
Stops as posthuman  
perspective

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## INTRODUCTION

Starting from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, technology has been known for having gained an increasing amount of relevance inside our daily lives. Not only have we been able to observe both how the technological apparatuses that we employ on a daily basis have changed in terms of appearance and potential, but we have also witnessed how they changed *for* and *with* us users, and occasionally, purchasers.

In the light of this change, countless debates have emerged. On one hand, there are persons who praise such devices filled with potential and efficiency. On the other hand, many others experience skepticism, or even fear for what kind of consequences the constant use of such devices could provoke. The dream to stop such machines seems even more desirable, yet we tend to forget that we are the direct responsible and occasionally the fulfillers of such scenario. Although it seems natural to play the victim card, we cannot however elude from what we created and continue to rely on a daily basis. Figuring out the ones to truly blame is by no means easy. Critics and researchers of various fields, from sciences to humanities, have been interested during the last century on this rising condition. Together with defining its implications in human field, they have also assigned a precise name to this new condition – posthumansim.

The present work aims to explore this condition, and bring into light its possible facets. In a reality increasingly pervaded by artificially intelligent technological devices, I want to investigate what brought us to posthumanism, in all its progresses and downfalls, and how we can possibly familiarize with it. To support my analysis, I will examine a short novel by the British writer E. M. Forster entitled *The Machine Stops*. Since posthumanism covers a wide range of aspects, I have divided this work into three different chapters, in order to analyze a specific topic and give enough space to its in-depth discussion:

- In the first chapter, I will introduce posthuman's condition, together with the first chapter of Forster's work. I will search to locate its origins, both in theoretical terms, and in literary terms. Moreover, I will try to envision

how and to what extent such technological progress would impact the typical interactions and relationships that humankind carry out with their fellows, and last but not least, with the machines it created;

- Chapter 2 focuses on a more specific context – that is, the social background in which humankind lives, in all its well-grounded social hierarchies and constructs. I want to investigate how such well-established constructs would adapt, or even shift in the wake of a posthuman reality. The focus of my speculations will be dedicated to the concept of “crime” as well, and how the technological “advancement” would be employed by the most influential, decision-making bodies;
- Finally, Chapter 3 will have a more ecocritical cut, in order to speculate if posthumanism and our environment share some possible common points, and how they would benefit the suitable balance for the coexistence of both organic bodies and artificial machines.

I still remember what I felt as I was reading *The Machine Stops* for the first time. Despite being a work of fiction, I admit how its lucidity deeply struck me. Throughout the reading, I wondered how a book written in 1908 was able to portray with such clearness the condition we are currently living in.

The last century has been filled with the most diverse debates. Whether they have a political or social background, whether they concern a higher purpose, or a simpler exchange of trivial ideas, it is much likely that such debate would take a predictable, known turn. No matter which context or purpose is taken into consideration, an opinion regarding technology and its increasing presence will be always raised.

However, it can be noticed that all those opinions regarding technology share the same ground. If we take in consideration the advancing age of a person with the passing of the time in which he or she lives, we can be rather sure that the subject can remember and name one or more evolutions, or even actual discoveries, in technological field, and the wave of acclamations, curiosity, doubts and fears that followed. An example worth mentioning is the evolution of two mass-produced devices: computers and phones. Many of us have witnessed how far we have come from the bulky IBMs to the featherweight

MacBook and from the first *mobile* phones to the *smartphones*, with all their plethora of *smart* accessories. Not to mention the much-debated Internet. Today, it is quite common that a device is preceded by the adjective *smart* to attract our attention and curiosity, and we fall for that. Whether it is sheer marketing strategy or not, it is undeniable that in no time we surely get our hands on a compact device, yet with enough potential to become vital for our days, and even predict our actions, from one algorithm to another. Phones and computers however are just the tip of the iceberg of what technology may offer. Besides all those devices, we have become familiar with other applications, such as artificial intelligence, or augmented reality, and their possible uses in biological, social, or even educational fields.

However, “lucidity” is I think the most suitable word for encapsulating the life and the prolific literary production of this author and his avant-garde essence. To better clarify what I actually claimed, I shall introduce the life of E. M. Forster together with his most influent works.

Edward Morgan Forster was born in 1879, and he was an only child. His father, known as Eddie, was of Irish descendants, and worked as an architect. His mother, Lily, belonged to a family of artists from Spain. Eddie died of tuberculosis in October 1888, leaving a more than sufficient sum that would have ensured his widow and his orphan son a bearable life. Due to the frequent moving, the young Forster attended different public schools, such as Tonbridge, and consequently, King’s college in Cambridge. During his Tonbridge days, the young boy started to manifest a latent discomfort towards the attitude of racial and class superiority that lurked in the wealthiest classes of the English society of that time. This attitude was clearly against Forster’s dedicated and passionate soul. It was said that Forster gained a reputation of a boy gifted with “an unconquerable faith in the value and interest of human beings” (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2006). It is during these years that Forster’s true, innate abilities began to be noticed as well, and he received his first prizes and recognitions for his works and essays. Besides publishing his essays for the King’s College magazine *Basileon*, Forster started to write *Nottingham Lace* in the same years. The plot was quite simple, and it narrated the attempts of the young male protagonist to dissuade his fellow from

pursuing a conventional life. This would have paved the road for his future career as a well-established, unconventional novelist. Another important element that had allegedly influenced his writings were his frequent trips with his mother across Europe, especially in Germany and Italy.

In Rome, he starts to write *A Room with a View* in October 1901. On the other hand, Forster traveled to Germany in order to pursue his temporary occupation as the tutor for the daughters of one of his friends during the early months of 1905. That year continued to be favourable for Forster's fame, and in October 1905, his novel *Angels fear of Tread* was published, earning a vast success among reviewers for its "brevity, humor", and "quite unlike" insights that set Forster's novel apart from "any contemporary fiction" (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2006). Similarly to his previous work, Forster's new novel explores the changes of the young protagonist Philip as he travels from a dreary, lifeless Tonbridge to a lively Italy. During winter 1905, Forster published another novel entitled *The Longest Journey*, where the main protagonist lives his life in a quasi-idyllic Cambridge, until he sees himself being trapped in a monotonous marriage and in a career as a teacher in a public school.

From those generally narrated novels, it is by no means difficult to point out a recurrent common element. His first works were in fact characterized by strong, autobiographical references, where the main characters had to face and come into terms with the harsh, obtuse reality in which they lived, a reality that was by no means at odds with their kindred-driven, humane advocated self. Forster aimed at exploring the inherent difficulties and doubts that emerge at the moment in which someone has to choose between an anticonformist, yet surprisingly pleasant life, and a life dictated by mere conformity (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2006).

Another example that could confirm what has already been stated is the continuation of *A Room with a View*, written in 1907, where the protagonist Lucy has to choose between two alternatives: to pursue an unconventional life with the bohemian George on one hand, or to be condemned to a conventional life with Cecil on the other. Forster continued to pursue with his writing during the following years as well.

*The Machine Stops* was written in the late 1908, after Forster heard about a news that will shock him (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2006): a man was able to rise from the ground and fly with the help of a machine he allegedly designed (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2006). Soon after the news, Forster vented on his notebook journal. His concerns open as a sort of apocalyptic vision: being born “at the end of the age” (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2006), he now senses that “a new civilization” (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2006) is gaining ground, a civilization made of fields corrupted by petrol, of skies filled with airships, instead of glittering stars. The simpler times of his youth were swept away in favour of a growing advancement of a dehumanizing science, where humankind has become a puppet trapped in the threads of the machine it created with the sole goal of being used to weave a progress geared towards a national, but not humane, scale. Forster’s somber vision will be the backbone that will build the rhetoric of *The Machine Stops*.

The following works of Forster were however not only the most decisive ones for his already acclaimed fame, but also they dealt with some themes that would be the starting point for future literary critical approaches.

Written between 1910 and 1913, *Maurice* narrates the story of the protagonist of the same name and his platonic love for another man, named Clive. At some point of the narration, Clive gets married, driving Maurice to frequent suicidal thoughts. Despite this dramatic turn, the novel has a happy conclusion, and Alex, a gamekeeper, finally requites the sentiments of Maurice. Besides the actual sexual tendencies of the author himself, the plot of *Maurice* was inspired by a real suicide that occurred during Forster’s King’s College days. It is nonetheless true that *Maurice* was written long before gay liberation. In fact, the “unconventional” love story of the young Maurice circulated secretly among Forster’s friends circle for 50 years, and later published in 1971, after Forster’s death.

Another work that would have paved the road for the upcoming postcolonial studies was *A Passage to India*. It was October 1912 when Forster decided to travel to India, driven both by his sensation of losing inspiration, and to meet the challenge offered by his long-dated friend and love interest Masood to “write a book on India” (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2006). Forster visited numerous Indian cities,

including Lahore and Delhi, before returning to England in 1913, where he would write the first seven chapters of the book.

*A Passage to India* is the story of Adela Quested's journey through India, the people she encountered, and her attempt to search for the "real India" (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2006). Through Adela's eyes, Forster explored and brought into light the inherent power mechanisms inside imperialism, the relationship between India and England, and last but not least, the importance and the value of personal relationships. The last part of *A Passage to India* was characterized by a strong philosophical imprinting, where the author explores Hindu's ethos. However, *A Passage to India* would leave free terrain to many possible interpretations and debates among the emerging postcolonial studies around 1970. Through *A Passage to India*, did Forster attempt to project on India the discriminations perpetuated over centuries by his English fellows, or was he the first writer to finally recognize to India its deserved, independent identity?

Forster's travels abroad England were not limited to India only. With the outbreak of the First World War, Forster took part as a Red Cross searcher for lost soldiers in Alexandria during the last months of 1915. However, it is exactly in Alexandria that Forster finally experienced his first love affair with a man called Muhammad al-Adl, who worked as a truck driver.

His verve celebrating the faceted properties of human individuality, together with the passionate distrust towards institutions and conventions, will become vital for his later increasingly frequent public appearances, which started around 1930. Forster was soon praised for his "direct, unaffected tone of voice" (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2006), and his clear, accessible insights. He was also the author of many other articles addressing his unconformity towards the rising wave of fascism and the introduction of censorship in prose works, defending the right for individual liberty and self-expression. His well-established fame as a prolific, unconventional novelist, together with his reputation as a fully respectable public figure, granted him a vast success and following even during the outbreak of war, as he used to participate and deliver several broadcasts for the BBC. He was known for his typically anti-war position and his speeches where he underlined the true importance and the values of a more tolerant



nation, where individual freedom prevailed over hatred and oppression. Forster died on 7 June 1970, after a fatal stroke, leaving a unique heritage of influent novels and short stories.

Although the numerous works, I shall refer to the primary text with which the present work will deal. The striking similarities with our times, together with the promises for an advanced future, brought me to the conviction that perhaps, there are certain equalities with the challenges we are experiencing within a seemingly unstoppable technological progress. If the closeness of human beings and the technology that they brought to life has become even more inseparable, it is about time to become familiar with this new condition, with all its possible, considerable facets.

## CHAPTER 1

### UNDERSTANDING THE MACHINE

#### *A critical insight of a posthuman reality.*

“Imagine, if you can” (Forster 1909, 1)

This is how E. M. Forster’s short story begins, by exhorting his readers to imagine. In no time, readers find themselves inside a small cell, where a woman whose name is Vashti conducts her ordinary life surrounded by buttons, levers, and many other sophisticated, automatically powered mechanisms of all sorts. Her only contact with the world outside her cell is a plate with which the woman can remotely communicate with her fellows, including her son, Kuno.

Contemporary readers could be struck by the machine-cold sensation that pervades the overall setting, yet intrigued: what E. M. Forster is presenting to his readers is nevertheless an “advanced” society, where a technological progress has visibly impacted social life itself in a radical manner. Every basic need can be effortlessly provided through a sophisticated system, referred as the Machine, powerful enough to provide and fulfill the basic means of subsistence, and eventually, human interaction.

At some point of the story, an unusual request is made to Vashti, a request that could have been formulated by a human being only: her son wants his mother to meet him in person, and not through the usual system employed for remote communication. The only possibility that Vashti has in order to fulfill the odd request of her beloved Kuno is to undertake an unexpected journey across the remains of planet Earth, where the woman will witness and evaluate directly the effects and contradictions of the advancement of her society.

Pondering the two faces of such progress is in fact the main aim of this chapter as well. Through an in-depth analysis of the first chapter of E. M. Forster’s story, I will try to illustrate firstly the changes that occurred and shaped the fictional society narrated in *The Machine Stops* on account of the narrated technological progress. Moreover, I want to bring into light how such changes affected the social organization of Forster’s society, and most of all, its inhabitants and their interactions with each other as well. Although

this short story has been firstly published in 1909, it is undeniable that many elements have been able somehow to predict the diffusion of certain technologies that may sound familiar to contemporary readers. An example is the system for the remote communication. The takeover of such advanced technologies make one think, from a more critical standpoint, that the society of E. M. Forster present some characteristics that might be attributed to a possible, posthuman future. For this reason, this analysis will be conducted through comparison with the fundamental text that laid the characteristics of the posthuman movement, that is, *The Posthuman Manifesto* by Robert Pepperell. A further analysis will be conducted in order to reveal the darkest, most debatable details of such advancements. There is no doubt that such technological advancement had significantly impacted this society, especially considering the fact that a powerful machine governs this society.

However, even if on one hand this Machine is powerful enough to guarantee the subsistence of its citizens, by facilitating and advancing their basic life functions, on the other hand its impact has at some point altered not only the behaviors of the same citizens, their perception of themselves, and the reality in which they live, but also its social partition. In this occasion, I will use Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, especially the concept of *Panopticism*. Finally, to demonstrate how far human beings have been changed, the character of Vashti, together with her dialogues and inner thoughts, will be another subject for my analysis as tangible parts of all the sort of changings that humankind has gone through.

### **1.1: The posthuman challenge of redesigning humanity**

Before entering into the details of the first part of *The Machine Stops* and analyzing its relevant features, it is important to clarify firstly the basic concepts of posthumanism, with special regards to its main principles and goals.

It is starting from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its subsequent decade that humanities have felt the urge to redesign the concept of being human, in all its biological, psychological, and last but not least, relational implications (Braidotti 2014, 7). With modern humanism,

humankind – always to be intended as individuals with a reason of their own – had to compete against the arbitrary, unquestionable power of a divinity-infused sovereign “in order to obtain the full control of their own destiny” (The Ethics Center, 2018). On the other hand, humanities have found themselves in front of a new challenge, which this time urged to find a new way of rethinking the concept of human being *per se* more in line with contemporary times, but without overlooking its central role gained during Enlightenment. This effort has soon become the main goal of a rising movement, which was given the name of posthumanism. Hence, posthumanism could be regarded as both an allegedly reconstruction of the central role occupied by humankind since modern ages, and the effort of going beyond the road paved by humanism, yet without abandoning the concept of Human as a whole (Berthens 2014, 213). A rising number of critics have been lately engaged with the pursuit of giving a more applicable definition as possible to the term posthumanism, and to analyze what that definition may convey. In fact, Luca Valera pointed out in his essay that the prefix *post-*, which can be found in the term “*posthumanism*”, indicates “a situation of positive development, a possible release from an oppressive and limiting condition” prior to the “possibility to overtake a reality that appears as antiquated” (Valera 2014, 481-482). To support his statement, the author takes as an example other terms with the same prefix, such as “*Postmodern*” and “*Poststructuralism*”, for they present a similarity with what occurred with the term “*Posthumanism*”. In stating this, Valera detects that posthumanism employs the same shift to “impose a radical change of mentality and *Weltanschauung*, such that would be incomprehensible in the light of the precedent paradigms” as well (Valera 2014, 482). Having stated so, one could also intend posthumanism as a conception that aspires to explore humankind in all its possible facets. To underline the value of totality inherent in posthumanism demonstrated in Valera’s article, Roberto Marchesini continues to argue in his article that the term posthumanism embraces two values:

- A *condition* (i.e. the proper state of something or somebody in regard to its appearance);
- A *dimension* (i.e. a model projection and interaction with the outer world) (Marchesini 2016, 1)

As a consequence, not only does posthumanism rethink human condition in all its ontological terms, but also in its interactional terms with its fellows and the reality in which it lives, thus, as a result, with its anthropocentric role. Posthumanism, continues Roberto Marchesini, embodies in this manner all the hypothesis, aspirations, doubts and fears of a “new way of conceiving humankind that increasingly eludes from these existential representations” (Marchesini 2016, 28), alluding to a more, humanist point of view.

This work of rethinking and redesigning the human being in all its anthropocentric values gave rise to countless, different debates on the subsequent steps of its becoming. Such debates became even more relevant during the 19th and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as technology began to both improve and, of course, to be more accessible even to the average middle class, starting to become a solid presence in everyday life. The advancement of technology, together with its increasingly presence in the ordinary world, stressed the principal question of posthumanism: the anthropocentric role of humankind is now challenged by the rise and advancement of new types of artificial intelligences, yet able to respond and simulate every human action on a human scale. Rosi Braidotti hints that these modern machines have absolved a function of “anthropocentric devices” (Braidotti 2014, 97), able to mimic the basic human faculties. As the boundaries between a biological body and an artificial machine are starting to become even more liminal, the interactions between humans and machines are starting to develop in a so profound, never before witnessed level of intimacy that the two poles can be easily and mutually contaminated (Braidotti 2014, 97-100).

This effort of relocating the Human within a scientifically pervasive scenario has been the focus of numerous doubts and anxieties, which can be occasionally tracked in various literary productions. In his *A Critical History of Posthumanism*, Andy Miah demonstrates how the anxiety towards the *other* (in this precise case in biological and anthropomorphic terms) results more eradicated in various, familiar literary works than anyone could expect, as an immediate response to a moral question: what does exactly means to be human? In the same article, Miah quotes many titles, including the most eminent work of Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818). *Frankenstein* is a hybrid, a term that

usually refers to a creature, or a being who presents two, compelling characteristics in the same organism. Frankenstein is composed by way of joining numerous body parts in order to create a single human body. However, even if it exists and perfectly functions like a normal being, its existence would have never been made possible with the contribution of his human creator. Frankenstein is therefore the quintessential confirmation of the liminality between what is human and what is not: Frankenstein is the perfect fusion of organic and inorganic parts that perfectly coexist in the same organism – a creature that exists, but his existence would have never been possible without the work of human intellect. What makes the difference between the two counterparts so jarring is due to the prevailing specist vision of the main narrator. In the same article, Miah quotes a point raised by Mazlish. Mazlish locates the lurking sense of alienation felt by humankind as a sense of “separateness and superiority in regard to machines (as well as other animals), viewing as a threatening new species rather than as a part of their own creation” (Miah 2009, 13).

However, the extreme, dystopic wing of the science fiction genre somehow anticipated the specist vision raised by Mazlish. Locating the narration in a distant future, such writers were able to explore and eventually ponder the life conditions under a possible, scientific development. Besides *Frankenstein*, other familiar names can fall under this categorization, including H. G. Wells, E. M. Forster, and Isaac Asimov. However, the speculations of such authors were no longer limited to a mere, narrative sphere. The recent technological advancement has led many engineering companies to create devices, and eventually, real robots that can perfectly simulate an average human being both in terms of appearance, and in terms of behaviors.

For the sake of remaining in line with this work, I will start analyzing and discussing the features of the first primary texts that will constitute the integral part of the analysis that will follow – that are, *The Machine Stops* and *The Posthuman Manifesto*.

## 1.2: Pepperell's *The Posthuman Manifesto*

One of the most influential contributors who attempted to define what posthumanism could possibly define, and to trace its main characteristics, was Robert Pepperell, the British artist and author of many, significant works concerning the possible influences between new technologies and real world,.

In 1995 Robert Pepperell published his essay *The Posthuman Condition* that included a sort of essential guideline concerning this emerging way of conceiving humankind and its reality, entitled *The Posthuman Manifesto*. Not only does this guideline cover a fundamental role in attempting to theoretically define for the first time what does exactly mean posthumanism, but most of all, it marks a brand new awareness of a “condition and project based on new presuppositions that could overtake the humanist tradition”, as Roberto Marchesini states in his article (Marchesini 2016, 3).

*The Posthuman Manifesto* is articulated into eight, different sections, joined by a logical *continuum*, which aims to explore, in addition to the most, general aspects, the most intrinsic aspects of Humanities. Such approach demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of posthumanism, and its ability to cross any kind of constructed border. This is how Pepperell set his *Manifesto*:

1. A *general statement*, which sums up the most crucial points of the Posthuman condition. Those statements are going to be the main subject of my future analysis;
2. A section on *human consciousness*, which explores and debates the characteristics of human consciousness;
3. A section on *nature and science*, which explores the possible impact of science in the nature we know;
4. A section on *(dis)order*, which explores the order of things;
5. A section on *meaning and being*, which investigates if an organic being could form a synthetic consciousness;

6. A section on *uncertainty*, which attempts to address the most, speculated question concerning the meaning of “being human”;
7. A section on *art and creativity*, which explores the inner faculty of human beings as art producers;
8. A section on *synthetic beings*, exploring the possibility of creating another kind of human beings by employing the improvements of the existing technology. (Pepperell 2005, 2)

From a closer overview of those sections, it is noticeable the effort of Posthumanism to detach itself from the accustomed anthropocentric scheme.

### **1.3: Utopian and dystopian machines between human desires and regrets**

Needless to reiterate how Forster’s literary heritage left a lasting mark in English literature. On the other hand, it is surprising to remark how the majority of academics have rarely given it the attention it rightfully deserves. Remaining pertinent to the main theme of this work, it is even more surprising to reckon how *The Machine Stops* is usually referred to a visionary “anti-utopia” (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2006), written as a response to the “rapid industrialization and the technological optimism of futuristic utopians”, a category under which also the already-affirmed Sci-Fi author H. G. Wells falls (Jonsson 2012, 161). Besides that, further speculations on the matter are hardly to be found.

However, it is for its lucid, skeptical position towards the promises for a better and advanced future that I firmly believe that there is more behind *The Machine Stops* rather than a simple critique and concern towards an unknown future. I also want to show how the lucidity of Forster’s work painstakingly predicted some core aspects of posthumanism. It is important to keep in mind the date of its publication, as I proceed with my argumentations. Before entering into the details on why *The Machine Stops* could present a possible, posthuman value, I want to highlight some fundamental concepts that are recurrently linked to both Forster’s work and many other Sci-Fi works as well – that



are, the concepts of utopia and dystopia – and the reason behind their relevance in Sci-Fi narrative.

Although the two concepts of utopia and dystopia often share common features, it is important to bear in mind that those two concepts have always challenged critics in terms of finding a coherent definition. Even the true origins of the term utopia are still quite debated. In her essay, Fatima Vieira briefly explores the philological history of the term utopia, in the light of the new wave of understanding and trust on humankind and human faculties gained through Renaissance era. Vieira locates the origin of the term utopia as a literary *topos* in the works of the humanist Thomas More (1478-1515). With the continuous progresses in geographical and human field, More felt the urge to create a neologism that could finally legitimize a rising, unconditional trust in human beings and their abilities, which will soon after be part of a specific literary movement – that is, utopian literature. Vieira offers two, plausible etymological origins, which I will list and interpret as it follows.

For Vieira, More composed the term utopia by joining three, different ancient Greek terms:

- *Ou-*, a prefix suggesting a negation;
- The word *topos*, which can be translated as “place; land”;
- *-ia*, a suffix that indicates a location (Vieira 2010, 4-5)

This could be roughly translated as *non-place*, a place that does not exist in the real, known by humankind world.

Moreover, Vieira argues that More could have possibly originated the term utopia from another neologism which is almost similar in spelling to the previously analyzed neologism, but its etymology is completely different – that is, “*eutopia*” (Vieira 2010, 4-5), the *perfect place*. This would confer another, correlated meaning to the term utopia:

- *Eu-*, the prefix that indicates positivity, perfection;
- The word *topos*.

The neologism that would have indicated unequivocally the prolific genre of utopian literature was soon consolidated.

In a standard work of Renaissance utopian literature, the main protagonist would find himself inexplicably (this often occurred through a literary expedient, such as a vision or a dream) confronting a *fictional* land. I stress the fictional value of such lands because, as a matter of fact, they are usually portrayed as small pieces of land or islands, completely set apart and untouched by the known world and its norms – the *non-place*. On the other hand, the collective wellness and social order of the inhabitants was ensured by an outstandingly perfect and righteous justice system, and a working economy – the *perfect place*. The protagonist would spend some time (it is usually unspecified, in order to maintain the dreamy allure surrounding the fictional, far away land) in this paradise on Earth, in close touch with the inhabitants, where he would learn about the secrets behind such order. At the end, he would return to his times, ready to narrate what he saw and experienced in the fantastic land. Some late, canonical examples besides More's same-titled work, are Johnathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, and Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*.

It is not a case if this *topos*, where the best qualities of human faculties were praised and celebrated, would be soon become an important component of the literary genre of scientific fiction. Engaging space travels towards unknown planets and galaxies, improbable robotic machines, and close encounters with extremely intelligent humanoids were the fundamentals in which Sci-Fi literature lied. The much-acclaimed revolutionary scientific discoveries and life improvements during Victorian era, together with the inaugurations of great, universal expositions (I shall cite the Crystal Palace exhibition of 1851 in London, United Kingdom, and the *Exposition Universelle* of 1855 in Paris, France), science and technology were no longer confined to a mere scholarship or experimental field. Applied sciences were getting closer to general public, often in form of object of cultural interest and divulgation, such as the already-cited great exhibitions, and last but not least, circulating printed material, such as pamphlets, or entertaining novels and works of fiction.

This is much probably the main reason behind the success of H. G. Wells, and his fame as the funding father and promoter of Sci-Fi literature. Thanks to his *The Time Machine*, Wells was able to combine Charles Darwin's natural science theories (due to Wells' closeness to the biologist Thomas Huxley, Darwin's fellow and Aldous Huxley's uncle) and his biology studies to create an everlasting work which is still considered as the milestone and norm-setter among scientific fiction theorists (Parrinder 2005, vii-viii; ix). The title refers to the fantastic machine used by the nameless protagonist, a brilliant scientist and "time traveler", in order to travel across time and space, and his adventures though time warps and mysterious dimensions. The fervid verisimilar description of the obscure, unlikely to be realized machinery, which occupies the first chapters of the story, is enough to trigger the imagination of the enchanted readers.

'Now I want you clearly to understand that this lever, being pressed over, sends the machine gliding into the future, and this other reverses the motion. This saddle represents the seat of a time traveler. Presently I am going to press the lever, and off the machine will go. It will vanish, pass into future time and disappear. Have a good look at the thing. Look at the table too, and satisfy yourselves there is no trickery.' (Wells 2005, 8-9)

The machine of Wells is the archetype of an undoubtedly complex machine, yet it puts in its human creator's hands the power of travelling through time, by bending and thus *manipulating* it at his own will and necessity. The time traveler was able to fully grasp a concept that was until then considered abstract, out of humans' reach, something that was considered unlikely to happen to common human beings.

'Of course we have no means of staying back for any length of time, any more than a savage or an animal has of staying six feet above the ground. But a civilized man is better off than the savage in this respect. He can go up against gravitation in a balloon, and why should he not hope that ultimately he may be able to stop or to accelerate his drift along the Time-Dimension, or even turn about and travel the other way?' (Wells 2005, 6)

Although purely belonging to a fictional rhetoric, Wells' machine had nonetheless shown the path: an accessible machine that could finally empower the already existing faculties and abilities of both its human creators, and later on, its public, and future purchasers.

However, this optimistic attitude was destined to shift as the time passed, as the up until now allure of positivity and trust that surrounded such machines was starting to waver. With the creation of machines with a more compact aspect, and the integration of silent, immediate sources of electric energy rather than steam-powered, bulky engines,

the public started to demand more efficient machineries. In his essay, Kibel locates this growing request as the shift that changed the way in which humanity conceived and interacted with the machines it created and came across, and occasionally bought. This is not a case if Kibel starts from the need of interaction and communication inherent in human nature in order to shape his insight on the matter.

To introduce and argument his statements, Kibel relies on the theory of *Cyberspace*, developed by Marcos Novak. *Cyberspace*, reports Kibel, is the “spatialized visualization of all informations in global information processing systems” (Kibel 2012, 4), a sort of global space which transcends from any form of manmade boundary, capable of “enabling full copresence and interaction of multiple users” (Kibel 2012, 4). This would create for its users the right circumstance to engage in “simulations of real and virtual realities” (Kibel 2012, 4), employing “inputs and outputs from and to the full human sensorium” (Kibel 2012, 4), thus granting a total “integration and intercommunication with a full range of intelligent products and environments in real space” (Kibel 2012, 4). To better clarify, Novak’s *Cyberspace* is therefore an immense and undistorted space, where the external stimuli and sensations are registered and interpreted by humankind’s perceptive sphere – that is, the human sensorium – are now reduced “to a neural network encompassing brain and body” (Kibel 2012, 4). As a consequence, all these perceived sensations will be delivered as if they were authentic experiences, without being ulteriorly distinguished as, perhaps, being triggered by an artificial machinery, a simulation. This means that an artificial, machinery-provoked simulation will share the same sensorial charge of an authentic, real-life experience. Even though the human-addressee can still sense a certain difference from the sensations he receives when interacting with a fellow human being or a machine, he will not give relevance as he engages with his activity.

There lies the core difference between Wells’ machine and Forster’s Machine. While the power and capabilities of Wells’ machine are confined to a mere manipulation of an abstract concept – time – at the sole purpose of giving to its creator the opportunity to travel back and forth through time at its own will, Forster’s Machine manipulates in a more, pervasive way. From what emerged in the brief introduction at the beginning of

this chapter, Vashti, together with her fellow inhabitants, are fully submerged in the Cyberspace of the Machine. The simulation *is* the reality in which *The Machine Stops*' inhabitants live. As a result, the inhabitants of *The Machine Stops* seem to have totally lost the sense of realness, of direct experience. To Vashti, it is extremely normal to interact both with her son and with her audience through the plate, hence through an artificial, automatized medium. Remote communication has become the norm, an absolute natural way of communicating, of interacting, and substituted the way of interaction known and employed by humankind, by the contemporary readers – face-to-face, direct interaction among fellows. As even the readers may have guessed, the complete absence of direct experience with fellow human beings and with the outer world has significantly impacted human race, or at least the human race portrayed by Forster.

The abnegation of human capacity in favour of machines has in fact been the main source of Forster's concerns, channeled as the somber vision, which has already been reported in the previous section. *The Machine Stops*' relations are nothing but the portrayal of the plausible relations that would take place in a near technological future. Social relations are deprived from their immediate context, and substituted by a mechanical, and later on, digital representation.

Humankind, therefore, will no longer employ the power of the machine it created to reach a determined, pre-fixed goal. This would still imply that the distinction between man and machine still persists, although quite feeble. What Forster envisions instead is the *total* absence of such distinction, where human beings and machines coexist, and share an identical relational and sensorial sphere, what keeps the simulation alive. There lays the astonishing lucidity of *The Machine Stops*. Although published in 1908, the directness of Forster's insights and register has been able to portray not only his visionary fear of human relations' displacement in favour of powerful machines during more contemporary times, but to an extent, he also portrayed the displacement of the anthropocentric position in the wake of "anthropocentric devices" (Braidotti 2014, 97). *The Machine Stops* anticipates the subversion of the boundaries that separated an organic human being to an artificial machine, well before the introduction of more contemporary

terms, such as “artificial intelligence”, “virtual reality”, and last but not least, “posthumanism”.

However, I want to raise something pointed out within Kibel’s article – that is, Mazlish’s “machine problem” (Kibel 2012, 7). What humankind tends to forget is the fact that machines *function*. Even though it is easier to jump in the conclusion of claiming that machines somehow usurped someone from a certain position, or from a certain way of acting, this actually never happened. Machines, affirms Kibel, are “prosthetic devices, extending the reach of humanity in adjusting itself to the world, and the world to itself” (Kibel 2012, 7). Machines have never usurped humankind from its anthropocentric spotlight. On the contrary, Mazlish argues how humankind continues to focus on the difference between humans and machines, instead of focusing on the ongoing advancement, and as “beings continuous with the tools and machines they construct” (Kibel 2012, 7). In the same moment in which humankind changes its perspective and its way of interacting with the machines it creates, something will probably change.

Another diverse way of interpreting the Machine is the fact that Forster might have characterized the Machine in such manner as a response to all those rising totalitarian regimes – such as fascism – and their intrusiveness in the private life of their citizens. The failure of providing “the necessity of change”, and the “abolition of personal and cultural difference” (March-Russell 2005, 5) is in fact both what equates Forster’s Machine to an actual dictator, and a further element that sets apart the utopist time machine from the “anti-utopic” Machine, according to March-Russels’ article.

The time machine is the epitome of human control and affirmation over an abstract concept like time, and medium with which the protagonist, the so-referred time traveler, comes across the quasi-heavenly land of the lighthearted Eloi, remaining consistent with its inspiration rooted in utopian literature. Although the Eloi share their Eden-like world with another race – that are, the gruesome Morlocks – it is clear that Wells’ inspiration behind the characterization of the two specimen was drawn by Darwinian theories. The difference in aspect and behavior between a Morlock and an Eloi is dictated by the direct consequence of their adaptation to the two, different environments in which the two specimen live. The coexistence of the naïve Eloi with the cannibalistic Morlocks,

together with the adaptation to their environment, was fundamental to ensure and perpetuate a determined, natural, and to an extent, social order. However, what happens if such order is altered, or even worse, subverted by an *artificial* presence?

I want to answer this question by citing the standpoint of Emelie Jonsson. Instead of “safeguarding the human beings who reside with it” (Jonsson 2012, 11), the Machine’s society is more concerned with the perpetuation of the Machine itself, and to a certain extent, its simulation. As a dictatorship concerned to perpetuate the cult of its tyrant, instead of addressing the actual concerns of its citizens, even Forster’s Machine continues its unceasing run towards a promised, better future, which seems to never arrive. *The Machine Stops* is the cry of a humanist, as he confronts with an increasing dehumanized society, scarred by the “emotional impoverishment generated by the repression of diversity, spontaneity and creativity” (Caporaletti 1997, 6). Those are the fundamental themes for understanding Forster’s whole literary heritage, and his fears which emerged spontaneously as he envisions a technologically pervasive reality populated by the “powerfulness and impersonality of a mechanical engine” (Caporaletti 1997, 6), a reality that seemed to be plausible during his times, but nowadays, it has become even more closer.

The imagination of nightmarish worlds, where hyperbole is employed to stress some already-existing, negative connotations of a possible, often existing reality is the typical, recurrent theme for a dystopia – that is, clearly, the counterpart of an utopia. The term dystopia, allegedly created by John Stuart Mill in 1868 (Pitting 2010, 135-136), follows the same etymological path illustrated by Vieira. The various components are listed as it follows, as it has been already seen previously, with the etymological origins of the word utopia:

- *Dys-*, being a pejorative prefix, suggesting negativity, discomfort;
- The word “*topos*”, *place*

The resulting neologism could be roughly translated this time as “*bad place*”. As a result, dystopias are in fact the disenchanting, repulsive places where all those human ambitions celebrated in utopian literature are now denied, exaggerated, and even ridiculed (Pitting

2010, 135-136), as an opposite response and criticism towards the unconditional trust and rely on human faculties and intellect.

For Silvana Caporaletti, the Machine could represent therefore a dystopian element. The Machine embodies all those theorists, and later on scientists and engineers, and their lust for the empowerment of artificial machines, in an attempt to rule what cannot be ruled by humans only. The Machine will triumph as soon as it will dictate over and replace with its “mechanical muscles” (Caporaletti 1997, 8) the “physical and mental functions of human beings, expropriating them of their human prerogatives” (Caporaletti 1997, 8). In doing so, this will eliminate any trace of that much acclaimed and defended anthropocentric position. Conceptually speaking, Forster’s prophetic, technological nightmare is often regarded as the precursor of later, canonical dystopias, such as Orwell’s everlasting totalitarian hell in *1984*, and Aldous Huxley’s eugenic society in *Brave New World*.

The characters of such dystopian lands, just like the characters of *The Machine Stops*, have to cope with the “side effects of a human error” (Caporaletti 1997, 9). All they have to do is coexist with the object they covered with improper human faculties, with the sole hope of perpetuating an unreachable, perfect future civilization that would enhance and improve their existence. On the other hand, with the thinning of the gap left unfilled by the boundaries between humans and machines, it has become challenging to determine who, or what the true beneficiary of that perfect future actually is.

The latter concern will be the milestone on which *The Machine Stops* will rely, resulting in an in-depth analysis that will generate further discussions and reflections on various topics from the next sections of this work on. The analysis will also integrate the most relevant direct quotations from Pepperell’s *General Statements in The Posthuman Manifesto*, in order to highlight how posthumanism could be seen as a possible, closer reality than anyone could expect.



#### 1.4: Inside E. M. Forster's *The Machine Stops*

*The Machine Stops* begins with an explicit exhortation to its readers, inviting them to imagine, and to produce, thanks to their innate mental faculties, a fictional scenario. The readers find themselves inside a tiny, yet mechanically powered cell, filled with any kind of buttons and levers (Forster 1909, 1). Apparently, a woman inhabits the cell. Her name is Vashti, and she is the protagonist of the story. Not much is known about her and her past: she is described as an extremely feeble and sullen woman of unspecified age, who spends her days inside her cell giving lectures on random topics (Forster 1909, 1). As odd as it may sound to a reader with a strict anthropocentric mindset, it seems like Vashti never spent a single day outside her cell, and she does not even feel the urge to do it. Everything she needs, whether is delivering a lecture or talking with her son Kuno; whether is sleeping, eating, taking a bath or unwind (Forster 1909, 3), is perfectly commissionable through a complex, automatized system composed by a large quantity of levers and buttons. Each of them corresponds to a specific need to fulfill, from light and dark shifts, to human interaction, which is made possible by an object similar to a plate that enables her to remotely communicate with the world outside her small cell (Forster 1909, 25).

Starting from the very first lines, the text at least warns its readers about what kind of society they are envisaging: the narrated society is actually an *advanced* society, and not a future one, as someone could erroneously think of. Details on the precise time or historical location are hardly to be found in the text, even if the only thing that is clear to the reader is that humanity has undergone a radical advancement (Forster 1909, 1), where life conditions have been modified, adapted and, in a way, enhanced by the presence of the machines. This is in fact what Pepperell exactly stated in point two of his *General Statements*:

2. All technological progress of human society is geared towards the transformation of the human species, as we currently know it. (Pepperell 2005, 2)

What the readers witness is nothing but the result of a society in which the technology that we are already familiar with became so crucially present in everyday life to become vitally relevant to human life, to the point of replacing any political or

economic system, which guarantees the order and subsistence of human race. This is also clarified in point 9 of Pepperell's *Manifesto*:

9. Posthumanists do not fall into the trap of imagining a society where everything works well. Economic and political theories are as futile as long-range weather productions. (Pepperell 2005, 2)

Silvana Caporaletti gives a further, curious interpretation on the matter. I have previously pointed out the fact that readers find themselves inside Vashti's cell as soon as Forster's story begins, without having enough time to wonder if the cell is part of a real civilization, or if it is just a product of fiction. Caporaletti refers to this literary technique as an example of "illusion of truth" (Caporaletti 1997, 3). This makes Vashti's cell part of a well-established, unquestioned reality. However, in the same article, Caporaletti focus her attentions again on the "Imagine, if you can". Escorted by an impersonal, yet omniscient narrator, readers find themselves fully submerged in the narration of *The Machine Stops*, where it is asked them to actively participate with their imagination (Caporaletti 1997, 3) in the unfolding of the story. Moreover, the same Forster intrudes occasionally in the narration, employing metanarrative elements (Caporaletti 1997, 3). An easily noticeable example is Forster's exhortation to imagine Vashti's physical appearance:

Think of her as without teeth or hair. (Forster 1909, 1)

In no time, the sullen aspect of the main protagonist is rendered in readers' imagination, and the story can proceed. This uncommon narration technique is nothing but an additional affirmation of Forster's unique ability as a writer.

At this point, it is safe to assume that even human interactions have been profoundly changed. Any occasion of social interaction among different participants, whether a greater number of participants is supposed to be involved (like in the case of the lectures held by Vashti; Forster 1909, 1), or simply two interlocutors is carried out thanks to a program presumably developed ad hoc for remote communication. The interlocutors taking part to a general conversation, or a greater social gathering, interact among them through a hardware device that is depicted as reminiscent of a mirror (Forster 1909, 1): the participants can see and interact with each other, without the need to leave their cell and meet, as it regularly happens in a common, face-to-face conversation. Contemporary

readers may find striking similarities with the most recent and used softwares for instant messaging and video calls, such as the famous “Skype”. Even the most simple and natural – and undoubtedly intimate – conversation between a mother and her son is not exempt from the remote system. The conversation between Vashti and Kuno is after all just like all the other conversations present throughout the whole short story: rigorously conducted through the remotely controlled plate, and never meeting in person (Forster 1909, 1-2). At this point, is safe to assume that real life interactions have become an obsolete custom, and the consequent reason behind the reduction of the natural need of bonding among components of the same species, in all its recreative and affective implications. Even if the interlocutors can talk using the mirror-like device, their conversation ends as soon as they log out and turn off their devices, returning to the solitude of their cells. It is a type of communication that appears dry, and with an extremely limited vocabulary. Something that is completely at odds with the readers’ idea of a basic, accustomed idea of conversation, especially when it comes to a conversation between mother and son. Instead of having a deep, caring conversation, Kuno and Vashti limit themselves to exchange few, short lines.

However, it would be difficult after all to carry on a conversation under such circumstances. As also asserted by Kuno, the remote system is not programmed in such a way that could replicate the intrinsic nuances of a normal conversation (Forster 1909, 3), such as the variations of voice tones and facial expressions. Therefore, it would be difficult to articulate a further and adequate response based on the interlocutor’s expectations and intentions. This detail is better visible as Vashti proceeds talking with Kuno: every time the woman is expected to debate a thought of her own, she repeats the same phrase repeatedly, *en lieu* of articulating and pondering a complex thought, showcasing a total inability of thinking with her own head. However, she would not be able to do otherwise, and she would not be able to add much more in any case. Besides from her usual conversations, I think it is worth reminding that Vashti keeps herself busy with another activity: she often delivers small, remote lectures on random subjects. Although Forster does not mention the exact nature of her mansion, the woman limits herself to deliver a series of simple facts, without leaving any space to a further

investigation, or a discussion. Concepts, just like emotions, are reduced into something unequivocal. This is also demonstrated in point nr. 11:

11. We now realize that human knowledge, creativity and intelligence are ultimately limited. (Pepperell 2005, 2)

In his article, March-Russell stresses ulteriorly the concept itself of idea, and its original meaning. March-Russell reminds that the word idea derives from the Greek word *idein*, “to see” (March-Russell 2005, 10), implying an act with a “role of insight within the work of representation” (March-Russell 2005, 10). In the world of *The Machine Stops*, this act is no longer carried out. Since they mirror the world as an “objective given”, Vashti’s and her audience’s ideas are shared and praised just for their “factual accuracy” (March-Russell 2005, 10), and not for their psychological insights.

This, together with the scarce occasions of actual human interaction, might have led to a significant decrease of social relationship, which, consequently, results in the direct cause of two different, but interconnected factors: deprived from its qualities, human interaction is reduced to a function among the diverse functions that can be activated inside a cell. This can lead to a further conclusion, reported in the 14<sup>th</sup> point of Pepperell’s *Manifesto*:

14. As computers develop to be more like humans, so humans develop to like computers more. (Pepperell 2005, 2)

As human interaction is now confined to a function among other functions, and as reality is confined into a small cell filled with the basic needs for a living, so the impulse for knowledge of the self and the world is limited, depriving in this way the cardinal tool with which human beings have employed since the dawn of times to interact with the outer world, and nonetheless, to bond with their fellows, and last but not least, with their consciousness. Vashti, just like her undefined colleagues, never shows signs of curiosity, or at least, an impulse to know new things to discuss. Her daily life looks like an endless loop of lectures, video calls, and time for her self-care. It is also worth pointing out how the simple fact of sorting out a furniture out of sheer personal choice is avoided, and replaced with a single product which is equal to everyone (Forster 1909, 4), therefore cancelling all the intrinsic implications of personal choice and difference. This detail leads to two, equally shocking conclusions: not only is humankind deprived of all its

peculiarities, that are personal tastes or individuality, which always defined us as individuals with our own tastes and opinions. Humankind is also reduced as something that can be perfectly homologable to the engines of the cells in which it resides.

However, the need for interaction is paradoxically the reason that lies behind the odd request of the young Kuno, and why he wanted to contact his mother: he wants her to come and meet him in person, and not through the screen (Forster 1909, 2). Kuno's request is of course not welcomed in a warm way. His attempt resulted into leaving the woman completely baffled. On the other hand, Kuno does not give up so easily, and he innocently attempts to persuade his mother by narrating what he felt as he was gazing at what appears to be the Orion's constellation (Forster 1909, 2-3). Despite the enthusiasm and the continuous pressures of her son, Vashti remains unmoved, and somewhat shocked. This is noticeable by the dry way in which she replies to her son. Vashti limits herself to repeat that "there is no advantage" in visiting the surface of the Earth, because it is just "dust and mud" (Forster 1909, 3). The reaction of Vashti, together with the years spent inside her cell with little to no actual face to face interaction with another living human being – as it has been already previously stated – additionally charges the singularity of Kuno's request. On the other hand, Kuno's request can simply imply that the ability of thinking differently, or acting depending on one's own will, still exists, even though it is often regarded as a singularity, or even as suspicious (Forster 1909, 6). This is also mentioned on point 6 in Pepperell's *Manifesto*:

6. All humans are not born equal, but it is too dangerous not to pretend that they are. (Pepperell 2005, 2)

However, the role of Kuno will be better contextualized in the chapter that follows.

Since he felt that the debate was leading to a dead end, Kuno decides to cut off the conversation (Forster 1909, 3), leaving his mother to the mechanical loneliness of her cell.

Anyways, after a long series of attempts made out of sheer insistence from the part of Kuno, the woman understands that she has no further choice. Towards the end of the first chapter, and after countless hesitations and anxiety fits (Forster, 1909, 6/25), Vashti is ready to undertake allegedly the biggest leap of her entire life, and finally meet

her son in person. In the story, it is never mentioned where Kuno exactly lives. The only piece of information that is reported is his position: he lives somewhere in the northern part of the hemisphere (Forster 1909, 6). The only possible way that Vashti has to reach him is taking an air-ship, which is referred as a particular kind of an old-fashioned relic of the “former age” (Forster 1909, 6). In reality, the air-ship is nothing but the full-fledged aircraft that is still employed nowadays to travel from a continent to another by air. After a short consultancy to the times of departure, the woman is finally ready. Although the idea of undertaking a journey has always been considered as an overall thrilling event, for Vashti is sheer psychological torture, as it is shown in a brief detail: the woman had to take some pills in order to calm down her uncontrollable anxiety (Forster 1909, 5-6). The sole thought of bumping into strangers – human beings just like her – scares her to life. With the Book of the Machine as her sole companion and anchor of relief, Vashti is ready to undertake not one, but two kind of journeys, which can be interpreted in two different ways:

- First, Vashti has to undertake this journey *physically*, which means that she is forced to drag her physical and perceivable body out of the cell where she has spent her whole days since then. This signifies that the woman will become aware that her body can perceive and be perceived. She can move it across a space which is immensely greater than her cell – a place composed of places to reach, and persons to interact, and vice versa;
- This reason anyway intermingles with the second, and most profound layer of interpretation: through this journey, Vashti will *feel* for the first time in her life new, never before registered sensations – that are authentic, human-felt sensations and states of mind, in all their not program controlled singularity.

Like an infant that came out from her mechanical womb’s caretaker, the woman will enter therefore in contact with an environment that even if it appears somewhat frightening and totally unfamiliar with her, it is after all the same environment that already existed long before the rise of this advanced society. Moreover, it somehow continues to exist, no matter how much power and relevance the Machine has gained up until those times, and no matter how much time she spent inside her cell.

This is the main reason behind my choice to bring Vashti's characterization to light. Because of her frantic, "advanced" lifestyle and unequivocally standardization of human-machine interactions on a daily basis, it might serve as glimpse of how humankind, in all its social and behavioral connotations, could change in a society that shifted its focus on machines rather than actual human beings. Now dislocated from its anthropocentrism, humans and machines are relocated at the same, identical existential level. This means that machines are no longer referred as objects, but authentic, organical entities, capable of simulating a life of their own, and this is what makes such machines so complex as well. This is what Pepperell has to say thereon:

12. Complex machines are an emerging form of life. (Pepperell 2005, 2)

Moreover, since machines and humans share the same level of existence, this implies that being so close to machines not only has shaped and influenced humankind in terms of evolution, but also in terms of adaptation. As a direct consequence, the mindset and the faculty of human bonding are significantly modified, as it has been previously stated in point 14 of Pepperell's *Manifesto*. Humans have acquired therefore a similar behavioral path to computers. This is perfectly visible both in Vashti's previously analyzed demeanor, especially in her lack of arguing her stances, and her inability to create any kind of creative content. Furthermore, it is evident in the way in which she is handling her journey: even the most spontaneous novelty, just like a journey itself, is an unnerving occurrence.

I want to uphold the latter point I raised by analyzing a short episode. While Vashti and what they appear to be their journey companions are about to enter the air-ship, a man accidentally drops his Book on the floor (Forster, 1909, 7/25). This episode might end being trespassed by many readers, and registered as a casual episode of clumsiness from a contemporary reader's perspective. This is, however, not the case of *The Machine Stops* and its characters. Instead of squatting down and collecting his Book from the floor, the man leaves it at the same, exact point where it dropped it. In addition, Forster charges this episode with a subtle detail: if the man would have found himself inside his cell, the floor would have lifted itself, so that the man could have been easily able to collect his dropped book. But again, this is not the case, and the book is left where it was dropped,

leaving the man with little to no clue of what to do next. Moreover, if he would have had any clue, he would not have nonetheless enough strength to squat down and collect it from the ground (Forster 1909, 7).

“The man in front dropped his Book — no great matter, but it disquieted them all. In the rooms, if the Book was dropped, the floor raised it mechanically, but the gangway to the air-ship was not so prepared, and the sacred volume lay motionless. They stopped — the thing was unforeseen — and the man, instead of picking up his property, felt the muscles of his arm to see how they had failed him.” (Forster 1909, 7)

This short, yet meaningful episode might suggest a further realization: what the readers have envisioned is an image of a man stripped out of his identity, leaving him to exist as an engine among engines whose only purpose is to assure the correct functioning of a simulation of a life. If it was the life known by the readers, it would be the life that everyone experiences since each one’s birth, in all its unpredictable casualness, just like a book that has been accidentally dropped. Lending Kibel’s words, Forster’s human race appears to be “degenerated” (Kibel 2012, 5). Stripped out of its innate cognitive and relational faculties, the inhabitants of the Machine resulted in “a kind of shuffling and rearrangement of a fixed corpus of ideas”, encapsulated into an emaciated “flaccid” bodies (Kibel 2012, 5). The sole occupation of those sullen bodies is the exchange and discussion of general, sterile ideas. The inhabitants’ bodies are nothing but bodies crystallized in a monotonous cell, the space of a monotonous life.

After the short episode, Vashti sails the air-ship, together with her other travel companions. As they enter the aircraft, they are welcomed by a young hostess (Forster 1909, 8). Similarly to the other side characters of the story, the hostess is left unnamed. Her only duty is to ensure the required condition to every passenger throughout the whole flight across the hemisphere. It is curious to acknowledge the fact that the hostess is the first person in flesh and bones with which Vashti succeeded to start a conversation, although her reasons are strictly dictated by specific needs. Vashti needs someone to close the metal curtain of her window because the heat and the light of the sun is making her feel uncomfortable (Forster 1909, 8). Despite the lack of comfort and her unceasing anxiety, Vashti is nonetheless able to carry on with the poor conversation on the landscapes she can detect outside her window. From the dialogue between the two women, it can be detected that the air-ship is flying over the mountainous part of Asia,



where the Himalaya is still standing in all its glory. However, Vashti still remains unmoved even in front of both this spectacular sight, and of the flight attendant's attempts to remind her about the old, "unmechanical" names of the various mountains and places (Forster 1909, 9). As a response, Vashti closes the window curtain, as if she was switching off one of her countless buttons and levers inside her cell (Forster 1909, 10).

"She pushed back a metal blind. The main chain of the Himalayas was revealed. "They were once called the Roof of the World, those mountains."

"What a foolish name!"

"You must remember that, before the dawn of civilization, they seemed to be an impenetrable wall that touched the stars. It was supposed that no one but the gods could exist above their summits. How we have advanced, thanks to the Machine!" (Forster 1909, 9)

"And that white stuff in the cracks? — what is it?"

"I have forgotten its name."

"Cover the window, please. These mountains give me no ideas." (Forster 1909, 9)

### **1.5: Under the power of the Machine**

During the very first lines of the first dialogue between Vashti and Kuno, at the point in which the two characters are discussing about the possibility of meeting in person, another element emerges from their words – that is, the Machine. Even though it is introduced without giving information about its aspect and origins, the readers will see how the Machine extremely dominant actually is, as well as eradicated *in* and *within* the story. This section will serve to better contextualize the element of the Machine, and why its presence, although it is after all an unanimated object, its presence within the story is much more crucial than anyone could expect, even for the subsequent unfolding of *The Machine Stops*.

Despite the scarce background context, the most peculiar aspect that emerges from the very beginning – and from where I intend to start with my analysis, is the way in which Vashti and Kuno talk about the Machine. In this way, the readers are given two, different points of view that can help them to better identify the Machine and its workings:

- From *Vashti*'s standpoint, the Machine is the responsible of the advancement of humankind up to her days. The Machine is the quintessence of greatness, and sometimes object of worship;
- From *Kuno*'s standpoint on the other hand, the Machine is no doubt great, but he reminds his mother that humanity actually built it. (Forster 1909, 2)

The Machine therefore has a primal function: all the prompts that can be found in each cell, from the most essential to the complex one are all orchestrated by the Machine itself. Each citizens' demand is an order for the Machine, and it excellently executes. The Machine is everything that makes all their requests possible, including raising a baby (Forster 1909, 6). The Machine is everything and everywhere, a lurking, mechanical presence. Albeit its apparent absence, nothing about it is kept mysteriously: each inhabitant owns a book called *The Book of the Machine*, which appears to be the one and only object that has never been digitalized. Appearing for the first time when Vashti needs to consult where and when the air-ship departs, the book is said to offer the right answers to each question (Forster 1909, 5). It is the guide for a technological jungle, consulted during times of trouble, and worshipped for its clear, unmistakable answers.

At this point, the readers can start to trace a first, plausible conclusion. Continuing under the optic of Pepperell's *Manifesto*, the Machine can be intended as the ultimate, verifiable example of how far the advancement of the society of *The Machine Stops* has come, to the point of being interpreted as the ultimate goal of a possible, posthuman society. Readers might remember what has been stated in the 12<sup>th</sup> point of Pepperell's *General Statements*, about the rise of complex machines as a possible new form of living beings. Readers can agree with me that the Machine is more than a simple computer, similar to the ones we have at home. The Machine is much more complex than such devices: it can ensure and fulfill every, possible request made from its inhabitants. This point intermingles with point nr. 15:

15. If we can think of machines then machines can think; if we can think of machines that think, then machines can think of us. (Pepperell 2005, 2)

In addition to being a mechanism with an existence of its own, the Machine is even able to think about its citizens and their human needs. The Machine is no longer

considerable a device that helps and facilitate a short number of functions commanded by humans. Even though created by humans – as also Kuno asserts – it is a Machine that can think *for* and *as* a human. With this stated, I can now move again to point nr. 14. In the previous section, the character of Vashti has been explored in order to demonstrate how humankind’s mental faculty has drastically changed and adapted to a mental pattern similar to machines, and thus showing a limitedness in responding coherently to small variables. The Machine on the other hand has adapted to behave more like a human, highlighting a capability of responding and interpreting the needs of its human citizens. In order to stress what I previously stated, I want to point out something that Kibel reported in his essay as well. The Machine has gained an extreme amount of power such as to be put at the same level of the other, human character, and referred as such, since its name is spelled with a capital M. The Machine is no longer treated as an inanimate object, or part of the landscape (Kibel 2012, 6). It is vital and integral part of its inhabitants’ lives, the source of the simulation. This is the ultimate proof of how machines are ultimately humanized, and even treated as a godsend emissary capable of hearing prayers, or detecting dissenters via video calls, as Vashti warns her son (Forster 1909, 2). Even though all those details has served as an additional affirmation of how the Machine is the epitome of advanced technology, I think it is better to pursue with a further, parallel analysis in order to cover all the facets of this complex mechanism, as if the readers are following the streams of its energy.

In 1975, the French philosopher Michel Foucault published *Discipline & Punish*, a book which attempts to trace, with the occasional support of a great number of documents, the history of the evolution of the penal system in modern times,. The book analyzes then the cultural shifts that influenced this evolution, and how the control of the subjects was enacted, exploring what Foucault indicated with the term of *Discipline*.

In an attempt to give a clear definition as possible, Discipline can be referred to a type of subtle control, which allows the ones in charge of executing it to analyze and detect the behaviors of a certain person, who is considered out of the norm. The detection of such behaviors serves to correct, and make them “docile”, using Foucauldian’s terminology, through a series of strategically studied methods.

It defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. (Foucault 1977, 149)

Foucault locates the origins of discipline in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and it is based on three, main reasons. They are listed as it follows:

- The *scale*: The body of the disciplined can be treated as a "retail", so that one or more parts can be taken into consideration;
- The *object of control*: The efficiency with which the parts taken into consideration, together with their correlated activity are carried out by the analyzed subject;
- The *modality*: a constant state of coercion that allows to detect easily the exact moment of the object of control's activity for a longer time span. (Foucault 1977, 137)

In doing so, a certain, prolonged control can be obtained, and be adapted to a larger number of situations. In fact, this way of controlling was applied not only in battlefields – that are, the staple locations for such purposes – but later on, this was also started to be employed in many other institutions, such as schools and hospitals. In addition, discipline can be distributed in a way in which a vast number of individuals can be controlled. This distribution follows its own rules as well:

- *Enclosure*: the subjects are gathered and partitioned;
- *Functional sites*: the spaces designed for controlling the subjects that are transferred into them. Such spaces can be partitioned into smaller portions of area, similar to cells.

The index of *Discipline and Punish* reports that the 3<sup>rd</sup> part of the book deals with not only what discipline exactly means, and the many ways in which it is perpetuated on the subjects. It also dedicates an entire space on how the various elements employed for the correction of the subjects can be organized, exploring the various hierarchies and distributions of power. In order to give a more practical explanation, Foucault employs the concept of *panopticism*.

The term is inspired by the *Panopticon*, an architectural site invented by the British architect Jeremy Bentham. With the use of a map, Foucault explains how Bentham organized such space. The main elements and their explanations are listed below:

- The *plant*: the site where the structure is going to be built. It has a circular area which can be subsequently divided into two, additional areas;
- The *center*: the central area that will be occupied by a tower divided into many, wide windows faced towards the periphery;
- The *periphery*: the area that encircles the center. It is divided into many, smaller cells all along the length of the central area.
- In addition, each cell will have *two windows*: the *first window* is faced towards the exterior part of the panopticon, and it filters the natural light that comes inside. The *second window* is on the other hand oriented towards the central tower. The latter will be used by the supervisor, or anyone in charge of the surveillance.

It is thanks to the two windows' interplay of lights and shadows that the supervisor is able to spot the inmates, and gaze at their demeanor and gestures, without being discovered or detected by the subjected inmates. Bentham suggests adopting some solutions in order to enhance this state of invisible control and minimize the risk of being perceived by using Venetian bins and zigzag partitions (Foucault 1977, 220). A sole noise, or shadow, may reveal the existence of the supervisor, eliminating in this way the whole purpose of the *Panopticon*.

However, the project of Jeremy Bentham never saw the light of the day. On the other hand, Bentham's unrealized project captured the attention of Foucault and its studies, especially regarding on how discipline might be enacted under certain, historically-localizable circumstances and institutions (Foucault 1977, 224). Foucault's interest is cited and confirmed in the article of Gianfranco Pellegrino as well. It was actually thanks to Foucault and its studies if the complex and articulated project of Bentham has been somehow still discusses up until our days. For Pellegrino, Foucault has in fact conferred the symbolic meaning known by the critics in his *Discipline and Punish*. Foucauldian *Panopticism*, affirms the author of the article, has given for the first time the "distinctively

modern model for a condition [...] a technique of power". (Pellegrino 2013, 2-3). *Panopticism* suggests to the critics a model that could be more identifiable in the modern, real world, and therefore, more relatable and applicable in a vast number of situations and confrontations. In fact, Foucault considers the *Panopticon* as a more efficient institution rather than the old prisons for three, main reasons:

- *Light privation*: prisons were usually located underground, hidden from the sunlight. In the case of the *panopticon*, sunlight is its true force;
- *Enclosure*: differently to what happened with prisons, where the inmates were all located inside the same structure, the inmates inside the *panopticon* are located in the same structure, yet isolated in their assigned cell;
- *Impossibility to hide*: inside the *panopticon*'s cells, the inmates have not the chance to hide, or elude the guards' constant, invisible gaze.

For Foucault, the *panopticon* creates therefore a kind of extremely pervasive control, unceasing and resistant over a long span of time. As a result, a homogeneous surveillance arises, and guarantees the further rise of a continuous chain of control to the detriment of the subjects that need to be disciplined (Foucault 1977, 220). The constant control is therefore the true weapon of surveillance, the true trap (Foucault 1977, 219).

Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see. (Foucault 1977, 219);

The inmate is completely alone inside his cell, in a state of total isolation. This does not only stress the subject's vulnerability, but it also prevents him to take part into rebellions with the other inmates inside the same structure. (Foucault 1977, 219):

The crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collective of separated individualities. (Foucault 1977, 220)

For this reason, Foucault argues that Bentham's *Panopticon* relies on two principles:

- *Visibility*: the tower of control is always well visible. The inmate has the complete certainty of being constantly monitored;
- *Unverifiable*: on the other hand, the inmate will never know the exact moment in which he is supervised. The effect of such control, less violent, but

nonetheless more psychologically subtle, creates a constant state of anxiety, of uncertainty, in the mind of the inmate. (Foucault 1977, 220)

It is curious and nonetheless shocking at the same time, to discover how many of those details are present in the reality of *The Machine Stops* as well. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the most striking details of the Machine that can be localizable on the construction of the *panopticon* as well.

The very first detail that is worth starting with is the cells in which the characters live, just like the main protagonist does. As the readers might have guessed throughout the unfolding of the short story, each cell has a limited number of small pieces of essential furniture and control panels, but the presence of windows or actual doors are nowhere to be mentioned. The sole source of light comes from the monitors' screens placed inside of them. The inhabitants live all alone, and towards the half of the first chapter, it is even mentioned that a cell with a number of identification is assigned to a child as soon as he or she reaches an adequate age to become self-sufficient (Forster 1977, 6). Neither close relatives can live together inside the same cell. In fact, Vashti and Kuno, despite the fact that they are respectively mother and son, they live separately. The remote communication system might have been developed for such purpose: it is the only way with which those people can talk to each other, or simply keep in touch with a close relative, without the need to leave the cell. Moreover, it is also worth pointing out that this society is rid of the typical places that the readers might find inside a common city – that are, shops or other places designed for social gathering. The food is sent directly inside the cell, and the furniture is equal for everyone. This might conform the attempt to confine any kind of occasion for social aggregation.

Some conclusions might be traced at this point: the society illustrated by Forster is completely deprived of all the possible connotations that can be found in a typical society. Its inner constitution appears to be built up as numerous, little cells that do not communicate with the external world. On a more, *Panopticon*-like perspective, the readers might guess that the cells are respectively its periphery. Having stated this, the readers might now wonder what occupies the central part. In order to find the answer to this question, the readers can follow the energy that pervades the cells.

It will not be surprising that such irradiated energy comes from none other than the Machine itself. The readers have no clue about who firstly created the Machine. It also never mentioned the reasons behind such creation. However, the Machine has been and is always present within the story, just like its energy that flows all over the city and inside its countless cells, able to fulfill every, possible request. Nobody knows where the Machine is exactly located, yet its energy pervades every inch of each cell, ready to be summoned. Its infinite energy is enough to confirm its existence. The Machine is the epitome of advancement, in all its technological grandeur. It is an inorganic mechanism, allegedly far from the features that are considered typical in humankind. Yet the Machine has been able to perfectly integrate its automatized mechanisms and functions, and subsequently adapt them to the point of understanding and giving a similar response to the ones of its human inhabitants, and nonetheless, to the point of being referred as such by its human users. In doing so, it subverted and intruded the until then central position occupied by humans only, creating therefore a symbiotic, liminal relationship where human beings and machines coexist and help each other to enhance their existence towards a possible advancement of their conditions.

As sensational as it might sound to some readers, this relationship could however be interpreted in another, darker way:

- On one hand, there is no doubt that the Machine has been powerful enough to *help human beings advancing*, and presumably *improving their lives*;
- On the other hand, this kind of relationship might present some deeper downfalls. The symbiotic value could have also weakened the boundaries that since then have kept distanced organical beings and unorganical beings – that are, in this specific case, complex machines. This might have brought to a *sort of contamination*, where the two poles might now dictate new roles over another, such as who exercises its control over who.

The Machine, therefore, could also serve as a way to control and watch over the citizens under its unceasing ray of power. Although there are no windows to be found all along the walls of the cells, the readers might guess that some of the monitors' present among the various control panels inside of them, with the sole function of eavesdropping



what an inhabitant of the cell is doing, or talking to while video calling other, fellow inhabitants. This might be the reason behind the elusive trait of Vashti's personality. An example could be detected when the woman hushes her son to not talk about "such things" while they use the system for remote communication (Forster 1909, 2).

Therefore, the central role of the Machine inside Forster's story can be summed up as it follows:

- The Machine covers a central role of the *story itself*;
- The Machine covers a central role for *the lives of the inhabitants*, both in personal terms, and presumably, in social terms.

With this stated, one can raise an interesting question: if this change has brought to a subversion of what was usually attributed to the individual sphere, can the same change have certain repercussions to a much broader, social scale as well?

This question will be the starting point for the chapter that will follow.

## **Preliminary conclusion**

In this first chapter, I wanted to introduce the main topic of this work – posthumanism. I divided this chapter into five different sections in order to ensure a preliminary insight on what posthumanism exactly is, and how it originated.

In section 1.1, I have introduced and discussed about the posthuman condition, from its origins to the challenges and goals on which it relies. Moreover, I wanted to highlight the reasons behind the growing relevance that posthumanism gained during the last century, especially in the light of the introduction of new, increasingly efficient technological devices and programs in everyday life. Some critics sense that such technological devices have been advanced enough to even *simulate* the faculties of their human creators to the point of gaining further efficiency in the future. This would result in their intrusion and alleged contamination of anthropocentrism. The fate of anthropocentrism is still the object of many debates and evaluations among critics: what kind of result could the union between an organic human being and the artificial machine it created possibly give birth to?

The answer to this question has animated both critics involved in different fields of study, and many other figures belonging to other contexts, such as writers. In fact, in section 1.2, I have introduced a literary work that I cited frequently throughout my analysis – that is, Robert Pepperell's *The Posthuman Manifesto*.

Forster's work was reprised more in depth in section 1.3, especially in the attempt of locating the shift from an optimistic understanding of the machine (always to be intended as a generic, artificial apparatus created by human beings in order to fulfill a specific goal or request), to a more skeptical one. To give even more evidence to this shift, I have compared two famous machines drawn by English literature – that are, H. G. Wells' time machine, and E. M. Forster's Machine.

Having provided such background, I started the actual analysis in Section 1.4. My main aim was to take into consideration all the aspects emerged throughout the previous sections to apply them in the first chapter of Forster's short story. In doing so, I wanted to demonstrate how many aspects of posthumanism are both visible in the

characterization of the main protagonist Vashti, and in the fictional society in which she lives.

This analysis brought into light two important points:

- It demonstrated how humankind drastically changed to the point of adapting its behavior in a predominantly, mechanical environment;
- It demonstrated how technologically advanced machines have been enhanced to the point of almost simulating human-like behaviors.

As a result, those points have somehow confirmed how liminal the boundaries between humans and machines actually can be, in the light of a gradual shifting of an until then predominant, anthropocentric position. Humans and machines are now united into a mutual symbiosis, where each one of the two poles can easily integrate outside and inside itself the features, or functions, of the opposite, coexistent pole,

However, despite this symbiosis sounds in line with the much-yearned desire for advancement, one can wonder if this union could have certain, negative side effects: can an unorganic entity become powerful enough to the point of dictating its own rules over its human creators?

The answer has been provided in section 1.5, as I gave my own interpretation and insight specifically concerning the society narrated in *The Machine Stops* and its ruling Machine.

Even in this case, I searched for an element that could possibly present some similarities with the object of another, correlated analysis. My choice fell on *panopticism*, a theory developed by the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault. In doing so, not only did I try to give a possible answer to the question of the previous paragraph, but I also tried to lay the path for the topic of the second chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### DISMANTLING THE MACHINE

#### *Power, hierarchies and oppressions in posthuman times.*

“I have been threatened with Homelessness, and I could not tell you such a thing through the Machine.” (Forster 1909, 10)

To Vashti’s relief, her journey aboard the air-ship has come to an end, and now the woman can rejoice with her son after a long time. Kuno is waiting for her too, but with him, a crucial news for his unsettled mother. Vashti will soon discover the reason behind the impatience of her son, and why he urged her so much to the point of forcing her to undertake a long, never before experienced journey across the hemisphere. The news she is going to be given is in fact terrible, and even more terrible is the fate that is weighting upon her young son. No sooner than the second chapter of *The Machine Stops* is started that the news of Kuno is revealed, leaving both Vashti and the readers completely baffled.

The young boy has been threatened with Homelessness. In a reality where life is squeezed into an essential cell, the sentence of Kuno signify certain death, mainly for asphyxiation, due to the exposition to the inhospitable, outer world, and – of course – out of the Machine’s reach and its mechanical cares. In order to have deserved his fate, the boy has acted in an unforgivable way, and for this, he is now considered as a fully-fledged criminal, a criminal who does not even deserve a stare charged with shame from his mother’s eyes. Despite the numerous drastic changes that has already been analyzed during the previous chapter, crime still somehow exists, and so punishment and isolation, as a response to have infringed the law. However, a question may emerge spontaneously. Evaluating the reality of *The Machine Stops*, one must wonder what kind of crimes could be possibly carried out in a reality in which aspects, such as the autonomous decision-making sphere and individuality, have been overturned. And most of all, what kind of actions someone must commit in order to be labelled as a criminal?

This chapter intends to start from this reflection. This time, the character of Kuno will be analyzed in order to understand the reasons behind his fatal decision, and what has brought him to deserve that kind of destiny. Together with this analysis, *Discipline*

*and Punish* by Michel Foucault will still be come as useful to delineate not only why Kuno has been condemned, but also why Homelessness has been chosen as the right sentence for his extreme action. Similarly to what has been done in the previous chapter, the vocabulary employed both by Kuno and Vashti will be used to demonstrate how binary oppositions are still frequently used in any kind of argumentations, regardless to the changes that occurred both in humankind and in society.

### **2.1: A cruel machine sentence**

During the course of the first chapter, readers had the chance to have a glimpse of the actual personality of Kuno. As also his mother leaves her audience to imagine, Kuno has always been visibly different from the other inhabitants of the cells. From his articulated descriptions and verbose argumentations, the reader can guess that the young boy has a lively and, most of all, curious temperament, in particular towards the novelties that tingle his attention. The reader may has already noticed his quality, especially during the very first dialogue that occurred in the beginning of *The Machine Stops*, when the boy was trying to persuade a passive Vashti to come and reach him. Kuno attempted to catch his mother's attention by narrating her what he witnessed with his eyes full of curiosity and enthusiasm during his small excursions above the surface of the Earth, but without success. His liveliness jars with the accustomed, unmovable attitude of his fellow inhabitants. It is not a coincidence that his mother is completely aware of this fact. She even points out how "queer" he has always been, even during his childhood days (Forster 1909, 6). However, his last visit will be fatal for his fate.

As the boy narrates to a speechless Vashti, he has been visiting the surface of the Earth for a long time, but during the last conversation he had with his mother, the boy did something unforgivable. From what the readers learn from Vashti and her continuous citations of the Book, it is "perfectly legal" to visit Earth's surface, as long as the visitor owns a special, mandatory document called "Egression Permit" (Forster 1909, 11). This document is supposed to regulate the visits above the surface, with all the measures and controls of the case. On the contrary, that was not the case of Kuno, and this is where his demise starts. The boy never requested for his Egression Permit because he found his way autonomously (Forster 1909, 11). This is where the authentic personality of Kuno

emerges, leaving his audience and Vashti herself disarmed by his innate, yet uncommon lucidity.

Kuno then starts his narration. His action was actually premeditated: first, in order to sustain the required fatigue of such adventure, Kuno started to exercise, to regain the strength he lost due to the scarce occasion for physical activity inside a common cell. Readers may remember the short episode where one of Vashti's journey companions was not even able to squat down and collect his dropped Book from the floor, before entering the air-ship. Having a remarkable physical strength was unfavorable (Forster 1909, 11). It is even left intended that anyone who was suspected to have it was killed (Forster 1909, 11), with a sort of euthanasia. On the other hand, Kuno regained it while slowly, but constantly – and of course, secretly – training his physique inside his cell (Forster 1909, 13). Like a curious toddler venturing and experiencing for the first time the world around him, even Kuno takes his first steps, to retrace his space, and subsequently, his awareness, regaining what the Machine has inhibited. Together with his new muscles, Kuno regains his sense of space (Forster 1909, 11). With his legs, he is now able to move across his usual environment, and to rediscover its intrinsic meanings, such as distance and perception (Forster 1909, 12). It was, in terms of humankind, an enormous leap nonetheless: he is the measure (Forster 1909, 12), the one who perfectly and autonomously understands what is near, and what is far: what he is able to reach by his own, and what he is not able to do so.

Man is the measure. That was my first lesson. Man's feet are the measure for distance, his hands are the measure for ownership, his body is the measure for all that is lovable and desirable and strong. (Forster 1909, 12)

With this new consciousness, he is now able to redimension the space outside his cell, and to change his perspective accordingly. This will help him with his other, subsequent missions. From a dark platform, he is able to deduce with his own mind where he has to go in order to continue with his search for a possible exit. If the city area is constantly, artificially lit, what kind of passages might be covered along the dark aisles (Forster 1909, 12)? After a long battle in the darkness, with only his limbs to guide him, Kuno finds a lever, and finally, he is able to exit, and see the sun. From his excited description, the reader can do nothing but realise Kuno's goal, his own campaign against

the Machine and its control over humans: not only has Kuno acted completely by himself, free from any kind of button, or lever. Kuno has regained what it means to be a fully-fledged human being. The boy makes his own suppositions, his own thoughts, and most importantly, he feels the space around him, without the help of anyone – neither a physical, nor a mechanical entity. This is well noticeable in his unstoppable excitement, while he is narrating the landscape he saw, the grass he touched, the things he felt. Regained emotions that now he feels the urge to share with anyone who wants to listen (Forster 1909, 15). He intends to reveal what the Machine, since its rise, has attempted to marginalize human faculties into automatized, controllable mechanisms, for the sake of advancement. However, his escapades, and later realization, will come to a crucial end.

The boy is so distracted by the changing landscape before his eyes that he has not enough time to realize that someone is after him – that is, the “Mending Apparatus” (Forster 1909, 16). Kuno understands he has no other choice but to get back to where he departed as soon as possible. Suddenly, during his attempt, he is assaulted by the worms outside the passage he discovered (Forster 1909, 17). The scare and the frantic fighting make him losing his balance, and Kuno falls, and finally faints (Forster 1909, 17). The boy wakes up later on inside a barren room (Forster 1909, 17), and his story finishes.

As a response, Vashti does nothing but growing even more angry and unsettled towards Kuno. She even blames herself for being his mother at some point (Forster 1909, 14). The emotions of her son do not seem to affect her grave mood, and she limits herself to respond with her usual, poor argumentations, even while Kuno is trying to provoke her. Instead, she limits herself to simply deny his interlocutors’ stances, but without giving any space for her own reasons, such as when Kuno accuses her of worshipping the Machine (Forster 1909, 11). With the progression of the story, a certainty makes its way on Vashti’s disdain: her son’s behavior will be never left unpunished. Kuno is now considered as an outlaw: he infringed the alleged sole law present in that society. However, one might wonder if Kuno and his curiosity are something to be considered condemnable. Any further details on the laws of the society narrated in *The Machine Stops* are not given, but the readers can nonetheless start to analyze the condemned, and the sentence that awaits him, and finally ponder why he deserves such cruel destiny, despite his young age.

## 2.2: The body of the condemned

*Discipline and Punish* is the endeavor by Michel Foucault to trace the evolution of the Western penal system, from its origins to the Modern Age, taking into consideration the historical and cultural advancement of the societies as well, listing the various changings and confronting them with each other. Foucault argues that one of the most fundamental leaps from the traditional to a more, modern penal system is the passage from the physical torture of the medieval age to the non-physical punishments introduced during Modern Age. Foucault confronts them as it follows:

- During medieval tortures, the condemned had to endure atrocious and extremely painful methods, which were carried out both as a part of the effective punishment, and additionally for extortion, or penance. A frequently used method were mutilations, where single parts or extended areas of the body of the condemned were deturpated and subjected of excruciating pain. In addition, such acts were often made publicly, as a sort of scatological spectacle that everyone had to participate in order to avoid any sort of further crimes. A clear example is widely reported by Foucault at the beginning of the chapter *The Body of the Condemned*, where he describes how a regicide was carried out to the detriment of a man called Damiens in 1757. Foucault narrates all the tortures Damiens had to suffer, like copious mutilations all along his whole body. It is crude, yet necessary to point out how some mutilations had to be repeated by his executioners in order to make them more effective. Damiens died mainly for blood loss and the unbearable pain (Foucault 1977, 17). On the other hand, this brutality was surpassed during modern times;
- However, even if tortures and public spectacles were no longer hosted, it did not mean that punishments were no longer present as well. Due to the social changes, and the moral attempt to “humanise” – citing the main figure of Enlightenment, such as the Italian Cesare Beccaria, famous for his essays against public tortures – the cruel system of public punishments and its correlated spectacles were significantly changed. The latter were undoubtedly suspended, but instead, a new penal system was introduced. First, the element of the public spectacle was abolished. Punishment became an act that was



carried out of the public sphere, and became hidden element (Foucault 1977, 20). Even though, another sphere takes over – *consciousness*. Limiting the public sphere into a more hidden sphere, where the condemned interacts directly with his executioners, a new relationship emerges. Together with this, even the concept of shame itself is redimensioned. With the system of the public tortures, the sense of shame was the unifying thread among the executioner, the condemned, and the crowd. With the newly introduced system of the trials, the execution becomes a sentence, charging it with a double valence: The executioner feels shame for the crimes committed by the condemned, but at the same time, it takes the distances between such acts, leaving responsibility to other, affiliated authorities. Therefore, there is a separation between who inflicts the punishment, usually someone in charge with bureaucratic responsibilities, and who will execute the punishment first handily, forming an authority with full, autonomous power to decide. To prove this fact, Foucault puts in contrast a list of rules that was created by Foucher for *The house of the young prisoners in Paris*, created eighteen years after the previously reported execution of Damians. It is a sort of a strict timetable that the prisoners were expected to follow. Each part of the day corresponds to a certain, distinct activity, such as hard works, supper, or even prayers. The condemned however were never left unsupervised. (Foucault 1977, 18)

This proves how the sentence is no longer used for the sole desire for punishing the condemned, or expiation from his evil actions. The sentence is now referred as a way of correction (Foucault 1977, 21) of the outlaw's behaviour. Consequently, the readers can now discern the fundamental component of this change, and the one who influenced the further redistribution of the various penal systems – that is, the body of the condemned (Foucault 1977, 22). If the condemned is someone who caused damage to the society in which he lives, he is now a subject to be corrected, instead of someone who has to publicly perish in the most brutal way possible.

Physical pain, the pain of the body itself, is no longer the constituent element of the penalty. From being an art of unbearable sensations, punishment has become an economy of suspended rights. (Foucault 1977, 22)

Excruciating, “inhuman” sufferings become more bearable, “humane”.

From the reported example of Foucher, it can be deduced that the condemned sees his basic rights restricted, or suspended until his redemption, rather than being a scapegoat that must suffer unbearable pain. The sentence is therefore administrated, but keeping the necessary distances between the condemned and the one who declares his sentence.

If it is still necessary for the law to reach and manipulate the body of the condemned, it will be at a distance, in the proper way, according to strict rules, and with a much higher 'aim'. (Foucault 1977, 22)

However, other authorities will guarantee the surveillance *en lieu* of the one emitting the sentence. Foucault locates those authorities with warmers, and later on, doctors, and even psychologists.

As a result of this new restraint, a whole army of technicians took over from the executioner: warders, doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, psychologists, educationalists; by their very presence near the prisoner, they sing the praises that the law needs. (Foucault 1977, 22)

Those figures are in charge with the "juxtaposition" (Foucault 1977, 22) between the condemned and the executioner, promoting therefore an example of rightfulness to follow, but punishing the condemned for his crime at the same time through precise rules and measures.

Today a doctor must watch over those condemned to death, right up to the last moment – thus *juxtaposing himself as the agent of welfare*, as the alleviator of pain, with the official whose task it is to end life. (Foucault 1977, 22)

The violence, the bloodshed, and the extortions became then a series of rights to be suspended (Foucault 1977, 22). The body of the condemned is now a medium deprived of his basic freedom and individuality, in order to highlight the sense of reclamation in terms of rightfulness and property of the ones hierarchically above him.

This is what Kuno experiences during the second chapter of *The Machine Stops*. It is already left intended that Kuno has already been catalogued as different from the other inhabitants. At some point of the story, it is reported that Kuno had requested to be a father, but the Central Committee has turned out his request (Forster 1909, 12). The reader may hint that Kuno has always been partly supervised by the Committee for his out of the norm behaviour. The reader may remember that the Central Committee has already been mentioned during the first chapter as the creators of the Book of the Machine (Forster 1909, 6). Therefore, the Central Committee might be the greatest authorities

inside the hierarchical scale of the society in *The Machine Stops*, and the ones who administrates the power that surrounds the mysterious Machine. It is also curious pointing out that another possible group of authority emerges from the narration of Kuno – that is, the Mending apparatus (Forster 1909, 16). From what the readers can understand from Kuno's words, this institution is in charge of repairing the technical abnormalities all along the Machine. This duty however can also be differently interpreted. Forster might have intentionally charged the Mending Apparatus with a double meaning: this institution might also be in charge of detecting and repairing other abnormalities, intended as illegal actions carried out by human beings. This could explain the fear of Kuno when he realises that he has been discovered, and what triggered his escape. He fears that his behaviour might, in a certain sense, be mended as well.

However, it is worth highlighting how the sentence that weights upon Kuno is directly proportioned to the advancement of the society in *The Machine Stops*. There are no traces of explicit tortures, or crude punishments. There is no doubt that this society is advanced, and still relies closely to a similar penal system to the one of the contemporary readers. On the other hand, this does not signify that Homelessness is seemingly the worst sentence one may encounter. In a society where the main needs of subsistence are available only inside the automatized cells, Homelessness means certain death, or slow agony. The body of the condemned is exposed to the outer air, out of the cell in which he resides, hence cut off from all the needs he always found inside of it, such as food, and fresh, breathable air. Death comes mainly for physical reasons, but most importantly, because the condemned is deprived from his primary sources which he could find in the sole environment he knows, and with which he interacted until the rest of his days. The Machine does not kill its subjects first hardly, but it gradually deprives them from the needs it constantly distributes. Stripped out of his freedom and the right of living like a common human individual inside a society, Kuno finds himself in the hands both of the Central Committee and of the Machine: they have to correct the behaviour of one of their properties.

Foucault stresses numerous times the concept of property during the course of *Discipline and Punish*. He locates the origins of this term during the rise of modern age in western civilisation. It is thanks to the significant economic growth, due to the

improvement of the production and availability of goods that society felt the urge of both reforming the relationship between the condemned and the executioner. It additionally reformed the penal system in a certain way in which it could be more conformed to the type of society and its changings it was experiencing (Foucault 1977, 88). With the overcoming of the ancient model of sovereignty, where the king was the one and only primary source of administration of power and justice (Foucault, 1977, 90), a new, more complex system of evaluation of the crime was introduced. The major crimes were separated from the first tier from the smaller crimes linked to wealth and property (Foucault 1977, 98), which were usually linked to the growing lower classes.

This shift brought to the creation of a more complex juridical system, but which was able to determine the type of crime, and therefore, a more adequate control, in order to obtain more surveillance as possible, and to intervene directly in case of subversive acts (Foucault 1977, 104), and prevent them in case of future repercussions. This system, argues Foucault, is based on six rules, which are based on six, different “punitive signs” (Foucault 1977, 105), *en lieu* of an immediate response. The most decisive and localizable rules within the unfolding of the events in the second chapter of *The Machine Stops* will be picked up in order to be better analysed and contextualised, always taking into consideration the case of Kuno:

- The rule of *sufficient ideality*: this is indeed a difficult concept, but it sits at the core of the changing of the penal system. If the crime to be committed results advantageous to the eyes of the criminal, the expected punishment will be proportioned to the disadvantage that the condemned draws. This is the root of the changing of the concept of pain. The pain is no longer intended as only the physical pain directly afflicted to the body of the condemned, but it is more like a representation of it. The sentence of Homelessness does include any kind of violence or extremely painful methods of coercion. It is sufficient to overturn the spirit of adaptation of the inhabitant of a cell;
- The rule of *lateral effect*: for being felt as such, pain must be felt by the ones who are not directly involved to the sentence. Citing Beccaria, Foucault illustrates the following paradox: if on one hand the condemned is the direct subject of the privation of his own identity and liberty, on the other hand the

sentence of the condemned is felt by the ones who are not directly involved, producing a wider and “lasting impression” effect (Foucault 1977, 106). There lies the paradox: the sentence that will be assigned to the condemned has to require the minimum pain possible, but to maximise the representative value of the ones who witness the condemned. Vashti is horrified not only for the blasphemous words of her son, but rather by the thought itself of the sentence that awaits him. The sole, general idea of being deprived from her cell, her only source of living that she knows, frightens her. As a response, the woman bursts in a crying fist (Forster 1909, 14):

- The rule of *optimal specification*: if a new set of crimes identifications has been introduced, a new way of categorisation of the crimes that can be perpetuated must be listed. It is needed therefore a new module that is capable of a code who modulates the type of required punishment with its correlated sentence. Therefore, if the sentence is now considerable a deterrent from a future, out of the law action, the expected punishment must take into consideration mainly the nature of the condemned, and what brought him to act out of the law (Foucault 1977, 109). It is in the latter rule that lies the cruelty of the sentence that awaits Kuno. In a society where the simple concept of individuality is eradicated by a complex, automatized system, the behaviour of Kuno is now considerable different, and “dangerous”, citing the previously quoted point 6 of Robert Pepperell’s *General Statements* in his *Manifesto*. Kuno is too dangerous for the society in which he lives not only for his subversive mentality, but also curiously enough, even for his new regained physical appearance. Vashti is triggered by the growth of a light moustache above his lips (Forster 1909, 16). As a consequence, Kuno is far more distant from the accustomed image of human being for that time, deprived from both his physical and, most importantly, from his atavic mental sphere. For the persons like Kuno, there is no space in the society of the Machine. He is destined to be excluded from its intrusive cares, and suffer until the end of his days.

Like a Hycarus of the posthuman days, Kuno desired nothing but to feel the heat of the sun gloriously shining in the sky for the first time ever in his entire life, free from

the burden of the Machine. He is now falling underground, along the vomitories, with the sole certainty of being, as soon as possible, mended, just like a grind of an infinite working machine that refused to properly work.

### **2.3: The art of oppressing and being oppressed**

The most emotional and empathic reader might wonder if it is the real end that awaits the young Kuno. After all, he would have raised a good point: with the ostracization of his mother, the boy is left completely alone to face an anything but a serene destiny. Neither the state of total solitude of her son does not seem to touch the remains of empathy that Vashti could potentially feel. This, of course, did not happen. On the contrary, the woman flees away right after her son has finished telling his story, without turning back, or granting him a final stare or a single goodbye. None of this never happened. As even the readers have read, the woman is also outraged by the words of her own son, and even profoundly offended by both his demeanour, and his presence. Something that even Kuno noticed with a faint note of disappointment, as he acknowledges that he is “so different” from his mother (Forster 1909, 15). For the readers, it is the ultimate proof that between Vashti and Kuno lays an almost abysmal difference. There is no doubt that there is a factual difference between the attitudes of the two main characters, as the reader has had multiple occasions to notice. However, there is a major, further difference that lays in the way in which mother and son conceive their own way of thinking and conceiving the reality around them. If in the first chapter the reader had already had some glimpses, in the second and present chapter he extensively witnessed how the two main characters have an unbalanced, completely opposite perception of reality. The reader could simply jump into the conclusion by stating that Vashti is nothing but the daughter of her decade, completely obedient to the Machine and the cult that surrounds it, and Kuno is the compelling character that tried his best to make his mother question the reality around her for the first time in her whole life. However, by stating this, it would mean to avoid a possible, deeper analysis of the two characters. This time, I intend to untangle those questions that have been left unanswered until now. I aim at highlighting its hidden peculiarities that might have been overlooked for their apparent difference from the readers’ usual conceptions. I will demonstrate how some of them

share a striking similarity to some social structures that can be easily traced in the majority of western societies. For this reason, the theories and social studies of Foucault concerning power will be continued to be used as the starting point for the analysis that is going to be conducted in the following micro sections.

### **2.3.1: Power**

The first definition that needs to be clarified is *power*. I intend to start from this concept because not only it is undoubtedly a difficult concept to grasp *per se*, but most of all because its definition will be the *fil rouge* that ties together the next steps of my analysis.

The character of Vashti, never puts into discussion neither the reality surrounding her, nor the immense capacity of the Machine. Her demeanour sets her completely apart from her son Kuno, who, on the contrary, put his life in danger in order to prove how questionable the Machine actually is. Vashti just thinks that her reality is the one and only reality that effectively exists. This, as a consequence, excludes the possibility of alternative, existing realities, as she continuously insists to repeat to Kuno. To uphold her usual poor position, Vashti cites the Book (Forster 1909, 13). The fact that Vashti completely lacks of appropriate argumentative capacities is something that has already been proven and discussed numerous times in the previous chapter. However, there is a reason that lays much deeper than this affirmation: is it possible that Vashti knows just the reality in which she lives?

In line with other theorists, such as the Italian Gramsci and Althusser, Michel Foucault encloses the answer to this question with the concept of *power*. Due to his countless revisions, it is by no means easy to trace a clear and heterogeneous definition of power. Despite this initial challenge, power is an extremely eradicated concept in modern western society and in the hierarchies that presents. It is however undeniable that its eradication is at the source of its force: power is omnipresent, pervasive and stratified inside every social hierarchy and institution, which, as soon as they enact it, it produces a sense of protection, of wealth (Berthens 2008, 131).

A possible example that could help clarify the latter definition is the state of sheer anxiety experienced by Vashti, as she puts her foot outside her cell for the first time. The

woman is almost paralysed by the fear, and her body shivers as soon as she realizes she went out from her beloved cell. Being physically away from her usual environment from the very first time in her whole existence not only makes her feel completely lost, but this is not quite the exact point of the analysis. Moving away from her cell also means *moving away from the power of the Machine*, and thus moving away from her only *certainty*, and *source of security and protection*. Changing her environment would have meant changing her lifestyle as well, something that she never predicted. After all, she has never been given an alternative, or at least experience a different environment from her usual cell. What makes the readers' and Vashti's life so different is the fact that their lives have been shaped, and presumably transformed, by the ones that possesses power. In fact, power has a *transformative capacity*: the hierarchical position of the ones who possess a certain amount of power might have the ability to change, influence and modify the actions of the individuals below their sphere of action. This is also the reason why, judging from a contemporary times' perspective, it seems odd that even a mechanical object covers a governing role, similar to a leader in flesh and bones. However, I shall remind the type of society portrayed in *The Machine Stops*, in all its acclaimed and praised advancement. Therefore, the hypothesis of machines evolved enough to be fully capable of covering a leading role, just like a normal human being does, is not to be excluded.

After having attempted to give a plausible explanation, I will try to identify the source of power as well for the sake of a complete and exhaustive analysis. This might return useful for the following debates that might be raised subsequently.

In his article, Heller tries to highlight the origins of power and what makes its force so pervasive. He attempts to illustrate the strategies and tactics that higher hierarchies use and why therefore it is so impossible for the lower ranks of a given society, the ones subjected to power, to resist. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault denies that this new anatomy of power was not an invention, or a "sudden discovery". Power, quotes Heller from Foucault, can be intended rather than a "multiplicity of often minion processes" arisen from precise needs (Heller 1996, 5). As also Heller argues in his article, Foucault locates four, plausible reasons for its force:



- The first one – and by no means the most important one – can be located in the way in which the new arisen capitalistic system created a new method of surveillance based on the stratification of the social hierarchies
- This led to the creation of new forms of control. Similarly to what has been already discussed, this new way for controlling is indeed complex, and therefore, more subtle and versatile;
- The latter claim is what stays at the core of this new system’s true efficiency. This is the also main reason why Foucault was able to locate it in other social institutions, such as hospitals and schools.

Heller tries then to give his own definition of power. Power is not a form, as many readers could hastily conclude. Power is rather a “medium of changing” (Heller 1996, 7). Continuing with the terminology of Foucault, if power is everywhere, in every social sphere, power is present in those changings that rule or lessen the liberty of its subjects. A repression can be covered behind power, the ultimate goal of the executor behind it. However, as also Heller reflects, it is extremely complicated to determine not only what lays inside power, but Heller also points out that, due to the unbalance of social hierarchies, not everyone might have the same portion of power (Heller 1996, 10).

What Vashti knows might be then just a tiny portion, a version orchestrated by the upper parts in strict contact with the machine, as also Kuno tries to advert her (Forster 1909, 12), when he argues that the book might state the wrong. Vashti cannot reply to this affirmation, of course, but it can be hard to give a reply if for years, the book has been her only parameter with which the woman measured the reality around her. At this point, one can therefore wonder in which way power could be rendered tangible by the ones who obtain it. The answer to this question lays on the definition of two concepts which are bound to the previously clarified definition of power they are going to be explained in the section that is about to start.

### **2.3.2: Knowledge and discourse**

The Book of the Machine is apparently the sole object that has not yet been transformed into a technological device. The book, in fact, has been written and distributed by the Central Committee, and contains all what the inhabitants need to know

about their cells and their correct functioning. Page after page, the book offers the right answers to every possible question and doubt, without any digression. The book appears initially at the beginning of Vashti's journey during the first chapter, when she needs to consult the times of departure of the air-ship. However, the woman decides to bring her copy with her for the rest of her long journey. She constantly keeps it close to her, as if her whole life depended on that volume.

Even though the Book of the Machine is after all just a mere object that has been left out from the unceasing technological advancement, it can nonetheless serve me to better demonstrate how power circulates. A detail that must not be forgotten is that the Book has been written by the Central Committee – that is, the alleged highest rank inside the society of *The Machine Stops*. Their position might be the closest one to the Machine, and this could allow them to know how to operate the Machine, and presumably, know the secrets behind it as well.

The Book is then a tangible proof of the power of the Machine, and the element that keeps alive and binds together the spirit of the inhabitants with its technological massiveness. For this reason, Foucault locates two, other different forces that keep power and its effectiveness whole. Their unbreakable bound is the actual force of the power.

The first concept that needs to be clarified is *knowledge*. A possible definition of knowledge can be found in Miller's article, where he tries to illustrate the efforts of Foucault and his scholars to define what knowledge stands for. Using Foucault's terminology, knowledge enforces itself in three, different points:

- Knowledge is an *ensemble of profoundly structured claims and statements*;
- This ensemble of statements is presented in a *strictly objective way*. This is nothing but the perspective of a determined social group;
- Such perspective serves as a *series of functions* that will be applied to subsequent power relations, where a group enters into play. (Miller 1990, 4)

The Book of the Machine is then nothing but a clear example that would clarify this concept. Putting together the emerged pieces, three, different conclusions can be made. They will serve the readers to better understand the concept of knowledge:

- The Book is an ensemble of instructions – that are, simple facts, written down by the Central Committee about the correct use of the Machine under every

circumstance. Even though instructions are after all undebatable facts, I shall point out that those facts are written by the Committee, therefore from their own point of view;

- Being formed by instructions, the Book does not include an option for a possible debate or discussion. It is an objective exposition of what the Machine can do;
- Such instructions are collected, printed, and distributed by the Central Committee. It can also be implied that they are also in charge of evaluating which kind of information are allowed to be included in the Book, before being sent to all the other, lower social classes, including the one in which Vashti belongs.

Knowledge has in fact an intimate relationship with power: each member of a given society has access to power. The inhabitants let themselves be entangled with it, and internalise the knowledge they receive. The sole fact of having collected her book during her journey makes Vashti feel calmer and more collected outside her cell. In the very moment she would feel the urge to open it, she would be sure to find the answer to her question in no time.

Another element that further bounds those theories is the concept of *discourse*. Discourse is what ties together a cluster of statements, therefore of knowledge. In another work entitled *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault attempts to trace the complex and articulate mechanism behind this notion in both a theoretical level, and historical level. In his attempt to skim down the concepts that might be helpful for the ongoing analysis, *discourse* can be defined as a practice that can be detected through not only the theories and speculations, in form of teachings and practices. It is also present in other, more natural, more spontaneous elements, such as the words someone pronounces, and the gestures someone could unintentionally do (Foucault 1972, 201).

The knowledge that this discursive practice gives rise to was not embodied perhaps in theories and speculations, in forms of teachings and codes of practice, but also in processes, techniques, and even in the very gesture of the painter. (Foucault 1972, 201)

There lays the complexity of power, its extreme articulation. Not only is power exercised through unconfutable facts, similarly to what has been previously stated with knowledge. Power is present to the many other spontaneous and natural elements that everyone carries out within its quotidian. Those in fact are all those behaviours and norms,

such as the words used to describe a determined environment or fellow human being, or the actions someone carries out intentionally or unintentionally, that are so repeated and conveyed to the point of becoming a solid part a determined culture. As a consequence, *discourse* influences the way in which someone arguments, debates, or simply refer to something close to his reality.

Being an extremely complex and vast concept to cover, and in order to keep my analysis as clear as possible, I will introduce a new, separated section entirely dedicated to the next topic and its correlated discussion. I intend to focus my analysis especially on an aspect that emerged from Vashti and Kuno's dialogues throughout the short story.

### **2.3.3: Binary Oppositions**

One of the most deeply rooted way that always have helped humankind to interact with reality are *binary oppositions*, a system that has been the subjects of numerous debates among poststructuralists like Foucault. This refers to a pair of concepts that, even though they share a common root, their meaning put them in opposition with one another, determining consequently a certain way of intending. Binary oppositions have been theorised by structuralists as the staple way that humankind has always employed in order to know and interact with the reality around them (Berthens 2008, 60). The classical example is the opposition that follows:

- Light vs. Darkness

Although 'light' and 'darkness' come from the same domain ('light' and 'darkness' describe a state of presence or absence of light), their *difference*, their *opposition* however triggers further, inner meanings, that can be eventually employed in the common language as a way to describe or refer to other domains.

- Since it refers to its presence, *light* can assume the meaning of clarity, brightness, and therefore, positivity. 'Light' has a positive connotation;
- *Darkness*, on the other hand, refers to shadow, uncertainty. It describes the absence of a source of light. As a consequence, 'darkness' assumes a negative connotation.

The meaning underlined by the opposition *light/darkness*, however, can therefore depend on the point of view, of the concept that its user wants to convey, and which pair

wants to stress to the detriment of the other. This is not a case that, in his article, Peter Elbow states that this is exactly what made poststructuralists wonder about the dangers of binary oppositions, and their urge to overturn the path traced by structuralists. In every place in which binary oppositions are well consolidated, this also implies the existence of an overtly and covertly system of dominance and oppression, where the prevalence of one of the two parts allows it to gain a favourable position over the one that has been excluded (Elbow 1993, 2). However, the author asserts that this state of privilege cannot be avoided. Even if the reader would try to subvert or shift the focus to the alleged, unflavoured pole, the result will be the same. In fact, in the same article, Elbow states how impossible to escape from binary oppositions actually is. It is natural for humankind to divide every concept, especially the most difficult ones, into “clumps” that can be divided into “two piles, and then be confronted” (Elbow 1993, 4).

From what has been previously brought into light, it looks like that this aspect is still somehow employed by the inhabitants of *The Machine Stops*, despite their much-acclaimed advancement. They are not exempt from that well eradicated pattern. Moreover, it even appears to be stressed and empathised. This is extremely facilitated by the fact that each, basic notion or concept is rendered as a simple, general idea, therefore, a more understandable concept ready to be easily assimilated. This is quite noticeable, when Vashti tries to dissuade her son from visiting the surface of the Earth, because it is just “dust and mud”, and therefore, disadvantageous to visit.

Mother, you must come, if only to explain to me what is the harm of visiting the surface of the earth.

“No harm,” she replied, controlling herself. “But no advantage. The surface of the earth is only dust and mud, no advantage. The surface of the earth is only dust and mud, no life remains on it, and you would need a respirator, or the cold of the outer air would kill you. One dies immediately in the outer air.” (Forster 1909, 3)

At this point, her lack of argumentation comes in handy, and a first opposition emerges:

- *Earth* is nothing but a barren surface with unbreathable air, therefore dangerous and *inhospitable* for any human being;
- For opposition, the *underbelly* of the earth, where the cells are built together with the Machine, is life, security, and *civilization*, a term that is recurrent in Vashti’s speeches.

This opposition can charge of meaning the punishment that awaits Kuno – that is, homelessness. Deprived from their cells, and consequently, from their primary source of life, the condemned is exposed to the surface, therefore to an unfavourable environment that will surely and finally harm him. A further, critical pair can be traced:

- Earth becomes synonym of *death*, of an barren place that causes nothing but harm to whoever visits it;
- Cell becomes on the other hand synonym of *life*, of advanced and improved life;

The intrinsic meaning of ‘cell’ as a ‘source of life’ is reinforced by the Book of the Machine itself. The Book dictates what the Machine can do, therefore the cell/life sphere is even more charged of new meanings: the Machine is the one and only entity that knows how to make its inhabitants survive. This is the main reason behind the almost worship-like respect that the inhabitants have towards the Machine: it is thanks to the one and only Machine that their lives are made possible to the point of being improved.

“The civilization that had mistaken the functions of the system, and had used it for bringing people to things, instead of for bringing things to people. Those funny old days, when men went for change of air instead of changing the air in their rooms!” (Forster 1909, 5)

However, a chapter-long confrontation was enough to discard Vashti’s certainties. As it was also claimed by Elbow, this weakening was caused by switching and highlighting the characteristics of the other pole opposed to the pole in which she usually considered the appropriate one. Or at least, the pole in line with the one and only reality and perspective that she knows.

This is what Kuno exactly did. It is curious to point out how Kuno has his own way of conceiving ‘light’ and ‘darkness’. It is thanks to a binary opposition that he was able to discover where he could exit from the city, and thus evade from the Machine’s control:

- If the control of the Machine and its advancement is associated with a positive connotation, with bright, then its presence is marked by *light*;
- On the other hand, the zones untouched by its control are the darkest, unlighted ones, and therefore, closer to the surface of the Earth.

“I think I should have been content with this — it is not a little thing — but as I walked and brooded, it occurred to me that our cities had been built in the days when men still breathed the outer air, and that there had been ventilation shafts for the workmen.” (Forster 1909, 12)

The society of *The Machine Stops* is itself an example of a city based on binary oppositions, where social categorisation are still vivid and present up to those days. As also Sibleg reports in his article, western cities have always conserved such vision where the centre was considered the lively, privileged part of the city, in contrast with the marginalized outskirts, which were frequently linked to episodes of class or race marginalization (Sibleig 2001, 4). Remaining in line with the occurring analysis, this opposition however mirrors the attitude of the boy himself as well: as it has been already stated, his attitude is the direct cause of his fatal destiny. The question that opened this chapter comes again in handy: why Kuno is considered a criminal?

The boy is considered as a criminal the effects of such oppositions. Not only did the boy doubt the power of the Machine, but also he represents what the Machine does not want:

- A typical subject is a person who is physically and mentally *weak*, and therefore, more controllable;
- Kuno is physically and mentally *strong*, and therefore, dangerous. He could easily question the Machine, and search for the truth.

Kuno is an outcast, the object of social ostracization. He embodies the man before the great advancement. It is as if Kuno belongs to another, surpassed era, which can not by no means profit from the unstoppable race towards advancement. The Machine does not need thinkers. It needs to be commanded by people who can do nothing but submit, to the point of forgetting their humane values.

“There was not room for such a person in the world. And with her pity disgust mingled. She was ashamed at having borne such a son, she who had always been so respectable and so full of ideas. The very hair that disfigured his lip showed that he was reverting to some savage type. On atavism the Machine can have no mercy.” (Forster 1909, 14)

Therefore, the ultimate binary opposition that emerged during the previous sections of this work can be uncovered:

- In order to be capable of fulfilling the requests of its human subjects, the *Machine* assumed a *human-like* behaviour;
- The *human* inhabitants, such as Vashti, are nothing but *automats* among their cells. Despite their organic bodies, their mental faculties, together with their

individuality, are now profoundly limited, or even annihilated. Their only purpose is to switch a bunch of levers, just to fulfil their basic life needs.

This not only confirms what Pepperell predicted, but it also shows how unbalanced social hierarchies are. Power becomes the prerogative of a certain, dominant pole (in the case of *The Machine Stops*, power becomes the prerogative of machines) is still well eradicated and perpetuated, despite the much acclaimed technological advancement. Despite it always sparked a sense of positivity in collective imaginary, progress and advancement often disguise a negative meaning as well. Even though technology in general has felt the positive effects of such improvement, this does not mean that another, correlated counterpart has received the same treatment. In *The Machine Stops*, this sort occurred to humanity.

“Cannot you see, cannot all you lecturers see, that it is we that are dying, and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine? 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. The Machine develops — but not on our lines. The Machine proceeds — but not to our goal.” (Forster 1909, 13)



## Preliminary conclusion

In the second chapter of this work, I aimed at proving how power is still evidently eradicated in social hierarchies, and perpetuated as discriminations and oppressions to the detriment of something or someone considered “different” from an established norm. The focus and subject of my speculations for this chapter was to prove how such discriminations are still perpetuated even inside a self-proclaimed “advanced” society, as the one narrated in *The Machine Stops*.

For the complexity of the covered topics, I divided this chapter in few, yet interconnected sections. In this way, I attempted to maintain a specific *fil rouge*, which would bind together both the various sections, and the themes each one of them covered.

The main theme of this second chapter was inspired by the title of the second chapter of *The Machine Stops* itself – that is, *The Mending Apparatus*. The Mending Apparatus is nothing but a sort of fictional patrol in charge of verifying whether the Machine presents certain abnormalities, or defects. I believe that Forster was inspired by the verb “to mend”, which implies the act of repairing something from a damage. Being one of the few bodies that supposedly granted order and control within the Machine’s society, I wondered if they it could even “mend” somebody, in terms of behaviour.

As the narration proceeded, I sensed that the latter supposition was turning out to be the case I was looking for. The reason why The Mending Apparatus was after Kuno was because they were actually trying to “mend” his outrageous action against the Machine and its imposed order: the young boy was able to reach the surface of the Earth, infringing all the norms, and eluding any kind of control. Kuno’s unforgivable adventure is narrated in section 2.1. Besides simply summing up the major events occurred in *The Machine Stops*’ second chapter, I also wanted to set out the focus that will be reprised from the subsequent sections on: to what extent could Kuno be considered a criminal? Moreover, what type of crimes can be committed inside a posthuman society?

To support my analysis, I have employed Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. In section 2.2, I have shown how the western penal system changed from a system of excruciating physical tortures to a more articulated, “humane” system of control over the condemned during modern times. Despite the “humane” value, Foucault was sceptical on

the matter. In his *Discipline and Punish*, he demonstrated how this way of controlling over people regarded as criminals, or dangerous for social order, was even more pervasive and psychologically involving, on the contrary of what happened with medieval tortures. Moreover, Foucault's speculations were not limited to a mere penal context. In fact, he reckoned that the same pervasive control was even applied in many other social contexts and hierarchies.

Without losing track of *The Machine Stops*' unfolding, I wanted to compare certain details, which emerged throughout the second chapter of *The Machine Stops* with Foucault's theories regarding power, knowledge and discourse. For their difficulty, I decided to divide section 2.3 into three smaller sections. In doing so, I contextualized as best as I could each aspect and its social implications in its own, same-titled section.

Through these three smaller sections, I have shown how power can be channelled both in social hierarchies, and in other natural and closer to everyday elements, such as language.

The linguistic aspect that I chose to focus on were binary oppositions. The reason behind my choice was because not only binary oppositions are the staple tool with which humankind has always employed to familiarize the reality in which it lived, but also because they are used to label what, or who, is different, and potentially dangerous for themselves and for their fellows. This is the reason why binary oppositions have been always used throughout history as a way to legitimize acts of oppression or marginalization to the detriment of the subjects considered "different", "diverse".

The discussion of binary oppositions served to bring into light an often-overlooked consideration: if humanity has not been able to overcome its old – and of course, harmful – heritages to the detriment of other "different" individuals belonging to its same species, how it will behave towards the other species that coexist in its same environment?

**CHAPTER 3**  
**STOPPING THE MACHINE**  
**Viruses, death and the unthinkable**

“Oh, to-morrow — some fool will start the Machine again, to-morrow.”  
“Never,” said Kuno, “never. Humanity has learnt its lesson.” (Forster 1909, 25)

Throughout the previous chapters of this work, I attempted to envision how humankind’s condition could possibly change on the eve of a society dominated by machines. In the first chapter, I have introduced the society of *The Machine Stops*, with all its inhabitants, and of course its powerful and mysteriously pervasive Machine. On one hand, humankind has been able to enhance a non-mechanical system with the capacity of fulfilling and facilitating determined actions, whether it is a basic life need or a desire for entertainment. On the other hand, the inner system of the Machine has been advanced to a certain point in which it is even able to rule and govern a society, dictating its rules over its human creators. The latter implication has been extensively discussed in the second chapter, where language, *Weltanschauung*, and social hierarchies have been analyzed in order to detect the presence of similarities with the distribution of power that can be located in western societies.

This analysis however has sometimes been difficult to carry out. While reading, I was urged to gather even the smallest detail encountered, and pay attention to the so called unsaid. This included the gestures and the emotional sphere of the characters I have encountered. Whether for mere stylistic choice or even maintaining the overall mystical sensation that pervades the whole short story, I found that Forster has left his readers with some unresolved questions. First, he never mentioned who exactly created the Machine. Undoubtedly, Kuno asserted that the Machine has been created by “great men” (Forster 1909, 2), though it is not clear for which specific reason. This question is somehow linked to another question: what brought humankind to live under the surface of the Earth? In addition, what are the possible causes that made it difficult to live up there?

Unfortunately, the only detail that can be detected is located at the end of the second chapter, when it was mentioned that an event, referred as the “great rebellion” (Forster 1909, 17), has took place allegedly not long before the advent of the Machine. What is clear is that this event shed death and destruction, and the remains of the ones

who once took part are piled outside the vomitories placed above the surface of the Earth, as if they were a reminder for the dissenters who venture outside of the city, eluding the control of the Machine. Additional details are nowhere to be found. This leaves however free terrain for further interpretations and speculations.

The year of publication of *The Machine Stops* is 1909. If this date could be placed in a timeline, 1909 is relatively close to the advent of the First World War. The surface of the Earth would be the scenario of deadly, worldwide conflicts. This could have been worsened by the introduction of new, deadly weapons, such as chemical gasses in battlefields. This, together with the inadequate healthcare offered to wounded soldiers, has probably given rise to the proliferation of numerous, dangerous viruses. Considering the entity of such event, such hypothesis might lay at the core of the alleged origin of the Machine: an infallible and inalterable system, powerful enough to ensure the fulfillment of every, possible need. The Machine offers moreover a safe shelter for a population endangered by the damages of war and fatal sicknesses – that are, the staple sources of what has always scared humanity since ever: death.

Death is part of those events that are so crucial for the life of every, existing human being that is, and always has been, impossible to overcome. No matter how unalterable an organism is, whether an organic or inorganic entity is involved. They both share the same, unavoidable destiny.

This is in fact the destiny that Forster's Machine encountered, during the third, and last chapter, of his short story. Time has passed since Kuno and Vashti met in person, but the life tenor has significantly and inexplicably dropped: the Machine, the herald of power, is deteriorating. Nobody can do anything to prevent its unceasing decay, and nobody seems to remember how to fix its system, leaving the other inhabitants staring helplessly at the crumbling walls right before their eyes.

Sickness and death will be the main themes of the third and last chapter of this work. I aim at addressing as clearly as possible the reasons behind the fear and sense of impotence of humanity towards the few changes that was never able to overcome.

### 3.1: Dangerous viruses and fragile bodies

Something that caught my attention while I was reading *Discipline and Punish* was the scenario with which Foucault chose to start his chapter on *Panopticism*. The choice of Foucault falls in an unspecified French town of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which was put into lockdown due to a sudden outbreak of plague. The measures that have been applied in order to minimize the dangers of contagion are listed as it follows:

- The communications with outer cities, including transport and exchange of means, were suspended. The inner space of the city was put into lockdown, and then divided into smaller portions, in order to maximize the further operations and monitoring of the population;
- The citizens are forced to remain inside their own homes. Every key that gives access to the various houses were kept by the guardians designated for the surveillance of a specific area of the city;
- Any unnecessary movements are a violation of the state of quarantine, and thus, considered as a crime;
- To each guardian was given a register with all the needed information about the names and surnames of each citizen residing in their area of control. Additional information about the citizens' sex, age, and address were allowed to be listed down, together with a blank space for further annotations for the health state of each citizen (if they look sick, if there are some irregularities, or if they require special cares);
- When needed, the guard had the duty to call out the citizens residing inside their houses. In order to demonstrate their adequacy to safety measures, the inhabitants had to make themselves visible, in order to be identified by the guards;
- Due to the limitedness of exchanges with the outer areas, the means of subsistence were rationalized. The needed ratios of food was provided by a system of threads and hooks through which a wooden basket was made gliding from house to house;

- The sanitization operations were executed regularly: the various houses' interiors, together with all their furniture, will be purified and sanitized with all the needed precautions.

Even though those measures were dictated by the specific need of preventing the spread of plague, it is curious to acknowledge that Foucault included them among the various ways of controlling a population. For Foucault, quarantine – and especially quarantine – is the perfect state that allows a kind of hierarchical control to be enacted. The various guards in charge of surveillance can freely execute and enact their central role as guardians of social security over the inhabitants under their area of control.

The enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead. (Foucault 1977, 216)

Sickness becomes the object of power. The plague, the infection that is known to have scarred the history of Europe, and the contagious sickness *par excellence*, is now used as a tool for social order. Plague must be controlled, avoided at all costs in an attempt to marginalize its unstoppable spread. This is when power enters into play, and quarantine introduced.

The plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion: that of the disease, which is transmitted when bodies are mixed together; that of the evil, which is increased when fear and death overcome prohibitions. (Foucault 1977, 216)

The fact of being forced to stay at home at all costs is indeed an unbearable state, yet necessary for the prevention of public sanity and order. This, however, comes with a great cost: the identity of the citizens, their private sphere, become the object of control, a tool to test their obedience to the imposed rules. Their bodies are locked away from their daily mansions, their usual places, and last but not least, their close relatives. Depriving all those elements belonging to the personal and decision-making sphere of each individual, the citizens are nothing but fragile bodies grasping for protection from the spreading plague. Power, at this point, makes its way until it reaches their bodies, and their personal, intimate dimension of their houses.

Two ways of exercising power over men, of controlling their relations, of separating out their dangerous mixtures. (Foucault 1977, 217)

Plague, asserts Foucault, is a form concealing its correlated meanings “of politics and medicine” (Foucault 1977, 217). In this case, power is channeled through a rhetoric against the contagion, which now assumes a value of impurity, disorder, and clearly, death. This, together with the original fear of being fatally infected, triggers a new fear – that is, the fear and inherent search for something, or someone, responsible for the transmission of the virus. Power therefore enforces its control:

- On one hand, the state of quarantine continues in order to guarantee the required social order in crucial times of precarious health conditions;
- On the other hand, the identification of possible plague incubators must be guaranteed as well in order to identify whatever, or whoever, endangers the state of alert. The suspected subjects will be consequently punished and excluded from the society.

The creation of new sets of binary oppositions will further reinforce this precarious condition. Binary oppositions have already been extensively discussed in the last section of the previous chapter as a tool to label the reality in which humankind lives. The quarantined society is not exempt from the creation of new pairs. Foucault suggests the following set of oppositions, such as:

- *Sane* (a healthy individual or object that does not present any traces of a possible infection) / *Mad* (an infectious individual, a virus incubator);
- *Harmless* (a sanitized object or individual, and therefore, safe to interact) / *Dangerous* (an object or individual that has probably been exposed to the infected environment. The interaction with the contaminated object or individual might be harmful, and therefore, dangerous);
- *Normal* (a properly sanitized and quarantined object and individual) / *Abnormal* (an improperly sanitized object or individual, or presumably a virus incubator). (Foucault 1977, 218).

This new way of branding is the result of “differential distribution” dictated by the need to determine what, or who can endanger the state of quarantine, and thus, spread the virus and its subverting and fatal uncontrollability.

Generally speaking, all the authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding of differential distributions. (Foucault 1977, 218)

The constant division between the normal and the abnormal, to which every individual is subjected, bring us back to our time, the existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal brings into play the disciplinary mechanisms to which the fear of the plague gave rise. (Foucault 1977, 218)

A society in which the control over all its citizens, whether they are suspected of carrying the virus or not, can be considered, for Foucault, as almost a “political utopia”, enacted to control, execute and determine new forms of control towards living beings. The same discourse is resumed in another work written by Rosi Braidotti. In *Il Postumano*, Braidotti puts the focus of her attentions and inquiries to the core of the problem, to what brought a certain, given society to be put into quarantine – that is, the virus responsible for the plague.

Just like the many other deadly sicknesses that for years have shed an incredible number of victims all around the world, causing pandemics on a global scale, the plague is actually caused by a virus. Rosi Braidotti refers to viruses as an “inhuman variable” (Braidotti 2014, 121). A virus is indeed a microscopic, undetectable element, yet its trail of deadly infections and sicknesses is well detectable in times of pandemics. Its constitution is far from what humankind usually conceives of “life form”, yet its existence is made possible through a series of transmissions from nature to animals, and then, from animals to human beings. I want to remind briefly that the plague that stroke Europe in the mid-1300s was caused by a type of infectious rats. The transmission from nature and animals, and clearly, from animal to human beings creates a bridge between various, organic beings, leading consequently to an organic contamination. This symbiotic relationship can be summed up as it follows:

- On one hand, humanity understands that its body is fragile, and corruptible. This triggers a state of insecurity, and vulnerability; Humanity realizes that its central position can be usurped by an unthinkable, organic menace;
- This is linked to the realization of being set apart from the much-idealized concept of a life untouched by death and suffering by humankind.

Directly quoting Balsamo, Braidotti shows how the idea of an uncontrollable virus is in fact a well-eradicated fear among humankind. This is how Balsamo describes this condition:

A subsequent uncontrollable, tangible fear, derived from the idea of death and annihilation towards such uncontrollable menaces. (Braidotti 2014, 121)



This fear, dictated by the need of the preservation of both the self and the same individuals belonging to the same species, urged to find a new way of preserving the body from what might cause unrepairable harm, and deprive it from its capability of affirming its power, its control and rules over things. Health becomes object of speculation and interest on a national scale, and promoted as fundamental right for every, existing human being. However, Braidotti points out those such fundamental rights are dictated and promoted from a humankind's perspective *over* the environment in which it is located. The rhetoric man-over-nature is in fact the same rhetoric which still widely employed by western societies.

In spite of its frequency, this does not prevent the readers from dismantling its consolidation, and to reveal the paradox on which it relies. I will list the main implications, so that even the readers will be able to notice them:

- This rhetoric is undoubtedly promoted as a way to raise awareness among humankind in order to sensitize their role as living beings surrounded by nature;
- Braidotti cites Protevi to denounce the seemingly unavoidable tendency with which influential political spheres fall into applying the old, yet still recurrent pattern of a “dominating anthropomorphic subject over the environment”, perpetuating therefore another hierarchy. (Braidotti 2014, 120)

The moral discourse of defending the right of well-being is another relic of a specist discourse: the message that conveys is the usual attempt to preserve the anthropocentric position occupied by humankind only. Braidotti gives her own motivation on the matter: she argues that this defense of the anthropocentric role is the direct consequence of the lack from human beings to regard themselves as the direct responsables of their actions (Braidotti 2014, 120), which eventually resulted in environmental disasters, including facilitating the spread of viruses and epidemics among the global population.

The public discourse has become at the same time moralist regarding the inhuman forces of the environment, as well as hypocrite in perpetuating the anthropocentric arrogance. (Braidotti 2014, 120)

As Rosi Braidotti did in her book, I think I could allow myself to make some remarks on the matter at this point as well: as a human being myself, I think that

humankind must understand that we are, after all, a species living in an environment with other life forms. I do not doubt their diversity, but there is a vital detail at stake: they are beings that live *with* and *as* us humans, and just like us, they reproduce, search for food, and last but not least, they exist on this planet, no matter how they carry out such needs. As humans, we must not forget that no one *owns* Earth. We *share* Earth and its landscapes, and our actions and choices we undertake, whether they would result in a major or minor impact, have nevertheless a certain impact not only in the environment in which we live, but also in the vital, yet precarious equilibrium that keeps together all the existent species living in this planet.

My latter reflection is the starting point with which I want to proceed with the ongoing discussion. In the fourth chapter of her *Staying with the Trouble – Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Donna Haraway underlines how in reality the first true population that has been traced in the early days of the Earth is actually bacteria and viruses. Despite their nature, their spread allowed our planet to be properly shaped, creating that long chain of biological purposes that permitted the environment with which we are all familiar to evolve, and guarantee the adequate life conditions to the other, developing species, including human beings. Haraway suggests thereafter a reformed question:

What are the effects of bioculturally, biotechnically, biopolitically, historically situated people (not Man) relative to, and combined with, the effects of other species assemblages and other biotic/abiotic forces? (Haraway 2016, 116)

The answer to this question might somehow intermingle with the points suggested by Rosi Braidotti, which I previously used to uphold my position. Human beings often forget a fact that would help them reform the way in which they conceive what surrounds them: no specimen act alone. This ulteriorly confirms the point on which Braidotti insisted: Haraway's claim would help humanity to rethink about itself not only in terms of responsibility towards the "assemblages" of "other species", but also in terms of coexistence with other species. Every variation inside this assemblage, whether bacteria or human beings cause it, has a determined impact that might have a positive or negative outcome that might eventually alter not only the state of the species that provoked the variation first handily, but also the state of the other, coexisting species as well. It is curious to notice how Haraway even includes genocides among the possible environmental changes. Besides from being a fully-fledged act of cruelty perpetuated by

human beings to the detriment of other, similar human beings, genocides can also be interpreted as a species that endangers another species. This claim would help humanity to finally distrust from those moral claims promoted by western societies. Stripped out of their rhetoric made of promises for modernity and evolution, they are after all claims engulfed with specism and die hard hierarchies founded on mere, anthropocentric parameters. There are other, organic species – like, in fact, viruses – that act outside the anthropocentric conception. Those forces and their mechanisms therefore assume an “unthinkable”, “menacing” value because they are difficult to fully understand from a mere anthropocentric standpoint.

In his article, in fact, Arundhati Roy uses viruses as the perfect example of a force whose action is far from all those conceptions and parameters we, as human beings, consider universal and unquestionable. Roy asserts that viruses “search for *proliferation*”, “not *profit*” (Roy 2020, 2), like a man-made capitalistic system. Viruses move, shed death and countless victims, they elude every kind of control created by humankind. Viruses fuel fear, not control. With that said, I shall now trace two, main reasons why humankind fears viruses:

- Viruses are dangerous for humankind’s health, causing sicknesses and infections all over its body. Humankind realizes that their bodies are vulnerable both in physical, and in psychological terms. A microscopic, unexpected variable is powerful enough to dethrone humankind from its central position, and from which it can administrate its control;
- Moreover, viruses are dangerous for its community. Viruses put into question all the social constructs that have been created and perpetrated by humanity.

Therefore, the true nature of all those fake, specist claims disguised as modernity, and, most importantly, binary oppositions is exposed: they are all tools employed by a determined, dominant species to justify, and sometimes promote, its oppressions to the detriment of another, coexisting species, which is usually identified as “inferior”. Consequently, this will fuel a further hierarchical system based on discriminations and marginalization of the subordinate pole.

Vandana Shiva considers the typical, recurrent binary oppositions promoted by western society as the direct responsible of the “bankrupt” of their “ethics and

philosophy” (Shiva 2003, 2). The importance to preserve the balance between humankind and environment is a recurrent topic and concern in many other Shiva’s works. In fact, there is a vital, yet often surpassed reason that lays underneath. This balance is extremely delicate: the wealth of a good part of world nations depends on natural resources. Any kind of alteration of such resources, whether it has a natural or artificial cause – such as air pollution – damages nonetheless the greater, delicate balance of our planet. Polluting or infecting a natural resource might be fatal for the ones that benefit from it. This is a fact that has been always overlooked and underestimated by the self-proclaimed advanced western societies and their capitalistic conception. Diversity and variables are the obstacle to their unceasing yearning for wealth and well-being, and consequently, for the advancement of their society and the individuals who live in. In this regard, Shiva shows how such conception conceals further discriminations that would be useful to pursue with my discussion:

- Shiva illustrates a *humane* discrimination, where the diverse is not able to produce anything that could benefit the capitalistic standards of western societies. Shiva locates in this discrimination all those gender and social oppressions that are made to the detriment of women and third world populations;
- On the other hand, Shiva considers a *natural* marginalisation. If the environment can produce a natural resource considerable profitable enough for the economic and social advancement, it is a profitable resource. On the contrary, the same resource is wasted, polluted, and therefore, destroyed, no matter if it was useful for other specimen. The alteration of the equilibrium that made the existence of that source possible is the primary cause of the alleged proliferation of fatal diseases, of viruses. (Shiva 2014, 1)

With that stated, one might raise a spontaneous, concerned question: what kind of scenario would await humankind, if its avoidance towards the diverse would be ulteriorly stressed, in an attempt to preserve its anthropocentric position?

In her same book, Rosi Braidotti finds the answer to this question in science improvement, in the technological advancement that lays in the hands of humankind since

its discovery. Thanks to her answer, the readers can finally understand what lays behind the lust for advancement that always resides in the ambition of humankind. Employing its incorruptibility, humanity create certain technological devices powerful enough to allow it to reach its final dream: to overcome the obstacles that set it away from perfection, from absolute control. Technology is the ideal shelter from sickness, imperfections, and from death. Machines do not allow variables.

Again, these convictions on the future of a technological life of the body go with the palpable fear for death and the annihilation provoked by uncontrollable and spectacular physical menaces: antibiotics-resistant viruses, spontaneous contamination, flesh-eating bacteria. (Braidotti 2014, 121)

It is easier to envision machines whose sole existence is to serve the ambitions of their human creators than a world in which each species, from the organic to the inorganic ones, coexist, without altering their delicate balance, with all their evolutions, proliferations, extinctions, in order to create the “kinship” among species promoted by Donna Haraway.

The Anthropocene marks severe discontinuities; what comes after will not be like what came before. I think our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge. (Haraway 2016, 117)

### **3.2: Posthumanism and the unpredictable**

It is curious to notice how, despite its relatively far date of publication, *The Machine Stops* portrays what has been discussed in the last section of this chapter. This shows how the lust for the improvement of human race has never been limited to a romanticized sphere – as it happened in the early Sci-Fi literary works. Despite the hyperbole employed for the sake of narration, I find undeniable to admit that *The Machine Stops* presents countless similitudes with the reality in which I am currently living and writing this chapter. Of course, I am not just referring to the elements I have encountered throughout my analysis – such as the system for remote communication, extremely similar to the application I normally use for videoconferences. I intend to highlight what emerged from the points that have been raised by the reflections and concerns of the previous sections. Even though it has not been made clear when exactly *The Machine Stops* is taking place, the readers can envision however where its human advancement has arrived, and what has been changed for the best or the worse during its unceasing run.

The first detail I want to start with is how drastically has changed the relationship between humans and environment. Earth and its environment are part of a negative rhetoric. The readers might remember the binary opposition raised at the end of the second chapter, in which I concluded that Earth is source of death, and its underbelly of life. Earth is depicted as nothing but a bare land, which causes fatal harm to whoever visits it. Its emptiness, its unbreathable air does not leave space for neither individual life, nor for its proliferation as civilisation. It can be noticed that everything that could remind of nature is nowhere to be found inside the society of the Machine, there are neither plants, nor windows that face towards a certain landscape. The sole element that could have a reminiscence with the outer world is the air pumped inside the cells. However, air became a perfectly controllable and allegedly purified element that can be breathed without causing any problem. There is no need to underline how extremely distant this society looks like from a more contemporary way of intending a generic society.

However, when all the hopes for a similar perspective seem to be gone, there enters Kuno into play. Kuno and his words will restore what seemed to be a memory of a forgotten environment, in all its unique variability. Earth is not a dead place. On the contrary, there is still life, in every field wetted by the dew, in every star that forms a constellation, and in every kaleidoscopic dawns. In opposition to his mother, who is easily scared even by a single, intruding ray of faint light, Kuno is not afraid of Earth and its surface. He embraces its unpredictable essence, its unknown, yet surprising variables, and the same variables that constitute the uniqueness that shaped its land, and that forged its beauty.

After all, I shall quote again Vandana Shiva's opinions on the matter, Kuno finds himself in harmony with the environment in all its variables, because he himself embodies the variable element within his society, and as a consequence, with his intransigent mother. Vashti is the daughter of her time, mechanical and predictable, just like the food she receives, the entertainment she requires, the air she breathes. Her journey through the Earth was fearful because she was not able to predict it, and she avoids her son as soon as she realizes he *is* the difference. She turns away from him in the same way she did with the ray of light intruding from the window of the air-ship: as if she was pressing one of

her buttons, in hope that this is enough to prevent her from the side effects of an unpredictable variable.

This reflection can be applied to his sentence as well: his punishment, his ostracization from his society represents the ultimate fear for the different that lurks in the minds of the other inhabitants. The Machine does not allow such variations under its control. The confinement of the different, the fear of change – could they possibly be the alleged reason behind the origins of the Machine?

Considering what emerged from the previous analyses, this hypothesis seems strikingly plausible. On the verge of human extinction from a global conflict that caused more deaths than victories, with a population decimated by the scarce, polluted natural resources, or the spread of a pandemic, humanity built its own trench: an unbreakable, undefeatable Machine that grants order, health and life to anyone under its immense power. Man created a never-before-witnessed device that could finally fulfil its atavistic desire: to be finally free from the shackles of destruction, of decay. The path to advancement was stretching right before their eyes. However, humanity tends to forget a small, yet fundamental detail: quoting again Donna Haraway's words, no species act alone.

Even in the advanced society it constructed, humanity perfectly adapted itself, and with adaptation, it comes habit. Humanity in fact fell into its old habits, made of hierarchies, of binary oppositions, of new, disguised ways of discrimination and abuse, always in the detriment of the ones not in line with the favourable standards. Humanity is alone to the mechanical loneliness of their cells, and alone in its desperation as it stands in front of an unconsidered destiny that was until then out of their reach.

This is exactly what happened at the very end of *The Machine Stops*. The Machine, the herald of advancement, the tangible object of human advancement, is collapsing right before the helpless eyes of its inhabitants. The reason behind its fall is unspecified, but I want to remind the readers with what Kuno said during the first chapter:

Men made it, do not forget that. Great men, but men. The Machine is much, but it is not everything. (Forster 1909, 2)

Humans, in all their faulty perfection, had the capacity of creating a device that works perfectly, indeed, but, like everything, even the life of this device had to come to

an end, bringing its creators inside its extinction, a *memento mori* delivered by an unorganic, man-made entity.

Helplessness, confusion, darkness are the sensations that pervades the very last lines of *The Machine Stops*. The inhabitants are a swarm of decaying flesh exhaling their final breathes, and witnessing the object of their certainties crumbling down, like its walls. The city has now become their open tomb, which faces onto the glimmering, terse sky – the last image before their death.

“They wept for humanity, those two, not for themselves. They could not bear that this should be the end. Ere silence was completed their hearts were opened, and they knew what had been important on the earth. Man, the flower of all flesh, the noblest of all creatures visible, man who had once made god in his image, and had mirrored his strength on the constellations, beautiful naked man was dying, strangled in the garments that he had woven. Truly the garment had seemed heavenly at first, and heavenly it had been so long as it was a garment and no more, man could shed it at will and live by the essence that is his soul, and the essence, equally divine, that is his body.” (Forster 1909, 24-25)



## Preliminary conclusion

In the third and last chapter of this work, I wanted to prove how vital for the environment the coexistence of different specimen, whether they are human beings, or other “inhuman” organisms, including viruses and machines, actually is, despite the somewhat troublesome, or even fatal, initial difference is.

On a more conceptual level, this chapter leaves much more space to introspection and to occasional personal reflections rather than the two previous chapters. Moreover, due to the closeness of the themes to contemporary reality, I have decided to give more space to an in-depth discussion of such recent topics, instead of dedicating more space to the textual analysis and contextualization of *The Machine Stops*, as I usually did in the other previous chapters.

In section 3.1, I wanted to highlight how even an invisible virus can endanger all these heritages inherent in western civilizations, such as social hierarchies, and anthropocentric mindsets. I wanted to stress on two, important values I reckoned in viruses’ nature. They are listed as it follows:

- *Variability* – that is, something susceptible of environmentally spontaneous, or human provoked, alterations;
- *Unpredictability* – that is, humankind’s capacity of not fully predict such alterations. Viruses’ nature is dictated by the primordial need for survival.

An alleged reason behind humankind’s lust for creating increasingly powerful machines could be interpreted therefore as a defense towards what it cannot predict or extend its control to, and most of all, a defense towards what it has always feared of – that is, death, and the subsequent extinction of its race.

In fact, only in section 3.2 I resumed with the unfolding of *The Machine Stops*, and its final chapter – that is, *The Homeless*. Through its intensity, I have demonstrated how even the most advanced society, like the one narrated in *The Machine Stops*, can be crushed and reduced into debris by an unknown, unpredictable variable. Humanity is reminded of how fragile and temporary its body actually is, no matter how many machines it creates, and clearly no matter how efficient and undefeatable such machines are supposed to be.

The retrospective tone of this chapter was after all intentional: its function is to both conclude this work, but at the same time, to offer a way of rethinking at the reality in which we, as human beings, live. Even though each specimen presents its own, intrinsic differences and variables, their existence would not have been made possible, and neither perhaps the existence of our planet.

Albeit their apparent, initial difference, each specimen has its own potential to offer, and thus create a transversal union in which everyone can equally benefit from it, avoiding the risk of a prevailing, self-proclaimed “superior” species over another.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has dealt with various facets of posthumanism, especially in regards with the relationship between humans and machines. In the three chapters, I have drawn the conclusions that follow:

- In the first chapter, I wanted to bring into light what would happen if the differential gap that kept human beings and machines separated would be culminated, to the point of disappearing completely. Through the analysis of both Vashti's and the Machine's characters, readers have been able to see how liminal the boundaries of anthropocentrism actually are, and to what extent it can be subverted. In the case of *The Machine Stops*, the gap became a symbiosis. The weak flesh has allowed the Machine to fill and empower its limits. In return, the Machine promised the future aspired by the flesh, as long as it was subjected to its new, mechanical rules. Besides *The Machine Stops*, I employed two other texts in order to motivate further my statements – that are, Pepperell's *The Posthuman Manifesto* for Vashti's and her environment's contextualization, and Michel Foucault's *Panopticism* inside his *Discipline and Punish* for the Machine's one. Even though such future might sound promisingly advanced, it is still hard to tell with certainty which one of the two poles will be the rightful beneficiary of such advancement;
- The second chapter starts from the latter reflection. This time, through the analysis of Kuno's character, I wanted to highlight how “advancement” does not always imply a positive connotation. Even in an alleged posthuman society, humankind could potentially perpetuate that entire heritage made of social constructs and discriminations towards the weakest, least-favourable individuals inside a given society. This time, I choose to focus on certain concepts discussed by Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish* – that are, power, knowledge and discourse. I wanted to demonstrate how power is still carried out within a society, no matter how

advanced a society claims to be. For this reason, I wanted to reflect upon another linguistic aspect, which was an object of interest for Foucault's studies as well – that are, binary oppositions. Since power for Foucault must be actualized in order to be viable, language is the most suitable and by no means natural tool for this purpose;

- The third and last chapter was rather different, if we consider the other, preceding chapters. Despite its rather retrospective tone, it stresses the importance of a rather current theme. Although the apparent, initial diversities that a certain living being could present, whether it is harmful or harmless, whether it is organic or inorganic, its presence itself is important to allow the environment in which we all live to exist, and continue to shape the unique environment that exists in planet Earth only.

In the early months of 2020, a never-before seen pandemic started to shed terror all over the entire globe. The newly identified virus belonged to a branch of other, similar viruses that affected the respiratory system, causing tremendous high fevers, general weakening, and many other severe lung complications. However, what made this virus even more dangerous was both the fact that it was never adequately identified since its first outbreak in 2020, and the subsequent lack of a cure or vaccine that could stop its seemingly unstoppable spread. The name became the synonym of contagion, sickness, and death: COVID-19. In no time, COVID-19 put in their knee a vast number of nations, pleading to be spared from its invisible sickle. On the verge of a global pandemic, numerous nations had no choice: countless cities were put into lockdown, limiting inner and outer movements of means and people. Since then, the world ceased its run, stopped by an unidentified, microorganism.

Inside their domestic sphere, humanity was reminded of its actual fragility, its temporariness on this planet. However, humanity has been given a great opportunity that, since then, seemed to be overlooked, forgotten: now that it is set apart from the usual ordinariness, made of work, meetings and recreation, humanity could rethink of the position it occupies within the environment of the planet it lives in.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has forced humankind to live in a situation that no one ever experienced, and to adapt to it in no time. Going out meant playing the Russian roulette with the now contaminated city. Safety preventions were obligated, but they just served to minimize the risk of being infected among normal citizens. During those times of uncertainty, even the staple certainties that until then seemed unquestionable, they now waver under the menace of an invisible force.

It is not a case if I chose to conclude this work about intermingling organisms with the variable that subverted the plans I made, the certainties I believed in. Albeit it was a difficult period, I think that COVID-19 left me, and many other people, a lesson to learn. Surely it is not the same lesson that marked the tragic end of *The Machine Stops*, but it was a lesson that left a mark both in our way with which we interact among us as human beings, and last but not least, among the other species that exist with and thanks to us. In those few lines that are going to mark the end of this work as well, I intend to share my final thoughts on the matter.

To discover what COVID-19 has firstly subverted, I shall start from the ordinary. Whether it is hectic or quiet, an ordinary life is that ensemble of places, moments and familiar faces that each of us experiences, or comes across on a daily basis. Of course, habit can fall into a negative connotation, but on the other hand, habit has also the goal of founding certainty, and therefore to create a safe space in order to bond with people and things.

With lockdown, a great part of such habits was impracticable due to the strict measures. Being forced to remain inside the same place, whether it was a home or another place, with the sole contact with one's partner or family, or in the worst cases, with oneself, was a situation that caught humanity unprepared. This was enough to make us think about how this ensemble of faces and places is important not only for us and our life ambitions, but also for the constitution of the identities that forge us as individuals, in all our peculiarities, and privileges.

The ones who spent the entire quarantine all alone could agree with me that even the simplest concept of a united family is a privilege itself. This claim would prove how wrong and falsely founded all those models of "standard" families promoted by western

societies are. Unity, respect, and love are something that go beyond the attempts of promoting the usual standard disguised as the “ideal” conception for growing a family based on solid principles. The truth is, this is just another tool employed to justify the perpetuation of another, phallogocentric hierarchy to the detriment of women and all these claims of property that subjected their bodies for their “diversity”. The union of a family depends on bondings dictated by emotions, and not for a mere intersection between different, morphological sexes.

If we start to understand this simple, yet important concept, we can rethink at all those discriminations that lurk among humanity – race, gender and sexual discriminations – we can finally rethink at our position within our environment as a species coexisting with other, different specimen. Creating kinship means creating a transversal relationship with other kins, taking into consideration their potentials and faults in the perspective to shape an environment that guarantees the correct evolution to each specimen. Whether they are organic or inorganic, each specimen must benefit from the same advancement, because each one of them can contribute to it. However, there is still a long way before the dream of Donna Haraway could be possibly fulfilled.

The focus of my attention has been technology and how it could be possibly applied on humankind’s life. It turns out that lockdown was the perfect terrain to witness to what extent technology has entered not only in our professional spheres, but also in our private lives. It kept us busy, so that we could had the chance to feel less the heaviness of the endlessness of the days during lockdown. Technology, however, did much more than entertaining us between streaming services to a social network page. It was thanks to it if many people were allowed to keep in touch with their careers, both in a general occupation within a certain work field, and in an educational field, although it is unlikely that technology will never substitute the circumstances in which humanity carries out their mansions.

It was nonetheless interesting to see how, in this case, humanity and technology have been able to create the adequate compromises to simulate at least what they normally carried out before lockdown. Moreover, I think this has helped many employers to increase awareness about the opportunity to make technology both affordable and

accessible, especially for all these people who require special cares on a daily basis, or who simply cannot economically afford for a suitable, working device. Technology could finally offer the adequate support for those often marginalized people by a condition they never asked for, and create the suitable circumstances for including them, and of course, offering them the same, equal opportunities as the ones offered to a person without any, particular health condition.

With that stated, I shall draw the final conclusion that follows: enhancing the preexisting conditions of each species without the risk of altering their nature is possible and desirable. I am not questioning the fact that it is a self-fulfilling task. However, I think that each one of us is responsible to try, and make a step back in order to reflect to the points I raised up until there, the points that each one of us might have experienced during its life. We must not forget that our efforts, our attempts to change our way of thinking at all those things we consider consolidated are actually done for the sake of maintaining that balance, somewhat ungovernable, somewhat fearful. However, we must admit that it is actually the same balance that makes life possible on this planet since its early days, with all its unpredictable, yet unique variables.

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