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ENGL108D

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For my revision, I rewrote the introductory paragraph to give a better overview of the paper and added a brief overview of the short story. I reworded a lot of awkward phrasing which I realized weren't really conveying my point. I expanded on a lot of points which you pointed out were lacking and cleared up a lot of ambiguous language. However, I kept the sentences about eugenics in the fourth paragraph because I wanted to talk about how the story relates to the social/political atmosphere of the Industrial Revolution. In revising the essay, I realized that I needed to have another person look over my essay and beforehand with a more critical eye. This is partially because I didn't have a full draft when I came into class on Friday, but I also realize that a fellow student, especially one unlikely to be an English major, is unlikely to see all the mistakes I made. Next time I will visit the writing center and get them to look over my essay before handing it in.

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ENGL108D

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The Machine Stops: A Commentary on Blind Progress

In contrast to other works we studied in class, E. M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* provides a bleak outlook on technology. With the ability to communicate instantly with others around the world, citizens who spend their entire lives in a small cell and the blind adherence to a device with all the answers, it is almost impossible not to notice the similarities to today and incredible that the story was written over a century ago. Forster's dystopian society of the future is one where there is no need to work and citizens spend their entire lives in the same room due to everything being taken care of by the titular Machine. While men built the Machine in the first place, it has shaped the new norms of this society as well, leading to a lack of personal contact and a disregard for the environment. Eventually, society's blind faith in the Machine leads them to disregard a system failure, leading to the collapse of society. The Machine is a metaphor for progress and industrialization. Through it, the story critiques the dominant culture of the time in regards to society's complete reliance on the Machine, society's complete submission to its unemotional algorithms, and industrialization's penchant for completely obliterating individuality

Throughout the story we get a sense of how much the characters rely on technology. McLuhan believes "[media is] so persuasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part ... untouched" (McLuhan qtd in Flew and Smith 71) and the Machine certainly fits that description. In the

book, it is stated that “ever since her birth [Vashti] had been surrounded by the steady hum [of the Machine]” and she has come to associate silence with death. From the moment a child is born, when they are taken and raised by the Machine, to the day they die when they ask for euthanasia, the people of this society are enveloped by this technology. One particular technology the Machine provides is similar to video chatting today. It was probably inspired by the telegram and telephone invented just before the turn of the century. While video chatting allows for Vashti and Kuno to communicate with each other from opposite sides of the world, it seems as if almost all communication is done using video chat. Vashti is repulsed by personal contact, which “had become obsolete, owing to the Machine” (Forster). One passenger cries out when Vashti accidentally touches them to steady herself and her act is referred to as “barbaric.” (Forster) While video chatting was probably made to facilitate communication, it has evolved into hindering it. Vashti notes that “the Machine did not transmit nuances of expression. It only gave a general idea of people - an idea that was good enough for all practical purposes” (Forster). Human expression and touch are very nuanced and essential to forming bonds with others. It seems ludicrous to never touch someone. The story emphasizes Vashti and Kuno kissing, touching perhaps for the first time, when the Machine collapses. This touching moment shows that despite technology’s dominance over the society, it’s members are still human and something as simple as embracing is natural and necessary. This society’s revulsion to human touch comes from their complete reliance on the Machine for communication which just drives them further from human touch, creating a feedback loop. Communication is just one example of many where society relies exclusively on the Machine. From healthcare, to entertainment, to education, everything is provided by the Machine and it ultimately robs society of meaningful human contact.

Because of humankind's reliance on the Machine, they have grown complacent and automatically accepts its decisions as the correct one. We see this complacency early on. Vashti is uncomfortable with her large bed and would like a smaller one but is unwilling to complain because she knows the Machine would refuse its requests. Later, when she complains about the music, the committee stonewalls her. An uncomfortable bed is inconsequential in the long run but later, the Machine's Mending Apparatus breaks. The men and women who believe the Machine to be infallible are incapable to critical thought, despite always exchanging ideas. Immediately after laughing and dismissing the idea of the Machine breaking, Vashti turns to her friend and complains about the Machine's inability to fix her music. One lecturer notes that although it is broken, "Mending Apparatus has treated us so well in the past that we all sympathize with it, and will wait patiently for its recovery. In its own good time it will resume its duties." They do not consider what mends the mending apparatus. Only Kuno and a few other detractors reject the Machine as omnipotent and most of them are punished with homelessness. Society's deference to this dominant technology feels like a religion. "The Book of the Machine" (Forster) seems to have first been written as a guide or manual to life as "in it were instructions against every possible contingency" (Forster). When she wakes up, Vashti performs the "ritual" (Forster) of picking the Book up, mumbling "O Machine" (Forster), and kissing it three times. It seems like prayer, and homelessness seems like excommunication. Even near the end, when Vashti knows something has gone terribly wrong, she takes comfort in the book, thinking "while there was the Book there was security." The society believes themselves above religion but "in practice all ... worshipped [the Machine] as divine." Later in the book, they even acknowledge it and reinstitute religion as worship of the Machine. It is startling how easily Vashti accepts it after vehemently denying it earlier to Kuno. Forster uses religious terms such as "sinful" to describe

Kuno and “believer” to describe the rest of the citizens in this scene. By first denying god, and then supplanting him with the Machine, a man-made object, Forster paints this society as blasphemous in a time when being irreligious was practically unheard of. He reminds the reader that man-made objects are not perfect. He argues that increased complexity or inclusion of concepts unknown to the user does not necessarily mean infallibility and that blind faith in technology is dangerous.

Society’s members in the world ruled by a machine are pruned to be the same because an algorithm will always produce the same result. “People were almost exactly alike all over the world” (Forster) and at birth, babies are taken from their mothers and destroyed if judged to be too muscular. While the concept of destroying subpar humans is horrifying to us today, to the turn of the century mind, it was not as foreign. The eugenics movement was at its height at the time, but its proponents probably did not consider what if another’s definition of fit was not the same as their own. Forster challenges the idea of an efficient society as an ideal one. The Machine will not provide Vashti with another smaller bed because all beds are the same size for maximum efficiency. Throughout the story, he uses the metaphor of society as a beehive with the Machine as the queen and its nearly identical subjects as its mindless worker drones. The rooms are “like the cell of a bee” and the city is “broken like a honeycomb” at the end. It is a poignant take on industrialization’s need for optimization and its production of identical goods. By reducing a society to a beehive through progress, Foster suggests this is what the reader’s society may become in what many in his time would see as inferior or less evolved creatures. Interestingly, progress has stalled. Vashti seems to lack purpose in life, despite how much she values her time. All society does is exchange ideas, but they never seem to be implemented, and

they reject any “contrary to the spirit of the age” (Forster). The story suggests diversity in thought, appearance and occupation is essential to society.

In conclusion, Forster paints a dystopian society out of one which by many metrics at the time, would be a utopia. He poses the question of whether progress and technology are good but ultimately, my takeaway from the story is to be wary of, rather than dismiss technology completely. McLuhan believed that technology shaped society while Williams believed society shapes technology. I am a firm believer of both. Forster reminds us throughout, that “Men made [the Machine], do not forget that.” Careless design could have unintended consequences on a product’s users but somebody had to design it in the first place. I find it hard to believe the Machine developed eugenics, communism and industrialization on its own, and Foster takes these ideas to and cautions against their logical extremes in this story.

Works Cited

Flew, Terry, and Richard Keith Smith. *New Media: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press

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Forster, E. M. *The Machine Stops*. 1909, archive.ncsa.illinois.edu/prajlich/forster.html.

