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The Point of It
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This chapter is centrally concerned with two stories by E. M. Forster. One, ‘The Machine Stops’, has long been considered a classic of dystopian fiction. For George Kateb in *Utopia and Its Enemies* (1963), Forster’s story, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), and Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1924) taken together give vent to ‘almost every fear that utopian ends arouse’ (Kateb, 1963, p. 20); Tom Moylan draws the title of his 2000 study of dystopias, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, from the last phrase of Forster’s tale. ‘The Point of It’, published two years later, has not been discussed in relation to problems of utopia, but I will be arguing here that it offers key insights into the suite of values animating ‘The Machine Stops’ and, by extension, a number of anxieties informing an important strain of anti-utopian thinking. I will go on to suggest that another line of modernist writing furnishes an effective riposte to such anxieties, and that this riposte requires us to reconsider some prevailing assumptions about the relations between quotidian existence under capitalism and utopian imagining.

First published in 1909 and subsequently included in Forster’s second collection of short fiction, *The Eternal Moment and Other Stories* (1928), ‘The Machine Stops’ centres on a woman named Vashti, who, like the other inhabitants of the future Forster conjures, lives in a single room in a vast honeycomb beneath the surface of the earth. Like her fellows, Vashti rarely leaves that room, since within it all needs are met at the touch of a button. An encompassing entity known as ‘the Machine’ provides food, drink, light, ventilation, and entertainment; a button somehow ‘produce[s] literature’ (Forster, 1909, p. 94); one may hear whatever music one desires at any time; and there is no need to go visiting other people physically, since one’s thousands of friends communicate with one through ‘speaking-tubes’ (p. 94) and ‘blue optic
plate[s]’ (p. 116). One can even listen to a friend give a lecture, which appears a common pastime. Indeed lectures about art – such as Vashti’s own lecture on ‘Music during the Australian period’ (p. 91) – are often preferred to the thing itself. Near the beginning of the story, Vashti turns off the ‘isolation-switch’ that had briefly blocked most inputs to her room, at which

all the accumulations of the last three minutes burst upon her. The room was filled with the noise of bells, and speaking-tubes. What was the new food like? Could she recommend it? Had she had any ideas lately? Might one tell her one’s own ideas? Would she make an engagement to visit the public nurseries at an early date? – say this day month.

To most of these questions she replied with irritation – a growing quality in that accelerated age. (p. 94)

No other work of fiction anticipates quite so uncannily the ceaseless visitation by others, through networks extending into one’s domestic space, that defines existence in the age of e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, and Skype.

The first crisis of the tale is brought on by the conversation Vashti had isolated herself in order to hold, an exchange with her son Kuno via optic plate. Kuno, we learn, had been a little odd even in the days of his infancy at the public nurseries (a venue at which, as the preceding quotation suggests, people do sometimes meet – though it seems unlikely that this happens often, since Vashti has not seen a ‘fellow creature […] face to face for months’ [p. 98] or entered the tunnel that leads from her room to a public conveyance ‘since her last child was born’ [p. 97]). Whatever the rationale for the public nurseries, lasting parental-filial bonding is not encouraged: ‘the book of the Machine’, the single printed object in Vashti’s room, states that parents’ duties ‘cease at the moment of birth’, and, though Vashti fondly remembers teaching Kuno the basic life skill of using ‘stops and buttons’ (p. 108), the Machine at some point ‘assigned him a room on the other side of the earth’, under what had once been England (p. 97). Vashti’s room is beneath Sumatra.

In the initial conversation, Kuno tells Vashti that he wishes to walk upon the surface of the earth, which Vashti finds shocking and ‘contrary to the spirit of the age’ (p. 94), and that he wants her to visit him in person. Vashti resists this request for some days and through several exchanges, but eventually – for ‘she must brave the journey if he desired