The Future of Family in Dystopia:
E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* and Liam Brown's *Skin*

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Abstract

This article explores the intersection of technology, dystopian settings and family dynamics through a comparative analysis of E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1909) and Liam Brown's *Skin* (2019). It investigates how both texts portray technology as a double-edged force, simultaneously enabling connection and accelerating alienation, especially within familial relationships. Forster's early 20th-century vision anticipates the psychological and emotional costs of mechanized life, while Brown's contemporary novel reflects the deep impact of digital overdependence during prolonged lockdowns. The study considers how the media, particularly digital screens, mediates communication and exacerbates isolation, turning technology into both a lifeline and a mechanism of control. Special attention is given to the roles of parenthood, especially motherhood, as a site of resistance and emotional endurance. Through the characters of Vashti, Angela, Kuno, Amber and Charlie, the article maps the emotional toll of confinement and surveillance, while also addressing issues of mental health, body image and identity in technologically saturated environments. By comparing narratives from distinct historical contexts, this work highlights the ongoing relevance of dystopian literature in interrogating our digital present and imagining future societal trajectories. The conclusion emphasizes the critical need for human connection amidst growing technological dominance.

Key Words – Dystopian Literature; Body Studies; technology; family; alienation

1. Introduction

A woman sits alone in a dimly lit room, her face illuminated only by the glow of a computer screen. She's on a video call with her daughter, discussing everyday matters. Outside the window, however, the world is far from ordinary. A deadly virus rages on and the once bustling streets lie silent. Is this a scene from a dystopian novel, or a snapshot of our recent reality? In moments like these, the boundary between fiction and life begins to blur, prompting urgent questions about the role of technology in shaping our most intimate relationships.

In this article, I argue that *The Machine Stops* by E.M. Forster and *Skin* by Liam Brown serve as compelling case studies for examining the ambivalent nature of technology within dystopian contexts. These texts highlight how technology acts simultaneously as a connector and a divider, sustaining familial bonds while also eroding them.

The deliberate pairing of these two texts, separated by over a century, reflects a methodological choice that goes beyond mere thematic resonance. *The Machine Stops* emerges from the threshold of industrial modernity (1909), a moment when mechanical automation began to reshape social structures and familial configurations. Forster's prophetic vision articulates early twentieth-century anxieties about technological dependency well before such concerns became mainstream cultural phenomena. *Skin*, written in 2019 and published shortly before the global outbreak of COVID-19, captures the apex of digital saturation and transforms what Forster imagined as dystopia into lived experience. This temporal distance is not merely chronological but epistemological: it allows us to trace the evolution of techno-cultural anxieties from speculative fiction to documented social reality. Where Forster anticipates the psychological costs of mechanization, Brown records the emotional toll of digital oversaturation. The comparison thus illuminates not only recurrent motifs in dystopian imagination but also the prophetic function of science fiction as a mode of prefiguring social transformation. By examining these texts in tandem, we can observe how fundamental concerns about technology, embodiment and human connection recur across radically different historical moments, revealing both continuity and transformation in our relationship with technological mediation. This diachronic approach reveals how each historical moment produces distinct forms of technological anxiety. Forster writes during the height of industrial optimism and yet anticipates its psychological toll. Brown, by contrast, writes from within an era of digital ubiquity, exposing its isolating and disembodying effects. The selection of these two specific texts, over other dystopian works from their respective periods such as Zamyatin's *We* (1924) or contemporary pandemic fiction, is strategic: both authors centre the domestic sphere as the primary locus of technological disruption, making family dynamics not merely a narrative backdrop but a focal point of dystopian critique.

Dystopian literature has long served as a mirror to collective anxieties, especially during periods of technological upheaval (Baccolini and Moylan 2003: 2). *The Machine Stops* (1909) articulates early twentieth-century fears about mechanization and its potential to displace human connection and dismantle family structures. Kuno and his mother Vashti exemplify the tension between technological conformity and the yearning for authentic human experience. Conversely, Liam Brown's *Skin* (2019), written just before the COVID-19 pandemic, captures contemporary concerns about digital dependence and psychological vulnerability. Set in a near-future shaped by viral lockdowns, the novel portrays Angela, a mother navigating five years of confinement

with her children Amber and Charlie, struggling to protect them while enduring emotional breakdowns and moral collapse within the family.

While *The Machine Stops* is traditionally categorized as a canonical adult dystopia, its philosophical themes about technological control and human alienation resonate across generations (Moylan 2000: 120). *Skin*, by contrast, bridges the Young Adult and adult fiction divide. Through Amber's coming-of-age story and Angela's maternal anguish, Brown explores the multifaceted toll of isolation, an experience that mirrors recent real-world events. Both texts gain further meaning when situated within their respective historical and cultural contexts. Forster's story reflects the early 20th-century crisis of modernity, where Victorian ideals of family stability were destabilized by industrial growth and technological innovation (Gorham 1982: 30). Scholars like Raymond Williams have shown how communication technologies reshape not only economies but also social values and interpersonal bonds (Williams 1973: 4).

Meanwhile, *Skin* offers a 21st-century reflection on the risks of digital surveillance and emotional desensitization in the wake of global crisis. Its resonance with post-pandemic fears is undeniable. Technology becomes both saviour and jailer, a lifeline and a weapon. By comparing these two narratives, I seek to demonstrate how dystopian literature remains an essential lens for understanding evolving concepts of family, identity and resistance in technologically mediated societies.

2. Technology and Family in Dystopian Literature

In *The Machine Stops*, Forster imagines a future in which humanity has become wholly dependent on an all-powerful Machine that not only sustains life but dictates the conditions of existence. Society has surrendered its autonomy to technology and individuals live in isolation, their every need met by automated systems. The family unit, as traditionally conceived, has dissolved. Vashti, emblematic of this new order, engages with her son Kuno exclusively through the Machine's communication systems. For her, physical proximity is not only unnecessary but undesirable. This technological mediation creates an emotional chasm between them, reflecting the dehumanizing effects of a society governed by technological control. «The Machine is much, but it is not everything» (Forster 2015 [1909]: 4), Kuno remarks, expressing his growing discontent with a world devoid of authentic human connection.

Similarly, in *Skin*, the omnipresence of digital screens and the isolating impact of a deadly virus strain familial bonds. Angela, Colin and their children, Amber and Charlie, navigate a world where technology is both a necessity and a barrier. Initially, Angela attempts to preserve a sense of normalcy, but prolonged isolation erodes her mental well-being. The very devices that offer the family access to the outside world also become tools of surveillance and alienation. Colin's increasing detachment and moral decline reflect the psychological toll of digital confinement. His transition from supportive father to apathetic, ethically compromised figure parallels broader concerns about the fragility of familial cohesion in technologically saturated environments. Both narratives illustrate how dystopian fiction uses the dissolution or transformation of the family unit to critique societal dependence on technology. As Baccolini notes, dystopias often open «a space of contestation and opposition for those groups – women and other ex-centric subjects whose subject position is not contemplated by hegemonic discourse – for whom subject status has yet to be» (Baccolini 2004: 520). Consequently, the family becomes a key site

where technological dominance exerts control, rendering intimacy precarious and resistance difficult. Moreover, Brown's depiction of technological saturation aligns with Sherry Turkle's argument that digital communication, while designed to connect, often results in emotional disconnection: «We bend to the inanimate with new solicitude. We fear the risks and disappointments of relationships with our fellow humans. We expect more from technology and less from each other» (Turkle 2011: 16). Angela and Colin's deteriorating relationship, mediated by screens and digital routines, exemplifies how familial intimacy is eroded when technology becomes the primary medium of interaction.

2.1. Media Influence and the Role of Screens

In both *The Machine Stops* and *Skin*, emotional distance within the family is intensified by the pervasive presence of media. Screens not only facilitate communication but simultaneously deepen isolation, altering the dynamics of human relationships. In Forster's novella, the «round plate» (Forster 2015 [1909]: 3), a prophetic version of the modern screen, enables continuous visual communication but renders physical presence obsolete. This early 20th-century vision of mediated interaction creates an illusion of closeness while fostering profound emotional detachment. The act of seeing becomes mechanical, devoid of tactile or embodied intimacy.

This tension is central to dystopian critique: the very technologies that promise connection often undermine the possibility of authentic relational experience. As media theorist Neil Postman warned, technologies of representation alter not only the content of communication but also its form and psychological depth. He argued that «the weight assigned to any form of truth-telling is a function of the influence of media of communication», highlighting how media transitions from print to television, for instance, reconfigure not just how we express truth, but how we recognize and believe in it (Postman 1985: 58). Forster's anticipation of video conferencing decades before its invention suggests an acute awareness of how media reshape interpersonal boundaries.

Brown's *Skin* extends this concern into the digital age. In the novel, screens become not only tools of survival during a deadly pandemic, but also agents of surveillance, fragmentation and disconnection. The family's dependence on digital interfaces to maintain contact with the outside world begins as a lifeline but gradually becomes a source of emotional claustrophobia. Angela's perception of her children – particularly her growing discomfort with Charlie – is filtered through the lens of mediated observation. The more technology mediates their lives, the more alienated they become from one another. This dual role of media – as both savior and oppressor – echoes what Jean describes as the *simulacrum* of reality: an image or representation that replaces and ultimately erases the real (Baudrillard 1994: 6). In both texts, the screen mediates not just communication, but reality itself, displacing genuine human presence with a manufactured substitute. Dystopian fiction here serves as a critical lens to interrogate the seductive power of digital mediation and its implications for familial and emotional life.

2.2. Media Saturation, Control and the Psychological Toll of Lockdowns

In *The Machine Stops* and *Skin*, the omnipresence of screens collapses the boundary between public and private life, turning homes into extensions of the surveillance state. The beehive-like cells in Forster's story find a disturbing parallel in Brown's digitally confined households, where the internet functions both as a lifeline and a mechanism of

social control. In both narratives, controlled interiors contrast with the chaotic and dangerous outside world. Angela's attempts to maintain emotional stability for her children uncannily prefigure the lived experiences of many parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, when lockdowns intensified digital dependence and disrupted family dynamics. In *Skin*, this overreliance manifests in Angela's declining mental health and her children's increasing detachment. These fictional elements mirror empirical findings: a 2020 study published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* reported a marked increase in anxiety and depression among children and adolescents during lockdown, exacerbated by loneliness and excessive screen time (Loades et al. 2020: 1218). Similarly, an article published in *American Psychologist* emphasized the rise in parental stress and family conflict, highlighting how technological mediation failed to compensate for the absence of physical support systems and how the pandemic imposed new pressures on the parent - child dyad, such as negotiating shared spaces and adapting to altered routines under extended confinement (Prime et al. 2020: 634).

Charlie's emotional withdrawal and Angela's sense of helplessness echo this reality. While technology initially appears as a coping mechanism, it ultimately exposes the fragility of emotional and relational resilience. The family's reliance on digital devices becomes a closed circuit of surveillance and alienation, deepening rather than alleviating psychological strain. Through these parallels, Brown and Forster not only explore technological control but also critique the modern illusion that digital connectivity equates to emotional closeness. Both narratives reveal that the saturation of media in intimate spaces may reinforce vulnerability rather than alleviate it. The emotional toll, particularly on children and caregivers, reinforces dystopian fiction's function as a psychological barometer of societal stress.

2.3. Formal Mediation and Narrative Architecture

The technological anxieties explored in both novels permeate not only their thematic content but also their formal structures, demonstrating how dystopian concerns shape literary expression itself. Forster employs an omniscient narrator whose prose adopts the mechanical precision it critiques: sentences are economical, functional and geometrically structured, mirroring the Machine's operational logic. The dialogues between Vashti and Kuno occurs exclusively through mediated communication, forcing readers to experience the emotional distance that technological intervention creates. When Kuno insists to see her and says «I want to see you not through the Machine. I want to speak to you not through the wearisome Machine» (Forster 2015 [1909]: 4) the request crystallises the impossibility of authentic contact. Even his visible sorrow is blunted, for «the Machine did not transmit nuances of expression» (Forster 2015 [1909]: 5). Forster's formal restraint here enacts alienation: intimacy is reduced to spectral images on a plate, the prose clipped and functional, the narration itself mirroring the sterility of mechanical mediation. The short story's compressed form, brief, self-contained and formally restrained, contrasts with the vastness of its thematic implications, creating a tension between narrative scope and structural limitation that reflects the characters' own confinement.

Brown employs markedly different formal strategies that reflect digital-age interiority and maternal consciousness. *Skin* utilizes Angela's first-person narration as she recounts the family's experience of a fictional viral outbreak to her unborn child, whom she addresses as "Egg". This intimate, confessional storytelling becomes an act of resistance

against digital mediation, privileging embodied, generational communication over technological interfaces. Angela's voice demonstrates such profound intimacy with her children that she can imagine and articulate their emotions. Her longing is captured in a moment of reflection on Amber: «I wish I could throw my arms around her. Just once. To mop her sweaty brow and crush her body to mine like I did when she was a baby. To hold her and say, "Hey, it's okay. Things are going to get better. Everything will be all right in the end"» (Brown 2019: 14) . The prose's affective repetition collapses temporal distance between past and present, refusing abstraction and insisting on embodied care. This builds a deep psychological landscape that contrasts sharply with Forster's external, mechanized world. These contrasting formal approaches, Forster's omniscient detachment versus Brown's maternal interiority, reveal how each author's relationship to technology manifests in the very architecture of their storytelling.

3. Technology as the New Parent in *The Machine Stops* and the Effects of Lockdown in *Skin*

In E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops*, the Machine has effectively supplanted the traditional role of the father figure. Vashti, who is wholly devoted to the Machine, regards it as the ultimate authority and source of sustenance. Her interactions with her son Kuno are mediated entirely through the Machine, which not only isolates them physically but also creates a profound emotional distance. Since Vashti's relationship with Kuno is strained by her unwavering faith in the Machine, she perceives his desire to explore the world above ground not as natural curiosity, but as a dangerous and rebellious act. «You are beginning to worship the Machine» (Forster 2015 [1909]: 16), Kuno tells Vashti, recognizing that her devotion has eclipsed her ability to connect with him on a human level. This highlights the central conflict in their relationship: Kuno's yearning for direct, embodied experience versus Vashti's fear of anything beyond the Machine's control.

Kuno's eventual rebellion against the Machine and his determination to see the real world are acts of defiance against a system that has stripped him of his humanity and denied him a healthy relationship with his mother. In the story's final moments, Kuno's desperate attempt to reach out to Vashti, even as the Machine collapses, underscores the enduring human need for intimacy: «I am dying - but we touch, we talk, not through the Machine» (Forster 2015 [1909]: 36). This fleeting moment of physical contact represents a symbolic reclamation of their relationship, however brief. It becomes a poignant reminder of the irreplaceable value of direct, human connection, even in a world ruled by technology. Donna Haraway's theory of the cyborg helps illuminate Vashti's character: in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway argues that technological systems dissolve binaries between human and machine, public and private and even mother and caregiver. «The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour» (Haraway 2010 [1991]: 308). Vashti, sustained by the Machine, has relinquished maternal intimacy and emotional responsiveness, embodying a post-human model of parenthood defined by obedience, not nurture.

Skin presents a similarly complex portrayal of a family's psychological struggle during prolonged isolation. Angela's maternal challenges are intensified by her relationship with Jasper, a rare figure immune to the virus and living beyond societal confinement. Jasper offers her emotional solace, but their connection destabilizes her already fragile family, especially her deteriorating bond with her husband, Colin.

Colin's transformation is central to the novel's critique of modern masculinity. Initially presented as rational and caring, Colin becomes emotionally distant and morally unmoored. His descent into apathy and psychological collapse under the pressures of isolation exemplifies what R.W. Connell describes as the fragility of hegemonic masculinity. As Connell argues, hegemonic masculinity is not a stable essence but a «currently accepted strategy» whose dominance is eroded when «conditions for the defence of patriarchy change» (Connell 2020 [1995]: 77). Colin's unraveling thus reveals the dependence of his masculine identity on external structures of stability and authority. Events such as the family's trip to the countryside – where they encounter a house with dead occupants – symbolize this internal collapse. Angela's maternal instincts drive her to secure food in a moment of desperation, showing fierce protectiveness. In contrast, Colin reacts violently, killing an intruder without hesitation. This marks a pivotal shift in his psychological state. He retreats into virtual reality and AI, distancing himself from his family, culminating in an attempted sexual assault on Angela at a VR launch event, a horrific manifestation of his moral collapse. This moment solidifies Angela's realization of his monstrous transformation. It also underscores the novel's gender critique: Colin embodies a toxic masculinity unable to adapt to crises without turning to dominance or destruction. Angela, by contrast, navigates motherhood with emotional complexity, resilience and reflective care, making her a deeply sympathetic figure.

Angela's nuanced portrayal is further enriched by feminist scholarship on maternal identity. As Kaplan argues, mother-daughter relationships in literature often reflect broader cultural anxieties and transitions (Kaplan 1992: 8) and Angela's growing awareness of her daughter's struggles reveals a deep maternal sensitivity. Angela's ability to balance protection with emotional attunement, despite external pressures, marks her as a figure of hope amid the dystopian chaos.

3.1. Charlie's Body and the Societal Pressures in Dystopia

Charlie embodies the tensions of dystopian confinement through his dramatic physical transformation during prolonged isolation. His increasing obesity, emphasized in the novel, transcends a personal struggle to reflect the psychological and emotional burdens imposed by an environment of technological overdependence and emotional neglect. Susan Bordo's assertion that the body is a «text of culture» (Bordo 1993: 149), contextualizes Charlie's body not as an individual failing but as a response to the systemic and cultural conditions of his dystopian reality. His reliance on digital technology, simultaneously an escape and a prison, exacerbates his detachment from lived experience and familial intimacy, aligning with Bordo's theory that the body materializes the unspoken conflicts of modern existence.

Charlie's grotesque physicality mirrors his moral degradation, with his growing body symbolizing his descent into cruelty and manipulation. Angela describes him as having «mounds of pale, gelatinous flesh» and grinning in a way that accentuates his grotesqueness, adding «several chins to the thick roll around his neck» (Brown 2019: 263). Angela's portrayal reveals the tension between maternal instinct and growing emotional detachment from her son. Her feelings oscillate between exhaustion and profound love, but her relationship with Charlie deteriorates as he withdraws further into technology. She frequently encounters a wall of silence when trying to connect with him and she grows suspicious when he appears cheerful, admitting: «a shiver ran down my spine» (Brown 2019: 26-27) upon hearing him laugh during a video call. Her repulsion is

evident in her descriptions of Charlie as overweight, sedentary and perpetually attached to his computer. The emotional chasm deepens further as she confesses her conflicted maternal feelings:

> I'm not saying I don't love Charlie. It's just that I don't like him very much. […] To imply we have a biological obligation to like a future sex offender or serial killer just because we accidentally fucked them into existence is plain crazy (Brown 2019: 110).

This disturbing ambivalence highlights the fragility of unconditional parental love under dystopian pressures, where technology displaces emotional labour and surveillance replaces care. Angela suspects Charlie of cruelty but also struggles with the ethical weight of maternal responsibility. Her fear that Charlie might become a perpetrator of violence underscores the anxiety surrounding masculinity, alienation and digital toxicity.

The situation escalates when Charlie publicly humiliates Amber by posting her intimate poem online, further alienating him from Angela. His body, once merely a symptom of overindulgence, now signifies internalized corruption. Kathleen LeBesco argues that fatness in American cultural narratives often becomes a marker of moral failure and social deviance, especially when set against ideals of productivity and self-discipline (LeBesco 2004: 56). Charlie's bloated body, described in Angela's anxious narration, becomes a critique of both techno-capitalist confinement and a culture that moralizes embodiment.

Donna Haraway's reflections on embodiment offer a compelling lens through which to interpret Charlie's physicality as socially constructed rather than biologically fixed. As she writes «Bodies, then, are not born; they are made» (Haraway 2010 [1991]: 418) through social processes and regulatory discourses. In this context, Charlie's body reflects not merely neglect, but the insidious workings of a digital surveillance state that constructs and disciplines subjects through constant exposure and disconnection. Charlie's transformation into a Big Brother figure - controlling, manipulative and emotionally vacant - embodies the very dystopian horror that *Skin* seeks to critique. His actions, such as tormenting Amber and undermining Angela's authority, are symptomatic of a broader societal failure. As Margaret McLaren notes, the body in these narratives often becomes «the practical locus of social control» (McLaren 2002: 95). Charlie's body, then, is not only a site of shame or revulsion, but also a mirror of the confined, overexposed and estranged world he inhabits.

Ultimately, Charlie's character illustrates how dystopian fiction leverages the body as a symbolic terrain, where power, trauma and resistance collide. His obesity, cruelty and emotional disengagement become interconnected symptoms of a social order built on technological dependence and emotional deprivation.

4. Conclusion

The Machine Stops by E.M. Forster and *Skin* by Liam Brown explore how technology, dystopia and family dynamics intersect, illustrating how oppressive environments deeply affect familial bonds, particularly those between parents and children. Both works portray societies in which the dominance of technology disrupts or destroys traditional family structures, but they diverge in tone and resolution, one suggesting collapse, the other gesturing toward resilience and renewal. In *The Machine Stops*, Forster envisions a world where mechanization has supplanted human intimacy, symbolized by Vashti's

dependency on the Machine and her alienated relationship with Kuno. The absence of a biological father figure, replaced by the Machine's impersonal authority, emphasizes the erosion of interpersonal connection in a society driven by technological control. Kuno's rebellion and his desperate attempt to connect with his mother in the final moments highlight the story's emotional core: the irreplaceable value of unmediated, human contact. Forster critiques this techno-utopian vision, warning against the risks of surrendering human agency to mechanized systems and although Vashti briefly questions the Machine's infallibility, the story ends on a note of ambiguous hope.

Skin, in contrast, reflects contemporary family struggles in a digitally saturated and crisis-driven world. Colin, initially a caring father, becomes morally compromised and emotionally absent, exemplifying the fragility of patriarchal roles under social stress. Angela, as a maternal figure, fights to preserve her family's unity amid five years of isolation. Her character, torn between grief, resilience and hope, evolves into a figure of quiet resistance and care. The revelation that Angela has been narrating her experiences to her unborn child, Egg, offers a powerful metaphor for futurity, continuity and the maternal impulse to imagine a world beyond collapse. Angela's connection to Egg symbolically aligns with what Raffaella Baccolini calls the «critical dystopia» (Baccolini 2004: 520), a space where the bleakness of the present is counterbalanced by hope for social transformation. Her storytelling becomes an act of reclamation, enabling her to preserve emotional truth and project meaning into the future. In contrast to Forster's mechanical annihilation, Brown offers a redemptive arc, one rooted in the maternal, the embodied and the intergenerational.

Both narratives emphasize the profound effects of technology on human relationships and identity. By situating their critiques within the domestic and familial spheres, *The Machine Stops* and *Skin* demonstrate how dystopia is not only about societal collapse, but also about the intimate, psychological toll exerted on individuals and families. In doing so, they challenge readers to reflect not just on the dangers of technological overreach, but also on the enduring human need for connection, care and hope.

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