



What happens when the machine stops?

## Description

Watching the graceful slow motion [crash of the Airlander 10](#) at Cardington Airfield on the news this week prompted me to think about what happens when the machine fails. In the case of an airship it might drift, or fall gently to the earth, even if it lands with a thump.



The classic science fiction short story by E.M. Forster, *The Machine Stops* (1909) presents a common anxiety about what it is to depend on technology, and delivers the narrative through a dialogue between a mother and her son (Kuno) in a future where everything is controlled by “the machine.”

People lounge in armchairs in their hexagonal hive-like pods listening to lectures and having *ideas*. All is synthetic. Air travellers close the blinds on their airship lest they catch a glimpse of the alps and sunlight. Kuno’s mother says, “I dislike seeing the horrible brown earth, and the sea, and the stars when it is dark. I get no ideas in an air-ship. What kind of ideas can the air give you?”

Without giving too much away, the story ends with an airship crashing into the honeycomb that was the city. The last thing the mother and son see is the “untainted sky.”

## The myth of self-reliance

The story serves as a warning against threats to individuality and self reliance, pushing to extremes their opposite: mindless acquiescence to the power of something else – the machine, the collective, dictatorship, capitalism. In Forster’s story the villain is the all-pervasive electro-pneumatic machine and people’s acquiescence and conformity, but he could just as well be referring to the machine of the state.

I’ve also been reading the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) who took nature as the model for the independent spirit. He observed that the rose growing beneath his window doesn’t need to justify itself, to compare itself with other roses, or roses from the past (39). We should be independent in the same way: –the ancient precept, –know thyself,– and the modern precept, –study nature,– become at last one maxim• (12). Contrary to Emerson, the conceit amongst the inhabitants of Forster’s dystopia is that nature has been tamed and rendered obsolete. It has nothing to teach us.

There’s no evidence that Emerson took his self-reliance into the countryside. He thought it wonderful to enjoy the spectacle of nature in quiet contemplation, but the skill is to exercise the same sense of independence and solitude while in the heart of the city and its commerce: –the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude• (35).

It was his friend Henry Rouseau who left the city to exercise self-reliance in a rustic hut by the lake at Walden, though there is an industry around the compromise and failure of that particular project, e.g. See [Thoreau’s Walden: Phony Testament of the Greens](#).

## Digital-reliance

Behind much of the discourse today lamenting people’s apparent [addiction to the Internet](#), social media, and video gaming resides an Emerson-like belief that we should be independent individuals, non-conforming, self-reliant and get back to nature. Emerson wrote in his essay *Self-Reliance*, –Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist• (34).

I also suspect that contemporary anxieties about [artificial intelligence](#), super [surveillance](#), autonomous [self-replicating machines](#), machine domination and the so-called [singularity](#) cluster around a belief in something that is blatantly impossible, namely self-reliance. Contrary to the myth of self-reliance, human beings have always been in societies, organised themselves, and become reliant on the technologies they invent.

Were the machine to fail could we rely on just ourselves? That is a dilemma for someone who takes for granted the innate autonomy and independence of the human being, and someone who can only imagine the alternative to self-reliance as a hive mind existence in a machine-led dystopian future. That makes compelling fiction, but the world as lived seems to be otherwise, and much more complicated.



## Note

- “What kind of ideas can the air give you?”• Of course, the air is full of ideas. Air relates to atmospheres and moods, common architectural themes. See post: [Moody atmospheres and electric auras](#).
- For an interesting article by a US academic linking Donald Trump’s populist, individualistic rhetoric to Emerson see: Tiersky, Ronald. 2016. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Donald Trump: Will power educate the potentate? *Huffington Post*, (17 May) [link](#).
- For more on extreme individualism see [All watched over by Ayn Rand](#).
- The first image is from a news report showing an amateur video of the crash of the Airlander 10. The second is the demolition of the power station at Prestonpans, East Lothian, Scotland.
- For a funny treatment of the hive mind myth see the Onion [video](#): How Does A Hive Mind Keep A Synchronized Swimming Team So Coordinated?

## References

- Edel, Leon. 1975. Walden: The myth and the mystery. *The American Scholar*, (44) 2, 272-281.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 2016. *Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Dossier Press
- Forster, E.M. 2011. *The machine stops*. London: Penguin

## Category

1. Nature

## Tags

1. individualism
2. self-reliance
3. transcendentalism

## Date Created

August 27, 2016

## Author

rcoyne99