



A Canted Atlas Crept

Vashti the mother of Kuno the protagonist in E. M. Forster's influential short story *The Machine Stops* has a dread of direct experience and at the beginning of the third chapter, titled "Homelessness" Vashti considers her revulsion at Kuno's compulsive, and to her, alarming quest to find his own way. "Those who still wanted to know what the earth was like had after all only to listen to some gramophone, or to look into some cinematophote. And even the lecturers acquiesced when they found that a lecture on the sea was none the less stimulating when compiled out of other lectures that had already been delivered on the same subject. "Beware of first-hand ideas!" exclaimed one of the most advanced of them. "First-hand ideas do not really exist. They are but the physical impressions produced by life and fear, and on this gross foundation who could erect a philosophy? Let your ideas be second-hand, and if possible tenth-hand, for then they will be far removed from that disturbing element - direct observation." *The Machine Stops*, originally published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Review* in November 1909, is influential for many reasons; the jewel like quality of Forster's prose, his elegant crafting of the narrative, but principally, it is Foster's prescient vision of the future and the way in which he seems to have anticipated things that define the present, that have made *The Machine Stops* a novella of abiding influence.

Peter Nelson's current project is titled *Landscape Tractate*. A rather refined way of implying that the work, a video of 10 minutes and 16 seconds with a soundscape by Peter Farrar, is a treatise or carefully constructed discourse on a specific topic, in this instance the cultural construction of nature as evoked by the term landscape. From a formal perspective, *Landscape Tractate*, like landscape itself and the similar term in Mandarin *Shan Shui*¹, is an aggregation of features that congeal into a narrative whole, the way beads are strung in a necklace. Composed entirely of recreated and remixed fragments of landscape paintings, most notably by Fred Williams and borrowings from other artists such as Paul Noble, *Landscape Tractate* is compiled, like the lecture on the sea cited by Vashti, completely out of already existing material, and for the same reason. Just as Cosplay has unhinged individual identity from its fixed anchorage above ethnicity and gender, the Internet has constructed an atemporal present dislocated from the established indexes of time and space. It is within the simultaneous equivalence of all things that the Internet has brought into being that the cultural location of *Landscape Tractate* is to be mapped, erased and redrawn. To paraphrase Philip K Dick², who like E. M. Foster was a noted novelist and short story writer, objects and cultural images can be conceptualised as data, and consistent with this metaphor, life can be understood as merely the constant rearrangement of that data.

Gary Carsley, April 23rd, 2015

¹ Meaning Mountains plus Water.

² In his 1981 science fiction novel *Valis*. The title is an acronym for Vast Active Living Intelligence System

MOP Projects Wed - Sat 1 - 5 pm Sun 1 - 5 pm
2 / 39 Abercrombie Street Chippendale NSW Sydney 2008
02 9699 3955 mop@mop.org.au www.mop.org.au

MOP Projects is assisted by the NSW Government through Arts NSW.