

The Great White South

Antarctica, the blank continent, the end of the world. The Antarctic is perhaps the last vacancy, a something which is not nothing. The gaps on our maps have all been filled in, but with its remoteness, its long dark, its freezing dry interior where little but hardy bacteria survive, the pole retains the glamour of terra incognita. It is not an absence, but an empty presence. It is a gap in our busy geographies, a space open to the imagination. Its vast empty interior is a perfect desert, encircled by the welling life of its coasts.

The pleasure we take in stories of the Antarctic rely on the Romantic notion of the sublime. Any polar tale will be replete with experience of the incomprehensible - measureless expanses, unimaginable cold. The effect becomes sublimated, aestheticised, through our distance from the frozen vastness, by our certainty of safety. The pleasure we take in these stories lies in part in the contrast of our comfortable consumption of the narrative - lying on a sunny lawn, seated in the chair by the heater - with the hardships and frigid atmosphere of the pole. The Antarctic is a terrain of the imagination, a storied realm hanging above us like a dream city. Its very whiteness allows us to project ourselves upon it.

It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me...

... by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation... as in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour, and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows - a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink?

Herman Melville

Moby Dick

The white whale is sign of a godless horror for Ahab, but in being everything and nothing, it is the perfect repository for imagination.

Rendering an icy landscape blanker still, whiteout eliminates even the most rudimentary perspectives. Snowy overcast creates bright but indistinct conditions, eliminating form with its borderless pallor. Size, distance, all sense of scale is obliterated. A paucity of visual cues leads the hungry eye to interpretations contradicted by physical reality - a false horizon, a mountain melting into cloud. Whiteout represents the null point of landscape. White on white, full of light, but with nothing to see, a photograph taken now would be blank, but full of hidden dangers.

A science fiction parable offers a parallel null point of portraiture. The venerable British television show *Sapphire and Steel* tells the story of a frightening thing, a Magritte-inspired Man Without a Face released by photographic experimentation. Without features or qualities, its face is a blank fleshy expanse. As *Sapphire* describes it: "The structure is here, the texture is here, but not the subject. There never was a subject."



Sapphire and Steel, video still

The creature is a cipher; a photograph of nothing come to something resembling life. It has power over images, is able to transform people into photographs, and extrapolate old portraits into living beings. Watching the programme as a child, the Man Without a Face became the stuff of nightmares. A series of photographs from the 1911 Australasian Antarctic expedition provide a strange echo of this blankly terrible figure. Portraits show men with empty faces, their frozen breath forming a blank crust over their features. The white ice faces muffled in fur hoods correspond almost exactly to the eyeless, noseless, mouthless television image of a subjectless subject.



Mawson Expedition photograph

The alien conditions of the Antarctic are charted on a graph mapping the temperature and available moisture of various climatic regions. Dry, cold, supporting the barest hint of life, the conditions of Mars and the interior of Antarctica do not appear vastly different. The lingering formless dark of the polar night, existing in equal opposition to the freezing all-colour of the snowy day, provides a perfect backdrop for a sinister polar story. Full of the frightening present absence of the Man Without a Face, *Who Goes There?* (twice filmed as *The Thing*), exploits the claustrophobic atmosphere of an over-wintering research station. An alien is unearthed at the South Pole. An all-engulfing protoplasmic organism, it is able to absorb and mimic perfectly any living creature. Deadly, malign, it slowly consumes the scientists in the snowed-in base. The Thing's perfect semblance, not only of form, but also of personality, torments the trapped researchers desperately seeking to distinguish the human from the inhuman.

The white surface of the continent can lead even sober explorers into fanciful comparisons. The published account of Vivian Fuchs and Edmund Hillary's 1958 motorized trans-polar trip provides hard evidence of the folding of geographies involved in thinking about the ice. In an effort to explain the distances involved in their overland expedition, their book has a map of Antarctica overprinted with Europe and North Africa – a parallel journey traces from London to Tripoli. A stranger comparison would be hard to envisage, but in a way the superimposition of the journey from the old Imperial capital to Libya, the Orientalising of the white continent makes perfect sense. Antarctica operates as a more perfect other – performing a symbolic function no longer possible for 'the East'.



Map of Europe and North Africa superimposed on map of Antarctica, showing comparative distances.

For us in the South Pacific this cultural operation is complicated by the fact that the rhetorically distant land is not really far away at all – as we feel when the Southerly blows. Antarctic fantasies offer a politically correct othering, but for us this displacement is complicated by an actual relationship – of tourist departures and territorial responsibilities. Its allure as a land of imagining, as well as its stark beauty and extraordinary biota, provides fuel for the conversion of the continent of blank into another space of consumption. When I went looking for writing about the Antarctic I found spiral-bound government reports, explorers’ accounts, large-format photography books - and a Lonely Planet guide. Tourism is a fast-growing industry on the ice, but it is not a place of easy leisure.

The 1979 Erebus disaster, in which an Air New Zealand sightseeing plane crashed into the Antarctic mountain, remains New Zealand’s worst air crash. The accident, which killed 257 people, has all the pathos of Scott’s doomed return from the South Pole, of systemic failure compounded by unforgiving weather.

A short piece of eight millimeter film shot by one of the passengers survived the crash. Its images remind me of that other famously poignant photograph of the Scott party at the Pole. Flags hanging limp, the five explorers turn their grim, wind-burned faces toward the camera. We know their fate, their cold deaths, and it glazes over the image. Their weary eyes are staring through the lens and into history.

All photographs are indexes of old light, shadows caught in emulsion like flies in amber. As signs of dead time, flickerings of our own mortality, there is something deeply affecting about the images from the interior of the plane. Passengers mill around the cabin talking, drinking, looking out at the bright white landscape below. Funereal black hides their eyes, protecting their identities, marking them as figures in some drama. Unlike us, they are innocent of their fate, and unlike the Edwardian adventurers in that other polar photograph, the shadows we see did not expect that this might be their last journey.

Plane hits mountain. In an instant all on board are dead.

Photographs of the crash site show a burnt smear on the snow. In contrast to those other, now more famous impacts of aircraft and architecture, this tragedy is empty of ideology. The carnage is not willful, but built up of error and misfortune. It occurs not in a city of millions, but on a remote and empty continent. But it is still a disaster of the first world, a betrayal of privilege, or perhaps a cost extracted.

Herbert Ponting, photographer on Scott's final expedition, struggled to represent the ice. One of his best-known photographs, *Home of the Echoes* is a flash-lit image of the edge of the Great Ice Barrier. Beneath the towering walls, a tiny figure looks up, sledge harnessed behind him. Not present in the original negative, the silhouette was inked in later to give some sense of scale, some human terms to the image. Ponting left the polar party before they went inland, remaining to document the winter at the coast. He remarked, "After the party reached the Great Ice Barrier there would be nothing to photograph but the level plain of boundless, featureless ice, or the long caravan stringing out towards the horizon."ⁱⁱ



Herbert Ponting, *Home of the Echoes*

...the whole convention of representational art, with which the landscape had been identified since the Renaissance, breaks down as one moves into the interior. Mathematical perspective becomes impossible, the customary icons of landscape art cannot be found, colour and shape are bleached from the scene, and inherited artistic conventions become meaningless. Instead the landscape is abstract, minimal, conceptual. Interior Antarctica is nature as Modernist.ⁱⁱⁱ

The blank interior of the gallery's white cube is modernism's habitat. Constant labour and material is required to maintain its aseptic, perfect pallor. But the Antarctic proffers millions of square kilometers of blank, a superabundance of white, a fussy gallerist's dream or nightmare...

The white cube relies on the surrounding culture for its function as a pause in the busy world of signs. It acts as a frame through its adoption of certain décor conventions. But if we extract the white wall from this

context, multiply it a million million times, the featureless vastness becomes intractable to incorporation or representation.

It is the researches of the scientific community that frame activities on the ice - empiricism and observation, wind gauges and magnetic field readings. Contemporary art, while it may poach these methodologies, finds it difficult to gain a toehold in a land of sparse cultural relationships.

Perhaps the images of the Erebus crash are the first truly modern pictures from the continent. The blackened ice, the shards of the tail with its koru mark the landscape. From the air, the pale ground converts the tragedy into an image of dissolution, a black and white drawing. Photographs of the disaster become tokens of formlessness, like a Robert Morris scatter work rambling entropically across a gallery floor or a flow of asphalt from one of Robert Smithson's pour pieces.



Fig. 33. Crash Site. Exhibit 70.

Evidence photograph of the crash scene

German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen received furious criticism for describing the attacks on the World Trade Centre as works of art. But those events were designed to be seen, filmed, reported. They were pre-meditated and freighted with symbolism. As intended, the attacks created images that burnt into the retina. The Erebus disaster was not intended for a hundred million screens. But the accident, its terrible distance and finality, created a stark alignment of meaning and image.

For those beyond the circle of the bereaved and those police and mountaineers sent out to retrieve the bodies, it is the enfolding of the unknown with the familiar that makes the Erebus disaster lodge in the mind. We don't have to reinvent ourselves as climatologists or explorers to imagine ourselves on that singed mountainside. Air accidents are a toll of the jet age. A nation of travellers, we know the cold burn of that particular fear. On Erebus, a plane crash, a perfectly modern disaster, is laid bare by the landscape. But the scattered fragments also articulate the emptiness of the ice and snow. The icy white of the Antarctic lays stark our fears, but our fears delineate the land as well. In a continent so late to naming, is it strange that the fateful mountain should be named after the son of Chaos, that its companion should be called Mount Terror?

ⁱ John Wood Campbell, *Who Goes There?* (Hyperion Press, 1976)

ⁱⁱ Herbert Ponting, *The Great White South*, London, (Gerald Duckworth and Co, 1950), p.183

ⁱⁱⁱ Stephen J Pyne, *The Ice*. (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2003), p.152