

## CHAPTER ONE

# Whitescapes

Sometime one summer during the early 1990s, I was invited to a party. The host was an Anglo-American art collector, and the party was in the collector's house, which was in a city at the southern end of a northern European country. First impressions on arrival at this house: It was big (but then so were the houses around it, so it didn't appear *that* big). It was the kind of area – a wealthy area of a rich city – where only small or shabby things looked strange or out of place (like the solitary drunk I saw wrapped in an old yellowish-green overcoat). The house looked ordinary enough from the outside: red brick, nineteenth or early twentieth century, substantial but unostentatious. Inside was different. Inside seemed to have no connection with outside. Inside was, in one sense, inside-out, but I only realized that much later. At first, inside looked endless. Endless like an egg must look endless from the inside; endless because seamless, continuous, empty, uninterrupted. Or rather: un interruptable. There is a difference. Uninterrupted might mean overlooked, passed by, inconspicuous, insignificant. Uninterruptable passes by *you*, renders *you* inconspicuous and insignificant. The un interruptable, endless emptiness of this house was

impressive, elegant and glamorous in a spare and reductive kind of way, but it was also assertive, emphatic and ostentatious. This was assertive silence, emphatic blankness, the kind of ostentatious emptiness that only the very wealthy and the utterly sophisticated can afford. It was a strategic emptiness, but it was also *accusatory*.

Inside this house was a whole world, a very particular kind of world, a very clean, clear and orderly universe. But it was also a very paradoxical, inside-out world, a world where open was also closed, simplicity was also complication, and clarity was also confusion. It was a world that didn't readily admit the existence of other worlds. Or it did so grudgingly and resentfully, and absolutely without compassion. In particular, it was a world that would remind you, there and then, in an instant, of everything you were not, everything you had failed to become, everything you had not got around to doing, everything you might as well never bother to get around to doing because everything was made to seem somehow beyond reach, as when you look through the wrong end of a telescope. This wasn't just a first impression; it wasn't just the pulling back of the curtain to reveal the unexpected stage set, although there was that too, of course. This was longer-lasting. Inside was a flash that continued.

There is a kind of white that is more than white, and this was that kind of white. There is a kind of white that repels everything that is inferior to it, and that is almost everything. This was that kind of white. There is a kind of white that is not created by bleach but that itself is bleach. This was that kind of white. This white was aggressively white. It did its work on everything around it, and nothing escaped. Some would hold the architect responsible. He was a man, it is said, who put it about that his work was 'minimalist', that his mission was to strip bare and to make pure, architecturally speaking, that his spaces were 'very direct' and 'very clear', that in them there was 'no possibility of lying' because 'they are just what they are.' He was lying, of course, telling big white lies, but we will let that pass for the moment. Some would hold this man responsible

for the accusatory whiteness that was this great hollow interior, but I suspect that it was the other way around. I suspect that the whiteness was responsible for this architect and for his hollow words.

This great white interior was empty even when it was full, because most of what was in it didn't belong in it and would soon be purged from it. This was people, mainly, and what they brought with them. Inside this great white interior, few things looked settled, and even fewer looked *at home*, and those that did look settled also looked like they had been *prepared*: approved, trained, disciplined, marshalled. Those things that looked at home looked like they had already been purged from within. In a nutshell: those things that stayed had themselves been made either quite white, quite black or quite grey. This world was entirely purged of colour. All the walls, ceilings, floors and fittings were white, all the furniture was black and all the works of art were grey.

Not all whites are as tyrannical as this one was, and this one was less tyrannical than some: 'Is it that 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, when beholding the white depths of the milky way?'<sup>1</sup> Next to the white that was Herman Melville's great Albino Whale, this white paled. Next to the deathly, obsessive white that insinuated its way into the dark heart of Joseph Conrad's Captain Marlow, this white was almost innocent. Admittedly, there was some Conradian residue in this shallower white: 'Minimalism', it seemed to say, 'is something you arrive at, a development of the sensitivity of the brain. Civilization started with ornamentation. Look at all that bright colour. The minimalist sensitivity is not the peak of civilization, but it represents a high level between the earth and sky.' But this wasn't spoken with the voice of a Marlow; it contained no irony, no terror born of the recognition that whatever appeared before you now had always seen you before it a thousand times already. Rather, this was the voice of one of Conrad's Empire functionaries, one of those stiff, starched figures

whose certainties always protect them from, and thus always propel them remorselessly towards, the certain oblivion that lies just a page or two ahead.

What is it that motivates this fixation with white?

First of all, let's get the term *minimalism* and its careless association with whiteness out of the way. In reality, this didn't occur very often at all, at least in the Minimalism that consisted of three-dimensional works of art made during the 1960s, mostly in New York. Certainly, there are a good many skeletal white structures by Sol LeWitt. And Robert Morris was suspicious of colour, so he painted his early work grey, but not white. Dan Flavin used tubes of white light – or rather daylight, or cool white, which is to say whites, not white – but his work was more often than not made in pools of intermingling coloured light: red blue green yellow orange, and white. Carl Andre: intrinsic colours, the specific colours of specific materials – woods and metals in particular – no whites there to speak of. And Donald Judd: sometimes intrinsic colours, sometimes applied, sometimes both together, sometimes shiny, sometimes transparent, sometimes polished, sometimes matt. Dozens of colours on dozens of surfaces, often in strange combinations: polished copper with shiny purple Plexiglas, or brushed aluminium with a glowing translucent red, or spray-painted enamels with galvanised steel, or whatever there was. In truth, the colours of Minimal art were often far closer to that of its exact contemporary, Pop art, than anything else. Which is to say: found colours, commercial colours, industrial colours, and often bright, vulgar, modern colours in bright, vulgar, modern collisions with other bright, vulgar, modern colours.

To mistake the colourful for the colourless or white is nothing new. But it is one thing not to know that Greek statues were once brilliantly painted; it is another thing not to see colour when it is still there. This seems to speak less of ignorance than of a kind of denial. Not perceiving what is visibly there: psychoanalysts call this negative hallucination. But we have to tread carefully here, and we should be especially careful not to

get drawn into seeing colour and white as opposites. White was sometimes used in Minimalism, but mostly as a colour and amongst many other colours. Sometimes, it was used alone, but even then it remained a colour; it did not result, except perhaps in LeWitt's structures, in a *generalized* whiteness. In these works, white remained a material quality, a specific colour on a specific surface, just as it always has done in the paintings of Robert Ryman. Ryman's whites are always just that: whites. His whites are colours; his paintings do not involve or imply the suppression of colour. His whites are empirical whites. Above all, his whites are plural. And, in being plural, they are therefore not 'pure'. Here is the problem: not white; not whites; but *generalized* white, because generalized white – whiteness – is abstract, detached and open to contamination by terms like 'pure'.

Pure white: this is certainly a Western problem, and there's no getting away from it. Conrad, who analyzed the Western problem better than most in his time and better than many in ours, could also recognize a white when he saw one. The imagery in *Heart of Darkness* is coloured almost exclusively in blacks and whites. This is not the same as the other great opposition in the narrative, that between darkness and light, although at times it comes close. Conrad's target is the generalization of whiteness and the predicates and prejudices that merge with the term and seem inseparable from it. This generalized whiteness forms a backdrop to the narrative, a bleached screen which is pierced and torn, time and again, by particular instances of white things. These things – white teeth, white hair, white bones, white collars, white marble, white ivory, white fog – always carry with them an uncanny sense of coldness, inertia and death. *White*, like *black*, like *light* and like *darkness*, becomes a highly complex term. For Conrad, to speak of white with certainty is, knowingly or otherwise, to be a hypocrite or a fool. Marlow recognizes this when he remarks that a certain European city 'always makes me think of a whited sepulchre'.<sup>2</sup> The intended reference here is to the Bible: 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed

appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye appear outwardly righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.<sup>73</sup> Within the first few pages of the tale, long before Marlow has set off for Africa, his own whiteness already lies in ruins. It was something to be laid to rest, as he later puts it, in 'the dustbin of progress, amongst all the sweepings and all the dead cats of civilisation'.

There are only two short passages in *Heart of Darkness* where colour, or colours, are given any attention. One is close to the beginning of the story and one is close to the end, and they are oddly symmetrical. The former comes a few lines after Marlow arrives in the sepulchral city. He enters the Company's offices, 'arid as a desert', occupied by two women, one dressed 'plain as an umbrella-cover', one 'white haired', both knitting 'black wool'. Amid this grainy monochrome, his attention is caught by 'a large shining map, marked with all the colours of a rainbow', which he describes: 'There was a vast amount of red – good to see at any time, because one knows some real work is being done in there, a duce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink jolly lager-beer. However', he continues ominously, 'I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow.' These vivid hues are attractive, but they are also arbitrary. And their arbitrariness is ironic: they denote the 'white' territories, whereas the white areas on maps, which had fascinated Marlow as a child, marked unmapped or 'black' areas.

If this brightly coloured map marks a kind of gateway for Marlow to one heart of darkness, his second encounter with colour is also a kind of gateway to another dark heart: his encounter with Kurtz. As his steamer draws close to Kurtz's station, Marlow sees a man on the shore:

He looked like a Harlequin. His clothes had been made of some stuff that was brown holland probably, but it was covered with

patches all over, with bright patches, blue, red, yellow, – patches on the back, patches on the front, patches on elbows, patches on knees; coloured binding around his jacket, scarlet edging at the bottom of his trousers; and the sunshine made him look extremely gay and wonderfully neat withal, because you could see how beautifully all this patching had been done.

This person, represented in Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* by the crazed war photographer played by Dennis Hopper, talks incessantly and in contradictions; he has apparently travelled throughout the continent and has been both friend and enemy of Kurtz. After he departs, Marlow asks himself 'whether I had ever really seen him – whether it was possible to meet such a phenomenon!'

There is clearly a connection between these two passages. At its simplest, the patches that adorn the 'harlequin's' clothes could symbolize his erratic wandering through the various coloured patches that adorned the Company's map of Africa. But in both instances, colour is also given a kind of unreality; its arbitrariness consists of a kind of unconnectedness to anything; it is an addition or a supplement; it is artificial; it adorns. Or perhaps it is dislocated in a stronger and more dangerous sense. Either way, colour has a kind of autonomy from the unstable contradictions of black and white and the psychic confusions of darkness and light.

If Conrad punctures a generalized whiteness with numerous instances and examples of white things, Melville works in something like the opposite direction: he begins with one great big white thing and, at certain points, begins to wonder whether the terrible whiteness of this thing could be generalized beyond it and infect his more homely conception of white. 'It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me', he admits, while at the same time noting that 'in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own.' He recognizes the gravity of the impasse and his confusion:

'But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught.' In the absence of an explanation, Melville, like many of us, compiles a list. His is a list of white things, in particular white creatures, which symbolize one or another kind of virtue: regal, imperial, religious, juridical, moral, communal, sexual . . . And yet, 'for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honourable, and sublime', Melville insists that there still 'lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than the redness which affrights in blood'. For Melville, as for Conrad, there is an instability in the apparent uniformity of white. Behind virtue lurks terror; beneath purity, annihilation or death. Not death in the sense of a life ended, but a glimpse of death-in-life: the annihilation of every cherished belief and system, every hope and desire, every known point of orientation, every illusion . . . For both writers, one of the most terrible instances of whiteness is a still, silent 'milk-white fog', which is 'more blinding than the night'. And for both, in the face of such whiteness, colour appears intolerably, almost insultingly, superficial. Melville:

And when we consider that all other earthly hues – every stately or lovely emblazoning – the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and all the gilded velvet of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtle deceptions, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all defied Nature absolutely paints like a harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principal of light, for ever remains white or colourless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge – pondering all this, the palsied

universe lies before us like a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him.

For Melville, the truth of colour is merely cosmetic; it contains 'subtle deceits'; it is 'not actually inherent in substances'; it is only 'laid on from without'. But if nature 'paints like a harlot', it is not simply to seduce us, but to protect us in its seductions from 'the charnel-house within'. We have to wear tinted spectacles; otherwise, what we might see will make us blind.

The virtuous whiteness of the West also conceals other less mystical terrors. These are more local and altogether more palpable; they are, mainly, terrors of the flesh. Melville's great white whale is, conceivably, a monstrous corruption of the great Western ideal of the classical body. This body, at least in its remodelled neo-classical version, was of course a pure, polished, unembellished, untouched and untouchable white. For Walter Pater, writing on the neo-classical scholar Winkelmann and classical sculpture sometime between the publications of *Moby Dick* and *Heart of Darkness*, this 'white light, purged from the angry, bloodlike stains of action and passion, reveals, not what is accidental in man, but the tranquil godship in him, as opposed to the restless accidents of life'.<sup>4</sup> A few pages on, this light loses its whiteness and re-emerges as 'this colourless, unclassified purity of life' which is 'the highest expression of the indifference which lies beyond all that is relative and partial'. In his elision of whiteness with colourlessness, transparency and purity, Pater was at least following the logic of Winkelmann, for whom the ideal beauty of the classical form was 'like the purest water taken from the source of a spring . . . the less taste it has, the more healthy it is seen to be, because it is cleansed of all foreign elements'.<sup>5</sup> Winkelmann, in his turn, was following the example of Plato, for whom truth, embodied in the Idea, was, as Martin Jay has put it, 'like a visible form blanched of its colour'.<sup>6</sup>

It was this classical body, further purified and corrupted in Stalinist 'realism', that Mikhail Bakhtin counterposed with the altogether more fleshy and visceral 'grotesque realism' of the medieval body. For Bakhtin, the classical form was above all a self-contained unity,

an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off is eliminated, hidden or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable facade. The opaque surface of the body's 'valleys' acquires an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world. All attributes of the unfinished world are carefully removed, as well as all signs of its inner life.<sup>7</sup>

Bakhtin's description of the classical body also describes with uncanny accuracy the art collector's 'minimalist' interior, where everything was finished, completed and strictly limited in a closed individuality that was not allowed to merge with the world outside. The idea that anything might protrude, bulge, sprout or branch off from this sheer whiteness was inconceivable. The inner life of this world was entirely hidden: nothing was allowed to spill out from its allotted space; all circuitry, all conduits, all the accumulated stuff that attaches itself to an everyday life remained concealed, held in, snapped shut. Every surface was a closed, impenetrable façade: cupboards were disguised as walls, there were no clues or handles or anything to distinguish one surface from another; just as there were no protrusions, neither was there a single visible aperture. In this way, openness really was an illusion maintained by closure, simplicity was ridiculously overcomplicated, and unadorned clarity was made hopelessly confusing. You really could become lost in this apparently blank and empty white space. In its need to differentiate itself from that which was

without, nothing could be differentiated within. This space was clearly a model for how a body ought to be: enclosed, contained, sealed. The ideal body: without flesh of any kind, old or young, beautiful or battered, scented or smelly; without movement, external or internal; without appetites. (That is why the kitchen was such a disturbing place – but not nearly as disturbing as the toilet.) But perhaps it was more perverse than that; perhaps this was a model of what the body should be like from *within*. Not a place of fluids, organs, muscles, tendons and bones all in a constant, precarious and living tension with each other, but a vacant, hollow, whited chamber, scraped clean, cleared of any evidence of the grotesque embarrassments of an actual life. No smells, no noises, no colour; no changing from one state to another and the uncertainty that comes with it; no exchanges with the outside world and the doubt and the dirt that goes with that; no eating, no drinking, no pissing, no shitting, no sucking, no fucking, no nothing.

It won't go away. Whiteness always returns. Whiteness is woven into the fabric of Culture. The Bible, again: 'Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.'<sup>8</sup> We can't escape, but, as Conrad and Melville have shown, sometimes it is possible to unweave whiteness from within . . . Henri Michaux, artist, poet and acid-head, writing 'With Mescaline':

And 'white' appears. Absolute white. White beyond all whiteness. White of the coming of white. White without compromise, through exclusion, through total eradication of non-white. Insane, enraged white, screaming with whiteness. Fanatical, furious, riddling the victim. Horrible electric white, implacable, murderous. White in bursts of white. God of 'white'. No, not a god, a howler monkey. (Let's hope my cells don't blow apart.) End of white. I have the feeling that for a long time to come white is going to have something excessive for me.<sup>9</sup>