

**Sabine Frost**

## **White In. White Out. The Noticeability of Text<sup>1</sup>**

### **Conspicuous text**

The term ‘whiteout’ is usually understood as a weather condition in polar or mountain regions affecting visibility through diffuse lighting. In this case, however, the idea of ‘whiteout’ is not merely taken as a motif, but as a way to describe disruptive effects in literary texts. The term ‘whiteout’ is used here to point out how ‘snow’—in the broadest sense—pervades the structure and language of narrative texts from the 19th to the 21st century. The texts in question deal with snowstorms and snow drifts; they send their protagonists on polar explorations and mountain expeditions; heroes get lost in snow or suffer from extreme frost. But no description of a typical ‘whiteout’ is to be found there. The phenomenon itself takes place where the descriptions of ‘snow’ depart from the purely semantic level and refer to the structure of the texts. In these break-outs of story-telling, texts expose their own textuality. Here we find a possibility of literary self-reflection. Exposing textuality allows for a reduction of mimetic reproduction of reality and a negotiation of literary methods. The Russian formalist Viktor Šklovskij calls the aim of art—and also the aim of literature—to make the subject-matter visible.<sup>2</sup> The reader has to *see*, not just to recognize. To counter immediate perception, literature utilizes techniques that complicate the

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the presentation of my PhD-project “Whiteout. Schneefälle und Weißeinbrüche in der Literatur ab 1800” (“Whiteout. Snow and Whiteness in Literature since 1800”) held at the “Arctic Discourses”-Conference in February 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Šklovskij, Viktor: “Die Kunst als Verfahren”, in: Striedter, Jurij (Ed.): *Russischer Formalismus*, Munich 1969, 5-35.

process of reading and understanding. These are rhetorical methods like defiguration, the suspension of meaning, or shifting to a meta-level on which the text breaks out of its story-telling to talk about itself. I call those break-outs of semantics literary ‘whiteout’ effects.

Using a meteorological phenomenon to describe the poetic structures in literary texts is motivated in three ways:

The term ‘whiteout’ emphasizes the interaction between literature and science, the latter particularly in connection with polar and mountain explorations in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The intricate relations between fictional and non-fictional texts as well as their historical and cultural configurations form a background to many ‘snow’ topics. Both sorts of texts supply the discourses of territorial spaces—also polar spaces—with facts and phantasm. It is often difficult to decide whether the imagination of the unexplored regions in the centre of these texts is scientific or literary. Some narratives seem more realistic than diary entries of the real explorers. Their accounts seem to follow literary imagination. Perhaps the loss of accessible knowledge and the possibility of vision are the most interesting aspects of these narratives. Even today—Arctic and Antarctic regions are being explored and mapped, even attracting a good deal of tourism. Fictional and non-fictional travellogues still provide each another with expectations, images, and vocabulary that not only describes but constitutes these regions.

Thus, ‘whiteout’ establishes a relation between form and content of literary ‘snow texts’ the project deals with. This focus corresponds to a tradition which utilizes topics and motifs of snow, cold, crystallisation, and whiteness as metaphors for negotiating literary processes. The metaphors of ‘flowing speech’ and ‘frozen letters’, for example describe differences between the oral and written versions of language. The white plane of snow, however, refers to the blank page as a potentiality for writing, but also as a threat of emptiness and erasure. In ancient Greek the crystal—from Greek “cryos” which means ‘ice’—symbolized the unity of

spirit and matter. Since the Romantic period, this motif has also been used in describing the artistic process.

But I am not only interested in metaphorical traditions, but also in something Roman Jakobson calls the “palpability of signs”<sup>1</sup>. On one hand, snow, cold, crystallisation, and whiteness are semantically connected to descriptions of winter landscapes; on the other hand, they are used as metaphors in the process of literary self-reflection. The question at hand is how those metaphors—especially as combinations rather than as a singular element—affect structure, language, and narrative methods of literary texts. One can find a ‘whiteout’ in ‘frozen language’ while talking about snow, a language that imitates the white monotony of the landscape by repeating whole sentences, or that creates disorientation in a way similar to the snowstorm it is discussing. For example, the specific language in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*—besides the notorious chapter “The Whiteness of the Whale”—provokes relevant associations without any semantic relation to the Poles or to Arctic regions. The narrator feels in his accommodation as if he were “in the heart of an arctic crystal”<sup>2</sup>. He compares people with snow-flakes<sup>3</sup>, breaks the “ice of indifference”<sup>4</sup> or calls the lowering of a whaling boat, a “Nantucket sledge ride”<sup>5</sup>. The ‘icy’ vocabulary opens a semantic space for the simultaneity of polar fascination and fright, but also for the motif of the journey into unknown regions with the risk of failure and shipwreck. Actually the whale itself—still absent in the plot—becomes implicitly present. The text refers to the process of literary writing itself by telling other or additional stories besides the story of *Moby-Dick*.

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<sup>1</sup> Jakobson, Roman: "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in: Sebeok, T.A. (Ed.): *Style in Language*, New York 1960, 350-377, 356.

<sup>2</sup> Melville, Herman: *Moby-Dick*, New York 2003, 70.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>4</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 68.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

‘Whiteout’ is not only considered as a weather condition but also as a psycho- physiological phenomenon connected to the distortion of perception. The subject’s constricted ability of reading signs for its spatial orientation is transferred to the reader of a literary text. The reader also depends on the visibility and readability of signs for his orientation in the text. This analogy is based on spatial concepts implemented to discuss literary texts, but also on a metaphorical reading of the term ‘whiteout’ and the specific relationship it creates between landscape, paper, and text.

It is this last aspect which I would here like to elaborate in more detail.

Imagine you are standing in a white room where neither walls, nor a floor can be discerned. You are not really sure about the existence of walls, or the floor in the first place. You don’t even know whether your next step will lead you onto safe grounds, or will make you stumble. You can stretch your arms out but there is nothing around you.

The protagonist in Tina Uebel’s novel *Horror Vacui* describes a similar situation with the words: “Antarctica was switched off: Welcome to whiteout.”<sup>1</sup>

‘Whiteout’ is a term of atmospheric optics and describes the inability to attain depth perception and even horizon definition despite having a wide range of sight. This weather condition appears in polar or mountain regions and is caused by a combination of snow covered ground and overcast sky. Snow and sky reflect diffuse light that reduces contrasts and affect visibility, especially of bright objects. In contrast to fog or snowfall, one *can* see the proverbial hand in front of one’s face. One can also see one’s foot—but not the surface on which it is standing. C.O. Fiske, *U.S. Navy* climatologist, reports:

Many a polar traveller has experience the eerie sensation of looking down at his feet and being able to see his foot gear yet being unable to distinguish the surface on which he

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<sup>1</sup> Uebel, Tina: *Horror Vacui*, Cologne 2005, 72; my translation.

stands. The next step may plunge him over an ice cliff or bring him into collision with a raised object. Explorers have reported actually walking into the side of a camp building while being under the distinct mental impression that the building was yet some distance away.<sup>1</sup>

The ground surface does play an important role for spatial orientation, our knowledge of direction and distance between objects. So, 'whiteout' doesn't occur by itself—it requires a subject to describe its effects. Because of this it is not considered as a purely meteorological phenomenon. As a psycho-physiological problem, it raises interest in the discussion about spatial orientation in general, for example in military research. It is surely no accident that polar psychology developed in the 1950s in preparation for the International Geophysical Year 1957/1958. Several nations researched together in Arctic and Antarctic regions, but their results were also designed to secure military and economical supremacy there. For example, Antarctica was used as a "giant laboratory and research field"<sup>2</sup> for psychological experiences in manned spaceflight. In the report of George S. Harker of the *Experimental Psychology Department of the U.S. Army Medical Research Laboratory* "the phenomenon of 'Arctic whiteout' has been placed in context of research contributory to an understanding of its physical source and physiological and psychological effect."<sup>3</sup> A person affected by 'whiteout' condition is severely handicapped and can, for instance, lose gravitational, vertical and spatial orientation. Aviators can experience acute vertigo. In a 'whiteout' there is only an "inadequate or misleading

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<sup>1</sup> Fiske, C.O.: "White-out – a polar phenomenon", in: U.S. Naval Institute, *Proceedings* 82/9 (1956), 954-959, 956.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, Ove: "Human Adaption to Life in Antarctica", in: van Mieghem, J./ van Oye, P. (Ed.): *Biography and Ecology in Antarctica*, Den Haag 1965, 690-752, 734.

<sup>3</sup> Harker, George S.: *Whiteout – A bibliographical Survey*, Experimental Psychology Department, U.S. Army Medical Research Laboratory Fort Knox, Kentucky 1958, 7.

visual stimulation”<sup>1</sup>, as Harker explains. He underscores the fact that “the individual is as much the same disadvantage as if he were in total darkness”<sup>2</sup>. But in contrast to total darkness one doesn’t actually know that one is *blind*. One still retains trust in visible things, although they raise suspicion as being “inadequate or misleading”.

‘Whiteout’ is just one polar problem among others and explorers have to overcome more dangerous weather conditions. But the inclusion of a subject makes ‘whiteout’ comparable to literary texts, because the subject’s distorted perception makes it possible to transfer that phenomenon into a textual space which also has “inadequate or misleading” signals for reader orientation. The metaphorical term ‘whiteout’ illustrates this relation in itself.

The term was first used in the technical sense in 1946 by the *U.S. Weather Bureau*-meteorologist Leonard Hedine in the *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*. He looked for a “term in common use and generally understood” to designate a weather phenomenon he observed in northern Alaska. “It would seem that there is need for an official term, possibly ‘Arctic whiteout’ [...] to warn pilots of this hazard [...]”<sup>3</sup> Two months later Arnold Court, also a *U.S. Weather Bureau*-meteorologist, reacts to this article by mentioning that the described phenomenon was also encountered by recent polar explorers and that they had called it “milky weather”<sup>4</sup>. That term, in turn goes back to Richard E. Byrd’s description of his South Pole flight in 1930 as: “like flying in a world that has turned to milk”<sup>5</sup>. It is uncertain whether Hedine was aware of this—it seems that “milky” didn’t reach everyone even in the small circle of *U.S. Weather Bureau*-

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>3</sup> Hedine, L.J.C.: “The ‘Arctic Whiteout’”, in: *Bulletin of the American Meteorology Society* 27 (1946), 130-131, 130.

<sup>4</sup> Court, Arnold: “On the ‘Arctic Whiteout’”, in: *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* 27 (1946), 359-360.

<sup>5</sup> Byrd, Richard E.: “Narrative of the South Pole Flight”, in: Joerg, W.L.G. (Ed.): *The Work of the Byrd Antarctic Expedition 1928-1930*, New York 1930, 36.

meteorologists—but it is certain that he was after a term, which could describe the ‘whiteout’ condition precisely. “Milky” in the sense of ‘unclear’ could also mean ‘foggy’, but—in his own words: “It is important that this phenomenon should not be confused with snowblindness, fog, snowstorms, or blowing snow.”<sup>1</sup> So, how can one explain the success of the term ‘whiteout’, which also doesn’t exactly meet Descartes’s demands of clear definition?

Hedine himself calls it a “descriptive term” that refers to the effect on the subject. “[T]he picture is one of an unrelieved expanse of white,” he writes. But that image of an expanse of white colour underscores particularly the relation between territorial space and text space. Because the ‘whiteout’ of landscape does not only refer to “whiten”, “make white” or “white out” in the sense of covering walls with white colour or applying an additional layer. Primarily it refers to blank spaces in printing, but those so-called ‘whites’ are no addition, they are interruptions of written space. *Pura charta* or ‘white space’ is “the unprinted area of a piece of printing”<sup>2</sup>. So, “whiten” or “white out” also means “to leave space”<sup>3</sup> —in texts. ‘Whites’ name the “[b]lank space in certain letters or types, a space left blank between words or lines”<sup>4</sup>. The metaphorical term ‘white spot’ to name unexplored regions marks that relation. It describes the inability to map those regions—that’s why they have to be white and empty in maps. Also the idiomatic phrase ‘in the white’ to designate an “unfinished state or condition”<sup>5</sup> accents this: a condition ‘in the white’ has no contour, one can neither ‘read off’ nor ‘trace’ something.

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<sup>1</sup> Hedine, “The ‘Arctic Whiteout’”, 130.

<sup>2</sup> The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, New York 1966, 1630.

<sup>3</sup> The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1628.

<sup>4</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 1933, Vol. XII, V-Z, 71.

<sup>5</sup> The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1628: “in the white: unfinished state or condition, widen the interlinear spacing by inserting leads”.

However, Hedine's so-called "descriptive term" not only transfers the whiteness of paper into geographic space like 'white spot' or 'in the white'. The metaphorical 'whiteout' shows that there are multiple transfers between both spaces. We talk in a deictic manner about texts and use lateral, vertical and sagittal terms like 'above', 'below', 'right', 'left', 'background', or 'foreground'. It is said, for instance, that one needs to find an 'entrance' to the text, or perhaps attain some 'distance' to get an 'overview'. The spatial conception of texts is related to our spatial orientation. So, 'whiteout' is a re-transfer of spatial imaginations of paper and texts into territorial space.

But what really happens in a new transfer of the 'whiteout' as a phenomenon of territorial space to the text space? The text space under 'whiteout' condition is a space that is in flux and does not allow for steady orientation, because its meaning becomes doubtful and all cues, all signs are also "inadequate or misleading", at least if unambiguous meaning is the goal.

In his essay "Der Text als Raum", Winfried Nöth describes spatial conceptions of texts and the metaphor of architecture for its composition. His ideal text space is a space with complete and intact lines and planes. The structure and all objects are clearly visible. Everything disturbing the process of visual orientation, maybe spots on the surface, gaps, breaks or any kind of distorted visibility, is a deficit, something which makes the reader stumble. Texts under 'whiteout' condition confront their readers with the problem of visibility and readability of signs—to Winfried Nöth they are surely no 'ideal' text spaces. It is these spaces that I compare to literary texts.

At the outset I mentioned the complicating of the process of reading which supposedly results in instant perception. In Winfried Nöth's vocabulary these texts are full of stumbling blocks that delay the process of understanding.

But Nöth misses a key point here: the fact that the stumbling blocks point to another level of meaning, particularly the negotiation of the 'message itself'. By making use of certain motifs such as the disorienting effects of snowy landscapes, literary texts provide the reader with—ironically, relatively



clear—signals as to the function and even the structure and media nature of these stumbling blocks. In the specific case of the set of literary metaphors and scenes which make the ‘whiteout’ metaphor plausible, literary texts not only refer to their own media —white paper and black ink—, but also formulate matters in a literary field beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which are taken up by 'hard science' only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is one of many cases in which science is a latecomer in the pursuit of knowledge—to be more exact, the scientific discourse (in Foucault's sense) views it as possible to formulate things which up to that point were sayable 'only' in literature.



Left: Wite-Out® Brand, Correction fluid.

Right: Advertisement for FedEx Kinko's Office and Print Service.

In the 1960s the American company BIC names its new product, a correction fluid, “Wite-out Brand”. Surely that had not been Hedine’s intention of “common use and generally understood”, but especially the differing way of writing—‘white’ without ‘h’— hints to the ‘whiteout’ in relation to ‘atwite/wite’ which is semantically connected with ‘censure’ and ‘censor’. Here the ‘whiteout’—as a precondition of re-writing—becomes positive. The correction fluid represents both: it applies white colour but it

also creates a (new) blank space. This way “wite-out” and especially ‘whiteout’ refer to the distinction between the sign and its surface or between the readability or visibility of whites.

Speaking of literary ‘whiteout’ effects does not only refer to reduced contrasts and the erasure of writing but to the uncertainty of perception and ambiguity of meaning. The main problem is the subject’s trust in still visible signs, but those signs are incomplete or have changed their meanings—therefore it has become impossible to create one certain meaning. This inability directs the reader’s view to the structure of texts, where they explain their own makeup.

Maybe this point becomes clearer when one compares ‘whiteout’ with a term that is closer related to literature in the broadest sense: ‘blackout’ as a theatrical term. In common use ‘blackout’ describes a failing, for example memory loss. One can also find that term in the language of aviation as “[a]n enforced period during which all lights in an area are turned off or concealed, so as not to be visible from the air”<sup>1</sup>. In relation to the pilots individual perception ‘blackout’ also means “[a] condition of temporary loss of vision, possibly also loss of consciousness, resulting from the effect of high and sustained positive acceleration on the body”<sup>2</sup>. But this term has been adapted from theatre language—originally ‘blackout’ means to suddenly darken a stage.<sup>3</sup> It is used for intended effects as well as for stage accidents. In this case, the sudden darkness leads to a kind of enlightenment: the visibility of theatre’s utilities to create illusionary effects. In theatre, light or also the loss of light, is used to lead attention to a certain point. Interesting for my comparison of ‘whiteout’ and ‘blackout’ is for example the change of stage lighting in the 19th century. The inadequate and also defiguring candle light of the 17th and 18th century created a “chronically

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<sup>1</sup> Kumar, Bharat: *An illustrated Dictionary of Aviation*, New York 2005, 106.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>3</sup> Bowman, Walter P./ Ball, Robert H.: *Theatre Language. A Dictionary of Terms in English of the Drama and Stage from Medieval to Modern Times*, New York 1961.

bad lit” stage room.<sup>1</sup> But using electrical light on stage was in the beginning also quite experimental. The new and unusual bright light showed something which might better had stayed in the dark: theatre’s methods to create illusion on stage.

Paul Lindau talked about first lighting experiences and mentioned such an intensive light which erased all colours of stage decoration, destroying any illusionary effect. The audience didn’t see a tree in a landscape but to an empty canvas; and instead of a cloudy sky it saw an empty sailcloth.<sup>2</sup>

The bright electrical light makes the rough material visible, it shows the methods of theatre. This visibility was an effect that also leads to another exposure with artistic works. They expose that they are art and do not hide that aspect as a diminishing of reality reproduction.

The ‘blackout’ itself works of course in another way, as a spotlight. It presents the change of a scene or the end of a play. But the sudden darkness, the loss of visibility, also calls attention to a certain point, like a spotlight with bright light. Theatre’s lighting represents the interplay of light and darkness, of things made visible and others, better left in the dark.

I do not want to compare the first electrical light on stage with a blinding ‘whiteout’, my point is that plays, and also texts, can create conditions where they leave their way of story-telling and break with their own illusionary effects by no longer reproducing a mimetic reality. The texts my projects deals with—narrative texts by Ludwig Tieck, Christoph Ransmayr, Adalbert Stifter, Robert Walser, Alexandr Puškin, Lev Tolstoj, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Conrad Aiken, Herman Melville and E.A. Poe—‘simulate’ their distortion of perception. ‘Simulation’ means, for example the relation between the fictional territorial space of the plot and the structural text space. The story’s snowstorm suddenly becomes the drifting of the letters *in* the text. Producing unreadabilities refers to

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<sup>1</sup> Schivelbusch, Wolfgang: Lichtblicke. Zur Geschichte der künstlichen Helligkeit im 19. Jahrhundert, Munich 1983, 183; my translation.

<sup>2</sup> As cited by: Baumann, Carl-Friedrich: Entwicklung und Anwendung der Bühnenbeleuchtung seit der Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts, unpublished PhD, Cologne 1956, 360.

the literality of the texts and their suspense between readability and visibility. In this way, they prevent total comprehension and unambiguous meaning.

Using the term 'whiteout' to talk about literary effects describes the text as a space of interplay between black and white, and a storytelling while at the same time exposing textuality, acuteness and blurring, clarity and ambiguity, production and erasure of signs and their meaning.

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