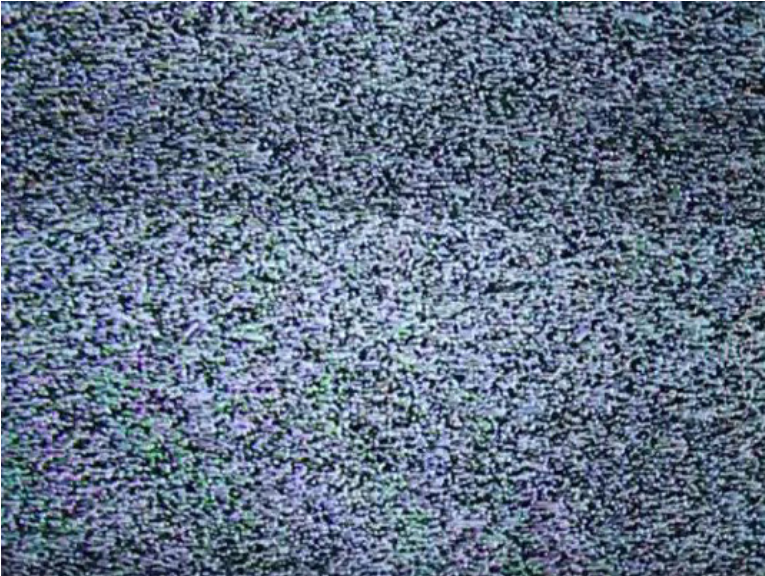


Static Resonance



Marfa Static is a simple project: a visual record of one second of regular “old-fashioned” television static. Taken both from a black and white and a color television while staying in Marfa, Texas, the static wasn’t hard to find (reception in remote places is notoriously hard to get). The TVs were analog (rather than digital) and relied on a simple antenna, which insured a steady stream of visual fuzz. This is noteworthy, as digital technology does not produce static the way analog technology does and so static as we know it is becoming harder to “see.” This is less true of radios to date, although in theory digital broadcasting will also eliminate aural static. In the not too distant future, static in both mediums may very well disappear from our lives.

One second of static is roughly thirty frames. This is quicker than the eye can process and represents barely a whisper in any narrative arc. And yet these thirty frames capture one of the most iconic and dramatic images of the twentieth century. Static is a moving picture of invisible

forces, of slowly dancing snow, a blizzard of warring ants, a hypnotic and rather subversive abstract choreography that innocuously resides in homes around the world, found wherever there is a TV.

A perfunctory search reveals that different countries and technologies of television broadcasting create different types of static or, more specifically, discrete patterns of static. In different places bad reception takes on distinct traits and associated meanings: zoomorphic, (meta)physical, and cultural. To many, it also signals isolation, poverty, and the interstitial magic of broadcast technology, an autocratic power that creates and disseminates information.

Given the way invisible waves can make things appear as if by conjuring, not to mention their ubiquity in the very heart of every home, radio and television were often linked to conspiratorial themes of government surveillance and science fiction. One leitmotif is that the static itself functions as a medium between this world and another, an arcane communication from aliens or ghosts. One of the best-known examples of this is the horror movie *Poltergeist* where ghosts speak through the television set after broadcasting ends late at night. In an iconic scene, the little girl who

“sees” these specters stares at the glowing static and intones ominously, “they’re heeere.”

Perhaps just as unnerving as the undead is the parallel anxiety about the technology itself. Television bookends the great leap begun in the industrial revolution. Portending a massive sociological shift still underway, the advent of the transistor and vacuum tube announced a new world where electronics became too small and complex to understand. Furthermore, *live* broadcasting has largely been subsumed by “tuning in” to rebroadcasts of previously filmed programming, a (mechanical) reproduction that signals the unmoored nature of history itself. The image is no longer fixed in time but can be turned on and off, or repeated, as if by magic. Static highlights this fungibility as modern consciousness is fundamentally reshaped to reflect the endless image stream.

Television static is created by two complimentary phenomenon: the transmission of the content and the physical components of the analog receiver. In the briefest of possible terms, TV consists of the organization of electrons on a specially coated glass screen into lines that with sufficient resolution create images. This is how television can be broadcast “over the air.” The electrons are

packaged and sent as waves to be received by your television antenna.

Static occurs when that reception has been disrupted, either because of insufficient broadcasting power or some kind of interference like that caused by adjacent electronics. When this happens the visual and aural signature of static is broadcast as “noise”—in other words, dancing snow accompanied by a hissing sound. In addition, a significant portion of interference is caused by a third source known as cosmic microwave background (or CMB). CMB exists throughout the universe, emitting what amounts to a steady hum. For a century scientists debated its origin. In 1965 two researchers, Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson, made a startling discovery: they determined that the origin of this ubiquitous cosmic noise, most commonly experienced as static, was, in fact, the Big Bang.

MARFA STATIC

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