

STATIC AS A TROPE IN ELECTRONIC ART: DAVID HALL'S 1001 TV SETS (END PIECE) AND OTHER WORKS

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Abstract

Static is often used in electronic art to symbolise a metaphysical outside that is only perceivable with technology. A significant recent example is David Hall's 1001 TV Sets (End Piece). In this paper I will explore the static as outside trope using numerous examples, with a focus on Hall's work. I will show that the trope demonstrates how static can be meaningful and so functions as more than merely interference.

Keywords: static, sonic, outside, electronic art, trope, David Hall, metaphysical.

Static, the white noise seen and heard on analogue television sets, does not just signal the lack of signal. It is often used in electronic art to symbolise a metaphysical *outside* that is only perceivable with technology and from which the meaningful, including sometimes the supernatural, comes. Despite the emphasis on static, electromagnetic interference, as visible, its presence is unstable and destabilising, as is indicated by its sonic dimensions. It acts, interfering with signals and overflowing boundaries, and is spatial, filling space and transforming it.

Examples of popular culture where the static as outside trope, as I call it, appears include the HBO ident, and the films *Poltergeist*, *White Noise*, and *Static*. A recent example of electronic art that employs the trope is *David Hall's 1001 TV Sets (End Piece)*, which was presented at Ambika P3 gallery in London in March-April 2012.

Here I will explore the static as outside trope using examples such as those listed above, with a focus on Hall's work. I will draw on Michael Taussig's writing about the magic of technology, Jacques Derrida's work regarding ghosts, and Michel Serres' metaphysics of noise to explain the way the trope presents noise as outside, as well as the significance of this. Moreover, based on this I will show that the trope demonstrates how static can be meaningful and so functions as more than merely interference. Analogue television signals around Australia are gradually being switched off as part of a shift to digital broadcasting, a process that will be complete by the end of 2013 and indeed has

already been completed in a number of countries. The significance of this shift is directly addressed in Hall's work, demonstrating the timeliness of this investigation.

Static as a Trope

Apart from the increasingly ubiquitous HBO ident, in which the station's logo emerges from static to an angelic chorus of *ahhh*, the static as outside trope is predominantly recognizable due to its use in films. The film *Poltergeist*, in which ghosts escape from the static emanating from a TV set, is probably the most well known example, however there are a number of others [1]. For instance in *White Noise* TV static is used to help the central character make recordings of electronic voice phenomena (EVP), and in *Static* a man claims he has invented a device that makes it possible to see heaven while others find the device only shows static [2, 3]. Notably, Greg Hainge has explored the use of noise in horror films, including *Poltergeist*, *White Noise* and *The Ring*, in his book *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise*, but while there are a number of parallels between his arguments and mine he, I find, primarily focuses on the way in which noise is figured as disruptive in horror films and communication systems [4]. As I have stated, I am interested in the way in which the static as outside trope more broadly demonstrates noise as meaningful. The trope is also present in other forms of electronic art, in particular in audio-visual installations such as David Hall's *1001 TV Sets (End Piece)*, which I will explore later.

The Magic of Technology

The use of TVs and communication technologies more generally in the static as outside trope is significant because it can be considered a specific example of a broader trope, that of technologies as magical and mysterious in their function and power. This is a trope that is common in horror films – examples include *The Ghost in the Machine*, the *Ringu* films and their Hollywood remakes, *Kairo*, and *Insidious* [5]. Moreover, the trope has a rich history, both in the arts and more generally.

Michael Taussig writes of the “mimetic faculty” of technologies of reproduction in his book *Mimesis & Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, offering an explanation, at least to some extent, of the way in which communication technologies are frequently treated as if they are actually able to summon those

whose words or likeness they reproduce [6]. Particularly crucial to Taussig's argument is the duality of mimesis as both a “copying or imitation” and a more direct “palpable, sensuous, connection” between bodies, such that “seeing something or hearing something is to be in contact with that something” [7].

Taussig writes about the significance of the large amount of “colonial phonography” that exists, that is, the use of early sound recording and playback technologies at so called frontiers. This is exemplified in Robert Flaherty's documentary film *Nanook of the North*, which features the Inuit man Nanook, on whose family the film is focused, expressing amazement at hearing and seeing a gramophone being used [8]. Rather than being interested in the effect of phonography on “the natives,” Taussig is interested, in his own words, in “the white man's fascination with their fascination with these mimetically capacious machines” [9]. He argues that what is crucial is “the magic of mechanical reproduction itself,” explaining:

In the West this magic is inarticulable and is understood as the technological substance of civilized identity-formation... Yet these shocks rightly live on in the mysterious underbelly of the technology – to be eviscerated as “magic” in frontier rituals of technological supremacy [10].

Basically, his argument is that colonial photography and film of ‘natives’ being shocked by phonography is an example of a drama Westerners play out to enjoy the power of their society's machines, a power they themselves, that is we ourselves, generally do not fully understand. The static as outside trope is an example of the same playing out of the power and mystery of technology, a dramatization of the hold of technology over those who use it. It is a spectacle to be enjoyed as fiction that nevertheless demonstrates the relationship many have to technology, in which the function and power of the technologies they use is considered magical.

Interestingly, Taussig notes that it is “curious” that this drama has been played out with sound reproducing technology rather than photography or cinema [11]. This, I find, is because of sound's mysterious quality. Photographs, as Susan Sontag has argued, furnish evidence but sound is thought of as ephemeral, a mere effect [12]. Sound, as I have

indicated, overflows boundaries, creating ambiguous spaces.

The Ghost in the Machine

In all of the films I have mentioned what emerges from static is the supernatural. *Poltergeist* and *White Noise* both feature ghosts that manifest in various ways from static – in particular that played from TVs – while in *Static* the central character is able to see heaven using a device he makes from a TV, while whenever someone else uses the device they see only static. This reflects the way in which it is common to speak of seeing ghosts on an analogue television broadcast if there is shadowing of the picture due to interference (an effect itself called *ghosting*). In Ken McMullen's film *Ghost Dance*, when asked if he believes in ghosts, Jacques Derrida responds "here, the ghost is me...so ghosts do exist...the modern technology of images...enhances the power of ghosts and their ability to haunt us" [13]. Derrida considers his appearance in the film to be that of a ghost. Subsequently, when asked about his appearance in the film during an interview with Bernard Stiegler in their book *Echographies of Television*, Derrida argues:

At this moment, in this room, night is falling over us. Even if it weren't falling, we are already in night, as soon as we are captured by optical instruments which don't even need the light of day. We are already specters of a "televised." In the nocturnal space in which this image of us, this picture we are in the process of having "taken," is described, it is already night. Furthermore, because we know that, once it has been taken, captured, this image will be reproducible in our absence, because we know this *already*, we are already haunted by this future, which brings our death [14].

Here Derrida builds from a similar point to Taussig. He argues that because our image and our voice can be reproduced and we know this will be possible following our death, we are pierced through by a disappearance we experience that "promises and conceals" a "magic" or "ghostly" apparition or re-apparition [15]. This, he suggests, and it is here that his argument crosses with that of Taussig, is only possible because of a "faith" that stems from our lack of

understanding of how the technology functions [16]. He explains that even if we know how a technology works we don't see how it works and so "our knowledge is incommensurable with the immediate perception that attunes us to technical efficacy" [17]. Applied to the ghosts that emerge from static in some of the films I've mentioned, Derrida's theory suggests that the static as outside trope serves, at least in part, to play out a dramatization not only of the perceived magic of technology, but the way that magic acts on each of us, the way it influences our sense of identity, our life and our death.

Derrida, I find, does not address sufficiently the sonic aspects of the *ghosts* of which he writes. He argues that *specters* and *phantoms*, as distinct from ghosts (*revenants* in his native French), are specifically visible – referencing "the spectacle" and "*phainesthai*" or "appearing to vision" respectively [18]. However, he argues in both cases it is a "night visibility" for they are never fully present and so both remain to some extent effects, like sound [19]. This is even more the case for ghosts, which he suggests are concerned with "coming-back [*revenge*]" and so are not necessarily visible, instead having a presence like that of an echo [20].

Despite our tendency to treat technologies as things on display, or which we might use, he argues that "wherever there are these specters, we are being watched, we sense or think we are being watched" [21]. Here he is referring specifically to when people use technologies that involve a screen, such as is the case in all the examples I have been discussing. He argues that "this flow of light which captures or possesses me, invests me, invades me, or envelops me is not a ray of light, but the source of a possible view: from the point of view of the other" [22]. We can sense that what he describes occurs in *Poltergeist*, *White Noise* and *Static*, as well as *1001 TV Sets (End Piece)*. However, it is static that represents the other and in each example in which the ghostly emerges from the static, the static is heard as much, if not more, than seen. It reaches into the spaces in which it broadcasts, filling them with the other, and yet like the ghosts never becomes fully present.

Noise as Outside

The static as outside trope, as I have argued, presents noise, in the form of static, as not only unintended, loud or interfering but as representing the out-

side. In his book *Genesis*, Michel Serres presents a metaphysics of noise that supports my claim [23]. He theorizes *noise* as a metaphysical outside that is distinct from but represented by the noises of different kinds that are heard. He argues "noise cannot be a phenomenon; every phenomenon is separated from it, a silhouette on a backdrop, like a beacon against the fog" [24]. *Noise* precedes and underlies everything, he claims. He writes:

The *noise* is incapable of differentiation, everything in it is indistinguishable. It is laminar and white; each lamina takes the place of any lamina, white noise, continuous aquarian outpouring, sustained noise of waterfall, a null signal, formless background [25].

Static, approached using Serres' metaphysics of noise, is representative of a metaphysical outside, *noise*. However, this does not mean that static itself constitutes that outside. Serres is clear in his argument that such an outside is inaccessible. He describes it as a "saturation of differences," pointing out that "no difference or complete difference both produce the undifferentiated" such that *noise* can at best be represented, not apprehended in full [26]. Static, in such a way, when heard coming from a television set late at night, signals a lack of signal and in doing so represents the outside that is *noise*. If static blankets a signal without completely covering it, it may be referred to as *snow* but even then it is reduced to something identifiable. The static as outside trope, meanwhile, uses it to signify a metaphysical outside from which meaning emerges, and which therefore, despite being inaccessible, is productive.

David Hall's 1001 TV Sets (End Piece)

David Hall's installation piece *1001 TV Sets (End Piece)* is, when compared to the films I've mentioned, particularly interesting. It is based on his previous work *101 TV Sets*, which was first shown at *The Video Show*, Serpentine Gallery, London in 1975 and is itself in turn based on a work known as *60 TV Sets* that was premiered at the exhibition *A Survey of the Avant-Garde in Britain* at Gallery House, London in 1972 [27, 28]. Both of these works were produced in collaboration with Tony Sinden and featured a number of TV sets – sixty and

one hundred and one respectively – tuned or mistuned to various broadcast signals [29].

Timed to coincide with the shut off of analogue television signals in London, *1001 TV Sets (End Piece)* featured, as the title suggests, one thousand and one TV sets tuned to a variety of stations. Gradually, as the various stations were switched off, each of the sets flicked to static until all of the televisions were left playing and showing nothing but white noise.

In the work, static is all that is left after all the analogue television signals are gone and this can be read in a number of ways, all of which emphasize the conception of static as representing an outside. Although the work does not overtly present technology as magical or present the supernatural as emerging from static, it nonetheless positions static in a similar way to the films I've mentioned. Clearly the work can be considered to critique, or at least provide a visceral experience of, the cacophony of contemporary media – this seems the most obvious reading of both *60 TV Sets* and *101 TV Sets* – and in addition, depending on your point of view, the peace or anxiety of being immersed in static, which in the work is juxtaposed with the TV signals as an outside. However, the timing of the work with the shut down of analogue television signals in London in 2012 suggests more. Hall's work, with this in mind, can be thought of as a mournful tribute to static that calls into question the assumption that it is desirable to eliminate noise, to deny that which is outside the bounds of what is considered meaningful, wherever possible. Serres describes how the grey of a studio floor where "all hues have fallen" is noise, not of possibility but of culmination [30]. He writes "here, the noise is no longer possibility, it is its opposite, it is no longer the font of time, but its culmination" [31]. The static in Hall's work can be considered an example of this, explaining its nostalgic qualities. Yet, it nonetheless is produced from and represents *noise*, the outside. Moreover, the sonic dimensions of the work are not completely "laminar and white" [32]. Instead, though the static on the TV screens is flattened and contained, the white noise that gradually dominates as the stations are shut down fills the space, echoing off the walls. The *noise* remains inaccessible but nonetheless spills into the known as static. Witnessing Hall's work, I mourn the disappearance of static but I do so inspired by the magic of

technology, thinking of the ghosts in *Poltergeist* and imagining the outside.

Conclusion

The static as outside trope is significant for its role in a variety of electronic arts, particularly in film and most recently and poignantly in David Hall's *1001 TV Sets (End Piece)*. Not only does it explain the role of static in these works, it shows how noise is often positioned as outside and explains how this is involved in the development, production and marketing of new telecommunications technologies. Digital television is frequently presented as superior to its analogue predecessors not only because of its high quality pictures and sound but because it eliminates the threat of static, supposedly ensuring audiences see and hear broadcasts free of interference and noise. However, that is a definition of quality dependent on the assumption that interference and noise are always disruptive, not productive, and, as I have shown, this is not necessarily the case.

Digital broadcasting does not allow us to apprehend the outside that static represents. Instead, all that is available to us is signal. Supported by a rhetoric of immediacy, digital technology presents broadcast signals as situated in a striated space in which they are surrounded only by other, regulated, signals, seemingly somehow outside of nature. Digital television broadcasts are either received seemingly intact or break up. If there isn't a signal, or isn't enough signal, for a digital television to receive, the television itself presents one, such as the increasingly familiar message *No Signal*. Paradoxically, this is perhaps not so different from the way static functions – despite being the result of a lack of signal, signalling that there is no signal, a site in which "all hues have fallen" [33]. However, there is one crucial difference: the message *No Signal* is a deliberate function of the technology while static, despite its familiarity, is considered noise. Beyond the simple message that there is no signal, therefore, static represents a metaphysical outside that is indecipherable and yet full of possibilities.

Static is not just electromagnetic interference. As the static as outside trope shows, it is itself meaningful. Static represents not only an absence or loss of signal, in fact itself containing many signals, but a metaphysical outside that is denied by the digital television technology now being adopted in Australia and elsewhere.

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