GOD LIVES IN THE STATIC

Electronic Noise, Synchronicity, Dead Frequencies, and the Possibility That Reality Is Trying to Talk Back

SOFTSPELL STUDIO

OPENING SAMPLE

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The MP3 companion is supplied separately with the Digital Listening Edition. The book remains usable without it.

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Opening sample: prologue and Chapter 1. References used in these excerpts are supplied at the end. The full Digital Listening Edition includes the complete book and companion files.

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PROLOGUE

The Signal

The instrument was built to hear things people could not. For a while, one of the things it heard was a microwave oven.

At the Parkes radio telescope in Australia, researchers had been investigating brief bursts called perytons. Their changing frequencies imitated a feature of astronomical pulses travelling through thin plasma. The events were real measurements, but their source was uncertain. In 2015, a team led by Emily Petroff reported a way to produce them: open a microwave oven before its cycle ended, with the telescope at an appropriate relative angle. Emission escaping during the magnetron's shutdown could account for the local events. The team took care to distinguish those events from an astronomical fast radio burst. They had identified a terrestrial impostor, not reduced an entire class of discoveries to kitchen equipment.[5]

It is an excellent story. It is also a dangerous one to tell badly.

There is a cheap version in which scientists go looking for the secrets of the cosmos and find lunch. You can almost hear the joke completing itself. There is another version in which people notice that something does not fit, investigate their surroundings, devise a test, and make the strange event happen on purpose. That version is less efficient at humiliating anyone. It gives us something better to look at.

Before the test, the observation had room around it. Something had happened. There was a record. The record resisted an immediate explanation. Whatever made it was part of the world, and the world had briefly become larger than the available account of it.

Then somebody opened an appliance.

The explanation changes the object of attention. It may also change the person who was attached to the mystery. An unexplained event can furnish a surprisingly large room inside a life. Hope moves in. Fear brings a chair. The future acquires a window. An answer, when it arrives, can feel like a landlord changing the locks.

We should not confuse that feeling with evidence against the answer. But neither should we pretend the feeling is uninteresting. The story of a signal includes the apparatus that detected it, the cause that produced it, and the minds that found themselves unable to leave it alone. This book concerns all three.

Consider a different scene, invented for the purpose. A person sits at a table with a small radio. It is late enough for the room to feel slightly detached from the rest of the building. Beyond the window, an occasional car passes. The receiver gives out a continuous, grainy sound. The person has been listening for several minutes when an irregularity seems to acquire a contour.

Almost a word.

The person stops moving. The hand that was reaching for a glass remains above the table. The sound continues. Nothing in the room has visibly changed, yet the arrangement of everything has altered. A moment ago someone was listening to a machine. Now someone may be listening to someone.

We have not supplied the word. That omission matters. If I write a name here, you may carry it into every noise that follows. If I make it the name of a dead relative, I will have acquired an emotional force the scene has not earned. If I give the listener an address, a history, and a diagnosis, I will have quietly converted an illustration into a person whom you think you know.

For now, the receiver hisses. The person listens. There is enough in that arrangement to keep us occupied.

Perhaps the sound contains speech from an ordinary transmitter. Perhaps the receiver is producing an artifact. Perhaps the person has found a phrase in material that was never spoken. Perhaps a recording would allow us to distinguish some of these possibilities. Perhaps the record would be too poor. An investigation does not become more honest by promising that every uncertainty will eventually be settled.

Nor does it become more adventurous by declaring that uncertainty has already settled everything in favour of a ghost.

The strange part begins a little earlier than the dispute usually does. It begins at the instant a sound stops feeling like a sound and starts feeling addressed. An occurrence acquires a second person. You.

Human beings have built many instruments for approaching that instant. Radios and telescopes. Cards and coins. Tape machines. Books opened at chance. Rooms made quiet enough to magnify a small event. More recently, machines that return fluent language when we tell them what hurts. The devices differ. Their histories differ. Their standards of success should differ too. But each can bring a person to a threshold where finding something and being answered begin to look alike.

What if the universe doesn't communicate in sentences?

It is a good question partly because it conceals several others. What would communication mean without a sender? How would we recognize a message whose language we did not share? Could something tell us the truth without intending to tell us anything? And how would we distinguish a revelation from the feeling that a revelation had occurred?

Some of these questions concern causes. Some concern conventions. Some concern what a person is allowed to make of an event after its causes are known. A single experiment will not answer them all. Neither will a single insult.

The skeptical vocabulary is often correct and occasionally used as a way to stop looking. Pareidolia. Coincidence. Expectation. Words that name a process can be mistaken for explanations of every instance. The occult vocabulary has a different temptation. Resonance. Synchronicity. Contact. Words that make an experience vivid can be mistaken for measurements of the world beyond it. The interesting work begins when a word has to earn the claim being made in its name.

We will meet recordings interpreted as voices of the dead, broadcasts whose listeners were never supposed to understand them, and astronomical observations that became something more remarkable than the first explanation available. We will also spend time with a room, a shuffled deck, and an ordinary notebook. The notebook is less glamorous than the rest. It may prove the more demanding instrument.

You do not have to become a believer to enter this book. You do not have to perform disbelief either. If you are convinced that there is no

supernatural sender, the work of interpretation remains. If you believe there may be one, the need to distinguish an experience from its proposed cause remains. Those are not competing admission requirements. They are conditions under which a conversation can continue.

The title on the cover makes a larger claim than the evidence inside can establish. I intend it as a pressure placed on a question. A god may be a person with intentions, an ultimate reality beyond persons, a name for overwhelming significance, or a word somebody reaches for when ordinary description feels too small. Those possibilities should not borrow one another's evidence while we are distracted by the typography.

The practical companion is called The Static Experiment. It is a deliberately made recording of generated textures and disclosed tones. It contains no hidden intelligible speech. Its purpose is to give attention something ambiguous to meet. Later in the book, you can try a short listening procedure and preserve what happens before explaining it. You can also skip the exercise. The book does not keep a list of people who failed to hear something.

The experience may be eerie. It may be moving. You may spend twenty minutes thinking about an errand. None of those outcomes needs to be improved into a claim of contact. The recorder will survive your disappointment. So will the universe.

Return to the imagined person at the table. The sound almost forms again. A familiar impatience appears: either say it or go away. It is the impatience of wanting ambiguity to become a relationship. The person reaches for a notebook and writes what they think they heard. Then, underneath, what they think it means.

For once, the two entries are allowed to remain separate.

At Parkes, an explanation came through the door of an oven. Elsewhere in this book, an explanation will remain incomplete. We should be able to live with both kinds of ending. The world is under no obligation to preserve our preferred atmosphere, but an ordinary cause does not make an encounter unworthy of attention. Sometimes learning how a thing works lets us hear it more closely.

The person at the table waits. The radio gives out its small weather. Beyond the window, a car moves away. Nothing has introduced itself.

CHAPTER 1

In the Beginning Was Noise

Start with the receiver before anyone turns it on.

It is tempting to imagine an empty box waiting to be filled. Somewhere else a transmitter will produce a signal; the box will open a path for it; a voice will arrive. In this picture, noise is what happens when something gets in the way of a clean encounter. The proper condition of the channel is a kind of absence.

An actual receiver is less obliging. It is made of materials at temperatures above absolute zero, surrounded by electromagnetic activity, connected to components with responses of their own. In 1928, J. B. Johnson reported measurements of thermal electrical noise in conductors, while Harry Nyquist supplied a theoretical treatment of the phenomenon. A listening instrument can contribute fluctuation without waiting for a mysterious visitor to interfere with it.[2, 3]

The box belongs to the world it is being used to inspect. That should be obvious. We repeatedly manage to forget it.

Imagine buying a small receiver from a seller who calls it a window into hidden frequencies. The description gestures toward a real achievement: instruments can transform signals inaccessible to unaided senses into forms we can perceive. But the word window encourages a particular fantasy. It suggests transparent access. Whatever appears on the other side seems to have been waiting there, complete, for the glass to reveal it.

A receiver is closer to an arrangement of questions. It responds to some inputs more strongly than others. It filters, amplifies, converts, and displays. Its output is the result of those operations. The shape of a question can make a previously unnoticed thing available, but it can also give different causes a similar appearance. A whistle in a speaker may carry less information about its origin than the confidence with which we call it a whistle suggests.

This does not make instrumentation untrustworthy in principle. It makes the instrument part of the explanation. If the event changes when the cable

moves, the cable has acquired a role in the story. If the event disappears when a particular stage is bypassed, that absence matters. If the event returns every time the refrigerator starts, the kitchen has entered the laboratory again.

An occult instrument promises to hear what ordinary life excludes. Engineering wants that too, though it is less satisfied with the adjective sensitive on its own. Sensitive to what? Under which conditions? With what response to the things we wish it would ignore? The difference between a useful instrument and an impressive box can reside in those unromantic questions.

Noise itself has several ordinary meanings. A sound can be noise because you dislike it. It can be noise because its source is unrecognized. In a communication system, it can be interference with the recovery of a wanted signal. In mathematics and engineering, particular noise models have precise statistical properties. These meanings overlap, but they are not interchangeable.

The neighbour's music may be noise to you and the point of the evening to the neighbour. Its acoustic structure does not disappear because you wish it would. The same sound can change its practical role without changing its physical cause. If you are transcribing a conversation, an air conditioner may obscure your evidence. If you are repairing the air conditioner, that same vibration may be the evidence you need.

There is something philosophically unsettling in this small reversal. We want signal and noise to arrive wearing permanent badges. Instead, a task helps determine which is which. Yet the task does not give us permission to hear anything we like. You cannot repair a motor by declaring its grinding irrelevant. The world still pushes back. The distinction is relational, not lawless.

Try a modest experiment in imagination. You sit in a room and listen for the quietest continuous sound. Then listen for the next sound that begins and ends. Then for a sound you can alter by moving. No secret intention has been uncovered. You have reorganized your access to the same place. The room now seems to contain more events because you asked more than one question of it.

Attention can enlarge experience without adding a new object. That fact will return in stranger clothing later. For the moment, a chair and a faint hum are enough.

In 1948, Claude Shannon published A Mathematical Theory of Communication. Its fundamental engineering problem concerned reproducing, exactly or approximately, a message selected elsewhere. For that purpose he separated semantic importance from the statistical possibilities and constraints of transmission. His measure of information concerns uncertainty within a model of possible messages. It is not a meter for the emotional or spiritual weight of what is transmitted.[1]

The separation is useful. It permits us to study a channel without pretending to calculate what a sentence will mean to the person receiving it.

Here is an original miniature channel. Two lamps stand in a window, one blue and one amber. Before leaving, you agree with a friend that blue means the spare key is under the pot, and amber means it is with the neighbour. The arrangement offers two equally likely alternatives. If it works, observing the light settles which of those alternatives applies. The information is useful because an agreement, an actual situation, and a working apparatus already connect the light to something outside itself.

Now change the arrangement. Amber almost always appears; blue is uncommon. Seeing blue is less expected. That does not make the blue light a more sacred object. It changes the uncertainty associated with the observation under the model. If an unrelated tenant installs a blue lamp for decorative reasons, you may still have a surprising observation while losing the causal agreement that made it an answer about the key.

The distinction is easy to lose when a sequence looks unusually complicated. Imagine receiving a thousand randomly selected characters. A short rule may not reproduce their exact order. Now imagine receiving a familiar sentence about the key. The sentence is structured, predictable in several respects, and more useful for getting into the house. Difficulty of prediction and usefulness to a person are different properties. Neither should impersonate the other.

An unfamiliar output is not automatically an intelligent output. A complicated output is not automatically a profound one. You can test an

alleged signal by asking what it enables: reproduce a selection, identify an event, distinguish a source, guide an action, or support a shared convention. Without such a question, announcing that a recording contains information can become a ceremonial way to say that something happened.

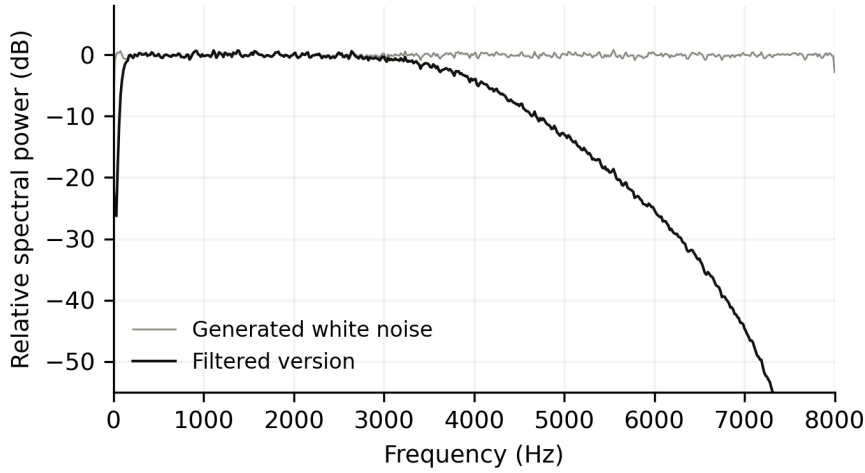
Something usually has happened. The interesting part is finding out what kind.

Consider a row of marks scratched into a surface. They may be a message in a language you do not know. They may be the tracks of an animal. They may be damage. A resemblance between the marks and writing is a reason to investigate, not a completed account of their origin. More scrutiny might reveal repeated forms, a material tool, a cultural setting, or the route by which the surface was damaged. The initial fascination survives best when it can accept correction.

Sound invites a similar mistake because it unfolds in time and disappears. A short fragment may seem to contain the rhythm of speech. You play it again. Now a possible word gives the rhythm an outline. On the next replay, the outline seems to prove that the word had been there all along. We will examine that process closely. Before we do, it helps to notice how much has already entered the account: a recording, playback choices, a listener, a proposed language, and the memory of the previous attempt.

The word static tends to hide that company. It suggests an undifferentiated field, one substance against which any clear shape must have arrived from elsewhere. Real recordings contain histories. Bandwidth has been limited. Microphones and speakers have responses. A moving cable may contribute an event. Someone chose the gain. A file may have been compressed. The floor beneath an explanation is already furnished.

White noise has a more specific technical meaning than the hiss between stations. Ideal white noise has flat power spectral density: equal bandwidths carry equal expected power. A finite recording has limited bandwidth, and its measured spectrum fluctuates rather than tracing a perfectly level line. The headphones, room, and hearing of the listener alter the encounter again.[47]



Synthetic example: generated white noise and a filtered version. Relative levels, not a recorded transmission.

Other constructions distribute power differently. A noise weighted toward higher frequencies may seem fine-grained or abrasive. A darker filtered sound can resemble wind behind a wall. These descriptions name possible impressions, not hidden sources. By slowly moving a filter, a composer can make a constant process seem to approach or withdraw. By changing its level relative to a tone, the composer can make the tone appear and disappear without moving anything across a room.

The companion recording makes such choices openly. It contains generated noise, filtering, deliberately placed tones, and changing levels. Its local detail is not individually composed note by note, but its conditions are arranged. Randomness has been invited to work within a frame. It has not relieved the maker of responsibility for the frame.

This is a useful correction to the romance of pure noise. A random procedure still arrives through an apparatus: a coin and a hand, a generator and a seed, a deck and a shuffle. Even when the process has the statistical property you want, choosing to consult that process for this question is an act. The meaning of that choice does not become a physical property of the coin.

Sometimes what an observer calls noise is exactly what another observer has been waiting to find. In 1965, Arno Penzias and Robert

Wilson reported excess antenna temperature at 4080 megacycles per second, now written as 4.08 gigahertz. Their short paper described a residual contribution beyond expected sources and directed readers to a companion paper's proposed cosmological interpretation. The observation became part of the evidence for the cosmic microwave background.[4]

The distinction between unwanted fluctuation and useful evidence changed because the scientific question changed. An excess that persisted after attention to known sources acquired a different role. It did not become a message because its discoverers wished for one. An investigation connected it to an explanatory account that other observations could examine.

The temptation is to extract a mystical slogan: the universe had been whispering to us all along. As metaphor, that may be attractive. As an account of the result, it adds an intention the observation did not establish. A physical trace can reveal an event without anyone having arranged the trace to greet its eventual reader.

We depend on that ordinary form of revelation constantly. A crack in plaster tells you something about a building without the building having decided to communicate. Smoke can warn a traveller who was never its intended audience. A tide line on a wall is legible after the water has gone. These events have causes, and their interpretation can be correct or mistaken. Their lack of a sender does not make them unintelligible.

The deeper temptation runs in the opposite direction. If meaning can emerge from apparently meaningless material, perhaps nothing is ever meaningless. That sentence sounds generous until it becomes a demand. The person listening must now find the message. A texture is no longer allowed to be a texture. Every unremarkable event begins to look like a failure of attention. A philosophy of openness has acquired the working hours of a bad job.

We can leave room for meaning without requiring it to be encoded in advance. A stone can become a paperweight. A piece of discarded timber can become a table. A sound can become the private emblem of a summer. Materials and purposes meet; something useful or beautiful may result. It would be odd to insist that the timber had secretly delivered the table to the person who made it.

The analogy has limits. A table is visibly assembled. A perceived word may arrive all at once, before the work involved in hearing it becomes available to reflection. That speed can make a constructed fit feel like a discovered fact. Later chapters will ask how to preserve the experience without giving the speed of recognition more authority than it deserves.

For now, imagine two boxes on the seller's table. The first is advertised as a receiver. You ask which frequencies it receives. The seller says the frequencies cannot be measured. You ask what would make the output change. The seller says the source responds to openness. You ask whether a disconnected antenna changes anything. The seller says doubt can block the signal.

The second box produces a broad, shifting sound. Its maker tells you that it is arranged to invite associative listening. You are part of the surprise. No claim is made that an unknown intelligence chose the output. You may still hear a city, a breathing animal, or a room you have not entered in years. Knowing the construction does not necessarily spoil that encounter. It changes what the seller is entitled to infer from your report.

The first box protects an explanation from every possible outcome. The second leaves the work of interpretation visible. This book is interested in what remains available under the second arrangement. There is enough uncertainty in the encounter between material and attention without manufacturing a false history for the material.

The receiver on our table has not become transparent. It has become more interesting. We can ask what arrives from outside, what the apparatus contributes, and what a listener begins to do with the result. A noise floor, a filter, and an expectation belong to the account. None needs to be disguised as a theological discovery.

Leave the receiver on. Listen for the different things it might make audible. Do not ask it for a sentence yet.

The hiss has not become an answer. It has become a subject.

SOURCE RECORD

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