

Signal / Noise

*“Some say it's conversation
But you hear incoherent cries
Like static between two stations
William insists it ain't just noise”*
P. Blegvad - Blue Eyed Wiliam, 1983

All human activity and experience is organised in space and time. Yet we understand little of the origin of space and time. That is to say that we can trace, in part through technologically enhanced forms of observation, the points of origin of existing things, while we cannot trace the origin of existence itself. Bound by the finitude of our own existence, as mortal human beings, we are prone to extend this specific experience of time, the passing between birth and death, to a cosmological scale. To understand as it were what it was that gave birth to our universe, to all universes (existing and possible / potential).

Mother, that which gives birth, the point of origin, sits at the heart of the word 'matter' in the latin root of the word, 'mat', signifying 'mother' - that which gave birth, the point of origin. An origin that is lost after our inception into this existing universe. The moment of its final loss, when mother dies, invariably is a moment of absolute existential crisis: the loss of origin is an absolute 'terror' (an existential fear), a point of absolute darkness, quickly blotted out by the light of existence.

Despite this overexposure by what actually exists, the here and now, a nagging feeling remains behind, vaguely discernible in the background noise of daily flows of activity. Where is the lost origin? How did I come into existence, how did all that which actually exists come into existence? What preceded this point of origin? Similar in kind and significance to the analysis of background noise in cosmic radiation, which might give us clues as to the origin of our existing universe. And yet the answer to these questions eludes us for the infinity time.

Can we get closer to the point of origin by examining these noise patterns, looking for traces, signals from a prehuman past? Is there meaning, semantics, in these emanations of noise of activity and radiation? Can we make them intelligible? Can we create technological perceptual protheses that are adequate to the scale and intensity of cosmic data generation?

A curious effect of such perceptual machines is that they very quickly start to operate at a scale and intensity (speed) that transcends the limits of the human cognitive apparatus. To see requires time, a minimal exposure time, beneath which nothing is visible at all. These perceptual machines, operating in a machine time of ultra short duration, exceed and disappear from human perception. In doing so they render whatever it is that they perceive entirely obscure to us. We have no access to their operations because their duration is too short for the human cognitive apparatus to perceive anything at all.

All these questions are at the heart of the artistic quest that the works of Katarina Petrovic encircle - principally without offering us an answer.

We might ask, is this quest for the point of origin and its own coming into being, therefore a principally absurd undertaking?

The answer is “Yes!”, but the undertaking is nonetheless an inextricable part of human existence.

*“These noises, do they serve a purpose?
Or are they merely arbitrary?”*
P. Blegvad - Blue Eyed Wiliam, 1983

Eric Kluitenberg is a cultural and media theorist, writer, educator and curator, living and working in The Netherlands.