Radio Interference

Grapes Hill is not particularly steep, but like anywhere in Norfolk, an incline has a name. It was a bright sunny morning in May and the Peugeot van cruised the final section of Grapes Hill, towards the traffic lights. The radio was tuned to BBC Radio 3 and the presenter was providing a preamble to the next piece of music, Jonathan Dove's 'Vast Ocean of Light', performed by the choir of Westminster Abbey. Dove's contemporary piece is inspired by Phineas Fletcher's 17thC poem Vast Ocean of Light, which starts,

Vast Ocean of light, whose rayes surround
The Universe, who know'st nor ebb, nor shore,

It is prosaic to mention this, but just at the bottom of Grapes Hill, for whatever reason, the radio in the van struggles to pick up a good signal. Crackles of interference perforate the choral opening and continue through the first bars with electronic flaps, pops, and crumples. I remember hearing that radio interference contains static from the afterglow of the Big Bang. That thought came into my mind and I have to say I was struck by the happenchance conflation of static on the van radio with that of ethereal choral music itself responding to the magnitude of the universe.

Let us think of the Big Bang as a pod cast, where cosmic microwave background serves as reruns of the original broadcast. Did anyone pick up these radio signals before the invention of radio? Ten thousand years ago did anyone touch an acid-bearing fruit to a copper-rich mineral deposit and taste the weak signal of quantum fluctuations and then look up to the stars? Strange to think of those signals bouncing through the expanding universe like erratic projectiles in a pinball machine, occasionally finding a receiver and flapping, popping, and crumpling as the score goes up and up and up.

My grandfather was an amateur radio enthusiast at the turn of the last century, at first building simple crystal sets and then progressing to valves and then transistors as technology advanced. Numbed for life by the horror of the First World War, he found solace in constructing mechanisms that could amplify the distant calls from other countries. In about 1970 he gave me a small transistor radio that he had purchased at a discount through some kind of breakfast cereal promotion. It was the size of a pack of butter, with a simple lateral tuning dial and a small ariel that clipped neatly to the top of the set. To switch it on you scrolled the rotating on/off button, which doubled as volume control. There was a gentle resistance as the reed mechanism of the switch advanced to the on position, followed by a softened click (more a domk), which was accompanied by an unruly cackle of static, like audible sleepy dust cracking from early morning eyelids. There was no way of avoiding this abrasive awakening, no matter how one turned that switch. I took the transistor radio set to school with me, showed it to friends in the playground and then into assembly at the end of the day. In the middle of assembly, I pulled the radio from my pocket, and edged the milled on/off/volume disc downwards with my thumbnail until the domk and then the crackle, and then eyes of everyone looking for the source of the offending broadcast. I avoided detection, avoided confiscation of the radio, but on the way home dunked it into a deep puddle of water, Mott the Hoople drowning and spluttering and eventually silenced. The radio dried out but never worked after that.

Nostalgia is stupefying, I know, and it is ageing. But I do harbour fondness for the vagaries of analogue systems. I sort of get the ‘warmth of vinyl’ thing, but more stirring than that is the sound of medium wave, long wave and, especially, short wave radio transmissions. The wow and flutter, the hiss, the mournful whistling, the phantoms, the music from the desert, the rapid morse code that blips throughout the night. These are my wireless Proustian triggers. Radio enthusiasts give poetic names to the various types of interference such as spurious emissions, fundamental overload, and harmonics. There is something enchanting about the thought of short-wave transmissions bouncing off the stratosphere, being influenced by cloud formations, tall buildings, and flocks of migrating birds. Head under the blankets and radio set tuned deliberately between stations, these enigmatic transmissions assumed an exotic guise, radio oasis, whispers from beyond, messages from deep space, the chattering of satellites.

The notion of interference can be viewed from the perspective of reduction as well as addition. Signal loss, data loss, corruption, obliteration, and jamming. This is beautifully expressed in Katie Paterson’s artwork Earth-Moon-Earth, whereby Paterson uses a transmitting technique known as ‘moon bounce’ to relay Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata in Morse code from earth to the moon and back to earth. When received back on earth, the relayed data is translated into musical notation, which then plays autonomously on a grand piano. Some of the data is lost in the process, deflected by atmospheric conditions resulting in a rendition of Moonlight Sonata with some notes missing. It is left to us to imagine where those notes have gone. Perhaps absorbed into the water droplets of clouds in the stratosphere, to fall as gentle precipitation around Bonn.

The thing is, digital transmission has no hinterland, no in-between or un-intended. It is of course a stream of binary data that can only corrupt itself. Glitch is the poetics of digital transmission. But glitch so often causes a defective language that yields no reading. The DAB radio has nothing between channels and the digital LCD television will not oblige the viewing of anything other than a received channel. Digital transmissions are on, or they are off. If they glitch, there is an informative pop-up text notifying you of this.

My van does not have a DAB radio. I take the slip road off St Crispins and turn into Upper Green Lane, where the studios are situated. The four-story red brick building that houses OUTPOST studios dwarfs the van and as always happens, Radio 3 is mostly lost in the shadow of spurious emissions, fundamental overload and harmonics.