**Infra-mince and the poetics of gas:**
Liner notes, vinyl records & the difference that makes a difference

Lisa Gye & Darren Tofts (Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne)

Sometimes – often in science and always in art – one does not know what the problems were till after they have been solved.

Gregory Bateson, *Steps to An Ecology of Mind*.

Our eye finds it more comfortable to respond to a given stimulus by reproducing once more an image that it has produced many times before, instead of registering what is different and new in an impression.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*.

What follows is a series of conceits that explore a form of molecular semiotics that transform classical album covers from the “easy listening” tradition of popular music into canonical texts from the history of ideas. These provocations describe the uncanny epiphanies that may occur when, for instance, a Shirley Bassey album becomes *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* by Luce Irigaray.

![Image of album cover](classical-gas.com)
or *Music in the Morgan Manner* segues into a fighting title by Roseanne Allucquere Stone.

![Classical Gas album cover](https://classical-gas.com)

classical-gas.com

Drawing on Marcel Duchamp’s readymade concept of *infra-mince*, or infrathin, as well as Gregory Bateson’s informatic “difference that makes a difference” our ongoing *Classical Gas* project captures in freeze frame this poetic moment of transformation from one semiotic state to another. As in physics or digital states of information exchange, the fine and elusive epiphany of transformation is always in the eye of the beholder. Art isn’t necessarily about what you see, but what it prompts you to see.

**Inhalation: the molecular poetics of infra-mince**

Duchamp was interested in neglected and barely visible culture, ephemeral stuff that is ignored such as urinals, hatstands or pieces of string. The most audacious and obscure instance of this was the po-faced concept of *infra-mince*. This was an obtuse and highly intellectual thought experiment to do with questions of molecular and imperceptible change in the ordinary and the banal. Like the difference between print in its unread and read states, forms cast in the same mould, the warmth of a seat recently vacated by someone on a train, the smell of the mouth in tobacco smoke when exhaled. [1] Or for us a new *Classical Gas* t-shirt that has been worn.

In terms of *Classical Gas* the semantics of each album title is an analogue of difference and replication at the cellular level. Body snatching an album cover by German composer Werner Müller, shape-shifting or becoming Other in Photoshop changes identity at the level of the pixel, the *physis* and *physics* of digital visuality. So too the chameleon-like morphing of bodies whereby Müller rages as American literary wild man Leslie Fiedler:
Ambiguity: philosophy as popular entertainment
Curiously Duchamp insisted that you could not define the infrathin but only show examples of it. *Coldness and Cruelty* by Gilles Deleuze juxtaposes the image of Max Bygraves and the implied identity of the French philosopher. The image of an English variety entertainer also elides with Deleuze’s study of the enigmatic writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch which gives the album its name. Further, the infrathin play of time: is Deleuze lighting up, or being told to butt out? His countenance suggests distraction, a pause in the act of smoking. And an afterthought: will that match light his cigarette or burn his fingers?

So *infra mince* as a differential effect of the juxtaposition of multiple forms of communication in which text, image, genre and an implied way of seeing all three
becomes a discrete and manifold whole. Variation and replication occur at the same time as a kind of compressed semiotic inhalation and exhalation, as well as seeing and seeing double.

Ambiguity is a form of détournement that persuasively mixes one channel of semiotic information with another such as The Elisabeth-Serenade by the Gunther Kallmann Choir and Revolution in Poetic Language by Julia Kristeva. This album presumes an interval between two things that we can perceive and only imagine at the same time. In the material world of cardboard and pressed vinyl there is no Revolution in Poetic Language album, but within the infrathin poetics of Classical Gas there is.

**Liminality:** *in through the out door*

Ambiguity presumes the possibility of two different states co-existing, if obliquely, with one another. The imputed album is liminal, a border zone or threshold between states of difference, between what is the mix and what could become the remix. The relationship between album title and cover art is an obscure palimpsest of two possible states flickering; an uncanny ambivalence that leaves us, after James Joyce, “in twosome twiminds”. [2] Liminality evocatively captures this sense of double vision, an ocular duplicity that partitions as well as occludes two different spaces or states mediated by a threshold. As in the totemic scene from John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956) when John Wayne stands enframed by the doorway of the Jorgensen homestead. The perspective of the viewer is deep within its dark and cool recesses. In stark contrast the harsh sunburnt brightness of the Texas desert glares beyond that portal. This resonant image, seen in so many variations throughout the history of cinema, is an apt figure for thinking about Classical Gas album cover art as liminal, between states in transition, waiting for something. As in Susan Sontag’s *Notes on Camp:*
But to invoke two such states in anticipation of recognition is a provisional assumption that exists in an ideal time of viewing in which both titles (album and text) are known and recognized. This presumes the bombast and archival mastery of Joyce’s “ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia”; a figure imagined in *Finnegans Wake* reading *Finnegans Wake*. [3] The visual epiphany of seeing double may or may not happen, since the slender membrane between two different visual codes in collision is not immediately obvious. *What it is* becomes a judgement made by the viewer on the presumption of a double presence. Or not.

**Exhalation:** *the difference that makes a difference*
Gregory Bateson may be uncannily describing the process that makes *this* album possible when he describes information that undergoes “successive transformation in a circuit”. [4] The difference between an overt or implied state takes possession of its *a priori* Other in an act of body-snatching:
The visual collision of album title and image is an abrupt, momentary rupture. It creates a pause for thought, a “delay” of the kind Duchamp talked about in relation to the *Large Glass*. [5] As *Classical Gas* is fundamentally an image-text project neither can be separated from the other. The accompanying captions or liner notes denotate and detonate simultaneously— another grammatical difference that contributes a third level of meaning to the overall virtuality of an album. Here, for instance, liner notes for a Hi-Fi Stereo Demonstration record for a Kriesler phonograph morph into *Philosophy in the Bedroom* by the Marquis de Sade:

The Family Romance of Eugénie, Dolmancé and Madame de Saint-Ange. Donatien Alphonse François’s tale of the coming of age story of a voluptuary, recorded in “Single-Unit” Stereo Sound. In this “Dramatic Club and Play Reading” presentation, de Sade’s exotic parable of the boudoir comes to life as a breakthrough in musical equipment design. The “luxury finish” completes the perfect listening experience in Kriesler hi-fi innovation. [6]

The syntactic combination of acute Gallic accents and voluptuaries in the bedroom may seem inappropriate and out of place in a comfortable scene of familial harmony. The sensation of imposture, method acting or parody is difficult to not see or hear, or at the very least intuit.

In other titles the semiotic channels are neither ambiguous nor ambivalent:

In *An Evening with Ted Colless* the liner notes denotate while the image detonates. Unlike *Coldness and Cruelty* the absence of an iconographic image of the recording artist and implied author provides an obvious contrast and rupture. It simply is what it is: an album featuring the Byronic cultural theorist Ted Colless at Town Hall. The tantalizing incertitude at play here (as with all titles in the *Classical Gas* catalogue) is what exactly would we hear on such a record, especially with liner notes like this:
The three Dons, Juan, Quixote and Giovanni all woven together. Ted Colless. In this celebrated night at Town Hall, Ted performs selections from his *The Error of My Ways* in his distinctive, oneiric way. A flâneur of space and time, rhapsodist of rhyme and reason, satirist of bombast and pretension, Ted warms to his audience as they holler for more. [7]

What do these liner notes suggest about what we think we might hear? How does Colless perform selected essays and in what ways is this performance dream-like? These liner notes are the “bits” of information that make a difference after Bateson, the difference between a present state and a “preferred” or implied state. [8]

**The talking cure: erotica and exotica**

Really difficult to know what we might hear on *Totem and Taboo*. And the problematic of sound and silence is gestured to in the logorrhoea of the talking cure.

Since its first release in 1913, enthusiasm for *Totem and Taboo* has been tremendous. Here, the Austrian maestro romps through one of his most requested pieces, giving it new appeal. Savour it with a Wiener Rohkost and perhaps a glass of your favourite Spätlese. A real pleasure for all the family to enjoy. Beware the blunted stylus! A worn stylus will impair the quality of sound reproduction you hear. Make sure your stylus is in good condition before you play this record. If in doubt, have it checked by your dealer—or buy a new stylus. [9]

Who knows how Freud “romps” through *Totem and Taboo*? But this undecidability is the frisson of all titles in the *Classical Gas* catalogue, as well as the *jouissance* of imagining the unknowable and embracing the tension of either/or without having to make a decision. The aesthetic of *Classical Gas* is erotic rather than hermeneutic, a reverse strip tease in which garments are put on illicitly rather than removed illicitly. The undecidability of either/or can’t be resolved and tantalises in terms of its
possibilities that are not mandated by the “virtual co-existence” (after Deleuze) of writing, spoken word, image and sound. [10]

After Derrida after Bateson after Duchamp, this poiesis is the différance that makes a difference. Classical Gas albums deconstruct both channels of signification (vintage album cover art and theoretical or philosophical title) in the pure sense of deconstruction as a play of differences, not critical or hermeneutical analysis. Both signifying chains differ and defer at the same time, instantiating an undecidability that is vaporous and gas-like that drifts and is never static or fixed. The spectator contributes to the creative act of making a possible album by interpreting what could be or what might be. Duchamp talks of this collaborative process as a transubstantiation in which the spectator determines “the weight of the work on the esthetic scale”. [11] Each Classical Gas title is therefore not a relay but a delay in invoking an imaginary, fabulatory or real album to come. In this way each Classical Gas title, like the Large Glass, is “definitely unfinished”. [12]

**Gas, steam & other vapours: speaking of the devil**

And what of gas and steam and vapours and clouds? As Steven Connor notes, “For us, the problems of deleterious air are confined almost entirely to the respiratory and alimentary systems. For other periods, air was much more generally diffused through and operative on the bodily frame….although air arrived or arose in the lungs and stomach, it could work its way damagingly into bones, teeth and all the organs, including the brain”. [13] Classical Gas may then bring on the “vapours”, an evocatively named condition which was thought to loosen the body, almost literally to unstring it.

In The Anatomy of Melancholy Robert Burton quotes the Dutch physician Levinus Lemnius on the dangers of tempestuous air, like gas, which pulled the frame of the senses apart and for this reason it could be hijacked by devils:

> Besides, the devil many times takes his opportunity in such storms, and when the humours by the air be stirred, he goes in with them, exagitates our spirits, and vexeth our souls; as the sea-waves, so are the spirits and humours in our bodies tossed with tempestuous winds and storms. [14]

The colloquial phrase “speak of the devil” captures that moment of serendipity and coincidence when someone of whom you have been talking in their absence suddenly appears in your presence, on television or some other form of mediation. This unexpected visitation suggests that Classical Gas is bedevilled or rather bedazzled after the title of Stanley Donen’s 1967 film. Like other forms of arcana Classical Gas titles are mysterious but also demonically possessed, ventriloquising the past as if in need of exorcism to rid it of its devils, stink and bad air. But Classical Gas “stanks” to a different kind of funk, more James Brown than Aleister Crowley.

**Conclusion: daddio of the raddio**

Classical Gas finally is a kind of “steam radio”, an imaginary device that “belongs to some comfortable but superannuated past”, vaporous, elusive and always on the verge of evaporation into nothingness. [15] As a curious aside when we searched for steam radio Google asked us if we really meant “stream radio” presuming to know better,
like an executive producer telling a radio DJ what’s hot and what’s not. And of course Apple already has a streaming app called “Steam Radio”. But the joke depends upon the recognition and acceptance of a technological order of succession, in which the digital-electronic is preceded by the electric and the electric is preceded by the steam-driven. Like “the cloud” that we are exhorted to embrace by our technological overlords it is all about looking back: to steam, to the ether, to vapours. They urge us not to look down at the dirt beneath our feet or at our footprint, because that gaze leads to the realisation that we are living in and contributing to an ecological crisis. Instead look up at the clouds and consign the past to the past, just in case we may learn something from it. Looking back, behind and beyond what we see may provide us with the glimpse of a presence lurking fugitively just out of sight but not beyond perception.

So breathe in, breathe out. Listen to the book. Read the album. Buy a t-shirt. Don’t learn from the past and then, as some famous classical gasbag once said, be condemned to repeat it again and again. Easy listening and curious looking is always a risk. And it’s always a gas.
ENDNOTES


[3] ibid., p.120.


REFERENCES


