

CAREFUL WHISPERS, OR ANIMATED CUTS OF EATING  
MATTER AND TECHNIQUES FOR DARK THINKING

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# Careful Whispers, or Animated Cuts of Eating Matter and Techniques for Dark Thinking

Stephen Loo, University of New South Wales

## INSTRUCTIONS to Editors:

**T**he text is organized around three FRAMES: (1) a performance-lecture, (2) a food performance, and (3) this piece of Writing. Position: Center Justified. Font: Times New Roman. 10 pt.  
Watch out for double quotation marks for speech in FRAMES 1 and 2. There is a fourth frame (wall, perhaps?), which is technically outside these frames. Position: Right Justified. Font: Times New Roman (Italics). 10 pt.  
INSTRUCTIONS to Readers. Position: Right Justified. Font: Times New Roman. Square Brackets. 10 pt.  
Note: FRAME 3 will weave in and out of other FRAMES, so I will not always have instructions to bring the readers out of the preceding FRAME.  
INSTRUCTIONS to web designer to locate video clips: Position: Centered. Caption Font: Times New Roman (Italics). Please leave instructions “CUT to FRAME # or TRACK #” etc. in the text.  
“CUT” points are in caps. Position: Left justified. This is a reading instruction, but I am open to typesetting and UI and UX suggestions for online version.  
Finally, leave INSTRUCTIONS above after following, here, as it is part of the work.

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[Read with headphones on.  
Best accompanied by eating crunchy food like crisps or nuts, or chewing gum, to taste.  
Pair with a slurpy drink, preferably alcoholic. Use a straw for enhanced effect.]

“The thought immediately preceding this action.”

## CUT to FRAME 1:

Phoenix, Arizona, USA. Sometime in late 2019. In a darkened upstairs room of a bar, amidst strains of beer glasses tinkering and muffled hilarity, the Analysts gather and sit, closely and maskless—after all, this was a time before the Great Pandemic—as though an audience about to witness a performance-lecture. In dark clothes, the Analysand (who is also the Writer of this article) paces . . .



**CUT to FRAME 4:**

*Dear Reader, four lines into the Writing, and already we face a Lacanian impossibility. It is as Analystsand that I write my unconscious; but it cannot be my unconscious that is writing. However, you the Reader are reading this because I have given language to my unconscious, reduced it to knowledge, and offered it up as speech for interpretation by the Analysts at the performance-lecture and as writing to you here. To Lacan, this act is “a reduction [of the unconscious] to the impossible, to what does not stop not being written” (see Cardenas 2010). (Lacan’s reference to the unconscious relates to the Real of sexual relationships, but that’s another story).*

**CUT to FRAME 1:**

. . . paces in solidarity with the blackness and the “gloaming” (after Tarkovsky; see Tawa 2010) of the trigger warning on screen:

“G. General Audiences. All ages permitted. WARNING: some sounds and words may have lulling effects or induce nausea. Or both. Feel free to fall asleep or leave suddenly.”

The Leader of the Analysts, as if sensing my rising anxiety, whispers, “Just tell us about your Techniques, how you think, how you do it . . . you know, how you animate in your work.” He adds as if for good measure, “You’ll be fine . . .” He trails off, distracted by the faces of the Analysts worried by the trigger warning, by the now-horrified expression on his Co-Leader’s face, and the possibility of the room emptying even before the start.

“Do you mean my psychoanalytical methods? I will talk about eating. Hearing eating, in fact. Too weird?” “It has to do with the animation of life and death,” I continue, after a pause, in the hope of adding brevity to a lecture that is already shaping up to sound like non-sense psycho-babble. The fact that this is what my artwork *Careful Whispers* literally sounds like does not escape me.

I thought to myself, “This lecture is ‘about’ the May 2019 artwork. It is not the work. But yet it is: as a work, it lives in the mediated sounds and vision that the Audience-Analysts will experience here and now.” This is what troubles me about a lecture “about” an artwork. The “about” lays bare the “techniques” that animate my work but also what animates me as an academic artist. It also lays bare my psychopathologies, which have resulted in an artwork that agentially performs the ethico-political psychopathologies in myself and in the institution(s) under whose aegis I produced it.

With the troubling complexity of artistic, social, and material agency of doing art within the context of higher education swirling in my mind, the room darkens (even more), and I begin the lecture. “On a late Melbourne afternoon of Thursday, May 23, 2019 . . . “

**CUT to FRAME 2:**

Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Late afternoon, Thursday, May 23, 2019. Audience members trickle in and intertwine comfortably—an even more unthinkable act at present—on large cushions on the gallery floor. They observe six diners at a square table with a lazy Susan (a round turntable for dining, commonly found in Chinese restaurants) wired to large mics and other acoustic technologies. The program reads:

*Careful Whispers* is an orchestral noise-scape of a performative banquet for six that triggers the human Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR), blurring the lines between sound aesthetics and the conduct of everyday life. The work can be conceived as the autoregulation of individual diners in a socioinstitutional environment as they are coconstituted between the *anima* of food and the *animality* of nourishment. *Animation* is defined here as unstable sensory engagement that produces a radical space-time matrix that is vibrational, enhancing or decreasing our capacities for full agency and potential in the world

based on the choices made in relation to what we masticate and ingest: a biopolitics that is a coming into relation of the gap between a mediated death and an ersatz life.

This performance, an orchestral work in three movements—Entrée, Main Course, and Dessert—is the finale of *Careful Whispers*, the culmination of a one-week residency at RMIT Galleries, and a part of the exhibition *Bruised Food: Hungry for Social Practice*, curated by the inimitable Drs. Marnie Badham and Francis Maravillas. The meal begins with the usual warnings that the performance may trigger psychopathological reactions in some people—audience and diners alike.

On cue, I whisper into the microphone, “*geo-* is a prefix referring to ‘earth’ [a form of the Attic and Ionic *ge*, which means ‘the earth, land, a land or country’; also from Old Norse *gjá*, related to Gaia],” and the diners begin eating.

### CUT to TRACK 1: ENTRÉE

[INSERT TRACK 1: *Entrée*]

TRACK 1: *Entrée*, *Careful Whispers*, 2019

[\[Click to play\]](#)

[Continue reading while listening to TRACK 1. The audio in the video is important, the visuals are not, but I am not the Reader-Listener.]

### CUT to FRAME 3:

[The cut can occur immediately with the start of TRACK 1, or after TRACK 1, to taste]

Launceston, Tasmania and Sydney, NSW, Australia. *This* FRAME is written, with delays (French: *retard*), in relative lockdown and quarantine during the Great Pandemic of 2020. Tasmania has been COVID-19-free for three months now; I write this piece in commiseration with academic friends in Arizona and Melbourne (the latter only now arriving out of a dramatic Second Wave).

This piece of writing inhabits the dark zone between the first two FRAMES: the production of a performance-based artwork around eating and hearing as social practice, under what constitutes practice-based research within the institutional setting of higher education; and the higher education of students through a performance-lecture on my art practice, which is at the very least a demonstration of practice “techniques” that provoke what constitutes the production of art within an academic institutional setting. On the surface, such an exercise would seem to reinforce education as the didactical transference of expertise, namely an artist-academic demonstrating her practice as critical within an institutional setting, replete with the hallmarks of being conceptually driven through scholarly abstractions and appropriate material mediation.

Writing places these two institutional frames, more importantly the darkness between them, within yet another frame, that of the psychoanalytic. This piece of writing enacts a “transference” between frames, by which I do not mean making justificatory correlations between two events; nor is it a self-reflexive critique of my practice. This “writing-through”—writing as psychoanalytical “working-through”—is a critical affair inasmuch as it has to concertedly engage with, and take responsibility for, the unruly emanating diffractions of concepts and practices from diverse fields such as human neurophysiology, mammalian evolution, trauma psychotherapy, affect theory, quantum physics, social practices around food, and sound technologies.

Timothy Morton reminds me of another Lacanian psychoanalytical trope lurking in my performance of writing-through, namely the “pretense” of some correlation in the gap between my internal world—my thinking and being, conscious or unconscious—and the material world of the disciplines from which stem the concepts and practices I play with. How much am I pretending to close the gap between internal thinking and the external world? Is there a trickster quality to my academic subjectivity? (see Morton 2016, 326) I ask, as Lacan points to yet another impossibility, “I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thought. I think of what I am and where I do not think to think” (Lacan 1977, 166 in Morton 2016, 327). My argument here is to acknowledge that it is as an academic-trickster-performer—or idiot (after Deleuze)—that “I” cut to create gaps at the same time as “I” am the gaps, continually diffracting and making contingent correlations between inside and outside.

I say to the Analysts, “I worry ‘about’ acting in this way as I make art within an institutional setting.” I feel a need to take responsibility in/for my pretensions, to address the tension between on one hand my desire as a human subject that reduces my unconscious to language, and on the other, the fact that the unconscious as Lacan’s Real does not stop not being written.

Showing an image of *K2-02*, where Michael Yuen and I made a work that was “nothing” but the space of an empty gallery (in my defense, I did sweep it clean on schedule each day), I admit to the Analysts that “I have literally been called a trickster by Ross Gibson in his catalogue essay.” Riffing on Lewis Hyde’s *Trickster Makes This World*, Gibson’s (2007) exact words were, “When you think about it, the vacuity of the idea is downright compelling. Seeing nothing in the idea at first, you might say it sucks.” Thankfully he went on to say, “*K2-02* show is like one of those mesmerising ruses that is sometimes set up in a political contest, where a complete deal gets designed cunningly so that all options are already imperceptibly slanted well before negotiators arrive at the table.”

Perhaps a much better way of saying all of this is through Karen Barad’s more performative slant of taking “response-ability” for the emerging relationalities and abstractions in a work, i.e., those that allow the very possibility of responding to it without circumventing the nature of the response. In my case, my intention here is to avoid setting in place doxic (read: institutional) formulations of art, a difficult task given the many institutional frames in which *Careful Whispers* is located. As context for the arguments that follow, allow me to list several of these. The artwork is produced in RMIT Galleries as the university venue; University of New South Wales is the institution through which academic research reporting and legitimation occur. The narrated whispers forming part of the acoustic orchestration (some of which appear in the media TRACKS accompanying this text and in OFFCUTS at the end) are from an unpublished presentation at the GeoMedia Research Network Workshop in Amsterdam (Loo 2017). The performance-lecture on the artwork is performed under the aegis of Arizona State University and its Center for Philosophical Technologies (CPT: as if “CPT” is not enough of a clue to the conundrums in writing about speaking about a performance about philosophy and technology). This piece of writing is for *Techniques Journal*, an academically peer-reviewed research outlet. Lastly, the very act of transference itself that the performance-lecture sets up cannot escape critique, as the thinking and materiality with which it is associated are always already organized by the condition of institutionality, be it in the university, gallery, or clinic.

## CUT to FRAME 1:

I start the Phoenix lecture apologetically by saying to the Analysts, “I’ve been asked to talk about animation, which I will do through *Careful Whispers*, an artwork on the sounds of eating and the nature of hearing. It is an interdisciplinary project that animates concepts and practices from very diverse fields.”

And as if giving a circumspect nod to the negative bias in the human psyche, I continue trepidatiously: “By showing and telling you about this project, about how animation is part of my work, I would be revealing what animates me. By speaking to you today about my techniques, I will be animating myself, as you the audience will be animated when you psychosomatically experience (you are not forced to, hence the trigger warning) the artwork firsthand. It does feel like I am in an analyst’s chair. And you the Audience-Analysts will be tied to me (whether it is a libidinal tie will depend on how this all plays out) and thus implicated in *Careless Whispers*. If we take this situation as analogous to the psychoanalytical transference that conventionally occurs between analyst and analysand in therapy, I would be enacting my pathologies around making the work—plus the work itself relies upon the enactment of psychopathologies—in search of a cure. Perhaps.”

Psycho-babble?

Transference in psychoanalysis, akin to didactic education (albeit within a more socially systemic model), relies upon a libidinal imbrication of a dual analytic relation between analyst and analysand, whereby pathologies are

worked-through by performative transfers, mediated by a coda of images and enunciations. In contrast, Félix Guattari's political project of "transversality" attempts to dismantle this dual relation through an engagement with psychotherapy as institutional, viz that psychic lives are already themselves unconsciously institutional (Guattari 1984). To Guattari, by acting transversally in the clinic through techniques that open up new modes of communication, movement, and perception—whose conditions of possibility are previously absent or unsupported—novel forms of collectivities can be made to emerge. Through different "divisions" or sectoring of patients, namely redrawing the lines of institutional groupings with interchangeable roles between analyst and analysand (see Genosko 1996, 4–5), and with the singularity of everyone in the group maintained, transversality provides the avenue for producing militant subjectivities and new group formations.

I talk to a slide on screen that states, "Transversality does nothing less than schizophrenize the transference" (Genosko 1996, 14). I expand: "What this means is, by animating this lecture as an exercise in psychoanalytic transversality, what I am hoping for is the production of new subjectivities as part of an ongoing critique of the institutional production of *Careful Whispers*. We can say that agencies the artwork conjures are distributed and thus democratized between myself as the artist, academics like your esteemed Leaders, and you the student-publics—but also the diners who ate the food; the audience who listened; the food makers; sound artists like Dr. Jen Brown and Dr. Juliana Keller, who assisted me; and other technicians."

"Furthermore," I say to the Analysts, "transversality shifts an understanding of the *dispositifs* implicated in the artwork, whether it is the spatial acoustic recording equipment, the food manufacturing machines, or the sociotechnical systems of kitchens or art galleries, complete with their intersectional categories of social, gendered, and technologized identities, et cetera."

What is of concern to me here, however, is how a transversal technique that forms dissident agents within institutional frameworks tells us more about the relations between thought and sociotechnical systems. It should become clear that a work like *Careful Whispers* keeps company with the turn to new materialism in the humanities, social sciences, and the arts. Of relevance here is a conceptualization of agency beyond the human subject, and therein the anthropocentrism of thought, towards ascribing agential powers to the external world's material, systems, and geoenvironments; in fact, to all matter itself, as Barad would have it.

One new materialist strategy is to eschew the correlationalism between thought and world—allowing a flattening of ontology of actants—to affirm a transversality that "*cuts across* or intersects dual oppositions in an immanent way" (emphasis added, Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 100), leading to processes of becoming that are fueled by pure contingency. Not even the laws of nature and physics escape this indeterminate ontology. Taking cues from Bohr's quantum epistemology and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, where we cannot completely know both a particle's position and momentum, Barad argues that to know the nature of matter—in her case, whether wave or particle, or more accurately, how matter is made determinate—is relative to the point, and apparatus, of observation (Barad 2007, 139–140). Crucially for Barad, working at a scale far beyond human comprehension and scientific measurement, it is "observation" through scientific instrumentation and that allows "matter to matter" in a determinate way.

"I would now like to bring Barad's attribution of determinacy of matter in association with sociotechnical systems, what she calls 'agential cuts' (Barad 2007, 219), back to the discussion on darkness between animated frames." Bravely, I say, "Allow me to draw a blunt analogy . . ."

Allow me to draw a blunt analogy between Barad's cut and the cutting of frame sequences in animation. The animation cut creates the darkness between frames, forcing both an interaction between the frames on either side of it, at the macroscale between scenes or the microscale of temporalities between movement images. The cut produces difference between the frames of observation and is therefore the source of animation and that which animates.

I tell the Analysts that animation is a matter of life and death, hoping that this jolts them from the afternoon stupor fast setting in: "Etymologically, the word 'animation' is derived from the Latin *anima*, meaning 'soul' or 'spirit.' Animation is therefore connected to major conversations in philosophy and may be considered the practical extension of core philosophical notions relating to time, relativity, reality, mortality, mythology. It is the practice of mediating darkness of death and light of life on either side."

"Animation becomes the art of manipulation—illusion—of turning still images to movement images." Norman McLaren's famous definition of animation as "the art of manipulating the invisible interstices between frames" (in Hoffer 1981, 5) is projected above me.

This is followed by the overly used illustration of Etienne Jules Marey's "Cavalier Arabe," which brings to life horse-man-horse-man-horse—. "The construction of the movement-illusion in the mind, based on the peculiarities of the body's perceptual mechanism, is how dead images are said to be brought to life." Marey, and other scientists of his time, called early animation devices "philosophical toys" that experimented with synthesizing time, mortality, and the limits of reality.

In the same way, Barad’s “agential cuts” draw boundaries that separate and differentiate matter, forming new relationalities that are not a priori to the cut. In the cut, there is no possibility of predicting eventualities, nor the form that matter takes in differentiation, except to reinforce the cultivation of its capacity to respond and transform. An “intra-action” of matter occurs with the cut, whereby the determination of matter is emergent with the cut. A paradoxical temporality therefore exists in an agential cut: it determines not only matter that comes after the cut but that which precedes it, providing a nonchronological presentation of time (as opposed to what occurs in an “interaction,” where identities of matter exist in an already predetermined form, as relata that preexist the action) (Barad 2010, 267n1).

This provides a new understanding of animation where the cut becomes fundamental to the animation, contra its functioning as separation. The cut engages in “agential separability—differentiating and entangling” (Barad 2010, 265). What it suggests is that “[d]istinct agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute sense, that is, agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements” (Barad 2010, 267n1). Matter therefore is ontologically indeterminate on one hand but agentially creative and generative on the other.

Animation in Barad’s philosophical conceptualization of matter is folded at another scale, that of disciplines. Her philosophical concepts rely upon, but simultaneously provide speculative interpretations of, quantum field theory. In the entanglement of philosophy and physics, thought and the world are coconstituted. The nature of reality as we know it is therefore not immune to the agencies of human thought. As Christopher Gamble and Thomas Nail (2020) say,

... even an omniscient being with infinite knowledge would not be able to exhaustively quantify matter because matter is inherently indeterminate, generative, and relational. Moreover, since we humans are just as fully material as anything else, any act of human observation of matter—including even ostensibly “formal” kinds of observations—must also play a role in constituting matter.

This raises an ethical question around a thought as a conceptual, technical, and performative action as it transversally cuts into matter in ongoing (re)materializations of relationalities. Thought therefore creates difference in all entities (no matter their ontological integrity as “things”; see Harman 2018) as moments, phenomena, and other “spacetime matters” that are irreducibly entangled. In Barad’s materialist sense of entanglement, agential cuts performatively animate both self and Other. Hence, agential cuts possess an obligation to the Other, whether concepts, thought, or matter itself, as these are brought into being through ongoing differentiations that challenge self, disciplinary, historical, or eventual identities.

## CUT to TRACK 2: MAIN COURSE

[Continue reading as  
TRACK 2 plays in the background]

[INSERT TRACK 2: Main Course]

TRACK 2: Main Course, *Careful Whispers*, 2019

[\[Click to play\]](#)

## CUT to FRAME 1:

The Analysts, some with fingers in their ears, listening with slight grimaces (I’m uncertain if from pain or pleasure), as the . . .

**CUT to FRAME 2:**

. . . Entrée movement of the symphony reaches a crescendo. With the few moments I have relieved from whispering, I make the final cuts to the preserved pig’s ears and black ear fungus (Cantonese: *hak yee chai*), readying the Main Course for service. I thought of the multiple senses of otherness in the food I’m cutting into: taste, texture, appearance, cultural difference, ways of eating—but especially the sounds they make while being cut, while being eaten, while they were “alive” as organ(ism)s; the sounds of secretions in the mouth and gut that receive them; and so on. For the moment, the sound of each cut of my knife as it contacts the rubbery consistency of the ears can be heard like tiny rumbles of thunder through the space as the piezo microphones pick up the tiny vibrations between metal and organic substance.

The diners, somewhat acoustically and digestively exhausted by their percussive mastication, are now faced with preemptive imaginings of chewiness. This anticipation is firstly led by the imagination triggered by peripheral vision of the cheap Chinese takeaway paper menus, now limp and stained by food splatters from the entrée course, the words of which sound fishy and seem to be all ears:

~ MAIN COURSE ~

SQUEEKALILY CHOP SUEY  
Rice cakes stir-fry with pig ears and lily flowers

YEE CHAI YEE PEW YEE MEE EEW!  
Little “black ear” fungus and fish maw “Yee Mee” noodles

PAWS, JELLYFISHES & SNAKE SLAD  
Green pawpaw, jellyfish, and snake bean salad

The diner’s anticipation is secondly felt as mouthfeel—the squeaky sounds that resonate in the head when dense, chewy food from the head of another animal and rotting wood rub against the enamel of molars, accented by the impact at the close of a chew, teeth scraping against teeth like nails on a chalkboard, before the food’s elasticity bounces the jaw back open, ready for the next stroke.

[Readers to heed the trigger warning,  
which also applies to this Writing]

**CUT to BREAK-**

**-ing FRAME 4.**

[Pause TRACK 2]

*Dear Reader, I hope you are enjoying the animated writing so far and that it is making sense, even if it is non-sense, but it may be time for a break. You are somewhere in my cutting room, where the floor always seems like a mess, with previously animated sequences now lying nonlinear and disjointed, surrounded by a disquieting sense of darkness released from between frames, pooling in pure (in)difference. I have set an animation game for myself in writing this piece. Cuts to text, events, chronologies, concepts, disciplines, practices, processes, human actors, nonhuman agents, things, food, and other research matter produced as an academic artist are entangled in ways that trigger human affectual capacities in the production of (non)-sense.*



*While this may seem like a stochastic stream of consciousness, the nature of the cuts to and between works is a methodological attempt at demonstrating the agential realism of “writing-through” the psychoanalytics of the event(s); heeding perhaps Deleuze’s call to ethical sense for us “to become worthy of what happens to us, and thus to will and release the event, to become the offspring of one’s own event [. . .]” (1990, 149). What Deleuze calls for in an ethics worthy of the self is the maintenance of pure difference without representation, repair, or reconciliation, that is, to be indifferent to difference and to be rapturous in the darkness of that struggle and the creation-destruction that it entails.*

*Barad’s agential realism may be an image for this pool of darkness on the cutting floor, this cut/break right here and now in the writing/reading as event. It belongs to an agency, but that which cannot be localized or detected; there is no nature here except for virtual-material entanglements of “naturing” (Swarbrick 2019). I am interested in the “desiring field” (after Barad) of this “dark precursor” (after Deleuze) as agentially real and “mattering” but at the same time disjunctive from matter and thus indifferent. Such is an event that questions the very possibility of agency and ethics in practice-based research.*

### **CUT to FRAME 1:**

Outside the now quiet upstairs room of a bar, lightning streaks between heavy rainclouds.

“Thunderbolts explode between different intensities, but they are preceded by an invisible, imperceptible dark precursor, which determines their path in advance but in reverse, as though intagliated” (Deleuze 1994, 119).

[CUT (IT) OUT. Artistic license. This is Arizona, USA. And it was a fine evening.]

There was a point, however, when an awkward silence in my session with the Analysts caused me to say, “Let’s talk about the weather.”

And up on screen was a previous slide relating to something else altogether:

“ . . . a piece of meat activated by electric waves of desire, a text written by the unfolding of genetic encoding.”

—Rosi Braidotti (2000, 159)

I am now in a bind; what would the Analysts think of the seemingly unmistakable but serendipitous connection between Deleuze’s lightning bolt and Braidotti’s “electric waves”?

Where to make a cut in communication—a pause, a stutter, a change in direction, a separation, a determination—is a dangerous affair. This is especially so in the context of psychoanalysis, where language frequently departs as ontologically framed by the function of communication and the processes of resemblance and identity, viz representation, upon which it relies.

I say quickly, “Braidotti here is discussing the Deleuzian body as a ‘folding-in of external influences and a simultaneous unfolding outwards of affects’” (Braidotti 2000, 159).

An utterance in this context cuts like lightning through the night. Each is preceded by, as Deleuze warns, an imperceptible darkness. “The question of whether psychic experience is structured like a language, or even whether the physical world may be regarded as a book, depends upon the nature of the dark precursors” (Deleuze 1994, 122).

I follow up the Braidotti explanation with, “To Donna Haraway, ‘bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their boundaries materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; ‘objects’ do not pre-exist as such. [. . .] Siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice’” (Haraway 1988, 595).

The darkness of the cut readies the infinite number of peripheral series of resemblances and representations for visibility and enunciability. The darkness plays the part of “differentiator of differences” between identities (Deleuze 1994, 119) while itself remaining purely indifferent to the outcome and indeterminate in its nature. It can be argued that the resulting visible and enunciable representations and resemblances are thus only illusions of identity maintained by the linguistic precursor that remains dark as pure difference, which Deleuze names as none other than the refrain:

“[T]he linguistic precursor belongs to a kind of metalanguage and can be incarnated only within a word devoid of sense from the point of view of the series of first-degree verbal representations. It is the *refrain*” (1994, 123).

## CUT to FRAME 2:

“Within the organization of the human mouth, the tongue and larynx are organs that allow speech and language. They also allow eating and drinking to occur, through the regulation of breath . . . “ I whispered, commencing the Second Movement.

[Readers can choose to restart TRACK 2,  
which opens with the same words, whispered]

*Careful Whispers* attempts to collide concepts, semantics, signification, and representation via language with the materialization of bodies in a Harawayian sense. That is, bodies without organs, or organs as bodies, that perform as sites of linguistic precursors become a transversal pooling of agential cuts (after Barad). Said another way, bodies are the immanent indices of differentiation of matter. Bodies matter (verb) in ways that are “simultaneously material and representational” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 96).

The drone of backing vocals to the meal continues: “As such, they are organs that regulate the threshold of life and death: permitting us to swallow life-sustaining food and drink by momentarily disallowing the intake of life-giving air. Likewise, the restriction of respiration to differential volumes of air permits the articulation of sounds as communicable language. The mouth enables collective individuation, or dividuality, and thus ensures the survival and flourishing of the species in that way” (Loo 2017).

## CUT to FRAME 1:

[my cutting floor getting really messy . . . ]

I declared earlier that I am fond of playing with food and am a food-performance artist of sorts. “I have often thought that my best work is in the design of recipes, writing of menus, and instructions for eating. A frustrated chef, no doubt.”

[ . . . and now with food cuts]

So here, now, I find myself in a situation of interrogating the semiotic-material psychoanalytics of cheap Chinese takeaway menus in *Careful Whispers*. A dish for entrée is:

SNAP CHIRP OHM  
Fried anchovies, cricket, and lotus root snack

And for dessert,

POKE STICK IN JELLY AND SUCK  
Pocky® and fruit jelly pots

Here is another from a more “serious” work about a meal designed to think-/eat-through trauma associated with cancer:

*III. three mouth-feels everlasting gobstopper wrapped in edible silver  
served with deep fried sage (eaten whole)*

♪ Themes from The Lone Ranger, Oompa Loompa Song and  
Jules Massenet, *Méditation* from *Thaïs*,

Apoptosis is the certainty of death programmed into every living cell, allowing renewal, growth and diversification, that is, life itself.

She had a year to live. The question that plagued her throughout that year was whether to live hedonistically or ascetically.

In Act II, Athanaël, a monk, confronts Thaïs, a beautiful courtesan of Venus, and attempts to persuade her to leave her life of pleasure and find salvation.

Cancer cells have a diminished ability to undergo apoptosis. By ignoring their programmed life span to go on growing unmeasuredly, these cells inevitably cause organs to fail, and organisms to die: death through excessive vitality

*“Having not felt like eating, but eaten, I sat down to eat / tea...”  
—in Navigating the Internal Landscape, Launceston 2016*

The recipes and menus are types of spatial or situated writing, much influenced by Jane Rendell’s (2006) practice of “site-writing,” where the site-specificity of writing critically draws out “the spatial qualities of these interactions between writers and readers on the one hand, places, artefacts, and texts on the other, [including] sites—material, political and conceptual—as well as those remembered, dreamed and imagined” (2020).

The recipes and takeaway menus animate representational riffs, misspellings, and mistranslations between different languages and linguistic traditions (English and Cantonese, Bahasa Malaysia and French, in the main); onomatopoeias; mouthfeel; medical science; sound and music; animality; ingredients; and cultural food habits: all with a liberal splash of psychoanalytics, affectually triggering the ongoing differentiating of the mind and body as they multitask eating, listening, reading, and talking. Language here performs in semiotic overdrive, becoming-gestural in the sense of demonstrating what Agamben, after Benjamin, posits as “communicability” (Agamben 2000, 57) through language rather than communication by language.

Communicability is an experience with language at the threshold of wordlessness and speech, whereby humans as linguistic beings are struck by the subject that is language itself, in its “infancy” (Agamben 2007). While the use of language in the recipes and menus may be childlike, they attend to the infancy of language (and hopefully not the infantile, although it is sometimes a fine line in my work!) in a self-referencing that is accessible to thought. This relationship between language and thought resists the role accorded to language (handmaiden in communicating contemporary subjectivities and consciousnesses) but gestures to the potential for communication rather than communication itself. “[T]he gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such [. . .] the communication of a communicability” (Agamben 2000, 58). Nothing is being produced or acted in communicability. Rather, it is something to be endured and supported.

In this event of endurance, for Haraway, bodies and systems of signification or representation materialize alongside each other in a continual process of differentiation (Haraway 1988, 595). And for Barad, what is endured is a process of meaning-making by a thousand cuts that add up to flows of determination that matter. For Deleuze, however, in his theory of difference, what needs to be endured is the refusal of sense- and meaning-making, where the cut disavows any stabilization towards any determination of difference. The prevailing non-sense of pure difference—the dark precursor—is that which is intolerable to thought, because it refuses to be thought but endured (Swarbrick 2019).

Such endurance will not be something that resides in an individual human being as emotion or feeling. Rather, it is perceptible, within a Deleuzian framework, as the often-researched concept of affect. Affect is not defined by human physiology but by differential presence of identities. Or as Adrian Parr puts it, it is the “variation that occurs when bodies collide or come into contact” (2005, 11), whether human or inhuman, diffracting any sense of self in contingent directions.

### CUT to FRAME 2:

I have always seen *Careful Whispers*, with its human, animal, material, technical, and environmental agential cuts, as a site of perdurance, where relationalities of perseverance and resistance prevail as ontologically productive to (all) life.

### CUT to TRACK 3: DESSERT

[Continue reading as  
TRACK 3 plays in the background]

[INSERT TRACK 3: Dessert]

TRACK 3: Dessert, *Careful Whispers*, 2019

[\[Click to play\]](#)

But it is possibly the participants’ endurance during the performance that is starting to wane now.

“Topologically, the mouth is geological: *geo-*, from Old Norse *gjá* meaning ‘ravine,’ is related to Old English *gionian*, meaning ‘to yawn’” (Loo 2017, 2) is one of the sentences whispered during the work.

I could not tell whether the Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) is taking effect in (some of) the audience and diners or if they are frankly bored by ASMR.

### CUT to FRAME 1:

Fast-forward to nearly the end of my lecture, in which I seem to have returned to the animation of thought in relation to meaning-making through language as agential cuts, feeling like a circular argument refusing to land. In the darkness, a few may have left the premises, but there had certainly been a yawn or two from Analysts lulled by the sounds of eating in background, which included these words:

“The mouth—and its equivalents in other organisms—is a geological opening that works as the threshold between the inner realm of the human and the Earth as its outer environment significant to it as an organism, which Jakob von Uexküll famously defined as *Umwelt*” (Loo 2017, 2).

“Ahem.” I cough. Apologizing, I reflect on how the cough opens the body through the mouth like the yawn. Both are associated in some way with body reflexes while eating—coughing while gagging to restore breathing, yawning to breathe deeply to oxygenate the blood and to expel carbon dioxide from higher metabolic activity during digestion. The cough and yawn are geomediological autonomous responses that on one hand clear the air(ways) to allow better breath-taking, and on the other, cut the (discursive) air, a “gag” as a sudden act by the body that stops speech, filling the air to make up for speechlessness or the difficulty in making-sense. Walter Benjamin, writing on theatre, says the gag has a beauty similar to the gestures of an animal. It has “no definite symbolic meaning for the author from the outset, rather the author tries to derive such a meaning from them, in ever changing contexts and experimental groupings, for example in the theatre work of Kafka” (Benjamin 1999, 801). Criticality emerges when a work is

reduced to pure gesture, because the potentiality of expression arising from writing as gesture is a productive interruption of the surface of language, where meaning-making surges into the gap that the interruption leaves; that is, where language is simply shown as a medium in which communication takes place prior to the determination of meaning.

In many ways, *Careful Whispers* interrogates the Agambenian idea of the “communication of communicability” amidst an Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) by a body listening and responding to the stochastic glitches in the acoustic ecologies of eating laced with whispers of barely audible language.

When I mentioned that *Careful Whispers* has to do with ASMR, I did get a flash of recognition and stupefied grins appeared across some Analysts’ faces. Others sniggered a “WTF, how is this legitimate research?” and instinctively reached for their phones.

ASMR—the tingling sensations behind the head or neck or the warm feeling that spreads down the back and through the body—is triggered by certain sounds: whispering, tapping, rasping, and eating. Driven by YouTube videos and social-media virality, ASMR became an audiovisual pop phenomenon largely touted as pseudoscience after being named ten years ago. Research in psychology, trauma counseling, insomnia, human physiology, and food science related to ASMR has, however, picked up in recent times, because of the possible palliative and recuperative benefits of triggering this parasympathetic response.

Validated research into ASMR must necessarily be interdisciplinary, or at the very least commenced simultaneously in diverse disciplines because of (1) its emergence in everyday social practices, (2) the deep instinctual recognition as a response one gets in deep-care situations (the whispers of lullabies, the safety of a favorite blanket), and (3) its being made instantaneously global by social media fueled by neoliberal consumerism. In many ways, it is the researchers in creative fields, especially media arts, with scientific interest in psychology and neuroscience who are providing critical narratives and practice-based methodologies for groundbreaking ASMR research. The work of experimental psychologist Charles Spence, for example, on the multisensory perceptions and determinants of food and eating has influenced my work (see Barratt, Spence, and Davis 2017).

Although recognizable, the feelings/emotions associated with ASMR are difficult to describe and locate. They are akin to an indeterminate source of body pressure that leads to determinate instinctual behavior or pathologies in Freudian psychoanalysis. The French *jouissance*, Danish *hygge*, or Japanese *umami* come close. So does the association with flow states (the feeling of operating at peak performance or in contra, the interminable feeling of time in an altered state). This difficulty foregrounds the perdurance of thought situated in its dark precursor of agential cuts, the entanglement of waves of overdetermined concepts from disparate disciplines, and the institutional conditions of their visibility and enunciation.

It has gone dark outside, and I am standing between the Analysts and drinks; this is never an enviable position to be in. A collective yawn is definitely now in the air. I am going to have to cut the session off without a conclusion, I think, having already taken up more than my hour with the Analysts.

In this premature ending (and in view of the numerous animation cuts on the floor), the same nagging tension from earlier persists in my obligation to take institutional responsibility for the performance-lecture, the artwork it outlined, and this piece of Writing for a peer-reviewed journal, which in many ways stands as a “reading” of my unconscious, as research.

Whether by trick or trade, seriousness or laughter, perduring conceptual glitches or bodily gags, I have hoped to point to the entanglement of thinking and matter that philosophy and science have historically attempted to separate. Humans have often thought they can think matter but not how matter can possibly be determined by thinking. At stake is nothing short of the presence of human thinking itself, accounting for the differentiation of matter at a Baradian microscale and confirming Gamble and Nail’s earlier postulation that because humans are as fully material at the subatomic scale as anything else, any kind of observations we make must therefore, by theoretical deduction, play a role in constituting matter. So through the power in the subjective and situational nature of the cut, glitch, and gag, the self-subverting latent surrealism in intra-actions between thought and matter can be made to arise when interdisciplinary concepts and arguments are called up as ingredients of both matter and thought. In the end, I see my responsibility as no more than increasing the *response-ability* by you the Reader and any others—audience, participant, analyst, or editor—for improvising and collaborating within the enclosure of institutional research, which is no less than the politics and ethics of resistance.

Thanking the Analysts for the session, I admitted, “As I predicted, there were more things brought up in the session than were successfully worked-through today. But I take comfort in your Leader’s offer to write this up for an online journal, where I’ll have an opportunity to better explain my set of conceptual reasons for working on ASMR through a food performance.” So I thought then.

**CUT to END (Option A)****CUT to FRAME 3 . . .****. . . with OFFCUTS in FRAME 4**

*In the end, the cutting floor is littered with conceptual OFFCUTS—punctuations to the signifying chains of the Writing above but also sources of signification. Indulge me on a last riff on Lacanian psychoanalysis in animation theory. The offcuts are akin to cinemes, the smallest segments with their own realities in Christian Metz’s cinematic syntax (Metz 2000). Cinemes have the potential to be formed into assemblages of meaning, but as punctuations to signifying chains. Each would have retroactively determined the cinematic sequences that came before it. The offcuts’ indeterminacy is also fueled by being outside the cinematic frame. In their anamorphism they are visible in, but yet superfluous to, what Stephen Heath (1993) calls the “narrative space” of film, which in turn points to the incomplete formalization of the cinematic/reading subject.*

The evolutionary advantage of ASMR to the human animal has yet to be fully explored. And the admittedly outlandish approach I have taken to explain the entanglements of such research, through a piece of performative writing where I claim agential cuts performed by language—as different/ciation (after Deleuze) in its virtuality—actualizes the determination of matter, and thought, through representation.

It would be useful and appropriate here as a matter of an incomplete conclusion, and to foreshadow your response-ability as a reader immanent to the matter of multiple beginnings of further research and practice, to outline a list of hypotheses—like OFFCUTS of an animation—that have driven my techniques for working with ASMR. And given the field’s infancy and the indeterminate nature of the response phenomenon in humans, all practice-based research henceforth is implicated in the very mattering of ASMR as practical philosophy.

*Dear Reader, thank you for your active participation in my research—your reading and listening are performative of new agential cuts into the material, where each intra-action with the text stands as a different/ciated research publication. Note: the OFFCUTS below are unpublished ideas originating from a presentation to the 2017 GeoMedia Research Network Workshop in Amsterdam (Loo 2017), which made their way into the whispered narration in *Careful Whispers* and are now animated into this piece of writing-through the libidinal economies of (your) reading, listening, and eating.*

OFFCUT 1—What *Careful Whispers* as a food performance shows is that thinking is determined alongside feeling and perception in a very different way. Firstly, it has been well argued that the gut is the second brain in humans, behaving in ways that are both sympathetic and parasympathetic to the cortical brain. The enteric nervous system that handles digestion extends well beyond the skull. It travels through the body, taking the psyche with it (Wilson 2004).

OFFCUT 2—The vagus nerve is part of the parasympathetic nervous system (responsible for the dichotomous fight/flight and immobility/disassociation responses at moments of crisis). In trauma counseling, polyvagal theory works with the discovery that the vagus nerve has two distinct branches. The dorsal branch, affecting the lower diaphragm and connected to the digestive system, is associated with reactions of immobility. The ventral branch momentarily dampens the body’s active state with more agile neurochemical balancing, allowing for social engagement. The ventral vagal nerve affects the middle ear, which filters out background noises to make it easier to hear the human voice. It also affects facial muscles and thus the ability to make communicative facial expressions. Finally, it affects the larynx and thus vocal tone and vocal patterning, helping humans create sounds that soothe one another (see Wagner 2016).

OFFCUT 3—Sanford Kwinter (2013) provides an evolutionary account of how the human brain is biologically tuned in relation to the open and multiplicitous environments the species finds itself in. Of particular interest is the evolutionary connection between diet and the expansion of the human brain mass. The brain is “expensive” to maintain, requiring a great deal of calories and sensitive temperature regulation. So too are the intestines. Hence there is a balance between brain size and gut efficiency in evolutionary terms, requiring the species to possess a “systematic approach to eating” (324–325). This means the development of highly selective foraging and hunting techniques to source high-calorie foods (seeds, tubers, eggs, meat). I argue that there is an evolution of multisensorial perceptions of hearing, kinesthetics (vibratory perception), and smell attuned to procuring a diet supporting cortical brain development and function.

The evolution of perceptual and mechanical apparatus in humans for efficient eating must also cover taste (development of synesthetic senses to detect edibility: nutrition vs. poison) and the often-unnoticed sensations related to mouthfeel. An even more overlooked proprioceptive connection to mouthfeel is hearing, not so much sound that reaches the outer ear as waveform but as vibrations through the jaw and skull.

OFFCUT 4—There is an evolutionary connection between the mammalian middle ear and jaw. Having three ossicles in the middle ear is a defining feature of mammals. Reptiles and birds have only one middle ear ossicle, the stapes or columella. From fossil data, comparative anatomy, and developmental biology, it is now clear that the two new bones in the mammalian middle ear, the malleus and incus, are homologous to the quadrate and articular bones, which articulate the upper and lower jaws in nonmammalian vertebrates. The evolution of the three-ossicle ear in mammals is thus intricately connected with the evolution of a novel jaw joint, the two structures evolving together to create the distinctive mammalian skull (Anthwal et al. 2013).

OFFCUT 5—Kwinter outlines research showing that human young are born with still-developing brains and that the greater parts of brain development and expansion occur outside the womb, judging by the schedule of cell multiplication and connective networks in the first three years or more of life. An interesting postulation is that “[t]he large braincase of the mature human baby would not be compatible with the hip structure of an efficiently bipedal mother” (2013, 326–327).

OFFCUT 6—A hypothesis: sensorial perception at the stage of heightened brain plasticity is not merely from the signification of language and the development of higher-order conceptual thinking. It is well known that the brain is hardwired by multimodal perceptions of the multiplicitous environment. I posit that with eating and drinking being something that the human child does from birth, the vibratory and acoustic inputs in relation to the sucking, mastication, and ingestion of food, coupled with the evolutionary connection between the jaw and middle ear, must surely account for archaic neural pathways that could be triggered by parasympathetic response. Herein lies a possible psychophysiological connection to ASMR.

OFFCUT 7—To Bernard Stiegler (2010), anamnesis—a process from Platonic thought of remembering as rediscovering knowledge that humans already possess but also a process of selection by virtue of forgetting—marks the ‘exteriorization’ of the self in the course of individuation. These processes take place under evolving technical systems that are produced both by ‘external’ processes of collective individuation (that is, language, education, law, economy) and ‘internal’ psychic individuation (that is, desire, habits, drives, etc.).

OFFCUT 8—In *A Theory of Meaning*, Uexküll compares *Umwelt* to a melodic motif wherein each living thing plays a melody that harmonizes with other entities it encounters in its environment in ways that build relations. He imagines a vast *symphony of nature*, where all living things are musically and structurally attuned like different orchestral instruments, allowing for the intensification of relational properties, forming ecological relationships (Loo and Sellbach 2015).

## CUT to END (Option B)/START

“Thoughts on the dark matter(ing) and thinking, while eating.”

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