Notes from Underground
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In *Notes from Underground*, Susan Sontag’s voice is translated into a grainy, undulating soundwave. I was doing research at the library, listening to an interview with Sontag that was broadcast on Swedish radio on the occasion of the publication of her book of short fiction, *I, etcetera* (1978), when a small window appeared on the database’s screen, framing a soundwave moving along to the ebb and flow of her voice. It’s how the database is programmed—though I still don’t know what purpose it serves, other than giving the ghostly feeling of seeing Sontag move.

I decided to film the jagged soundwave because it also reminds me of the silhouette of a mountain range, or the outline of stalactites, or a cardiograph, or an elevation drawing of the path of a subway traveling above and below ground. The movement seems to correspond with multiple velocities, temporalities, frequencies. It diagrams the negotiation of a border against an imaginary median line that we’re conditioned to see, even if it might not exist.

Borders likely attract me because I grew up on one. *Notes from Underground* (abbreviated here as *Notes*), contains distinct horizontal and vertical movements that narrate an unlikely connection between the Stockholm underground and Susan Sontag’s sojourn in Sweden, with a cavern system 5,000 miles away, roughly a three-hour drive from where I was raised in Texas, on the borders of Mexico and New Mexico.

Carlsbad Caverns National Park was one of a handful of places in the region that served as a destination for sightseeing day-trips when my family hosted an out-of-town guest. Other options included a quaint adobe town called Old Mesilla, where Billy the Kid stood trial for murder, and where a restaurant called La Posta used to thrill with its collection of caged parrots, macaws, and toucans. Another destination was White Sands National Monument, impressive for its vast undulating gypsum sand dunes. It’s where Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster made her dystopian film *Atomic Park* (2004), aware of its proximity to the first nuclear test site. But it’s the caverns that resonate most with the place I live today.

Sontag lived in Stockholm on two separate occasions, for a total of over two years, during an important time in relation to her personal politics, having arrived to the Swedish capital directly after successive trips to Hanoi and Paris in the spring of 1968. She indulged in the generous practical, financial support allotted to her creative work—and made two films, *Duet for Cannibals* (1969) and *Brother Carl* (1971). She was the same age I was when I moved to Stockholm in 2010. Of course, I find myself here at a very different time, but for similar work-related reasons.

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A scene from Sontag’s *Duet for Cannibals* recurs in my *Notes*. A man and woman walk through a subway station in the city center. The protagonist, a young political activist, reflects admiringly on how the art in the station—a whitish concrete frieze by Siri Derkert—makes him believe in the progress of humanity. But seconds later, his idealism totally collapses, when his lover takes out a gun and proposes he kill her husband, an exiled German Marxist intellectual, for whom he works. Today, the scene reads humorously. It truly looks ridiculous, but still it struck me for the bleak outlook Sontag seems to convey in writing and directing it, as if to say: humans are irredeemable, no matter their politics. A very similar message is found in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novella *Notes from Underground* (1864). Like Dostoyevsky, Sontag seems to convey that no amount of utopian social advancement can release us of our insufficiency. In her diary from this time, she jots down some notes after returning from Stockholm.

Dialectic of the relation between conscious and consciousness:
—function of language (language promotes consciousness / an increase of consciousness is not only philosophically debilitating (cf. Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, Nietzsche), but, more importantly, morally debilitating)

Sontag, whose life revolved around all things literary, is keenly aware of the notion that language facilitates our own blindness. We are “able to relate only to things which turn us away from other things” (Blanchot 1982: 134). But there’s more to say on this. In an interview that appears in the first half of the video, Sontag states how she thinks we’re capable of inflicting “unimaginable cruelty and wickedness” on each other, and that recognizing this is the start of one’s “moral adulthood.” She excavates deeper, telling the interviewer how it drives her “nuts” when people are “surprised by atrocities—saying how can this happen? How could people do this to each other?” She wants us to understand that life is nothing if not total contingency, and so it shouldn’t surprise any of us when violence befalls the most innocent, the most desperate among us. This is an example of how I use Sontag as a conveyer of moral questions—questions posed by her answers that I found in a web-archived interview from the American news channel C-SPAN, conducted on the cusp of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, not long before her death in 2004. She’s really angry—about all of it.

For anyone who’s come across Sontag’s essay, “Letter from Sweden”, it’s abundantly clear that she experienced a strong sense of disappointment and confusion despite, or probably as a result of, her high expectations for it being an advanced social welfare state. She’s pretty down when she returns home. Her diary from this time reveals her contemplating loneliness—how it affects her creative ability to form new ideas. For obvious reasons, I was reading about Sontag’s time in Stockholm with particular personal interest.

4 Siri Derkert’s public artwork is in the Östermalmstorg metro station in central Stockholm. It was made between 1961-1965.
7 Cf. Sontag 2012.
9 Cf. Sontag 12.
10 Cf. Sontag 2012.