



*The Shadow is Just as
Tangible as the Origin*
by Mara Lee

(Excerpt)

SVILOVA-2016

Katabasis and sparagmos

THE PLACE OF LANGUAGE is prominent in the three videos. The place of writing is prominent. Clarice Lispector, Susan Sontag, Virginia Woolf. But none of the three videos are actually about the writers. If translation can be perceived as a research tool in *Sunsets*, then the writers can be said to perform as vehicles for Tan's overall examination of liminal phenomena—for instance, between night and day, underground and above ground. This question is most explicitly addressed in *Notes From Underground*, in which the artist straddles one of the most evocative Ancient Greek myths—that of katabasis, the poet's descent into the underworld. Poets and artists have long struggled with the myth of Orpheus, and its renderings are manifold. Short version: Orpheus pleads to Hades, King of the Underworld, for his loved one, Eurydice, who has died of a snakebite, to return to the living. Since no one could mourn as beautifully as the lyrical poet Orpheus, Hades yields to his request, under one condition: upon the journey to the light, Orpheus is forbidden to look back. Just as they reach the surface, Orpheus turns his head, and Eurydice falls back into the shadows. Thus she dies a second time, and henceforth Orpheus can only sing about his loved one, but never have her.

The most prevalent interpretations emphasize the sacrificial gesture of art, how the poet gives up his loved one for the sake of art's higher cause. Feminist counter-readings call attention to Eurydice, and problematize her role as mere object of the male gaze and desire.¹

The myth continues with the ferocious death of Orpheus, torn apart by raging Thracian women. The dismembering of Orpheus is an example of *sparagmos*, the Dionysian ritual that involves Maenads (or Bacchantes). In a more modern rendering though, *sparagmos* is not confined to one sole literary motive. Considering, for example, the

¹ See for instance Lynne Huffer, "Blanchot's mother," *Yale French Studies*, no. 93, 1998; Frédéric-Yves Jeannot, Hélène Cixous, Thomas Dutoit, "The Book That You Will not Write: An Interview with Hélène Cixous," *New Literary History*, Vol 37, no. 1, Winter 2006.





Notes From Underground, 2013, Video Still.

literary fragment from the point of view of sparagmos would enable the reader to not only perceive the fragment in terms of form, but also as linked to an originary violence. Also, according to literary scholar Anders Olsson, sparagmos might be read as a liminal experience, and the one who sings is “a voice from the border, in dispersion.”²

So, the question is: What kind of hell does the artist encounter in her modern katabasis?

Notes From Underground undertakes a descent that is accompanied by the voice of Susan Sontag. Why? Here *The Divine Comedy* by Dante—the world’s second-most famous katabasis—provides an indication: Sontag is neither the subject or object of the video, but nothing more or less than the artist’s guide in the underworld, as Virgil was Dante’s guide. By means of old recordings and interviews, Sontag’s voice rises from the shadows, and uncannily enough, the mediations only seem to reinforce her presence.

The choice of Sontag as guide is not only due to her grandeur as a writer: like Tan, she is an American working in the field of art who at a certain period of her life moved to Stockholm for professional reasons. (Let us recollect that Dante wrote *The Divine Comedy* in exile.) Now,

² Anders Olsson, *Skillnadens konst. Sex kapitel om moderna fragment*, Albert Bonniers, 2006, 343. My translation.

the move from The United States to Sweden is not comparable to the banishment Dante was subjected to, but the experience of inner exile is not always stirred by excommunication or banishment. Inner exile is marked by liminal experience: a border that feels, like skin, a feeling border.³

Worth noting though: Tan is no stranger to diasporic experience—like a red thread, it runs through her family history. Dispersion, in other words, is not mere metaphor in her work—it is literal, material, and historic reality. It is not surprising, thus, that Tan works with geographical layering in *Notes From Underground*. Stratigraphy is used here as a method for uncovering alternative histories. No, wrong of me, I mean a method for writing alternative histories. In a way, the artist performs subjective, historical research, but refrains from letting private experience tower in the foreground. Autobiography is not a concern of Tan’s. She refuses, consequently, to let her work be reduced to autobiographical self-representation. Sure, an isolated reference to the artist’s childhood is made, but not to reinforce a biographical narrative. On the contrary, these occasional references are deliberately empty, signifiers without signifieds, as when the artist says, “That’s mine,” in a conversation about things in storage. What she refers to as “mine” is hidden from the viewer, as are the things she has kept in storage over the years. Thereby occluding the possibility of biographical interpretation: we know there is a personal history, something that is “mine”, a childhood, a lifeline, but the main purpose of referencing this is to place it in relation to a larger picture. One might say that the artist inscribes her life into the overarching structures of both descent and dispersion, both katabasis and sparagmos.

These two main lines in *Notes From Underground* are embodied by the sequences shot on the subway. The downward movement converges with a sprawling, dispersing one. As we find ourselves inside a subway car, the name of a station flickers by: Hallonbergen (Raspberry Mountains). We are on the blue subway line in Stockholm. Unlike the two other subway lines that start in the suburbs, cross the city center and then continue to another suburban area, the blue line starts in the very center of Stockholm, then moves outward to the suburbs, which makes its demographic journey so startlingly evident. The suburbs located at the outer end of the blue line lodge an abundance of histories that are rarely told: diasporic histories, experiences of exile.

³ Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Routledge, 2009 [2000], 45.



The artist deliberately abstains from getting close to these histories—you will find no attempt to represent the everyday experiences of non-European immigrants. Instead, we find ourselves in almost empty subway cars, evacuated spaces. But this emptiness shouldn't be read as the artist trying to reproduce how immigrants are made invisible in Swedish society, because then these would no longer be "notes from underground." Instead, Tan creates an absence that is insistent, tangible. Embodied absence. How? The artist has moved to a country that presents itself as the most equal society in the world. But those of us who live in Stockholm experience, on an everyday basis, its adamant segregation, especially the divide between center and margin. On top of that, "Sweden is the country within the Economic Cooperation Organization OECD with the greatest difference in employment between native and foreign-born."⁴ *Notes From Underground* doesn't explicitly address these particular problems, but the empty subway cars speak their own language of visualization and de-visualization. The viewer sees what isn't there. She sees what is not seen, not spoken.

Tan often returns to the concept of the liminal, the threshold. Linger in the farthest stations on the blue line means that we cannot close our eyes before yet another dimension that makes a neat division between visible and invisible, here and there, above and underground, impossible. Namely, violence. In other words, the boundary experience and the liminal require the acknowledgement of the violence by which that very boundary becomes visible: sparagmos, diaspora, dispersion.

The blue subway line is associated with violence. All the Stockholm suburbs with populations dominated by foreign-born, non-European immigrants are associated with violence. *Notes From Underground* also talks about violence. Sontag reflects upon the human capacity for cruelty, and stresses that instead of constantly manifesting surprise over it, we should understand this inclination. There is also the passage when a caller with a question wonders why we are not able to perceive those from other cultures, and specifically from Iraq, as human beings. We can guess that this question is asked during The United States' war against Iraq. Again, Sontag reveals herself as a tough realist without illusions, answering that "it's even worse."

The descent that takes place in *Notes From Underground*, the journey into the underworld that the artist sets out upon with Sontag

⁴ *Stockholm news, Online News in English*, May 19, 2011. For further reading, see the report: OECD. *International Migration Outlook 2014. Special focus: Mobilising Migrants' Skills for Economic Success*, 2014.

as a guide, makes us attentive to what is not there: the obliteration of diasporic fragments of generations of human beings in exile. The sharp, snapping sound that runs through the video work is an orienting signal for blind passengers, and you can only hear it on the blue line. It communicates in a language that most viewers don't understand, taking the shape of a provocative question flung at us: Which one of us is blind?

"I am a miner. The light turns blue. / Waxy stalactites / Drip and thicken, tears," writes Sylvia Plath in one of her most famous poems.⁵

Mining as a metaphor for the research process is just too self-evident for Tan's subtle and profound work, and still: the other journey that is undertaken in *Notes From Underground* is to Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. Why is that? Why turn to yet another foundational metaphor for Western thinking—Plato, Freud, you name it? Because, and this is the pivotal point throughout my essay, the cavern isn't a metaphor, it is real, lived life.

The viewer quickly understands that the artist visited these caverns often as a child, and now she returns there as an adult. The easiest thing would be to interpret this descent as a subjective liminal experience where personal history intersects with geologic past, and how different times and spaces intertwine. The viewer is introduced to dark, dripping underground caves. Beautiful, absurd—a tourist attraction. All this fuss to show us a tourist attraction? It strikes me once again that most things that are said in Tan's work are left unsaid, and, by showing us the shadows, the work points at other, unsaid and unseen shadows.

What are the shadows of Carlsbad Caverns? Why is our guide taking us there? Katabasis, sparagmos, diaspora. What is the unspeakable violence that this tourist attraction obscures? New Mexico is a state where the questions of limits, borders, and frontiers are most urgent. Within its population of Hispanics, Chicanos, Latinos, Mexicans, indigenous and native Americans there are thousands and thousands of histories of migration, diaspora, dispersion, and struggle. Again, the artist chooses not to address this fact explicitly, but the viewer can't but be made aware of it while following the ascending elevator ride. The elevator attendant asks: "Where you folks from?" The

⁵ Sylvia Plath, "Nick and the Candlestick," *The Collected Poems*, Ed. Ted Hughes, Harper & Row Publishers, New York 1981, 240.

male voice answers quickly, steadily, no doubt or shivering in his voice: "I'm from Sweden. Stockholm." His national identity is stable. But the artist, on the other hand: "I live in Stockholm. But I grew up in this area." No further explanations, but the attentive listener will be reminded that the production of strangers intensifies each and every time the question "Where are you from?" is demanded from us in a place that we call "home." The ease by which our identities are cut in pieces, dispersed.

The old home and the new.

Underground, ancient caves, and the by now obsolete triumph of modernity in the form of the dispersing lines of the subway.

Notes From Underground is a narrative about migration and diaspora. But instead of trying to restore a subjective speaking position for the Other, Tan chooses to speak from within canonical narratives, opening them up for alternative interpretations. We must, however, mind the gaps, fractures and blind alleys. The Orpheus of our time knows that the chthonic moves in various directions: a subway line becomes a sound wave which points towards Tan's third film, *Waves*. So the basic elements connect the three films: air, earth, water. But instead of fire, there is language.

The Shadow is Just as Tangible as the Origin by Mara Lee was originally published in *Lisa Tan: Sunsets, Notes From Underground, Waves*, with contributions by Natascha Sadr Haghigian, Mara Lee, Lauren O'Neill-Butler, edited by Joshua Shaddock, published by Archive Books, Berlin, distributed by Anagram Books, London and Berlin.

The book serves as a guidebook of sorts to Lisa Tan's eponymous video suite. The concept of the liminal permeates Tan's videos: drifting between day and night, above and below ground, land and sea. An analogous transit is offered by the book, suspending the reader between the empirical and subjective, with the hope of fulfilling the promise held out by the liminal: transformation.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Lisa Tan is an artist living in Stockholm. She received an MFA from the University of Southern California, Los Angeles and a PhD from the University of Gothenburg, Valand Academy. She is currently a guest professor in Fine Art at The Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm. *Notes From Underground* has been previously exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia (2016); Galleri Riis, Stockholm (2015); and the Lofoten International Art Festival, Svolvær (2013).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mara Lee is a poet, novelist and scholar based in Stockholm. She is the official Swedish translator of Anne Carson. Her novels *Ladies* (2007), *Salome* (2011), and *Future Perfect* (2014) are published by Albert Bonniers Förlag. Lee's recent scholarly study, *När andra skriver: skrivande som motstånd, ansvar och tid* (The writing of Others: Writing conceived as resistance, responsibility and time) is published by Glänta. She has written several essays on artists, including Lina Selander and Eva Hesse ("Om Eva Hesse" published by Moderna Museet). She is the recipient of the P.O. Enquist prize established by Norstedts, as well as the Svenska Dagbladet literature prize.



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