

Images in History

TOWARDS AN (AUDIO)VISUAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

The outcome of an international symposium taking place on 27–28 April 2017 at the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities in Stockholm, this anthology can be read from either end. At one end, a number of essays addressing the question of how pictorial, especially photographic, representations can and have been understood either as historical artefacts or as sources of knowledge about the past. In a nutshell, images in history. Turn the book over again and continue reading. At the other end, an equal number of contributions – texts as well as images – that approach the same question from the reverse angle: how pictorial, especially photographic, representations can themselves be used to convey a new and different understanding of the past. In another nutshell, history in images. Taken together, the two parts of the volume are intended, each from its own perspective, to prepare the ground for a new historical (sub)discipline, viz. (audio)visual historiography.

Keywords: (Audio)visual, film, history, images, methodology, photography

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What Börje Hanssen saw

A walk through Helsingborg, July 1943

During a few days in July 1943, the Swedish scholar Börje Hanssen walked around in Helsingborg with a camera and photographed streets, buildings and backyards.¹ The 26-year-old Hanssen had completed his studies in economic history and political science, among other subjects, and was at the time working on a project led by the professor of art history Gregor Paulsson under the title “Swedish environment under free trade and democracy”. Paulsson’s aim was to depict the development of Sweden’s living conditions and urban environments from the 1840s to the 1940s. He had engaged the services of a group of young co-workers who carried out studies in a number of different towns and smaller urban areas, and Helsingborg in southern Sweden was one of the empirical examples that had been chosen. Hanssen had first come to Helsingborg in the summer of 1942, when he worked together with one of Paulsson’s students, the art historian Elias Cornell. Cornell also worked in Helsingborg for a time in 1943, but the photographic work covered in this article was carried out by Hanssen alone. With Hanssen’s photographs from Helsingborg in 1943 as an example, I will discuss how knowledge of a place arises.

Paulsson’s major project was undertaken between 1942–1950 with a total of around 20 co-workers and resulted in a publication in two parts, the first of which was published in 1950 under the title *Svensk stad. Liv och stil i svenska städer under 1800-talet* (“Swedish town: Life and period styles in Swedish towns in the 19th century”). The second part, *Svensk stad. Från bruksby till trädgårdsstad* (“Swedish town: From foundry village to garden city”) was finished in 1953.² The project had changed character to some extent from its original anthological concept to become a synthesizing monograph, and the end timeframe was no longer the 1940s but rather the turn of the 20th century. Its knowledge-based content is still current, for example the historical description of the epoch of industrialism in Helsingborg that is presented in *Svensk stad* is still the most thorough to have been produced to date.³ However,



Fig. 1. "Kullagatan southward from EPA on a Monday afternoon." Photographer: Börje Hanssen. Nordic Museum archives.

with the odd exception, Börje Hanssen's photographs are not included in *Svensk stad*, although his contribution to the final collection of books was still significant – he was the author of around 40% of the text.⁴ *Svensk stad* dealt mainly with the time from the 1840s to the beginning of the 20th century, which is why photographs from the 1940s were not particularly of use. It would take a while, but *Svensk stad* would eventually come to be recognized as a classic work, the content of which represents authoritative knowledge about the cities and towns depicted as well as the process of Swedish urbanization.⁵ The result of Hanssen's photographic endeavours, around

100 pictures with associated captions, can now be found in the archives of the Nordic Museum. The photographs are dated, and the time of day they were taken is also given. In the summer of 1943, as in the previous year, Hanssen focused on documenting and analysing homes and public environments, two of the fundamental aspects of Paulsson's project. But he also had an assignment to conduct a "retail study" which encompassed, among other things, a comprehensive study of the shops along Kullagatan in the town centre.

WALKS THROUGH HELSINGBORG IN THE SUMMER OF 1943

On the afternoon of Monday, 12 July 1943, a warm summer's day with clear skies, Börje Hanssen found himself at the EPA department store, from where he observed Kullagatan in a southerly direction. The street was a commercial centre in the town, with a long line of shops and companies located in street-level retail premises and on the upper floors of the buildings. In one of Hanssen's photographs (*Fig. 1*) we see the relatively narrow street in shadow. Four women are walking alongside one other in the middle of the street, with another woman riding a bicycle in the opposite direction. A number of shop signs can be seen, and on the right of the picture there is a building with large display windows on the ground floor. Looking at this photograph today, one is struck by the lack of cars, and perhaps also by the very narrow pavements. Anyone familiar with Helsingborg's current city centre will note a number of buildings that no longer exist, as well as the fact that the street had pavements in 1943 – today it is a pedestrian thoroughfare and has the same paving on the same level over its entire area. In his caption Hanssen writes:

Kullagatan southward from EPA on a Monday afternoon. The pavements are narrow, and it is just as common for people to walk on the street itself as on the pavements. A more or less total lack of through traffic contributes to this tendency.⁶

The EPA department store adjacent to Kullaplatsen (now known as Konsul Olssons plats) is the point of orientation to which a reader of the text is expected to relate, although this building is not actually visible in the picture, and we are left to envisage it behind the photographer. One reason why Hanssen specifically mentioned the EPA department store in his caption could be that it was a relatively large and well-known building in the town, along with the fact that EPA, the only department store in the town centre, was of great importance to Hanssen in his survey of the town's retail environment. In the caption to another of the photographs from Kullagatan (*Fig. 2*) it is "the entranceway to Hedströms" that is the point of orientation.⁷



Fig. 2. "The entranceway to Hedströms." Photographer: Börje Hanssen. Nordic Museum archives.

Hedströms was a very well-known and long-established merchant house, with warehouses and a shop adjacent to a side street where the Hedström family had their residence on the floor above the store. This family-owned business, which had existed for several generations, was in many ways the antithesis of the modern EPA department store next door, and was a point of orientation in the town in terms of both space and time.



Fig. 3. "Illustrates the old shell around the new content." Photographer: Börje Hanssen. Nordic Museum archives.

A while after he had photographed Kullagatan's pedestrian traffic, Hanssen found himself alongside an older two-storey timber-framed building a bit further southward (*Fig. 3*). This building was probably built sometime during the first half of the 19th century, and it had captured his attention due to the disparity he found himself observing between the building's older framework and the visibly older construction of the second-storey façade, on the one hand, and the modern ground-floor display

windows on the other. In his caption he writes in argumentation for his choice of subject: "Illustrates the old shell around the new content."⁸ The new content in this case was a modern-furnished boutique with premises on both the ground floor and first floor of the building.

Hanssen explains the aim of his photography to an intended reader, and in doing so he perhaps also clarifies questions for himself by putting his observations in print. In this particular instance he was looking to depict the phenomenon of a new business having moved into an old-fashioned environment, where the building's exterior, in this case a low timber-framed building, does not correspond with the modern character of the business. This was a topic to which he returned at a number of locations during his camera-based journey through Helsingborg. In his caption to the previous photograph from Kullagatan, Hanssen had noted the people who were walking in the middle of the street. However, even though a number of people are visible on the pavement in this photograph, along with a parked bicycle, Hanssen has chosen not to comment on these. In this way it also becomes clear exactly what his subject was in this particular picture, namely the building and the different time strata that it represented, not the people who were moving through the town or their various modes of transportation.⁹

Two days later, on the afternoon of Wednesday 14 July, which was also a sunny day, Hanssen paid a visit to the northern part of Kullagatan. On this occasion it was not retail environments but rather residential environments that held his attention. He went into the backyard of no. 50 Kullagatan, looked up at the brick house that dated from some decade in the 19th century about which he was unable to be more precise, and took a photograph (*Fig. 4*). In his caption he writes: "People live on all of the floors. An incredible constructional conglomeration in the town centre that dates from the 19th century."¹⁰

Thereafter he went into the backyard of no. 48 Kullagatan and took two photographs, with three children in focus (*Fig. 5*). In his caption he notes two things: there was little space available for the children to play, and there was an outhouse. Here and in the backyard next door, it was not the modern commercial town, represented by EPA just a stone's throw away, that was the focus of Hanssen's interest, but rather another, old-fashioned Helsingborg, with buildings constructed without rules or regulations, and with an outhouse in the backyard, next to which children played without any organized apparatus. His caption reads: "Backyard interior at Kullagatan 48. Children play in the cramped backyard. The door to the latrine can be seen."¹¹

Hanssen took one more photograph on this day, of Arnhamska gården (a well-known property owned by the Arnham family) adjacent to Stortorget, where Kullagatan ends. As with the timber-framed building he had photographed a couple



Fig. 4. "People live on all of the floors." Photographer: Börje Hanssen. Nordic Museum archives.

of days earlier, Arnhamnska gården also embodied different time strata in one and the same construction, as Hanssen noted: "To the side of the courtyard the timber-framed buildings remain: a warehouse and a dwelling, while outside a completely different picture is shown."¹²

This interest in time-related disparities in the urban environment is a recurring theme in Hanssen's material from Helsingborg, both in relation to retail environments and residential environments. He noted major differences between the street



Fig. 5. "Backyard interior at Kullagatan 48." Photographer: Börje Hanssen. Nordic Museum archives.

façade and the backyards. Modern display windows on the ground floor but an older façade and construction technique on the floors above were reflections of how the norms, ideals and actual needs of different time periods had an impact on the physical environment. The environments which Hanssen observed in the 1940s – cramped backyards, buildings put together in haphazard fashion, an outhouse in the yard, and trade courtyards with warehouses – would disappear in conjunction with the major urban transformation that took place during the 1960s and 1970s, and the tone of



Fig. 6. "Monstrous villas." Photographer: Börje Hanssen. Nordic Museum archives.

Hanssen's descriptions reveals his negative attitude to such environments, a view that was widely shared by society at large.

The district of Olympia, just to the east of the town centre, is characterized by large Art Nouveau villas, most of them built as multi-family homes at the start of the 20th century. Börje Hanssen came to Olympia on a Saturday afternoon (*Fig. 6*), a week or so after photographing Kullagatan. In a caption from this day he writes about "monstrous villas" surrounded by the most minimal of gardens, and he also notes that

the street was deserted. It is obvious that he did not like what he saw. When Börje Hanssen visited this district he saw an architecture that he felt lacked value. The buildings also represented a style of construction that had been more or less illicit at the time they were erected. When the area was first built up during the earliest years of the 20th century there were no plans in place to regulate the construction process, and the property developers had exploited the plots of land to the maximum, with nothing but profits in mind; although Helsingborg's city planners were quick to react and prepared plans that would entail restrictions on how large buildings were permitted to be. When Hanssen was there in 1943, some 40 years after the buildings had been erected, the constructions were still felt to be controversial. In the early 1940s it was the garden city, with single-family homes surrounded by gardens intended for the use and pleasure of their owners, which had become the ideal; not the dense settlement still to be found in Olympia.

WHAT BÖRJE HANSSEN WROTE

Hanssen's captions are sometimes very brief, sometimes long and descriptive. Another of the participants in the *Svensk stad* project, Marita Lindgren-Fridell, wrote in an essay in 1980 about how, during the work, she had written detailed captions with reasonings about the subjects of her photographs, and how these could have sufficed as independent elements in the presentation of the project's material, but for the fact that there wasn't enough space for them in the final version of *Svensk stad*.¹³ Lindgren-Fridell's description of how she worked gives context to Hanssen's pictures and captions. His way of working was not unique but rather part of a method practised by a number of Paulsson's co-workers. And it was not just the method that was common among them, but also the way of viewing, analysing and writing about the environments that they studied. The group involved with Paulsson's project can be likened to what the Polish philosopher of science Ludwik Fleck called a stable thought collective, a phenomenon that arises when individuals in a group exchange thoughts and ideas in creative discussions. Ideas are formed within the group in a collective style of thinking that otherwise could not have emerged for the individual persons; in other words the group is a prerequisite for the production of the ideas and thoughts that steer a common project.¹⁴ As part of such a thought collective, Hanssen saw what his taskmaster Paulsson and the others in the group saw. Paulsson was strongly influenced by contemporary American urban sociology and had written the Swedish preface to the American sociologist Lewis Mumford's *The culture of cities* from 1938, which was published in Swedish in 1942.¹⁵ The perception of the buildings in the district of Olympia to which Hanssen gave expression, and his thoughts about

the cramped backyards in central Helsingborg, were part of the group's common style of thinking, influenced and shaped by both Mumford and Paulsson. Nor were Paulsson and his project group isolated from the rest of society, with their style of thinking well in keeping with the general perceptions and spirit of the time.

Börje Hanssen depicted Helsingborg through a combination of pictures and texts. The question is: would Hanssen have been able to describe Helsingborg's buildings, living environments and retail environments without his photographic images? Or would the photographs, without the attached captions, have been able to guide a viewer searching for knowledge about Helsingborg's environment at that time? The purpose of the captions can be viewed as a way of guiding the reader's attention in the right direction, of getting the reader to see what Hanssen himself had seen.¹⁶ But even if the captions as such were intended, in edited form, to be part of the *Svensk stad* publications, the actual writing of the captions was just as much a part of Hanssen's own process of knowledge production, since they gave him the opportunity to process what he had observed in the field, in combination with what he had learned from literature and archives.

The combination of pictures and texts provides a modern observer of the material with insights into both what Helsingborg was like in the 1940s, and a clear guide to Hanssen's own world of visions and thoughts in 1943, something that neither the pictures on their own nor the texts on their own could have achieved. The photographs and captions together provide a great deal of knowledge about what Helsingborg was like in 1943, but they are just as meaningful as sources of an understanding of Börje Hanssen's own views on construction, history and urban development, as well as his interpretation of the assignment he was charged with in Helsingborg. By reviewing what Börje Hanssen chose to note in his captions and, equally significantly, what he chose *not* to note, it is possible to analyse that which was of importance to him when he took his photographs, and perhaps even what it was that he actually saw.¹⁷ Hanssen's captions can be viewed as an expression of his own knowledge process, in which he has selected certain aspects of Helsingborg and observed them through his lens, after which he has processed his observations in text. In this way the camera becomes not only a tool for reproduction, but also a tool for seeing, which helped Hanssen to discover different phenomena in the town's physiognomy.

WHAT DID BÖRJE HANSSEN ACTUALLY SEE?

Hanssen wandered between different time strata in a limited area in the centre of Helsingborg, between the almost pre-industrial dwellings and backyards and the modern retail environments just a stone's throw away. When the photographs were

developed in the summer of 1943, they were for him sources of information that complemented other materials he used to be able to depict the various conditions that then existed in Helsingborg. Today, 75 years later, his photographs also represent sources of knowledge about the research process of the time. The subject of the photographic image is constant, it does not change, but as a source of information a photograph is constantly changing over time, since a viewer of the photograph reads new meanings into it.

A recurring theme in Börje Hanssen's captions is the disparity between the town's contemporary pursuit of modernity, and its pre-industrial past. A modern-day observer with access to all of his material could interpret it as him seeing the whole of the industrial epoch through his camera lens. What he actually saw in 1943 was a rapidly changing town whose process of change was so important and interesting to depict that he was also very keen to write a dissertation on it a couple of years later.¹⁸ 75 years on, the photographs that resulted from Börje Hanssen's work in Helsingborg are of great value as documentation of what the town was like in the summer of 1943. But they are also documentation of Hanssen's work method and way of thinking at the time, whereby he falls in with a then-prevalent style of thinking.

When Hanssen worked in Helsingborg, photography as a technology had existed for almost exactly 100 years, and photographic imagery was an established medium that had gained a great many areas of use and application. Within technology and science as well as the social sciences and the humanities, the camera was a given instrument, and the photographic image was frequently used for a number of different purposes. The *Svensk stad* publications are extremely rich in illustrations of various kinds, including maps, reproductions of older paintings and drawings, and older and more recent photographs. The images in these publications represent a way of mediating knowledge on the same terms as the printed text. Börje Hanssen carried out his camera-based wanderings through Helsingborg with the aim of capturing the town's various characteristics at the time. His material – in the form of photographs and captions – was intended to be part of a greater context, and was never meant to stand alone. And even though Börje Hanssen's photographs remained, with one exception, unpublished, they were still of great value to the man himself, and the knowledge process of which they were an important part was of great significance for the final text that was eventually published in *Svensk stad*. The knowledge about Helsingborg that is contained and presented in these books is still of immense value and interest, and the creation of that knowledge was thanks to Hanssen's photographic work.

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NOTES

- 1 Hanssen worked in Helsingborg during the summers of 1942, 1943 and 1944, in the middle of World War II. To a modern reader of his notes and letters, it may seem odd that the ongoing war is never referred to in his texts, especially as Helsingborg is situated at the coast of Öresund, only 4 kilometres from Denmark which was then under German occupation.
- 2 Gregor Paulsson, *Svensk stad: Liv och stil i svenska städer under 1800-talet*, 2 vols. (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1950); idem, *Svensk stad: Från bruksby till trädgårdsstad* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1953).
- 3 Henrik Widmark, *Föreställningar om den urbana världen: Identitetsaspekter i svensk stadsbild med exemplet Helsingborg 1903–1955* (Ph.D. thesis: Uppsala University, 2007), 193.
- 4 David Gaunt, 'Börje Hanssens betydelse för *Svensk stad*', in *Perspektiv på Svensk stad: Staden som forskningsobjekt 1950–1980: En skrift från projektet Svensk stadsmiljö, byggande och boende under de senaste hundra åren*, eds. Thomas Hall & Ingrid Hammarström (Stockholm: Akademitratur, 1981), 25.
- 5 Anders Dahlgren, 'The *Svensk stad* (Swedish town) project: Architectural history in action', *Konsthistorisk tidskrift* 85:1 (2016), 76–84.
- 6 Photograph in the Nordic Museum archives, Gregor Paulsson's collection, vol. 3. This and the following captions are all in the Nordic Museum archives, Börje Hanssen's collection, vol. F1:3. Translation by the author.
- 7 Photograph in the Nordic Museum archives, Gregor Paulsson's collection, vol. 3.
- 8 Photograph in the Nordic Museum archives, Gregor Paulsson's collection, vol. 3.
- 9 Karin Gustavsson, 'Fotografens blick och betraktarens syn', in *ETN: Etnologisk skriftserie* 8 (2013), 7–20; eadem, 'Kunskap ur tomrum: Närläsning som etnologisk metod', in *Kulturbistoria: En etnologisk metodbok*, eds. Lars-Eric Jönsson & Fredrik Nilsson (Lund: Institutionen för kulturvetenskaper, Lunds universitet, 2017), 121–136.
- 10 Photograph in the Nordic Museum archives, Gregor Paulsson's collection, vol. 3.
- 11 Photograph in the Nordic Museum archives, Gregor Paulsson's collection, vol. 69.
- 12 Photograph in the Nordic Museum archives, Gregor Paulsson's collection, vol. 69.
- 13 Marita Lindgren-Fridell, 'Minnen från arbetet med *Svensk stad*', in *Perspektiv på Svensk stad: Staden som forskningsobjekt 1950–1980: En skrift från projektet Svensk stadsmiljö, byggande och boende under de senaste hundra åren*, eds. Thomas Hall & Ingrid Hammarström (Akademitratur, Stockholm, 1981), 23.
- 14 Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and development of a scientific fact* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 45, 102–103.

- 15 Lewis Mumford, *The culture of cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1938); idem, *Stadskultur*, trans. Leif Björk & Åke Malmström (Stockholm: KF, 1942).
- 16 Magnus Bremmer, *Konsten att tämja en bild: Fotografiet och läsarens uppmärksamhet i 1800-talets Sverige* (Lund: Mediehistoria, Lunds universitet, 2015), 14.
- 17 Gustavsson, 'Kunskap ur tomrum'.
- 18 Karin Gustavsson, 'I utkanten av *Svensk stad*: Material och människor, arkiv och böcker', in *I utkanter och marginaler: 31 texter om kulturhistoria: En vänbok till Birgitta Svensson*, eds. Marianne Larsson, Anneli Palmsköld, Helena Hörnfeldt & Lars-Eric Jönsson (Stockholm: Nordiska museets förlag, 2015), 229–239.