

# Dreams of the Blind

Rolf Gullström-Hughes

Here we have a man who has to gather the day's refuse in the capital city. Everything that the big city threw away, everything it lost, everything it despised, everything it crushed underfoot, he catalogues and collects.

*Charles Baudelaire*

And then one day perhaps the city returns and rips out the sore and builds a monument to its past.

*John Steinbeck*

“I PREFER SLIDES,” he said, loading the carousel carefully. “Black and white slides. Video is such an *unimaginative* medium.”

The front row of students grinned. They were first year architecture students, hungry for innovation; black and white slides were fine with them. Besides, the visiting lecturer, who was tall and dark-haired, had a perpetual sidelong smirk on his tanned face and people tended to smile at him even when he was trying to be serious. He moved in a calm, lounging manner which added to the impression he gave of quiet self-satisfaction, as did his voice, the drawling purr of one whose transatlantic rubbernecking was underwritten by serious research funds. His name was Marcus Schwartz, and, according to the photocopied publicity, he was “Professor of Technoburban Studies and Digital Planning within the newly-established Department of Conceptual Realities at UCLA”. It was no secret that his own architectural practice had picked up a couple of mil-

lion the previous month by designing animation software for Hollywood. Helena, my companion, had been talking of little else but his visit for weeks. Back into Modernism and High Art was he now reversing by touring Europe with his slides of urban dislocation and a dog-eared Walter Benjamin hanging from a frayed pocket in his designer denim jacket. Even from the third row, you could smell his coconut shampoo as he kneeled on his ironed 501s to plug in the projector. So much for innovation, I thought when I finished the lecture programme. Finally, he snapped into place the loaded carousel, the blinds were drawn, the lights turned off, the audience fell silent, and the slideshow began.

Superimposed over a photographic collage of faces, the first slide showed the words:

Marcus Schwartz  
*presents:*  
Stockholm Culture Capital  
Urban Legends

*“Legend begins where man has lived, where he lives ... Each day the modern sense of existence becomes subtly altered. A mythology ravel and unravels. It is a knowledge, a science of life open only to those who have no training in it. I start with this quotation from the French surrealist, Louis Aragon, because it indicates my qualification for talking to you tonight about Stockholm and architecture—that is, the fact that I have no significant experience of either. I like to think of myself as a philosopher who moves between questions of *space* and those of *time*, between *architecture* as the organisation of space, and *architectural discourse*—the organisation of language—which is sequential and therefore concerned with time.”* The slide projector whined smoothly. The screen showed a drawing of rows of seated figures in what looked like a large hall. To their right were tall glass windows giving a view of crowds of people moving through what looked like a funfair; to the left there were a couple of tiered balconies occupied by people strolling. Helena squeezed my hand.

“Gunnar Asplund’s Paradise Restaurant for the Stockholm Exhibition. 1930,” Schwartz sighed reverentially at the sight of the slide. “When the lights finally go out, the diners can see the wonderful blue of the midnight sky. Only then do they notice the walls, those indistinct blue walls which so melt into the blue outside that you feel the restaurant has no walls but is itself part of midnight space. This is architecture which dissolves all the boundaries—a celebration, pure and simple. *It is not*, Alvar Aalto wrote, *a composition in stone, glass, and steel, as the functionalist-hating exhibition visitor might imagine, but rather a composition in houses, flags, searchlights, flowers, fireworks, happy people, and clean tablecloths.* What is Aalto describing here? Paradise. A paradise populated by flesh-and-blood people.”

Aalto uses the enigmatic phrase *the unknown human* and writes of Asplund’s *inexhaustible resources and means which flow directly from nature and the inexplicable reactions of human emotions*. It seems that he found in his surroundings many “unknown” and “inexplicable” qualities—not least, perhaps, his hero’s working habits, the demands he made of his disciples, the compulsive piercing of flesh beneath his bloodied fingernails with sharpened 7HH pencils. A spot of blood, then, on the clean tablecloth set before the happy people on the drawing board.

*“The more the centre of gravity within architecture is displaced from valuing individual synthesis, monuments, etc. towards a more organizational concept of relevant problems, the more meaningful becomes what we call an ‘exhibition’, where one can introduce systems, methods, details, possibilities for development, and so on.”*

I looked at the rows of intent faces around the hall. I began to suspect that it is not the lecturer who dreams but rather the audience. The lecturer simply takes care of the conditions which give rise to their dreams. In this respect at least he can resemble an artist.

“So here is a first suggestion for thinking about culture; the introduction of systems, methods, and details which create possibilities for development.”

“Is he proposing the introduction of *happy people to clean tablecloths?*” I whispered.

“*Sssh!*” Helena said. “Don’t spoil this for me.” The projector whirred and up came a photograph of a man in a railway uniform facing three rows of bright television screens in a dark room.

“After hours he loses himself in these images. Platforms. Escalators. An emptying car park: Floors Three, Two, One, Basement. The bluish-grey pictures makes lives appear secret or banal; a couple kiss on a rising escalator; at the ticket barrier they part; a woman with long hair pushes a pushchair down the stairs; in the seat of the pushchair, a flat, square box; an elderly couple squint at a map on the platform wall; they peer at each other then squint at the map some more. For this man, it’s a panorama more absorbing than any fiction. The lack of surprises makes each gesture, each fleeting expression, compelling. A complex cinema of the everyday. The scenes are poorly lit, unfilmable almost, but to him they are as calming to watch as the movements of the sea, shifting tides of human behaviour washing across the monitors.”

Schwartz loosened further his already slack tie, a mannerism we had all seen on TV, the meaning of which, unfortunately, was that he was starting to enjoy himself.

“Some of us are tired of cropped images, soundbites, news summaries, convenience information. Surveillance, with its unending stream of mundane events, seems to deliver the supreme realisation of our realist aspirations. The future has arrived and he can see it, deep beneath the streets, in the glow of a dozen screens. He believes that closed-circuit television lacks partiality. In the unblinking gaze of these cameras he sees evidence, patterns, beautiful correspondences, and it does not seem strange to him that these images can reveal more than the busy city above. So he makes tapes, secretly, and files them according to a private system of dates and themes. Unknown to his employers, he has built up a large collection of tapes which he watches on his home VCR during his free time. But there is never enough free time to watch recorded events and so he becomes an extension of what he watches. With this picture we are looking at, he enters the frame.”

With this picture, I thought, *we* enter the frame. Someone, somewhere, is no doubt watching *this* audience gawp at the free freak show, having convinced itself of the “scientific” origins of its curiosity.

“Bentham’s panopticon, you remember, enabled a centralised supervisor to monitor all of an institution’s inmates. The ultimate goal, Foucault said, is for the inmate to internalize the mechanism of surveillance which the building establishes. What matters is that the prisoner knows himself to be observed by an inspector, whether the inspector is actually looking or not. In view of this, Foucault writes, Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable: *Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being inspected at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so.*”

While he talked I thought of Håkan, a fortysomething I had met on Kungsträdgården. Despite the sub-zero weather, he was dancing, naked save for a jockey pouch and dangling moneybelt. He had an explanation for his behaviour. He had come to expose himself to the television signals as they passed from transmitter to receiver and had calculated that the signals were most dense here, the heart of the hotel district, in the midst of innumerable hotel rooms equipped with satellite television. Håkan could see an unending procession of images tumbling and scrambling above the streets—lunatic angels set loose on the networks by their multinational gods.

Most of us believe (if we think about it at all) that we can walk down the street unaffected by this colourful presence, but Håkan knew otherwise; he felt them swarming around him, susurrating on his tongue, multiplying in the warm folds of his underwear; they came howling from the hanging satellites, incomprehensible and terrifying, and they were thickest of all in the air above Kungsträdgården. To those whose eyes are open, Kungsträdgården is a threshold for thousands of spectral newscasters, sports jocks, quiz masters, pop stars, cartoon animals, politician

actors, pundits, funksters, pranksters, gangsters and models; an unending blizzard of technicolour fluttering to their destinations above the grey pavingstones and shivering trees. And the only way Håkan knew he could keep them under control was by dancing, which was why, irrespective of the weather, he took off his clothes and danced, shaking his pink limbs so that each slippery image (even the pay-channel porn stars, who could cling to him tightest of all) would slide off his skin and lie steaming on the frost-bitten pavement. Hence his dance, comprising an unending series of minute muscular spasms and twitches, each denying the half-formed television image a lasting grip on his hairy skin. The onlookers, the mutterers, and the name-callers had not learned his movements. Why? Because they were *contaminated* by those images which had escaped the demented procession from outer space to their allocated Sony, Panasonic, Grundig, Finlux, or Mitsubishi prison cells.

“You’re not listening,” Helena whispered. “He just quoted you.” A few people had turned in their seats to smile and nod at me. I tried again to concentrate on what Schwartz was saying.

*“The foreigner is the other of the family, the clan, the tribe, Julia Kristeva writes. At first he blends with the enemy. External to my religion, too, he could have been the heathen, the heretic. Not having made an oath of fealty to my lord, he was born on another land, foreign to the kingdom or the empire.”*

I first met Helena at the Stads Bibliotek. She was watching people read and I began to watch her in turn, discretely, from behind the cover of some fashionable theoretical journal which I was pretending to read.

“Here then is our second definition of culture. Solipsism. Paranoia. Consumerism.”

She has copper auburn hair and freckles, and on that day she was wearing a silver padded ski jacket. I remember thinking that she seemed to be a strange mix—as if a Celtic priestess had been recruited as an astronaut and then stranded on the white streets of Stockholm. In fact, her mother came from Solna and her father was a Hungarian Jew. I followed

her eyes to try to see what she saw. People were sitting at desks or standing at bookshelves. Almost all were reading. People reading look like they are praying. Their hands are clasped together to cradle the book, their eyes are downcast, a look of inward concentration softens their features. To watch this private communion seems intrusive, as if only the skin on the face separates the reader's thoughts from the onlooker. Helena said that she was doing important research, research which would ultimately help these people to read more... *more openly and efficiently*. Openness. I heard that word used often. Openness and transparency. Those were the buzz words of the day. To do business you had to use them frequently. She believed that the future belonged to those who could assimilate knowledge quickly and efficiently. With her degree in media studies from Stockholm University she was able to use words like *knowledge* and *information* without embarrassment.

Schwartz was cradling his paperback copy of *One-Way Street* as if it were a sacred text printed on crumbling papyrus. The screen showed a photograph of a number 41 bus on Kungsgatan, passing through a blizzard of snow falling from a dark sky. There were few shoppers on the pavement. Inside the bus the passengers stared at nothing, a look they seemed to have been practising for years.

*"Separation penetrates the disappearing person like a pigment and steepens him in gentle radiance,"* he read.

That first conversation took us to Kulturhuset, the house of culture, where we ascended to the third floor to see another library, another tangle of bookshelves, headphones, computer screens. We stood against the glass gazing down on Sergels Torg. The "foreigners" were gathering, edgy and motionless, among the pillars and litter outside Centralen. Centre-stage beneath the flyover, the organ lady pumped away at her footpedals, warbling indefatigably into her microphone. Muscular teenagers wearing cycle shorts and Walkmans rollerbladed backwards, their legs criss-crossing like scissors as they negotiated small obstacles on the ground, a reverse ballet of non-contact. Here, then, is the dead centre of the capital, this set of energies suspended in a void grudgingly

bequeathed by the surrounding commerce. As we came down the stairs, a drunk swung through the swinging doors into the reception and was silently slung out again by an efficient security guard paid to protect the peace and preserve the culture.

“Life in the city has made us highly social creatures,” Schwartz revealed. “We have developed the habit of watching our environment very closely, picking out small signs and clues. By the year 2000 more than half the human race, and by the year 2025 two-thirds of all humanity, will live in a city. So the city places us in a community of strangers and in a community of strangers, we must use a quick set of stereotypes to classify the people we encounter. We classify each other according to ‘type,’ according to our clothes, our mannerisms, the newspaper we are reading, our expressions and gestures, the accessories with which we journey through the metropolis. *The foreigner allows you to be yourself by making a foreigner of you*, Edmund Jabès writes. We feel unique but we look the same as the last person to stand in our space. This is where fashion helps us out. In the Hades of Greek and Roman mythology, the river Lethe caused those who drank of its waters to forget their former life. Fashion, in celebrating novelty rather than recurrence, oblivion rather than memory, is our contemporary Lethe, winding its way through all the big cities of the world. Look at the good ladies of Östermalm in their lipstick and labels—dedicated amnesiacs, oblivious to even their recent past.”

Schwartz was late middle-aged and looked like he slept with his female students. Since Helena was once-upon-a-time one of my students, I could not entirely occupy the moral high ground on this score; nonetheless I strongly disapproved of sleeping-with-students by others. Even more strongly did I disapprove of sleeping-with-others’-students, which was the worst of both worlds as far as I was concerned.

We had walked around the building, looking in through its windows. *Glass is the skin of a building*, Helena said, keeping me in the role of the tourist, the ageing disciple, the breathless voyeur. *It produces a transparency of form and therefore function*. From the little skin a person reveals to the



world—the hairs on a hand, the nape of a neck—one imagines that one can imagine the entire body unclothed. *Parliament used to meet here during the Seventies, assembling in what is now the theatre.* But this belief that a detail, a fragment, can illuminate an entire form of life is a religious delusion. *As the uses of space evolve, the story of the building emerges,* Helena was saying, as if rehearsing to present a documentary. I wanted to kiss her but I had to speak instead. Glass keeps the culture in there, the other out here, I said. I breathed on the grimy window and rubbed at the mist with my fingertips. Skin is not transparent, I said. Helena slid her hand into mine. Your skin is transparent, she said.

“I’m often asked how I find them.” Schwartz was smiling at his own ingenuity. “The truth is I don’t find them. They find me. According to a talmudic legend, the angels are created so that after they have sung their hymn before God, they cease and dissolve into the empty air.”

It is not so difficult to imagine the appeal of the universal to a former commanding officer of the Israeli Secret Service like Schwartz. How much more comfortable to become “a philosopher who moves between questions of *space* and those of *time*” than to confront the memories of military hi-jinks in the desert. All those liberated fingernails scratching into one’s dreams; the hot-wired terrorist testicles; the cool sponges soaked in bleach.

“City personalities are similar to the angels—self-creating, ephemeral, and valuable because they appear each moment, make a difference in that moment, and then vanish.”

These are his prisoners, I realised. Disposable information. I felt sick again.

“This gives us another analogy for life in the city. A series of rituals of renewal and repetition to set against the natural forces of our body’s decay.”

I closed my eyes to make him vanish. His voice remained.

*“In times of terror, Benjamin writes, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everyone will be in a situation where he has to play detective. Strolling*

*gives him the best prospects of doing so.* Here then is our next account of culture—a *flânerie* through the mysterious theatre of the city streets.”

There was an unexpected silence. Helena had raised her hand, attracting Schwartz’s attention. To my surprise she now stood up and addressed the hall.

“And if the *flâneur* is thus turned into an unwilling detective, Benjamin continues in that heavily ironic passage, it does him a lot of good socially, for it accredits his idleness. He only *seems* to be indolent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not close his eyes. Unfortunately, you seem to have missed the irony.”

Schwartz was peering at Helena, his gaze sliding over her body like a long, dry tongue.

“Benjamin is mocking the impotence of a timid intelligentsia at times of social upheaval,” she continued. “He is not advocating politics as a spectator sport, nor does he suggest a retreat into the virtual gaze of the tourist. Hence the irony: *Thus the detective sees rather wide areas opening up to his self-esteem. He develops forms of reaction that are in keeping with the pace of a big city. He catches things in flight; this enables him to dream that he is like an artist.*”

Helena sat down again. Somebody coughed at the back of the hall. Schwartz glanced at the Chairwoman for guidance. I took Helena’s hand and squeezed it.

“Bloody well said!” I said loudly. I felt the eyes of dozens in the audience on us, but I kept watching Schwartz, the seasoned charmer, as he started buttering up Helena. After the first sprinkling of compliments, he gave the impression that he was not even listening to his own blandishments. It was a performance worthy of a future US President. He even switched off the slide projector, the better to highlight his *raw spontaneity*. Out came my flask and we kissed on the mouth—once, twice—until some of the warmth returned.

Ultimately, I have decided, people describe themselves when they try to bring together the complexities of a city in words. If Schwartz spends his

days between the reduced electromagnetic fields of his laptop monitor and the high resolution MTV in Dunkin' Donuts—fitting in Europe whenever a “window” appears in his Psion Organizer—then it's little wonder that his Stockholm turns out to be a montage of recycled theory from the Paris of the Second Empire, Berlin between the wars, and whatever pop cultural studies he imbibes as he relaxes in Club Class on his transatlantic flights. Schwartz belongs to a new “media-friendly” generation of professionals who can give you the pith of Plato, the crux of Kant, in a well-turned phrase which has been copied and pasted from some previous transmission. Television has decided that we need faces for our ideas and so every subject readily throws up its own Schwartz. It's the democratic thing. Walter Benjamin, our hero's hero, identified two types of storytellers; the person who has come from afar and the person who has stayed at home. Storytelling cannot develop without bringing together these two roles, he argues—the lore of faraway places, such as a much-travelled person brings back home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place. And Schwartz belongs to a new breed who combines both roles in one person, coming to us through the airport with his Californian tan at the same time as he settles into our living rooms, smiling and relaxed, on his very own campus chair.

He was signing books and joking with well-wishers when I returned from the toilet. Helena was waiting for me by the exit.

“What's the hurry?” I asked, having discerned some complimentary wine on the publisher's stall.

“I asked you not to drink, just this once,” she said, buttoning her coat, tight-lipped. “Of course, you let me down.”

At the back of the 54 bus I attempted to reason with her. She was not interested in my arguments. I had abused Schwartz, insulted his intellectual capacities, ridiculed an invited professor, and then humiliated her by accusing him of attempting to seduce her during last year's Venice Biennale. It all sounded distantly familiar, although I had not considered the possibility that he and Helena could have got together at the Venice Biennale. Evidently you have been considering it for some months, Helena

retorted. She got off the bus at Odenplan and I got off too, in order to reason further with her. She would not come home with me. She was going to stay with a friend. She would let me know if she wanted to see me again. At that moment, she very much doubted it. I said her name, over and over, like a mantra to keep her by my side, but she crossed the road, her silver jacket gleaming under the streetlights. I shouted her name through the traffic. She turned onto Sigtunagatan and vanished from my sight.

So there it is—love, not at first sight, but at *last* sight. I stood at the bus stop with the dirty snow thawing in puddles on the pavement, and I heard again Schwartz's voice;

*Separation penetrates the disappearing person like a pigment and steeps him in gentle radiance.*

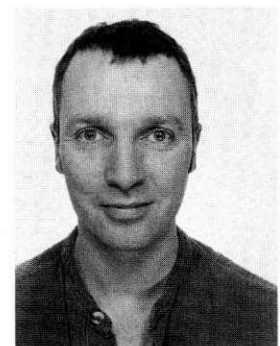
Vasaparken was deserted. I walked the footpath in the dark. I remembered a friend who had travelled Scandinavia and North America making plaster casts of women's hands, the story of each life inscribed on the skin of the palm. Her exhibition of the replica hands had been acclaimed in New York, but when it was over she seemed to lose her way, as if the tangle of lifelines she had preserved in plaster had unravelled the thread that she herself should follow. So she moved to Uve, an uninhabited island off the south coast of Sweden and I did not speak with her for more than a year. But I hear that she has returned to Stockholm to make a documentary about the dreams of the blind.

By the all-night toilets and the burned out Vasa Grillen I met my friends, the only ones to understand why I walked out of my job the previous winter. They were already in party spirit when I joined them and they welcomed me warmly, as one welcomes an old friend. Perhaps Håkan has the right answer in his pale gyrations on Kunsträdgården beneath the icy moon. Perhaps we need to be cleansed not just of the slick, sticky images that surround us, but also of the words that spill out when we open our mouths.

Odengatan was quiet for two or three hours before the return of traffic. The falling snowflakes seemed to be attracted to each cube of streetlight like listless moths to a frozen flame. I shrugged off my jacket, set the

bottle carefully on the bench, and started dancing. I tried to shake all the words from my head. The boys clapped and cheered me on. I danced to the ragged music of their voices in the enveloping silence, to the frightened beat of hearts in that cold January night. When I opened my eyes, I saw Helena walking across the road and then running towards me. I saw her beneath the streetlights as clearly as I see you now.

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Will Eisner's Central City is a cramped, compact stage for human conflict and interaction.