
DOMESTIC BOUNDARIES

Privacy, Visibility and the Norwegian Window

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Abstract

The article presents an exploration of domestic borders in the Norwegian town of Skien. Differences between homes may be minimal, however the differentiation between homes, can occasionally, be marked (Wallman, 1978: 203). This observation has relevance for Norwegian and Somali households whereby perceptions of domestic boundaries, visibility and definitions of privacy are analysed. The domestic window is shown to provide one material medium for the negotiation of ethnic identity and social classification. I argue notions of the private are dynamic and contextual and frequently have less to do with 'being seen' than with a perception of the social gaze. Consequently, looking at ethnic minorities, Norwegian locals and the private home in Skien does not just imply investigating the link between visibility and privacy but questioning the ideas on which this link is based, and rethinking notions of privacy itself.

Key Words ◆ ethnicity ◆ privacy ◆ public and private boundaries ◆ windows

INTRODUCTION

The Norwegians have a saying, a Somali man explained to me '*borte bra men hjemme best*' (away is good but home is best). In his Somali view, this sums up Norwegian values to a tee. And in his view this is a negative quality rather than a positive one; 'everyone goes home after work, everyone just goes home'. Here Saiid is contrasting his experience with Somalia where he used to spend most of his time out with friends. Now that he is living in Norway he acknowledges that family duties keep him home, he is a family man. Still though, he has time to go into town on

Saturday afternoons and meet his friends in the town centre where they while away the hours chatting in small groups. There is no obvious town square in Skien, instead the centre is marked by a small, public Ibsen park and shopping area linked by a pedestrian street. This area around the shopping-centre and car park provides Saiid and his friends with a place to meet where they come together outside the domestic environment and where they enjoy exclusively male company. The small congregations of Somalis on Saturday afternoons are widely recognized in Skien and interpreted in different ways. It is, perhaps, occasions such as these that compound differences between the immigrant population and the locals; a group of men gathering near the car park apparently for no other purpose than to converse. Important here is the staging of sociality as a public activity. Saturday afternoon socializing, conducted by Saiid and friends is striking both because of its visible gender exclusiveness but also because socializing in Skien is a much more domestic and even formalized activity.

This article focuses on Norwegian and Somali households in blocks of low- and high-rise flats in the town of Skien in south-east Norway. As part of the research, interviews were conducted in two areas – these blocks and in another part of the town centre, comprising detached and semi-detached houses and described by many as traditionally working class. Through ethnographic research, in which a material culture approach is central, I show the home and householding routines to involve complex decisions regarding one's position in a wider social sphere. I argue that for Skien and Somali informants, household boundaries are negotiated in relation to often differing expectations of domesticity, whereby unequal weight may be given to categories such as privacy, visibility, seclusion and access. Ethnic contrast provided some informants with a foil for self-expression, but many others articulated surprisingly detailed impressions of their Norwegian neighbours, based on their window decoration. Building on this ethnographic data, my conclusion aims to illustrate varied notions of privacy that are, importantly, often tied to the visual.

In defining privacy, one finds it is often taken as pertaining to the encroachment of the boundaries of the self or control of personal information. Schoeman defines it as 'as the measure of control an individual has over information about himself, intimacies of personal identity, who has sensory access to him' (1984: 2). Privacy is something to be protected, it is morally significant yet diffuse enough to lack clear boundaries, so that it is often only clearly identified when it is breached. In view of a recent extensive literature that engages with modern forms of surveillance, to have privacy is often to side-step modern technological advances, such as new information technologies that allow for novel forms of intrusion (e.g. Kateb, 2001; Rosen, 2000; Spanbauer, 2004). That

is, to have privacy is often associated with being electronically or visually unseen. However, as Salecl points out, if the right to privacy has to do with not being exposed to the gaze of the other, 'we can say that . . . we have an increasing desire to see what is supposed to be hidden' (2002: 4).

Not only does the concept of privacy remain elusive, but its specific relationship to public (civil society) or private (domestic) spheres is often unclear. We are told that Euro-American home life has turned progressively inwards, emphasizing the intimacy of home away from the public realm of the street and the alienation that it represents (Halle, 1993; Löfgren, 1984; Putnam, 1999: 147). Concomitantly it is argued that it is precisely this 'privacy' of the home that isolates and depoliticizes it, thus masking power asymmetries embedded in space (Duncan, 1996). In dealing with this ambiguity, I am interested in how informants speak of privacy, and am mindful that diverse constructions of privacy have been proposed within Scandinavia and elsewhere (Popenoe, 1977, see Freeks and Hessler, 1995 for a Swedish example). Leira (1992) for example makes an argument that Scandinavian frameworks of the public-private divide are coloured by social-democratic political culture, arguing that traditional public sphere intervention in the home results in different perceptions of civic privacy (1992: 169). As a result, she argues, the public-private split, in terms of state policy and intervention in social reproduction does not hold the same distinctions in Norway as might be found in more 'liberal' welfare states such as Britain for example (see Leira, 1992: 168-9 for discussion). What is considered private in Britain may not be so in Norway. A case in point might be the annual publication by Norwegian national and local newspapers of the income, assets and tax bills of national and regional wealthy citizens. The facility to peruse individuals' incomes and tax bills does not only apply to media coverage of the rich however, tax offices are open for a defined time in order to allow interested parties to browse the financial circumstances of their associates, neighbours and so on. A joke does the rounds that this is how Skien girls find their husbands.

Like silence (Tacchi, 1998), privacy is not an absolute but more a matter of degree, but physical or technological invisibility as a necessary complement of privacy is frequently reiterated. In this example, conversations and interviews focusing on home windows and domestic boundaries evoke notions of private space within the public arena, and public presence within the private. Additionally in a society where egalitarianism has traditionally been linked with social sameness, the value of likeness has a particular resonance. According to Berggreen (1989, in Cohen-Kiel, 1993) social sameness and egalitarianism is closely linked with the visibility of one's likeness. Being equal means being seen to be equal. The question this article therefore poses is how is

sameness and difference played out in a social context – the home – in which domestic privacy is highly valued. Secondly I explore the significance of the pedestrian gaze through Skien windows on household occupants. I approach this question through an analysis of undrawn or unused curtains through which individual and private households are susceptible to public observers. Windows cue a distinction between privacy and access, albeit visual access, to the home and pedestrian intrusion to private homes belies a common link made between privacy as being hidden or unseen, or at least highlights the specificity of its contextual nature.

DOMESTIC BOUNDARIES

Gullestad (1992) has observed that in tandem with 20th-century social levelling, different sectors of Norwegian society observe implicit layers of distancing or boundaries, 'symbolic fences' that distinguish those that come from different backgrounds or define 'other' experience, such as among immigrant, sub-cultures, and between different social classes in Norway. But amongst the number of physical boundaries, those that surround the home, both as physical and social markers, appear to be rigorously defined. The threshold of the Skien home is clearly marked with garden walls, fences and by allocated car spaces for each household. Mirrors are frequently placed just inside the front door, and the corporeality of arriving or leaving is again underlined in the removal of shoes and coats in the hallway before one enters the domestic space proper. Again, Norwegians' deep respect for privacy has been noted in academic literature: while the family may be Norway's most valued institution, the home is its 'private and intimate' focus (Sørhaug, 1996: 115–16).

From my earliest visit to Norway in 1994, I was told that unlike many other European countries, with developed pub and restaurant cultures, Norwegians prefer to meet their friends at home. Socializing, therefore, in the form of inviting friends for coffee or meals would be more immediately considered within the domestic space than meeting in town. Later, Oslo students assured me that that had changed in the 1980s, but as a general rule it still rings true for many people in Skien. Informants explain a tradition of home-centredness (Gullestad, 1992) largely with reference to climatic restrictions 'in winter, it is too cold, you just want to rush home where it is warm and cosy'. Another consideration is the expense of eating and drinking in restaurants and pubs where high prices are common and, even for lunchtime meals at work or school, many people prefer to bring a packed lunch or *matpakke* rather than going to the expense or trouble of eating out. These explanations for the centrality of home may appear exaggerated however, for

it is not the case that people do not venture out for evening classes, sports and outdoor pursuits. On the contrary Thomas Hylland Eriksen notes that the population of 4.5 million makes up 17 million members of 2393 groups, clubs and organizations (1993: 24). Rather many prefer not to linger or to socialize in the public sphere after these events but go straight home. Numerous physical and social barriers distinguish public from private sphere, and yet the private home does not seem to be contradicted by relatively unhindered domestic visibility.

Emphasis on windows as boundaries appears particularly apt in this discussion. According to Gullestad, a Norwegian emphasis on borders or 'a passion for boundaries' as she calls it, grows from imagined sameness. She argues 'Norwegians seem to be countering challenges by a transformation of national identity in which attempts at "boundary-setting" are central' (1997: 22). But if boundary setting represents 'an attempt to resolve the ambiguities of difference by fixing the boundaries of belonging' (1997: 22), it is an idiom that is not recent to the social sciences, and was famously developed in the work of the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth and his associates.

In his seminal work *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* Barth (1969) looks at the ethnic boundary that defines the group with the aim of illustrating the processes of self-ascription of ethnic identity. Drawing two paradigms together; the first that ethnic groups are bounded or contained and secondly that identity is managed and presentational (see Cohen, 2000: 3), Barth argued that ethnic identity is malleable – it is articulated at the point where ethnic groups encounter each other. It is impermanent and strategic; ethnicity can adjust to the 'specific circumstances of any ethnic interaction' (Cohen, 1994: 10) such that when two ethnic groups are in close proximity, the identity of any one group may be modulated to that of the other. Identity therefore is not an enduring, stable quality but is essentially contrastive. Contrasts find expression in boundaries, but cultural differences are significant only in so far that they are effective in negotiating social relations (Donnan and Wilson, 1999: 21). Pertinent to my study is the notion of the domestic boundary as an essential feature of identity management. People move within and across home boundaries, which may be physically or conceptually crossed without threatening their existence. According to Barth the locus of attention should be placed on these sites, on the boundary that defines the group rather than the cultural stuff that it encloses (Donnan and Wilson, 1999: 22) because actual cultural differences are only significant if they are given value or salience. It is precisely this point that is pertinent here. Barthian boundaries, in precluding 'cultural stuff' are limited in application to domestic examples. For unlike fixed borders, the case-studies that follow allow and suggest a context for limited interaction. Windows provide the context for sameness recognition, or for a perception of

'significant difference' (Wallman, 1978: 201, emphasis in original). Equally informant comments about visible windows can be seen to address a perceived pedestrian audience as well as cater for an interior atmosphere. In as much as these boundaries facilitate a limited interaction, Wallman's discussion of social boundaries through the metaphor of a balloon or teabag seem more appropriate. The analogy of the teabag is taken to represent the elasticity that allows influences to pass across a social boundary without jeopardizing it (1978: 205). It permits a certain to and fro across the boundary that affects both sides, and in keeping with the analogy, responds to changes in situation and through time. In this example however, and in contrast to Barth, the demarcation of socially significant difference and the point of distinction between households does not necessarily run along ethnic lines; having a 'cosy' home has certain material manifestations that cross-cut ethnic, age and class backgrounds.

SAIID AND MELISSA

Saiid and Melissa are a Somalian couple who had been living in Skien for several years when I met them. Saiid had come to Norway as an asylum-seeker in 1989, he was in his early 30s and worked in a local kindergarten, while Melissa was 19 and attending a local high school. They had two small children and lived in a two-bedroom apartment in a block of low-rise apartments in an area I will call Marken. Marken has both high- and low-rise apartment blocks built between 1956 and 1964, which are part of a co-operative building and housing association. In total there are approximately 804 flats in the Marken blocks, 35 of which are owned by the county council for the immigrant community. It is estimated that perhaps an additional 10–15 apartments have been bought by immigrants who have not gone through the council system.

In view of the way the Marken blocks are described by residents, town citizens and the local county offices, one can see that not only is the locality physically peripheral to the town centre, but it is also marginal in other respects. Marken represents a short-term option for many: young people settle in the apartments before moving to a larger home and starting a family. In fact it is not permitted to rent or sell the high-block flats to families with children and therefore they tend to be occupied by single individuals and elderly pensioners. It is here that immigrant informants were routinely settled by the local county council. As a rule they are offered the use of a flat for a nominal rent until they become established. On reaching financial security, they are given the option of purchasing the flat or paying full rent.

There is little public space around the blocks where residents can congregate and my Somali and Sri-Lankan informants tended to meet in

their flats or in the town centre. Alternatively, an *International Culture Centre* provides a location for immigrants to come together. It has facilities such as a coffee shop, and acts as a venue for a variety of educational and social events, such as dancing or craft classes. Adjacent to the centre is a school that provides free language tuition for those who wish to learn Norwegian. The school and Cultural Centre provide people with a recognized location to pursue study and leisure activities or to partake in foreign cultural events; it is open to all town citizens, but immigrants and especially women tend to dominate the centre's activities. The International Cultural Centre provides the only venue for Somali women to meet outside the home, but Melissa told me that there was an active network of friends who arranged other forms of get-togethers for local Somali women in private homes or flats. In this respect home socializing holds some similarities with Norwegian practices, however even here the perception of domestic boundaries as 'open' or 'closed' were taken by Somali informants as a salient point of departure from their Skien neighbours and became a central forum through which inter-ethnic relations were discussed.

Throughout fieldwork, informants often advised me against dropping into people's homes unannounced. Turning up on a doorstep, I was told, would jeopardize fieldwork and make certain individuals uncomfortable. The problem was not only my newness to the area, but also that some householders had carefully choreographed modes of socializing, such as sewing-clubs or wine-clubs, that were pre-arranged on a monthly basis and avoided worry of intrusion. 'Drop by anytime' was a common invitation, 'but phone first'. Saiid and his wife, aware of the importance of giving prior notice before visiting, frequently reprimanded me for my habit of phoning before I dropped by. They interpreted it as being 'too Norwegian' and they positively urged me to arrive unannounced. As Saiid pointed out, access to the home is related to a sense of hospitality which they feel is missing in their daily exposure to Norwegian rules of domestic etiquette.

Saiid Yeah, the problem is that with Norwegian culture you can't just call in to people, you can't go and knock on the door. You have to call before you go and we don't do that, we just go and knock on the door, you know. That's our culture, you know.

Melissa In our country, you don't have to knock, you don't have to call, even if you have a telephone. Like you, I don't need to invite you, you can just come and knock on my door and say 'hi, I was just passing' and I have to give you something to eat because there is always room for somebody else.

The state statistics agency (*Statistisk Sentralbyrå*) defines an immigrant as a person living in Norway with two foreign parents. Currently

Europeans represent 60 per cent of foreign nationals, Asians 23 per cent and Africans 8 per cent. In recent years the number of immigrants from developed countries has declined, while numbers of nationals from developing countries, particularly from Iraq and Somalia have increased (*Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development*), and although the relative number of immigrants in Norway is smaller than in countries such as Sweden, Germany or France, the debates surrounding them are 'extensive and polarized' (Gullestad, 2002: 47–8). Since the immigration ban in 1975, newcomers have only been admitted on the basis of being experts, family members, students, refugees and asylum-seekers. So for the year 2001, 25,412 foreign citizens were registered as immigrants in Norway, of whom 14,782 were asylum seekers or refugee applicants. Of those 5866 were granted protection.¹ In the Marken blocks the majority of immigrants, as defined by the local county council in 1998 came from Somalia, followed by former Yugoslavian states, Iran and Iraq. And in processing these immigrants local authority policy follows that of the state in being steered through a language of integration.² This language differs as one moves from public, media discourse to the day-to-day social exchange of individuals however. In analysing 'integration' as it is experienced locally, I found that it was often posited in terms whereby it mediated common ground. Frequently lacking other venues for interaction, the home provided one medium which was employed as a point of reference for the block's residents. As open or closed, the boundaries of the flats and domestic practices situated within them became the medium for an expression of domestic inclusiveness or exclusiveness, contained sociality and visibility. On a local level, comparison may be hedged around public or domestic practices such as speculation that Saiid and male company excite as they linger, chatting, in the town centre or, as it emerged again, in discussion of a mosque in Oslo. In this example the visibility of the mosque was one purported objection, rather than the actual temple. 'It is not the religion', one young woman commented 'but why can't they have a prayer house which is just like a regular building?' 'Sticking-out' or 'fitting-in' has wider social resonance (Gullestad, 1992) in epitomizing a perceived changing social order. In contrast the Skien town mosque, I was told, was an ordinary house located in the vicinity of the local police station.

For Saiid and Melissa the boundaries of the home are permeable; sociality spills out into different forums and they perceive the Norwegian home as fixed and solid, where crossing the boundaries is predicted and organized in advance and thus controlled. Norwegian informants, such as Hanne by contrast, notice a different type of spatial segregation where Somali women are never seen loitering with the men on Saturday afternoons, but gather instead in equally exclusive groups in the Cultural Centre. Somali men and women form decentralized neighbourhoods in

different pockets around the town while community building networks are enacted in homes and alternative venues such as in the cultural centre, or in the town centre. From Norwegian interviews, in contrast, one gains a much stronger sense of normative decorative orders when talking about home interiors, current fashions and friends' advice in actual or speculated decorative changes (Garvey, 2003). Householders emphasize the sociality of decoration, involving friends and partners and can describe the current trends of the day: fashionable colours for living rooms during research included deep greens, dark reds and mustard yellows. People seemed to know current domestic fashions and used to ask me about those in my home country. In view of the widely recognizable trends which have run from the pastel pinks and blues of the 1980s and ochres, mustards and greens of the 1990s, there is a sense of 'keeping up' with the dynamics of decorative trends. These styles are not necessarily restricted to any social class, although they may be subject to class nuances. Keeping-up is being part of this social trajectory, showing oneself to be fashionable and up-to-date, knowing the trends and being able to reject or participate in them and is part of Skien home-making. Decoration is a viable means of social interaction, visitors comment on changes made and congratulate the householder on their good taste (*god smak*). Of course, the latest fashions are not necessarily adhered to; in my opinion it matters less whether there are standard fashions than that there is a perception of recognizable and shifting fashions. One young couple in Oslo claimed 'I bet every apartment in this block has a blue kitchen!' In contrast to Oslo this apparent conformity is more easily refuted – or not – in Skien which lacks the social diversity of a capital city. Significantly though, monthly furniture catalogues that are distributed freely to people's homes are popular, even if only to flick through absentmindedly. And they work, according to a branch manager of a national furniture store, who estimated that in the region of 37 million kroner³ is spent annually in their production, a cost divided between the store and its furniture suppliers. But if the home is the canvas for creating a family environment that participates in a wider social project, this is perhaps best flagged through the points of interface between the interior and the wider public sphere.

WINDOWS

Perhaps more than any boundary, it is the window that can best be described as an interface. As an interface it provides the interstice between overlapping boundaries. The window melds public and private behaviour; through the social gaze domesticity as it is lived is made visible and as such it highlights differences in domestic practices amongst diverse social groups. Moreover it is precisely because of its

banality and ubiquity that the common domestic window becomes a medium through which social comparison can be made. For while informants strenuously underline the private-ness and individuality of their home, its public visibility is rarely acknowledged.

Walking around the Marken blocks of high-rise flats one day, a friend commented to me that one could tell by glancing at the windows whether the flats were occupied by Norwegians or not. From a local perspective this assertion held some truth: Skien households often have very decorative windows (Figures 1 and 2). Windows are embellished with a composite of elements: one frequently sees plants, candlesticks and lamps on sills, and occasionally clay ornaments hanging from the central sash. These decorations can obscure somewhat the visual access into the interior, but also serve as a form of decoration. In fact some informants refer to the nakedness of the street, or the lack of sociability of occupants without this form of public/private ornamentation. Curtains are commonly hooked back midway down the length of the window frame and although net curtains are rare (except, I was told, in the homes of the elderly), curtains proper tend not to be drawn, even at night. This visibility is striking when

FIGURE 1 Skien window with typical decoration.

Photo by the author



experienced for the first time. For although the curtain is an important element of the houses that I visited, complementing the overall décor of the living room furnishings, I rarely saw them used. When I queried informants about this lack (as I saw it), a typical response might be 'who would be interested in looking in?' Skien etiquette seems to require that no matter how visible living rooms and kitchens are, one should not look. 'Not looking' therefore suggests that domestic privacy is not an enforced action, but maintained through mutual co-operation. However as informants make clear, looking, appraising and comparing home decoration is precisely an attraction of summer evening walks for some local residents, as I detail later.

During my interview with a 40-year-old woman who lives alone, she described to me the visibility of her home and the scrutiny of the social gaze. Earlier in the interview she described an occasion when a passer-by asked her about a lamp hanging in a corner of her living room.

Pauline Does that mean that people look in your windows?

Monica Yes, they must, sometimes I feel that . . . I bought blinds, wooden ones which I can pull down. When I lived in the high-blocks I could get up and not have to think about what I had on me but now I have to make sure I have a T-shirt on before I come down as people might look in, people go on walks and look in houses, so I can't do the washing-up without being aware of it.

Pauline So it is good that you have blinds?

Monica But I can't bear to use them, to lock myself in either. I suppose I could draw them down and up again but I don't want to do that, I want to see out as well. I haven't had them so long, in the beginning I had them right down but I don't want them down, let them look, that's what I say. If it had been a lamp in the window I would have felt better about it than a lamp right in the middle of the house. Some evenings I have tried to come and see in myself and it's not that easy, I have two plants at this window and two others at that one.

Monica's decisions regarding her new home were actively made in cognizance of the social gaze. She argues that her domestic choices and perception of the public audience are made in interlocution with each other and although she expresses some discomfort with the pedestrian attention she receives, she has done little to obscure it. At the same time, as she continued it became obvious that her own domestic choices were made in recognition of current styles and fashions (cf. Garvey, 2001).

FIGURE 2 Typical Skien window with net curtains tied back.

Photo by the author



She added:

The same as me, like when I and a friend might walk around and look in houses and see which curtains look nice and which don't. I know that others do that for my house too. And there were quite a lot who have discussed the change in the colour of my house exterior.

As detailed by informants, the ideal Skien home is composed of a number of components such as candles, lamps, ornaments and plants. These elements do not stand alone but are combined to evoke a feeling of homeliness or 'wholeness'. Light for example is particularly stressed in interviews and lamps or candles on tables or in windows add greatly to this effect, the latter transforming the window into a decorative feature. Frequently lighted candles or lamps can be seen displayed in windows, focusing the eye towards the light or possibly away from the interior activities within. Less often one might find a lighted lamp in a window with drawn curtains behind, emphasizing the light as a beacon to the street outside.

The visual aesthetic of decorated or illuminated windows is not restricted to Norway. Cieraad describes the Dutch window as representing a 'lighted showcase', a spectacle for visibility and a 'type of exhibitionism' (1999: 31; see also Hannertz, 1996). However viewing the light from the perspective of the household as well as from the street there is also another, related interpretation. In his historical analysis of street lighting, Schivelbusch (1987) charts the historical development of streetlight in Paris as an attempt to appropriate public space by state authority. With the introduction of a state-owned lighting system came a similar symbolic appropriation of the street as a state-ordered space. He argues this appropriation of the street by the modern state can be viewed by looking at the different spheres of influence spatially marked out in it today; '[T]he sidewalk is the responsibility of the adjoining house-owner who has to clear it of ice and snow, whereas the bordering area of the street proper concerns only the municipality' (1987: 62). Public lighting by these means represented a claim to the public sphere by a postured authority, he argues. In Skien, if street lighting represents space occupied by the state, society or public authority, the lamps and candles in windows streaming out onto the public road and pathways represent an interesting mirror image to his argument. Lighted candles are a characteristic feature of Norwegian homeliness (Bergan and Dysthe, 1994), and lamps and candles on coffee tables and in windows are commonly found. Perhaps most notably candles represent warmth, cosiness and pleasant domesticity, and this particular evocation ripples out into public spaces more generally. One informant who works in an alcohol rehabilitation centre for young adults emphasized that she always lights candles in her office when a meeting is

scheduled with a resident. Equally, national festivals, such as at Christmas are described as 'festivals of light' when, ideally, light from candles should refract from polished windows onto the interior and glistening snow outside. During this time informants might assert that even if no other decorations are erected, one has to put electric lights on outdoor trees or in the window because 'it is so cosy, when you are passing-by to see all the lights in the windows' (Lene). Particularly in houses modelled on old designs, one might see lamps on all front-facing windows, and when lit, they occupy the surrounding area. The light arguably occupies a double role in drawing attention to the beacon in darkened surroundings, or in diverting attention away from the interior by providing a focus on the border of the visual field. Plants on window-sills potentially function in a similar manner; in the interview detailed earlier they were used as added insulation against over-inquisitive pedestrians.

Schivelbusch's argument focuses on the connection between light and hegemony, and even though his argument is not concerned with the private sphere a connection could be made between domesticity, the public gaze and the constitution of subjectivity (Foucault, 1977). A reference to 'peering eyes' of the social audience in Sweden (O'Dell, 1997: 132) could be aligned with Cohen-Kiel's contention that Norwegians prefer to be 'faceless in a crowd' (1993: 65) or to the traditional connection between social probity and windows. Cieraad (1999) for example draws attention to urban myths surrounding the nefarious activities of the window cleaner, and again, in Skien one can still find 'spy mirrors' on old houses, from which respectable (and implied female) householders could scan the goings-on in the street without having to come too close to the window. Now, the mirrors have moved inside, being ubiquitously placed in front halls. However, on occasion the lights, candles and decorations give the impression that the exterior gaze is not unwelcome. This impression is enhanced not only at times of national festivities, but also on those, albeit rare, occasions when one sees an illuminated lamp in a window with drawn curtains behind (Figures 3 and 4). The important point here, I believe is that lighted windows represent a visual field crossing domestic boundaries, as in Schivelbusch's example of the sidewalk, a non-material interface where public and private boundaries appear indistinct.

These decorative techniques, again, are not lost on immigrant informants; Simone described the surprise her Tamil friends expressed when she lighted candles 'just to be cosy', a measure which they associated with power cuts at home, she said. This description was affirmed by Simone's friend Ahila who explained that Simone's home was 'very nice', but 'very Norwegian'. Saiid and Melissa equally took note of Norwegian window decoration.

Pauline What do you think of Norwegian home decoration?

Melissa I like their kitchen, that is what I like.

Pauline How do they decorate it?

Saiid They have lots of things in the windows and the colours of the windows and the colours of the walls are the same, and they hang things on the wall, plates and cups and things. I like that, I like it.

The impression of a classificatory schema tied to window decoration emerged with Else, a housewife from northern Norway who recently settled in Skien.

Else Yes, yes, the blocks are different because everyone thinks the next person will do it. I think it is very important, what it looks on the outside as well as the inside . . . You can see from the windows if they are Norwegians or foreigners. For example, they don't have plants or flowers in the windows and only have curtains and they just hang down. I have discussed this a lot with people and they agree that you can tell the nationality from the window.

Pauline Is it important that the windows are nice?

Else I am quite occupied by that.

FIGURE 3 Lamps and house plants framed by drawn curtains, enhancing the public character of domestic windows.

Photo by the author



Pauline Why?

Else I don't know, not just the windows but the whole interior, I love the interior, I love – I really like making it cosy around me, making it how it should be. I pay attention to that, I like to have it just so, and that is when I am happiest. I couldn't imagine living in a place without pictures on the wall and plants, it would be naked, no I must have it as I have it.

Later, in drawing further comparisons with immigrant neighbours, Else conceded that the lack of attention to windows may be emblematic of greater attention placed on family members 'I think Pakistani and Somalis pay more attention to each other, to themselves and friends and family. You can see it when you go to town, there is always a group of them – more than us Norwegians. It seems anyhow that they mean more to each other'. In striking a note about windows as framing the occupants within, Else is not only drawing attention to the window as cueing Norwegian or non-Norwegian occupants, but is also referring to the status and efforts of the individuals inside. A 30-year-old Norwegian woman who was married to a Tunisian man and who had converted to Islam, noticed that her Tunisian friends decorated more simply than her Norwegian peers 'like they don't care so much about it, they might have a sheet on the windows as curtains but I am a bit different. I am a bit

FIGURE 4 The public character of domestic windows – Lamps and drawn curtains.

Photo by the author



too fussy for that. I wouldn't hang sheets on the windows, I would have to have curtains. I am used to that at home too'. Finally one gathers that a brief scan at the window can provide a first impression of the household's occupants. As Gitte, a 19-year-old Norwegian woman explained:

Grandparents' generation, they have net curtains which cross over each other and they have lots of plant pots with lots of small decorative things around them and they usually have begonias. And lots of little lamps hanging from the centre and that is typical 'old people'. Young people have it a bit simple, plants in the window and coloured cotton curtains and green plants – palm and cactus – and no lamps hanging in the middle of the window. Those belong to the over 60-year-olds.

CONCLUSION: BEING SEEN

Being seen or being under the public gaze has many applications. At the beginning of this article, I quoted Schoeman (1984) in his contention that privacy is not so much keeping personal information secret as having a measure of control over its circulation. Gullestad (1997) also reiterates the quality of control in Norwegian social relationships and comments that it is not coincidental that Barth, as a Norwegian academic, should forward a theory of boundaries. She argues 'traditional and concrete notions of boundaries between property now seem to be extended to personal space of individuals, to boundaries within and between homes, to national self-government as well as other kinds of units, such as ethnic groups' (Gullestad, 1997: 35). Examples given of boundary marking include incidental observations such as stickers on babies' buggies that command 'don't touch', to national politics and questions surrounding EU membership. In short defending independence on the national or international stage exhibits an 'intense preoccupation' with boundary-setting, such that it is a central organizing concept for bolstering feelings of control (1997: 35). However as I have shown there is also a marked transparency of Norwegian interiors that appears unusual in the light of this argument. For example it is common to see the names of a household's occupants listed on the exterior of the home, such as 'Tove lives here' (*her bor Tove*), contrary to the deliberate anonymity which guards the privacy (or perceived security) of occupants of British or Irish households. Moreover undrawn curtains and the degree of visibility they allow strikes one as a marked exception to an otherwise restricted sphere.

As an interface the domestic window marks a change in the social fabric. From an internal perspective the border surrounds the familiar and the normal, whilst those excluded are more likely to view it as the beginning of a another performative system (Wallman, 1978: 207). Another performative system refers not only to a criticism of Barth for

his omission of seeing the boundary as experienced from both sides (Wallman, 1978), but also to his overemphasis on contrast. Ethnicity, as a politicized cultural identity, can be invoked to draw or highlight distinction 'as a tactical posture' (Cohen, 1994: 120). One might expect that windows particularly evoke a burden of the gaze amongst my Somali and Tamil informants and the immigrant population more widely who are moved from state reception centres to local government housing, continually under the gaze of the state. Conversely the window as channel, frame or interface appears to assume greater significance for Marken householders than their immigrant neighbours.

At certain moments disparate domestic practices achieve salience for identifying difference, but privacy and sociality have a diverse resonance when applied to Norwegian and Somali homes. Saiid and Melissa and their Somali neighbours exhibit some awareness of the importance of Norwegian windows but view them with apparent indifference. For them Norwegian boundaries are conceived of in terms of practices of seclusion and access and in contrast they are at pains to illustrate their spontaneity, accessibility and sociability through an open household, based on ideals of hospitality. In the same blocks, and amongst Skien locals in houses one gained the impression that uncurtained windows appear more as a frame for the display of domestic 'cosiness', an interface with different planes of reception, and a form of social participation.

Moreover it is the quality of this engagement, and the reciprocity of gazes that is important here. A necessary distinction can be made between Levin's discussion of an 'assertoric gaze', that establishes an opposition between observer and observed and an 'alethetic gaze' (1988: 440). The alethetic gaze suggests an 'intertwining of gazes' and a concomitant sense of 'wholeness or connectedness, which might undermine an objectifying vision' (Reed, 1999: 50, quoting Levin, 1988: 210–11). This intersubjective relationship between observer and observed is elaborated as 'the seer can feel his seeing as it is felt, or received, by the other, the one who sees. The seer and the other as seen belong to the same flesh . . . two seers, seeing one another, cannot avoid an involuntary, organismic acknowledgement of their primordial kinship' (Reed, 1999: 50). Window decoration is a matter of insignificance for Somali informants, part of a larger story of Norwegianness, of which the alethetic gaze is a significant component. Skien windows can only be realized with reference to a broader perspective of contrast and comparison to the Norwegian home and to the nature of privacy more generally. But perhaps more than other threshold markers windows underline the boundaries of the Norwegian home as a dynamic space, and evoke a relation or interface for public and private engagement. The windows I have described are peculiarly Skien boundaries, not because they register distinctions between Norwegians and the ethnic other but

primarily because they are material manifestations of this public/private dynamic.

Notes

1. SOPEMI (2002) 'Trends of Migration to and from Norway and the Situation of Immigrants in Norway', by Camilla Landsverk, Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development.
2. The Norwegian Parliament decided in June 2003 to enact an introduction scheme for newly arrived refugees in order that they should be included in working life and society as soon as possible. The introductory programme lasts up to two years and consist of 300 hours of training in Norwegian language and social studies. (Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development - www.odin.dep.no/archive/krdbilder/01/14/infor017.pdf).
3. At the time of fieldwork, 10 Norwegian kroner was worth just under 1 pound sterling.

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