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**Abstract:** In this paper, we argue for an ethical understanding of exurban environments, which we propose as symptomatic spaces of neoliberalization. We outline the idea that civility within public places is a mode of moral communication grounded in everyday encounters and embedded in the ordinary places in which they are enacted. We also advance the argument that exurban environments, as properties of neoliberal capital, employ distinct strategies to monopolise the use of space and encourage its inattentive occupation. We illustrate this through our case study in the North of England, a business and retail park which we suggest as typical of spaces produced through wider processes of neoliberalization. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of the writers and theories explored throughout the piece for a critical understanding of place, one that is premised on the importance of a quotidian understanding of the social, an everyday morality.

**Key words:** Civility, Ethics, Exurban, Emmanuel Levinas, Neoliberal Space

## Visibly Mute: Ethical Sociality and the Everyday Exurban

The present conjuncture is Kafkaesque to the degree that castles and ramparts reign over us everywhere. These castles and ramparts are usually in plain view, frequently palpable to our senses, even inside us, yet at the same time they're distant and somehow cut off, somehow out of reach and inaccessible; their occupants are evermore difficult to pin down when we come knocking at their doors, providing we can find the right door to knock on (Merrifield 2012: 127).

The quotation above acutely identifies the concurrent “social closure *and* physical openness” that characterises the contemporary city, where populations can be shut out from any sense of public space and civic voice (Merrifield 2012: 52). In essence, Merrifield describes the spaces of neoliberalization, the “elusively dispersed yet deeply embedded form of social rule” (Peck, Theodore and Brenner 2009: 101) which geographers have characterised in terms of the systemic violence of its socio-spatial strategies (Springer 2011). Cities have been characterised as the “incubators” of the political strategies through which the various instantiations of neoliberal logic are rolled out in quotidian ways (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 375). In this article, we wish to add to this argument and extend its focus to the type of exurban setting that has accompanied the growth of neoliberal discourses in North America and Western Europe (Peck and Tickell 2002: 382). Specifically, this article analyses a retail and business park, developed in the 1980s and 1990s on the outskirts of a large industrial city in the North of England, in order to assess the type of ordinary landscapes (Springer 2011: 526) shaped by neoliberal logics. We are interested in understanding the atmospherics of this particular place and the “mobilization of affect” in its buildings and spaces, not least because of the ultimate social and political ends to which such atmospherics play (Thrift 2008: 172; also Lees 2001 and Kraftl and Adey 2008). We understand our case study as an example of a new type of “commercial public space” which enacts power dynamics not primarily via confrontational methods of policing space, but rather through “the *experience* of the space

itself, through its *ambient* qualities” (Allen 2006: 442) that contrive to foster feelings of comfort rather than coercion amongst its consumers. Merrifield’s analysis is located within his discussion of Occupy, a movement which has attempted to “utter a different vocabulary of revolt” through which it engages “a new way of seeing, a new structure of feeling” (2012: 131-132). Building on this, we argue that such a new way of perceiving the landscape is needed, one that pays due regard ~~for~~to ethical and critical registers, for the quotidian geographies of corporate life are uneven in terms of the power-geometries they enact (Massey 1993). Moreover, these geographies are increasingly difficult to read, as argued by Merrifield in his depiction of contemporary urban forms shaped by capital that are openly visible, yet strangely mute and enigmatic in their spatial affects; as Allen notes (2006: 443), social closure is achieved in such ostensibly accessible sites precisely because “we remain largely oblivious to the scripted nature of such open spaces”.

An expectation that we should be able to read landscapes has been central to thinking about urban development, both in a prosaic sense of navigating any given space and as expressive of the wider cultural contexts within which buildings are placed. Lefebvre (2002) suggested that landscape be thought of as a social text which is composed of a complex of signals, signs and symbols on the ground, negotiated and enacted daily by those who use the space. This sense of place as semiotically understood and socially enacted is heightened in Lefebvre’s analysis of the types of spaces accompanying top-down processes of capitalist growth and state-sponsored forms of planning; such processes produce landscapes to be consumed according to a logic of visualization, with a resultant devaluation of experiencing the city in non-visual ways (1991: 98). Lefebvre observed a mutation in the type of landscapes associated with mass (auto-)mobilities (2002: 310), signalling the shifting importance of spaces such as motorways and logistics hubs to wider urban and regional economies. In these

diagnoses of urban development as increasingly premised on widespread patterns of mobility and a heightened visual apprehension of landscape, Lefebvre anticipates arguments by Augé (2008) that the late period of modernity is characterised by physical environments that are non-relational and dis-embedded from their local cultures. In his rendering of the exurban non-places typical of late capitalism, Augé suggests the de facto diminished importance of towns and cities, and their historical significance as sites of sociality, by their representation on motorway signage (2008: 76-78).

Lefebvre's and Augé's analyses prompt us to rethink how we might engage critically with the political and economic processes of our time through the spaces that these produce (Madden 2012; Hill 2010). Central to this challenge, we argue, is transforming our understanding of spaces conceived and planned in economically instrumental ways to spaces that are more open to interpretation by their users (Lefebvre 1991:38-39). Characterisations of cities as places wherein the public and private selves of individuals are negotiated through shared spaces have long been implicated in debates about moral life, civic responsibility and the governance of populations (Osborne and Rose 1999). Whilst we cannot equate the idea of a public sphere with public space exactly, there is a material grounding to the enactment of public culture and political praxis that should not be overlooked; as Springer argues, "*where* things are said is at least as important as *what* is said, *when* it is said, *how* it is said, and *who* is saying it" (2011:543-44). Moreover, for Mitchell, public space does not merely form a backdrop to struggles over rights to the city, but is active in their implementation (2003:235). The city inculcates practices of civic responsibility, with the urban form "a crucial condition of citizenship in the sense that being a citizen is inextricably associated with being *of* the city" (Isin 2002:283). If we agree with these arguments, how do we envision centres of ethical sociality in contemporary exurban forms that are highly fragmented and dispersed

around the edges of established cities, running counter to the traditional patterns of centrally organised geographies that have hitherto informed our understanding of the urban (Sieverts 2003)? When dealing with urban forms that are increasingly radial and stretched, and understood as relationally constituted in wider networks of commerce and power (Amin 2012: 64), questions of citizenship and sociality assume ever greater urgency (Merrifield 2013).

In raising the question of how best to act morally in a world where discursive power is itself abstract and impersonal, Popke suggests imbuing “the practical exigencies of daily life with ethical significance, to expand the realm of the social that is normally subject to moral or ethical judgement” (2006:505). In the discussion that follows, we make a start in this direction, by using the language of ethical theory to interpret the geographies of the everyday exurban. We begin by presenting the arguments of Zygmunt Bauman and Richard Sennett on the role of urban spaces as primary sites where we learn the rules of civility; their work allows us to articulate the idea that the practice of civility implies a kind of moral communication. This idea is developed through an engagement with the work of Emmanuel Levinas, whose philosophy deepens this communicational model of civility and extends it by a discussion of ethical relations and obligation. Setting these writers into dialogue allows us to arrive at an understanding of civility as a form of ethical sociality that is embedded in quotidian social practices and situated in geographically specific contexts; in this paper we look at contemporary spaces of exurban development as sites of ethical sociality, but within which we can observe two core strategies which constrain individuals who use these sites. That is, we argue that exurban environments are experienced as saturated mediascapes | advertising capitalist orthodoxies, or as spaces that to a large degree become mute by withdrawing from the understanding of those who inhabit them. These tendencies can exist

simultaneously within the same space, and often to the exclusion of other spatial strategies and modes of inhabitation. We illustrate this with the example of Centre 27, a retail and business park close to the city of Leeds in England, highlighting the almost aggressive anonymity built into the design of much of the corporate architecture here once we leave the familiarities of its heavily branded retail areas. Such anonymity weakens the capacity of the passer-by to read the environment in the way that Lefebvre suggested was possible in traditional urban forms; such aggression instils a disempowering dynamic between person and place. Exurban environments like Centre 27 are proprietary spaces of capital, where money interests attempt to orchestrate, constrain and monopolise their use, rather than spaces shared by individuals through a civil practice coextensive with moral life *per se*. Whilst we do not argue that these influences are absolute and that individuals and groups cannot disrupt the neoliberal logics that characterise particular places, we do describe the exurban environment as constraining in order to highlight the importance of spatial forms, especially those that we routinely experience, in shaping wider cultural practices and critical politics. We conclude with a brief discussion of how a critical understanding of place might yet be articulated, based on a quotidian understanding of the social, and on an everyday morality.

### **The Encounter as Moral Communication**

One approach to the task ahead would be to develop an account of what it means for such spaces to be civil – and to begin this we turn first to Bauman. In so doing we highlight a conceptual weakness in his formulation of civility, one that arises in part from his decision to set it out via Sennett's narrow theorisation of the role of speech in civil space. By reconnecting Bauman's urban social theoretical work on civility and strangers with that of his earlier commitment to exploring a Levinasian moral philosophy, we hope to elaborate an idea

of civility that is more robustly moral, and that accommodates language in its fuller manifestations, before situating this in our case study of Centre 27 in the second section.

~~Bauman's definition of civility is~~ Bauman defines civility as interacting with strangers “without holding their strangeness against them” (2008: 104); without resenting them for their strangeness, without recoiling from their strangeness, and without demanding that they hide their strangeness behind some veil of familiarity. We might understand this notion of civility as an openness to contingency or the unknown and so, in turn, as an encounter that embraces, or that does not erect a barrier against, the perceived risk inherent in the unpredictable randomness of public space. Bauman understands the encounter as a lost art, something society has come to resist as the dissolution of community under conditions of neoliberal capitalism has led to an anxiety toward those with whom we are unfamiliar. As such, he argues (1998: 134), people shy away from interaction with strangers, presenting themselves only as a surface that the other may glance at (or off), and affecting a blasé attitude, as Simmel suggested in his analysis of the city of industrial modernity (1903). Bauman places an emphasis on the role of urban design and architecture in encouraging practices of civility. He writes:

Civility, like language, cannot be ‘private’. Before it becomes the individually learned and privately practised art, civility must first be a feature of the social setting. It is the urban environment which must be ‘civil’, if its inhabitants are to learn the difficult skills of civility (Bauman 2008: 95).

Looking around at the shopping mall, the high street, and the city centre in general, Bauman concludes that we occupy spaces within which we aggregate but do not negotiate some shared endeavour – or at least the sharing of that space’s occupation – since we enter them primarily as consumers, engaging in an act that he characterises as individualistic. We

consume on our own, even when we are together with others. One manifestation of this is the characterisation by Hankins and Powers of new urban environments as highly regulated, retail driven spaces wherein residents and passers-by “are embodiments of a public – their performance is public – but they lack a collective sense of struggle or awareness” (2009: 847). The consumers and residents of Bauman’s urban setting inhabit public space only in a “topographical sense”, where one’s “being *in* public” is confused with a wider sense of being part of a “public in its collective sense” (Iveson 2007: 17); being part of a wider civic practice would imply rights of public address and deeper political engagement than Bauman finds in the performance of private practices and sensibilities within shared space.

The argument from Bauman in his work on liquid modernity seems to be that we have gone quiet; in part, this is because of an anxiety toward strangers that has been cultivated in societies that are today more fragmented, more individualistic, and less communal, but also because the environments we inhabit are not designed in such a way that would encourage conversation, from which he would then seek to locate civility. Bauman takes his cue on the latter from Sennett and by turning to this material we can identify its constricting effect on the argument about civility. In *The Fall of Public Man* Sennett sets out his thesis that public life is a kind of obligation. Public space, properly designed, is meant “to intermix persons and diverse activities” and yet most of it, by design, is “dead”: “On the most physical level, the environment prompts people to think of the public domain as meaningless” (Sennett 2002: 12). Our fear of the stranger is, by this organisation of space, managed by turning any encounters into meaningless gestures – “formal”, “dry” or simply “phony” (Sennett 2002:3). This organisation encourages an occupation of space which is fleeting and instrumental, rather than involved and social. Sennett writes that “public space has become a derivative of movement” (2002: 14), designed to be passed through rather than to be used. The effect is a

two-fold isolation, of inhabitants of the space from its milieu; and of one inhabitant from another. With regards to the latter, Sennett identifies a curious co-presence of visibility and muteness as people are visible to one another but remain silent – or at least have “the right to be mute” (2002: 27). For Sennett, strangers – in the sense of those who are unknown rather than alien – are scrutinised primarily in terms of visible behaviours rather than a direct conversational exchange. This is a matter of concern for Sennett, for whom conversation, exemplified in an idealised form in the early-eighteenth coffeehouses of Paris and London, creates the basis of meaningful encounters between strangers and, leading from this, cultures of co-operation, a position elaborated in his more recent work (Sennett 2012).

For Sennett, modern society has deskilled us when it comes to co-operation, allowing us to avoid encounters with others and the need to negotiate difference. What we lose in the negotiation of difference – and where it can be found if entered into properly – is cooperative conversation. Sennett calls this *dialogics*, “attention and responsiveness to other people” (2012: 14), respecting what the other person says and, rather than working towards agreement, developing an understanding of the other person’s position. For Sennett, conversation schools us in the ethical life but is not a form of moral action in its own right. In contrast to Sennett, we want to argue that communication can be considered as an integral part of a moral life. To see how, however, we need to move beyond Sennett to take greater account of the non-verbal. In stating the problem with environments that encourage occupants to be visibly mute, Sennett includes a range of non-verbal communications as replacing conversation between strangers, such as gestures, clothing, the way people move, and so on (2002: 39). His argument is that these fall short of the kind of conversations exhibited in his coffee house, and as such do not facilitate the dialogic co-operation that might achieve moral good. This discounts the value of body language, the signing of fashion,

and over-emphasises an account of communication that only takes place conversationally. As Goffman demonstrated, the accomplishment of any social interaction can only partially be judged through its verbal aspects, with non-verbal traces crucial to understanding what that interaction has achieved (1990). More recently, there exists a range of writings by geographers on the multiplicity of embodied practices implicated in the events of everyday life, extending far beyond those afforded importance in representational theories of the social (e.g., Anderson and Harrison 2010).

Ultimately, Sennett offers too narrow an account of what moral communication might consist of and how it is initiated. To conclude this section we will explore the possibility of casting civility as a more broadly conceived moral communication that is grounded in the encounter, and in order to achieve this we want to read Bauman now alongside one of his earlier influences, Levinas. Bauman's relationship with the work of Levinas has been sustained for decades, with Bauman using this body of work extensively in texts such as *Postmodern Ethics* and *Life in Fragments*. In a [more](#) recent interview Bauman dubbed Levinas his “ethics teacher” (Dawes 2011: 131) and later texts, such as *Collateral Damage* (2011), see him including Levinas in his critique of state and market in liquid modernity. What we want to do here is to continue this placement of the moral in the liquid by refracting Bauman's account of civility and public space through a Levinasian account of moral responsibility – which will also allow us to push Sennett's account of conversation further. Levinas conceives of the encounter with the other person as an ethical relationship.

The relationship with the Other, the face-to-face with the Other, the encounter with a face that at once gives and conceals the Other, is the situation in which an event happens to a subject who does not assume it, who is utterly unable in its regard, but where nonetheless in a certain way it is in front of the subject (2008a: 78-79).

When we encounter another person – ‘face-to-face’ – the locus point of this encounter is the face of the other person. It ‘gives’ and it ‘conceals’ in so far as it provides the shop-front of social commerce but at the same time is an unsurpassable barrier to the ‘back of house’, so to speak, of the other person; that is, one cannot get past the face and achieve an intimate and accurate understanding of the other person, their motivations or intentions, their inner-life. The encounter with the other is an event, something that happens to the self but that is beyond its control. What the face represents is that the other person is a limitation of the freedom of the subject, that they exist on their own terms, and that in order to share the world with them we have to constrain our actions, that is, to act responsibly. This is what Levinas calls ‘a calling into question of my spontaneity’:

It is the very revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls in question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent (2007: 84).

Yet this calling into question should not be understood as coercive or violent itself. Rather, the other person is encountered as vulnerable – and this is expressed by the face. For Levinas, the face is naked; we do not cover the face, it is exposed: ‘The nakedness of [the] face extends into the nakedness of the body that is cold and that is ashamed of its nakedness’ (2007: 75). The face of the other, then, is a display of their vulnerability, the last nakedness that decency allows, that exposes to us the fragile nature of the human being. So, whilst the encounter with the other calls into question my powers, it does so from the vulnerable position of exposure rather than from a position of superior power. Through the exposure of the face there is a silent injunction not to do harm to this vulnerable other, and to give morally to them. The silence of the face indicates a kind of communication that Sennett takes no account of. Simon Critchley (1992: 179) understands the face as ‘a non-verbal language of

the skin' that grounds ethical subjectivity; even in its silence the face says 'thou shall not kill' and reminds us of our responsibility to the other. This is an account of saying that is prior to anything said (Levinas 2008b: 5-7), an invitation to moral responsibility that need not be verbal (Levinas 2007: 20). Levinas' contrast of the saying and the said – the said unilateral, without regard for the other; the saying a response to the other on their own terms – can be used to inform Sennett's call for co-operation through speech, but we need to remember that Sennett's account of co-operation does not seem to leave room for the non-verbal call of and response to the face that allows us to understand moral engagement in its wider forms. Similarly, Bauman's argument that we encounter strangers only as surfaces loses sight of the Levinasian argument that this surface, the non-verbal language of the skin, is morally expressive by the very fact that it conceals the other.

By introducing Levinas to the Bauman-Sennett account of civility we can make the following two adjustments towards a conceptualisation that is more robustly ethical in its outlook. First, if we conceive of the stranger as the other, in the sense of Levinas – where the other is understood as "the stranger in the neighbour" (2008:123), drawing attention to the fundamental strangeness of all other people – then Bauman's position that civility involves encountering the stranger in all her strangeness becomes a form of responsibility. The stranger is irreducible to a background character in the urban *mise-en-scène* of our own personal narratives, because this is irreconcilable with responsibility initiated in the presence of otherness. Returning the influence of Levinas to Bauman's work on civility allows us to reframe it as a kind of quotidian moral responsibility inseparable from moral responsibility in general. In short, civility is simply a continuation of morality *per se*, where the stranger is encountered despite her otherness and where responsibility cuts across mere visibility; a form of ethical sociality initiated in the encounter and consummated in communication with the

face. Second, if we include non-verbal communication in the way that we co-operate with others in our occupation of public space, then this transforms any understanding of civility as rooted in the *conversational*. We can say that the encounter itself is a form of moral *communication* since it opens on to the expression of the face that in its saying initiates moral responsibility. This may be a silent expression or an utterance that calls for help; either way, the face demands a moral response. Finally, then, the problem of the visibly mute should be restated. It is not that spaces that do not encourage us to talk to each other are always insufficient to encourage civility (although they might be); rather, it is those spaces that do not encourage us to be attentive to the expression of the face that are inadequately civil.

### **Visibly Mute**

Derived from an engagement with Bauman, Sennett and Levinas, we have sketched an account above of how we might conceive of civility in terms of morality and communication. In this section we want to put this account of civility as ethical sociality to work in the exurban environment. This involves collapsing Sennett's two-fold isolation – of inhabitants of space from its milieu, and of persons in space from one another by the interplay of visibility and silence – in order to put forward the position that particular kinds of spaces become themselves visibly mute. That is, they either employ signage or branding in such a way that inhabitants are encouraged to engage with the signification of capital over that of the Levinasian face, as with retail spaces; or they are denuded of signage in such a way that inhabitants are encouraged not to read the spaces themselves, at the risk of becoming deskilled in the sort of attentiveness to one's surroundings that is vital to a Levinasian account of ethical sociality, as with, for example, the logistical spaces of neoliberalism.

As such we now illustrate our argument with reference to a case study of an exurban site in the North of England, typical of the regional pattern of economic growth within recent decades. Just off the M62 motorway in West Yorkshire, close to Leeds and closer still to the towns of Batley and Birstall, is Centre 27, a business park combining retail outlets with office spaces, manufacturing sites and distribution hubs. It is a site we have researched over a number of years (Martin 2008), most recently as a team revisiting it at periodic intervals between 2011 and 2013 in order to chart the impact of the global recession on the landscape. The starting point for the observations in this paper came from our attempts to access a number of individual businesses to carry out ethnographic studies of their work in 2011, which were frustrated by their unwillingness to participate. In the course of this, we visited the site at periodic intervals and talked to people working there when opportunities arose (in shops, cinemas, pubs, outside offices and more generally on site), whilst reflecting throughout on our place as researchers within the space, noting how our modes of thinking about and because of the site were entangled within the visual strategies shaping our movements there (Degen, DeSilvey and Rose 2008).

Neither city nor countryside as conventionally understood, Centre 27 is an example of an exurban development brought into (economic) being through its location on the road which connects towns and cities on the East coast of Northern England to those on the West (Martin 2010). This site illuminates the impact of neoliberal policies at national and transnational scales on regional economies; ~~this~~ the region has shifted from the predominance of nationalised and heavy manufacturing industries to the prominence of consumerism and service sector work throughout the post-war period. With this shifting economic basis came a re-orientation of the urban fabric and a newer, expedient formula for the production of urbanised spaces. Centre 27 was developed in the 1980s and 1990s, and echoes international

developments on the restructuring of regions as economic entities around transportation infrastructures that connect to global routes (Keil and Young 2008) and splinter traditional urban patterns (Graham and Marvin 2001). It shares many of the features of North American developments on the edge of existing urban cores (Garreau 1991), especially its functionality for a primarily transient population visiting via the motorway for work or leisure, rather than the resident population of nearby housing estates and small towns. It is symptomatic of the post-city form whose premise is to create more jobs than bedrooms, in spaces hitherto not thought of as urban in any sense (Garreau 1991: 6-9). As with many sites that facilitate the widespread mobility of people and goods in contemporary societies, we can observe the "complete urbanization" of the environment, acting to extend the economic and cultural reach of capital (Lefebvre 2003: 4; also Brenner 2014).

Centre 27 sits within the Metropolitan Borough of Kirklees, an area which on many measures of population (age, occupation, health, etc.) compares closely to the national average (Kirklees Council 2012). The impression that this is an everyday setting is reinforced by its location alongside an estate which offers a mixture of housing and services for different communities, from young families to ageing residents. The business and retail parks can be argued to be ordinary places, offering illustrations of everyday landscapes that, in their buildings, signage, technologies and very materiality "may seem remarkable only by their apparent insignificance" (Lorimer 2005: 84). It is emblematic of the background spaces understood by Thrift as "latent worlds", unremarkable and routinised spaces that "make certain aspects of the events we constantly come across not so much hard to question as hard to even think of as containing questions at all" (2008: 19). Cresswell has argued that the "meaning of a place is the subject of particular discourses of *power*, which express themselves as discourses of *normality*" (1996: 60); in spite of (or perhaps because of) its

normality, there is something opaque about much of the landscape and architecture at Centre 27, and this serves to obscure the power-geometries it helps to enact (Massey 1993). The physical infrastructure and setting of this place diverges from the colloquial understanding of urban space: there is little, if any, of the condensed symbolism that Lefebvre (2002) finds in the monuments, ecclesiastical relics and public buildings of large cities. In his reading of the traditional city form, Lefebvre argues that the landscape “offers a social text which is generally legible and often admirably composed” (2002: 308); in its material form, Centre 27 offers a text that is often illegible, composed in an exclusionary and partial way and, we argue, actively works against the cultivation of sociality historically associated with urban culture (Holston and Appadurai 1996). The materiality, physical artefacts and spatial form of the built environment are important in facilitating civic cultures and practices; as Amin argues, “the full weight of the ensemble of things, bodies, technologies, sounds, visual clues, buildings and more in public space must be considered as an atmospheric force working on civilities and incivilities” (2012: 71).

There are parallels in our case study to the ethnography of Atlanta Station by Hankins and Powers (2009), especially their characterisation of a landscape denuded of evidence of the state, whether in the form of civic monuments, buildings or an infrastructure that is inclusive of the public good (such as the adequacy of pedestrian space). Like Atlanta Station, Centre 27 is a site developed to attract thousands of people on a daily basis, but without the provision of civic institutions such as public parks, libraries or family services; the primary school in the neighbouring housing estate notwithstanding, one would need to travel to Batley to access these types of public institution. In pointing this out, we do not mean to suggest that the designing in of civic buildings to wider exurban plots would provide a fix to the creation of communal life; indeed, Lefebvre was critical of state-sponsored forms of planning, with all

its monuments to collective life, in his analysis of how different modes of production shape space (1991). Harvey has argued that the imposition of traditional civic artefacts and urban forms can lead to a process of spatial control along socially conservative lines (1997), meshing with the discourses of fear and exclusion that characterise culturally prevalent iterations of community life (Young 1990). More fundamentally, our critique does not seek to imply a spatial determinism, whereby the design of a place will necessarily direct the uses made of that space. To do so would be to reify space, making it “a social hieroglyphic similar to Marx’s conceptualization of the commodity form” (Soja 1989: 7) and to forget Lefebvre’s reminder that spatial practice is complex, made up of everyday praxis, master-planned uses and the re-imagination and re-appropriation of those spaces by users on the ground – all at the same time (1991: 38-39). We recognise the “plural and distributed” nature of contemporary places of political engagement (Amin 2012: 70); and agree that public spaces are “public not because they are simply there, in the open, in a city centre, but because these spaces are made public by people encountering one another, there” (Merrifield 2013: 919). We do not ignore the findings of research on the reclaimed uses of suburban shopping mall sites for progressive understandings of community action (Parlette and Cowen 2011), and nor would we dismiss the argument that there is always more social life than meets the eye on the ground of the suburban transport hubs that connect up large conurbations (Maspero 1994). Nonetheless, as Allen suggests in his account of contemporary public space, “[a]mbient settings are of a *pattern* and so too are our responses to them” (2006: 446); our analysis of Centre 27 reveals a heavily ordered space which locates its visitors in an asymmetrical relationship with the landscape.

In opening up a critique of the site, we describe a place that we have observed over the course of repeated visits as a team since 2011 and, for Martin since 2006; in our view, Centre 27 is a

space which sits abruptly apart from its neighbouring housing estate, draws people as consumers away from its nearby towns, and offers no indication of its existence prior to its re-development. This apparent erasure of previous forms of social life, or sense of cultural amnesia, may be for many reasons – space may become illegible over time, with the layering of different modes of production and political cultures over those of others (Soja 1996) – but, we argue, in the current period is symptomatic of the effects of capitalist and neoliberal logics at play in the production of space. However history is (or is not) accommodated, what we increasingly observe is the cleaning up and smoothing over of landscapes, in line with the imperatives of prevalent political orthodoxies (Massey 2005; 2011); this is the localised, “ordinary city” experience of global processes of neoliberalization (Springer 2011: 526). At its worst Centre 27 offers “a spatial environment saturated with contemporary ideologies of containment and exclusion” (Ferrell 2012: 1688), a corporate landscape lacking sociable space and where the communication is primed to go in one direction only (Iveson 2012). For a site designed next to a motorway network in order to plug into wider networks of mobility, it offers a curiously inward facing form of urbanism, where the architecture receives visitors and invites readings of the space purely on its terms.

Centre 27 hosts a number of different types of corporate and retail businesses, and their architectural artefacts range from the familiar to the unfathomable. The retail section in Centre 27 is a constellation of familiar names – WH Smiths, Boots, Next – horseshoed around a large car park. Outlying the main retail hub are lone-standing chain restaurants and larger retailers such as IKEA, more easily accessible by car than by foot. Beyond this the business park becomes simultaneously less familiar and less accessible. Travel by foot to other sites is hampered by intermittent pavements, appearing around workplaces but often absent in between them. The buildings they do not connect range from the offices of well-

known businesses that make no mention of the purpose of the site to the wholly esoteric. On the former end of the scale, for example, are the offices of William Hill. Whilst it is intelligible from the ground that this is part of a large gambling business, the place of this building within that operation is opaque; we do not know what the employees of William Hill are working towards here, and so the work within this place to an extent resists placing – even to those working in the same building, as we discovered during a fire alarm at the building when workers from another firm joked that they presumably worked night-shifts, such was their lack of contact with the rest of the building. Elsewhere on the site, we find buildings represented only by acronyms and nothing else which would indicate the nature of business (Figure One). A perfunctory web search might gather that information but, notwithstanding the use of mobile media, this understanding of the milieu is withheld from uninitiated occupants of the physical space. More esoteric still is a completely blank structure surrounded by an impenetrable iron fence, devoid of visible signage (Figure Two). It appears empty, the gate is locked – and if it is available to rent then there is no legible indication of this from the fortified perimeter. When we venture away from the retail space we are faced with an environment that is largely difficult to read; in tandem with Merrifield’s analysis of the inscrutability of the architecture that structures our occupation of contemporary space (2012), it is our contention that this illegibility or invisibility is increasingly a hallmark of the everyday exurban experience.



**Figure One: Anonymous, Acronymous Building**



**Figure Two: Blank Building**

On the one hand, there are areas of our exurban site that are organised around signs that constitute the signification system of capital. Lefebvre understood landscape as a social text, composed of the interaction between signs, signals and symbols – with signs described as akin to words within a language system (2002: 284). Lefebvre's criticism of contemporary cityscapes imprinted by auto-mobility was due to the prevalence of directional technologies

crowding out the other elements, structuring urban rhythms in a manner that is indifferent to its inhabitants (2002:310). Augé extends Lefebvre's argument and observes the mediation of space by words "or even texts" that as a result remove the need to stop and look (2008: 76-78). He has in mind the motorway signage that lists the heritage sites, history and ~~other such information~~leisure opportunities of a given town or city, the point being that once we have learned this from our cars we might just drive on instead of paying them a visit. This suggests the now ubiquitous "architecture of communication over space" model which Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour found in its proto-typical form in post-war Las Vegas, where if "you take the signs away, there is no place" (1977: 8; 18). Also included in this visual landscape are prescriptive and proscriptive signs, such as the various instructions for shoppers inside stores and the now ubiquitous 'No Smoking'. ~~All in all,~~ Augé suggests that the saturation of space with signs places the inhabitant in "silent dialogue ... with the landscape-text" (2008: 83). Reading Centre 27, there are certainly prescriptive kinds of signs present – one reads 'Beware Pedestrians', which is indicative of a space designed for automobile use and as a derivative of movement. More prominent still are the kinds of texts inscribed with culturally-saturated store names designed to illicit custom. ~~Thus, w~~Within the areas of the site given over to retail, we find a quotidian manifestation of the logic of advertising captured by Cronin in her analysis of the contemporary urban form as underpinned by the temporal patterns of commodity capitalism (2006: 628), where the ubiquity of easily recognisable commercial branding in urban spaces has reached the status of a cultural vernacular. The ubiquity of corporate messages in public spaces has been critiqued also by Iveson, who locates the quantity and form of outdoor advertising in contemporary urban environments within the processes of neoliberalism and the "creeping *monopolisation* of the outdoor media landscape" by commercial interests (2012: 164). The force of Iveson's critique derives not from an aesthetic objection to the visual clutter that accompanies such media, but to the

political implications of city and regional authorities engineering the built environment to accommodate “the unidirectional mode of communication privileged by advertising as a form of public address” (2012: 166). If we understand civility as an openness to alterity and attentiveness to the expression of the face – which would locate civility, via Levinas, in the moral realm – then we might question the extent to which such landscapes of signs are conducive to civil occupation. It would be too strong to say, with Bauman (2008), that, since consumption is a solitary practice, consumer spaces are uncivil to the extent that occupants need not co-operate with one another. Such a claim would rob the individual of moral agency, and presume the experience of those using the space (Degen, DeSilvey and Rose 2008). Rather, we argue that the rationalization of these spaces does little to encourage attentiveness to the signification of the face and, as such, do not encourage civility. Responsiveness to others is an individual matter and site architecture cannot negate its possibility; however, the inscribed instrumentality of such spaces provides strong competition for attention. Commercial spaces are multi-functional at the level of consumer choice, though this semblance of choice may obscure logics of “restriction, curtailment and closure” (Allen 2006: 452), and these spaces are ultimately mono-functional insofar as consumerism is the primary intended purpose. The neoliberal sign-scape of the retail park monopolises space for the interests of capital. The unidirectional public address initiated by the system of signs that governs such spaces encourages an efficiency of movement, maintaining a rationalization of occupation of the space and attempting to exert dominance over how individuals use ~~the space~~it. As such, we can say that they are not conducive to civility in so far as one system of signification – capital – attempts to out-compete another – the signification of responsibility that grounds morality in the encounter with others.

On the other hand, our exurban site contains spaces that we have identified as unremarkable and inhospitable. Levinas, in a passage from *Totality and Infinity* on dwelling (2007: 152-74), begins to understand the home as a threshold, an opening onto the world of others that allows for what he calls "recollection" – a form of self-consolidation in which the individual readies herself for the demands of moral existence – but also as a porous boundary that invites the other, a prerequisite for hospitality. Whilst a direct parallel ought not to be drawn between a home and an exurban environment, Levinas's work here allows us to reflect on the moral consequence of inhospitable spaces that do not encourage occupants to dwell in them or to dwell upon them, conditions sufficient for the kind of self-consolidation in public that makes ~~possible~~ care for others possible. He writes: "The home [...] has a 'street front', but also its secrecy" (2007:156); it is this secrecy that allows the individual to draw herself together in order to take on responsibility for others, the "street front" providing the permeable frontier for welcoming. At Centre 27, where certain architectures are without front, this welcome has been rescinded; where there are no adequate streets, which for Lefebvre rendered the secret public (2002: 310), there is no interplay between public and private sensibilities, but only secrecy. Levinas's moral boundary circulates "between visibility and invisibility" (2007: 156) yet in this exurban environment visibility can be understood as a mask for a greater invisibility (the secret) that is not breached, as Levinas's home is, by the gesture of welcoming. The problem with such spaces is that they are unmarked and so are, in turn, unremarkable, and the problem with unremarkable spaces is not so much that they are hard to question but contain no questions at all. Recollection, after all, is about attention to oneself, attention to one's possibilities and to the situation at hand, but without environmental stimuli how does one discern the possibilities available to oneself in situ? If the mode of occupation of anonymous sites is such that an attentiveness to questioning is not required, then it encourages a blasé relationship to one's surroundings and a neglect of its affects (Thrift 2008:

172). Such spaces do not welcome the individual and so do not provide a site of dwelling from within which the individual might welcome others. Whilst, again, responsiveness to others is an individual matter that cannot be negated by site design, habituation to the idea that a space contains no questions has the potential to detune the individual from attentiveness to the signification of the face that, by initiating responsibility for the other, calls into question her right to exercise her power ~~by initiating responsibility for the other~~. Levinas (2007: 173) observes that there is always the possibility that a 'front' might be ~~closed~~ shut off, that an opening might be closed, responsibility rejected – he compares this to "accepting the rules of a game, but cheating" (2007:173), since occupying a privileged site is only achieved at the exclusion of others, which demands their inclusion, or, hospitality. But whilst the home is an opening onto – set back from – the world, the exurban environment is in the world, ostensibly a social space. As such, it is notable when public space is designed in such a way that moral civility is not encouraged, with the wider implication being the lack of visibility of power, as observed by Merrifield in the quotation which opens this piece. For Levinas (2007: 153), the dwelling is not intimately bound up with some identifiable object (a particular house, say) but rather, the orientation of the individual to this objective world of things is situated by the individual's relation to his or her dwelling. A building can only become a dwelling when it allows for recollection. It is possible, then, to question the extent to which the built environment beyond the home might be better organised to provide for recollection, in the sense of providing a place where we might feel at home with ourselves (Levinas 2007: 156), and as such we question the possibility of dwelling in the inhospitable spaces of neoliberal capitalism. The system of signification of capital competes with our attentiveness to the encounter with the other as communication, whilst unreadable spaces deskill us of our attentiveness to the expression of the other that calls us into question, that signifies our responsibility. Levinas understands the environmental threshold – as a liminal

space where encounters are negotiated – as a form of dialogue; what we have at Centre 27 is a visible landscape that encourages muteness to the ends of capital.

The overall effect is that of enclosure, paralleling those features of “walled urbanism” that Jeffrey, MacFarlane and Vasudevan suggest as endemic in contemporary neoliberal landscapes of exclusion and alterity, where, through the political economies of their production and regulation, environments loosen the individual subject from obligations to others and serve to “immunise the body politic from alternative forms of shared sociality” (2012: 1260). In closing the passage on the dwelling, Levinas explores the role of language in uniting people morally across barriers and thresholds. “The calling into question of the I”, that is, the call for the individual to assume responsibility for something beyond herself, he writes, “we call language” (2007: 171). “This voice coming from another shore”, he continues, “teaches transcendence itself” (2007: 171). This voice – language, the saying rather than what is said – is “without frontier”, cutting across the divide between street front and the privileged site within, a “relation across a void” (2007: 172). This language, for Levinas, is the welcome extended to the other, or hospitality. So it is that language, in the Levinasian sense of the expressiveness of the face, brings us into a moral relationship with the transcendent other, a welcome that *welcomes in* whilst the threshold remains. This relation with transcendence cannot be separated from everyday life or its spaces. Moreover, the “relationship with the Other is not produced outside of the world, but puts in question the world possessed” (2007: 173). It is at this point that Levinas's work on dwelling becomes most pressing with regards to the visibly mute exurban environment, typified by Centre 27, since, for Levinas, it is language that “puts in common” a world otherwise taken possession of, that unites “I” and other regardless of position or privilege (2007: 174). “Language’s function”, Thrift argues (1996: 39), “is simply to set up the intersubjective spaces of common

actions, rather than representation as such". With places such as Centre 27 the 'language-text' identified by Augé dispossesses us by encouraging interaction with signage whilst the blank spaces, **without language,** do not permit us to take into common a world left deliberately un-authored in order to accelerate our movement through its spaces. Spaces driven by, and absorbed within, the logics of capital do not encourage civil encounters, whether understood as between individuals or between people and power, as a politics of the encounter might require (Merrifield 2013). For Levinas (2007: 152), the individual is at home where she is not "brutally cast forth and forsaken in the world", making possible responsibility for the other; yet, spaces such as the subject of this paper, without the kind of intimacy or dwelling that allow for this recollection and welcome, provide barren ground for the language of hospitality. In such spaces we are dispossessed.

**Comment [D1]:** Do you think we should delete this? No space is without language, surely?

### **Conclusion: Towards an Everyday Ethics, a Re-socialised Sense of Place**

In the previous discussion, we have tried to think through, in ethical terms, a typical example of an exurban development which comprises a quotidian place of work and leisure along a major motorway in the North of England. We have elucidated our understanding of ethical sociality as a kind of communication, using the writings of Bauman, Sennett and, especially, Levinas as guides. The ethical relationship as articulated by Levinas is a site of radical asymmetry, a dyadic space wherein the subject surrenders a sense of self established on the premise of individual sovereignty in order to assume a profound responsibility for the care of the other. Popke clearly explicates the consequences of framing the ethical relationship and subjectivity "not as a duty to be fulfilled according to the dictates of universal principles, nor even as an obligation arising out of the relational nature of socio-cultural difference; but as an originary responsibility that, within the infrastructure of modernity, has somehow become

elided" (2004: 305). To which we would add that within the processes of supermodernity, and the spaces they engender (Augé 2008), this elision is deepened. Contra the associations between the city as traditionally understood and the emergence of a politically progressive public culture (Sennett 2002), within the exurban environment, the manifestation of Lefebvre's thesis of a "generalized urbanism" on a global scale (2003: 17), we argue that the possibilities for a spatial praxis that is morally responsive and responsible are weakened. Attentiveness to, and responsibility for, others is obviated by the muteness of the corporate architecture, abstracted from its surrounding location and its populations. Lefebvre is clear that the production of space is never a settled process, even in the case of abstracted corporate spaces, such as those we have highlighted at Centre 27, which nonetheless contain within them the possibilities of alternative spatial practices (1991: 52). To this end, the metaphor of speech is important to the challenge of transforming the social in just ways, through spatial means: for Lefebvre, what is at stake in this transformation is the "reconstruction of a spatial 'code' – that is, of a language common to theory and practice" which sets into relation differential understandings of place and opens out its meanings, beyond its corporate functions, to those who live there or use the same spaces in other ways (1991: 64).

Opening out the meanings of any given place, within a communicational mode, does not imply a consensus on the ground between those with different needs or uses of the space, but rather holding in tension competing territorial claims. In Centre 27, we have characterised a landscape that is thoroughly corporate in presence and feel, but there are small areas within the site that offer us a different type of commerce, a different space of communication. Most notably, we would point to the car wash located at the edge of the site on the road to Batley, a hand wash business staffed, at least in our experience, by migrant labourers operating in a variety of languages between themselves and with customers. Here we are witness to forms

of co-operation and collaboration through practical activity that resonate more with Sennett's account than found elsewhere on the site. Our sense of such spatial practice might invite analyses that are sensitive to the embodied and performative enactment of the social, a focus on the "everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements" that Lorimer associates with more-than-representational ways of thinking (2005: 84). Our understanding of the car wash is that it gives us pause to apprehend different forms of ethical sociability, and a "situational ethics of response", where space itself, in its informality, plays "an active part in *performing* such an ethics, in giving it license, potential and presence" (Darling 2010: 256). Darling's observation builds on Popke's call for an understanding of ethics that is based less on legalistic principles than embodied practice: "an ethos [which] works toward encounters that open us to a generous sensibility, one that might be capable of re-enlivening our affective engagements with others and fostering a heightened sense for what might be possible" (2009: 84). Certainly, the car wash demonstrates a kind of generosity absent from the corporate sites described above; in our visits, we were 'received' in a quite different way to our experience within the retail park and in the anonymous back office complexes. For one thing, it is the space more than any other in which we were guided by individuals rather than reliant on textual directions on behaviour. Our interactions with individuals *as well as* signage made a difference in terms of how we experienced the hospitality of place, and its openness to others. The building is rare on the site in that one finds graffiti on its side; whilst one does not want to romanticise this, that there is such a small area of space open to the presence of non-corporate life in this place comes as a welcome relief.



**Figure Three: Tyre Shop and Car Wash**

In this paper, we have tried to open up the space for critique that Ferrell suggests as part of the role for a critical geography that is epistemologically “attuned to noticing the dimensions of power and authority embedded in otherwise taken-for-granted understandings and perceptions” (2012: 1702). We have done so by attempting to view an everyday form of space in terms of its ethical premise; this, we argue, is important given the centrality of such exurban environments as the primary means of making space in many economies and societies (Sieverts 2003). We have thought through these spaces in terms associated with the traditional city form, as sites of civic interaction and sociality, not because of an attachment to familiar urban patterns, but because there are ideas enmeshed within urban cultures that are worth aspiring to. These would include Lefebvre’s understanding of the city as a site of differential space (1991), or Isin’s analysis of the city as a “difference machine”, wherein the urban form can be seen as assembling (as well as generating) differences between groups in their spatial strategies and struggles for political recognition (2002: 283). In Centre 27, the car wash offers an exception(al) space that throws into relief the more general rule of smoothed over, exclusionary commerce; we need more exurban spaces that are open to

different uses, appropriations and values, where the sovereignty of the corporate sector is not absolute.

To engage such a differential sense of space involves an agonistic praxis (Springer 2011), which resonates with calls for an ethically guided form of communication between groups with differing discursive positions and territorial claims (Chatterton 2006). It is in drawing out the contradictions of space (such as the seeds of the differential within abstract space, the invitation to alterity within the home space, or the opening of an everyday ethics out of a space amoral by design) that Lefebvre's challenge to us lies. This is the challenge to read landscapes in critical, progressive and relational ways; as Peck, Theodore and Brenner suggest, "New spaces must be carved out not only for a global ethics of responsibility, but also for sustainable forms of sociospatial redistribution – anathema to neoliberalism" (2009: 112). It is the challenge to illuminate the everyday spaces wherein the state has been "complicit in rendering itself invisible" (Hankins and Powers 2009: 861) – even if that invisibility is deceptive. The globalisation of economic processes and the neoliberal mode of political governance in countries such as England have produced spaces, such as Centre 27, that range from generic retail landscapes to abstracted spaces that are illegible, remote and inhospitable to those who might wish to question them, if their presence provokes questions at all. Nonetheless, if we understand a central drive of social science research "is to render the world problematic by elaborating questions" (Thrift 2008:18), then the need to question these spaces remains, if we are to understand the production and ethics of everyday economies, politics and socialities.

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