

Erving Goffman

FRONT AND BACK REGIONS OF EVERYDAY LIFE [1959]

(Source: Goffman, Erving (1990) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 111–21)

Editor's introduction

Between 1949 and 1951 the sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–1983) worked in Scotland investigating the social structure of Shetland Islands communities. As can be seen in this extract from his first book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman seems more interested in what was going on in the kitchen of the hotel where he stayed than in mapping the general structures that governed the islands' communities. It is this attention to the micro-sociology of everyday life (rather than the macro-sociology of social structures) that characterises Goffman's contribution to sociology. And it is this focus on the everyday (along with a decidedly non-academic style of writing) that has made Goffman's books so popular both inside and outside the field of sociology. Goffman offers something like an investigation of what Tom Burns calls 'a rhetoric of conduct' (Burns 1992: 11): an attempt to trace the meanings of various ways of acting in different situations.

What Goffman ends up with is a version of the everyday self that is fundamentally plural (a theme that he also stressed in his book *Frame Analysis*: Goffman 1974). This is an understanding of the self (or the selves) that works to sidestep some of the pitfalls that can attend investigation of the everyday. Rather than approaching everyday life in the hope of distinguishing between the authentic and the inauthentic (separating the true self from the false self), Goffman recognises that the self is that collection of performances that take place in and across specific locations. By employing a set of tropes that are associated with theatre and gaming (play, stage, set and so on) Goffman's approach to the everyday suggests an inventory of performances spatially arranged across the geography of everyday life. In some ways this points to some shared concerns with a much more recent interest (or renewed interest) in performativity. In other ways it also shares some common ground

with what Michel de Certeau will term the tactics of everyday life: that resistive or evasive creativity that takes place in the tears in the fabric of power (see Chapter 6). What it does not share with de Certeau's work is de Certeau's scepticism about the visibility and transparency of such actions. Anyone who has worked in a restaurant (rather than studied it) will know that the 'aggressive sampling' of a pudding is the very least of those inventively disgusting acts that are typical of everyday kitchen life. Is Goffman's tame version of Shetland kitchen life due to a certain propriety in crofter culture, or are more emphatically 'vulgar' actions invisible because Goffman is in the end resolutely marked out as a hotel guest?

Further reading: Burns 1992; Goffman 1974; Manning 1993.

IN THE STUDY OF SOCIAL ESTABLISHMENTS it is important to describe the prevailing standards of decorum; it is difficult to do so because informants and students tend to take many of these standards for granted, not realizing they have done so until an accident, or crisis, or peculiar circumstance occurs. It is known, for example, that different business offices have different standards as regards informal chatter among clerks, but it is only when we happen to study an office that has a sizeable number of foreign refugee employees that we suddenly appreciate that permission to engage in informal talk may not constitute permission to engage in informal talk in a foreign language.¹

We are accustomed to assuming that the rules of decorum that prevail in sacred establishments, such as churches, will be much different from the ones that prevail in everyday places of work. We ought not to assume from this that the standards in sacred places are more numerous and more strict than those we find in work establishments. While in church, a woman may be permitted to sit, daydream, and even doze. However, as a saleswoman on the floor of a dress shop, she may be required to stand, keep alert, refrain from chewing gum, keep a fixed smile on her face even when not talking to anyone, and wear clothes she can ill afford.

One form of decorum that has been studied in social establishments is what is called 'make-work'. It is understood in many establishments that not only will workers be required to produce a certain amount after a certain length of time but also that they will be ready, when called upon, to give the impression that they are working hard at the moment. Of a shipyard we learn the following:

It was amusing to watch the sudden transformation whenever word got round that the foreman was on the hull or in the shop or that a front-office superintendent was coming by. Quartermen and leadermen would rush to their groups of workers and stir them to obvious activity. 'Don't let him catch you sitting down' was the universal admonition, and where no work existed a pipe was busily bent and threaded, or a bolt which was already firmly in place was subjected to further and unnecessary tightening. This was the formal tribute invariably attending a visitation by the boss, and its conventions were as familiar to both sides as those surrounding a five-star

general's inspection. To have neglected any detail of the false and empty show would have been interpreted as a mark of singular disrespect.²

Similarly, of a hospital ward we learn:

The observer was told very explicitly by other attendants on his first day of work on the wards not to 'get caught' striking a patient, to appear busy when the supervisor makes her rounds, and not to speak to her unless first spoken to. It was noted that some attendants watch for her approach and warn the other attendants so that no one will get caught doing undesirable acts. Some attendants will save work for when the supervisor is present so they will be busy and will not be given additional tasks. In most attendants the change is not so obvious, depending largely on the individual attendant, the supervisor, and the ward situation. However, with nearly all attendants there is some change in behavior when an official, such as a supervisor, is present. There is no open flouting of the rules and regulations.³

From a consideration of make-work it is only a step to consideration of other standards of work activity for which appearances must be maintained, such as pace, personal interest, economy, accuracy, etc.⁴ And from a consideration of work standards in general it is only a step to consideration of other major aspects of decorum, instrumental and moral, in work places, such as: mode of dress; permissible sound levels; proscribed diversions, indulgences, and affective expressions.

Make-work, along with other aspects of decorum in work places, is usually seen as the particular burden of those of low estate. A dramaturgical approach, however, requires us to consider together with make-work the problem of staging its opposite, make-no-work. Thus, in a memoir written about life in the early nineteenth century among the barely genteel, we learn that:

People were extremely punctilious on the subject of calls – one remembers the call in *The Mill on the Floss*. The call was due at regular intervals, so that even the day should almost be known in which it was paid or returned. It was a ceremonial which contained a great deal of ceremony and make-believe. No one, for instance, was to be surprised in doing any kind of work. There was a fiction in genteel families that the ladies of the house never did anything serious or serviceable after dinner; the afternoon was supposed to be devoted either to walking, or to making calls, or to elegant trifling at home. Therefore if the girls were at the moment engaged upon any useful work – they crammed it under the sofa, and pretended to be reading a book, or painting, or knitting, or to be engaged in easy and fashionable conversation. Why they went through this elaborate pretence I have not the least idea, because everybody knew that every girl in the place was always making, mending, cutting out, basting, gussetting, trimming, turning and contriving. How do you suppose that the solicitor's daughters made so brave a show on Sunday if they were not clever enough to make up things for themselves? Everybody, of course, knew it, and why the girls would not own up at once one cannot now understand. Perhaps it was a

sort of suspicion, or a faint hope, or a wild dream, that a reputation for ladylike uselessness might enable them to cross the line at the county Ball, and mingle with the Country people.⁵

It should be plain that while persons who are obliged to make-work and make-no-work are likely to be on the opposite sides of the track, they must yet adapt themselves to the same side of the footlights.

It was suggested earlier that when one's activity occurs in the presence of other persons, some aspects of the activity are expressively accentuated and other aspects, which might discredit the fostered impression, are suppressed. It is clear that accentuated facts make their appearance in what I have called a front region; it should be just as clear that there may be another region – a 'back region' or 'backstage' – where the suppressed facts make an appearance.

A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course. There are, of course, many characteristic functions of such places. It is here that the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated; it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. Here stage props and items of personal front can be stored in a kind of compact collapsing of whole repertoires of actions and characters.⁶ Here grades of ceremonial equipment, such as different types of liquor or clothes, can be hidden so that the audience will not be able to see the treatment accorded them in comparison with the treatment that could have been accorded them. Here devices such as the telephone are sequestered so that they can be used 'privately'. Here costumes and other parts of personal front may be adjusted and scrutinized for flaws. Here the team can run through its performance, checking for offending expressions when no audience is present to be affronted by them; here poor members of the team, who are expressively inept, can be schooled or dropped from the performance. Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character. Simone de Beauvoir provides a rather vivid picture of this backstage activity in describing situations from which the male audience is absent.

What gives value to such relations among women is the truthfulness they imply. Confronting man woman is always play-acting; she lies when she makes believe that she accepts her status as the inessential other, she lies when she presents to him an imaginary personage through mimicry, costumery, studied phrases. These histrionics require a constant tension: when with her husband, or with her lover, every woman is more or less conscious of the thought: 'I am not being myself': the male world is harsh, sharp edged, its voices are too resounding, the lights are too crude, the contacts rough. With other women, a woman is behind the scenes; she is polishing her equipment, but not in battle; she is getting her costume together, preparing her make-up, laying out her tactics; she is lingering in dressing-gown and slippers in the wings before making her entrance on the stage; she likes this warm, easy, relaxed atmosphere . . .

For some women this warm and frivolous intimacy is dearer than the serious pomp of relations with men.⁷

Very commonly the back region of a performance is located at one end of the place where the performance is presented, being cut off from it by a partition and guarded passageway. By having the front and back regions adjacent in this way, a performer out in front can receive backstage assistance while the performance is in progress and can interrupt his performance momentarily for brief periods of relaxation. In general, of course, the back region will be the place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude.

Since the vital secrets of a show are visible backstage and since performers behave out of character while there, it is natural to expect that the passage from the front region to the back region will be kept closed to members of the audience or that the entire back region will be kept hidden from them. This is a widely practised technique of impression management, and requires further discussion.

Obviously, control of backstage plays a significant role in the process of 'work control' whereby individuals attempt to buffer themselves from the deterministic demands that surround them. If a factory worker is to succeed in giving the appearance of working hard all day, then he must have a safe place to hide the jig that enables him to turn out a day's work with less than a full day's effort.⁸ If the bereaved are to be given the illusion that the dead one is really in a deep and tranquil sleep, then the undertaker must be able to keep the bereaved from the workroom where the corpses are drained, stuffed, and painted in preparation for their final performance.⁹ If a mental hospital staff is to give a good impression of the hospital to those who come to visit their committed kinfolk, then it will be important to be able to bar visitors from the wards, especially the chronic wards, restricting the outsiders to special visiting-rooms where it will be practicable to have relatively nice furnishings and to ensure that all patients present are well dressed, well washed, well handled and relatively well behaved. So, too, in many service trades, the customer is asked to leave the thing that needs service and to go away so that the tradesman can work in private. When the customer returns for his automobile – or watch, or trousers, or radio – it is presented to him in good working order, an order that incidentally conceals the amount and kind of work that had to be done, the number of mistakes that were first made before getting it fixed, and other details the client would have to know before being able to judge the reasonableness of the fee that is asked of him.

Service personnel so commonly take for granted the right to keep the audience away from the back region that attention is drawn more to cases where this common strategy cannot be applied than to cases where it can. For example, the American filling-station manager has numerous troubles in this regard.¹⁰ If a repair is needed, customers often refuse to leave their automobile overnight or all day, in trust of the establishment, as they would do had they taken their automobile to a garage. Further, when the mechanic makes repairs and adjustments, customers often feel they have the right to watch him as he does his work. If an illusionary service is to be rendered and charged for, it must, therefore, be rendered before the very person who is to be taken in by it. Customers, in fact, not only disregard the right of the station personnel to their own back region but often also define the whole station as a kind of open city for males, a place where an individual runs the risk of getting his clothes dirty and therefore has the right to demand full backstage privileges. Male motorists will saunter in, tip back their hats, spit, swear, and ask for free service or free travel advice. They will barge in to make familiar use of the toilet, the station's tools, the office

telephone, or to search in the stockroom for their own supplies.¹¹ In order to avoid traffic lights, motorists will cut right across the station driveway, oblivious to the manager's proprietary rights.

Shetland Hotel provides another example of the problems workers face when they have insufficient control of their backstage. Within the hotel kitchen, where the guests' food was prepared and where the staff ate and spent their day, crofters' culture tended to prevail. It will be useful to suggest some of the details of this culture here.

In the kitchen, crofter employer-employee relations prevailed. Reciprocal first-naming was employed, although the scullery boy was fourteen and the male owner over thirty. The owning couple and employees ate together, participating with relative equality in meal-time small talk and gossip. When the owners held informal kitchen parties for friends and extended kin, the hotel workers participated. This pattern of intimacy and equality between management and employees was inconsistent with the appearance both elements of the staff gave when guests were present, as it was inconsistent with the guests' notions of the social distance which ought to obtain between the official with whom they corresponded when arranging for their stay, and the porters and maids who carried luggage upstairs, polished the guests' shoes each night, and emptied their chamber pots.

Similarly, in the hotel kitchen, island eating-patterns were employed. Meat, when available, tended to be boiled. Fish, often eaten, tended to be boiled or salted. Potatoes, an inevitable item in the day's one big meal, were almost always boiled in their jackets and eaten in the island manner: each eater selects a potato by hand from the central bowl, then pierces it with his fork and skins it with his knife, keeping the peels in a neat pile alongside his place, to be scooped in with his knife after the meal is finished. Oilcloth was used as a cover for the table. Almost every meal was preceded by a bowl of soup, and soup bowls, instead of plates, tended to be used for the courses that came after. (Since most of the food was boiled anyway, this was a practical usage.) Forks and knives were sometimes grasped fist-like, and tea was served in cups without saucers. While the island diet in many ways seemed to be adequate, and while island table manners could be executed with great delicacy and circumspection – and often were – the whole eating complex was well understood by islanders to be not only different from the British middle-class pattern, but somehow a violation of it. Perhaps this difference in pattern was most evident on occasions when food given to guests was also eaten in the kitchen. (This was not uncommon and was not more common because the staff often preferred island food to what the guests were given.) At such times the kitchen portion of the food was prepared and served in the island manner, with little stress on individual pieces and cuts, and more stress on a common source of servings. Often the remains of a joint of meat or the broken remains of a batch of tarts would be served – the same food as appeared in the guest dining-hall but in a slightly different condition, yet one not offensive by island kitchen standards. And if a pudding made from stale bread and cake did not pass the test of what was good enough for guests, it was eaten in the kitchen.

Crofter clothing and postural patterns also tended to appear in the hotel kitchen. Thus, the manager would sometimes follow local custom and leave his cap on; the scullery boys would use the coal bucket as a target for the well-aimed expulsion of mucus; and the women on the staff would rest sitting with their legs up in unladylike positions.

In addition to these differences due to culture, there were other sources of discrepancy between kitchen ways and parlour ways in the hotel, for some of the standards of hotel service that were shown or implied in the guests' regions were not fully adhered to in the kitchen. In the scullery wing of the kitchen region, mould would sometimes form on soup yet to be used. Over the kitchen stove, wet socks would be dried on the steaming kettle – a standard practice on the island. Tea, when guests had asked for it newly infused, would be brewed in a pot encrusted at the bottom with tea leaves that were weeks old. Fresh herrings would be cleaned by splitting them and then scraping out the innards with newspaper. Pats of butter, softened, misshapen, and partly used during their sojourn in the dining-hall, would be rerolled to look fresh, and sent out to do duty again. Rich puddings, too good for kitchen consumption, would be sampled aggressively by the fingerful before distribution to the guests. During the mealtime rush hour, once-used drinking glasses would sometimes be merely emptied and wiped instead of being rewashed, thus allowing them to be put back into circulation quickly.¹²

Given, then, the various ways in which activity in the kitchen contradicted the impression fostered in the guests' region of the hotel, one can appreciate why the doors leading from the kitchen to the other parts of the hotel were a constant sore spot in the organization of work. The maids wanted to keep the doors open to make it easier to carry food trays back and forth, to gather information about whether guests were ready or not for the service which was to be performed for them, and to retain as much contact as possible with the persons they had come to work to learn about. Since the maids played a servant role before the guests, they felt they did not have too much to lose by being observed in their own milieu by guests who glanced into the kitchen when passing the open doors. The managers, on the other hand, wanted to keep the door closed so that the middle-class role imputed to them by the guests would not be discredited by a disclosure of their kitchen habits. Hardly a day passed when these doors were not angrily banged shut and angrily pushed open. A kick-door of the kind modern restaurants use would have provided a partial solution for this staging problem. A small glass window in the doors that could act as a peephole – a stage device used by many small places of business – would also have been helpful.

Notes

- 1 See Edward Gross (1949) 'Informal Relations and the Social Organization of Work in an Industrial Office', unpublished PhD dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, page 186.
- 2 Katherine Archibald (1947) *Wartime Shipyard*, Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, page 159.
- 3 Robert H. Willoughby (1953) 'The Attendant in the State Mental Hospital', unpublished Master's thesis, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, page 43.
- 4 An analysis of some major work standards may be found in Gross, op. cit., from which the above examples of such standards are taken.
- 5 Sir Walter Besant (1887) 'Fifty Years Ago', *The Graphic Jubilee Number*, quoted in James Laver (1954) *Victorian Vista*, London: Hulton Press.
- 6 As Alfred Métraux [no date] 'Dramatic Elements in Ritual Possession', *Diogenes* 11, page 24, suggests, even the practice of voodoo cults will require such facilities:

Every case of possession has its theatrical side, as shown in the matter of disguises. The rooms of the sanctuary are not unlike the wings of a theater where the possessed find the necessary accessories. Unlike the hysteric, who reveals his anguish and his desires through symptoms – a personal means of expression – the ritual of possession must conform to the classic image of a mythical personage.

- 7 Simone de Beauvoir (1953) *The Second Sex*, London: Cape.
- 8 See Orvis Collins, Melville Dalton and Donald Roy [no date] 'Restriction of Output and Social Cleavage in Industry', *Applied Anthropology* (now *Human Organization*), 4: 1–14, especially page 9.
- 9 Mr Habenstein has suggested in seminar that in some states the undertaker has a legal right to prevent relatives of the deceased from entering the workroom where the corpse is in preparation. Presumably the sight of what has to be done to the dead to make them look attractive would be too great a shock for non-professionals and especially for kinfolk of the deceased. Mr Habenstein also suggests that kinfolk may want to be kept from the undertaker's workroom because of their own fear of their own morbid curiosity.
- 10 The statements which follow are taken from a study by Social Research, Inc., of two hundred small-business managers.
- 11 At a sports car garage the following scene was reported to me by the manager regarding a customer who went into the storeroom himself to obtain a gasket, presenting it to the manager from behind the storeroom counter:

Customer: 'How much?'

Manager: 'Sir, where did you get in and what would happen if you went behind the counter in a bank and got a roll of nickels and brought them to the teller?'

Customer: 'But this ain't a bank.'

Manager: 'Well, those are my nickels. Now, what did you want, sir?'

Customer: 'If that's the way you feel about it, O.K. That's your privilege. I want a gasket for a '51 Anglia.'

Manager: 'That's for a '54.'

While the manager's anecdote may not be a faithful reproduction of the words and actions that were actually interchanged, it does tell us something faithful about his situation and his feelings in it.

- 12 These illustrations of the discrepancy between the reality and appearances of standards should not be considered extreme. Close observation of the backstage of any middle-class home in Western cities would be likely to disclose discrepancies between reality and appearance that were equally as great. And wherever there is some degree of commercialization, discrepancies no doubt are often greater.