Chapter 1

FRAMING GOFFMAN
- MASTER OF DISGUISE OR CONSPIRING MAGICIAN?

Susie Scott

Introduction

Dramaturgy – the comparison between social life and theater – is the most influential of Erving Goffman’s metaphors. Exciting, intriguing and visually striking, the image of actors on stage, performing characters in scenes, invites us to take a seat in the audience and enjoy the show. Throughout Goffman’s work, we find recurring themes of mystery, deception and illusory appearance, encouraging readers to question what might lie behind the scenes. His tone is conspiratorial, promising to share with us the secrets he has learned about the performative intricacies of human social behavior. Goffman’s canonical texts, including *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), *Interaction Ritual* (1967) and *Relations in Public* (1971), document the ways in which teams of actors display and uphold tacitly agreed-upon versions of social reality. Later and more esoteric works, such as *Frame Analysis* (1974) and *Gender Advertisements* (1979), deal with the power of presented knowledge claims and discursive forms of truth.

Yet, despite this intellectual concern with dramatic distortion, Goffman is careful to keep himself hidden, remaining elusive and inscrutable behind the page. We rarely see Goffman-the-person, as he eschewed subjective inference in favor of dry observation, while Goffman-the-author had an understated voice that was intentionally measured. Rather than wearing his heart on his sleeve, he cloaked himself in mystery and left the audience guessing. Professionally, Goffman was famously reluctant to align himself with any disciplinary field, theoretical perspective or ideological position, rarely gave interviews, forbade lecture recordings, and sealed his personal archives (Shalin 2013). Ironically, this self-obscuration only serves to increase the audience’s fascination with who Goffman was and what he was intending. Imagined in posterity, through this tantalizing lens, he cuts more of a celebrity figure than anyone could have done in real life.

There is no shortage of critical reviews, analytical accounts and personal recollections by Goffmanian scholars (Burns 1992; Ditton 1992; Manning 1992; Winkin 1999; Raffel 2013; Scheff 2006; Smith 2006; Jacobsen 2010; Scott 2015; Hood and van de Vate 2017), and an impressive repository of documentary resources, the Erving Goffman Archives (Shalin 2013).
Nevertheless, it remains impossible to uncover a comprehensive view of Goffman; any attempts to reconstruct his biographical identity and understand his motivations are only partial, perspectival stories offering narrative, not historical truth (Spence 1982). In the following discussion, I suggest four alternate ways of framing Goffman’s project: we can read him variously as a hero, detective, villain or magician. After considering each version, I identify some common themes of (de)mystification and (dis)illusionment, which leave readers in a strange position of intimate exclusion.

The Universal Hero

Goffman holds a wide appeal, to academic and non-academic audiences alike. This can be explained by a combination of his accessible subject matter and enticing communicative style. Devouring his anecdotal reports on familiar scenes from everyday life, we feel a delighted shock of recognition (Burns 1992) that draws us into a shared world. The tone of his writing creates the impression that he respects us as fellow conspirators, standing with him outside of the drama that we shall observe. Like those in other “discrepant roles” (Goffman 1959), such as informants, non-persons and service specialists, we enjoy a privileged position of safe marginality, watching the action without being seen. This echoes Georg Simmel’s (1950) remarks on the fascination of secrecy: information that is restricted or held out of reach appears more desirable, acquiring higher value through exclusivity of access. The prospect of joining Goffman’s inner realm and being in-the-know makes the reader feel gleefully excited and adorned (Simmel 1950) with special privilege.

Another intriguing aspect is Goffman’s subtle attitude of social and moral criticism. While ostensibly, he writes with a cool, removed dispassionate tone of emotional neutrality (Becker 2003), there is a distinct implicit undercurrent of left-wing political values. He was keen to examine interactional discomfort and reveal socially troubling truths (Lofland 1984). He would arguably belong within the category of “radical” interactionists (Athens 2005; Katovich 2006) who address issues of power through a micro-sociological lens. He also shows an affinity with Howard S. Becker’s (1967) sociology of the underdog, a value-relevant stance of unapologetic bias towards marginalized social groups. In some texts, these messages are stronger. Asylums (1961a) was inspired by Goffman’s anger at the dehumanizing treatments imposed on his first wife, Angelica Choate, in a psychiatric institution. Gender Advertisements (1979) can be read as a proto-feminist critique of the patriarchal values embedded in popular culture. Elsewhere, Goffman contents himself with dry, sardonic commentaries on upper class
ennui and pointed observations about material inequality. Throughout these empirical examples, Goffman conveys empathy towards the stigmatized, humiliated and mundanely embarrassed.

Biographers of Goffman paint a picture of a deep and complex person, whose family background and origins matched the social characteristics of those he studied. Dmitri N. Shalin (2013) offers a biocritical hermeneutic approach that highlights the points of intersection between history, culture and identity (see Mills 1959) and invites a contextual understanding of Goffman’s romanticized image as the perpetual outsider. Born to Russian and Ukrainian Jewish immigrant parents in Canada, the young Erving was aware of his ethnic and cultural differences and ambiguous class status. His father ran a clothing store in Dauphin, Manitoba, and the family lived in relatively small Jewish communities within affluent, gentile neighborhoods (Cavan 2013). Visiting others’ homes, he was frequently exposed to social divisions and aspirations to upward mobility. The concern he observed with public appearances, displays of conspicuous consumption, and codes of manners, courtesy and etiquette, sparked Goffman’s interest in status anxiety and informed his early writing. A paper on class symbols (Goffman 1951) would emerge from his PhD fieldwork in the Shetland Isles, where he studied social interaction in an island community.

As a young boy, Erving was said to be shy, sensitive and rather precocious (Albas 2011), earning the nickname “Goofy Goffman” for his comic antics and social awkwardness (Bay 2001). One wonders whether, if born in our contemporary era, he might have been regarded as autistic. In adolescence, he would hover on the fringes at social gatherings, observing and talking about other people (Shalin 2013), and playing practical jokes (Winkin 1999). Goffman’s older sister, Frances, would become a professional actor; her involvement in a local theatre group meant that Erving had a long-standing familiarity with the world of drama and performing arts (Cavan 2013). Physically, Goffman was short in stature, with a height of only 5’2”, which in adulthood made him self-conscious in face-to-face encounters. Jacqueline Wiseman (2008) recalls how he stood on a chair in his university office, so that he could look down upon her during their meetings. He applied to work at the Canadian Film Board in order to avoid being drafted for military service, where he feared being bullied by hazing rituals (Wrong 2010). It is plausible to surmise that these experiences were formative of Goffman’s abrasive academic persona. Sherri Cavan (2013) suggests a victim-turned-victimizer narrative to explain his penchant for rudeness and callous remarks, which inspired another nickname, “Little Dagger” (Shalin 2013).

The Investigative Detective
The second way in which we can read Goffman is as a shrewd investigator, curious to understand what makes people behave in certain ways. He adopts a detached stance from which to unobtrusively observe, gathering naturalistic data from ethnographic fieldwork and printed documentary materials rather than interview accounts. Suspicious of verbal reconstructions, which might distort the historical truth (Spence 1982), he focused on tangible scenes and situations that could be empirically described. Goffman’s books are like a magpie’s nest, littered with illustrative examples from everyday life, as well as pamphlets, magazines and literature; each source is meticulously collected and supported by copious footnotes (Scott 2015). Rather than pass moral judgment on the reasons and meanings of conduct, Goffman purports to present a neutral, descriptive account of micro-social events and processes. In Frame Analysis, he opens with a bold statement of apolitical intention, distancing himself from potential accusations of bias (see Becker 1967) and sentimentality:

I can only suggest that he who would combat false consciousness and awaken people to their true interests has much to do, because the sleep is very deep. And I do not intend here to present a lullaby but merely to sneak in and watch the way people snore (Goffman 1974, 13-14).

This proclamation is partly a genuine reflection of Goffman’s background training in anthropology and his keenness to identify with more “scientific” disciplines than sociology, such as ethology, economics and sociolinguistics. Though taught and mentored by great figures in the symbolic interactionist tradition – Everett C. Hughes, Herbert Blumer and Robert E. Park – he refused to align himself with this perspective and instead cited his key influences as people like the cybernetic theorist Gregory Bateson and the animal behaviorist Ray Birdwhistell (Delaney 2013). However, we can also regard the statement more cynically as performative posturing: a strategically designed action to frame his work as credible and to cultivate an impression of academic authority.

We see Goffman the detective at work in a series of texts that form the heart of his dramaturgical writing: The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959), Encounters (1961b), Behavior in Public Places (1963a), Interaction Ritual (1967) and Relations in Public (1971). Viewed as a collection, this body of work reflects Goffman’s ultimate ambitious project to map the territory of the interaction order: that domain of social life that is structured by rules, norms and expected codes of conduct (Goffman 1983). Despite his frustratingly inconsistent use of conceptual terminology and lack of intertextual cross-referencing (Lofland 1984), it seems that Goffman intended to be rigorous and systematic, providing various taxonomies and typologies which help to catalogue the quirks of human behavior. I will now consider three examples of
this, pertaining to self-presentation, ritualized encounters and collective teamwork, and show how they have helped to inform some of my own research projects.

Once described as a “textbook of deception” (Manning 2000: 287), *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* offers a comprehensive overview of dramaturgical theory, using the theatrical metaphor to explain how actors perform different versions of themselves, tailored to the normative demands of each role-based situation. Goffman uses Kenneth Burke’s (1945) technique of “perspective by incongruity”, by drawing comparisons between symbolic objects found in familiar and unfamiliar domains. Thus, we find descriptions of the costumes, props and demeanor that actors use to give desired impressions, and the items of setting and scenery that support displays of character (Goffman 1959). Tactical arts of impression management include techniques such as dramatic realization, whereby actors highlight and emphasize stereotypical aspects of their roles through exaggerated performances, and dramaturgical discipline, whereby they try to appear “engrossed in [their] actions in a spontaneous, uncalculating way” while remaining sufficiently detached “to cope with dramaturgical contingencies as they arise” (Goffman 1959, 210). The boundaries between frontstage (public, contrived) and backstage (private, authentic) regions of the self are maintained by strategies such as mystification and audience segregation, to protect the insider secrets of the show (Goffman 1959).

I applied these ideas in my sociological theory of shyness (Scott 2007), which I defined as a feeling of relative incompetence at managing the dramaturgical demands of social situations. My participants explained how they imagined that everyone else in a scene understood the rules of interaction – the scripted lines, moves and symbolic gestures required (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1969) – but that they somehow lacked this tacit knowledge. They feared that they would make an embarrassing mistake that would create a poor impression and discredit their identity claims (Goffman 1963b), inviting critical judgment from the audience. As Hardy put it: “It seems as though I am trying too much to find out how to act like the ‘average person’, as though any self-invented methods could get found out and I would suffer great social punishment” (Scott 2007, 66).

Shy actors devise various tactics and strategies to mitigate this risk, including dramatic realization (overcompensating with an exaggeratedly bold, talkative persona), finding safety in roles (hiding behind the mask of a professional or other clearly scripted character), backstage rehearsals (planning a script before entering situations, such as making a phone call or visiting the hairdresser), and camouflaged costume (wearing dark colors to fade into the background, or dressing in otherwise inconspicuous ways). A delightful example of the latter came from Pearl, aged 70, who played upon cultural stereotypes of the elderly by hamming up the role performance of an ‘old lady’ to avoid social demands:
I feel safer all wrapped up. I would love to wear a long robe and a veil, but that wouldn’t be very popular today, would it? I compromise with coat, hat, gloves, spectacles (which I don’t need; they belonged to my mother) and a walking stick which I don’t need either. I like to be covered up and have something to hold. A friend suggested the walking stick and I find it very helpful. It looks natural, too, for an old lady of seventy to have one (Scott 2007, 111).

In Goffman’s (1961b, 1967, 1969, 1971) discussions of ritualized encounters, we see the influence of anthropological ideas. He documents a range of social situations in which interaction proceeds in a structured and stylized fashion, with ceremonial elements that are performed as symbolic displays. The mechanical operation of ritualized procedures creates a semblance of micro-social order through the observance of standardized frames. For example, clinical consultations between doctor and patient unfold in an orderly fashion (Strong 1979) through routines of turn-taking talk to gather information (Coupland 2014), the use of technical instruments, medical terminology and the iconic white coat (Vinson 2019). Interaction rituals frequently occur in everyday conversation: for example, the four-stage apology, consisting of challenge, offering, acceptance and thanks. These verbal interchanges may be remedial (repairing damage to social bonds, as with the apology) or supportive (displaying concern or courtesy, such as greetings and farewells) (Goffman 1971).

In some cases, ritualized encounters generate emotional energy (Collins 2004), strengthening collective sentiments and social solidarity (Durkheim 1912). Politeness rituals are rule-governed, performative speech acts (Austin 1962) that have a socially facilitative effect, by enacting and reinforcing cultural repertoires of norms and expectations (Watts 2003; Kádár and Haugh 2013). For example, in Swedish society, there is a tension between two sets of values: a cooperative, consensus-seeking principle (Grice 1975) that encourages tactful modesty (Daun 1989), and a direct, sometimes blunt, preference for clear statements of honesty (Scott 2022). As one of my participants, Josefin, explained: “We speak more straight to the point. If you don’t have anything to say, you don’t say it. But when you say it, it’s going to be, ‘Boom! Here it is.’ … Blunt, I think that’s probably the word” (Scott 2022, n.p.). This tension manifests in ambivalent speech acts that simultaneously gesture humility and deference (Hallett 2007; see Goffman 1967) and civil domination (Katovich 2013). For example, another participant, Kerstin, described a complicated version of the greeting ritual:

If someone asks, “How are you doing?”, many people in Sweden would answer with, “Oh, not so well”. “I have so much work to do and I’m so stressed”. … The most common answer is, of course,
“Good, how are you?”, but it’s not something you’d react upon, if somebody answered honestly (Scott 2022, n.p.).

A third theme is how actors work cooperatively in performance teams, to create a shared or group impression (Goffman 1959). Like the members of a theatrical cast, they practice “dramaturgical loyalty” (Goffman 1959) by supporting each other’s lines of self-presentation and responding to frame disruptions (Lyman and Scott 1970). If one actor forgets the script or makes a pratfall, their team-mates step in to cover their tracks and ensure that the show can go on. In symbolic interactionist terms, the team of actors upholds a common definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas 1970): an interpretive frame or working consensus of what is going on, which functions pragmatically to guide their conduct. Sometimes, however, there is a discrepancy between the presented and believed realities (Scheff 2006): the version of events that is ostensibly agreed upon and that which is understood to be the underlying truth. Tom Burns (1992: 76) described the “polite fictions” that teams collusively present in order to sustain normal appearances (Goffman 1969). For example, in my ethnographic study of a public swimming pool, I observed a tacitly agreed norm of disattending to nudity (Scott 2009, 2010). As it would be too embarrassing to acknowledge the true situation of being near-naked with a group of strangers, swimmers pretend not to notice each other’s bodies and avert their gaze elsewhere. These acts of civil inattention (Goffman 1963a) and studied non-observance (Goffman 1959) serve to uphold a show of decency (Weinberg 1965) and bolster the definition that “nothing unusual is happening” (Emerson 1970).

Teamwork often intertwines with facework, another Goffmanian concept describing the techniques actors use to sustain the public front of a role (Scott 2015). Face can be understood as a proxy term for social respectability; our faces are only contingently available “on loan” from society (Goffman 1967, 10) and must be regularly renegotiated. Dignity is afforded to those who behave in an orderly and predictable manner, but can be removed as a sanction for deviance. Actors are therefore anxious about the prospect of losing face, and motivated to keep or to save it. Goffman (1967) identified two kinds of facework: defensive (concerning one’s own face) and protective (concerning someone else’s face). Teamwork may therefore involve acts of protective facework, as in the case of embarrassment (Goffman 1956). For example, if one member of a friendship group makes a conversational blunder, such as getting someone’s name wrong, another member may laugh to cover the discomfort.

Interestingly, this process can occur through joint as well as individual action (see Blumer 1969). In a Norwegian ethnographic study, Hilde Rossing and I devised the concept of collective facework: the techniques used by whole teams to defend their shared face (Rossing and
Scott 2014). We observed how colleagues in a workplace-based beginners’ aerobics class perceived the “low ability” label as a threat to their professional face, which created an awkward role conflict. They resolved this dilemma collectively by generating new, tacitly understood norms of behavior, such as pursuing minimal forms of interaction. Rather than acknowledge their embarrassing predicament, they pretended to ignore each other and acted as if they were merely familiar strangers (Milgram 1977). This example shows the complex and paradoxical forms that dramaturgical action can take: sometimes it is by denying group identity that we strengthen it the most.

The Vengeful Villain
The third reading of Goffman is as a devious transgressor: sinister, scheming and deeply suspicious. In both his intellectual and personal lives, he could be contrary, disruptive and downright offensive, taking mischievous pleasure at breaking the rules. His intentions here are open to interpretation: was he on the audience’s side, warning his followers to be careful, or was he playing with us, too, for his own amusement? This ambiguity is entirely in keeping with the principles of micro-sociological theory. Deception is an inherent part of social life, and can be a facilitator of harmonious interaction (McCall and Simmons 1966). It is inevitable in dramaturgical encounters, where “even when given seemingly trustworthy guarantees”, no actor can be sure that “he [sic] knows either the other’s identity or his own identity in the eyes of the other” (Glaser and Strauss 1964, 669). Goffman (1959) pointed to the irony that despite knowing that our own performances are contrived, we tend to take other people at face value.

Cautioning against this “insider’s folly” (Goffman 1969), he advised his readers that we should not assume that other actors are on our team, or that our own team-mates will never turn against us and betray the trust we gave. Cooperative teamwork may not be as altruistic as it seems, for individuals are ultimately self-interested and instrumentally motivated: when the chips are down, we are prepared to hurt or exploit each other to advance our own position. Self-presentation is deliberately distorted, as we selectively display favorable aspects of character and conceal unfavorable aspects backstage. Social interaction may therefore be conflict-based, organized by principles of contest or competition. Goffman described these kinds of encounters as “expression games”, because they rely on each actor’s “capacity to acquire, reveal and conceal information” (Goffman 1969, 4). Expression games help to construct the definitional frames of situations, as two or more team-mates negotiate a shared, consensual reality; they can be contrasted with the ‘identity games’ that individual actors play to communicate (un)wanted impressions of self (Hood and van de Vate 2017).
Influenced by economic game theory, Goffman (1961b) argued that social interaction was dangerously “fun”, requiring a cautious balance between risk and thrill. Each player is intent on finding out as much about the other as possible while giving away as little as possible about themselves. Game play would become another important metaphor that Goffman (1969) used to explain the strategic and tactical aspects of interaction (Hood and van de Vate 2017). He used the concept of “action” in a specific and technical sense, defining it as those moves that are either problematic (having an unpredictable outcome) or consequential (fateful for the person’s identity or social relations). Teams and their audiences engage in tactical maneuvers to catch each other out, in “a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation and rediscovery” (Goffman 1959, 8), rendering everyday life a “constant game of concealment and search” (Goffman 1959, 83).

One application of this is the study of deceptive communication. Secret-keeping and lying are forms of strategic ‘action’ as they involve the intentional misleading of others (Meltzer 2003) by withholding or distorting knowledge that one knows to be true. Deceptive communication involves taking the role of the other (Mead 1934), by imagining how a fellow interact views the situation and manipulating this perspective to suit one’s own agenda. This again permits a morally neutral interpretation of socially deviant conduct. Goffman regarded some false claim-making as pragmatically adaptive and rationally justifiable, echoing Simmel’s (1950) remarks on the “expediency” of deceit. For example, his early paper “On Cooling the Mark Out” (Goffman 1952) explored the world of confidence tricksters, arguing that the strategies they used to appease their victims and ease the humiliating sting of status degradation could apply to other everyday social situations, such as rejecting college applicants or turning down a date.

Goffman also made a distinction between exploitative and benign fabrications (Goffman 1974), wherein the latter achieved something beneficial for an individual’s or group’s face. Practical jokes draw friends together, hoaxes expose greater abuses of power, and paternal constructions protect the feelings of innocent or vulnerable groups. Similar contrasts have been made between black and white lies (Bok 1978) and malicious and benevolent lies (Barnes 1994). Goffman’s (1959) typology of secrets indicates another way in which deceptive action can be pragmatically useful, subjectively meaningful and communicatively rational. Rival teams may hold “strategic secrets” about one another, for example in business, sports or politics, while stigmatized individuals keep “dark secrets” about the destructive information that might potentially discredit their identity claims. In *Stigma* (1963b), Goffman described how techniques of information control allowed people such as ex-prisoners and psychiatric patients to limit the “knownaboutness” of their condition and pass unnoticed in the company of “normals”.

9
Goffman’s casual view of deception as cool, situated intelligence (Smith 2006) was inspired by two leisure interests in tactical play: spying and espionage, and gambling. The former became another visual metaphor, shaping some of his key works in the 1960s. Writing against the cultural horizons of the American Cold War, Goffman was intrigued by the accounts of ex-military personnel and government strategists, and he consumed copious spy novels and films from popular culture, such as the James Bond series (Jaworski 2020). In tandem with this, Goffman’s shrewd eye developed through his exposure to the world of gambling. As a child, he had observed his father playing successfully, and later in his career, he managed to secure a job as a Las Vegas casino dealer. Although reportedly a dreadful poker player – ironically, he could not manage his own impressions enough to bluff his opponents (Smelser 2009; Albas 2011) – he was skillful at memory-based card games (Jaworksi 2020) and watched with admiration those who could keep poker-faced (Piliavin 2009).

Analytically, Goffman bracketed out questions of morality, focusing on the importance of appearing credible and trustworthy to others as a dramaturgical challenge (Manning 2000). Social actors assert not only that the content of their behavior is true, but also that the position from which they execute it is sincere and dependable. Goffman was not interested in the epistemological status of knowledge claims as objectively true or false, but rather in how people performed displays of honesty or made claims to moral rectitude as signs of truthful character (Bok 1978). He also considered what happens when this goes wrong: skeptical audiences may read between the lines, observing the leakage of destructive information through impressions “given off” (Goffman 1959). Accusations of fraudulence could spoil both an individual’s reputational identity and the collective face of a group: for example, with political party leaders. Goffman therefore focused on the consequences of deception for the interaction order (Scott 2012). Actors’ motivations were only relevant insofar as they might indicate the pragmatic purpose of a line of deceptive self-presentation. For example, cheating on an examination could be advantageous for enhancing one’s occupational status, while lying to one’s spouse could help to keep domestic peace. It is therefore possible to read Goffman as an amoral rather than immoral theorist (MacIntyre 1982; Strong 2013): he made a “functional, pragmatic endeavour to locate the meaning of actions in how others respond to them” (Smith 2006, 45).

In a generous interpretation, this might help to explain some aspects of Goffman’s personal character that his colleagues found disconcerting. He was regarded as something of an “academic oddity” (Strong 2013, 146), whose behavior ensured that he remained a social stranger and outsider. Goffman had a penchant for conducting ethnomethodological breaching experiments (Garfinkel 1967) by behaving unexpectedly to transgress interactional norms. He
was unsentimental and “intentionally tactless” in conversation, making rude and callous remarks with a “cruelly flippant gaucherie” (Delaney 2013, 99). Showing no apparent concern for the offence he might cause, he would study his victims’ reactions with the laconic curiosity of a bemused anthropologist. He seemed to delight in shocking and wrong-footing people in order to watch them fluster; losing poise, face and composure were the causes of embarrassment (Goffman 1956).

Some of these experiments were minor faux pas, disregarding social niceties. Goffman would stand too close to people (Glock 2008), fail to return handshakes, and refuse to indulge in small talk (Turner 2010). However, he also carried out some more unsettling experiments on his mentees and junior colleagues. Shalin (2013) reports the following notable examples. Goffman derided Thomas J. Scheff for being sick on an airplane, commenting loudly to the other passengers how humiliating it must be to lose control of one’s stomach (Scheff 2006, 100). Caught rifling through his roommate’s chest of drawers in a conference hotel, Goffman affected a brazen nonchalance with the justification that “You can learn a lot about people” this way (Jarrett 2000). Visitors to Goffman’s home would be left standing at the front door while he took notes on their confused reaction (Morrill 2008), and at a drinks reception, he told some acquaintances bluntly: “If I can’t find anybody more important to talk with, I’ll come back and talk with you” (Berger 2000, 279).

In these accounts, there seems to be “no sharp distinction between Goffman the scholar and Goffman the man” (Shalin 2013, 26). Our villain was immersed, even engulfed in his role performance (Goffman 1961b), to the point that his obnoxious stage persona occluded his true self. If there was a more authentic, backstage Goffman, it was rarely shown at work. Goffman’s “unrelenting sociologism” and “inability to turn off the scrutinizing switch” (Delaney 2013, 89) suggest that he was trapped in a fantastical world of his own creation. Whether this was sincere, deep acting (Hochschild 1983) or cynically contrived self-presentation (Goffman 1959), however, remains open to debate. Our final reading suggests that there may be another story, in which our hero resurrects.

The Magical Illusionist
The fourth reading of Goffman is as a performative showman, who, respecting his audience’s intelligence (see Becker 2000), wants to entertain us with a complex, sophisticated drama. His texts are multi-layered and work on different levels, not only containing analytical content but also meta-communicatively signaling self-referential intention. That is, Goffman presents us with a manifest set of interesting ideas, but then makes pointed hints and gestures towards alternate ways of seeing. There is almost an invitation to move from audience to performance
team, sharing in the “sweet guilt of conspirators” (Goffman 1959, 108). Urging us against the informant’s folly (Goffman 1983) of taking appearances at face value, he reminds us of the distinction between reality and contrivance (Goffman 1959). All the world is not a stage, he concedes, but much of it involves pretending. Social interaction entails a dialectical tension between the prospects of concealment and revelation, or knowing and being known (Simmel 1971). Indeed, the entire dramaturgical project can be read as a study of the unglamorous mechanics behind identity performance and a scrupulous examination of our secret, dirty work (Hughes 1962).

Goffman is like a magician, playing conjuring tricks with a deft sleight of hand that delights yet befuddles the audience. In both his wry observations of everyday life and his breaches of collegial relations, we can sense that all is not quite as it appears and that he has something else up his sleeve. He may give the impression of amoral cool detachment, but he gives off a more serious purpose (Goffman 1959). In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman (1959) identifies mystification as a key art of impression management. Performers try to keep barriers between their front and back regions, so that their audiences cannot see what happens behind the scenes. While he describes how ordinary folk do this in everyday life – we close doors, hide secrets, wear make-up and smile – he is also doing it himself through his writing.

For example, let us conduct a little frame analysis (Goffman 1974) of the Goffmanian library. The author positions his books within various genres to suit his changing intellectual predilections: we are shown an eclectic range of anthropological fieldnotes, intricate scientific classificatory systems, artful observations, speech and language dissections and instruction manuals for gambling. There is no logical sequence to this progression: it is less of a choreographed stage-show than a set of spontaneous and swift costume changes. The frame shifts he makes between genres are multiply laminated rather than discretely keyed (Goffman 1974), through patches of resonance and similarity. As noted above, John Lofland (1984) observed how Goffman uses his own terminology with frustrating inconsistency, making it difficult to cross-reference ideas between texts. Ostensibly, he guides his readers with helpful signposts, yet the architectural design of his wizardry remains mysterious.

Another clue to Goffman’s complexity lies in his dualistic displays of character. Consider the two, contrasting nicknames that he earned amongst his peers: “Goofy Goffman”, the cheeky but lovable rogue, and “Little Dagger”, the sharp, acerbic wit (Shalin 2013). It seems that there were, if not exactly two different Goffmans (Marx 1984), then at least front and backstage regions of his identity. Under the mask of presented personae, a director designed and orchestrated the display. Like symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy retains the idea of there being an actor behind the character, or agentic ghost in the machine (Scott 2015; see Ryle 1949). This
has a recursive, reflective component: Goffman (1961a, 366) describes the self as a coding process that makes sense of and organizes one’s own expressive social behavior. When he enacts this himself, through lectures, talk and writing, he demonstrates two further dramaturgical concepts. First, communication out of character (Goffman 1959) occurs when he steps outside of the frame, brackets it and comments on the contrivance of “making a scene”. Through double lines of expression, the manifest script is undermined by a contradictory subtext. Secondly, he deploys the strategy of role distance (Goffman 1961b) by performing dis-identification with his situated character: rather than sincerely playing his part, he cynically plays at it with an air of self-conscious detachment. Thus, Goffman signals to the watching audience that he is not whom he appears, and drops collusive hints that this is all a magic trick.

This self-contradictory juxtaposition occurs in many examples recollected by Goffman’s colleagues and students. Physically, he could present his personal front (Goffman 1959) either through the costume of formal attire, dressed in a dapper smart suit (Delaney 2013), or by turning up in shabby, disheveled clothes that gestured lower status (Fox 2008). Intellectually, Goffman conveyed a sneery snobbery towards unscientific methods like autoethnography (Fine 2009), yet drew upon anecdotal evidence from personal experience to illustrate his concepts (Shalin 2013). Politically, he made occasional sexist remarks to female students, suggesting that they ought to “go home” to domestic roles (Swidler 2010), yet on public platforms, he fiercely defended and advocated for women’s equal participation in academia (Cavan 2008). Goffman was a keen and loyal mentor of his graduate students, regardless of gender, and showed great respect for women colleagues including Lyn Lofland, Sherri Cavan, Arlene Daniels and Carol Brooks-Gardner. Mary Jo Deegan (1995) suggests that over his career, Goffman underwent a humble transformation from male chauvinist to staunch feminist.

Meanwhile, in the classroom, Michael Delaney (2013) recalls Goffman’s charismatic teaching style as the entertaining “profane jester”. He took the floor and held court with a commanding dramatic dominance (Goffman 1959), delivering soliloquies and monologues that held his audience spellbound. Yet only a few were allowed to enter this “charmed circle” (Delaney 2013, 97), and prospective students were made to undergo hazing rituals of initiation to test their resilience. Goffman would be deliberately rude and obtuse until convinced that students were serious rather than sycophantic, and was particularly begrudging towards sociologists. Those who did make the cut included Gary Alan Fine, Thomas J. Scheff, Arlene Daniels, Michael Delaney and Eviatar Zerubavel, all of whom have since became comparable “stars” in their own right (Delaney 2013) but whose testimonies reveal a bruising from the process (Scheff 2006; Daniels 2009).
This resonates with micro-sociological debates about authentic selfhood (Waskul 2009). While Goffman steadfastly “refuses to tell us quite what he is up to” (Strong 2013, 147), we get the distinct impression that this is a sophisticated show of something more than micro-trivia (Strong 2013; see Gouldner 1973), and that there is a serious game to be found within his fun (Goffman 1961b). Perhaps some of this ambiguity arose from the paradox of shy performativity (Scott 2017), whereby a habitually reticent, self-conscious actor may express themselves more boldly on the stage. Goffman’s presentation of self, both professionally and personally, seems to have been carefully measured with a calibrated interactional style (Delaney 2013). Arguably, despite the abrasive social armor, he was deeply concerned with matters of truth and fairness (Lofland 1984), and related ethically towards the disadvantaged other (Raffel 2002; see Lévinas 1961). Rather than there being “two Goffmans” or one actor with dispassionate detachment, perhaps what we see is a nuanced, dualistic character: a moralist operating behind an amoral front (Delaney 2013, 100).

Conclusion
This chapter has explored four different readings of Erving Goffman: as hero, detective, villain or magician. First, we saw how he came from humble roots and championed the cause of the underdog. A perpetual outsider on the margins of social scenes, he was concerned to expose phoniness and speak of uncomfortable truths. Second, he was a scientific investigator, categorizing and classifying human behavior with a systematic rigor and unbiased neutrality. Third, he was alert to the darker side of conduct, studying deceptive interaction and misrepresentative identity claims. Fourth, he was a charismatic conjuror, performing entertaining magic tricks to an audience whom he respected, and showing moral sensibility beneath the mask of mischief. Each of these interpretations can be convincingly argued and contains a partially plausible truth. Goffman is all of the above, and more: the ultimate performer.

Where does this leave us, his bewildered readers? Goffman (1963a) described social actors as transceivers: capable of both transmitting and receiving expressive information, and shifting between perspectival roles (Scott 2012). Knowing that others can deceive us, just as we pretend to them, we might feel skeptical and wary of whatever story is presented, and mistrustful of the credibility that is claimed about its source. Transceivership implies the disappointing (Craib 1994) insight that one’s own perspective is limited and partial, and that other people’s versions may obscure rather than complete. This is at once an epistemological, ontological and ethical matter. The Lucifer Effect (Zimbardo 2007) is a state of depressive realism that follows from the awareness that, in social life, there are no saints or angels: good people are capable of doing bad things, while even the most incorrigible deviants have some redeeming
features. Goffman teaches us how everybody’s character has contradictory sides: sincere and cynical, genuine and fake, trustworthy and discredited, magic and mundane. As an inside audience, we could occupy the border zones between these regions, taking advantage of the dual aspect view to question everything we see. Curiously, however, most of us decline the opportunity to break the fourth wall, preferring instead to suspend our disbelief and enjoy being immersed in the show. Goffman’s intentions remain a mystery, but this is key to his appeal, for he combines artful candor with theatrical delight.

References


Cavan, Sherri. 2008. “Having Been Goffman’s Student I am Drawn to Voltaire’s Dictum, ‘To the Living We Owe Respect, To the Dead We Owe Only the Truth’”. *Erving Goffman Archives*, available online at: http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/interactionism/goffman/cavan_08.html.


