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Photograph by Frederick A. Meyer.

Frame Analysis

An Essay on the Organization of Experience. By Erving Goffman. 586 pp. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. $12.50.

By PHILIP ROSENBERG

In a series of strikingly original, often brilliant books, Erving Goffman, a Canadian by birth who has taught at Chicago and Berkeley and at present occupies a chair in sociology and anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, has exhaustively examined the petty transactions that make up everyday life. Virtually everything he writes is informed by the same impish dialectic, for he delights in making us see the most simple transactions as complex and mysterious game-like strategies, and then in exposing the rules of the game to reduce the whole once again to a comprehensible simplicity. Not since Veblen laid bare the socio-economic significance of walking sticks and Pekingese dogs has there been an author capable, as Goffman is, of explaining why there are mirrors facing the counters in lunchrooms, why a man mutters an oath when he stumbles over a crack in the pavement, or why loitering, the simple act of standing still on a public sidewalk, constitutes a breach of civic order.

The small change of social intercourse obsessively fascinates Goffman because he senses instinctively the drama behind the most ordinary bits of social business—senses, that is, that what we do routinely is our "routine," our *shtick*, our bit of stage business. In "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (1959), the first of his nine books, Goffman argued that we are all essentially performers. We spend less time making things, getting and spending them, than we do trying to put the stamp of our own individuality upon them, for our main business is, in a sense, the fabrication of our own identities.

For centuries Western culture has assumed that self and society are the polar moments of our sense of what it is like to be alive in the world The social world may provide us with masks to wear on public occasions, but it is comforting to feel that there are faces behind the masks, selves that remain inviolate through all contextual vicissitudes. Yet in Goffman's world this seems not to be so. In the theatrical vocabulary he uses, the term "offstage" does not occur; when we are not onstage we are backstage, and the backstage area is a theater in its own right, with its own performance standards.

Consider what happens when I am walking with a friend and am accosted by another friend with a long and sad story to tell. As I listen to the story, I give off all the conventional signs of sympathetic attention, but if an opportunity presents itself I may signal to the first friend with a gesture or glance that I am doing my best to end the conversation and will be rejoining him as soon as possible. Is my show of concern to my second friend's story, then, phony? Goffman insists that there is no valid sociological ground for assuming that my impatience in any way compromises my attentiveness, or vice versa. I am simply playing two roles to two audiences at the same time, as we all must do with surprising frequency. "All the world is not, of course, a stage," he concedes at one point, then adds the characteristically Goffmanian punch line: "but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify."

If this approach suggests a shockingly disrespectful regard for the sense of self we like to maintain, Goffman seems not to mind, seems in fact to enjoy reducing us to something like puppets in an elaborate Punch and Judy show. "A correctly staged and performed scene," he writes in "The Presentation of Self," "leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it." When the performance "comes off," he adds, "the firm self accorded each performed character will appear to emanate intrinsically from its performer."

What Goffman seems to be denying, then, is the possibility of precisely the sort of authenticity our society values most highly. A being is authentic, Lionel Trilling tells us in "Sincerity and Authenticity," "by reason of its entire self-definition: it is understood to exist wholly by laws of its own being." Conversely, inauthenticity is a condition to which we fall when "the sentiment of individual being depends upon other people." If, then, in Goffman's world the self is no more than an optical illusion which merely "appears" to emanate from the actor—if the self is, as Goffman says, an "imputation"—the notion of personal authenticity can hardly be more than an arrogant conceit. "In this enterprise of presenting the self, of putting ourselves on the social stage,

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