

What I'm reading

What's up, Doctor Goffman? Tell us where the action is!

RICHARD HANDLER *University of Virginia*

Erving Goffman was a master of the long essay, a genre comparatively rare in contemporary sociological and anthropological writing. While there is a steadily expanding secondary literature on Goffman, few of his commentators have provided close readings of individual essays. This article offers close readings of 'Where the action is' and 'Normal appearances' to demonstrate the potential of this approach to the analysis of Goffman's *oeuvre*.

Erving Goffman, the great mid-twentieth-century sociologist, is neither forgotten nor unread. Since his death in 1982 at the age of 60, sociologists have been trying to figure out how to incorporate the idiosyncratic and wildly creative Goffman into their disciplinary canon. In contrast, anthropologists cannot claim him as a disciplinary ancestor, and so they have felt less inhibited than sociologists about poaching unsystematically in his extensive *oeuvre*. Perhaps the most anthropological of all the great sociologists, Goffman appeals especially to ethnographers of mass societies and to linguistic anthropologists. His focus on micro-ethnography, on everyday encounters, on body symbolisms and linguistic interactions may be problematic for some sociologists, but for anthropologists, it makes him seem like one of our own.

In this essay, then, my task is not to renew Goffman's name among anthropologists, nor is it to remind my colleagues to read him. Rather, I want to propose, and demonstrate, a certain method of reading Goffman, one required, I will argue, by the formal properties of much of his work. Most Goffman scholarship to date reads him in one of two critical modes. First, synthetic readings attempt to characterize the essential features of his *oeuvre* in order to know where and how to include him in the sociological canon. Second, analytic or episodic readings focus on selected features of his work: Goffman as fieldworker, Goffman's methods, Goffman's data, and so on.

While these two reading strategies (examples of which will be cited below) have produced much provocative and useful commentary on Goffman, the presentation of their findings relies on what we might call sampling or skimming. But skimming Goffman's marvellously literary texts inevitably fails to do him justice. Goffman was not only a great social theorist, he was a great writer. He thus needs to be read critically and carefully not only as a theorist, but as an author. And this means paying attention

to the literary form which, more than any other, was congenial to him: the long essay. I will proceed, therefore, by comparing two such essays, 'Where the action is' and 'Normal appearances' (hereafter, A and N in parenthetical citations), to hint at the kinds of larger readings of Goffman that might emerge if we start by working outwards from his individual essays.

Genres and terms

'Where the action is' is the sixth and final essay of *Interaction ritual*, a collection Goffman published in 1967 which included five shorter papers, four of which had been previously published as journal articles between 1955 and 1957. 'Normal appearances' can be considered the sixth and final essay¹ of *Relations in public*, a 1971 book subtitled *Microstudies of the public order*. Goffman tells us that these six studies 'were written to be published together', that 'they are sequentially related', and, yet, that 'each develops its own perspective starting from conceptual scratch' (1971: xviii).

'Action' and 'Appearances' tackle the same social phenomenon from different angles. The key terms of each essay are closely related. *Action* is a term Goffman takes from the criminal world, one that refers to extraordinary activity, often of the illicit sort, as in gambling. In 'Normal appearances', the key term is *up*, as in the phrase *something's up*, used to indicate extraordinary activity impinging on normal routines. 'Where the action is' explores the point of view of those who seek action. 'Normal appearances' explores the point of view of those who seek to avoid action, those who are threatened by the realization that something's up. It can perhaps be said that 'Where the action is' has an elegiac tone, whereas 'Normal appearances' is sombre. Whether such a distinction has culture-historical significance is a point I will consider at the end.

Both 'Action' and 'Appearances' are long essays. 'Action' takes up 121 of the 270 pages of *Interaction ritual*; 'Appearances', 95 of the 333 pages of new material in *Relations in public*. The long essay is generically ungainly in the social sciences, where the coin of the professional realm is the ten- to thirty-page journal article or the 200- to 400-page book. Never mind that many books are puffed-up articles. For purposes of professional review and advancement, the book and the article 'count' and can find homes in institutionally supported publication outlets, whereas the long essay is something of an orphan. Yet the long essay was a genre congenial to Erving Goffman (cf. Freidson 1983: 361), as attested by such classics as 'Role distance' (in *Encounters*, 1961a), 'On the characteristics of total institutions' (in *Asylums*, 1961b), and even the stand-alone, 147-page *Stigma* (1963). (Note that none of the works mentioned thus far has an index.) The long essay seems to have been the genre Goffman needed to accommodate the relentlessness of his analytic attack on ostensibly small ('microsociological') phenomena, things he once described (in a book that has an index) as secondary, outside 'the core matters of sociology' (1974: 13).

Goffman's essays, even the long ones, are the antithesis of the puffed-up article. His work is easy to read but difficult to grasp; as Randall Collins puts it, 'Goffman is deep' (1988: 42). He is one of the few authors in the social sciences whose every paragraph deserves exegesis. Reviewing *Relations in public*, the distinguished political scientist Marshall Berman asserted in 1972 that Goffman was 'one of the greatest writers alive today' (1972: 1; cf. Atkinson 1989; Fine 1999: 182). Berman was referring to the brilliance of Goffman's analysis, not to his prose, which the reviewer found dense, 'remote', and 'pedantic'. I disagree with the second assessment. Goffman's prose is delightful, with its unlikely lists ('card games, ball-room couplings, surgical teams in operation, and fist

fighters' [1964: 135]), its delinquent comparative angles ('unlike his feathered friends, the individual must commit himself to walking on a flooring' [N 284]), and of course its puns (an example of which I shall include later).

A special feature of Goffman's prose, indeed, of his sociology in general, is his use of what anthropologists call 'native terms' (like *action* and *something's up*) as analytic terms. Dell Hymes, a colleague of Goffman, noted his ability 'to christen practices that had no name' (1984: 628). The issue of naming social practices, and thereby reimagining them as sociological concepts, was raised long ago by Durkheim, in *The rules of sociological method*, where he argued that while sociologists sometimes start with 'lay concepts' (as 'guides' to the existence of 'social facts'), they should not rest content with them. Rather, he argued, 'we need ... to formulate entirely new concepts, appropriate to the requirements of science and expressed in an appropriate terminology' (1966 [1895]: 37; cf. Rose 1960).

Anthropologists, too, have been worried by this issue, but for us it extends beyond commonsense terms in English, French, and so on, to interpretative problems that arise in the study of other cultures. So, for example, in their monograph on Balinese kinship, Hildred and Clifford Geertz use the term *dadia* throughout, not 'agnatic, preferentially endogamous ... corporate group' (1975: 4-5). To use technical terms (like 'agnatic corporate group') has the virtue of linking local phenomena to comparable ones elsewhere, but the disadvantage of shoe-horning complex and possibly unique phenomena into categories that generate too much of the wrong kind of meaning. Conversely, to use native terms has the virtue of allowing the analyst to follow internal symbolic connections wherever they may lead, but the disadvantage of yielding an inward-facing text that cannot easily be used by non-specialists.

Goffman's writings split the difference between these two anthropological approaches. He is, after all, writing about a world both he and his readers inhabit, and thus he can presume they will have at least some familiarity with both the native terms he chooses to analyse, and the analytic terms he chooses to invent out of native terms (cf. Cohen & Rogers 1994: 311-12; Watson 1999). To put it slightly differently, Goffman can play with terminology in two directions. First, he can tweak common words and turn them into analytic terms: so, for example, 'ecological huddle' (1964: 135) and 'body gloss' (1971: 122). Readers may have to stretch to understand in what sense a 'huddle' can be 'ecological', or what 'gloss' has to do with face-to-face encounters, but it is precisely such interpretative work that will incite them to engage with Goffman's analysis. Second, Goffman can latch onto common Anglo-American terms and wring meanings out of them that will not have been obvious to readers who routinely use those terms as clichés. Readers will then find that such terms provide entranceways into cultural mazes they know intuitively, but not analytically. Thus, as we shall see, in Goffman's hands the term *action* becomes an entranceway into both the underworld and the cathedral of the self.

'Where the action is'

The best-known essays in *Interaction ritual* are probably 'On face-work' and 'The nature of deference and demeanor'. These, and the other three which precede 'Action', are micro-sociological studies of interpersonal encounters and exchanges, the sort of thing for which Goffman is famous.

'Where the action is' is different. It is far less about interaction than it is about the meaning of the term *action* in American society. As we shall see, action is the very opposite of 'acting normally'. Goffman begins: 'A decade ago among those urban

American males ... little given to gentility the term “action” was used in a non-Parsonian sense in reference to situations of a special kind, the contrast being to situations where there was “no action”. The term has spread to the wider society, Goffman observes, and thus he proposes a study in which ‘action will be defined analytically’ (A 149).

Consider for a moment what Goffman means by a non-Parsonian, analytic definition of action (cf. Collins 1988: 41-2; Kim 2003: 31-3, 51-3). Talcott Parsons was the reigning guru of Anglo-American macro-sociological theory at the time Goffman began his work in the 1950s. Parsons’s ambitious 1937 treatise, *The structure of social action*, had staked a claim to redefine American sociology in terms of the great European social theorists of the preceding generation, particularly Durkheim and Weber. The term *action*, for Parsons, had become a Durkheimian scientific term, a term that was ‘experience-distant’, not ‘experience-near’, to draw on a dichotomy explicated by one of Parsons’s students, Clifford Geertz (1983: 57). For example, in a 1966 treatise, Parsons defined action as follows: ‘Action consists of the structures and processes by which human beings form meaningful intentions and ... implement them in concrete situations’ (1966: 5). Indeed, Parsons sometimes wrote as if *action* was not a term but a theoretical framework: ‘[T]he study of human social behavior necessarily involves a frame of reference here called “action”’ (1961: 32). And with the very next sentence, he adds that ‘the term itself is not important’.

The term itself is not important. Compare Goffman:

It is, of course, in the gambling world that the term action had its slang beginning, and gambling is the prototype of action. In the casinos of Nevada, the following usages can be found: ‘Dollar action’, refers to light bettors and their effect on the day’s take; and ‘good [or real or big] action’, refers to heavier takes. Dealers who get flustered by heavy bettors are said to be unable ‘to deal to the action’, while cool dealers are said to be ‘able to handle the action’. Naturally, new dealers are ‘pulled out of the action’, and when bets get heavy and multitudinous at a crap table, the better of the base men may be ‘put on the action side’. Casinos that try to avoid high limit games are said ‘not to want the action’, while houses that can face heavy bettors without becoming nervous are said ‘to be able to take the action’ (A 186-7).

And Goffman goes on in the same paragraph with seven more examples, even more complicated than these.

Such exuberance, such sheer delight in native terminology, suggests ethnographic fieldwork.² In the front matter of *Interaction ritual*, Goffman tells us that ‘comments on Nevada casino gambling are based on a study in progress’ (1967: iii; see also Goffman 1969: 122). And elsewhere, he describes ‘the agony ... of Las Vegas pit bosses’ tasked with ‘breaking in ... 21 dealers’. A further reference to ‘my pit boss’ suggests that, during fieldwork, Goffman had himself trained to be a dealer (1971: 249; also Goffman 1989: 128; Winkin 1999: 29), a kind of ritual initiation that many ethnographers have arranged.

‘Where the action is’ includes several paragraphs of gorgeous, thick description of Nevada casinos. None the less, the essay is tightly constructed out of concepts drawn from Thomas Schelling’s game theory and from Durkheimian and Meadian sociology (Manning 1992: 56-71). In the first quarter of the essay, Goffman is less interested in native concepts than in describing in quite precise language some components of gambling and gaming. It gradually becomes clear that his goal is to distinguish *action* in the gambler’s sense from the social action of everyday routines.

The term *action*, Goffman tells us, refers to ‘activities that are consequential, problematic, and undertaken for what is felt to be their own sake’ (A 185). Action involves

'the willful undertaking of serious chances' (A 181). Goffman believes the term (*action*) has diffused from the gambling world, first into other illicit worlds and then more widely in American society. 'Yet almost always', he adds, 'the use seems apt. Underlying the apparent diversity in content is a single analytical property that can be sensed with sureness by persons who might be unable to define closely what it is they sense' (A 188). Here, then, we have Goffman the ethnographer reading over the shoulders of natives who know how to use their key symbols even though they do not normally turn them into analytic terms.

The relationship of personhood and time is central in Goffman's analysis of action. Recall that action is both 'consequential' and 'problematic'. People's activities and choices may or may not have serious consequences, and the performance of specific activities may or may not be problematic – that is, the outcome or result may or may not be in doubt. Moreover, while the consequences of a particular choice may be momentous, those consequences may take decades to unfold, such as, in the example Goffman gives, a person's decision to move from one state to another. In contrast, one of the distinctive features of action is that there is a relatively brief stretch of time between the moment of initiation and the moment of resolution: '[O]nce the bet has been made, *outcome is determined and payoff awarded all in the same breath of experience*. A single sharp focus of awareness is sustained ... during the full span of the play' (A 156, original emphasis). Recall, finally, that action is both wilful and undertaken for its own sake.

We now have all the ingredients that will allow Goffman to distinguish action from the routine activities of daily life. Leisure-time activities are structured to be inconsequential, although they may well be problematic. In contrast, during the serious activities of life, many of our decisions have consequences for us and for others. But daily life, especially in the work world, is routinized to predict and control the consequences of our actions, which are bureaucratically managed to mesh 'the individual's efforts' with 'the needs of other persons who count on him' (A 163). More generally, much of daily life in modern society is structured to create security, not chanciness. Here, remarks Goffman, 'is the Calvinistic solution to life: once the individual divides his day's activities into ones that have no effect and others having a small contributive consequence, nothing can really go wrong' (A 175).

But, we might add, pursuing the allusion to Weber, the price we pay for such security is the disenchantment of the world. And Goffman's serious chance-takers (gamblers, criminals, spies) populate the fringes of society because, apparently, they refuse to settle for a more normal, 'secure' life. Indeed, through their profession they stake 'a claim to a very special relationship to the work world', a claim 'compressed pridefully into one word', *action* (A 188).

Moreover, not only do these chance-takers reject routinized work, they display a kind of heroism that does not fit into ordinary life. In Goffman's analysis, those who seek action give themselves the opportunity to demonstrate both self-determination and a willingness to let go, to give up control, to submit oneself to fate. Action, in short, allows individuals to demonstrate what Goffman calls 'character'. What seems to be at issue (in the native ideology, as channelled through Goffman) is a kind of personal authenticity that shows itself to be beyond the reach of social coercion. Action consists of

fateful activities ... socially defined as ones an individual is under no obligation to ... pursue ... No extraneous factors compel him to face fate in the first place; no extraneous ends provide expedient reasons for his continued participation. His activity is defined as an end itself, sought out, embraced, and utterly his own (A 184-5).

Despite this native ideology of personal authenticity, or perhaps because of it, Goffman thought action was increasingly being subjected to commodification. He seems to mourn the passing of action from the world of the gambler to the wider world, where 'the term itself [has been] flogged without mercy in commercials and advertisements' (A 149). 'We have become alive to action at a time when – compared to other societies – we have sharply curtailed in civilian life the occurrence of fatefulness of the serious, heroic, and dutiful kind' (A 193).

As Goffman saw it, the American society of his day revelled in vicarious action. Consumers could purchase action, more or less fateful, at casinos, racetracks, and amusement parks. But they could also purchase vicarious action. Goffman samples the use of the term *action* in advertisements touting cars, clothing, and entertainment, and he coins his own term, 'fancy milling', to refer to what he calls 'the action of consumption'. 'Adults in our society', he writes, 'can obtain a taste of social mobility by consuming valued products, by enjoying costly and modish entertainment, by spending time in luxurious settings, and by mingling with prestigious persons' (A 197). In such fancy milling, people are at once performers and spectators and, as such, can obtain 'a flavor of action' while risking little beyond the cost of the entertainment (A 198).

Vicarious action requires, however, the real thing as its model, and here is the final irony. The heroes of real action live on the fringes of society, and their activities are often criminalized. Yet, in good Durkheimian fashion, Goffman suggests that these fringe elements serve an important ritual function in modern society, helping to keep alive our sense of the sacredness of authentic character or personhood. 'Casinos, pool halls, and racetracks', comments Goffman, are 'places of worship' where, perhaps, the 'moral sensibility' of our society is more alive than it is in churches. In rejecting 'the safe and silent places' of home and business, 'delinquents, criminals, [and] hustlers' reaffirm their 'self-respect'. This is society's 'payment' for 'the use we make of the ritual of their performance' (A 268).

'Normal appearances'

When we follow Goffman from 'Action' to 'Normal appearances', we move from casinos, pool halls, and racetracks to safe and silent places, places where various kinds of surveillance are routinely exercised, and where threatening interruptions are always to be feared. Just as 'Action' borrowed a framework from game theory, so 'Normal appearances' makes extended use of examples drawn from ethology. Indeed, the nine-page preface to *Relations in public* ends with an homage to ethologists, who, Goffman thought, had developed a 'field discipline' for the study of 'face-to-face interaction' superior to anything in 'contemporary social science' (1971: xvii; cf. Giddens 1988: 254-5). There is, however, a caveat: the Darwinian explanatory structure of ethology will not work in the study of human behaviour, and so, Goffman concludes, we must 'politely disattend this feature' of ethological work.

Thus it is a bit surprising to find Goffman asserting in the initial paragraphs of 'Appearances' that 'the central thesis here is Darwinian'. 'Individuals', he announces, 'exhibit two basic modes of activity. They go about their business' or, 'fully mobilized' by signs of danger, they respond with various manoeuvres from fight to flight. These two 'physiolog[ical]' states are mediated, Goffman continues, by 'a very pretty capacity for dissociated vigilance'. Both human and non-human animal individuals constantly scan their immediate environment, instantaneously interpreting all sorts of perceptual evidence and disregarding most of it, because most of it indicates no threat. Such

scanning is done only half-consciously, 'out of the furthest corner of whatever is serving for an eye'. Attention is focused elsewhere, until and unless 'something [should] really prove to be "up"', which will force self-conscious attention to signs of danger, to be followed, perhaps, by 'coping behavior' (N 238-9).

Let us consider the components of this simple model. There are actors conducting routine business. There is dissociated vigilance, a state of mind including both semi-conscious scanning behaviour and disattention – the latter being a semi-conscious decision to pay no further mind to a noticed phenomenon. There are potential threats, noted by the native term *up* (*something's up*). And threats trigger self-conscious interpretative work concerning both the role that an intruding other may be playing and the role one should play in response.

The colloquial phrase *something's up* figures centrally in this model. Dictionaries of Anglo-American slang give 'amiss' as one of the many definitions of *up*. We all know *what's up, Doc?* as a variation attributed, as the dictionary tells us, to the cartoon character Bugs Bunny (Dalzell & Victor 2006: 2039, 2087). Tex Avery, a key member of the Warner Brothers team that created Bugs Bunny in the late 1930s, gives this etymology:

I was fresh from Texas when I came out here [to California], I came out in twenty-eight or twenty-nine. At that time, down there you called everyone 'Doc', it was a high school bit ... I came out here, and I met a few guys, and they said, 'Where do you get that Doc stuff?' Well, it was just an expression ...

So when we hit on the rabbit, we decided he was going to be a smartalec rabbit, but casual about it, and I think the opening line in the very first one was, 'Eh, what's up, Doc?' And, gee, it floored 'em! They expected the rabbit to scream, or anything but make a casual remark – here's a guy with a gun in his face! It got such a laugh that we said, 'Boy, we'll do that every chance we get' (in Adamson 1975: 164).

As Avery must have known, it is always a dubious business to explain why something is funny. Consider, none the less, the signature Bugs Bunny moment. A predator approaches Bugs. The approach may cover a good deal of ground, and may require furious exertion (as in digging out a rabbit hole), but in any case it is often loudly overwhelming, a noisy show of force that can take no one by surprise. Adequately warned, with plenty of time and space for flight, Bugs none the less does nothing but wait, and then becomes the aggressor with his opening gambit, 'What's up, Doc?' The humour derives from both the buffoonish, incompetent expression of a threat, and Bugs's apparent refusal to recognize it as threatening.

More important, for present purposes, this signature Bugs moment caricatures and, in so doing, comes to stand for a kind of social negotiation that is central to 'Normal appearances': the interpretative dance of predator and prey, or, in a Goffmanian world, of con man and mark. This is a *protracted* social interaction. If 'Where the action is' focused on a condensed, heightened moment, a single 'breath of experience' (A 156), 'Normal appearances' slows down time to focus on one of the primal scenes of Goffman's sociology, when self examines other examining self examining other ... into an 'infinite regress of mutual consideration' (Goffman 1963: 18).

It is perhaps surprising that Goffman, who is notorious for drawing his data from popular fictions, makes no mention of Bugs Bunny in an essay the central trope of which is *something's up*. But then again, 'Normal appearances' is full of animals. Eleven of its first seventeen footnotes reference ethological examples – descriptions of animals resting, scanning, stalking, camouflaging, and fleeing. And the first major section of the essay is set up in terms of two concepts drawn from ethological studies: 'alarms' and 'the

umwelt'. As human and non-human animals move through their world (or inhabit a moving umwelt, or 'surround'), they can either scan and disattend, or scan, focus, and respond to alarms.

The human response to alarms is unique in the animal world. Non-human animals can be said to attend to danger signs, but they do not do so, as Goffman explains, in terms of a culturally constructed understanding of the 'normal' and the 'natural' (N 239). Thus the essay quickly moves from the topic of alarms to classic Goffmanian discussions of 'the overdetermination of normalcy' (N 256) and 'acting natural' (N 268). Normalcy is overdetermined, in Goffman's analysis, because humans can *account for* an alarming presence with explanations that cannot be predicted in advance:

No matter how bizarre or threatening an alarming sight may be, an effective accounting can be discovered for it, that is, an account, true or false, that will allay alarm. This means that normal appearances will have an open character to them. ... [since] there is no way to describe in detail the number of abnormalities that can be rendered unalarming by creative accounting (N 266).

Unlike animals, then, the human 'accounter has the world of meanings to draw on; his con alone need be his guide' (N 266).

Paired with this kind of accounting, and, indeed, in response to it, is the necessity to 'act natural'. The con artist does not want to call attention to himself, but wants instead to blend into the background of anonymous everymen who populate public spaces. Similarly, the mark, once he has got wind of the con, wants to give no evidence that might betray his suspicion. Indeed, Bugs Bunny's riposte might be seen as one example of acting natural in the face of a threat. In any case, Goffman goes on to argue that many 'relations in public' in modern, mass society are constituted by people acting natural – in a dramaturgical, not a Parsonian, sense. In a Goffmanian world, people sometimes feel they must play themselves: that is, act out, as naturally as they can, a role the content of which is their socially known self. Thus, Goffman concludes, normal appearances are often a 'normalcy show' (N 282).

The second section of 'Normal appearances' is an analysis of the stage setting for this show – what Goffman calls 'the design of vulnerability' (N 283). This is a sustained redescription of everyday spaces and places as potential settings or harbours for threats. Goffman describes the interiors of buildings (one's home, for example) as full of deadly, hidden forces we mostly ignore (like electricity and natural gas), and he points out that at home, we can be spied on as well as sheltered. He analyses 'lurk lines' (N 293), those 'blind spots' that follow us as we move through the umwelt. And, of course, 'access points' (N 300) like doors and windows are equally dangerous: '[W]indows can hide snipers' (N 296).

The whole section is, as Berman put it (describing the essay itself), 'a tour de force of paranoid logic and imagination, written with exceptional vividness and immediacy' (1972: 11; cf. Travers 1999: 166). In 'Normal appearances', it is not society's outcasts – those who are described in 'Where the action is', in *Asylums*, and in *Stigma* – who suffer harassment, surveillance, and oppression, but its mainstream citizens, its 'normals'. This is an everyday world turned upside down, sociologically, every day. What should we make of that?

Sixties action

To answer that question, there is no better starting-place than Marshall Berman's 1972 review. Berman thought Goffman's writings of the 1950s made him one of the

'prophets' of the 1960s. He placed Goffman among a group of social critics that included Paul Goodman, Herbert Marcuse, and Bob Dylan. These were the post-war voices who had decried mass society and the conformity it enforced. In Berman's terms, they articulated 'what came to be the most characteristic sound of the sixties: a political militancy that drew its life and energy from the individual's quest for "self-hood" and "identity"' (1972: 10; cf. Berman 1970). And yet, Berman thought Goffman was in some way overwhelmed by the sixties:

Although Goffman's works articulate the sensibility of the 1960's [sic], his voice grew suddenly, strangely still just around the time the real action began. Between 1963 and [1971] ... he published only one long essay, 'Where the Action Is' ..., and one short book, *Strategic Interaction* (1969). And although they were brilliant and fascinating in many of the old ways, much of the human immediacy and urgency seemed to be gone (1972: 10).

Needless to say, I do not agree with Berman that the old panache is missing from 'Where the action is'. But I find him perceptive in his discussion of the ominousness of *Relations in public*. In this book, Berman argues, 'Goffman situates himself at a distinct point in history. He makes it clear that he has experienced the sixties' (1972: 10). In 'Normal appearances', especially, Goffman's range of examples has expanded – from his Cold War anecdotes about spies and criminals (still, of course, heavily represented) to newer scenes from the student revolts at Columbia and Berkeley, and observations from research reports on slum housing and urban degradation, all of which give a general sense that the old social compacts have decayed and public spaces are no longer very orderly. And Berman develops an elaborate comparison of Goffman to Franz Kafka, to convey the ominous tone that pervades *Relations in public*. In his reading, Goffman the critic and prophet has become dismayed by what he wrought. As Berman asks, '[I]s Goffman's last judgment on the sixties ... a *mea culpa*?' (1972: 14).

Without trying to answer such a question (since we cannot), let us compare such imputed chagrin, and the ominousness of 'Normal appearances', to the celebratory tones one can find in 'Where the action is'. Clifford Geertz may have been correct to say of Goffman that his 'is a radically unromantic vision of things' (1980: 170). But it certainly seems that in 'Action', Goffman romanticizes his gamblers and their cult of chanciness (cf. Gonos 1980: 164). Indeed, he is almost willing to admit as much: 'Looking for where the action is, one arrives at a romantic division of the world', between home and work, on the one hand, and sites of action, on the other, which he goes on to describe, 'lushly' (Goffman 1989: 131), as 'places of worship' (A 268).

Compare, next, this romantic tone to the clinical tone Goffman takes in discussing the stigmatized, in his 1963 book, *Stigma*. Goffman makes the same functional argument in both cases. Society victimizes both action-seekers and the stigmatized in order to make examples of them – to use them as human fodder to exemplify, and thereby uphold, the moral order. And in *Stigma*, Goffman makes, I think, one of the most moving claims on behalf of the underdog that exists in all of social science (cf. Freidson 1983: 361), when he observes that it is the function and duty of the stigmatized to behave in such a way that 'normals' can feel they are tolerant:

The more the stigmatized individual deviates from the norm, the more wonderfully he may have to express possession of the standard subjective self if he is to convince others that he possesses it, and the more they may demand that he provide them with a model of what an ordinary person is supposed to feel about himself (1963: 116).

Yet, *Stigma* is not a straightforward brief on behalf of the stigmatized. Its passion is directed *against* the normals, while the mores and attitudes of the victims are clinically dissected. Indeed, I have found it difficult to teach *Stigma* to today's students. They are put off by Goffman's pre-sixties vocabulary, which includes words like 'cripple' and 'homosexual', and by his utterly unromantic descriptions of attempts at normalization, as in this passage on the 'tortured performance' of a person in a wheelchair who 'manages to take to the dance floor with a girl in some kind of mimicry of dancing' (1963: 10).³ More important, perhaps, today's undergraduates do not want to see that Goffman's acute analysis of both the socio-political organization of identity groups and the limited tolerance normals extend to them applies as well now as it did in the 1950s.

Indeed, to use *Stigma* to contextualize a comparative reading of 'Where the action is' and 'Normal appearances' suggests an image of Erving Goffman, critic of the 1950s, stranded on the farther shore of the 1960s (Handler 2009: 299-300). This reading might explain why *Stigma* never became a foundational text among scholars studying 'whiteness', notwithstanding the fact that Goffman's model of the power of 'unmarked' normals to mark or stigmatize selected categories of others contains most of the elements of what has now become a dominant model, at least in the softer social sciences and the humanities. Goffman never quite caught up with the rhetoric and tone of the various civil rights movements that developed after the sixties, although, as Carol Brooks Gardner suggests (1999: 56-59), he made a valiant attempt with 'Gender advertisements' (Goffman 1976; 1979).

But then, social scientists never quite catch up to the social realities they try to describe and analyse. As much as Goffman has been celebrated by sociologists, his work seems to defy their best efforts to assimilate it into a conventional narrative of the progress of sociological theory.⁴ This is due not only to Goffman's idiosyncratic brilliance. It has to do as well with his social relationship to his material, a relationship signalled (as I suggested at the outset) by his use of native terms as analytic terms. Goffman was a social theorist, an ethnographer of modern times, a writer in the literary sense of the term, and a social critic – all in all, a 'culturally indigenous anthropologist' (Watson 1999: 141). Robustly inhabiting all those roles, he forged his own genre of social-scientific writing, one that many of us admire but none (I dare say) dares imitate. It is only a small irony that he was able to sell millions of books along the way.

NOTES

This article was written in response to an invitation of Krishan Kumar, Chair of the Department of Sociology, University of Virginia, where I first presented it on 8 April 2010. Prof. Kumar and his colleagues were an appreciatively critical audience who gave me much to consider. Thanks also to Brian Balogh for discussions of North American cultural criticism in the 1960s. Bugs Bunny is not responsible for my errors.

¹ There is a seventh, previously published essay which Goffman includes as an appendix.

² Bruce Kapferer reports that Max Gluckman 'saw an Austen-esque, deft quality in Goffman's ethnography' (the reference being to Jane Austen, whose work Gluckman took 'as a model'); and, further, that Gluckman stressed 'Goffman's own self-reference that he was an ethnographer rather than a theoretician' (Kapferer 2006: 316). Susie Scott also claims that Goffman 'preferred to think of himself as ... an "urban ethnographer"', not a theoretician. She also reports that 'he was known amongst his colleagues as a keen gambler' (Scott 2007: 113-16; cf. Winkin 1999: 29). On Goffman as an ethnographer, see Manning (1999).

³ While completing this essay, I came across a newspaper account of a 15-year-old with cerebral palsy whose 'dream of dancing' was realized at Hempstead High School in Dubuque, Iowa, where she made the dance team. At the state dance and drill team competition, Challes Reese 'was able to participate in only one dance ... but she was at the center of the action, performing air guitar and spinning her [wheel]chair in sync with her teammates, transforming it from an obstacle into an asset'. According to the author of the account,

squad members 'learned [that] people of all backgrounds can break through barriers and discover lasting friendships' (Becker 2010). Goffman's 1963 analysis of markedness and phantom tolerance can be applied well enough to this account, although its overt ideological message draws from newer discourses of 'diversity'.

⁴ There is a lively and growing secondary literature on Goffman; a string of edited volumes provides a good overview: Ditton (1980); Drew & Wootton (1988); Smith (1999); Waksler (1989).

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Quoi de neuf, Docteur Goffman ? Dites-nous où il se passe quelque chose !

Résumé

Erving Goffman était un maître de l'essai long, genre relativement peu répandu dans l'écriture sociologique et anthropologique contemporaine. Bien que de nouvelles publications lui soient régulièrement consacrées, rares sont, parmi ses commentateurs, ceux qui ont donné une lecture détaillée de ses différents essais. L'auteur propose ici une lecture attentive de *Where the action is* et *Normal appearances*, dans le but de démontrer l'intérêt potentiel de cette approche dans l'analyse de l'œuvre de Goffman.

Richard Handler is Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Program in Global Development Studies at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *Critics against culture: anthropological observers of mass society* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), and is currently writing a series of essays on Erving Goffman.

Program in Global Development Studies, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4772, USA. rh3y@services.virginia.edu