The Theatricality of Everyday Life

By GEOFFREY NUNBERG

O VER the years, Erving Goffman has acquired a wide audience — wider, I suspect, than would normally exist for serious sociologizing of any sort. Readers come to Mr. Goffman because he is first of all a writer who brings a mordant irony to the pretensions and theatricality of everyday interaction, illustrating his points with anecdotes and observations that are wonderfully telling about the ways in which we endeavor to save face. For a parallel, we would have to go back to Thorstein Veblen, who captured the popular fancy around the turn of the century with similarly acerbic commentaries on the struggle to maintain appearances. Of course Veblen saw a pecuniary motive behind the struggle, while for Mr. Goffman it seems to spring from a primary drive of its own. But perhaps they are not so different: Each speaks to the anxieties of his time, and Mr. Goffman writes for an age that is mightily self-obsessed.

The five essays in "Forms of Talk" deal with the varieties of ordinary discourse, from the elaborate mumming of a platform lecture to the underplayed theatrics of the breakfast table. There are two papers that are largely abstract and theoretical, in which Mr. Goffman argues against taking a view of talk that is "ripped" — the little stages on which we enact our presentations. But readers with little patience for sociologists only to set a great distance between the analytical point of view and the common-sense understanding of what is going on. But Mr. Goffman compounds such otherworldliness with elegant irony and homey metaphors, speaking of the "custard of interaction" and the "environing social fuss in which the lecture is embedded," or calling politicians "deeply doves of the podium." So the familiar becomes not just strange, but uncanny, described less by a Martian "I beg your pardon — a three-record set") and the sponsoring body. Hence the elaborate apparatus of introductions, introductions of introducers, and the speaker can confer a kind of prestige on the audience of how authority can be worn lightly. The distance that gives the respect that authoritatively declined. What is just what the context as "channel noise," perspective of the text of Goffman sees display to become "ritualized," meaning, it becomes a gambit. A man may say "God!" in an i him to elaborate. A man at the barbecue and cries "this was unimportant (for mishap) and to demand channel is functioning presence of mind." (With his moans and marked absence of a gatch's deafness, and its suspicion contrivances of someone death of a loved one, I establish a class of "all treated as something ought yet to be appreciably right to be momentary, and providing a lot of the speech that."

It is all true and engaging book seeing artifice and Mr. Goffman's moralism — like Veblen's is unrelied. In his only the management of an intimation that a problem beyond the term his silence about deep can't assemble authority business that actors is the problem in mock complete understanding like that."

Of course we all know. But it is hard to resist want to believe that the drama, and not simply

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"the lecture," a genuine tour de force. This is the text of a talk that takes the lecture itself as its subject, an exercise that would normally lend itself to trendy posturing, but which Mr. Goffman handles with great tact. He takes the platform lecture as a ritual performance, where the imparting of information is largely a pretext for an occasion in which the eminence of the speaker can confer a kind of prestige on the audience and the sponsoring body. Hence the elaborate apparatus of introductions, introductions of introducers, and advertising and publicity. ("An institution's advertising isn't done in response to the anticipated presence of a well-known figure; rather, a well-known figure is important in order to have something present that warrants wide advertising"). In the performance itself, the speaker presents himself in the role of authority, providing "an illusion of personal access." What is most telling here is the business that the speaker engages in when he departs from the seamless articulation of his prepared text: prefatory remarks, asides, even the way he handles an out-of-order page. Parenthetical embroidery, for instance, "provides an example to the audience of how authority can be worn lightly.

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that can hardly touch the security he feels in his own manifest competency and therefore warranting no serious account." In the same way, the radio announcer who apologizes for a slip with exaggerated formality ("I beg your pardon — a three-record set") calls attention to himself conspicuously in order to show that he has not been disconcerted by his error.

In other hands, Mr. Goffman’s approach might yield only the prurient little insights that we expect of Erik Berne or Cosmopolitan magazine. What makes him more compelling is not just the aptness of his observations or the rigors of his theoretical scheme, but also his considerable gifts for rendering the everyday as bizarre and amusing. He mixes the scientificlatinisms of the old sociology ("participation framework," "referent-response") with the weird ungrammatical coinages of the new ("say-foring," "commentary-like," "self-talk"). Such expressions serve other sociologists only to set a great distance between the analyst’s point of view and the common-sense understanding of what is going on. But Mr. Goffman compounds such otherworldliness with elegant irony and homey metaphors, speaking of the "custard of interactions" and the "environing social fuss in which the lecture is embedded," or calling politicians "desperate doves of the podium." So the familiar becomes not just strange, but uncanny, described less by a Martian than by a colleague impersonating a Martian.

This voice speaks most divertingly here in "The Lecture," a genuine tour de force. This is the text of a talk that takes the lecture itself as its subject, an exercise that would normally lend itself to trendy posturing, but which Mr. Goffman handles with great tact. He takes the platform lecture as a ritual performance, where the imparting of information is largely a pretext for an occasion in which the eminence of the speaker can confer a kind of prestige on the audience and the sponsoring body. Hence the elaborate apparatus of introductions, introductions of introducers, and advertising and publicity. ("An institution’s advertising isn’t done in response to the anticipated presence of a well-known figure; rather, a well-known figure is useful in order to have something present that warrants wide advertising"). In the performance itself, the speaker presents himself in the role of authority, providing "an illusion of personal access." What is most telling here is the business that authority can command is unobtrusively declined. What matters in the lecture, in short, is just what the communication theorist would count as "channel noise," for "what is noise from the perspective of the text can be the music of interaction."

Mr. Goffman scores easily here and in a similar essay on "Radio Talk" precisely because in public displays like lectures and broadcast patter, the play is so obviously the thing. But when he turns to everyday talk, his analyses are more disturbing, if no less acute. "Response Cries" deals with the business of talking to oneself, and in particular with those not-quite-words like "wow," "oops" and "whew." We tend to think of these as spontaneous ejaculations, the whistles that sound when emotional steam is blown off. But Mr. Goffman sees display even here, for once a noise has become "ritualized," charged with a certain affective meaning, it becomes material for more calculated gambits. A man reading the evening paper grunts "Good God!" in an implicit appeal to his wife to ask him to elaborate. A cook drops a piece of meat into the barbecue and cries "oops," both to show that the error was unimportant (for we reserve "oops" for minor mishaps) and to demonstrate that "at least our vocal channel is functioning, and behind this, at least some presence of mind." Or in the classic case, a woman with her moans announces her sexual climax "in the marked absence of anything like the real thing." We can suspect contrivance even in the tears and demonstrations of someone who has just been told about the death of a loved one, for then "convention seems to establish a class of ‘all-too-human’ crises that are to be treated as something anyone not directly involved ought yet to appreciate, giving us victims the passing right to be momentary centers of sympathetic attention and providing a legitimate place for ‘anything’ we do during the occasion."

It is all true and engaging. You come away from this book seeing artifice and histrionics everywhere. But Mr. Goffman’s moral is very sad, because his skepticism — like Veblen’s or, for that matter, Thackeray’s — is unrelieved. In his catalogues of effects, he finds only the management of impressions; there is rarely an intimation that anything animates our performances beyond the terrible fear of being caught out. In his silence about deeper motives, he seems to say we can’t assemble authentic characters out of the bits of business that actors show us. Indeed, he recoils from the problem in mock horror; of the possibility of complete understanding he says "God save anyone from that." Of course we smile with him, not being ingenuous. But it is hard to rest bleakly content with that; we want to believe that there is more, that life really is a drama, and not simply a well-made play.