Two on the Aisle

Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates
by Erving Goffman.
Alpine, $7.95
Doubleday, $1.95 (paper)

The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life
by Erving Goffman.
Doubleday, 259 pp., $1.95 (paper)

Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction
by Erving Goffman.
Bobbs-Merrill, 152 pp., $2.95 (paper)

Relations in Public:
Micro Studies of the Public Order
by Erving Goffman.
Basic, 416 pp., $7.95
Harper & Row, $2.45 (paper)

Towards a Poor Theatre
by Jerzy Grotowski.
Simon & Schuster, $6.50,
$2.45 (paper)

Richard Sennett
For a long time I have been reading,
with a mixture of dismay and admiration,
the work of Erving Goffman. He is an American sociologist who has created a method for analyzing face-to-face encounters and "role-playing." His method, called "dramaturgical interaction," is a radical departure in American sociology. Goffman is not concerned with broad economic or population pressures, a statement like "the assembly line makes workers feel alienated" would also be foreign to his thinking. Goffman believes that people act out social relationships, and that these relationships are like theatrical roles. What Goffman means by "acting" and "role" I find most clearly defined in his book on mental hospitals, Asylums.

In 1955-1956 Goffman attached himself to St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, DC, to observe firsthand the daily life of mental patients and staff. Goffman found both sides acting in a terrible masquerade. The patients didn't take the doctors seriously unless they acted aloof, somewhat condescending, and skeptical about the patients' signs of distress. Patients didn't catch the doctors' attention unless the inmates acted manic, schizoid, or in some other way that the doctor could quickly recognize as "crazy."

Goffman's report of this world is extraordinary because it goes so much further than more recent, fashionable studies showing how the authoritarian doctor labels his patients sick in order to control them. Goffman saw that, under certain conditions of hospital life, both doctors and patients may want to live up to their images. Doctors who suffered when they saw the suffering of their patients but nonetheless behaved condescendingly toward them, patients who didn't feel particularly manic but went through the motions of appearing so, did so because they were building a social order together. The discovery of this social order, and of the meaning it gives to personal encounters, is at once Goffman's great achievement and his great limitation.

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patients. To act in such a way as to free himself finally from the institution becomes less and less important. As the patient establishes smooth and stable relations by managing his appearance so that he is marked as sick, the patient gradually becomes trapped in his role.

Goffman's idea that people make "careers" of mental illness supposes, I think, that face-to-face relationships have an innate structure. By means of role-playing, a person can achieve an equilibrium with and evoke reciprocal feelings from others, even in situations where one party is supposed to be entirely at the mercy of another. The

I use to describe the term one way, he envisages who is the masks with different on class, and is. The comparison is brilliant and misleading.

If people those situations, they catch others situations,; see too. He produces brilliant and distinguishes from belief.

First the role: dog

"The system be individual he other is concern, he performs slices of he is Goffman's goes about. Let us to the nation Goffman room at

Scrub

than running

Chief Intern

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son plays

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The imitation to" Chief S

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Like a prison, or a farm worked by attached slaves, or a monastery, an asylum is a “total institution.” In such places, all the rules for social life are laid down by a single authority. Goffman showed how, even in this extreme and powerful setting, the life that is dictated becomes subtly modulated so that it is different from the lives people in the institution actually lead. The formal principle of a mental institution, he will in time be able to leave the hospital. To give this obedience meaning, however, the person under treatment begins to form a “career” for himself as a sick person. So long as he remains noticeable he gets attention; his visible signs of illness are common ground that he can discuss and that connect him with other patients. To act in such a way as to free himself finally from the institution becomes less and less important. As the patient establishes smooth and stable relations by managing his appearance so that he is marked as sick, the patient gradually becomes trapped in his role.

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I use the term imaginary character to describe these normative roles, but the term distorts Goffman's thinking in one way. The system of appearances he envisions is so sweeping that to ask who is the “real” person behind these masks would be to ask who is untouched by conditions like sex, age, class, and so on—and of course no one is. The concept of a real person lurking behind his appearances, with a “reality” more truthful than the faces he presents to the world, is for Goffman misleading.

If people cannot help but behave as situations “allow and oblige” them to, they ought to be entirely the products of those situations. This is Skinner's position; seemingly it should be Goffman's too. However, in one of his most brilliant papers, "Role Distance," published in Encounters, Goffman distinguishes his dramaturgical approach from behaviorism in two ways.

First Goffman argues that any given role does not involve the whole person. "The system (of role-playing) or pattern borrows only a part of the individual, and what he does or is at other times and places is not the first concern. The roles of others for whom he performs similarly represent only slices of these others." More interesting is Goffman's analysis of how a person goes about fighting a normative role. Let us take some fragments of a conversation Goffman observed in an operating room at a Philadelphia hospital.

Scrubs Nurse: Will there be more than three sutures more? We're running out of sutures.

Chief Surgeon: I don't know.

Intern: We can finish up with Scotch tape.

Chief Surgeon: A small Richard.

Scrubs Nurse: Don't have one.

Chief Surgeon: OK, then give me an Army and Navy.

Scrubs Nurse: It looks like we don't have one.

Chief Surgeon (lightly joking): No Army or Navy man here.

Intern (dryly): No one here in the armed forces, but Dr. — (the Chief Surgeon) here is in the Boy Scouts.

The intern is in a subordinate position to the Chief Surgeon, and the Chief Surgeon rates his performance for the hospital. The intern's role...
ought therefore to be deferential, i.e., obsequious. The fact that the intern is ironic seems to be a rejection of role-playing. To understand why interns like this young man are so routinely snide, Goffman argues, we must start by using the normative role of quiet obsequiousness as a tool for analysis. Whatever is personally humiliating in that role sets in motion the length of time eyes meet on the street is kept to a minimum so that strangers can assure each other that they will not intrude. 

Out of trivia like this, Goffman erects an urban psychology based on warnings, reassurances, separations, and other charades that in some way manage fear. Indeed, his is the first comprehensive urban psychology to appear since the seminal essays of Georg Simmel. Like Simmel’s, Goffman’s analysis is aimed at describing the forms of consciousness induced by living in a city. This urban consciousness Simmel described as the continual turning in on the self for nourishment in a milieu in which a person would go mad if he or she reacted openly to all the stimuli outside the self. When Goffman describes urban consciousness he depicts the patterns by which people do react to those stimuli—how people scan others, what their eyes do, what ears do, and so on. Who is scanning—Simmel’s great question—Goffman does not consider.

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The roles Goffman presents are static. “Senior Surgeon” has a set of attributes which are analyzed as fixed; so does “patient” or “freak.” Goffman conceives of these characters as “given” in a particular situation. But the people who are the actors are not static. The man who plays “Senior Surgeon” may face the same situation year after year, but sometimes he is depressed, sometimes he is aggressive, sometimes he doesn’t worry about himself and lets the pleasure of his work absorb him. For him what Goffman’s analysis prompts them to play. The irony of the interns may be true that salesmen try to appear wholesome...of...us to bearing...and always trying to

ANTHONY TUTTLE

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Goffman’s analysis can be taken one step

further. The irony of the interns may

free them of the necessary balance and

sense of their own worth to keep them

functioning in the operating room; in

this case, the equilibrium of a situation

will be maintained by the way the

intern rejects the role expected of him.

Goffman’s ideas have been popularized

as “impression management” and

this distorts them (although the term is

his own) by making them out to be

psychological games. It is true that

presidents caught stealing try to manage

their public image to achieve by fraud

what they cannot get by force.

It is true that salesmen try to appear

wholesome and good-natured when

they have to sell pink plastic sofas or

used cars. What Goffman has perceived

is that in most direct, personal en-
n
counters neither presidents nor sales-

men can help it. The need for order in

personal relations prompts role-playing

whether a person desires to play a role

or not. Further, any conscious manipu-

lation of one’s public self is limited by

the role-playing of other people one

meets. Living Theatre has no part in

Goffman’s dramaturgy, for spontaneity

has no place in his conception of

acting. The “logic” of situations the

actors have not themselves created

prompts them to play.

I stress the elements of stability and

structure in Goffman’s theory because

throughout his work he has been

searching for different situations which

cause people to play roles. Asylums

(1961) shows people acting out roles

in a total institution; in Stigma

(1963) Goffman observes the way dwarfs

and people with other inherited deformities

gradually begin to think of themselves

as being in fact “freaks,” the role

which society assigns them. The

Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

(1959) is a more general work, but it

draws on Goffman’s study of a group

of Shetland Islanders.

For me the most interesting develop-

ment in Goffman’s career is his interest

in the role-playing that goes on in

seemingly impersonal situations. In his

most recent book, Relations in Public

(1971), he examines life in cities.

Goffman’s picture of the city is the

exact opposite of Rousseau’s. For

Rousseau, role-playing occurred in a

city because the city was a place where

the basest passions were unrestrained.

In an impersonal setting, decrets and

pretenses are most easily enacted,

strangers not being able to challenge

the truth of what one says or does.

For Goffman, role-playing is pervasive

in cities because cities inhibit expres-

sive behavior. Fear is the dominant

emotion analyzed in Relations in Pub-

lic, fear of the Stranger, fear of the

Other: fear is what people try to

manage in the charades they act out

face to face.

Every city dweller has had the

experience of walking down the street

with someone coming head on; he

moves out of the way, but the on-

they will not intrude.

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year after year, but sometimes he is

depressed, sometimes he is aggressive,

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himself and lets the pleasure of his

work absorb him. What Goffman asks

us to believe is that people, when they

interact, suddenly are able to manage

their personal behavior by striking

fixed poses, as though they were

statues.

In the theater, a character emerges

during the course of the action. We do

not know what Iago is like when we

first learn of his formal relations with

Othello. To study a role, Stanislavski

once told an actress, is to study what

in a personality will remain intact

during the course of the play, and

what will succumb to events. The roles

Goffman presents are very bad theater

on this account, for the impact of a

situation on Goffman’s actors is

“normatively” fixed, that is, entirely

predictable.

Take the role-playing discussed in

Relations in Public. At parties strangers

do not inquire too deeply into one

another’s affairs, partly as a symbolic

gesture meaning they do not wish to

make a stranger feel vulnerable or

exposed. This is called tact. But being

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Role is static in Goffman’s theory. Since the “controlling definitions” are not explicitly stated or explored, they are a part of the actors’ past history. The actors learn how to play a role, just as characters in a drama learn their roles. Goffman approaches role-playing in such a simplistic way that the meaning of role-playing, its incorporation in ongoing human experience, is not considered.

The image Goffman uses to define the complexities of experience is that of Man as Juggler. In his essay on “Role Distance” he writes:

“I have argued that a situated activity system provides an arena for conduct and that in this arena the individual constantly twists, turns, and squirms, even while allowing himself to be carried along by the controlling definition of the situation. The image that emerges of the individual is that of a juggler and a synthesizer, an accommodator and appeaser, who fulfills one function while he is apparently engaged in another.

Since the “controlling definitions” are fixed, juggling is what makes experience complex. The role seems to be itself immune to the impact of the actors’ past history. The actors learn nothing, they forget nothing.

Role is static in Goffman’s theory because he thinks of society as static. Goffman’s is a world without time. Society is: history may produce a situation, but this situation can be analyzed only as having happened at a given moment. For instance, the self presented to the world under sway of the Protestant ethic in the seventeenth century was very different from what appeared at the end of the eighteenth century. All a theory like Goffman’s could tell us about this change in roles is that the situation changed; this is hardly enlightening. Foucault’s Madness and Civilization shows how the definition of a mentally sick person has changed radically over the course of the last two centuries. Goffman’s approach can neither account for the causes of the situation analyzed in Asylums nor judge how long that situation is likely to continue. If we refer again to the theater, it could be said that there are scenes in this sociology, but no plot.

The theory Goffman puts forward implies very strongly what it never explicitly states or explores: that the “aesthetic” is a dimension of all social experience. The words Goffman uses are loaded: actor, role, dramaturgy, scripts—these elements of the stage are portrayed as the essence of everyday interaction between people. This is not the case. Goffman’s image of the individual emerges of the individual is that of being painfully attacked that are so common and so prevalent in our daily lives. The misuse of aesthetic terms above is a sign of respect. Fear—the self acting is transformed. The audience is able to make a comment to the audience, a parable of how the means of their own acting is to be changed; this is for Grotowski research on forms of speech which are harsh and yet wholly under control, contrivances of feeling that have a balance of the ordinary mush of sensations does not. The more “we become absorbed in what is hidden inside us, in the excess, in the exposure... the more rigid must be the external discipline; that it say the form, the artificiality, the ideogram, the sign.”

These signs and “ideograms” produce a powerful sense of anxiety even in American and British audiences who cannot understand the Polish actors’ words. The experience of attending one of the Laboratory Theatre’s performances begins with a sense of radical displacement from the ordinary milieu of theater, from its familiar seductions and claims,” writes Richard Gilman. “For Akropolis the spectators occupy various levels of an unsymmetrical arrangement, the actors moving in their midst, almost touching them at times, but without acknowledging their presence in any way.” The audience is shown the artifice, but is never aware of it, from “moral lessons to the audience, a parable of how acting on the stage is related to the ordinary world.”
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The words are misleading. Goffman describes situations that lack all the qualities of a believable drama; the characters are fixed; one scene follows another without development or cause. It is sometimes said that Goffman is a moralist, and that his weapon is irony. This reads more into his work, I think, than the work permits. There are no standards for evaluating the importance of Goffman's judgments on the endurance or fragility of roles. Which is to say that, unlike a genuine ironic writer, Goffman has no

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pealed to. Its size is also limited, so that being admitted to the theater is like being invited to a secret rite.

Indeed, the symbols themselves have a strong religious character, or they refer to cataclysmic historical events. Crosses which are so able to carry them by clawing, poses of being painfully attacked that are held, frozen, minute after minute in the attitude toward the audience, the symbols concern death. Groto-

wski is dramatizing and rebelling against masks which people have not, believed, roles which people have not merely played but played passionately. The mother, the nation of passive sufferers, the crowd waiting to be entertained: these consciously de-

veloped "ideograms" are his targets pre-
cisely because these are masks which Grotowski's people have worn with conviction. The world in which Erving Goffman's undertaking has seemed plausible is much different. Much different is the feeling of being made in most of the roles he deals with (save for those of the

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In Towards a Poor Theatre, an account of his methods and beliefs, Grotowski describes everyday acting in terms somewhat similar to Goffman’s. “Life-masks” are management of personal appearance, easily assumed personas in the world and no more than daily life. But Grotowski is concerned about the quality of these roles, and he believes they can be changed. To him, role-playing in the world is also bad acting; in learning how to be a good actor the “self” of the person acting is transformed.

Grotowski is known as the creator of “poor theater.” The term implies nothing so simple as standing on the sidelines of a theater and expressing oneself through props, lighting, etc., because they are too bourgeois. Grotowski means by poor theater the stripping away of every-thing on the stage but the essential theater the stripping away of every-thing on the stage but the essential theatricality. The “juggler” or “intern” are roles which people occupy various levels of an unsymmetrical arrangement, the actors moving in their midst, almost touching them at times, but without acknowledging their presence in any way.” The audience is informed of playing a role. You simply note that you are playing, and if it hurts, you “juggle” your way into others.

One of the limitations of this concept of the self becomes clearer perhaps if we compare Goffman’s dramaturgy to the ideas of someone who actually works in the theater. The Polish director Jerzy Grotowski has devoted much thought to how roles gradually develop, rather than how they are assumed. Grotowski has also developed a theory of how acting on the stage is related to acting in the ordinary world.

But is it fair to use Goffman as a point of reference? I think this is largely an analytic failure on Goffman’s part but I think it also suggests a certain impoverishment in the material Goffman has at hand. The “juggler” becomes a conceivable account of the human condition only in a society where commitments appear to be “entangling alliances,” and where escape into a physical or emotional wilderness has had a monotonous historical regularity. The “juggler” is cousin to Riesman’s “other-directed man” and Lifton’s “protein man” but without the inner turmoil that these writers saw as part of their perceptions. The “juggler” is simply a manager, in a dialectical fashion of The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology Alvin Gouldner argues that Goffman’s work is appropriate to a new middle class in America and Western Europe, a class of managers in large-scale bureaucracies who want to keep alive a sense of their individuality and at the same time to be obedient good guys as they move up the corporate ladder. But the managers of the self can, I think, be found now throughout all classes of society, and for reasons that have less to do with the development of bureaucraty than with the destruction of the city.

For Goffman, the dominant problem in the city is creating fear. Let us put aside for the moment the question of whether this is an adequate analysis and note that it is one that is shared by most of his contemporaries. There was far more to be afraid of in cities at earlier stages of industrialization—far more street crime, disease, decayed housing—yet at the moment there is an unprecedented fear of living in cities. Why should this be? I suspect one reason is that cities, when they are open and diverse, can be stages on which people learn to act in the self-conscious way Grotowski practices under very different circumstances. But there is an enormous risk in this dramaturgy. Paris as we know it from the novels of Balzac and Flaubert, Chicago and New York as we know them from Dreiser and Edith Wharton, were cities in which a man or woman could play many different roles, moving, as the sociologist Robert Park put it, from “microcosm to microcosm,” from the world of saloons, to union halls, to sporting arenas, for example, and each setting. But the characters who do not become self-conscious about their role-playing are crushed by the complexity and harshness of city life. Dreiser’s Sister Carrie survives; Hurstwood, the lover who could not learn to watch himself acting the part, does not. The virtue of the city, Flaubert wrote, is that a man learns to watch himself at play; the idea is close to Simmel’s description of the modern city as a milieu in which the individual

form, the artificiality, the ideogram, the sign.”

These signs and “ideograms” produce a powerful sense of anxiety even in British and American audiences who cannot understand the Polish actors’ words. “The experience of attending one of the Laboratory Theatre’s performances begins with a sense of radical displacement from the ordinary milieu of theater, from its familiar seductions and claims,” writes Richard Gilman. “For Akropolis the spectators occupy various levels of an unsymmetrical arrangement, the actors moving in their midst, almost touching them at times, but without acknowledging their presence in any way.” The audience is shown the artifice, but is never appealed to. Its size is also limited, so that being admitted to the theater is like being addressed by a secret of feeling that have a balance the ordinary mush of sensations does not. “The more we become absorbed in what is hidden inside us, in the excess, in the exposure, the more rigid must be the external discipline; that it to say the deviants like the insane and deformity, nor do the roles themselves have a rich historical, religious, or cultural content. I think this is largely an analytic failure on Goffman’s part but I think he has also suggested a certain impoverishment in the material Goffman has at hand.
In* Toward* a* Poor* Theater,* an account of his methods and beliefs, Goffman describes everyday acting in terms somewhat similar to Goffman's, "Life-masks" are management of personal appearance, easily assumed persons in the world and no more than unthinking reflexes to situations of daily life. But Goffman has also developed a theory how acting on the stage is related to acting in the ordinary world.

Goffman is known as the creator of "poor theater." The term implies nothing so simple as a theater of the people, or a theater which eschews props, lighting, etc., because they are bourgeois. Goffman means by poor theater something more spontaneous and forgetful of that being admitted to the theater is to reveal a mask, to occupy various levels of an unexpected audience, to speak and move about in the theater. The Polish director, Lecoq, the French director, conducts body exercise classes to make students move up the corporate ladder. But the managers of the self can, I think, be found now throughout all classes of society, and for reasons that have less to do with the development of bureaucracy than with the destruction of the city.

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I suspect one reason is that cities, where they are open and diverse, can be stages on which people learn to act not in the self-conscious way Grotowski practices under very different circumstances. But there is a second reason. The world in which Erving Goffman's work is appropriate to a new middle class in America and Western Europe, a class of managers in large-scale bureaucracies who want to keep alive a sense of their individuality and at the same time to be obedient good guys as they move up the corporate ladder. But the managers of the self can, I think, be found now throughout all classes of society, and for reasons that have less to do with the development of bureaucracy than with the city.

Goffman has developed a theory of how acting on the stage is related to acting in the ordinary world. There are no mask, no role as a system of signs which the audience can only carry them by crawling, poses held, frozen, minute after minute—as Crosses which are so heavy the actor cannot understand the Polish actors' experience of attending the play in the theater. The Polish director, Lecoq, the French director, conducts body exercise classes to make students move up the corporate ladder. But the managers of the self can, I think, be found now throughout all classes of society, and for reasons that have less to do with the development of bureaucracy than with the destruction of the city.

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