THE DELANEY DOSSIER: GOFFMAN MATERIALS

1973: re: Frame Analysis manuscript

1. May 3, 1973 letter of thanks from EO to MD on my critique of the draft manuscript of *Frame Analysis*.

2. April 13, 1973 letter from MD to EO, meta-commenting on my critical commentary on *Frame Analysis*. In retrospect, I am not at all sure how penetrating (or even entirely understandable) these comments are, although I do think that EO may have toned down some of his more hardened positivistic proclamations in the final book as a result. I had urged him to adopt a more "perspectivist" account of frame analysis, in part because I considered his patchwork attempts at philosophically grounding the whole endeavor to be wanting, and for that reason all the more susceptible to critical attack. (It was, after all, a rather strange hybrid in being an empiricist-ethnographic approach to a number of "reality" issues commonly treated in philosophical theory.) In the completed book, EO addressed my suggestion in footnote 4 on page 26, where he argues (with considerable justification) that his version of a correspondence theory of cognitive validity ought not evade warranting its own claims to be a realistic depiction of reality (or at least the bulk of truth-claims put forth on the basis of everyday practical reason).

1974:

Acknowledgments page from *Frame Analysis*, citing MD's contributions, with a photocopy of a presentation card ("Compliments of the Author") sent directly to me in New Haven by the publisher, Harper & Row, along with a copy (unsigned) of the book.

Aside: I had already bought a copy of the newly-published *FA* from the Yale bookstore and had marked up some passages, making it unreturnable. Being short of money (as usual) at the time, I decided to swap copies and "return" the unmarked presentation copy in lieu of the purchased copy. As I later informed EO, this entailed using a bit of "framing" chicanery — namely, explaining away the lack of a Yale bookstore sticker — to dissemble the fact that I had not bought that particular copy of the book at the bookstore. (I think that EO was more often chagrined than not by his readers and students resorting to such ostensibly "Goffmanesque" stratagems, in effect taking his name in vain. By many accounts, however, he himself was not above resorting to such gambits as an interactional gamester adept at getting a "rise" out of his interlocutors. Besides, his many sly accounts of confidence games, hoaxes, forgeries, espionage exploits, criminal subterfuge, and the like gave some warrant for seeing a bit of a sharpster in his character. Not to mention his one-time stint as a card-counter in Vegas.)
May 3, 1973

Mr. Michael Delaney
Department of Sociology
University of Pennsylvania

Dear Mike:

I have just begun to work through your comments systematically and will finish doing this as soon as I get back to town on the 11th. May I say now, however, that I am much in awe of the work you have put in, and much in your debt for having done so. I don't know how far I can get in answering your larger complaints, but at least a wide range of the smaller ones will be dealt with.

I'll get in touch with you when I have finished. Again thanks; often those points which you are most doubtful about raising are ones most useful for me to hear about.

Sincerely,

Erving Goffman

EG/LAC
Dear Erving Goffman,

The dirty deed is done. Herewith you will find your lovingly stroked words mutilated with bloody red ink and other unkind cuts. You have honored me by inviting my comments. In return, naturally, I have betrayed you. You have asked my sensibility to react, and it has, not holding back either ideas or criticisms, letting things spurt where they may. It might help to record that in these Macbethian labors I have generally not tarried to lavish praises. The pages are cluttered enough without an ongoing stream of enthusiasm. Now, it would not do in such an effort not to make comment on my commentary. So let me get on with it.

1. As suggested, the commentary is coddled, nit-picky, hyper-critical and not always ready to take a joke. Prickish. And I'm sorry. But the orientation is to frame, not game playing.

Suggested synonyms or re-formulations are there not so much for substitution as for possible tightening-up, precision, clarification. I have little to say about structure. As I read along, I responded immediately to the text—-not always happily (needs, free-associations, wild hairs...) By and large I did not try to pile up simply more riveting examples, assuming that the problem is critical selection rather than underabundance. I could have, but footnote mending is not my intention. Besides you will have quite enough of me as it is.

Sometimes you may complain that I have over-complexified where things must needs be kept simple. That is true. Sometimes, however, you over-simplify just where you have to most careful.

If there is an overall thrust to my remarks, it concerns the logical scaffolding on which you build your case. Herein, it has been found wanting. (I should add: I am not as learned as I display I am.)

2. On style: It could be that some of your "op. cit.s" are too spread out for easily reference. Mightn't you use tags titles (for your own self-quotations as well)? Would it help to have a lexicon of the major terms? Surely a table of contents and index would be useful. We are all subject in this day and age to trying to be too "relevant", to comment on the passing scene. Unfortunately such contemporariness by the time it reaches print may seem out of whack, or what is worse, a bore. (As H.L. Mencken.) I would eschew.

There are a variety of levels of concerns, data sources and seriousness apparent, some of which jar each other. (Naturally we would clash most on what we choose to ironize about.) Occasionally generalizations and specimen examples seem not to match up.

Note, you will note I have noted some notable notations. Of course.
3. Terms. Most of your key terms are fine—provocative and well-timed. Trouble is they tend to shift, blur, get unanchored as matters progress. Dichotomies are set up, only to be collapsed, one term eating up another. Terms stretch and contract as if transposed to an Einsteinian universe. It would seem that you need something like an ergon of terms, allowing them to be self-contained and stable at the centers. If you can, it would be helpful to be able to systematically interrelate the terms, each to the others, if only in your own head. (Can one thinks of "ratios" here?)

For instance, a "fabrication" seems to be a keying, but also a transform. These are all subsumable under "replicating processes." A key itself appears to be a kind of infra-frame. You never manage to fully explicate the inter-connections of basic schemata and their articulations into mere phenomenally present reaches of life. So they seem as if suspended "above" activity, instead of being constitutionally part of it. You at first restrict the basic dualism you find, but later it opens up without precise fixation.

I have never been able to clearly separate out how you distinguish (if you do) a "frame" from a "bracket" and from markers of them. (Is a bracket a frame marker? But how literal does this have to be? Compare a cocked eyebrow and a lowered curtain.) "Frame" I take to be the most flexible term in your word-box, and usefully so. I take it as possible answers to the phenomenally sustained issuance of "What is going on here?" But this is your job to work out. (As it is already, you're lucky you don't pay by the hour.)

I am sorry that you choose to downplay the musical analogy, which I think could be less troublesome and more rich than you apparently do. I think of such terms as "polyphonic," "ground-bass," "counter-point," and one currently favored amongst young reality buffs, "riff." Keestler and Langer do not shy away from such explicitly controlled use of the metaphor. (Far superior to mechanistic ones.)

4. It is important to observe that not only is this an exercise in frame analysis proper, but also, to use the fashionable prefix, in meta-frame analysis. This latter issue, I think, is what gives you the most trouble. Not only does it lead to philosophical begginess but also the very center of sociology itself.

At times, these logical levels get muddled, as does the distinction between observer and experimenter. For as you well know, everything in the essay is already a transcription of a once-lived reality. But that is not always systematically clear.

I do not find it allowable to conflate moral issues with frame-formalistic ones. In fact, the whole intractable issue of the status of the moral component is glossed over, except when it seems convenient for some spleen-venting. Of course, you don't have to address these problems head on, but then I find little profundity (or warrant) for equating the antics of Abbie with the machinations of our CIA types. Frame issues enter precisely because each case has its own set of intention-centricental considerations that apply, if responsibility is to be adjudged, i.e. moral pronouncements made. Austin was certainly aware of this.
5. "Style" remains a nebulous category, but I give up the attempt to convert you to my interpretation of it. I consider it an aesthetical matter of expressive skill, like among soul brothers, gender conduct is a misfit under this rubric. One may have very stylish feminine gestures, but females' gestures as such are not a matter of style. (Genre, perhaps?)

6. Evinced in the paper are severe theoretical (sometimes moral) strains; indeed, warring epistemologies. Never so much have you approached a Freud-like grand-form of theory structure. (That is, 19th Century.) The epiphenomena are the same, only the interpretation differs. (Dreams are dangerous entities for a Geffman-world. What is it that guides their doings?) I am reminded of that great French intuitionist, E. Durkheim, who struggled long to shake off the fetters of his positivist skin. Happily, or no, genius need not always conform to rigorous philosophical forms.

These are most knotty issues. Let me begin with the aspect I find most objectionable.

7. I take it that you do not want to inordinately complicate matters by getting into an application of frame analysis to theoretical structures. Fine. But then you go on to consistently appeal to science, or rather to its authority. Such an appeal, however, within the terms of your own analysis, can only be an to a philosophy of science, or of nature. And this in the absolute form of hard-edged positivism.

Now, this raises a witches brew of problems—problems to which two centuries of the finest minds in the world addressed themselves, which obsessed the last great world-encompassing movement in philosophy, and which await resolution to this day. (You would not know it by reading that confident breed of social scientists who more often than not are closet metaphysicians.)

Is nature so truly discrete and meaningful evident as you want to posit? And if this is what science has contributed to our knowledge, then how in turn is this justified, and what precisely is it in the object world that is so described? The thing itself? Or rather certain aspects of it which have proven amenable to various cognitive manipulations? Is not science too shot through with intentionality and presupposed axioms, whose truth cannot be demonstrated? Is not it too a social—meaningful—activity? It too has a social history, and thus a certain arbitrary shape. Even physics can be sociologized as shown in the influential work of Thomas Kuhn. And what to do with the Heisenburg Principle? The fact is that modern-day philosophy of science is simply not set up on a foundation of certainties as was once thought. (Philosophies of science also have a history.) And then, there is the problem which Soepenauwander pointed out, that "Clio, the Muse of History, is as thoroughly infected with lies as a streetwalker with syphillis." What we are faced with is not so much an infinite regress, but rather the problem of interpretative connectedness. And that of course, is related directly to frame analysis (belonging perhaps, to a philosophical exigesis of it.)

Here we stand on the uncertain ground that bedeviled dear Mannheim all his life: the relation of systematic perspectivism to the seeming need to anchor the certainties of truth.
But beyond that, what is at stake in frame analysis is not scientific pronouncements as such but common beliefs, the omission of everyday life (if not a "critique" of it). It must be said that understanding precedes explanation. We must know what "blue" is (or refers to) before we can analyze it on a spectroscope. This forces us to take sociological sides with the latter Wittgenstein, not the early one.

A great scientist once recommended that henceforth "table" had to be talked of as a tissue of holes—that's how it "really" is when seen in an atomic microscope. But of course if we went around talking about everything as blobs of atoms or as streaks of colors, we couldn't make any useful talk at all. (Great sport—and easy game—for the language philosophers. On these matters from a very astute angle, see Cassirer's Logic of the Humanities.)

Science has different objects from ordinary life—or if you want different aspects or levels of the objects of ordinary life. It just doesn't look at natural events as do you and I (sunsets, xxx say, or stars). Have you ever seen an atom? Has anyone ever seen an anti-neutron?

Now it's all very well to toy around with natural science models in order to grind out insights into social life. The precarious move is from that sort of inspiration to the equations: Nature=Science=Reality. Ain't so. The plain fact is that hard core positivism is dead, felled by its own incoherence (see Chemsky on Skinner). Of course it lives on as a Weltanschauung of sorts but surely sociologists of all people should be waking from their dogmatic slumbers by now. Wasn't Parsons enough to do the deed?

I might add that the assumption that events will ultimately bear out truth is a pre-eminent cultural supposition especially to be noted amongst the population of professional thinkers. (A small empirical generalization of mine.) It need not be that way at all, it may often not be or have any reason to be, and it may not even make sense in many spheres of thought, e.g., those concerned with deities, or moral disputes. I'll forbear reciting the roll-call of artists, although surely Hamlet and K. would be star witnesses.

What is at root issue here is more a matter of art than of science. When you deal with meaning, cognitive structuring, you leave behind claims to a privileged window onto bare-assed reality. And meaning is the issue here.

8. With regard to social reality, the problems become notoriously more intractable. You appear to imply a specie of everyday rationality, but without being able to provide any substantive account of why this should be so. (Even animal faith must have a rationale, if it is to be arguable.) Partly the fault is that you are not willing to grant cultural reality its own sui generis reality—a strange position not only for a sociologist but for a Durkheimian in particular. More operationally, I think you mix the reality status of abstracted ideal-types (or call it paradigm cases) with existential goings-on-in-minds. Now, if I may follow your own advice, I would take a lead from your treatment of "the initial statement" (p. 637.) This might well serve as the
key ground-form for frame analysis in general, with each strip of meaning along with its interrelated aspects and transformation potentials taken as a bracketed epoch. Such a move would allow you to by-pass the whole problematic terminology of "innermost reality" and so on. You could say what you need to say without plunging off into the heady sphere of entological decisions (or recommendations.) It would save you considerable grief to treat this abstracted specimen as a "sentence" to be parsed, rather than a reality to be ratified. You realize elsewhere that any event or action is subject to indefinitely abundant readings; that even in the most crystalline examples, there are always possible exceptions. What you want is the boundaries and laminations of what is taken as real, or as unreal. But being empirical, as against logical, in your interpretative thrust, you need not concoct imagined worlds after Wittgenstein, but rather explicated these forms of lives in themselves, sociologically blessed of course. Frankly, I think entology can take care of itself. There would remain difficult constructs for you to withdraw (viz., your drama-fact as dichotomy) but they stand in need of recasting in less blatantly unsupported form.

I find it exceedingly regrettable that a Chicago-trained mind would allow himself to deny a knowledge of real reality to 95% of the world's population. Of course there is ignorance in the world (sometimes in high places) and assuredly most of the world's people do not measure up to stringent criteria of knowing the latest scientific advance. (Nor do I--how and by whom is the line to be drawn?) What you really refer to is the commitment to scientific modes of research and trust in its findings insofar as one would want to know about them. In scientific matters, scientists function as arbiters of explanation, a cognitive court of final appeal. But that is as often to provoke crises as to resolve them, and the acceptance of this frame of reference is a frame issue unto itself. Who is to decide, on what grounds, when an issue is not amenable to science, or when scientific boundaries have to give way to explain given phenomena? I just want to note that science as a knowing activity is not without its internal problematics (which I doubt frame analysis per se could resolve) and that it too requires a whole cultural backdrop and attitude of mind. Maybe the world is becoming an increasingly disenchanted, rationalized meaning-sphere. As you know, this can be considered to be not wholly without its difficulties as well.

I have always felt that one of the great merits of your work has been its anthropological applicability by virtue of formalistic efficacy. Why abandon that great anthropological core in your writings by lusting after hard-core reality? In this voice you sound all too like that crypto-epistemologist Lenin, whose "empirico-materialism" is a scandal and embarrassment even to the devotee. And speaking of Lenin, you do not address at all the complicated discussions of "ideology" and "self-fulfilling prophecies." Our Vietnam experience, the most rationalistically fought war in
history, may give us some pause about the smugly asserting the superiority of our ultra-modern modes of cognitive manipulations. The reality-testing came become taxing indeed.

If you ever get lost in the desert, I hope for your sake there is a shrewd Arab, or some such, to guide you to the nearest reality of a water-hole.

As Weber succinctly put it, even logic is a cultural product. Nobody seriously wants to deny that there is an "object-world out there". Nor that science can explain us true and important things about the underlying structure of these objects of everyday life. (As did metaphysics predominantly in more glorious times.) What is inadmissible is to easily appeal to that object world--er to "the act itself"--for the intersubjective apprehension of it is exactly what needs elucidation. All the more for the abstract, mind-affected "object" that is society.

What is strange in your argument (although I see the structural reasons for it) is that you naturalize social reality rather than sociologize natural reality. You get all tangled up in the basic schemata that are culturally specific to us (or to you) which tends to drag frame analysis proper into treacherous regions where it can do little more than issue little peeps as to how right we are. The more fruitful approach, en my view, is for frame analysis to show precisely the limits and tensions of our taken-for-granted interpretative schemata, what precisely is beyond the reach of given categories and why. Such an interpretations of interpretations then need be subject only to its inherent convincingness, coherence and logical criteria rather than the question of what-ness. You seal off one line of attack rather than simply begging the critical questions. (Was Shakespeare's use of framing devices any mere "real", or less, than Pirandello's?)

These confusions and contortions suggest to me the lack of a philosophical preadectistic to frame analysis itself.

9. But, you may object, philosophy is just what wants avoiding here. The trouble is your ground work is not so much spheric philosophy as a rag-bag appropriation of the strands of various conflicting philosophies. In short, bad philosophy.

The fact is your very subtitle rings philosophical bells. The modern giant here is the mighty Kant whose principal task was to get at the schemata of schemata involved in all cognition. He is, of course, the fountainhead of phenemology. (Unlike you and others, he had a transcendantal reality behind phenemenal reality.)

A central point stemming from Kant is the question: How can things be objective at all unless frames are also guaranteed veridical status? At issue is not the enteleological status of frames as such, but rather the epistemological-functional one. What would it be like (for us, the world) not to have frames at all? For frames are not just linked to experience—they are constitutive of it. But frame analysis as a theoretic, heuristic framework of frames is only legitimated to be revelative in its conceptual analysis of phenomenical appearances. (I re-interpret Kantian distinctions.) To get at the elemental structures of all social action is a project that only Parsons has been insane enough to attempt.
(If you have two years or so to spare, you might read Critique of Pure Reason. Lacking that, Kant himself has supplied us with a treat for that great work, viz. Prelegomena to Any Future Metaphysics. Fr. Copleston has written an accessible summary of the complete works.)

A further consideration: What does frame analysis bracket off from itself? On what principles? How deep and how wide should we take it? And certainly how to go on with it, after this initial formulation? Does it have a future in itself or will it serve more as a one-shot affair, to be used thereafter as an orienting tool, a mind sharper? Sometimes frame analysis threatens to take in anything under the sun (everything meaningful, that is) such as our entire linguistic system. (I do not complain, only wonder.)

10. Now, one way try to circumvent all this is by invoking the logical particularism of Wittgenstein. And this, I think, is a good move. What you are after is a descriptive epistemology so to speak—an ethnography of knowledge. Unfortunately, your use of him and your appeal to his authority, is far from consistent, sometimes theoretically opportunistic. As you shall see, however, a number of your own formulations are vulnerable to W-type sallies.

What is notable is, as with Berger and Luckmann, a certain theoretical promiscuity. At a certain structural level, various currents seem to fight for supremacy. You want your phenomenology, plus your Wittensteins, plus your scientism, all in one bundle. At times, their clash resounds when it does not tinkle.

One way to circumvent the consequent xxxxx tensions is to rerove some of the mere extravagant claims. To trade off a bit of intellectual drama for a mere modest precision. The ideas are too good, too provocative, to have to drag along this philosophical baggage. (Of course, a tension that runs throughout your whole corpus is what could be conceptualized as an xxxxxx antimony between an “oversocialized conception of men” and a Bersonian free spirit. Given such a force-field, sparks are bound to fly.) In summary, I would suggest that you will have to do some fishing in deep waters or else cut your philosophical bait.

11. The matters you deal with, or touch on, are as you know, devilishly complex, manifold, and slimishly convoluted. Lifetimes have been spent pondering on them, while it remains true that “the fundament on which all our knowledge and learning rests is inexplicable.” (Schopenhauer; but it could have been L.W.) I am glad you have tackled them; I think you have added much of great suggestiveness to them; and even your flabbiest formulations are not of unredeeming public interest. What is novel is to attack these xxxxx grinding vexed problems of appearance and reality from a decisively ethnographic point of view. (If philosophy can aid sociology, surely we can in turn generate some interesting philosophical tangles.) Why, then, set yourself up for a pratfall by heming in on a wing and a Weltanshauung?
People out there are getting too raggedy-ass smart about these matters. There is only so much you can slide by with on reputation. (You have carved out more than most.) And there are too many eager headhunters out there in the academic wilds. Try to keep hold of your scalp. (I appreciate the opportunity to do my coup-counting here.)

I might dare add that I find it applaudable (if not always specifically) that the *mussolini* soulful mind is allowing itself mere openly to peep, turtle-like, from without the cynic shell. It would be a pity, a helpless irony, were the theorist to become ever so committed to a theoretical persona which cannot contain needful things worth saying in this soulless age.

Finally, let me say that I find myself in the strange position of arguing against myself as I argue against you, as I pit one Geffman against another. You are guilty, if not responsible, for helping reanimate my interest in philosophical applications. Philosophy—the original and ultimate form of frame analysis—is becoming useful again. Therein lies great excitement, and work to do.

In these remarks I have had the spiritual bad taste to take you at your word—to attempt to be unsparring honest. So I wind up feeling like the Platonic slave who, when it was drawn out of him, indeed could perform simple arithmetical operations. But, again, I feel like the Wittgensteinian pupil who, when given the formulae, inexplicably starts coming up with different answers.

So let matters move on from there.