

Part I

Definitions of performance

It was a new sort of activity. Well, actually, it was a very old sort of activity. Human beings appeared to have been doing it for centuries, but nobody had really called attention to it before. From the mid-1950s onwards, scholars in various academic disciplines began to get interested in how to describe and explain this activity. It was a little bit like theatre acting but didn't happen within the formal conventions and purposes of theatre. Instead it took place within what could be called everyday life, except that it could often be distinguished from other sorts of ordinary behaviour. While there were many different ideas as to how it was specifically distinguished, and to what sort of degree, from artistic theatre and ordinary behaviour, the various different scholars all ended up calling it the same thing, which was, of course, performance.

Although they were going on simultaneously I shall deal with these developments under two separate headings: first, the identification of a particular form of behaviour; second, the terminology of performance. In the first case, work by sociologists and sociologically influenced theatre specialists borrowed from each other to identify modes of interaction that were neither formal aesthetic drama nor casual everyday behaviour. In the second case, work by cultural anthropologists and folklorists developed terminology for, and understanding of the operation of, performed events in different societies. All of this together amounted not just to a new understanding of human interactions but also to a new way of doing understanding. The concept of performance was integral to both.

Chapter 1

Sociology and the rituals of interaction

The various stories about the origins of the concept of performance always tend to share one name in common: Erving Goffman. Goffman was trained in the University of Chicago School of Sociology, founded by Robert Park. The Chicago sociologists used the urban space and institutions around them to develop insights based on close observation of human interactions, a method sometimes called human ecology. But it was Goffman's work in particular that had an impact on the thinking about performance. Most accounts of the development of a non-theatrical concept of performance begin with a work he first published in 1956, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. This was a groundbreaking analysis of the structures and dynamics of interpersonal encounters, which built on an essay published the previous year. We shall look at what Goffman outlines in that essay before moving back to *Presentation of Self*.

'On face-work' appeared in 1955 in a journal of psychiatry. His other essays of this period appeared in journals of sociology and anthropology. It is that disciplinary fluidity which suggests something of the new territory being opened up by research based in observations of the 'glances, gestures, positionings and verbal statements' of regular, continuous human contact. 'On face-work' lays the groundwork for much that was to come, from Goffman and from others, by the simple shift of focus from individual person to group interaction. As he said later, in 1967, 'the proper study of interaction is not the individual and his psychology, but rather the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons mutually present to one another' (Goffman 2005: 2, 1). Needing to forge a new vocabulary, Goffman defined 'face' as 'an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes' and to 'have face' is to present an 'image that is internally consistent': 'At such times', says Goffman, underlining his demolition of the romance attached to that item of the human body which has so often been regarded as most personal, 'the person's face clearly is something that is not lodged in or on his body, but rather that is diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter'. Because

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‘face’ is dependent on socially approved attributes the individual is locked into a system of social expectation, which means that individuals are as much concerned with others’ behaviour as their own, so that a person conducts him- or herself in an encounter ‘so as to maintain both his own face and the face of the other participants’ (Goffman 2005: 5–7, 11).

On this basis ‘face-work’ designates ‘the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face’, such as maintaining poise when under pressure. And in studying those actions one becomes aware of what Goffman calls ‘the traffic rules of social interaction’: ‘Each person, subculture and society seems to have its own characteristic repertoire of face-saving practices’ (Goffman 2005: 11–13). The word ‘repertoire’ hints at the way the argument is tending, for once one understands the rules of social interaction as something learnt by individuals, as a way of always saving face, then it becomes possible to see face-work as a form of performance. This impression is sustained by the way a subsequent essay, ‘The Nature of Deference and Demeanor’ (1956), begins to deploy its terminology: ‘most actions which are guided by rules of conduct are performed unthinkingly, the questioned actor saying he performs “for no reason”’. But, unthinking though it may be, we are looking at something more than incidental behaviour: ‘An act that is subject to a rule of conduct is, then, a communication, for it represents a way in which selves are confirmed – both the self for which the rule is an obligation and the self for which it is an expectation’ (Goffman 2005: 49, 51). Rule-bound acts that establish and communicate selves happen elsewhere than in front of painted scenery.

The analogy with scripted theatre that is being gently introduced turns out to have some explosive effects. For, rather than keep in place the idea that a learnt role is fully emotionally inhabited, Goffman’s argument suggests that the role is constantly negotiated and is dependent as much on the reactions of others as on individual feelings. Indeed individual feelings are always imbricated with, and constructed by, the apparent responses of others. And these responses are governed by a repertoire that is learnt. In saying this Goffman is in a very different territory from the linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin who, the same year, conceived of the ‘performative’ utterance as an utterance that gets something done. Goffman might say that a performative utterance does get something done but only because it draws on and recycles elements of the available repertoire. The logic of this argument about the shaping force of the rules of interaction leads Goffman towards a wonderfully provocative attack on a deeply cherished ideological concept, where he asserts that human nature ‘is not a very human thing. By acquiring it, the person becomes a kind of construct’ (2005: 45).

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In the book that followed ‘On face-work’, *Presentation of Self*, Goffman elaborated the analogies with theatrical performance, again with explosive consequences. The general argument is that a person’s management of the impression they give to others may be likened to a performer working on an audience, with a ‘front’ presented for public view and a ‘back’ area, in interactions governed by ‘dramaturgical’ discipline. Early on he defines his use of the word ‘performance’ as meaning ‘all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants’. But he is clear that this differs from a ‘theatrical performance or a staged confidence game’ where routines are thoroughly scripted in advance. In everyday life the process of socialisation gives individuals the capacity to manage encounters and to recognise rules without necessarily knowing in advance what they are going to do nor how it works, so in that sense their performances are not ‘acted’. Nevertheless an incapacity to manage demeanour in advance does not mean that individuals do not express themselves according to their own personal pre-formed repertoire (Goffman 1990: 26, 79–80).

After defining individual performance, the book moves on to look at the dynamics of interactions, taking a particular interest in moments when performance is disrupted or breaks down and the mechanisms used to avoid such moments. These mechanisms involve ‘impression management’ by both individuals and teams, where a sense of ‘dramaturgical loyalty’ or discipline has its effects on team behaviour. Taken together these observations could provide, Goffman suggests, a useful new approach to the analysis of social establishments as closed systems. Whereas hitherto establishments were viewed ‘technically’ (efficiency of the system), ‘politically’ (efficacy of command), ‘structurally’ (status divisions) and ‘culturally’ (operation of morals and norms), to these might be added a ‘dramaturgical approach’. This would describe the ‘techniques of impression management’ that obtained in the establishment, which among other things would provide the basis for an analysis of power: ‘Power of any kind must be clothed in effective means of displaying it, and will have different effects depending on how it is dramatized’ (Goffman 1990: 232–34). Thus *Presentation of Self* firstly establishes a definition and working-through of what non-theatrical performance is and, secondly, suggests that non-theatrical performance can be used as a way of framing an object of study, offering a ‘dramaturgical approach’ that makes new sense of existing material. Performance is thus both a particular element of behaviour and a way of analysing. This double function remained associated with the term for ensuing decades, with its analytic capability giving it huge potency. This is illustrated in Goffman’s passing note about power,

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which seems to suggest, a number of years before Foucault, that power is a dispersed effect maintained by discourse.

But given the way Goffman's work was used later on, we need to underline two of the early points. First, performance is not just any form of behaviour but is specifically behaviour which works to influence others: communicative behaviour. Second, everyday encounters are not consciously planned deceptions but they do proceed according to protocols deeply learnt through processes of socialisation. The analogy with theatre, instead of invoking an image of an individual in full control of an expressive apparatus that gives them power over others, works to do the reverse. It splits the individual into two parts: a performer, permanently under pressure to manage the impressions given in interactions; and the character, the entity created by the work of the performer. So while 'self-as-character' has been hitherto assumed to be 'housed within the body of its possessor', by Goffman's argument 'this self itself does not derive from its possessor' but is generated within the scene of the interaction with the effect that 'a self is imputed to him' by others. Lest there be any doubt the point is repeated: 'A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it.' He then screws it home: 'The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited' (1990: 244–45).

Although it has been noted that the dramatic metaphor had limits as a sociological tool (for example, Manning 1991), it also functioned to demolish myths of human nature and organic selfhood, which in turn had implications for hitherto dominant ideas about the nature of knowledge. The world Goffman envisages is one of constant negotiation of positions, always being adjusted. In this world the learnt and expected conventions of social interactions may be thought of as 'ritual order', governed by a ritual code that works to maintain equilibrium. Because this ritual order 'seems to be organized basically on accommodative lines', one has to think about it differently from other types of social order. In particular one has to understand that it is not governed by facts:

Facts are of the schoolboy's world – they can be altered by diligent effort but they cannot be avoided. But what the person protects and defends and invests his feelings in is an idea about himself, and ideas are vulnerable not to facts and things but to communications.

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Communications belong to a less punitive scheme than do facts, for communications can be by-passed, withdrawn from, disbelieved, conveniently misunderstood. (2005: 42–43)

In demoting the importance of facts, emphasising their vulnerability to communication, Goffman's argument challenges the basis of the sort of positivist approach which assumes the stability of facts. And instead of 'fact'-based thinking he seems to encourage us towards a mode of thinking that assumes continual adjustment to always changing specific circumstances: relativism. The formulation of a relativist approach to the world has, as an integral part of it, the realisation that everyday human interactions can be described as performance.

But not perhaps as theatre. In the second edition of *Presentation*, in 1959, Goffman inserted a concluding note admitting that his extended elaboration of the theatre analogy was a 'rhetoric and manoeuvre'. His book was not, he clarified, about 'aspects of theatre that creep into everyday life' but instead about 'the structure of social encounters'. That said, the staging of theatrical characters involves 'the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations'. To allow it to be imagined that the book was about theatre in everyday life would have the effect of softening the implications contained in the idea that the everyday is itself performed. The unsettling nature of those implications is clear in a slightly earlier passage where Goffman gathers up all his theatrical metaphors, the back region, the front with its props, the onstage team, the audience, all the apparatus of the social interaction, to conclude: 'The self is a product of all of these arrangements, and in all of its parts bears the marks of this genesis' (1990: 245–47). Not only has the self nothing to do with the essence of an individual, but as a constructed entity it always bears the marks of its particular history. On these terms Goffman's particular concept of performance contrasts remarkably with some of the assumptions later to be made by artistic performance makers who assumed that by stepping away from the artifice of theatre and embracing the 'everyday' they would come closer to a mode of performance that could express the real self, where they could escape mediation and illusion to produce authentic emotion. Goffman on the other hand suggests that the everyday is itself a site for the production of impressions and dramatic effects, and that there can be no self outside of mediation. Thus, while artistic performance makers may have persisted in their own particular fictions, Goffman's formulations about performance had their most profound impact and were developed considerably further in the work not of artists but of social scientists.

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For example, Goffman's distinction between 'self' and 'character' was used by Messinger, Sampson and Towne in their 1962 exploration of 'the uses of the "dramaturgic approach" to social experience', which is, they say, 'a mode of analysis finding increasing use in social-psychological circles'. They describe 'a perspective that renders life a kind of "theater"', as a mode of analysis, but they are also interested in where this places the analyst. As they see it, 'the actor's view of what he is doing, is not relevant to the dramaturgic analyst', whose job instead is to focus on the impression the actor is actually making. It's a model of analysis that, in contrast with what ethnographers in this period thought they should be doing, consciously keeps a distance when it reads social performances. Indeed this 'dramaturgic approach' is a long way removed from theatre dramaturgy. Certainly Goffman's influence is there but Messinger and his co-authors say that their approach specifically draws on Kenneth Burke's 'dramatism'. This term was coined by Burke as a name for the method he employed in his book *A Grammar of Motives* (1945). The book does what it says, in that it is an attempt to provide a 'grammar' of the 'basic forms of thought which . . . are exemplified in the attributing of motives'. To produce this 'grammar' Burke adopts some overarching terms that will enable him to describe a range of examples. These terms are 'act', 'scene', 'agent', 'agency' and 'purpose', and he explains their function: 'In a rounded statement about motives, you must have some word that names the act (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the scene (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also, you must indicate what person or kind of person (agent) performed the act, what means or instruments he used (agency), and the purpose.' Although there may be disagreements as to their interpretation, these words allow him to answer questions about what, when, who, how and why. But his interest is in the 'purely internal relationships' between the terms, seeing how they 'figure in actual statements about human motives'. And although his terminology, being derived from analysis of drama, intends to treat language and thought as 'modes of action' (1945: xv, xxii; my elision), the work is explicitly philosophical and based in analysis of written texts and words such as 'constitution'. As Elizabeth Burns says, Burke is not primarily concerned with social action 'but with basic forms of thought which underlie it' (1972: 20). In that respect it was to be Goffman who would be much more influential on modelling a concept of performance.

Contemporary with Goffman's attempts to describe the syntax and dramaturgy of human interaction other scholars were trying to apply the mathematical theory of games to analyses of human, and specifically economic, behaviour, as in von Neumann and Morgenstern's *Theory of Games and*

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Economic Behavior (1944) and Martin Shubik's *Game Theory and Related Approaches to Human Behaviour* (1964). Shubik has said that in the fifties he put too little emphasis on 'conversational game theory' and that the actual activities of human beings don't easily admit of mathematical modelling (Shubik 2011), but it nevertheless held a promise of being able to describe the mechanisms of human interaction which stripped away traditional assumptions about character and interaction and thus appealed, if briefly, to those exploring new modes of performance. Philip McCoy did groundbreaking work on theatre and games theory, which came to the notice of theatre academic Richard Schechner. At the same time performance artists such as Vito Acconci and Anthony Howell developed performances based on rules of interaction, as an alternative for example to character motivation. When they appeared in published texts for performance by those associated with Fluxus, these rules took the form of enigmatic and all too brief instructions: 'Arrange to observe a sign / indicating direction of travel / travel in the indicated direction / travel in another direction' (George Brecht); 'drink from a baby bottle and pee' (Walter Marchetti) (in Stegmann 2012: 377, 380). In this form they became a sort of challenge to the imagination of performers, or perhaps an invitation, and in this respect they tied in with another popular topic of the period: play. Studies of 'play', following on from the work of the Dutch sociologist Johan Huizinga, became interesting as another instance of identifiable forms of human behaviour that seemed to be governed by agreed conventions and indeed rules. In a work originally published in 1938 Huizinga suggested play is 'productive of culture' but that this is threatened in 'highly organised' society by the operations of religion and science (Huizinga 1949: 75, 119). This model, in which the role of poet remains in touch with play, was attractive to those who made aesthetic performance but it was criticised in 1958 along lines characteristic of the period. Roger Caillois said that play produced nothing, that its place in ordinary life was demarcated by 'precise limits' and that it had a range of its own rules, observable in games (Caillois 1961: 7). In his suggestion that the analysis of rule-bound games gave insight to the shapes and pleasures of social interaction, Caillois was in similar territory to Goffman. But Huizinga's original formulation became highly influential on the thinking of political activists, as we shall see in Part II. For them play was related to another activity which both Huizinga and Goffman invoked as a model, namely ritual behaviour. Although ritual had for a long time been studied as a way of understanding religion, following the work of Marcel Mauss in the early twentieth century, ritual came to be seen as a form of social activity that produced religion. When culture emerged as a specific category of analysis, ritual activities became particularly important for study,

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as seen in the work of Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, Edmund Leach and Marshall Sahlins (see Bell 1992: 14–15). Taken together, face-work, game, play and ritual all seem to be modes of human behaviour that are somehow intensified beyond the accidental or casual. The sense of intensification comes from the fact that these modes of behaviour all have understood, if not necessarily conscious rules, and second, they all operate as modes of communication. What they communicate is the sense of the selves of those participating in the activity. Because these are modes of communication which work specifically to communicate ideas of self, it seems reasonable and convenient to group them as forms of non-theatrical performance.

A further elaboration of this concept came from a different direction when in the mid-1960s in Birmingham, UK, a group of scholars whose disciplinary origins were mainly in the analysis of literary text picked up on Goffman's general sense of human interactions as 'syntactical'. They began to read as 'text' social interactions and cultural display, in all their modes, even between football fans: 'The aggro fans talk of is in effect a highly distinctive, and often ceremonial, system for resolving conflict.' Observing match-day behaviour in 1978 Peter Marsh gives as example an interaction between Sheffield and Oxford fans in which there's a provocation to fight. Rather than leading automatically into actual physical conflict the stand-off is defused by those involved. What goes on, says Marsh, is typical of football grounds everywhere: 'the patterns of conflict and hostility . . . are so routine and commonplace that they are taken-for-granted and unremarkable. The apparent inconsequentiality, however, masks the fact that it is in these rituals that "honour" is satisfied.' They provide 'useful pieces of self-presentation' (Marsh 1978: 65, 67; my elision).

While this reference to 'ritual' might throw back to Goffman, the interest in ceremonial 'system' and 'pattern' of conflict is typical of an approach that was developed in the early seventies in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (hereafter CCCS). Founded in 1964 by Richard Hoggart, who wrote *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), CCCS had its roots in a socially aware literary studies. While some of its academics were also influenced by American studies of social interactionism, with an essay on Howard Becker appearing in a Centre publication (CCCS 1975), the interest in literary and cultural objects gave CCCS both a direction and a method. The mode of literary studies done by Hoggart, F.R. Leavis and Raymond Williams was one that in different ways – for these people had different political positions – commented on class division and cultural segmentation, and it did so from a position that was actively opposed to the dominant order. That same opposition was vigorously displayed by the young academics of CCCS

when they participated in student actions against the University, for example the sit-in of 1968. And it also directed their selection of objects of study which were, in the main, the operation of the news media and popular television as sites of ideological production and, second, the activities of groupings who were outside the dominant and often seeking to resist it, such as youth subcultures. All of this cultural work, we should note, was regarded by sociologists as being ‘unscientific’ (Dworkin 1997: 117).

In attending to both the media and subcultures the preferred method was to analyse them as ‘texts’. But in the case of subgroups, the ‘text’, rather than being a written cultural product, was more likely to be the clothing worn by members of the group. The adoption of particular modes of dress and preferred pastimes came to be seen as constituting ‘code’ and ‘style’, and by reading ‘style’ members of CCCS were able to analyse the outlooks and values of such subgroups as bikers, skinheads, teddy boys and punks. The job of the academic researcher could thus be summarised as being to ‘discover the hidden meanings inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces of style’ (Hebdige 1979: 18). Such reading of the code of the subgroup styles was formulated first by Phil Cohen in 1972. His innovation was that, in Dick Hebdige’s words: ‘Rather than presenting class as an abstract set of external determinations, he showed it working out in practice as a material force, dressed up, as it were, in experience and exhibited in style. The raw material of history could be seen refracted, held and “handled” in the line of a mod’s jacket, in the soles of a teddy boy’s shoes’ (Hebdige 1979: 78).

The activity of reading subculture as ‘text’ had more behind it than the traditions of literary study. There was also borrowing from anthropology. Anthropologists proposed that they could understand more about the people they studied by learning to identify and interpret their symbols and sign-systems. For example, in his study of the hippy subculture Hoggart’s deputy, Stuart Hall, referred to Victor Turner’s work on the sign-systems of the Ndembu tribe. But perhaps the more significant influence was that of Claude Lévi-Strauss, from whom scholars of CCCS took the term ‘bricolage’, the word Lévi-Strauss gave to systems of classification and connection by which so-called primitive peoples made sense of their worlds. The term was adopted by John Clarke to enable sense to be made of discursive systems such as fashion: ‘Together, object and meaning constitute a sign, and, within any one culture, such signs are assembled, repeatedly, into characteristic forms of discourse. However, when the *bricoleur* re-locates the significant object in a different position within that discourse ... a new discourse is constituted, a different message conveyed’ (Clarke 1975: 177; my elision).