

Draft 2 – September 8 2015

All the World's a Stage: theatricality and performance in the everyday and in the screenplay

This paper is shaped around a series of questions relating to the initial Call for Papers: what can the notion of *performance* contribute to writing a screenplay? What might this idea mean for the way in which we think about character, characterisation or the writing of dramatic scenes? How useful is this theatrical metaphor for screenwriters, researchers and teachers of screenwriting? And what are the consequences of seeing life in this way?

In the following paper I will be working with Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model as articulated in the *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* – arguing that this work while written in 1956 remains full of suggestive insight into how we present ourselves before others with clear implications for dramatic accounts of human action in the screenplay.

Goffman was a sociologist whose special area of study was small group interaction – a kind of microsociology that explores the codes of behaviour and the ritual basis of human encounter – in a way that novelists and dramatists do.

But first a short digression on the place of theatre and theatricality as ways of thinking about human behaviour – the paradox being that while the theatrical is central to any theory of mimesis, of representing humans in action – it is a quality we distrust and often fear, in everyday life. Why?

Perhaps because if we feel someone is performing, putting on an act, – we are distanced from that person, we perhaps feel manipulated or uncertain about the sincerity of the performance. The emergence of theatre in 16th century England coincided with an interest in dissimulation, feigning, pretence – with Machiavelli the master figure of the drama – and we retain the suspicion that with a performance what we see is artifice not reality – we do not have access to a person's true feelings or intentions. Iago's "I am not what I am" anticipating a modern anxiety about interaction and ambition – as well as Kevin Spacey's character in *House of Cards*. And for our own part we may sincerely act the part of ourselves but in doing so are

not authentically ourselves. As Gide pointed out “ We cannot be both sincere and seem so.” There is a difference between knowing and showing.

The theatrical and performance is therefore an inescapable part of our everyday experience. We have to communicate with each other, express ourselves, create the appropriate impression whether in a lift with strangers, having dinner with our family or in a business meeting. We have to perform on the world’s stage, put on a front, create the right impression, while concealing our fears and vulnerabilities and working out what others want.

Interestingly the words theatre and theory share the same root – *thea* – to look or view. We look for clues to guide our action, to work out what is really going on – the moods, the expectations of others – so we can judge what to say or not to say, when to make a move or be still: working out character intention and motive, anticipating future outcomes- are surely similar for the writer and reader of the screenplay as in everyday life. We play our roles as parents, teachers, or lovers – roles that conceal hidden desires, anxieties or intentions.

This gap between private self and public role often raises ethical concerns- for we know that we can stand outside the role we are playing – we can appear to be good without actually being good. Hamlet knew the boundaries between everyday life and acting were unstable and in constant flux: where all characters draw on theatrical techniques of stage managing them selves, how can the truth be known if emotion can be feigned? Hence at different historical moments – acting became identified with the superficial – with hypocrisy and deception – a pale imitation of true feeling. The ancient metaphor that “all the world’s a stage” was a commonplace by Shakespeare’s time. Plato in *Philebus* writes of the ‘great stage of human life’ on which men acted out comedy and tragedy. It was a familiar motto during the Renaissance expressing the unreality of life.

But modern theorists see *Theatre Mundi* as being more than a metaphor. Theatricality, performance, the relationship between actor and audience are concepts fundamental to the human drama – rather than a pale imitation of an underlying reality – they are how that reality is created. As Matthew Potolsky observes:

“ The theatrical principle governs all manner of human behaviour, table manners, grooming routines, education that trains us for a role....every time we approach a mirror, take a photograph or daydream, we play actor and spectator at once...the main thing is not to be ourselves.....the most challenging role is naturalness itself, since it demands the unquestioning participation of both parties.”

At this point we may ask who we are when we are not performing. Goffman – arguably like Pinter, Bresson or Hancke - was less concerned with the interior lives of characters or with offering explanations for action than in what meaning the action had for *others*. All performances need an audience and this emphasis on the audience relates directly to the reader and writer of the screenplay. Goffman’s close observation of social interaction and the ritual basis, the code of conventions that underlay such interaction provided a new context for understanding the details of social life that had previously been tacit or even secret – revealing the significance of small gestures and behaviours that had been dismissed as inconsequential.

His early PhD study of locals, service staff and tourists in the Shetland Islands revealed visual codes of communication, often through gesture, stance, demeanour, intonation - where individuals communicated their real feelings outside of the constraints of role, status or social situation – that have clear relevance for screenwriters. While Goffman’s focus on how people define situations through interaction rituals and seek to control them with a variety of strategic and defensive strategies, as well as the consequences of breakdown – embarrassment, shame, loss of face and dignity – highlight what is at stake in human encounters as well pointing to issues of constant interest to those writing or analysing dramatic scenes. The sense of how fragile everyday life and interaction can be and how vulnerable the human beings navigating that world are – challenge those critics who think that a concern with manners and codes of behaviour are trivial and of marginal concern.

In the *Presentation of Self*, Goffman offers two key notions that provide a simple analytical way of thinking about performance and the screenplay. Firstly there has to be an *audience* to whom individuals or teams present themselves: an audience who they try to impress or influence and who give meaning and purpose to the

performance. The notion of audience is central to the dramaturgical model – providing a set of expectations and guidelines for the performance. Audience members can also threaten the performance by stepping out of role, acting sceptically or by revealing information that could disrupt the performance. They observe and judge the performance based on past experience and information gleaned from body language and other implicit clues. The roles of audience and performer are of course reversed as the shifting point of view in any scene or social encounter – performer A becoming an audience to performer B who was previously observing their performance. This should remind screenwriters to think through the scene from every point of view in order to add nuance and detail to the complex of thoughts, feelings, actions and observations that are at play in any scene.

The second suggestive notion is that every performance requires a *backstage* as well as a front where the performance is staged. This is a place where the performance is prepared or elements concealed that may discredit the performance. For the screenwriter this is also a place to prepare and establish the logic of later outcomes, to create suspense and curiosity, dramatic irony and surprise. Where the young Godfather conceals the gun before lunch with the police commissioner that he will shortly murder.

These simple distinctions between performer and audience and backstage/frontstage allow Goffman to illuminate a whole range of behavioural routines and what happens when two or more people come together.

For example Goffman suggests that when people meet they seek information about them or seek to bring information they already know – about their class, status, education, trustworthiness, attitude toward them, intentions – for the very practical reason that this will help define the situation helping them decide what they might expect of her/him or what might be expected of them. If they do not know the person they will look for clues based on their conduct or appearance or from the setting – just as the writer will create and the reader seek in the screenplay.

Assumptions about the individual can of course be made based on past experiences of this particular role or from the specifics of social setting and props – but however well we think we may know the

individual there is considerable backstory information and facts about the current situation which remain concealed from us. We can only *infer* what the true attitudes, beliefs and feelings of the individual are and we have to act on the basis of these inferences – with all the attendant challenges, dangers and difficulties for maintaining the integrity of the self we are presenting.

From the point of view of the individual who is presenting themselves before others (or the protagonist in a scene) individual actions could spring from a variety of motives in pursuit of a range of objectives. An individual performer may want others to think highly of them or to give them something that it is difficult to talk about directly, they might want to ensure harmony at all costs or aim to defraud, deceive or manipulate the other to their own way of thinking. Regardless of motive or objective it is in the performer's interest to influence if not control the definition of the situation.

For Goffman this attempt to create the right impression and influence the definition of the scene involves two levels of expression – what he calls impressions given and impressions 'given off'. The first is the more theatrical element of presentation, setting, props, appearance – as well as the verbal expression involving tone, rhythm, choice of words and emphasis, the use of silence. The other the non-verbal – often unintended (although this may only appear so) information that others pick-up from the looks and glances, body language, their degree of involvement or interest, movements, gestures, reactions – such as the detail of behaviour before and after a person has spoken.

Sometimes an individual will act in a calculating way to obtain a specific response or act in a calculating way that he is unaware of or because it is required of him by the role she is playing. The others in their turn may misunderstand the situation or what is being communicated. To paraphrase Lacan "Communication is successful misunderstanding. "An important element of their response is in knowing an individual will want to convey a favourable impression, others will compare what she says with what they observe about her behaviour. They are watching her and she knows it. An individual performer may for example put on a smile or 'social face' before entering a social situation but this only sets the stage as Goffman observes,

“ For a kind of information game...a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation and rediscovery”

In this world where creating the right impression, influencing others to one's own advantage and where strategy, deception and concealment play an important part, issues of trust, sincerity and the potential for cooperation are also at stake.

For there is a *moral* basis to interaction – we assume a person is who they present themselves to be and we value and treat them accordingly. However any sign that they are deceiving us and they may lose this tacit reciprocity, though we in our turn may conceal the loss of face this may entail for the sake of maintaining propriety and social order. Some of course may abuse this built in avoidance of conflict and critique in social life. After all one of Dale Carnegie's injunctions in *How To Win Friends and Influence People* is *not* to criticise. He also summarises the other basic techniques of influencing people: smile, use the other person's first name, talk in terms of the other's interests, be a good listener – and do all this sincerely. How sincerely we believe in the part we are playing is another important element in Goffman's conceptual scheme.

For drawing on a rich sociological tradition, *role-playing* is central to his dramaturgy - and the extent to which we believe in the part we are playing, is the extent to which we sincerely believe in the impression of reality that we are attempting to foster – with the con-man at one extreme and the military officer at the other. For Goffman role and mask are interchangeable – our true self ever-receding within a series of roles and performances for different audiences – including our own selves. There is something in this conception of character and character networks that has echoes of Dostoevski's account of character revelation where there are things you will tell everyone, things you will share with a select group, things you tell only your most intimate partner things we will not let them know and things that we will not even admit to ourselves.

The collapse of role and subsequent order is a key theme in Harold Pinter's screenplay for *The Servant* – where a servant and master in late fifties London gradually switch roles and are left without boundaries, lost in a moral swamp at once sexual and metaphysical. “ I know your dirty secret” the no longer servile servant confidently asserts – but do we? Pinter and the director Joseph Losey are less interested in explanations and psychological accounts of behaviour than in presenting us – as the audience – with an inexplicable atmosphere of creeping distress and despair, a growing darkness and self-loathing behind all the roles and social selves. Pinter's conception of character is close here to Goffman's – with character as an effect of performance or the performance of a role - rather than a clearly defined psychological construct – offering us another way into thinking about character and characterisation in the screenplay. Like theatre, Goffman's conception of selfhood is a product of the relationship between actor and audience and not an autonomous reality.

So how can the notions of theatricality and performance as elaborated by Goffman help us in writing screenplays?

Firstly from the perspective of character as performance the screenwriter will be aware of her protagonist's need to control and influence the situation and the impression she wants to make on others – drawing on visual referents such as dress, appearance, props, gestures – while being aware that both the audience in the scene and the reader of the screenplay are seeking clues to confirm the truth or otherwise of the performance. So the use of non-verbal clues such as sudden looks, concealed reactions, backstage preparations, uncontrolled gestures – and the reverse of this process when the roles of performer and audience are exchanged. The writer may consider subtle visual reveals that will pay off later and engage the reader's curiosity and expectation.

The writer at one remove is also a performer seeking to catch the interest of his audience and manipulate a series of emotional responses through concealment and deception. They may want to consider how much their characters believe in the part they are playing recognizing that what is ultimately at stake for human beings is their sense of self or face – sacred and inviolate to others – and

how they make use of this dramatically. The outcome of the drama (character change) often being a loosening of the belief in the part one has been playing and the emergence of a more tender, loving and less strategic self as in *Groundhog Day* – though it takes the Bill Murray character many cynical manoeuvres to discover his true self and true love – perhaps to the disbelief of the audience who want to believe. They may also consider exploring the scene from the point of each character but from the analytic perspective of performer and audience and the part each role implies.

Another part of this distinction being the writer as actor, as performer of each of his characters – acting out the performance imaginatively and on the page, describing setting, props, backstage preparation – and the writer as audience to the performance both as a character in the scene and as the first audience/reader of the screenplay. Here we may be reminded of Jean Claude Carriere's description of the writing process of the screenplay being a double wave – both working through the point of view of the protagonist – what would they do next – and the audience watching the film – what would be really exciting, moving, surprising to see next: the writer as both performer and audience.

A film which draws brilliantly on this aspect of everyday life as a series of performances and audience responses and which encourages the meta-audience of the film itself to seek clues about what is actually going on – is Jessica Hausner's *Lourdes*. Here glimpses of backstage preparation and gossip enrich and complicate the public performances. The film follows a group of individuals on a pilgrimage to the healing waters of the title and an encounter with a possibly miraculous cure. The central character disabled by MS, silent and paralyzed in a wheelchair for the first half of the film is our audience – observing a variety of performances by hopeful pilgrims, status conscious nurses, upper-class helpers more interested in seduction than suffering, and sceptical religious orders – each performing their professional roles with varying degrees of belief while watching each other through a complex matrix of longing and desire, fear and loathing, jealousy and compassion. At a crucial point the central character seems miraculously able to walk and in a world where everyone hopes for a miracle but realises that this is unlikely – she is suddenly the centre of everybody's attention. But as an unbeliever she does not believe enough in the part she has been given to play and collapses back into the audience. Like her mentor

Haneke – Jessica is less interested in exploring motive and cause but in observing the action from the outside and offering a glimpse of something fragile and vulnerable – but like God ultimately unknowable. And yet how hard it is to live without hope or the possibility of freedom.

Goffman's analysis of the various roles we play, the interlocking social selves we call 'character' suggests they could also be seen as a set of traps that restrict our existential freedom and conceal our authentic self. He was writing at a time of the Beats and a renewed interest in Zen Buddhism and Existentialism runs through his work.

And here one might think of Jean Luc-Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie* from the same period– where the heroine learns to act like - then become a prostitute but who is also the actress trapped by a script and a director who happens to be her husband. Godard is interested in reminding us that the actress is a human being with her own freedom, performing her professional role but trapped by the gaze of the other – camera, director, audience while seeking her authentic self free from the definitions and desires of the other. Questions like these of sincerity and authenticity, freedom and responsibility and what they might mean – haunt Goffman's account of the performed self.

So back to Hamlet - How can we be true to our selves and therefore as Polonius suggests 'not be false to any man' when we have no clear idea or belief in an essential, authentic self and how therefore sentimental are our fictional accounts of human action?

Goffman anticipated a post-modern, deconstructed self – fragmentary, fragile, constrained – yet longing for originality and meaning– just like any good screenplay.

The concepts that Goffman illuminates – of performer and audience, backstage and front stage, of creating and maintaining a variety of roles and selves, of the gap between private self and public persona, allow us to look with fresh eyes at conventional dramatic terms such as protagonist and character, point of view and dramatic irony, character networks and relationships, scene writing and construction.

The dramaturgical metaphor may also make us think again about the psychological reduction of character and the false mastery of logical, linear narrative to be found in the conventional screenplay – and be more open to the irrational, the inexpressible, the inconclusive – in short to the subtle complexity of life as lived and experienced as well as performed. We may also wish to challenge Goffman’s famous provocation:

“ All the world is not of course a stage but the crucial ways in which it is n’t – are not easy to specify.”

Is our public self a representation of an authentic private original or is the inner self a secondary consequence of the public performance? Discuss.

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9/15