**Erving Goffman (1922-1982)**

Erving Goffman was a Canadian-born sociologist. At the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Pennsylvania, he promoted micro-sociology, which reveals social structures in the minutiae of face-to-face interaction (the 'interaction order'). For Goffman, stating the obvious was a way of uncovering that which is taken for granted.

Design historians interested in the everyday and performativity have been influenced by Goffman’s dramaturgical model, which illuminates how ‘design facilitates our interactions’ and ‘mediates our comprehension of, and commitment to, civic and social structures’ (Clark and Brody, 2009: 219). However, Goffman's interest in material culture extends only as far as it assists the performer in staging a good show.

Goffman’s best known work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (first published in 1956 by the University of Edinburgh Press and commercially in 1959) drew on ethnographic work on the Shetland island of Unst, examined in his PhD ‘Communication Conduct in an Island Community’ (University of Chicago, 1953). Goffman shows how we maintain conspicuous consumption appropriate to status and setting. The setting involves the scenery and stage props for human action (furniture, decor, physical layout). The personal front is composed of appearance, gesture, clothing, insignia and manner. Following Thorstein Veblen, Goffman noted that people can also be props, such as footmen, or wives displaying a spouse’s wealth. The back stage is where illusions are devised and stored, and costumes, for example, are maintained. 'Sign equipment' usually signifies differently according to the setting (e.g. a suit may be worn for work and for socialising) but sometimes it is specific to one ritual, such as a wedding dress. Similarly, settings are usually determined by the performances staged within them, but exceptions include cathedrals, for instance. Goffman acknowledges that the most important pieces of sign-equipment are those associated with social class, such as status symbols or expressions of material wealth, but he questioned the reliability of material culture for status display, arguing that status was a pattern of behaviour not a material thing to be possessed. Because in the face-to-face ‘interaction order’ expression and gesture are highly revealing, co-bodily presence necessitates impression management and 'civil inattention' for the avoidance of embarrassment.

Lees-Maffei (2005) suggests that Goffman's 1959 model of front and backstage is more suited to the period prior to World War II and that Bourdieu's work on the aestheticization of everyday life better suits the post-war period (Bourdieu, 1986 [1979]: 100). For Richard Sennett (1973) Goffman's dramaturgical construct was static and ahistorical and, compared with David Riesman's ‘other-directed man’ and Robert J. Lifton's ‘protean man’, Goffman's ‘juggler’ lacked a real, complex, self and merely managed various roles convincingly. Arlie Russell Hochschild (1998) notes that although Goffman’s conception of self allows for the management of emotions, it is a self known only through performance, and is therefore always unfinished.Others seeGoffman’s emphasis on the importance of objects in social interaction as conflicting with the symbolic interactionist view of the self as always ‘in the making’ (Riggins, 1990: 346).

Design historians may also be interested in *Asylums* (1961) which popularised the notion of the ‘total institution’, and in the influence of his 1969 book *Strategic Interaction* on game theory,as well as *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (1974) and *Gender Advertisements* (1979).

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**See:**

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