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Source: *Theory and Society*, Spring, 1976, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring, 1976), pp. 119-133

Published by: Springer

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/656942>

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Review Article

ON GOFFMAN'S FRAME ANALYSIS*

FREDRIC JAMESON

Though betraying traces of the *Hauptwerk*—prolonged gestation period, wide-ranging secondary references from linguistics to theatrical history, a voluminous file of clippings poured in pell-mell—*Frame Analysis* may also be regarded as yet another version, albeit a vastly distended one, of that peculiar monographic form which is Goffman's invention and to which we return below. It is in any case further testimony to the increasing rapprochement between ethnomethodology and semiotics, a development which may seem healthier for the latter, where it means liberation from a narrow dependence on linguistics, than for ethnomethodology, where, as we shall see in the present case, it suggests the spell of some distant and unattainable formalization, and is accompanied by a decided shift in emphasis from the content of social events and social phenomena to their form, from the concrete meanings of the raw material in question to the way in which they mean and ultimately to the nature of social meaning in general.

This is the sense in which *Frame Analysis* constitutes a virtual monument to the new tendency, with its elaborate defense of the proposition that meanings, in everyday life, are the projection of the structure or form of the experiences in which they are embodied, and that they may most adequately be dealt with in terms of the ways in which such experiences are framed, in which they relate to, transpose (change “key,” to use Goffman's musical analogy) or cancel other frames. That one may talk about social life this way (indeed, that, after Goffman, it will be difficult to *avoid* talking about it in these terms), *Frame Analysis* triumphantly demonstrates. It is semiotic, not so much in its application of specialized semiotic terminology and conceptual

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* Erving Goffman: *Frame Analysis*, Harper Colophon Books (New York), 1974.

instruments, as rather through the analogy between its fundamental program—the invention of something like a grammar and a set of quasi-syntactic abstractions for analyzing social life—and the strategy of Franco-Italian semiotics insofar as the latter involved the metaphorical application of linguistic categories to larger and more complex cultural phenomena. What will concern us here is rather the price to be paid for such an undertaking in the form of the systematic pre-preparation of Goffman's raw material and in particular a preliminary neutralization of the latter's social and historical content.

Not that Goffman's is the only form which a semiotization of ethnethodology might take: we should mention, for a complete picture of the possible options, the rather different emphasis of Garfinkel himself, or of Aaron Cicourel, on the *textual* dimension of social raw materials, and on the ways in which ordinary people transmute their own “facts” into “accounts” as well as those in which sociologists do it for them. This approach, a good deal more overtly linguistic than Goffman's, brackets questions of ultimate reality and limits itself deliberately to the consideration of such realities only insofar as they have already become texts: the methodological restriction is not unlike that of Barthes when, in *Système de la mode*, he decided to limit his semiotic analysis of clothing styles to the *verbal descriptions* of the latter in the fashion magazines rather than to take on the full substantiality of the things themselves. Goffman's aims are grander and more imprudently metaphysical than this, for he means to give us statements about the “objective” structures themselves; and, although questions may be raised about the status of the observer in his system, I think I would rather link the relative unself-consciousness of his procedures with that attack on the “subject” (in other words, on individual consciousness), which is, as we shall see, one of the most interesting features of his new book.

The other fundamental comparison for grasping Goffman's project and measuring its originality is of course that older tradition of Central European sociology—the unjustly neglected Georg Simmel as well as Schutz himself—from which ethnethodology ultimately derives, and which attempted to rewrite social objects or institutions—Durkheim's “facts”—in terms of social praxis, or in other words, to use the more recent formulation, to grasp social reality in terms of its socially *constructed* character. The fundamental objection to this approach—that its very stress on the *transparency* of social realities and institutions leaves it poorly equipped to do justice to the increasing *reification* and *opacity* of life under late capitalism—cannot retract its historic significance as a systematic attempt, by displacing attention from the *natura naturata* of society to its *natura naturans*, to break through

precisely that increasingly impenetrable object-world heaped up about it by increasingly inaccessible socioeconomic forces.

At the same time, it may be suggested that the new phenomenologically oriented sociology reflected a fundamental change in the character of social life itself in the great industrial cities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in particular that the new methods evolved in response to new difficulties in dealing with this new raw material, from which, with the general secularization of life, the rigid custom of the older traditional or village folkways had disappeared. This is a sense of *anomie* quite unlike, but intimately related to, that diagnosed by Durkheim, whose judgements on it, like those of his German contemporary Tönnies, were surely conditioned by the implicit or explicit comparison between this new "freedom of the city" and the older organic community or *Gemeinschaft* supplanted by it. What interests us here, however, is the formal problem posed by such new social material, which no longer seems to offer any "laws" or *moeurs* or prescribed behavior patterns to describe. In our perspective, indeed, a whole complex of problems, such as for instance that of the nature of social "structure," seem misconceived: thus the "problem" of social structure would appear rather to raise the historical issue of the emergence of a society about which such a question could be asked in the first place. So Malinowski reminds us that modern ethnography was born at the moment when a fundamental change took place in Western thinking on the question of whether primitive social groups were utterly anarchic (more properly, *anomic*), or, on the contrary, only too terrifyingly ordered and legislated: "It is a very far cry from the famous answer given long ago by a representative authority who, asked what are the manners and customs of the natives, answered: 'Customs none, manners beastly!', to the position of the modern Ethnographer. This latter, with his tables of kinship terms, genealogies, maps, plans and diagrams, proves the existence of an extensive and big organization, shows the constitution of the tribe, of the clan, of the family; and he gives us a picture of the natives subjected to a strict code of behavior and good manners, to which in comparison the life at the Court of Versailles or Escorial was free and easy."¹ Yet precisely that liberation of human activity and social life under capitalism, which allowed us for the first time to perceive and measure the rigid structures and organization of the various kinds of pre-capitalist social forms, places the student of modern social life in that dilemma to which we referred to above, and to which phenomenological sociology may be seen as one historical solution, namely the description of the laws of what is not supposed to have any laws any more, and the analysis of the structure of what is supposed to have freed itself from structure.

Goffman's situation is, to be sure, rather different from that of the sociologists of the older European metropolis; yet the formal problem in question, in the ostentatiously mobile and fluid America of today, is if anything more acute. It does not seem quite right, however, to characterize this situation, as he does himself, as one in which face-to-face encounters have become the public or the political arena². We are now far enough away from 1968 to have realized that the media personalization to which Goffman refers was not so much the sign of some impending social transformation, as rather a mode of containment in its own right. Still, the allusion suggests that it is against the Sixties as a whole that Goffman's work must be seen, and in particular, that it is in terms of the Utopian promises of the counterculture that his method becomes visible as a historical position and an ideological statement. For the vocation of the whole countercultural movement was the elimination of the last remnants of precisely those taboos and customs which it used to be the mission of sociology or anthropology to tabulate, and the Sixties (or rather, that part of the Sixties) held out the ultimate Utopian vision of a life space in which people could meet face to face in some absolute and unmediated sense, beyond all status or conventions, without recourse to preliminary identifications and independent of all the traditional formulas of conversational ritual, in short, utterly divested of all of those abundant cues with which the older social groupings hedged and defused the anxieties implicit in the encounter with the Other. Today, when the unmediated language of hippie talk has proved to be a tissue of conventions in its own right, and been degraded to the status of a media sub-code, when it has become clearer to us that, far from abolishing the older groups and social units, the hippie enterprise was itself dependent for its realization on precisely the existence of social class in the form of the shared background of disgruntled middle class children, the failure of this powerful but ill-founded anarchistic dream threatens to discredit Utopian thinking in general. Goffman's reply—his programmatic demonstration of the way in which, in the absence of the older skeletal structure of custom, the apparent formlessness of modern life is articulated by the firm cartilage of his socio-semiotic frames—is part of an only too predictable backlash and one of the most systematic rebukes to all of those premature predictions of the “withering away” of the social order and of social convention.

Clearly, however, this ideological and anti-Utopian bias is little more than the basic motivation of Goffman's work, whose authority must on the other hand be measured by its success and its inventiveness in coping with that formal problem of sociological description in a post-traditional world to which we referred above. This work has so often been described as “literary” by its admirers (or detractors?) that it does not seem impertinent to draw on

literary analogies as a way of underscoring the specificity of its own procedures, all the more so since the older social novel or novel of *moeurs* has some claim to be considered an ancestor of phenomenological or ethno-methodological sociology in its own right.

What is relevant for us in the history of that particular novelistic form is the hesitation of the latter, indeed its alternation, between two basic and apparently incompatible formal strategies. On the one hand, and most frequently, the social novel uses its anecdotal material to *typify* social custom, or in other words, to reveal the latter by offering illustrations and examples of its basic rules. In this kind of narrative, then, the relationship between social order and plot is one of the general to the particular, or better still, of genus to species or class to member. This strategy (in some respects reaching its climax in naturalism, and in the bestseller which emerged from naturalism) tends to find itself locked, not in a hermeneutic, but merely in a vicious, circle: to perceive the typicality of custom or character-type, we have to have known it ahead of time, so that the only aesthetic surprises in store for us will be held by precisely those deviations from custom or typicality which can no longer serve as very good examples of the latter. So the novel embraces the new vocation of documentation or journalism, only to find that it has thereby rendered itself superfluous in the process.

So, whether by narrative instinct or by conscious design, a rather different strategy comes into being which we will describe as the detection or revelation of social constraints and institutions by means of *transgression*: the novelist who chooses this second strategy must construct his plot, less as a guided tour than as a hunting expedition, in which traps are laid, feints are rehearsed, a whole apparatus marshalled in view of an event which may or may never occur, namely the blundering of the game into the nets thus provided, the triggering of the snares, the slow emergence into visibility of the elusive sense of society as law. The presupposition inherent in an approach like this amounts to a refusal to consider Society as an entity or substance in the functionalist sense; it implies the view that social institutions are essentially negative existents, and have the being of taboos, springing into life only when we infringe them, and quite invisible and imperceptible, indeed wellnigh non-existent, when they are respected and we remain within the intangible barbed wire of a whole network of electric eyes. So the greatest novelists were instinctively aware that there did not exist some object called Victorian society, of which you could provide some elaborate mimesis; but that on the other hand the instrument of plotting lay to hand to devise a set of circumstances such that alarm signals would go off page after page, causing the ghostly reality of the Social Order to make its appearance before the

mind's eye more effectively than any sociology textbook. I suppose that the last great example of such a novel—which deserves the qualification of “experimental novel” in a very different sense than that intended by Zola himself—was Ford’s *Parade’s End*, which charts a virtual transgressive map of pre-World-War-I British society.

The reader will long since have grasped the intent of this digression to underscore a similar shift in “narrative strategy” in the sociological schools themselves: on this view, the originality of ethnomethodological description is to have replaced the older illustrative and typifying sociology, which still believed in the reality of social laws and institutions, with a new strategy of indirection. Hence the instinctive predilection of the new approach for transgressive materials and its nowhere clearly formulated sense that what is revealing about contemporary society is not so much what it admits to being (or is supposed to be) but rather what is not supposed to happen in it, what goes wrong with it, what we have no words or terms to designate, and so forth. Its “institutions” are then felt to be visible only at their outer limits, in those strange no-man’s-lands in which people are no longer certain how to behave, and where, as in those ambiguous zones beyond either national jurisdiction, it is the feeling of being *beyond the social order* that suddenly allows us to grasp what the social order really was in the first place. Meanwhile, and in that spirit, the most characteristic raw materials of such a research strategy will be drawn from what, in Riesman’s old terminology, might be called the shame parts of a guilt—or anxiety—culture: hence what is so often felt to be the “morbidity” of ethnomethodology, its ostentatious selection of cases of intersexualism (Garfinkel), homosexual passing, the “Dracula syndrome” (e.g., colostomy patients who must periodically retire from public, in Lyman and Scott), physical stigma or “the management of spoiled identity” (Goffman), etc. These interests not only illuminate areas of social life we do not know, or avoid thinking about, but also suggest an orientation which remains operative in the ethnomethodological descriptions of “normal” everyday life as well, as may be seen from the whole area of face-to-face behavior which is in many ways Goffman’s privileged object of study. Here too, we are unable to escape the feeling that the most revealing accounts of face-to-face interaction are not offered by completed and thus normative examples of the latter, by demonstrations of interaction fully realized, as rather by deviations from that norm, by unsuccessful or only partly successful encounters, interactions that have somehow been short-circuited or disrupted by misunderstanding, embarrassment, role confusion, breaking frame, and so forth.

Goffman’s works are of course punctuated by frequent disclaimers that his

material is drawn only from our own society and that his findings are therefore not necessarily binding on other social forms: but the admission is not so much an invitation to comparative research and to a more genuinely historical approach to his subject as it is a dismissal of those perspectives. Perhaps one may reintroduce them into the present discussion by way of an old paradox, namely the still disturbing notion that life imitates art and that it is form (Professor Goffman's forms just as much as any others) which, far from reflecting content, cause it to come into being in the first place: in other words, when we have to do with phenomena of consciousness, appearance is a reality in its own right. It would follow, then, to choose an instance among just such "aborted" encounter situations, that if the older thought forms (philosophical systems, the nascent sociology of Auguste Comte, the moralizing wisdom of the era along with the beginnings of modern psychology, the nomenclature of everyday speech just as much as the novels of Balzac or Dickens) did not recognize *embarrassment* as a social event in its own right—something it may be said to have become, not only in Goffman, but in Proust and Joyce, as well as in the other-directed society itself—then there is a sense in which this phenomenon may be said not yet to have existed in that period. When Lucien de Rubempré, a budding poet and social climber, whose mother is in reality a midwife, regales an aristocratic salon with the difficulties a literary genius finds in coming to birth, his subsequent discomfiture ("your excellent mother will be a great help to you") is not felt by Balzac to be interesting in itself, but is presented as proof of a conspiracy against Lucien and expressed as something like a figure or a weak drawing room equivalent of those "realer" events which are the duelling strike or the liquidation of a business adversary. Meanwhile, this same apparently factual "kernel" of the phenomenon of embarrassment would surely prove to have an even more astonishingly different reality amid the guffaws and the ritual humiliations of a primitive tribe. This is then the sense in which it may be said that Goffman's form itself invents or constructs reality, the example meanwhile admonishing us to correct this work through a constant historicization of its raw material, in such a way that what was presented as a proposition about social life in general may be reprocessed into material for a diagnosis of this particular historical society alone.

We are thus led to a closer examination of the nature of that particular probe of contemporary social life which is Goffman's form, and to a description of the operations and procedures which allow him to abstract whole dimensions from the concrete here-and-now of contemporary life. The formal problem involved in any such process of abstraction is of course that of giving the illusion (or arousing the conviction) that a "complete statement" has been made; in this case, however, since Goffman's objects are so intangible (not

only in the sense of being “psychological” or “phenomenological,” but also in that marginality and transgressiveness referred to above), the strategic part of the operation is surely that of *nomination*, and few will question Goffman’s immense talent for inventing new terms and new names for his newly constructed social objects.

Indeed this part of his work strikes me as so symptomatic that I am tempted to characterize the latter as a kind of object lesson in the socialization of a private language, something that will probably seem offensive unless I add that this effort seems to me to be the driving force behind most of today’s intellectual life (or at least, the “advanced” parts of it) and unless I rapidly sketch in a picture of that new historical and intellectual situation in which, some “primitive accumulation” stage of theory having been completed, the new skill of *semiosis*, or simultaneous translation from one code or private language into another, becomes the evolutionary quality most necessary for survival. Jean Baudrillard has indeed gone so far as to assert that language in this shares the transformation of the older capitalism into something in which the classical “referent”—value in the case of commodities, meaning or the “signified” in the case of signs—is rapidly disappearing, creating a dizzying and uninterrupted circulation in the void, both of media-commodities and of those empty “signifiers” which we have in this context termed private languages.³ I would myself have preferred to stress the fragmentation of the publics, following upon the atomization and monadization of contemporary society, and the increasing uncertainty as to whether your own local “code” will be meaningful down the hall, let alone across the border. At any rate, it is certain that the older—shall we call them referential or realistic?—theoretical works which offered their theories as solutions to problems at least ostensibly presented by the material itself are in the process of being replaced by a new kind of theoretical work—the *meta-book*—whose task is the invention of a theory about other theories, the construction of a master theory through which their apparent inconsistencies can be overcome, or, in the case of theories which do not contradict each other because they have no visible connection with each other at all, in whose larger context they may be made fruitfully to interact for the first time. *Frame Analysis* is, happily, only a timid example of this kind of book, more fully developed in France, where the *Anti-Oedipe* of Deleuze and Guattari may serve as the canonical example; it is at any rate in a context like this that the talent for inventing new names and terms becomes a major intellectual strength.

It is, however, not enough to observe that the greater part of this new coinage of terminology has its origins in what I prefer to call “figures” rather than “metaphors” (“role,” from the theatrical realm, and “frame” from the

semiotics of painting, are only two such figural borrowings, to which we will return below): what is in many ways an even more crucial part of the operation is the defiguralization of the term, the removal of its too obvious metaphorical traces, its transformation into something neutral and scientific, but also personalized and marked, as it were, with that peculiar mixture of with-it Americanese and ironic distance which gives Goffman's style its distinction. This is what happens, for instance, in the construction of the concept of "keying," to my mind the most interesting new figure of *Frame Analysis*: the notion of musical keys, of modulation and the like, is a familiar enough source of occasional figures of speech, but to transform the noun into a verb is to terrorize the reader into a conviction that the operation is something he and all the rest of us do all the time, and that there is no point pretending we don't know what the terms means (compare, e.g., the word "passing" used above). Meanwhile, the new concept is supported by a series of cross-references to analogous concepts in other disciplines, the most striking being those drawn from the linguistic area, which range from Austin's performative utterances and the more recent concept of the "code" all the way to Volosinov-Bakhtin's account of indirect discourse (*style indirect libre* or *erlebte Rede*). These references certainly shed new light on the notion of keying, but I'm not sure that they are meant to do any more than to indicate the vast range of other fields to which the term "keying" might some day be relevant. Indeed, no effort is made to reach a theoretical synthesis of these various terms; rather, the existence of *analogous* terms in neighboring fields is itself the point to be made, suggesting, in that *Zeitgeist* atmosphere of modern theorization to which we have already referred, that the fact of a need for such a concept in other disciplines amply justifies a similar construction in this one.

Of course, the usefulness of the concept for Goffman is intrinsic and structural as well, for he needs a means of bringing identity or at least regularity into what is otherwise the flux of social experience, and this without falling back on the "natural" or common sense categories in use in daily life. Hence the idea of "a systematic transformation . . . across materials already meaningful in accordance with a schema of interpretation, and without which the keying would be meaningless" (p. 45). This does not quite eliminate the problem—unresolved in *Frame Analysis*—of some ultimate, "natural" reality that might be independent of social construction ("according to the definitions so far employed, the innermost part of a framed activity must be something that *does or could have status as untransformed reality*," p. 156—the italics are intended to draw attention to the prudence of the formulation); still, the notion of "keying" certainly tends to displace our attention to the *process* of semiotic transformation and away from the materials thus transformed.

At this point, then, we are offered, as might be expected, a whole range of illustrations which document the operations of “keying” on all levels of daily life: Goffman divides his material into five general headings—make-believe, contests, ceremonials, technical redoings, and regroundings (“the performance of an activity more or less openly for reasons or motives felt to be radically different from those that govern ordinary actors,” p. 74). The respective space allotted these various examples makes it clear that they do not interest the frame analyst equally: in particular, contests and ceremonials—conventionalized to the point where an “original” is no longer present or necessary for imitation, and where therefore the process of semiotic transformation is itself either less striking or rather different from that encountered elsewhere—would seem to spring from a type of social life—traditional and archaic, pre-media if not necessarily pre-capitalist—qualitatively different from the present, late stage of capitalism which provides the bulk of Goffman’s examples. Even when we limit ourselves to the latter, however, it is hard to escape the impression that logical priorities have been reversed in the rhetoric of such a demonstration, and that it is not the concept of “keying” which is validated by the difficulties and problems it can be shown to resolve, as rather the reverse, the various examples and illustrations being useful merely to show how wide the range of applicability of this term or figure is; and, as in a dictionary or grammar book, to furnish a range of different but acceptable syntactical exercises for the beginner to practice on. But this means that *Frame Analysis* is only apparently about social life; in reality, it is self-referential and its deepest subject is the validity of its own terminology. Thus the figure of “keying” proves in the long run to be its own example, and to validate its own meaning by showing how much in the way of heterogeneous material it can itself “key.”

Something like this could be shown, I think, for all of Goffman’s major essays or monographs; and our description of his form might well have been ratified by the ultimate confirmation by pastiche, for it is not hard to imagine some quasi-Goffmanian figure—let us say, the notion of the boundary and the no-man’s-land to which we had recourse earlier as the most transient metaphorical expression—which, parleyed into the status of a technical term, might then be illustrated in just the way described above, with material ranging from the uncertainties of everyday life to, say, the ritual of the Noh play. Before returning to our initial hesitation, however, and trying to determine whether *Frame Analysis* is to be thought of as one more figural monograph of this type, or whether it represents something like a new departure for Goffman, it seems appropriate to take note of an important variant in the form just described and, if only for completeness’ sake, to open up a new category or sub-category alongside it.

This category would, to my mind, encompass all of those Goffmanian figures which have remained linked to spatial experience, in which, therefore, the original concrete situation from which they were derived persists with a kind of historical residuality, like an after-image of the real. thus the concept of "framed space" is already little more than a figure of speech, by comparison with that of the "total institution" presented in *Asylums*. The slippage from a real place (the more traditional sociological investigation of *Asylums*) to that of semiotic or signifying space (as in the notion of the "frame" itself) is most clearly observable, perhaps, in what is to my mind the most tantalizing of Goffman's individual essays, on the so-called "Insanity of Place," published in appendix and as though in after-thought to *Relations in Public*: here, for almost the first and last time in Goffman, the semiotic effects, the meaning-construction, of the various "frames" of experience are anchored in the coercive realities of society itself as a concrete historical phenomenon, and the admirable passion breathed by this essay is comparable to that with which Michel Foucault has denounced the various forms of confinement (even though Goffman's indignation, like that of Foucault, ultimately expresses an ethical judgement on the social order rather than a political analysis of it).

Frame Analysis constitutes a break with the earlier essays in precisely that feature to which we have attributed the originality of ethnomethodology in the first place, namely its transgressive strategy; and the impatience with that older indirection, the ambition to achieve the monumentality and the system of a positive statement, are surely not alien to the dissatisfaction which one may feel with the new work. For *Frame Analysis*, alone of Goffman's investigations, abandons the earlier exploration of marginal experience and of the malfunctioning of non-marginal situations and institutions in an attempt to make a description, for the first time, of the functioning of those institutions and of the laws according to which everyday life is actually organized. The elaborate conceptuality of the "frame" is the result of this ambition to evolve abstractions which hold for *all* social situations, and do without those fragile links to concrete and historically determinate ones which were still present in transgressive phenomena. The semiotic thrust of the new work is clearly enough dictated by such aims: for, unable and probably unwilling to return to the older positive sociology of institutions and customs, Goffman can only evolve in the direction of the analysis of social *meaning*.

Yet the contradictions in the new enterprise are to my mind nowhere so strikingly dramatized as in the new kind of raw material which fills these pages. I must confess, indeed, that I found the constant stream of newspaper clippings, anecdotes, and believe-it-or-not happenings almost unbearably

tedious over several hundred pages; but the issue is not my own personal reaction, but rather the question of whether this material is not in itself structurally quite different from that—case studies, anomalies, “morbid” phenomena sometimes no less anecdotal than what is found here—which provided the basis for the earlier monographs. It seems to me, indeed, no accident that Goffman’s illustrations are here increasingly drawn from the realm—inauthentic above all others—of the *fait divers* and the media pseudo-event. At the very moment, in other words, when his analysis strives for its greatest degree of formalization and semiotic generality, his content becomes irremediably trivialized: nor can his use of this raw material be justified, as he tries disarmingly to do in his introduction (15–16), on the grounds of its “typification” or on the strength of its capacity to dramatize “the power of our conventional understandings to cope with the bizarre potentials of social life, the furthest reaches of experience.” For the *fait divers* is not a fact or an experience at all: it is a type of *discourse* and one peculiarly symptomatic of the superstructure of present-day neo-consumerism⁴; so that it is to have been very particularly the dupe of the referential or “realistic” illusion to have taken it for real content in the first place. Here perhaps more than anywhere else, then, Professor Goffman’s choice of what we have characterized as ethnmethodology’s semiotic, rather than its textual, strategy has played him false.

This said, there is yet another fundamental contradiction at work in *Frame Analysis*, this time in the very development of its central figure: yet that contradiction may perhaps best be arrived at through a brief characterization of what is strongest, both in Goffman’s own semiotic turn and also in the structuralist ideology itself to which it becomes thereby related. This is the polemic joined on the status of the “subject” or of individual consciousness: a debate whose more notorious monuments are Foucault’s celebration of the “end of man” and Althusser’s anti-humanism, but which can more soberly be characterized as an inquiry into the degree to which individual consciousness or individual existence may be considered an intelligible field of study in its own right.

The debate unites data from schizophrenia and the experience of drugs with that whole tradition of the “hermeneutic of suspicion” (Ricoeur) in which the instruments of demystification developed by Marx, Freud and Nietzsche find common ground in a devalorization of the pretensions of Reason or of the conscious mind: yet the historical and ideological force of recent French attacks on the “philosophy of the subject,” like those mentioned above, seems to me to find its proper context only when it is understood as a final and sometimes only imperfectly formulated attempt to liquidate the last

vestiges of bourgeois individualism itself and to prepare the basis for some new post-individualistic thought mode to come.

Frame Analysis participates in this effort to the degree to which its central conceptual instrument—that of the frame itself—offers a way of analyzing the “phenomenological” material of everyday life in *impersonal* terms. Indeed, in this sense, we might reverse the terms of our previous argument and suggest that what is wrong with the semiotic approach here (as well as in some of its major European practitioners) is if anything an *insufficient* formalization, the failure to go far enough precisely in dissolving the anthropomorphic vestiges of common-sense or surface categories, most notably that of the *subject*: so it is a disappointment that, for all its work in the area of narrative analysis, semiotics has continued to work with categories not noticeably distinct from the older anthropomorphic common sense ones of the “character.”⁵ Goffman’s notion of the frame and of its function as the very organizer of social meaning goes a long way towards suggesting a mode of analysis which would allow us to do without those “characters” who are the manipulated subjects of present-day social happenings.

But *Frame Analysis* is, in the area of the subject, even more instructive than this: for in his closing pages the logic of Goffman’s enterprise leads him to that decisive discovery to which other contemporary thinkers—Lacan, Sartre, Girard, come to mind⁶—have been led by very different avenues of research, namely the revelation of the reality of the collective beneath the appearance of individual experience, the disclosure of the individual subject as a field of multiple forces, not a substance but a locus, a nexus, of sheer relationships. So it is that Goffman’s inquiry into the formal elements that make up an interaction or an encounter leads to the discovery that what we used to call an individual is in reality the interplay and intersection of four different functions, “principal, strategist, animator and figure” (p. 523), whose complex operations among each other ultimately result in the phenomenological data of our social experience. Goffman resumes his discovery as follows: “Starting with the traditional notion of the individual as self-identified with the figure he cuts during ordinary interaction, I have argued some frame-relevant grounds for loosening the bond: that playfulness and other keyings may be involved which sharply reduce personal responsibility; that often what the individual presents is not himself but a story containing a protagonist who may happen also to be himself; that the individual’s presumably inward state can be shared around selectively, much as a stage performer manages to externalize the inner feelings of the character he enacts.” (p. 541).

Such a passage, in which the unique strengths of Goffman's work are visible in heightened and concentrated form, is not without offering some clues as to a fundamental weakness as well, one which prevents him from developing his discovery about the nature of the subject into new and unexplored areas, and deflects his argument back into the now sterile terms of a long-dead polemic (his attack on the false problems of introspective psychology at the end of the previous paragraph). For the final contradiction of *Frame Analysis* seems to me precisely this persistence, in the midst of the newly depersonalized language of framings and situations, of just that older, still anthropomorphic vocabulary of "roles" and theatrical performances which formed the conceptual horizon of Goffman's first and still Sartrean *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). The concept of "role" was, indeed, a two-edged one, for in those days it could be turned precisely against the psychology of the "person" or subject, and be fully as much a force for demystification as for a reinforcement of the anthropomorphic illusion. This can surely no longer be the case today, where, at least in the United States, the rhetoric of role, game, performance, mask and drama, has become a whole ideology in its own right: thus the frequently suggestive appeals to the authority and example of theatrical history, throughout *Frame Analysis*, have a curiously retrospective atmosphere about them, striking one ultimately as the research notes from some immense and never completed thesis on play-acting which was to have served as the philosophical basis for the older book on "roles". Here, the latter coexists uneasily with the new metaphor of the frame, and this uncertainty about the very figure around which the new book was to be organized is no minor flaw in a work whose attractiveness lies in the new figures it promises us.

NOTES

1. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (New York, 1961), p. 10.
2. "Recently this neglected field—the field of public life—has begun to receive very active attention, this being an aspect no doubt of a complex unsettling expressed variously in the current unsafety and incivility of our city streets, the new political device of intentionally breaking the ground rules for self-expression during meetings and contacts, the change in rules of censorship, and the social molestation encouraged in the various forms of 'encounter group' and experimental theater." *Relations in Public* (New York, 1971), pp. ix-x.
3. *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris, 1972), esp. pp. 172–199.
4. See Roland Barthes, "Structure du fait divers," in *Essais Critiques* (Paris, 1964, also in English translation, 1972); and Georges Auclair, *Le Mana quotidien: Structure et fonctions de la chronique des fait divers* (Paris, 1970).

5. See, for an important critique of the category of “character,” François Rastier, *Essais de sémiotique discursive* (Paris, 1973), pp. 185–206.
6. Sartre’s “whirligigs,” cf. *Saint Genet* (New York, 1971), pp. 333–353, Lacan’s L-schema of the constitution of the subject, cf. *Écrits* (Paris, 1966), pp. 53, 54ff, Girard’s “triangular mediation” of desire, cf. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (Baltimore, 1965) offer other examples of the “explosion of the subject” in contemporary psychology.