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Reserved and Irreverent. Some Considerations on Erving Goffman's Ethnographic Writing Style

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Abstract

Discretion and irreverence are two generally recurrent features when one refers to Erving Goffman. Even if their juxtaposition seems unlikely, both characteristics are strictly connected: they reveal the distinguishing trait of Goffman's sociological gaze. The aim of this paper is to consider discretion and irreverence not only as hallmarks of the public presentation of Goffman's self, but as methodological choices in developing his unique ethnographic writing style. Comparing Goffman's way of writing to classical ethnographic writings, one will realize that they are very different: Goffman's ethnographies are definitely more discreet, but his discretion actually underlies an irreverent, critical and desecrating eye. Staying in the shadows and 'watching how people snore', Goffman leads an attack both on the taken for granted assumptions of traditional ethnography, and on hierarchies and legitimate boundaries between social worlds. He violates the boundaries between highbrow culture and lowbrow culture, between sociology and literature; but what is most disquieting, is his violation of the borderline that divides reality from fiction.

Keywords: Erving Goffman, Ethnography, sociological imagination.

1. Introduction

Discretion and irreverence are two generally recurrent features when one refers to Erving Goffman[1]. Even if their juxtaposition seems unlikely, both

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[1] Dimitri Shalin (2008) underlines the ambivalence of Goffman's personality: 'He is remembered as "gentle", "unusually modest", "kindly, hospitable", "a warm, friendly, modest, considerate man", "a steadfast and loyal friend… charming, clear, and

characteristics are strictly connected: they reveal the distinguishing trait of Goffman's sociological gaze.

Goffman's reserved attitude is quite famous, and it is well-known how Goffman avoided showing off on the public stage during his life, he gave very few interviews and was always very careful to hide information about his private life[2]. On the other hand Goffman's caustic spirit and his skills in finding and touching raw nerves are the markers of his sociological essays. The aim of this paper is to consider discretion and irreverence not only as hallmarks of the public presentation of Goffman's self, but as methodological choices in developing his unique ethnographic writing style.

As a matter of fact, not only did Goffman give little information about his life, but he also wrote just short notes about his research methodology. If we take as an example two of his most explicitly ethnographical works such as *Asylums* and *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, we will realize that there is no methodological appendix or chapter, but just a few short notes which make it impossible to uncover the background of Goffman's research[3]. In *Asylums*, for instance, Goffman introduces his research with the following lines: 'In 1955-56 I did a year's field work at St. Elizabeths Hospital, Washington. D. C., a federal institution of somewhat over 7000 inmates that draws three quarters of its patients from the District of Columbia' (Goffman, 1961: 25).

Apart from the previous notes, there are just a few other indications: Goffman's role on the field, his negative attitude towards psychiatry, his social class, but not much else. The same can be said with regards to *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* where Goffman underlines that the materials used in his study are heterogeneous: '[…] some are taken from respectable researches

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sympathetic'". On the other hand other witnesses hint at a different Goffman: "'a detached, hard-boiled, intellectually cynic… mercurial character [with] the ability to shift selves", a man showing "an almost sadistic pleasure in shaking up the reader or listener" and a weakness for "metaphors, which… in retrospect… seem cruel and tasteless"', a man issuing a 'steady stream of sarcasm' which earned him the nickname 'little dagger'. See also R. Ervin (1992).

[2] Only in 2013 did Dimitri Shalin edit *The Erving Goffman Archives*, published by the University of Las Vegas: *The Erving Goffman Archives*, https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives. For an interpretation of Goffman's biography see also Romania (2016).

[3] 'Goffman sees himself as an "ethnographer of small entities". Being a student of Lloyd Warner and E. C. Hughes, he was trained to do this kind of work. […] He performed field work only three times: a study of a small community on the Shetland Islands (1953), a study of a mental health hospital (1961), and an unpublished study about behaviour in casinos' (Verhoeven, 1985: 95-96).

where qualified generalizations are given concerning reliably recorded regularities; some are taken from informal memoirs written by colorful people; many fall in between. In addition, frequent use is made of a study of my own of a Scotland Island crofting (subsistence farm) community' (Goffman, 1959: XII).

It seems quite evident from the above quotation that Goffman does not consider his ethnography at the Shetland Islands as the centre of *The Presentation of Self*, since it is referred to as one of his many sources and he does not seem to give it a specific relevant status in comparison to the other kind of documents used in studying social interactions. It was also noted '[…] although he refers occasionally to his field notes, his sources are as much literary as experiential' (Mac Suibhne, 2011: 1). So one could be tempted to assume that fieldwork is not so important in Goffman's research and that his methodology is grounded on document analysis. Moreover his sources are not just biographies, autobiographies, letters and life histories, but they also consists of documents such as newspaper and magazine articles, movie scripts, bridge and fishing handbooks, comics, and part of his corpus also includes literary texts and novels.

2. Goffman's ethnographic style

Nonetheless, the idea that Goffman's research is based mainly on document analysis rather than on ethnographic fieldwork is not so obvious. Starting from his doctoral dissertation Goffman (1953, unpublished) strongly affirmed the priority of direct observation above all the other qualitative methodologies. 'To participate in interaction without causing others to feel embarrassed and ill at ease requires that one exercise, almost unthinkingly, constant tact and care concerning the feeling of others; to exercise this discretion it is necessary to perceive correctly the indications others give of what they are feeling' (Goffman, 1953: 6-7).

Furthermore, he specifically referred to his methodology in 1974, when he was invited to the Pacific Sociological Meeting and lectured on the subject of fieldwork[4] (Goffman, 1989). Goffman's lecture on fieldwork is not so innovative or original: it is just an excellent summary of the main features of participant observation, but nothing else. On the other hand, there is a strong emphasis on ethnographic methodology and a keen attention for avoiding reactivity due to the inhibitory effect of the ethnographer's presence on the

[4] Philip Manning (1999) even refers to a rumor of a bootlegged tape of Goffman's talk.

field. What Goffman recommends is to be psychologically and physically synchronized with the subjects we are studying. It is necessary to tune our own body to the subjects we are studying in order to note 'their gestural, visual, bodily responses to what's going on around them and […] to sense what it is that they're responding to' (Goffman, 1989: 125-126).

'But that's the name of the game. You're artificially forcing yourself to be turned into something that you then pick up as witness – not as an interviewer, not as a listener, but as a witness to how they react to what gets done to and around them' (Goffman, 1989: 126).

It is quite clear from the previous quotation that Goffman is suspicious even of common qualitative techniques such as the hermeneutic interview, which in a sense is an 'artificial' form of interaction and it involves 'face-work'. On the other hand there is a nearly obsessive call to participant observation as by far the most effective research methodology.

'[…] residents would not readily accept as a friend and neighbour someone who asked formal questions about interaction or someone who showed an unnatural interest in matter of that kind. In order to observe people off their guard, you must first win their trust' (Goffman, 1953: 4-5).

To sum up, Goffman's contribution to field research seems quite orthodox[5]. Nevertheless Phillip Manning (1999) suggests that one would do better to look at what Goffman did in his work, rather than at what he said he did. In particular, if one analyzes his ethnographic writing style, it will become clear that he is not an orthodox sociologist at all and that his work is quite far from classical mainstream ethnographies. Comparing Goffman's style to classical ethnographic writings, one will realize that they are very different: Goffman's ethnographies are definitely more discreet, but his discretion actually underlies an irreverent, critical and desecrating eye.

It is useful to consider a classic text of sociological fieldwork: *Street Corner Society* by William Foote Whyte (1943)[6]. Just from reading its famous opening words, *Street Corner Society* summarizes some of the key features of classical ethnographic writing style:

[5] About Goffman's methodology see also Manning (2016) and Leone (2016).

[6] 'Even though Erving Goffman cannot be considered an exemplary ethnographer – his ethnographic writings were too casual – the prominence of his writings made a claim that participant observation research could produce rich and persuasive theory. This is exemplified in Goffman's discussion of his research in the Shetland Islands, described in *The Presentation of Self*, and his more elaborate detailing of the strategies of patients in St. Elizabeth hospital in *Asylums*. If these were not the most detailed or exemplary ethnographies of the period in methodological terms, they were, along with William Foote Whyte's 1943 *Street Corner Society*, the most influential and among the most widely read' (Fine, Manning, 2000: 480).

> In the heart of 'Eastern City' there is a slum district known as Cornerville, which is inhabited almost exclusively by Italian immigrants and their children. To the rest of the city it is a mysterious, dangerous and depressing area. Cornerville is a only a few minutes' walk from fashionable High Street, but the High Street inhabitant who takes that walk passes from the familiar to the unknown. (Whyte, 1943: XV).

In the previous short extract and in the following passages several elements become quite evident: a strong emphasis on the narrating self, a literary narrative style, and a frequent insert of quotations from raw field notes.

A subjective narration written in the first person is a must-have for any classical ethnography. The ethnographer has to clearly make his readers aware of the reality of his firsthand experience, he stresses that he has been 'on the field', that 'he got the seat of his pants dirty in real research', just to quote the famous advice by Robert Park. This is an attitude shared with a certain kind of journalistic enquiry: one cannot forget that historically the Chicago School of Sociology was founded in the age of the 'muckraking journalism', whose distinguishing traits were criticism and social concern which were expressed in the style of hard boiled literature (Weaver, McCombs, 1980).

On the other hand, this is a kind of sociological writing that borders on literary narration. *Street Corner Society* could also be read as a novel: the tale of Bill Whyte's research. And in fact many are the colorful everyday life episodes, starting from the first meeting with Doc, the bowling matches, life at the Italian community club. In her *Fields of Play* (1997), Laurel Richardson writes:

> […] Whyte in SCS does more than privilege narrative; he enters the domain of the novelist. Novelists write narrative with plots, characters, dialogue and settings. Causality governs narrative sequence. […] Just below the surface of SCS is Whyte the would-be novelist, using fiction-writing (not just literary) techniques to rhetorically accomplish his goal of writing a sociology with humans in it. The sociology he wrote is not the static snapshot of community studies but a story through time, a 'plot-like' story of characters. (Richardson, 1997: 109).

Richardson's point could be considered radical, but on the other hand it focuses on the fine line between ethnographic writing and literary narratives[7],

[7] To better clarify the close relation between ethnographic and literary style, just consider the following passage: 'Old San Francisco, which is the San Francisco of only the other day, the day before the Earthquake, was divided midway by the Slot. The Slot was an iron crack than ran along the centre of Market Street and from the Slot

and even critics of the postmodern wave in sociology, like Paul Atkinson, agree that ethnographies are tales or stories, not in the sense that they are fictional, but in that the writer uses standard literary conventions (Atkinson, 1990).

A third characteristic trait of classical ethnography is the frequent quotation from raw field notes: 'in a text which presents a logical argument, the author sets forth a formal thesis or proposition in the introduction as a stance to be argued, then develops each analytic point with evidence logically following from and clearly supporting the propositional thesis' (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw, 1995: 170-171). On the contrary, an ethnographic story results from an ordered progression of field note excerpts.

'The tension in the ethnographic text which contrasts exemplar and exposition results in a highly characteristic shifting of voices within the text itself. […] the text shifts from the voice of the sociologist, to the voice of an actor in the social scene and back again' (Atkinson, 1990: 88-89).

Comparing Goffman's writing style to the above-mentioned key features, one will realize that not only are they lacking, but that they are, in a sense, systematically and consciously, violated. If one takes *Asylums* as the most conventional ethnographic work in Goffman's production, it is quite evident how its approach differs from that of the classic Chicago School style.

First of all, *Asylums* cannot be read as the tale of Goffman's research at St. Elizabeth Hospital. There is no emphasis on the narrating self: Goffman avoids the first person. As Paul Atkinson notes, referring to his writing style:

> […] The voice of the author does not intervene overtly to explicate and comment on the subject matter. There is a remarkable lack of sociological discourse here, in terms of theoretical propositions and analytic frameworks. […] Goffman's authorial voice is not there to establish a hierarchy of authenticity any more than to provide a hierarchy of conceptual or rhetorical levels. (Atkinson, 1989: 67-68).

Goffman's voice is discrete not only in the theoretical passages of his

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arose the burr of the ceaseless cable that was hitched at will to the cars it dragged up and down. In truth, there were two slots, but in the quick grammar of the West, time was saved by calling them, and much more that they stood for, 'The Slot'. North of the Slot were the theaters, hotels, and shopping district, the banks and the staid, respectable business houses. South of the Slot were the factories, slums, laundries, machine-soaps, boiler works, and the abodes of the working class'. Even if it could resemble a typical Chicago style ethnography, particularly if compared with the quoted incipit from *Street Corner Society*, actually it is an excerpt form a fictional novel by Jack London (*South of the Slot*, 1909).

essays, but in his ethnographic report as well. Apparently he does not seem to be interested in marking that he has been on the field, that he has personally lead his life for more than one year living with psychiatric patients. Apart from being a stylistic choice, this reserved gaze could also hide an implicit but irreverent and desecrating critique of the ethnographic tradition. As a matter of fact the 'narrating self' is a literary convention taken for granted by the writer and his readers: the overlap of the 'I' pronoun with the real narrator is not so obvious in the text (Ismael in *Moby Dick* is not Melville, see Jedlowski, 2010). It is true that every ethnography is, in the end, an auto-ethnography, since the ethnographer belongs to the field and he/she cannot pretend to report his/her own personal experience as an 'objective' reality. On the other hand, in doing so, there is a strong risk of sliding into a self-celebrating narcissism, and the narrating self could easily impose its own voice above all others, while 'contemplating his own navel'. So Goffman's discreet gaze could be interpreted as a methodological choice: one has to talk about one's own personal experience whilst avoiding talking just about oneself[8].

Additionally, Goffman's writings are far from literary[9]. There are no accurate descriptions of everyday routines, there are no characters or colourful episodes. His eye is clinical and analytical, his expressive style is dry and cold, as the following passage effectively shows: 'In what follows I want to consider some of the main themes that occur in the secondary adjustments I recorded in a year's participant observation study of patient life in a public mental hospital of over 7000 patients, hereafter called "Central Hospital"' (Goffman, 1961: 121).

Again a stylistic writing choice involves a methodological question. Goffman was deeply aware of the problem of reactivity: if they feel they are observed, people will change their behavior, but the ethnographer too will distort his/her report, when he/she thinks about the assessment of his/her readers.

[8] Dimitri Shalin reports an episode referred to by Gary Alan Fine, who recalls how he proposed to do self-ethnography for a class he took with Goffman at the University of Pennsylvania. It effectively summarizes Goffman's attitude towards auto-etnography: 'Gary was getting married at the time, with a society wedding planned for some 800 guests, so he proposed a participant observation study of this momentous occasion. The suggested piece of ethnography would have been in keeping with Erving's famous dictum, "The world, in truth, is a wedding". This was not to happen, however. When Goffman heard his pupil's proposal, he averred, "Only a schmuck studies his own life." As Gary Fine noted in the same interview, he shunned self-ethnography ever since, taking issue with commentators who claimed his work was autobiographical' (Shalin, 2013: 2-3).

[9] About Goffman's analytic style see also Marzano (2006).

'I believe that [other] people shouldn't read [your] field notes, partly because it's a bore for them. But if they are going to read your field notes, you'll tend not to write about yourself' (Goffman, 1989: 131).

A third sharp violation of the conventions of the classic ethnographic style in Goffman's writing regards the field-note quotations. As previously underlined, the structure of an ethnographic narration consists of an ordered progression of field note excerpts and the text shifts from the interpretation of the sociologist, to the notes and back again. On the contrary, Goffman's notes are often lacking in his books, and when he cites them, they rarely fill a central position. So once again this could be seen as an expression of his discreet but irreverent attitude: his personal hand-notes are hardly ever quoted, but his books overflow with autobiographies, memoirs and travel writings, psychoanalytic texts, etiquette books, newspapers reports, advertising images, philosophical treatises, popular literature and classic literature. According to Anthony Giddens (1984), he draws from the same sources of descriptions as novelists or others who write fictional accounts of social life.

It is true that the use of literature in sociology is quite common, it is an effective pedagogical tool and it cannot be denied that Goffman uses novels to give his readers vivid examples of theoretical passages that could be hard to grasp[10]. But he also goes beyond. As Lewis Coser states: 'the trained sensibilities of a novelist or a poet may provide a richer source of social insight than, say, the impressions of untrained informants on which so much sociological research currently rests' (Coser, 1963: 2-3). Emerson, Frez and Shaw (1995: 171) highlight that: 'thematic narratives use field notes not as illustrations and examples of points that have already been made, but as building blocks for constructing and telling the story in the first place'. Consequentially, it could be assumed that Goffman uses novels and literary texts not only as examples, but as 'building blocks' for constructing his ethnographic reports. In other words, he treats novels as if they were empirical data. Apparently his ethnographic structure is quite conventional, since it reproduces the alternating of interpretations and quotations, but what is new is that he replaces field notes with heterogeneous kinds of documents which mainly consist of novels and literary materials. This is what could be called a 'hard' use of literature in sociology.

[10] See R. Perrotta (2017), 'Il velo strappato'.

3. Goffman between fiction and reality

To better highlight the use of literary sources in Goffman's ethnographies, one could read the very first sequence of quotations in the essay which introduces *Asylums*: 'On the Characteristics of Total Institutions'. The first excerpt comes from a best-seller loosely based on the author's real life[11], the second is an academic psychiatric essay[12], the third is again a literary autobiography[13], a sociological paper follows[14], then, once again, an autobiographical best-seller[15], the last one is an excerpt from a religious text[16]. The juxtaposition of heterogeneous materials is quite evident. What is remarkable is that Goffman does not seem to be interested in contextualizing the kind of passages he is quoting and even a cultivated and informed reader could find it hard to grasp the real nature of what he is reading. There is a subtle, ironic but penetrating desecration of hierarchies and legitimate boundaries between science and literature, between highbrow culture and lowbrow culture, between reality and fiction. The result is a blurring of genres: a popular best-seller is presented as if it were a scientific text and a psychiatric essay is reported for its literary value. These strategic and estranging juxtapositions were interpreted as an expression of an underlying critical attitude which Goffman shares with the generation of sociologists who were trained at the University of Chicago (Giglioli, 1990). Gabriella Turnaturi (2003) supports the idea of a 'hard' use of literature in Goffman's ethnographies; she states that Goffman is looking for significant interactions and presentations of everyday life as performances within literary texts. Which means that literary excerpts are used for their aptitude of dramaturgical idealizing, for their theoretical contributions, and for their authors' sociological sensitivity as well.

Starting from the assumption that literary quotations are not used as mere illustrations but as actual empirical data, one can consider the first quotation from *Asylums*. After defining what a total institution is and giving some examples, Goffman introduces its main characteristics. One of the most visually evident is the sharp division between medical staff and inmates: this

[11] Mary Jane Ward (1955), *The Snake Pit*, New American Library, New York.
[12] Ivan Belknap (1956), *Human Problems of a State Mental Hospital*, McGraw-Hill, New York.
[13] T. E. Lawrence (1955), *The Mint*, Jonatahn Cape, London.
[14] Sanford M. Dornbusch (1955), The Military Academy as an Assimilating Institution, Social Forces, 31.
[15] Brendan Behan (1958), *Borstal Boy*, Hutchinson, London.
[16] *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict.*

boundary, Goffman says, is dramaturgically marked when nurses shout to patients. At this point, in a usual ethnography, one would expect a reference to the ethnographer's direct experience on the field. But Goffman does not refer to his personal experience. What we can read is an excerpt from *The Snake Pit*, a novel by Mary Jane Ward loosely based on her own life: a typical best-seller, not of any particular literary value, but relevant mostly for the expressive effect of the reported situations, and in fact in 1948 it was transposed in an Oscar winning movie produced by the Twentieth Century Fox:

> 'I tell you what', said Miss Hart when they were crossing the dayroom. 'You do everything Miss Davis says. Don't think about it, just do it. You'll get along all right.' As soon as she heard the name Virginia knew what was terrible about Ward One. Miss Davis. 'Is she the head nurse?' 'And how,' muttered Miss Hart. And then she raised her voice. The nurses had a way of acting as if the patients were unable to hear anything that was not shouted. Frequently they said things in normal voices that the ladies were not supposed to hear... (Ward, as quoted in Goffman, 1962: 8).

The previously described situation could have presumably happened in Mary Jane Ward's real life, but dialogues are clearly invented and characters are fictional and stereotyped, presented almost as caricatures. The terrible head nurse, the shy and ingenuous newcomer, the first day at the asylum: a ready-made plot of an already seen movie, which one can barely pretend to consider as real. But at the same time we know that it is real because the novel is inspired to the author's real life. So it could be argued that it lies between realistic writing and expressive dramatized writing, and Goffman preferred the dramatized style, because even though they are both fiction, the realistic style is far more 'cynical' since it is based on the self-deceiving pretence of reporting the objective reality. On the other hand an autobiography written in an expressive dramatized style forces the author to idealize characters and situations, highlighting the latent values of the social world they live in. The plot of a best seller could be considered to some extent similar to a ceremony: 'an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community' (Goffman, 1959: 35-36).

On the other hand Goffman's literary sources are various, not only does he use bestsellers but classic novels as well. This is the case of George Orwell's work, which is frequently quoted. According to Andrew Travers (1999) one of the basic concepts of Goffman's sociology, that is 'non-person', was inspired by the term 'unperson' introduced by Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty Four*. As is known, in the famous dystopian novel the English language has

been replaced by Newspeak and one of the new words introduced in the dictionary is 'unperson'.

> It is a reasonable surmise that, since Goffman liked Orwell well enough in 1953 to quote from two of his books, he would have been aware of Nineteen Eighty Four (the novel was newsworthy in the year of its first publication in 1949, at the end of which year, coincidentally, Goffman began his fieldwork in Unst). So I suggest that the word unperson could have been in Goffman's mind when, happening on perfect non-person illustrations in other works by the author who had coined unperson, he introduced non-person into sociology. (Travers, 1999: 169).

What is quite intriguing is that Goffman never cited *Nineteen Eighty Four*. 'The resemblance between Goffman's non-person term and Orwell's Newspeak unperson is as astonishing as Goffman's non-mention of it' (Travers, 1999: 169). Paradoxically Goffman references to Orwell's works come mainly from the autobiographical novels: *Down and Out in Paris and London* (cited in *The Presentation of Self*) and *Such, such were the joys* (cited in *Asylums*). Let's consider the following excerpt from *Such, such were the Joys*:

> It is not easy for me to think of my school days without seeming to breathe in a whiff of something cold and evil-smelling - a sort of compound of sweaty stockings, dirty towels, fecal smells blowing along corridors, forks with old food between the prongs, neck-of-mutton stew, and the banging doors of the lavatories and the echoing chamberpots in the dormitories. (Orwell, as quoted in Goffman, 1962: 26).

The previous passage is cited with reference to the notion of 'contaminative exposure'. According to Goffman one of the most pervasive attacks to the inmates' identity occurs when the territories of the self (such as one's own body and possessions) are systematically invaded, the boundary that the individual places between himself/herself and the environment is violated and the embodiments of self are profaned. Orwell's memoirs of his days at the St. Cyprian's preparatory school are definitely effective in describing the experience of contaminative exposure in a total institution. On the other hand Orwell's writing style is very different from the dramatized and stereotyped descriptions by Mary Jane Ward. So Goffman, in citing Orwell's work, achieves the effect of idealizing characters and situations by marking the strict resemblance between fiction and reality: since the readers of Orwell's real life cannot avoid a comparison with the over-totalitarian society depicted in *Nineteen Eighty Four* and in doing so they recognize that the gloomy atmosphere of the biographical memoirs and of the dystopian novel is the

same. As a matter of fact, many interpreters have read the story of Winston Smith as a projection of Orwell life as an adolescent.

Apart from biographical novels, memoirs, and life histories, a substantial part of Goffman's data consists of texts of pure invention such as 'cartoons, comics, novels, the cinema, and especially, it turns out, the legitimate stage' (Goffman, 1974: 15). Verhoeven (1985) underlines that Goffman himself admits that there was not any conscious criteria in his choices; it is "'a caricature of systematic sampling". His selection happened 'over the years on a hit-or-miss basis using principles of selection mysterious to me' (Goffman, 1974: 15). Moreover, Goffman does not seem to mind whether the cited stories are reliable or not. This kind of material offers of course effective and useful examples to better clarify Goffman's sociological insights, but, according to the previous considerations, it can be assumed that even fictions are treated as if they were empirical data. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, for instance, Goffman reports a full paragraph from *The Trial* by Franz Kafka. Kafka, as is known, tells the story of Josef K. who wakes up one morning, and without having done anything wrong, is arrested.

> 'Josef K.?' asked the inspector, perhaps merely to draw K.'s distracted glance on himself. K. nodded. 'You are presumably very surprised at the events of this morning?' said the inspector, with both hands rearranging the few things that lay on the night-table – the candle and matchbox, a book and a pincushion which lay there as if they were objects which he required for his interrogation. 'Certainly,' said K., and he was filled with pleasure at having encountered a sensible man at last, with whom he could discuss the matter. 'Certainly I'm surprised, but I am by no means very surprised.' 'Not very surprised?' asked the inspector, setting the candle in the middle of the table and then grouping the other things around it. 'Perhaps you misunderstand me,' K. hastened to add. 'I mean…' here K. stopped and looked round him for a chair. 'I suppose I may sit down?' he asked. 'It's not usual,' answered the inspector. (Kafka, as quoted in Goffman, 1959: 96).

Kafka's sharp sociological sensibility has been underlined by Alessandro Dal Lago (1994) who notes the Czech writer's interest for analyzing the conditions of the subalterns, his aversion for the established authority, and he states that his novels can be read also as critical parodies of the alienating bureaucratic ceremonials. Rituals and ceremonies are the founding elements of the 'interactional order', and they are the primary objects of Goffman's analysis. So a quotation from Kafka cannot be considered a simple example in Goffman's work. It is an open recognition of sharing the same gaze toward everyday life, as Marshal Berman remarks:

> I mention Kafka specifically because he communicates so vividly the horror and anguish—as well as some of the absurd comedy—of everyday life. His narrators and heroes are clerks, salesmen, petty civil servants — like Kafka himself, who worked in the Prague Social Security office. They are sober, narrow, tepid, ordinary men, distinguished only in their mediocrity. They have no great aims or dreams in life: they want merely to 'do their job' (like the land-surveyor K.), or else, even more simply, just get through the day. Kafka, writing in their style, out of their experience, shows how is precisely these 'simple' operations that are the most complex, problematical, absurd of all. The demonic underworlds of romance and fable turn out to be far less frightful, less monstrous, than the ordinary 'real' world in which we live, or try live, our daily lives. This is the world on which Goffman's works throw a weird but brilliant light (Berman, 1972).

Both Goffman and Kafka are extremely skilled in catching those moments of everyday life when an accident happens and one feels a sense of disquieting because one realizes that what is meant to be the reality is just a dramaturgical effect[17].

4. Conclusions

> Ladies and gentleman, by way of introduction, this is a film about trickery and fraud, about lies. Tell it by the fireside or in a marketplace or in a movie, almost any story is almost certainly some kind of lie. But not this time. No, this is a promise. During the next hour, everything you'll hear from us is really true and based on solid facts (Orson Welles, *F for Fake*, 1973).

Considering Goffman's writing style is not just a curiosity or an academic exercise, but it focuses on a core problem of ethnographic research: the problem of data elaboration and construction.

As Howard Becker has recently stated: 'Social scientists combine three components – data, evidence, and ideas (sometimes called 'theories' or 'concepts') – to convince themselves, their colleagues, maybe even a wider audience, that they have found something true, something more than a coincidence or an accident' (Becker 2017: 16). In the case of a survey, data generally consist of marks produced by the people who tick a box on a questionnaire, in the case of fieldwork, data consist of marks social scientists make when they write down what they've seen or heard. So in standard

[17] For the more on the analogy between Goffman's and Kafka's gaze see also Cerulo (2005).

quantitative research, data gathering and analysis are the central phases of the research design, while writing the final research report can be considered a complementary activity. On the contrary, writing an ethnographic report involves both the data construction stage, since is in the act of writing that the ethnographer uses to give shape to his first hand experience, and the data analysis and interpretation as well[18]. Goffman's 'hard use' of fictional literature can therefore be interpreted as a provocative choice which unmasks the ambivalence of 'realistic narrations', since realism is a literary genre which is based on rhetorical conventions like 'the narrating self'. However, the adoption of realistic effects alone cannot prove by itself the evidence of the actual presence of the ethnographer on the field[19] (see Becker, 2017). As Clifford Geertz would remark, every writings is in the end a *fictio*:

> To construct actor-oriented descriptions of the involvement of a Berber chieftain, a Jewish merchant, and a French soldier with one another in 1912 Morocco is clearly an imaginative act, not at all different from constructing similar descriptions of, say, the involvement with one another of a provincial French doctor, his silly, adulterous wife, and her feckless lover in nineteenth century France. In the latter case, the actors are represented as not having existed and the events as not having happened, while in the former they are represented as actual, or as having been so. […] The condition of their creation, and the point of it (to say nothing of the manner and the quality) differ. But the one is as much a fictio – 'a marking' – as the other (Geertz, 1973: 16).

Referring to Geertz's approach, Mitchell Duneier states: 'In depicting the social significance of the cockfight, Geertz admirably strives for a kind of

[18] It is known that according to Clifford Geertz (1973) ethnographic descriptions should not be just the result of a mere detached observation but they are required to be 'thick', which means that they involve extremely sensitive hermeneutic skills in order to give a detailed description of the complex web of social relation that constitute a culture: 'If ethnography is thick description and ethnographers those who are doing the describing question for any given example of it, whether field journal squib or a Malinowski-sized monograph, is whether it sorts winks form twitches and real winks from mimicked ones. It is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned descriptions, that we must measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers. It is not worth it, as Thoreau said, to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar' (Geertz, 1973: 17).

[19] An obsessive insistence on realistic style in the ethnographic report and on the great amount of detailed handwriting produced, often hides the ethnographer's sense of guilt for the lack of representativity in the statistical sense of his sample.

"ethnographic completeness". This is not a naïve realism that promises "the story" or life "as it is," but rather a pragmatic approach to doing the best one can, given the limits of ethnographic method' (Duneier, 2011: 4).

Consequentially Goffman's ethnographic style could be interpreted as an attack either on the taken for granted assumptions of traditional ethnography, or on the hierarchies and legitimate boundaries between social worlds. He violates boundaries between highbrow culture and lowbrow culture, between sociology and literature, but the most disquieting is his violation of the borderline that divides reality from fiction.

In conclusion I would like to consider a last form of irreverence: Goffman's irreverence toward his readers. This article focused on two generally recognized characteristics when one talks about Erving Goffman: his discreet and reserved attitude combined with an irreverent and caustic spirit. What the reserved and discreet tones hide is a subtle but desecrating and penetrating critical attitude. Irreverence towards readers has not to be assumed as impoliteness or as a sort of posh intellectual attitude. I am referring to a 'constructive' irreverence that pushes the reader to develop a critical reflexive gaze on social phenomena. As the best sociology does, Goffman's writings do not give easy answers, they avoid a 'scientific' framing of the taken for granted idle talk. They force readers to ask themselves questions, to develop a systematic doubt. Once again this aim is achieved also through the writing style. Not only does Goffman cite literature as source material, he also develops a virtuoso style in the use of metaphors: a technique introduced in sociology by his master, Everett Hughes; 'the Goffmanesque touch is achieved by what Kenneth Burke has called 'perspective by incongruity'. This is the trick of taking a word usually applied in one setting and transferring it to another setting' (Lofland, 1980). By looking at the familiar through a new set of concepts, the taken for granted becomes problematic. The estrangement effect is produced by listing subjects who apparently do not seem to share anything in common like criminals, children, comics, primitives, pilots, patients and saboteurs, as it is shown in the following excerpts: 'The important thing about criminals, – and other desperados such as children, comics, saboteurs, and the certified insane – is not what they do or why they do it' (Goffman, 1971: 216). 'It was then and still is my belief that any group of persons – prisoners, primitive, pilots, or patients - develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it […]' (Goffman, 1961: 25).

Another way to unveil what is taken for granted consists in applying an incongruous reading model to social phenomena; like the use of the dramaturgical pattern as a key to study every day interaction or the notion of 'professional career' applied to the steps in the life of a mental patients, or the

use of technical expressions taken from the game of bridge, or from the slang of spies, to describe social encounters. The assumption of a new perspective by incongruity adds literary flair to Goffman's writings, but it has a disquieting effect on the ordinary reader.

One could object that, in perspective, Goffman's style is not so radical, particularly if it is compared to the new post-modern turn in Symbolic Interactionism. In the last few years many interactionists have introduced alternative ways of writing and have expressed a renewed urge for radical experimentations. Andrea Fontana (2001) reports of sociological experiments in the adoption of different kinds of artistic forms which vary from poetries to short novels, from conversations to photo reportages and personal narrations, from dramas and ethno-dramas to played and improvised readings, from personal exhibitions to multimedia visualizations (see also Toscano, 2008). On the other hand not all the postmodern radicals introduce something really new in sociology, and provocative tones sometimes are ends in themselves[20]. This never happens in Goffman's work since his discretion and his irreverence not only sharpen his eye, but furthermore, they continue to make his gaze relevant and innovative.

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[20] For more on the relation between Goffman's sociology and postmodern developments of symbolic interactionism see Schwalbe (1993).

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