

Social performance and presentation of self

**Key thinkers: Erving Goffman & Jeffrey C.
Alexander**

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Course instructions

- ▶ **Position paper deadline - 16.4.**
- ▶ Chose a recent video or a public appearance of a public figure (e.g. politician, celebrity, YouTuber) and analyse it using performance theory discussed in class.
- ▶ Do not choose movies/tv shows

- ▶ Mini-conference - think about the topic of your presentation and **consult your topic with one of the lecturers by 9.4.**

- ▶ **Class on understanding gender in interactions on 16.4. is off**

Erving Goffman (1922-1982)

- ▶ *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956)
- ▶ Examines how individuals present themselves and their activity in everyday life to others
 - ▶ Goal is “**impression management**” - controlling the impression others have of us as well as the conduct/response of others
- ▶ Stage - Actors - Audience
- ▶ Effective performances are those in which the audience acts as if the individual has conveyed the desired impression
- ▶ Both ‘actors’ and the audience project a definition of the situation that appears before them; actors through their performance, audience through their response



- ▶ Performance - “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (p. 8)
- ▶ **Front** - part of individual’s performance which functions to define the situation for the observers (intentional or unwitting)
 - ▶ **Setting** (i.e., scenery, props)
 - ▶ **Personal front** - elements of expressive equipment attributed to the performer himself (clothing, sex, age, rank, facial expressions, speech patterns)
 - ▶ **‘Appearance’** - stimuli which define the performers social status or the social activity he is engaging in
 - ▶ **‘Manner’** - stimuli signifying the interaction role the performer expects to play (e.g., arrogant, apologetic, angry...)
- ▶ Audience expect coherence between different elements of performance
- ▶ When different routines (performances) employ the same front, the social front becomes institutionalized, creating a set of stereotyped expectations and meaning - the front becomes a ‘collective representation’

Regions & region behavior

- ▶ **Region** - “any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception” (p. 66) (e.g., classroom, hallway); ‘perception’ not only in visual terms
 - ▶ **Front region** - place where a performance is given
 - ▶ **Politeness vs. decorum** - how one engages with audience vs. how the performer behaves himself in front of audience
 - ▶ Decorum is dictated by moral and instrumental requirements
 - ▶ **Back region** (a.k.a. backstage) - space where impression made in the front region (i.e., during the performance) is “knowingly contradicted” and where the impressions are “openly constructed” (p. 69)
 - ▶ Regions are not universal; they are defined based on the purpose they serve during an individual performance
 - ▶ Spaces that serve no purpose during a performance - ‘the outside’
 - ▶ Outsiders
- ▶ **“impression management”** requires maintaining control over regions

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-m4gFdrQ8M&t=314s>

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- ▶ Try to identify individual elements of performance.
- ▶ What represents the front region and the back region in The Circle?
- ▶ Who are the actors and who are audience members? What about the outsiders?
- ▶ If Goffman lived in the age of social media what element of the performance of self do you think he would it belong to?

Jeffrey C. Alexander (1947-)

- ▶ Founding figure of **cultural sociology**, a.k.a. the **Strong Program**
- ▶ To believe in the possibility of a “cultural sociology” is to subscribe to the idea that *every action, no matter how instrumental, reflexive or coerced vis-a-vis its external environments, is embedded to some extent in a horizon of affect and meaning* (Alexander 1998).
- ▶ Characteristics of the Strong Program
 - ▶ Culture as an “independent variable” capable of “shaping actions and institutions, providing inputs every bit as vital as more material or instrumental forces” (Alexander & Smith, 2003, p. 12) – **autonomy of culture**
 - ▶ Culture is not defined by social life, rather it takes part in defining it
 - ▶ **Thick description of texts** (Geertz) and **structural hermeneutics**
 - ▶ **Causal specificity** – specifying mechanisms through which culture does its work



Performance and Power (2011)

▶ Cultural pragmatics

- ▶ “Individuals and collectivities strategically direct their actions and mobilize all their available resources, but their instrumental power usually depends on success of a cultural kind. This does not mean that the explanation of their success should be purely symbolic. It means that pragmatic and symbolic dimensions are intertwined” (p. 78)

▶ Macro-sociological model of social action as cultural performance

- ▶ **Cultural performance** is “the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation.” (p. 28)

▶ Goal: psychological identification and cultural extension (similarly to sacred rituals)

- ▶ Creating an emotional connection between audience, actor, and text, is required if the cultural meanings are to be projected to an audience

Fusion, de-fusion, re-fusion

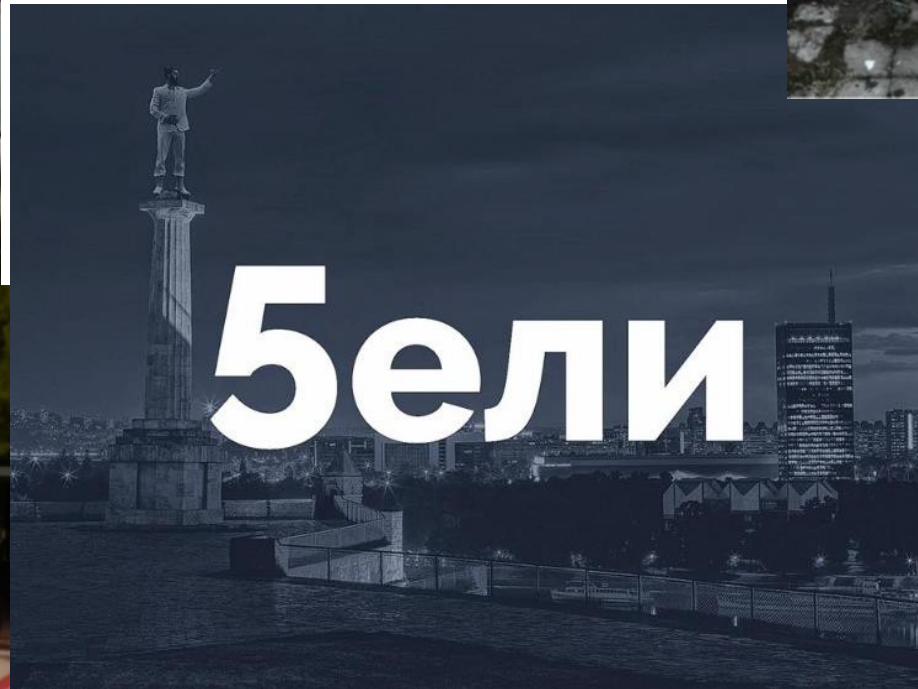
- ▶ Depending on the complexity of the collective organization, social and cultural parts are more or less segmented and differentiated, and the elements of a social performance are more or less fused
 - ▶ Simple collectivity = less segmentation and greater fusion of elements
 - ▶ Complex collectivity = greater segmentation and weaker fusion (i.e., elements of a performance are de-fused)
- ▶ To be effective in complex societies, social performances must go through a process of re-fusion (i.e., must become more ritual-like)
- ▶ If identification and cultural transmission have been established, the elements of a performance have been **fused**

Elements of Social Performance

- ▶ **Systems of collective representation - background symbols and foreground scripts**
 - ▶ **Systems of collective representation - actors' symbol-bearing world(s)** from which they draw upon for symbolic referents that inform their performance
 - ▶ Made up of deep **background of collective representations** and **foreground scripts** (i.e., referential texts)
- ▶ **Actors** - the one(s) performing and putting collective representations into practice
 - ▶ Literature vs. theatre (walking and talking)
- ▶ **Audience/observers** - evaluating performances; have the agency to reject it
 - ▶ Actors attempt to achieve identification by conveying authenticity

- ▶ **Means of symbolic production** - venue of the performance, expressive equipment, material resources
- ▶ **Mise-en-scène** - “putting into the scene”; performances must be directed (can happen spontaneously, without a “director”)- to walk and talk a performance must be “sequenced temporally and choreographed spatially” (p. 32)
- ▶ **Social power** - social performances are dependent on the distribution of power within a society which determine the access to means of symbolic production (who gets to act, what can be acted, who can observe)

Case study - Ljubiša Preletačević Beli



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEhWOa-D3Wo&t=12s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTidn2dBYbY>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcLdW7K86Gg>