The (In)definition of Reality:
Reframing and Contested Topsight

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I shall put forward here a definition of reality, or perhaps a particular take or perspective on reality. *Reality is what happens between the lines.*

But perhaps reality as such cannot be represented, or defined. It has to be defined with respect to a specific activity, and it has to be represented from a given perspective, a selective one. In this attempt at a definition I am proposing a perspective by the very fact of emphasizing what happens between the lines—instead of emphasizing, for instance, the lines themselves. The lines might stand for "what is" obviously there, reality as presupposed or unproblematic, reality as something shared by its inhabitants. But an interactional perspective on reality must go beyond that portion of reality which is shared (or "true") for all interactants, in order to give a fuller portrait of those aspects of reality which are not shared, which may be false or nonexistent to some of the participants, or which may be perceived only by some of them.

Still, perhaps we do need a definition of reality which is more comprehensive, more balanced and less paradoxical. I will therefore modify my original statement, and further specify that reality is the play, the dynamic interaction, or the dialectic, between what happens for the public record, and what happens between the lines. Or again, reality is constituted by the interactional play between shared frames of action (those "lines" which are unproblematically on the page) and other frames which, though they may be active for some of the participants, are not generally shared. Reality is a play of realities—the explicit one, and other secret, discreet or alternative realities which coexist in a given situation.

Reality, then, lends itself to a definition (although perhaps the definition is not actually written on any labels or captions). It is defined by presuppositions, by habits, by socially regulated modes of interaction, by institutions, routines, scripts, and frames of interactional communication. These frames, schemas, and presuppositions have been studied by theorists of cognition, of pragmatics, of interpersonal communication, such as Bateson, Schank and Abelson, Sperber and Wilson, etc. It is perhaps Erving Goffman's frame analysis that provides the most comprehensive and most suggestive version of the structure of reality—including the structure of multiple interacting realities.

Goffman provides a powerful model for the analysis of interactional reality: dramatism. Human interaction is organized in principle by shared templates which define and narrativize the situation and provide roles for the participants. It is through these shared templates or frames that we are able to shape reality as to what is at stake, what is happening, in a given moment or situation. What happens (officially) at any moment is, for instance, a meeting at the workplace, a concert, a party, a friendly conversation over a beer: any of these archetypal

scripts which orchestrate social reality inasmuch as it is *living theatre*—theatre played by social actors in real-life dramatic companies, and in a social space which has a theatrical structure. This is the perspective on social life provided by Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* in *Interaction Ritual,* or in *Strategic Interaction.*

What takes place between the lines is what Goffman calls a secondary channel—it is an alternative strip of activity which could also be described as a superimposed narrative line—a subplot which does not involve all of the participants in the main frame of activity or primary channel, but only some of them—or perhaps just one, the observer of that hidden dimension of reality which is taking place between the lines, the one who sees what the other participants cannot see—those aspects of reality that escape them and are, in a sense, both there and not there.

It is within this structural set of perspectival relationships that we can describe the concept of *topsight.* Topsight is the privileged perspectival position enjoyed by those participants who see what others don't see, the position of those observers who are aware of the secondary as well as the primary channel of interactional activity. Topsight need not be an absolute position, since there may be a number of secondary channels or sub-frames imposed on the main frame of activity, and there is no telling that one of them has absolute dominance over the others. Topsight, then, is relative to other interactant's lack of awareness of a given secondary frame, within a comprehensive frame of activity.

To take a simple example, the main frame may be provided by a meeting at work. The participants are all aware of each other's presence. However, their roles are, as far as the meeting is concerned, those of spectators or listeners, given that just now the boss is doing a presentation. It may well happen that two participants at the meeting may begin to interact, whispering about their plans for the evening, while the boss preaches on and all the others dutifully listen. Now these two employees have assumed a different role in the social theatre—they are not merely there in their official capacity; they have assumed a temporary role as private individuals. Just now we'll not investigate any further whether they are lifting their official mask for a moment, or merely donning an additional mask. However that may be, reality multiplies itself and acquires another level of articulation through this secret interactional move, a move which is defined as secondary by its very location within the wider frame within which it is embedded.

But if this secret or discreet piece of interaction is perceived and spied upon by a third party—by another employee who feigns she is not listening, or, why not, by the reader of my example—then the structure of reality is no longer doubled, but tripled, or multiplied, in a game of interactional perspectives. Much of the structure of a narrative account of this meeting, or indeed of any interactional encounter, would consist in a description of the perspectival relationships among the agents as they are established and new dimensions of reality appear, or in the gradual and artistic unfolding of existing perspectival relationships

which reveals the existing interactional and cognitive situation to a reader or a virtual observer.

Let us examine another example of the observational frame in an analysis of narrative structures. Take this poem from Stephen Crane's *The Black Riders* (IX), a micro-narrative in its own right:

> **I STOOD UPON A HIGH PLACE,**
> **AND SAW, BELOW, MANY DEVILS**
> **RUNNING, LEAPING,**
> **AND CAROUSING IN SIN.**
> **ONE LOOKED UP, GRINNING,**
> **AND SAID, "COMRADE! BROTHER!"**

Here the narrator is standing "upon a high place", which we might take as symbolizing his perspectival and discursive topsight in the textual structure, above the other characters. The devils are involved in their own interactional frame ("running, leaping, and carousing in sin"), and in the first sentence of the micro-narrative they are unaware that they are being observed. The narrator, the "I", commands two strips of activity: he is aware, like the devils, of the more widely shared frame, the devils' carousal. He is also aware of another strip of activity, namely his own awareness of the situation—the fact that the party is being watched from above by a non-participant, and the devils' ignorance of this. The second frame is more limited as regards participation; in principle the "I" is the only one taking part in it. The devils' party has become for him an objectified event, a spectacle which, however disgusting, can be safely enjoyed by a spectator who contemplates it from the outside; this interactional strip is self-enclosed as far as the devils are concerned, and the frame is like a theatrical fourth wall which prevents the devils from taking part in the focalizer's observational frame. Note that the frame is for the devils the very limit of reality—in a certain sense is not even a frame because for them *there is nothing outside the frame.*

Of course, the perspectival structure posited by the first sentence is undone or deconstructed in the second sentence, which provides a narrative resolution through frame-breaking. Although frames are constantly being broken, any frame-breaking has a somewhat paradoxical air about it (Genette's *métalepses* come to mind), and indeed two different realities, or two different dimensions of reality are meeting through these frame-breakings, and a new reality has to emerge dialectically. In our example, the upright and dignified verticality of the "I" is threatened by the piercing gaze of the devil, which, ascending upwards from below, and breaking through the perspectival containers, seems to threaten the very purity of heaven, and to sully with its foulness the very soul of the reader—because it was the reader, gazing down on the words and letters of the poem, those black devils involved in their own game—(cf. *The Black Riders,* XLVI)—it was the reader who was "I," towering over the page, looking down, vicariously, over the narrator's shoulder. The reader, too, thought he was safe in his own extratextual frame, but he is safe no more, because the text can gaze back at him and the devil recognizes him for his *brother*. Even a *sister* can feel a

jolt at the invasion of her private frame, and at her being demoted from her privileged topsight.

Reality is suddenly reorganized, reworked—because human reality is an interactional reality, managed through frames and their operations, through their being established and operated, through their recyclings and displacements, and through their rearrangements, dissolutions and sudden merges.

Stephen Crane's text might be further analysed along these lines. But our concern is now with the notion of frame itself, and its role in the managing of reality through attention. Note that in this example, we have called the devils' party the main frame, on the criterion that it is the more generally shared one. There is a potential ambiguity here, however, because the narrator's observational frame is more potent in another sense—precisely because it is not generally shared, because it is hidden, it makes for dominance, and is the "outer" frame in its own perspectival structure, the comprehensive observational situation which includes an enclosed object of observation. Still, the observer's frame, while it provides the outermost frame, could not exist without an object which is framed by it; in this sense it is subordinate to the devils' pandemonic party, i.e. to the most widely shared interactional frame, or primary channel. It is advisable to keep in mind this perspectival ambivalence. The perspectives of the many provide the general interactional game on which the dominant perspectives of the few are built as a second story. But this secondary or embedded story encompasses within its perspectival structure, quite paradoxically, the general frame as a field dominated by the observers' topsight, by a viewpoint which itself escapes observation, or tries to.

In our account, the subject who perceives most of these interactional frames and perspectival relationships is that silent woman, the observer of the employees' small talk at the meeting; or the implied author of *The Black Riders*, designing a narrative structure in which narrative topsight is paradoxically questioned. It is such cognitive (or narrative) subjects that provide our model for cognitive topsight, those who perceive most dimensions of reality— the "I"s who (in our account) observe the interactional landscape from a high place, the watchtower of topsight, or of hindsight, as the case may be. This "I" who stands highest, or who comes last of all, is *the observer who observes those-who-believe-that-they-are-observing-without-being-observed.* It is a quasi-divine perspectival topsight; a misleading one, therefore, and one which is analyzed by Lacan in his famous seminar on Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Purloined Letter". (This structure invites recursion, and I have pursued this line of analysis further in my paper "Acritical Criticism, Critical Criticism"). We have seen that Crane's poem, too, may be read as a miniature model of this deconstructive move.

Yet another example. We converse with someone; we listen and watch her face and body movements. What she *says* is one thing—a function of the officially established activity, whether work or leisure. On-record discourse is the main frame or primary channel—it is what is said. But what is *shown* may be something else. We watch a multimedia performance—involving proxemics,

intonation, gestures, kinesics, paralanguage, style, eye contact, interactional rhythmn. The body and its theatricality, the secondary channel, is often more worth attending to; it tells the truth which is half-concealed by the words. Or, if the encounter resists interpretation, at least it is there that we try to disclose the elusive reality of the matter; not in the scripted words, but in the full theatrical spectacle, and especially in the gestures, or sub-gestures. Topsight is here an object of desire, a virtual position defining cognitive control, but one which must be imagined rather than fully inhabited.

Perhaps we should provide a new definition of *the reality effect,* to use Barthes' phrase, or a different approach to that effect. As I see it, the reality effect is not so much where Barthes located it in that famous article (in irrelevant or non-significant details—although it is there too, to some extent); it is to be found, first and foremost, in that play of perspectives where two different realities clash or come to terms with each other; two (or more) realities defined by different interactional frames. The anomic interface between these realities is the battleground or the sports field where reality is managed and organized. To be sure, it is being interactionally managed all the time, but it is in the meeting of games of in the space between them (is it baseball or football that we are playing here?) that roles must be reworked and rules must be improvised, at the very least to the extent of preventing general embarrassment. It is in such dramaturgically uncertain situations, and they happen all the time, that reality falls apart. And while it is being managed and restructured it reveals itself for what it is, a set of interactionally organized reality games which sustain the edifice of appearances. Reality at its rawest also reveals itself as an indeterminate no man's land between those games, and as the social engineering which builds briges between them, in a variety of styles ranging from the pitiful to the masterful.

There are many realities, possibly more than our philosophy would allow for, but they are no more equal than Orwell's animals. The dominant reality is the official, publicly recognized one, organized into familiar interactional ceremonies which are universally or at least widely shared. It must be acknowledged to have a degree of public priority, and an authority which appears to be the authority of evidence itself. Actually, such primary realities seem to be so solid that we usually forget that they are a function of the theatre of everyday life. More specific reality games (e.g. a theatrical function embedded in everyday life) seem by contrast transitory, obviously fictional, and they contribute to the reality effect of the primary frame: if *Hamlet* is a play, surely I'm outside the frame and I'm *not* in a play myself? The authority of the real is thereby reinforced, even though it will appear that this force of the obvious is generated by a perspectival or structural effect.

Still—or, what is more,— in contrast with this primary frame of everyday life, Channel 1 of the interactional life-world if you want, the secondary frames which are built upon it, Channel 2, Channel 3, etc., also have an experiential priority of their own. A secondary frame opens up a provisional strip of reality in the world, and this reality may acquire a special intensity, enticing us to an intense involvement in it. Secondary realities may be just as immersive as any first-

degree life-world. Channels 2 or 3, moreover, enjoy an enhanced immediacy derived precisely from our active involvement in world-building—from their being in contrast to the primary level of reality, and from the continued existence of that primary reality as a backdrop, at once a background noise and a ground floor on which to build the upper stories. If our conversation takes place on the second floor, it is that floor which provides the immediate ground for our feet, however much the structure of the whole story may rest on the foundations of the first floor. After all, the ground floor may be built on an invisible basement, and in the last analysis the earth itself is a groundless basement floating within a system of inexplicable forces.

Unofficial or secondary realities, secret interactions and provisional fictions, therefore, do have a primacy of their own, an ontological priority which derives from the experiential priority of reality-management. The interactional difficulty of managing many frames and modes of reality without losing sight of our shared life-world provides us with a never-ending challenge, one which allows us to inhabit life as a slippery space of intense semiosis, a no-man's land (nor no-woman's neither) of interactional risk and uncertainty, rather than a well-rehearsed and predictable repertory play. Authentic experience is defined as such between the acts, and behind the scenes in the theatre of everyday life.

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