4.8: Dramaturgy

Dramaturgy is a sociological perspective on identity that employs a theatrical metaphor to explore issues of identity formation and reformation. As such, dramaturgy assumes a place, a moment, and an audience to whom the identity is being presented. This places identity formation both in a social context (such as a classroom, a chatroom, a family, etc) as well as at a particular point in time. This implies that identities can shift with varying contexts and moments.

The key aspect to dramaturgy, however, is the concept of the audience and an individual’s relationship with that audience in that specific time and place. As with impressions management, the individual actor must control their presentation of self so as to evoke from this audience a desired reaction to that presentation. So you can probably start to see elements of both impressions management (reacting to audiences) and looking-glass self (imagining the audience) within dramaturgy.

However, dramaturgy extends the metaphor of the stage even further, and this is where things get particularly interesting. A key element of dramaturgy is the concept of the front- and backstage. In face-to-face interactions, the front- and backstage are two related but separate areas, where the front is the space in which the performance of self takes place, and the back is where that performance is prepared. For example, to borrow Goffman’s own example (1977), for a waiter, the frontstage is the restaurant floor, where the waiter performs their identity as waiter for the diners. The backstage is the kitchen, where that identity is relaxed, until another order is up. As the waiter passes through the kitchen doors, they become the waiter once more, playing their assigned role.

It may be useful to look at one specific communicative arena, online social networking sites, from the perspective of dramaturgy, and ask the question, where is the backstage in an online performance of self? The internet blurs the line between frontstage and backstage, and thus problematizes it. An individual can be simultaneously front- and backstage – their World of Warcraft avatar, for example, can be performing to an audience, but at the same time you, as the extension of that avatar, can be alone in your room in front of the computer (maybe making snide comments about the
people your avatar is talking to in a chat window). The backstage and the frontstage co-exist simultaneously instead of concurrently. Another good example of this is when the virtual boundaries between front and backstage break down—like when someone is chatting in two windows, and mistakenly sends a comment meant for one recipient to another, or when someone tries to send a friend a private message via Facebook Messenging, but ends up posting it on a public wall instead.

Whether online or off, the goal of a dramaturgical performance of self is the same—to project to a known audience a desired and desirable perception of self, and to maintain that dramatic portrayal in a consistent manner. Whether you are playing the role solo or in a team, these goals remain the same.

Dramaturgy acknowledges that identities are pluralistic—we have many identities that we put on and off as we move through time and space, and enter and exit different social contexts. As such, to achieve these goals, one has to be able to quickly switch and negotiate roles, or performative masks, as they move between different social contexts.

But as you can see, there is a lot of overlap between different forms of impressions management, and they are by no means mutually exclusive. In fact, they work best when applied as a suite of concepts to address questions of identity in social contexts. For example, in the next section, we’ll apply some of these ideas to the area of fandom.

Discussion

1. In the theater actors routinely perform different roles. Do public figures, celebrities, political parties, or corporate bodies, in the media, alter their role playing according to the context or audience?
2. Find an example then describe, and give possible reasons for, each role your subject ‘performs’.

Reference: