

What Is Going On? An Analysis of the Interaction Order

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Abstract: Seeing sociology visually adds a sense of *realness* to the viewer compared to only reading sociological texts. In this paper, I aim to provide an example of how a single scene from a feature film can be utilized as a practical and meaningful means to analyze a social situation and to help students of sociology to grasp key features of Goffman's theory of interaction order. More precisely, the main aims of the paper are 1) to illustrate Goffman's theory of the interaction order by identifying acts of disruption and alignment in interaction through a film clip; and 2) to attempt to analyze, in a Goffmanian sense, what is really *going on* in the situational interaction. The scene is from the 2013 American movie *August: Osage County* and follows a dinner of immediate family in the wake of the funeral of the hostess's late husband. The normative and civilized interaction of the meal is, however, jeopardized by the hostile and provocative mood of the hostess, as she repeatedly disrupts the interaction order with attempts to mock and/or uncover the hidden and vulnerable truths of the immediate members of her family, exemplifying her power status in the particular situation. The dinner guests, however, try to overlook and resist the provocation of the hostess and stick to their predetermined roles to save and sustain their idealized selves (their faces) and the interaction order (the faces of others). In doing so they, on the one hand, discard the uncomfortable truths acclaimed by the hostess and, on the other, explain the hostess's provocative actions in terms of their claim that she is unwell and in need of medical attention. Thus, the attacked dinner guests in the scene align more alliance to the interaction order than to truth itself.

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Rules for behavior while in the presence of others and by virtue of the presence of others are the rules that make orderly face-to-face communication of a linguistic kind possible.

[Goffman 2005:148]

Symbolic interactionists argue that the most fruitful approach to understanding the actions of people is through micro-level investigations of the interactions of people within the context of a situation (Blumer 1969; Collins 2004). The argument states that it is within such micro-sociological analysis of the face-to-face interactions of people that larger societal norms and customs of society can be identified, thus providing a link between the micro and macro levels (Rawls 1987; Berger and Luckmann 1991; Verhoeven 1993:6; Collins 2004; Tavory and Fine 2020). That line of sociological inquiry centers on what the renowned sociologist Erving Goffman (1983) referred to as the interaction order (see also Rawls 1987).

People's behavior in situations rests on predetermined rituals that, on the one hand, make social interaction possible, but, on the other hand, constrain the actions of individuals as such rituals compel people to act not only towards their sentiments but under the expected norms of behavior of a particular situation. When people comply with those predetermined norms of behavior, the expected line of action is set, as everyone within the given situation accepts everyone else's line of motivation and action. That kind of mutual acceptance seems to be the basic structural feature of social interaction, making social interaction smooth and functional. Thus, those who partake in social interaction represent a "team," responsible for staging a successful "show" (Goffman 1990).

The mutual norms of action in a given situation only hold if all those involved play their part according to the script of the interaction order, which, however, is not always the case. Disruptions, or breaches in interaction, are common as people do not always stick to their prescribed lines of action. Such disruptions tend to unsettle the interaction order and can make people feel vulnerable and uncomfortable, and even ashamed. Disruptions in interaction can further endanger the whole encounter and lead to the breakup of a situational interaction. People who experience disruptions in interaction thus rely on a set of predetermined strategies and rituals as they try to align their actions to counter the disruption and reinstate some kind of normalcy of order in the interaction, in line with the interaction order. Such mutual dependency in social interaction can be described as social "dance" in which everyone has a common focus of attention, making conversational moves and counter-moves according to the moves of others to maintain a collective performance in a given situation.

Symbolic interactionists have been interested in the dynamics of face-to-face interactions of people within given situations where they have, in particular, contrasted successful interactions with those that were strained or violated due to the disruption of the interaction order (Goffman 2005:20). Randall Collins (2004:20), for instance, stated how "the extreme instance highlights the mechanism that produces the normal." And, in his series of books on the methodology of the social sciences, Howard S. Becker (2007), accordingly, argues that an effective method to understand the normative workings of society is to look for opposites that contrast what normally is to be expected.

In this context, Tavory and Fine (2020) have argued that micro-sociological theorists have overempha-

sized how actors make use of alignments in interaction, but they have to a lesser degree focused on the motives of disruptions of the interaction order that, in turn, would propose broader cultural issues of situational interactions. Thus, to illustrate how Goffman's theory of the interaction order works, it is important to provide examples and analysis both of how actors disrupt the interaction order in a particular situation and of the subsequent attempts of other actors within a situation to align the interaction and reinstate normalcy in line with the interaction order.

This paper can be defined as a study of local sociology of action (Tavory and Fine 2020). The analysis of the paper builds on the examination of a twenty-minute scene from the 2013 movie *August: Osage County*. More precisely, the scene, which follows a funeral dinner of those closest to the family patriarch, shows how the newfound widow, and hostess of the dinner (in particular), repeatedly disrupts the interaction order by her hostile and provocative conduct towards the dinner guests and thus breaking the norms of behavior she is supposed to maintain during the dinner. The unstable widow makes a *scene* and acts as if she was trying to pick a fight with everyone at the dinner table, and the scene unfolds to illustrate how the dinner guests try to preserve the rituals of the meal and to save face, and the interaction order in general, by submitting to, or sidestepping, the widow's attempts at provocation for the show to go on (Goffman 2005).

The main aims of the paper are 1) to illustrate Goffman's theory of the interaction order by identifying acts of disruption and alignment in a situational interaction through a film clip; and 2) to attempt to analyze, in a Goffmanian sense, what is really *going on* in the situational interaction, with further impli-

cations of the broader social themes and issues of the interaction.

The Interaction Order

The mere participation of people in social interaction is associated with some kind of risk. Just as people can face danger when encountered in hallways, elevators, and alleys, people can face danger in any situation of social interaction, in particular to their notion of selves (Goffman 1990; 2005). Social situations thus may force people to put their selves on the line, with the danger of being exposed, exploited, and/or violated in the presence of others (an audience).

When persons come into one another's immediate physical presence, they become accessible to each other in unique ways. There arise the possibilities of physical and sexual assault, of accosting and being dragged into unwanted states of talk, of offending and importuning through the use of words, of transgressing certain territories of the self of the other, of showing disregard and disrespect for the gathering present and the social occasion under whose auspices the gathering is held. [Goffman 2005:147]

Due to the instability and potential dangers of participating in social interactions, established lines of appropriate action or strategies have emerged to facilitate interaction, representing the interaction order. Although Goffman did not propose a systematic theory of the interaction order, his theory of the interaction order is built on several of his works (1961a; 1963; 1974; 1981; 1990; 2005). The main components of such a theory have been noted as being 1) the social self needs to be maintained through social interactions, which, in turn, places constraints on the individual and provides them with a motivation of compliance; 2) these constraints define the interaction order and

defy social structures; 3) the interaction order generates meaning for the sake of the order; and 4) people commit themselves to the interaction order for moral reasons (Rawls 1987). The interaction order is thus based on pre-existing rituals and the meanings people bring to a particular situation in which people are deployed by frames of meaning, forms of talk, and symbolic gestures, which are deemed appropriate and necessary for successful social interaction (Goffman 1961a; 1963; 1974; 1981; 1990; 2005).

Participants in a given situation represent a team collectively responsible for successful interaction and a showing of a good performance. Goffman used the metaphor of a staged theater play to describe social interaction as dramaturgical, as our daily encounters consist, on the one hand, of our backstage behavior, which refers to our solitary experiences, and on the other hand, of our front stage performance, where all are supposed to play their part in a situation before an audience, according to the proposed script of a given circumstance (2005). The main objective of such a team is to “sustain the definition of the situation that its performance fosters” (Goffman 1990:141). That means that the team members need to accept certain moral obligations to sustain the line the team has taken and cannot exploit their presence to stage their show. Adhering to the line of the interaction order thus protects one against risks and rewards those who toe the line as it reaffirms their worth. In this sense, Lawler (2014:125) has described the interaction order as sacred:

Interactions are “sacred” in the sense that, like religious ceremonies, they give us a sense of our social belonging and our sacredness as persons. Involvement in interaction...is an act of social worship and social binding. To disrupt the interaction is to disrupt society.

Thus, people in interactions work within a specific framework of appearances (Goffman 1990:242) as their involvement in interaction is an interlocking obligation. When one person breaks the collective frame of reference in a given situation, it affects everyone else present. Participants, therefore, cannot “denounce their team” by breaking that interlocking obligation, which serves as a base for the interaction order (Goffman 1990:208). Goffman (1983:5) thus sees social interaction as an order:

An order of activity, the interaction one, more than any other perhaps, is, in fact, orderly, and this orderliness is predicated on a large base on shared cognitive presuppositions, if not normative ones, and self-sustained restraints.

People are expected to play out their anticipated roles in a given situation, where they are supposed to act not only towards their agenda, to maintain their face in situational social interaction, but they are also expected to sustain a standard of considerateness for others present, where they go to great lengths to save the face of others if needed (Goffman 2005:10). That pressure to comply with anticipated roles craves discipline from everyone present in social interaction. One needs to “suppress his spontaneous feelings in order to give the appearance of sticking to the affective line” (Goffman 1990:211), for instance, when faced with inappropriate acts or hostility. A good demeanor is what is required of an actor. In this sense, situations have their moral character.

Disruption and Aligning the Interaction Order

The mutual considerateness of people in social interaction, that is, their motivation of sticking to the script of the interaction order, is, however, not always how things turn out. Disruptions of the

interaction order, or what Goffman referred to as breaking the frame of appropriate action, threatens the whole encounter, as it can lead to uneasiness and emotional vulnerability of those involved in the interaction and deteriorate further, causing the breakup of the situation (Goffman 1963; 1974). For instance, ethnomethodologists, such as Harold Garfinkel (1967), used breaching experiments to show the detrimental effects and social dangers of disruption upon social interaction. Due to the potential dangers of disruption of the interaction, people go to great lengths to counteract such breaches by applying “remedial interchanges” (Goffman 1963)—to reinstate the collective sense of alignment and normalcy of a situation and, more theoretically, to preserve the interaction order. People attempt to do so by making use of specific tactics to avoid disruption, for instance, such as using silence to ignore the disruption (see: Perinbanayagam 2018:67), or to correct the disruption by applying a particular “face-work,” to save one’s face or the face of others, for instance, by applying humor to defuse the situation (Goffman 1990:210-11; 2005:5-46), or by “footing,” which means to redirect the inappropriate conversation into a different route (Goffman 1981:124-159). Thus, discipline requires one to save the line in a situation of inappropriate behavior of others so the show may go on.

Such alignment measures, or remedial interchanges, however, mean that people in interaction often need to put on false fronts and even be dishonest for a social interaction to run smoothly. Symbolic interactionists, in this sense, argue that deception in social interaction can, for pragmatic reasons, be a good thing as deceptions facilitate and maintain the interaction order—regardless of whether people’s behavior is ethically right or wrong (Scott 2012). Manning (2000:287) even argues that Goffman’s

book on *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is like a “textbook of deception.”

Thus, the interaction order builds on deceptions of actors in a situation as total frankness would jeopardize the interactional harmony (Scott 2012). The shared mission of people in social interaction is to protect and restore the interaction order when it is violated so that it does not unsettle the civilized communication and harmony of the situation and harm the social atmosphere (Griffero 2016). People, therefore, need to suppress their emotional responses when faced with inappropriate acts or hostility (Goffman 1990:210-211).

Tavory and Fine (2020:372) have, however, suggested that although disruptions of interaction are usually perceived as detrimental to communication, they are, at the same time, “essential to any interactional order.” That statement proposes the view that disruptions need not be a bad thing. Accordingly, most disruptive behavior does not lead to the breakdown of interactions due to alignment measures. Disruptions, however, provide opportunities to challenge the false fronts of actors and thus have the potential to deepen the actors’ relationships with one another in return. It is sometimes necessary to rock the boat. The attempts of a breacher to restore honesty, for instance, in place of deception, can be defined as *disruptions-for relations*, and therefore considered positive for interaction, instead of *disruptions-of relations*, which have negative consequences for the interaction (Tavory and Fine 2020). Disrupted interactions, however, need to hold the right balance between order and disorder since disrupting behaviors face the risk of relational rupture and the breakdown of interactional relationships and can even lead to violence (Frank III 1976; Tavory and Fine 2020).

Analyzing the Interaction Order

Collins (2004:3) argues that to understand human behavior, we need to use the situation rather than the individual as a starting point. Situations are key venues for the study of interactions as it is from situations that social scientists can uncover broader social forces (Cooley 1964). Goffman (1963) further saw the individual self as embedded in particular situations. It is from the dynamics of the situation that we can understand almost everything about individuals and their social worlds. An interactionist perspective, thus, sees the interactions and the individuals, as well as the passions and their persons, and not the other way around (Verhoeven 1993:6; Collins 2004).

While individuals make up the interaction chains, which carry social messages across situations, each situation has its emergent properties (see: Mead 2002). Situations have, in this sense, laws and processes of their own. Participants in situations are motivated to uphold their shared understanding of a given situation. The situation, thus, gives rise to a social atmosphere, which can be perceived as *good* or *bad* (Griffero 2016). The atmosphere is good—or it works—when everyone adheres to the expected line of action, but it can turn sour when people step out of line and make others uncomfortable. Disrupting the interaction order can thus bring shame, embarrassment, and discomfort to actors in a given situation and further jeopardize the whole encounter. Emerging discomfort and embarrassment of actors within a situation are socially contagious, spreading, once started, in ever-widening circles of the discomfiture of the whole encounter (Goffman 2005:106; McLean 2017).

Finally, sociologists have shown some interest in “celebrative social occasions” (Schneider 2019).

George Simmel, for instance, saw the meal as a primordial social institution, which consisted of sacred rituals (see: Frisby and Featherstone 1997:130-136). Frank III (1976) further argued how situations that may appear to be private and are lived as private, such as family dinners, can also be considered public since public rules apply to those settings and they, in turn, expose larger cultural themes. In other words, collective meals are situations that consist of interaction rituals within a confined social setting, making the meal an ideal situation to study social interaction.

Setting the Scene

A Visual Analysis

Howard S. Becker (2007) argues that representations of society can be found in various types of material, for instance, in popular fiction. Symbolic interactionists, in particular, have utilized such material to a considerable extent in their studies of people and societies. In this vein, Collins (2020:2) argues how various data serve to provide a fuller and more detailed experience of social situations and interactions than written texts:

By recording conversations and playing them back carefully, we can see whether conversations are in rhythm or not (people are in sync with each other, or out of sync); who gets the speaking turns; who sets the rhythm and who follows. By analyzing photos of faces and body postures, we have learned how to read emotions; we can see when people are confident or tense, anxious or depressed, angry or sad, and whether smiles are fake or genuine. In face-to-face interactions, we can discern who sets the mood, who is emotionally dominant, and when people emotionally clash.

Through the analysis of moving pictures, such as feature films as applied in this paper, we do not only encounter the spoken words, as when we read written texts, but we also experience the various tacit implications of the communication; the facial expressions, the looks and gazes, the body language, and the utterances of interactions (Goffman 1981; 1990; 2005; Perinbanayagam 2018:67). Moving pictures, therefore, combine those elements Collins described above and serve to enhance our understanding of individuals and society, more so than one-dimensional written texts—as Carl Couch and his colleagues proposed in the late 1970s (see: Katovich 2017).

One of the strengths of utilizing visual media for sociological analysis is that the researcher can slow the world down, freeze time, and study particular moments repeatedly through visual media content, to raise awareness of a certain topic at a particular time and place (Katovich 2017; Halldorsson 2018; 2020). Visual media also provide the researcher with access to multiple socio-historical sites, which they usually cannot access through other means. Visual material can build a bridge between lectures, research and textbooks, and the world as it is (Demerath III 1981). Even extreme experiences of fictional characters from popular media have been seen to resemble real-life experiences (Halldorsson and Katovich 2019). Visual material can thus be used to help those interested in people and societies in general to grasp the meaning of the often complex and hypothetical theories of social interaction and in comparison to their lives. It has been argued that it is through the analysis of visual media that the researcher can enhance their understanding of the relationship between the individual and society (Berger 1977; Katovich 1984; 2021; Prendergast 1986; Burton 1988; Tipton and Tiemann 1993; Harper 2012; Moskovich and Sharf 2012; Rose 2016).

The main aims of this paper are to make use of a scene from an American fiction film; to identify the interaction order by highlighting the scripted roles of participants in the scene, and, in particular, how they disrupt and restore the frames of interaction to analyze the social interaction of the specific situation, and to analyze the underlying meanings of what is really *going on* in the scene. However, as Goffman did not provide tangible methodological procedures on how to conduct micro-level analysis on the interaction order (Schneider 2019), this study can also be seen as a contribution to the methodological applications of such research. Thus, this paper proposes the underlying methodological question of what can be learned sociologically by seeing interaction in a film, in contrast to more conventional sociological analysis.

August: Osage County

August: Osage County is an American film released in 2013. The film is an adaptation of a Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Tracy Letts and was directed for the screen by John Wells. The film takes place in present-day rural Oklahoma in mid-summer and begins when a renowned poet in his seventies, Beverly Weston, suddenly disappears from his home, and his body is found shortly after; he had committed suicide. Beverly's suicide had left his unstable, cancer patient, and narcotic-addicted wife, Violet, alone at the family estate, only accompanied by newly hired house help, Misty, as their three grown-up daughters have all moved away. The film thereafter centers on the estranged relationship of Violet with her daughters, as with other members of the immediate family, who first come to the family estate due to the disappearance of Beverly and then stay for his funeral.

The scene in question takes place in the wake of the funeral where the immediate family is having a funeral dinner at the family estate.¹ The scene portrays the ritual of the meal (Frisby and Featherstone 1997:130-136) where the family sits around an oval table, loaded with the customary props and aesthetics of a well-served special occasion dinner, served by the house help.

The characters in the scene are:

- The widow, mother, and hostess, Violet Weston (Meryl Streep). Her late husband, Beverly (Sam Shepard), is not a direct participant in the scene, but he is referred to on several occasions;
- The eldest daughter, Barbara Weston-Fordham (Julia Roberts), her husband, Bill Fordham (Ewan McGregor), and their teenage daughter, Jean Fordham (Abigail Breslin);
- The second eldest daughter, Ivy Weston (Julianne Nicholson);
- The youngest daughter, Karen Weston (Juliette Lewis), and her new fiancé, Steve Huberbrecht (Dermot Mulroney);
- Violet's younger sister, Mattie Fae Aiken (Margo Martindale), her husband, Charles Aiken, Sr.—a.k.a. Charlie (Chris Cooper), and their

son, “Little” Charles Aiken, Jr. (Benedict Cumberbatch), who is probably in his early thirties;

- The house help, Misty Upham (Johnna Monvata)—is of Cheyenne origin, making her the only person who is not of Caucasian descent. Furthermore, she can be regarded as a *non-person* in the scene, as she is the only one who does not sit at the dinner table, nor does she participate directly in the interaction during dinner (see: Goffman 1990:223).

In the following pages, the aforementioned scene will be used to analyze and demonstrate how the interaction order works, and more specifically, how the interaction dynamics emerge when 1) someone disrupts the interaction order (breaks the frame of reference in the situation), unsettling the proposed line of action (D = disruption) and 2) how the dinner guests respond to such disruptions in the interaction order with alignment (A = alignment).² It is recommended that the reader watch the movie clip before reading the analysis, presented on the coming pages, as the written analysis cannot convey everything of interest in the scene. It is further suggested that the reader watch scenes from the clip concerning the presented analysis to match the analysis with the visual representation of the topic.

The Analysis: Disruption and Alignment of the Interaction Order

Everyone is seated at the dinner table, except Violet (the grieving widow), who is in another room, when “Little” Charles enters with a casserole. His mother,

¹ The scene starts at 45:34 minutes of the DVD version of the movie and lasts for around 20 minutes. The analysis is made from the uninterrupted real-time depicted action. Furthermore, I made use of the text version of the scene dialogue from the adapted screenplay to help me note scenes from the dialogue (<https://ia800909.us.archive.org/19/items/pdfy-oj5ZIZEvqLa4-QGT/August-Osage-County.pdf>). There could be some minor inconsistencies between the screenplay and the movie dialogue.

² The letters and associated numbers placed in brackets in the following text are intended to systematically mark and categorize the acts of disruptions and alignments in the dinner scene.

Mattie Fae, greets his late arrival by cheekily saying, "There he is. I wanted to put you at a kid's table, but they wouldn't let me." Mattie Fae is publicly mocking her son in front of an audience (D1). The other guests (the audience) react by smiling. "Little" Charles is, however, embarrassed. Karen comes to his rescue as she responds: "I want you to meet my fiancé, Steve," and shifts the attention towards her new fiancé instead of "Little" Charles (A1).

Only a moment later, "Little" Charles (low on confidence after being the target of his mother's abuse) drops his mother's casserole, which spills all over the floor. In return, "Little" Charles faces further verbal abuse from his mother (Mattie Fae), who quickly gets up from her chair and yells at him, "You goddamn clumsy goofball!" (D2a). "Little" Charles apologizes for his clumsiness (A2a[1]) and Charlie (his father) tries to reduce the significance of the accident as he shifts to a lighter vein, saying: "All right, nobody's hurt" (A2a[2]). Mattie Fae, however, keeps on complaining and takes the role of a victim as she states: "What about me? I'm hurt... That's my casserole!" (D2b). As an outsider to the family, Steve (Karen's new fiancé), tries to defuse the increasing and emotional seriousness of the situation, as he light-heartedly remarks, "It's not a party until somebody spills something" (A2b[1]). Charlie finally directs the conversation into another route, as he asks, "Who wants chicken?" and the dialogue starts to center on the food (A2b[2]).

Right in the first minute of the scene, we can see examples of how Mattie Fae breaches the interaction; firstly, by belittling her son ("Little" Charles), and secondly, by harshly reprimanding him, and how others successfully restore the frame with a joke (to try to lighten the mood) and by guiding the conversation into another direction (towards the meal).

Such acts of breaking the frame and attempting to restore the frame are evident for the rest of the scene. However, aligning to the frame will not always turn out successful.

Now, Violet (the widow and hostess of the funeral dinner) enters the scene, and she is the last person to join the dinner table. She plays her role as the sympathetic widow, all dressed in black and carrying a framed photo of her and her late husband, a prop that represents the symbolic ritual of the funeral meal (see: Frisby and Featherstone 1997:130-136). When Violet enters the dining room, she feels that the four men present are guilty of showing disrespect on the special occasion by just wearing their shirts, but not their jackets. Violet, therefore, reprimands the four men like little boys, although they are all grown men, for not wearing their jackets, as she hastily shouts, "This is a funeral dinner, not a cockfight" (D3). Thus, Violet shows right from the start of the scene who is the boss of this house and the person who holds authority in the situation. Goffman (1961a:87) notes in that respect how "Incumbency tends to be symbolized through status cues of dress and manner, permitting those who engage in a situation to know with whom they are dealing." The four men obey the power order as they stand up and look embarrassed as they put on their jackets before they sit down again to resume the meal. Violet diffuses the awkward situation herself as she casually lights a cigarette and suggests: "Someone should probably say grace" (A3)—following the ritual of such occasions. As the family patriarch, Beverly, has passed away, Violet suggests that her eldest daughter, Barbara, should be the one to take on the traditional role of saying grace. Barbara, however, acknowledges that the rightful patriarch should be the oldest man at the table and suggests that Charlie should say the grace, which he even-

tually does after Violet gives him a commanding stare. That start of the dinner portrays the normative rituals of the traditional family meal, which, firstly, consist of representing the appropriate props of such a meal, such as matching cutlery, as well as family photos and memories around the dining table; secondly, the aesthetics of the served food and drinks; and thirdly, the collective ritual and associated gestures of saying grace before accepting the meal (Frisby and Featherstone 1997:130-136).

During Charlie's saying of grace, Violet repeatedly performs all kinds of negative gestures, such as through her facial expressions and body language, which are a clear sign of her dissatisfaction with Charlie's grace. However, the others do not notice her gestures as they have their eyes shut during the saying of the grace—thus, the disruption attempts go unnoticed. However, the ritual is suddenly disrupted when Steve's mobile telephone goes off and interrupts the delivery of the grace, which annoys those at the dinner table (D4). Steve apologizes, says that he has to take the call, and goes to another room (A4[1]). Karen is apologetic for her new fiancé and states that it was a "work" call (A4[2])—not that she has any clue as to the nature of the call. Bill, however, nods in acceptance of Karen's excuse, which indicates that her attempt has worked; that is, to minimize the interactional damage that her fiancé caused by not silencing his phone before the dinner ritual. Steve comes back as the grace is about to end and apologizes. Bill says: "Let's eat" (A4[3]), which puts an end to the case.

Next, after a discussion between Violet and her three daughters as to whether the two older girls would like to take on a sideboard their mother wants to get rid of, in which they are not interested, an awkward silence follows (interestingly, Violet ignores Karen's

interest in the sideboard, indicating that the two older sisters are favored over Karen). The situation becomes awkward due to the inappropriateness of the discussion of the sisters' inheritance at the time and how Karen was disregarded (D5). As the atmosphere at the table is getting heavier, Charlie brings the interaction back to the line everyone is comfortable with as he remarks, "The food is just spectacular" (A5)—again drawing attention to the meal. Everyone else hums and nods in acceptance, thus becoming "sweet conspirators" joining in Charlie's attempt to save the interaction order (Goffman 1990:237).

Violet, however, does not accept the compliment that Misty, the house help, is receiving for her food and scornfully remarks: "That's what she's [the house help] getting paid for" (D6)—denoting Misty as a non-person—which is followed by an awkward moment. But, Charlie shifts the discussion right away into another direction (A6). Earlier in the scene, Jean, the only teenager at the dinner, had proclaimed that she does not eat meat. Charlie picks up this point in a discussion:

Charlie: Jean, so I'm curious, when you say you don't eat meat, you mean you don't eat meat of any kind?

Jean: Right.

Charlie: And is that for health reasons, or...?

Jean: When you eat meat, you ingest an animal's fear.

Violet: Ingest what? Its fart?

Jean: Fear.

A central theme in the scene is the power domination of the older generation over the younger ones. The fact that young Jean does not eat meat stirs astonishment and disbelief among the elders, who collectively mock and belittle her stance (D7). Charlie goes on further to state how he has been eating *fear*

three times a day for sixty years, and that is what is considered a legitimate meal. “Little” Charles and Steve try to support Jean as they come to her defense against those attacks with some sound arguments (A7). Jean, however, is the victim of the collective joke.

The discussion about meat gives rise to a discussion between Violet and Mattie Fae about an old television commercial, which reportedly said, “Where’s the meat?” However, as Karen tries to correct her mother by stating: “Beef. Where’s the beef?” her mother screeches at her: “Where’s the meat?! Where’s the meat?! Where’s the meat?!” (D8). Others gaze in alarm at Violet’s sudden outburst. Barbara sighs, “That’s pleasant” (A8[1]), and Charlie glances over the table and again changes the course of action as he shifts the discussion towards the funeral service, as he states: “I thought the services were lovely” (A8[2]), a statement that gains support from others who hum in acceptance.

But, Violet is on fire and now, as the discussion has centered on the funeral services, begins to sabotage the memory of her late husband Beverly (D9).

Nobody talked about the good stuff. Man was a world-class alcoholic, more’n fifty years. Nobody told the story about the night he got wrangled into giving a talk at the TU alumni dinner... [laughs]. Drank a whole bottle of Ron Bocoy White rum—don’t know why I remember that—and got up to give this talk, and he fouled himself! Come back to our table with this huge...

Violet is pointing out the hypocrisy of funeral services, which only show the deceased in a favorable light—and not always truthfully. However, the audience responds with a certain sophistication, trying

to save face under the embarrassing circumstances. Only Barbara responds sarcastically, “Yeah, I can’t imagine why no one told that story” (A9[1]). Steve then tries to salvage the memory of the late patriarch as he directs the conversation from the man himself into the quality of his poems, as he argues, “I don’t know much about poetry, but I thought his poems were extraordinary” (A9[2]), and then he speaks directly to Bill, who read a poem at the funeral service: “and your reading was very fine.” “Little” Charles shows support as he nods his head in acceptance.

Next, Violet goes on to attack the secrecy of the intimate lives of some of those at the dinner table. For instance, Violet suddenly focuses her attention on Steve (the newest member of the family) and blatantly asks him: “Who are you?” As Karen explains that Steve is her fiancé and they are soon to be married, Violet starts to interrogate Steve about his former life. She verbally attacks his privacy by asking personal questions that put him in a vulnerable and embarrassing position in front of others (frontstage) (D10). As she asks whether he has been married before, Karen steps in to protect her fiancé’s privacy and tries to place her mother back in line and not pursue that thread of interviewing any further because the subject is too personal for such an occasion (and belongs backstage). Violet, however, disregards Karen’s balancing attempt and goes on to reveal that Steve has had three previous marriages. Violet gloats at her victory of having divulged Steve’s secret in front of everyone and speaks of him as if he were not present. Karen, then, directs the conversation on a different route as she says: “I took Steve out to show him the old fort and it’s gone!” (A10), and the other guests follow her lead and start to participate in a discussion about the old fort.

Karen recalls when she used to play Cowboys and Indians in the fort in her youth when Violet suddenly shouts in a rage: “Karen! Shame on you!” (D11), and as people are taken aback by her harsh reprimand to Karen, Violet continues and says: “Don’t you know not to say Cowboys and Indians? You played Cowboys and Native Americans, right Barb?” Violet is being sarcastic as she is making fun of Barbara’s wokeness, who earlier in the film tried to correct her mother’s frame of reference that Misty, the house help, was not an Indian but a Native American. Barbara answers back to her mother: “What are you taking? What pills?” in a rather hostile tone (A11[1]). Charlie, then, tries to defuse the intensifying situation (A11[2]) as he fakes that he has a heart attack, but when everyone starts to panic, he smiles and cries: “I got a big bite of fear! I’m shaking in my boots! Fear never tasted so good,” and everyone burst into hysterical laughter (except Jean and her father Bill), portraying triumphant glances, and pointing fingers at young Jean, the target of the joke (D12a). Jean’s mother, Barbara, even takes part in the mockery and continues the joke where she calls her daughter a liar as she likes to eat cheeseburgers now and then, “Double cheeseburger, bacon, extra fear” (D12b). Jean answers her mother and calls her a liar in return (A12b). Violet then comes to Barbara’s defense as she stares commandingly at Jean and reprimands her: “Y’know...if I ever called my mom a liar? She would’ve knocked my goddamn head off my shoulders” (D12c). Nothing but silence follows. Interestingly, no one tries to diffuse the situation—perhaps because Jean has the lowest status at the table as the only teenager.

Violet then goes on to use that delicate occasion as a way to coerce her daughters into giving up their rights to inherit her husband’s estate (D13a). Thus,

according to Beverly’s will, his daughters would receive his inheritance on the day of his passing. However, Violet argues that her late husband had changed his mind and decided to leave everything to her instead of their daughters—although that supposed change of mind of her late husband had not been manifested in a changed will of the man who committed suicide. She then pressures her daughters, one by one, in an awkward and tense scene to give up their right to inherit their father’s estate, to which they all agree, however hesitantly, as they are in front of an audience and do not want to be perceived so greedy as to be interested in their father’s money on the day of his funeral (A13a). Besides, Violet offers to sell some of his furniture to her daughters at a price that would probably be lower than she would get for those items at an auction. The daughters decline the offer, and Barbara responds: “Or you might never get around to the auction and then we can just have it for free after you die” (D13b). Thus, the conversation is turning ugly for others present at the dinner table, and Ivy sighs: “Barbara!...” (A13b[1]). As Violet and Barbara are arguing about her inheritance, “Little” Charles tries to draw attention to the poems: “Excuse me, Bill? I’m wondering, the reading you did, those poems...?” (A13b[2]). However, due to his low status in the situation, “Little” Charles has no voice at the table, and Violet thus ignores his comment.

But, since the attention has finally turned to Bill, who has been quiet in the scene so far, Violet maintains the focus on Bill and starts to bring the alleged marriage problems he and Barbara are facing to the surface in front of the audience. That includes Bill’s relationship with a younger woman (D14a). Violet thus exploits the opportunity to have a go at the marriage of her eldest daughter, Barbara, and her main adversary in the situation. Violet

goes on to talk about how women lose their attractiveness as they grow old, and as women grow older, they have no chance to compete with younger women for their husbands, aiming that point at her daughter, Barbara. Ivy tries to step in to put her mother in line (A14a) by explaining that what her mother meant was that women do not grow more attractive with age, and Karen further states that she disagrees with her mom. But, Violet rejects the lifeline Ivy is sending her, as she steps out of line when she states:

I didn't say they "don't grow more attractive," I said they get ugly. And it's not really a matter of opinion, Karen dear. You've only just started to prove it yourself.

Thus, Violet is now belittling her daughter's self-image in front of a larger audience present at the dining table (D14b), and Charlie states: "You are in rare form today, Vi." Charlie further tries to reason with Violet's increasingly hostile attitude as he says: "I just don't understand why you're so adversarial" (A14b). Violet answers, "I'm truth-telling. And some people are antagonized by the truth." Charlie further tries to reframe the sentiments around the table to save the interaction order, aiming his words at Violet as he says: "Everyone here loves you, dear." Violet, however, rejects the direction of the dialogue suggested by Charlie and states: "You think you can shame me, Charlie? Blow it out your ass!" In other words, Violet is looking for a fight, not a ceasefire (D14c). The situation has become highly emotional and fragile due to Violet's repeated refusal to stick within the line of interaction in the situation, despite the attempts of others to keep her in line. Barbara then stands up to her mother for her hostile behavior and meanness (A14c), which Barbara experiences

as "attacks" against everyone at the dinner table; Violet gets up on her feet, her voice booming, and goes on a rant (D15):

Attack my family?! You ever been attacked in your sweet spoiled life?! Tell her 'bout attacks, Mattie Fae, tell her what an attack looks like!

Violet goes on to describe an incident where Mattie Fae (her younger sister) intervened when she was about to be attacked with a claw hammer, with the argument that that was a real attack. She then goes on to ridicule her daughters:

We sacrificed everything and we did it all for you. Your father and I were the first in our families to finish high school and he wound up an award-winning poet. You girls, given a college education, taken for granted no doubt, and where did you wind up?
[jabs a finger at Karen] Whadda you do?
[jabs a finger at Ivy] Whadda you do?
[jabs a finger at Barbara] Who are you? Jesus, if you'd worked as hard as us, you'd all be President. You never had real problems, so you've got to make all your problems yourselves.

After Violet's emotional outcry, where she belittles her ("spoiled") daughters, Ivy tells her mother to calm down (A15[1]). Violet sits down and says: "It's a damn fine day, to tell the truth." Charlie takes the opportunity and states: "Well, the truth is, I am getting full" (A15[2]), referring once more to the meal. Steve shows consent as he nods and adds: "Amen."

Next, "Little" Charles suddenly jumps off his seat and begins to stutter: "I have a truth to tell." He is highly anxious (D16a). Ivy gives him a hint (A16a) not to reveal their secret sexual relationship, which

was probably “Little” Charles’ intention. He withdraws his intended confession for another less significant one, and in a moment of panic, runs out of the room. Mattie Fae is embarrassed by her son and states that she had given up on the boy a long time ago. Violet joins her sister in her lack of respect for “Little” Charles and humiliates Ivy in return (D16b). Ivy, again, stands up for her secret lover and insists that he is not “Little” Charles; his name is Charles (A16b). Violet, in return, placed pity on Ivy and states that “She always had a thing for the underdog” (D16c). The scene ends when Barbara finally gets fed up with her mother’s vicious attacks and abuse towards everyone at the dinner table, and she faces her mother with some unpleasant facts, as she declares to her mother: “You’re a drug addict!” (A16c). Violet, however, seems relieved as she answers, “That is the truth! That’s what I’m getting at! Everybody listen... I am a drug addict. I am addicted to drugs, pills, especially downers,” and as she pulls a pill bottle from her pocket, all hell breaks loose when Barbara lunges at the bottle, and they start to wrestle for it and end up in a fierce battle on the living room floor. As Goffman (1990:205) notes:

When the audience decides it can no longer play the game of polite interaction, or that it no longer wants to do so, and so confronts the performers with facts or expressive acts which each team knows will be unacceptable. This is what happens when an individual screws up his social courage and decides to “have it out” with another or really “tell him off.”

The crucial balance in the situation between disruptions and alignments is lost as the disruptions become so severe and persistent that the interaction order can no longer be sustained. The situation explodes and people start to behave in a gross-

ly uncivilized manner, tumbling and fighting on the floor (see: Frank III 1976).

Discussion

The dinner scene of *August: Osage County* can be utilized to illustrate Goffman’s theory of the interaction order, and in particular, how disruptions and responding alignments take place. As the description above shows, the frames of reference in that particular situational social interaction were repeatedly broken. The categorizations of the acts of disruptions and alignments in the scene are summed up and portrayed in Table 1. The table further illustrates sequences of action, where it can be noted how interactional communication develops.

As Table 1 illustrates, there were various kinds of disruptions in the scene. Most of the disruptions share the effect of making someone at the table feel bad or insecure. Those disruptions included bursts of rage and attempts to shame, mock, and coerce others (mainly by Violet, but also by Mattie Fae, Charlie, and even Barbara). In addition, there were instances of disruptions of the dinner ritual (where the dress code was broken and when the mobile phone rang). The table further illustrates how almost all noted disruptions in the scene were met with some kind of alignment. The dinner guests, for instance, used footing to change the subject of conversation (mostly referring to the meal or the funeral service); tried to diffuse the situation with a light-hearted remark (such as a joke); made apologies or stood up for someone who was under attack; tried to help and/or reason with the breacher; and blamed the breacher for their inappropriate behavior. Those instances of disruptions of the interaction order and the alignments that followed are discussed in a wider context below.

Table 1. Disruptions and alignments in the dinner scene

Scene starts:	Disruptions (D):	Alignments (A):
46:44	D1: Mattie Fae belittles Charles Jr., as she jokingly greets his late arrival by suggesting that he should sit at the kids' table.	A1: Footing by Karen: "I want you to meet my new fiancé, Steve."
46:57	D2a: Mattie Fae is enraged as Charles Jr. drops her casserole on the floor.	A2a(1): "Little" Charles apologizes for his clumsiness.
		A2a(2): Charlie tries to defuse the situation: "All right, nobody's hurt."
	D2b: Mattie Fae plays the role of the victim and claims she is hurt since it was her casserole that was ruined.	A2b(1): Steve tries to defuse the situation with a playful remark: "It's not a party until somebody spills something."
		A2b(2): Footing by Charlie: "Who wants chicken?"
47:44	D3: Violet reprimands the four men for not wearing their jackets.	A3: Violet casually lights a cigarette and suggests that: "Someone should probably say grace."
48:57	D4: Steve's mobile rings during the saying of the grace.	A4(1): Steve apologizes.
		A4(2): Karen apologizes for her fiancé and says that it was a work call.
		A4(3): Bill says: "Let's eat."
50:47	D5: Constrained discussion between Violet and her daughters about which of them should get a sideboard that belonged to their father.	A5: Footing by Charlie: "The food is spectacular."
51:30	D6: Violet derides the praise of the cooking of the house help.	A6: Footing by Charlie as he starts to ask Jean why she does not eat meat.
51:44	D7: A general mocking of Jean as she argues that she does not want to eat fear.	A7: "Little" Charles and Steve, to some extent, stand up for Jean.
53:03	D8: Violet screeches at Karen: "Where's the meat!"	A8(1): Barbara reacts by saying: "That's pleasant."
		A8(2): Footing by Charlie: "I thought the services were lovely."
53:22	D9: Violet shames the memory of her late husband.	A9(1): Barbara responds with a sarcastic note: "Yeah, I can't imagine why no one told that story."
		A9(2): Footing by Steve: "Now I don't know much about poetry..."
54:22	D10: Violet exposes Steve's former marriages and embarrasses him.	A10: Footing by Karen: "I took Steve out to see the old fort and it's gone!"
54:38	D11: Violet is mocking Barbara, who earlier criticized her for referring to Indians as Native Americans, as she jokingly reprimands Karen.	A11(1): Barbara answers back: "What are you taking? What pills?"

		A11(2): Humor by Charlie as he acts as if he has a heart attack—regarding a former discussion about Jean not eating fear.
56:12	D12a: Following Charlie's joke, most of the people laugh at Jean's expense.	None.
	D12b: Barbara continues to make Jean the target of the joke where she says that Jean loves hamburgers with extra bacon.	A12b: Jean answers her mother back and calls her out on her lying.
	D12c: Violet reprimands Jean for calling her mother a liar: "Y'know...if I'd ever called my mom a liar? She would've knocked my goddamn head off my shoulders."	None.
56:55	D13a: Violet talks her daughters out of claiming their inheritance from their late father.	A13a: The daughters give in to their mother's claim, and thus avoid making a scene.
	D13b: Barbara sarcastically speaks of the gains she and her sisters would receive when their mother dies.	A13b(1): Ivy sighs: "Barbara."
		A13b(2): Footing by "Little" Charles: "Excuse me, Bill? I'm wondering, the reading you did, those poems....?"
58:28	D14a: Violet exposes Bill and Barbara's marriage problems, and goes on to explain that women get ugly with age.	A14a: Ivy tries to defend her mother by explaining what her mother really meant, in a more refined language.
	D14b: Violet attacks Karen's self-image where she comments that Karen herself is getting uglier with age.	A14b: Charlie tries to reason with Violet and says: "I just don't understand why you're so adversarial," and he goes on further to try to connect with her on a caring note as he states: "Everyone here loves you, dear."
	D14c: Violet screams back at Charlie: "Blow it out your ass!"	A14c: Barbara stands up for everybody at the table as she accuses her mother of being rude to all the dinner guests.
60:20	D15: Violet criticizes her daughters and picks them out as losers, compared to her and her sister.	A15(1): Ivy tells her mother to calm down.
		A15(2): Footing by Charlie: "Well, the truth is, I am getting full."
62:50	D16a: "Little" Charles jumps off his seat and anxiously stutters: "I have a truth to tell."	A16a: Ivy gives him a hint not to reveal their sexual relationship by softly pleading: "No, no."
	D16b: After "Little" Charles runs out of the room, Mattie Fae states that she gave up on her boy a long time ago.	A16b: Ivy stands up for "Little" Charles as she says, "His name is Charles."
	D16c: Violet talks down to Ivy as she states that: "She always had a thing for the underdog."	A16c: Barbara declares to her mother: "You're a drug addict."
The interaction breaks up.		

Source: *Self-elaboration*.

Disruptions—Breaking the Frame of Reference

How a situation develops is, to a large extent, built on power and authority (Tavory and Fine 2020). Social interactions are stratified in the sense that some people within a situation have more power than others. Goffman (1983:10) notes: “Those individuals who are in a position to authorize and organize such occasions are often the ones who star in them.” Persons of power can set the tone of the interaction, impact the atmosphere, and determine who is at the center of attention, for good or bad reasons, as well as dictate who is marginalized and disregarded and who is not. Goffman (2005:107) further stated that “if there is to be talk, someone must initiate it, feed it and terminate it; and these acts may awkwardly suggest ranking and power which are out of line with the facts.” The audience of those in power is further motivated to take the side of those in power and impress them (Kelly and Archibald 2019).

The dinner scene features Violet as the person with authority and power, as well as being the center of attention. Violet, as the owner of the house, the grieving widow, the mother to the three sisters, the mother-in-law, grandmother, older sister, sister-in-law, and hostess of the dinner can, as head of the family, be assumed to be the rightful holder of power at the funeral family dinner. In this respect, Goffman has created a contrast between “dramatic” and “directive dominance” (1990:105), where those who possess formal power and authority do not necessarily hold the actual authority, although these often go hand in hand. Violet, in this sense, not only possesses dramatic dominance; she further enacts and exercises her directive dominance right from the start of the scene (see: Alexander 2011). Violet is the star of the show, which, for instance, is notable by the fact that she is the last one to arrive and that the dinner does not start until she gives it a go.

However, Violet is highly unstable, rude, and hostile to almost all of the dinner guests, from the start to the finish of the scene, as illustrated above. We see how Violet is guilty of breaking up the interaction by showing meanness and hostility to her dinner guests by bringing up topics and subjects that should be handled backstage, not on stage in front of an audience. That both adds embarrassment to the situation and endangers the selves of the targeted dinner guests. Violet’s estranged relationship with her daughters seems to play a fundamental part in her vulgar and offensive behavior, which unsettles the civilized communication and harmony of the encounter and places the whole situation in jeopardy. Disruptions, such as those illustrated in the scene, tend to be more dramatic in intimate relationships, for example, in immediate families, than elsewhere (see: Tavory and Fine 2020).

Violet seems to see the situation as a game with her daughters, where she tries to gain as many points as possible for herself at her daughters’ expense (Goffman 1961a; 1963; 2005:24-26). Violet prides herself in that with statements in the scene such as “I had that one pegged,” after she uncovered Steve’s former marriages, and when she declared: “Nobody slips anything by me,” after she uncovered Barbara and Bill’s marriage problems. Thus, it seems that Violet sees the situation as an opportunity for some kind of settlement with those in her immediate family, as she exploits the delicate situation to make her case and to settle some scores.

On the other hand, Violet also appears to be concerned about getting to the truth of things, as she, for instance, declared: “It’s a damn fine day, to tell the truth.” It could thus be argued that Violet’s attempts to deepen the families’ relationships by restoring honesty at these crossroads of her husband’s passing.

Violet's attempts to set the record straight by refusing to sugar-coat life and staging the usual hypocrisy of regular small talk, as people usually do frontstage (Scott 2012), are symbolic of disruptions of relations, as proposed by Tavory and Fine (2020), which, in this sense, could frame her intentions as worthwhile for the families' relationships in the long run. Thus, Violet is inspired to tell the truth as she sees it, despite the general resistance of others present to engage in such interaction. Attempts at truthful interaction can, in this sense, be attributed to Violet's motivation, which tends to endanger social interaction as participants tend to lose face when their backstage selves become exposed. The interaction, in turn, becomes uncivilized and hostile, and such acts of honest confrontations are, therefore, commonly perceived as deviant and problematic. Goffman notes how rigid honesty can cause problems (1990:212).

The scene further illustrates an interesting theme in interaction; that is, how the older generation is guilty of disrupting the interaction by verbally and symbolically attacking younger people and inserting feelings of vulnerability and inferiority among them. Examples from the scene illustrate how the collective power of older persons is used to suppress and restrain the younger ones through mocking their proposed silliness and humiliating them by exposing their backstage secrets to the other dinner guests. In this context, Goffman has noted how individuals who dominate situations sometimes do so at the expense of others, where they insult others, make jokes at their expense, and even expel them from the interaction (Collins 2004:21). That misuse of power by the elders in the scene embodies a generational cleavage and strain. Violet, in particular, as the main adversary, as well as the other elders (Mattie Fae and Charlie) sense that they are becoming outdated in a changing society—just like the outlaws in Sam Peck-

inpah's *Wild Bunch* (see: Þórlindsson 2012)—so they fight back at the youngsters. The younger ones adhere to more modern ideas and customs, which, in this case, include not eating meat and showing respect for minorities, which sounds foreign and threatening to the elders. Jean (the teenager) in particular provides a fresh, convincing, and intellectual argument of how eating meat involves eating fear, which sounds bizarre, and even ludicrous, to the elders. The elders thus experience a sense of anomic insecurities, in a Durkheimian sense, as they feel that the world is rapidly changing and the views and customs that they have incorporated from their youth are fast becoming outdated. So, the elders go on the offensive by attacking and ridiculing the younger generation on account of their different ideas and because they stand for divergent norms and values from those of their elders. Due to their experience, emotional and financial resources, the elders enjoy an advantage in such situations, leaving youth vulnerable to these attacks since they both lack the power of authority in the given situation and are also, at times, outnumbered by the older generation.

Alignment—Restoring the Frame of Reference

When a person disrupts the frame of the interaction ritual by acting inappropriately in a situation, towards oneself or towards others (as illustrated above), others present try to save the situation by making some kind of gesture, vocal or otherwise, to save the face of the person acting inappropriately, the face of others who may be affected by the inappropriate act, as well as their face. As the scene unfolds, Violet appears to be looking for a fight, but everyone tries to resist her antagonism by enacting the situation here-and-now and maintaining their face and the interaction order by playing their prescribed supporting roles in the collective ritual performance. However,

as the dinner guests experience a repeated violation of the normative interaction rituals, they come under increased pressure to keep up their normal appearances, despite the mounting and intensifying breaks in the script (Collins 2004:20). For the show to go on, those involved put up false fronts, which they try to use to save the faces of those present in the damaged situation (Goffman 1990:244). It is most often Charlie's responsibility as the oldest—the new patriarch of the family who sits at the end of the table—who is responsible for saving the line with footing and has the neutral authority to do so when Violet steps out of it, as she repeatedly does. However, despite repeated attempts by Charlie and others at the dinner table to preserve the interactional line of the situation, when Violet steps out of line, their efforts remain insufficient as Violet is looking for a fight. She is playing solo as the star of the show and is indifferent to attempts by the dinner guests to align to the customary interaction ritual of such a dinner.

Interestingly, despite Violet's constant confrontation and hostility towards most of the dinner guests, she gets away with her demanding behavior for a prolonged period. That lack of collective punishment towards Violet from the attacked dinner guests may be due to several reasons. First, due to the shared history of those present at the dinner table, who are members of Violet's immediate family; they, therefore, know how Violet can behave at times and what could be expected, and thus have a higher threshold towards Violet's eccentric antics than outsiders (Katovich and Couch 1992; Fine 2012). Second, Violet is grieving for her late husband, and emotional expressions of grief—although unanticipated—may be labeled as acceptable due to circumstances that provide the grieving widow with more latitude towards her provocative behavior than under less vulnerable and emotional circumstances. Third, Goffman (1963:218) notes that

“The more ‘legitimate’ the offender's reasons...the more these contingent offenses are viewed as fully excusable, and the less intentionality is imputed on them.” In other words, it may be argued that Violet got away with her offenses for a prolonged period since her verbal attacks on the dinner guests (who are her immediate family) were not necessarily wrongful or inaccurate *per se*, as she was speaking the “truth”—although some of her comments were more debatable than others. And fourth, the lack of collective punishment of the dinner guests towards Violet's hostile attacks may be due to her power of authority in the situation (Goffman 1963:229-230; Kelly and Archibald 2019), as discussed above. Both history and authority bring Violet some support in her stance, and obedience (for instance, from Mattie Fae, Steve, and others), as well as extended permissiveness from the dinner guests, despite her inappropriate and mean behavior. We may wonder what the reaction of others would have been if the teenager, Jean, had behaved similarly to Violet. Her behavior would have been defined as “interactional vandalism,” a term that has been singled out for those from subordinate social positions who breach the social interactions of the more powerful (Duneier and Molotch 1999). For that, she would probably have been harshly reprimanded right from the start, made to apologize for her behavior, and sent to her room.

However, as the scene unfolds, the funeral meal is stripped of its mystical atmosphere (Griffero 2016; Sumartojo and Pink 2019) due to Violet's virtual offenses (Goffman 1963), and despite attempts by the dinner guests to align the situation; they are unsuccessful in preserving the interaction order, which finally causes the premature termination of the situation as further interaction is not possible. The collective and somewhat spiritual conscience of the funeral dinner as an event (see: Durkheim 1965) is spoiled as Violet does

not try to modify her behavior despite being provided with several remedial interchanges as opportunities to do so. And, as she, furthermore, seems to be generally amused by her acts of “contingent malice,” the situational interaction results in a relational rupture (Goffman 1963:218). The ending of the movie shows Violet, the main breacher, alone and abandoned after having driven her daughters and their families away, due to her ruthless confrontation and objectionable behavior in social interactions.

Interestingly, Violet’s unstable and antisocial behavior, as illustrated by her disruptions, is blamed on her addiction to prescription drugs in the storyline rather than on her refreshing quest to restore more honesty among her immediate family. That interpretation demonstrates how powerful the interaction order is. Backstage issues should be kept backstage, and those who deviate from the expected norms are defined as unwell or sick and in need of medical help, as it turns out to be the case in the episode following the dinner scene in the movie where Violet is accompanied by her family members to see a doctor, representing the medicalization of society (Goffman 1961b; 1963:235). But, the key point here is that people tend to align more alliance to the interaction order than to truth itself since Violet’s verbal comments and attacks on the dinner guests were perceived rather as inappropriate than untruthful. Deception thus becomes a virtue in the interaction order, as the show must go on smoothly (Scott 2012).

Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to provide the reader with a sociological reading of a movie clip through a micro-sociological analysis of the dinner scene in *August: Osage County*. However, that reading is only one of many potential readings of the scene, which

first and foremost serves to provide the reader with an insight into how the interaction order works and how products of popular media can be utilized in sociological description and analysis. That means that I was not able to do the whole scene justice in describing and analyzing everything of sociological interest the scene offered. And, other interpretations and themes could as easily become the output of such an analysis, given the different perspectives of viewers and analysts of the scene.

However, the above analysis shows how an atmosphere in a particular social situation is built on the ongoing interactions of participants, which, on the one hand, are characterized by frequent disruptions of the interaction order (by the few), and on the other, by attempts to withhold and sustain the interaction order and safeguard its balance (by the many). Interestingly, the attempts of the dinner guests aim towards avoiding disruptions of the interaction order, and in turn, they also avoid confronting reality, which shows more alliance to the interaction order itself than to the straightforward and truthful revelations that surfaced in the interaction. From a wider sociological perspective, the analysis further highlights and exposes larger cultural themes, which influence the situational interaction, such as themes of power and authority, subordination, generational cleavage, and the medicalization of society (Goffman 1961b). Thus, the fictional film clip can be noted to portray truthful themes and elements of real life that can be detected, specified, and illustrated in detail through the analysis of the film clip by freezing moments of action in time, which allows the researcher to examine various kinds of explicit and tacit impressions and gestures of the situational interaction.

Hopefully, this analysis can serve to enhance the reader’s/viewer’s grasp of important parts of the the-

ory of the interaction order and the functioning of society at large. By providing an examination of the interaction order through the use of a film clip, this analysis should be able to further stimulate and encourage students and scholars of sociology to utilize

visual products in doing sociology because visual material—whether fact or fiction—contains helpful insights and observations of *what is going on* in a situation, and, in turn, of *what is going on* in society (Becker 2007:3).

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