



# Framing the Bullfight: Aesthetics Versus Ethics

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## **FRAMING BULLFIGHT**

### **- Aesthetics versus Ethics:**

#### **An Empirical Case and a Theoretical Approach -**

The curator of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Museum was recently accused of obscenity for having exhibited some works by the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. This is one of those many cases of irreducible conflict between an ethical and an aesthetic perception: irreducible, since those who perceive these photographs as morally shocking, and those who perceive them as artistically worthy of interest, can in no way reach any agreement nor compromise, as the former react on an ethical ground, and the latter, on an aesthetic one.

There exist many such conflicts between ethics and aesthetics, which appear to be occasions of very deep emotional investments, either as simple disputes between unreconcilable opinions or leading to formal juridical processes, as in the Mapplethorpe case. Among those various cases, bullfight provides, as we shall see, a particularly rich example, throughout a number of books, articles and public debates<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Our analysis will exclusively rely upon the literature published on the matter, since our interest is not directed to the very practice of bullfighting (which might later be analyzed throughout ethnographic observation), but to its perception and judgement. Besides a number of newspapers and magazines, we mainly used: A. Belzunce, C. Mourthé, La vie quotidienne de la corrida, Paris, Hachette, 1972; E. Hemingway, Mort dans l'après-midi, Paris, Gallimard, 1938; M. Leiris, Miroir de la tauromachie, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1981; J. Testas, La

As for the theoretical instruments accounting for those types of value conflicts between ethics and aesthetics, social sciences seem to be rather poor<sup>2</sup>. The more convenient theory remains, as far as we know, Erving Goffman's Frame Analysis<sup>3</sup>. We'll try to apply it here to the empirical case of bullfight, so as the former helps casting some light on the latter, which in turn should illustrate the very power of the theory - as well, maybe, as its limitations. We shall propose, first, a literal application of Frame Analysis to the properties of the object of judgement, that is bullfight; second, an instrumental application to the properties of the subjects, that is those involved in bullfight, either for or against it; and third, an analogical transposition of a frame-analytical description to the various "realms" of values - mainly ethic and

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tauromachie, Paris, PUF, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> For a sociological approach of the general problem of aesthetical versus ethic perception, cf. Nathalie Heinich, "Perception esthétique et catégorisation artistique: comment peut-on trouver ça beau?" in La mise en scène de l'art contemporain, Bruxelles, Les Eperonniers, 1990. Investigations on empirical cases of shifting between ethics and aesthetics have been proposed: in Nathalie Heinich, "Errance, croyance et mécréance: le public du Pont-Neuf de Christo, L'Ecrit-Voir, 1988, n° 11; Nathalie Heinich et Michael Pollak, Vienne à Paris. Portrait d'une exposition, Paris, Centre George Pompidou, 1989; Nathalie Heinich, "Au pied du mur. L'homme de la rue, l'art dans la rue et les grands hommes: sur une fresque en milieu urbain", Sociologie et Sociétés, Montréal, vol. XXI, n° 2, octobre 1989.

<sup>3</sup> E. Goffman, Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience, New-York, Harper and Row, 1974. It has been reviewed and discussed in: Nathalie Heinich, "A propos de Frame Analysis d'Erving Goffman: une introduction à la cadre-analyse", Revue de l'Institut de sociologie, Bruxelles, 1988, n° 1-2 (with a bibliography of english and american publications concerning this book).

aesthetical<<sup>4</sup>>.

#### Literal Application: Toward a Phenomenology of Interaction

In Goffmanian logic bullfight appears as a particularly rich example of frame<<sup>5</sup>>, both as a social and as a transformed frame: in opposition, for instance, to the "savage", unintended and unformalized confrontation of a bull and a man in a field, which would constitute a primary frame. It realizes the two important types of frame transformations: that is key and fabrication<<sup>6</sup>>.

Bullfight is a key in various ways. On the one hand it is a performance<<sup>7</sup>> - which includes, among other necessary components, backdrop, here made up by the "patio de arrastre",

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<sup>4</sup> This topic has been briefly sketched in: Nathalie Heinich, "L'art et la manière: pour une cadre-analyse de l'expérience esthétique" in Le parler frais d'Erving Goffman, Paris, Minuit, 1990. Conflicts about bullfight have been analyzed through one precise case in: Nathalie Heinich, "L'esthétique contre l'éthique, ou l'impossible arbitrage: de la tauromachie considérée comme un combat de registres", Espaces et Sociétés, 1992, n°1.

<sup>5</sup> Underlined terms refer to goffmanian concepts.

<sup>6</sup> One being "the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (E. Goffman, F.A. p. 44); the other being "the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on" (F.A. p. 83).

<sup>7</sup> "That arrangement which transforms an individual into a stage performer, the latter, in turn, being an object that can be looked at in the round and at length without offense, and looked to for engaging behaviour, by persons in an "audience" role" (F.A. p. 124).

closed to the public, where bulls are cut up into butchermeat. On the other hand, its high degree of formalization makes it look very much like a ceremonial, characterized by an abundance of rules, to which spectators are associated by their knowledge of them (a knowledge they display when acclaiming an actor for his exact mastering of the rituals: "Ole!"). And finally, it also realizes the key of sport contest in that it necessarily implies a winner and a loser - even though this peculiar game is not entirely playful, given that what is at stake is no less than the lives of the protagonists.

This last characteristic can also be described as the irruption, into the transformed frame, of the primary frame that is death: the irreducible, untransformable, ultimate event par excellence, making it outright impossible to attempt distancing. Such an eventuality means, in Goffman's words, a possible down-keing, explaining the high degree of protagonists' involvement<sup>8</sup>. Anyway, the rim of the frame remains that of performance, whatever the lamination operated between, for example, a pass intended to exhibit the skill or art of the torero (a key within the rim of performance), and a pass intended to kill the bull, abruptly reintroducing the primary frame of literal experience into the keyed frame of performance.

This last distinction between a pass "as if" and a pass "for real" leads to another type of transformation, in so far as

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<sup>8</sup> On this concept cf. F.A. p. 345 and passim, and Norbert Elias, "Problems of Involvement and Detachment", the British Journal of Sociology, vol. VII, n° 3, september 1956.

the feint at the basis of each pass is not only destined to dazzle the public but also to mislead the bull, making it mistake the movement of the cape for the body of its opponent, wind for flesh. In other words, if bullfight represents for the audience a keying of the primary frame, it nevertheless operates for the bull a fabrication, which means a deception - and an exploitive one - deviding the actants into those forming the collusive net and the dupes, excluded from the fabrication<sup><9></sup>.

Among other characteristics of keyings, style can be applied to bullfight. Defined by Goffman as resource continuity of the actor, it can be emphasized to a greater or lesser extent, depending on how much the interaction is handled by the torero in an aestheticized way: making the passes last before the putting to death, multiplying effects of self-presentation such as gestures and attitudes that are not indispensable to the movement itself (a form of upkeying); or, on the contrary, seeking direct confrontation as closely as possible (a form of downkeying). Upkeying and downkeying represent the two opposite poles of "classics", who prefer the purity of gesture, and "tremendists", who privilege emotion. They can also be related to the two fundamental keys of bullfighting, "sport" and "art". According to the artistic key, a torero builds on classical

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<sup>9</sup> "One party containing others in the construction that is clearly inimical to their private interests" (F.A. p. 103). According to Goffman's definition it is peculiar to a fabrication to be discreditable: here, we have a discreditation when, contrary to the regulations, the bull has already been fought, so that it cannot be tricked anymore by the cape and directly charges the torero.

"passes" and creates his own figures that will bear his name and assure his passage to posterity, just as a philosopher or an artist gives his name to a concept or a style.

Being doubly transformed, as a key and as a fabrication, the frame of bullfight is vulnerable to chain transformations, in particular to rekeying. Such a transformational vulnerability accounts for comical troupes of toreros or for museums of tauromachy, introducing additional lamination by inscribing bullfight into another rim - that is parody or fetichised contemplation.

Transformed frames are further characterized by the existence of brackets - either temporal or spatial<sup><10></sup>. Spatial brackets are manifold in bullfight, delimiting several levels of participation: the walls of the arena isolate, from the external world (primary frame), all the participants (transformed frame); the first barrier or "talanquera" isolates from the public all the personnel (actors, administrators, workers, doctors etc); the second barrier or "barrera" isolates, from the alley or "calejon" between those two barriers reserved for the personnel, the whole of the "cuadrilla", i.e. the team made up by the matadors and toreros, picadors and horses, banderilleros - and of course, the bull. According to this property of brackets to be neither inside nor outside, like the frame of a picture<sup><11></sup>,

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<sup>10</sup> "Opening and closing temporal brackets and bounding spatial brackets" (F.A. p. 252).

<sup>11</sup> "Neither part of the content of activity proper nor part of the world outside the activity but rather both inside and outside" (F.A. p. 251).

the barrier becomes part of the action as soon as an actor (man, or exceptionnally bull) transgresses it when in fleeing or in pursuit outside the arena. Thus a succession of circles - or rather of encased ellipses - materializes in a spatial dimension graduated types of participation inside this general rim of performance, itself materialized by the stone enclosure: a graduation ranging from the most involved (vulnerable through downkeying by irruption of this primary frame par excellence: death), within the fabricated frame of the feint by which man seeks to deceive the beast; to the least involved, within the keyed frame of the performance that a man (knowingly) and a beast (unknowingly) give to an audience in an amphitheatre; and finally, to the non-involved people outside the arena (the opponents to bullfight being virtually present through negative implication).

As for temporal brackets, they are to be found mainly in the musical parade of the overture (the "paseo"), and in the final march around the arena. But other less formalized and more spectacular rituals delimit the three great passes: "tercio de varas" (that of the picador), "tercio de banderillas" (planting of the banderillas), "tercio de muerte" (pass of the muleta and putting to death). But it is noteworthy that bullfight is practically all time-in, as the beasts represents danger at each moment even though some are more "in" than others - especially when the bull passes the man as closely as possible. Here lies a difference with a sport like tennis, for instance, where a considerable amount of time is "out". And as Goffman quotes



sexual interaction as a typical example of all time-in activity<sup><12></sup>, Frame Analysis, as a formal grammar of experience, appears to provide a differently motivated reformulation of the analogy between sexuality and tauromachy that philosophy or literature established on their own grounds<sup><13></sup>.

More than any other strip of activity, bullfight consequently appears as an arrangement, a non literal realm of being; and the fascination it exerts over "aficionados" (the very existence of this specific term being a symptom of such a fascination) may be given two reasons: on the one hand, this exceptional formal richness, and on the other hand, the eventuality of this most primary frame of all: that is penetration, either (literally) mortal or (metaphorically) sexual. Such an eventuality accounts for the extremely sophisticated formalization (evidenced by the weight of the costume, up to 10 kilograms), keeping at a distance, by enclosing it with forms, a final act which, if untransformed, might appear as equivalent to murder.

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<sup>12</sup> "Activities vary according to the sorts of internal brackets they allow. Tennis interaction involves more time-out than time-in (...). Sexual interaction is practically all time-in" (F.A. p. 260).

<sup>13</sup> Michel Leiris, in his Miroir de la tauromachie, offers a particularly brilliant analysis of the sexual undertones of bullfight (cf. "Amour et tauromachie", p. 45). Arguing that tauromachy is more than a sport and more than an art (p. 30-34), he formulates in other words the very phenomenon of frames superposition evidenced by Goffman's grammar.

## Instrumental Application: Toward a Sociology of Interaction Competence

Goffman also evokes the notion of interaction competence, as a capacity - more or less developed in each individual - of mastering frames. But what is this capacity made of? Taking now a distance with this formal grammar of experience, let us try to extend his theory so as to sketch how to bring out the varying individual relations to bullfight, rather than its invariable, intrinsic characteristics.

This kind of "differential sociology" might be applied to the different actants (actors, public, critics), and to all those who have to make up their minds about bullfight. Thus a sociology of sports would describe for each type of actors (toreros, matadors, picadors, banderilleros etc) the type of competences called for by a good management of the fabricated frame: being respectful of the rules and nevertheless individualised or stylised. Then, according to Bourdieu's method, these qualities could be related to the habitus and personal trajectories: age, social and geographical origine, education etc.

A sociology of the public, also based on empirical, monographic and statistical enquiries, would have to be carried out at several levels. On the one hand, one would describe the technical competences necessary to appreciate each of the moments, such as the capacity to recognize and name the different types of passes; this technical competence of the

"aficionado" would then be linked to the social characteristics of each individual, so as to determine to what extent bullfight touches specific social worlds. On the other hand, one could subject to a similar method the general disposition allowing any individual to live an event on what ordinarily appears as "second degree", i.e. as transformed frame (performance) rather than as primary frame (confrontation and death): evaluating the basic capacity to establish a distance - that is to say the capacity of keying the world, aesthetically or ludically -, and its relation to the degrees of interest or implication in bullfight, so as to the types of positions adopted by its partisans and opponents.

The concept of "interaction competence" could thus be broadened so as to include the unequally distributed faculty to accept the very principle of formalized distanciation and aesthetic approbation, concerning such an ethically disqualified act as the act of killing: in other words, the faculty to transform a primary frame into a performance key.

#### Analogical Application: Toward an Axiology of Realms

Frame Analysis provides all the formal instruments necessary to describe the duplication of the relation to reality, i.e. the opposition between a spectacularized - or keyed - perception and a literal - or primary - one. But it does not directly allow to understand whether and how the one and the other might organize value systems. These genuine, deeply invested values appear to powerfully model our relation to the

world: much more powerfully than Goffman's formal propositions lead us to believe - particularly in the case of bullfight, which raises strong and everlasting conflicts between opponents and aficionados. Let us try now to make these value systems become the object of our analysis, focusing no longer on the form of the frame but on its content: not Goffman's "rim", but what we propose to call the "realm".

Bullfight allows us to distinguish two basic types of realms: the ethical one, peculiar to the immediate relation with the world pertaining of the primary frame as well as to the denunciation of fabrication as a lie; and the aesthetic one, more adequate to keyed frames such as performances, contests, ceremonies etc. According to the former, an object or an act will be spoken of in terms of morality (good/evil); according to the latter, in terms of beauty (beautiful/ugly). So an analogical transposition has to be performed from Frame Analysis: just as reality can be grasped totally and exclusively according to this or that frame, it can also be grasped, just as totally and exclusively, according to this or that realm of values.

There is no exact one-to-one correspondance between a specific frame and a specific realm. A primary frame can be aesthetically or morally invested, or not invested at all: for instance, a sunset or a rainbow might be experienced by the onlooker as beautiful, or as well intentioned if related to a divine will, just as it might be technically analysed in terms of astronomy or physics, or even live indifferent, raising no

judgement or commentary of whatever order. Moreover, a keying is not automatically aestheticizable: for instance, when the stage play is viewed from the perspective of the backdrop; but a fabrication may be: for instance, when one speaks of an "admirable machination", a "beautiful trick".

There exist however evident affinities between certain frames and certain realms - that is, unequal probabilities to see the ones and the others match. Thus, the moral discreditation of a fabrication is a more likely eventuality than its aesthetic evaluation, as well as aesthetization seems to imply a capacity of distanciation which is characteristic of any keying, any transformation performed without victim or dupe.

Now, let's come back to bullfight. We have seen that it has the rare property of being at once a key, a fabrication and, finally, a primary frame. But it also has the peculiarity of being perceived just as exclusively according to an aesthetic realm as to an ethical one - thus demonstrating the total, systematic, irreducible nature of those realms of value. So it seems that such a conflictuality between invested values or expressed opinions lies in the very "frame-analytical" nature of bullfight: the multiplicity of distinct frames being precisely what makes possible the demultiplication of irreducible realms of values - and, correlatively, the general uncertainty or ambiguity of its status.

Consequently, these two types of sociological analysis - in terms of frame and in terms of realm of experience - appear to be both necessary to understand the types of relations

relevant to such a phenomenon as bullfight: either from the phenomenological or semiological view point concerning the characteristics pertaining to the object (here, a high degree of formalization linked to an equally high degree of emotional investment), or from the psychological or sociological view point concerning the dispositions of the subjects toward the "organization of experience". Let us conclude by suggesting that these two sets of conceptual instruments might be different but complementary ways toward the organization of research on human experience: this human experience of the relation between "individual ordinary implication" and "organization of society", in Goffman's own terms, to which Frame Analysis does supply a precious logical instrument.

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### NOTES

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