

Single
The Presentation of Self
&
The Fall of Public Man

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Single and their discriminating
observations.

Düsseldorf, 2011/2012. Once a month, Alex Wissel opens his nightclub, the Single, for twenty-four hours. Artists redesign the interior each time. Three, former bowling alleys under the Albanian Bistro Agi are loud and sweaty. They're curiously uninhibited. Agi, whose bistro serves as the Single's entryway, plays a leading role. The Single leaves the Bistro Agi and takes place somewhere else. The director Jan Bonny and Wissel plan on filming the project. Bonny provides the cameras. Things shift.

In a conversation about The Single, Alex Wissel speaks, amongst other things, about the books occupying him at the time. He mentions Richard Sennett's still relevant book, *The Fall of Public Man*, which critically develops Erving Goffman's work in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* - another of Wissel's landmarks. In his book, Goffman clearly outlines how our daily activities comply with a social dramaturgy. Sennett adopts this analysis but criticizes the rigidity of Goffman's model which doesn't accommodate for the transgression of social roles. He examines

the broad transformation of a society based on public action into a society ruled by intimate relationships. With the Single project, we see Goffman's and Sennett's theses actualized. They allow a distanced analysis of the Single project as part of the public sphere. Wissel enters as an ambivalent hero for a new public. The Single is primarily a stage set: nothing that happens here belongs to the individual, nothing stays private. In the film, everything becomes exemplary. We encounter a transformation from the contingently significant to the powerfully symbolic. Closer inspection reveals the connection between the decline of appropriate public behavior and the loss of what one could call the Dionysian - a term which, for good reasons, we can't help but utter with a hint of irony.

The Single can be seen as a representation of the public insofar as Wissel conceived it as a kind of stage. On this stage, every action should take on a representative and public character. A night in the Single Club becomes a night at the theater. The Single Film similarly becomes a sort of adaptation. Filmic adaptations of theater have a relevant history here. Siegfried Krakauer points to the fact that while theater has a largely symbolic character, film is more indexical and is closer to the 'river of life'¹. Filmic adaptations of theater are particularly interesting on an account of a film taking its antithesis - the theater - and using it as a motif. Theater's determined symbolism allows the flowing indexicality of a life portrayed in film to emerge more clearly and, on the other hand, theater in film begins to seem all the more theatrical. According to Krakauer, the 'river of life' corresponds to the essence of film. "The river was rushing, and since it had no knowledge of anything beyond its own reality, it simply did its thing." ²

In the history of cinema, the opposition between film and theater has been handled with increasing sophistication and John Cassavetes' *Opening Night* is somewhat of a landmark in this development. In his film, Gena Rowlands, Cassavetes' wife, plays Myrtle Gordon, an alcoholic stage actress and theater quickly becomes the central motif of the film. Gordon's personal problems infiltrate her performances on stage. Not only does the emptiness of her celebrity status permeate her roles, the parts she performs also increasingly influence her private life - a fact that emerges with embarrassing intimacy. The mounting crisis ultimately resolves itself in a performance that Myrtle masters despite being drunk. Her private alcoholism allows the performance on stage emerge in a completely different light - her audience is ecstatic about its

extraordinary authenticity. A part of Myrtle's tumultuous private life is resolved as she publicizes it on stage. It becomes symbolic and thus meaningful. The form of the film fully mirrors its content. Close ups of the actress' face reveal how much theater and film permeate each other here. Cassavettes himself acknowledges his interest in the briefly mentioned themes of the public, the private, intimacy, and the presentation of self. "So, *Opening Night* was about the sense of theatricality in all of us and how it can take us over, how we can appear to be totally wrong on some little point, and we never know what little point we're going to fight for. (...). I think there's a pull and a push between whether you're an individual, as I feel right now, or whether you are a part of a society, and I think we are, all of us, pulled and pushed between these two things constantly. (...) Myrtle has two selves. One was that background of Gena Rowland's own personal life, of children, family, home, schooling; the problems of who you are and trying to fight for your own individual survival as you do all these other prescribed chores. The other is what you could be if none of these things existed."³ What Cassavettes' films portray so masterfully is nothing less than the almost perfect admixture of public and private life which undermines a fully public life and its representative function. The single film offers a similarly impressive testimony to this escalating development.

In contrast to *Opening Night*, the Single Film has at least one more level of representation. Not only are the fictional lives of the characters and their relationship to theater represented here, the film also integrates the real events of the Single Club and thus takes on a documentary character. It is never clear whether a given scene in the film faithfully captures a real event in the Single Club or whether they were entirely, as far as one can say, staged. The appearance of the actors unfolds in the most complex way. One can't quite distinguish between the supposedly real behavior of the individuals, their considered performances as participants of the Single Club and their acting as actors in staged scenes. There are hints that some of the scenes in the film are only partially staged. Consider the scene where Wissel desperately breaks into tears while holding a monologue before the camera which becomes even more unsettling when Wissel confides that he no longer sees a point in continuing with the film. Why does he present himself here as a distraught film maker rather than a competent nightclub manager? In order to enable a compelling consideration of the Single and handle its networked layers of representation, we must consider the Single from a perspective which allows the project to emerge clearly.

Wissel mentions in conversation that, even before opening the Single Club, he had already designed the poster for the film. The meticulous drawing shows a group of the participants with Wissel's and Agi's inflated heads looming over them. When asked whether the Single Club merely happened in order to stage the film, Wissel only responded with an ambiguous, winking laugh. If the club was primarily a tool for the film, we should understand the Single Club as a set in which each participant, under the watchful eyes of their stage director - as Wissel likes to describe himself - takes on the role of an actor. As a result, there's the expectation that participants behave like actors and the tragic rupture of the single happens here. When asked, in the film, what happens when people take someone home, Wissel is clear in saying that this also functions as part of the larger Single 'sculpture'. In the *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman demonstrates just how much the understanding of self is a cultural construction. We're all just playing theater. What is more astonishing however, is Goffman's claim that theater, the play of masks in public, is entirely desirable. There is nothing amiss to be discovered here and every hindrance to this performance is somewhat questionable: "It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves."⁴ Richard Sennett follows this line thought and transforms it into a foundational definition of civilization. "Civility is treating others as though they were strangers and forging a social bond upon that social distance. (...) To speak of incivility is to speak of reversed terms. It is burdening others with oneself; it is the decrease in sociability with others this burden of personality creates."⁵

Only in performing and preserving our masks, intensifying and exchanging them, do we protect others from ourselves. According to Sennett, the notion of performance as a kind of social action has been forgotten in modern times as a result of secularization and commodity fetishism. Instead of public life, one encounters a "wall of silence" which individuals use to hide from the pathological voyeurism of others. By adorning themselves with fetishes, individuals attempt to offer each other cryptic clues as to their supposed nature without the fundamental requirement of public interaction. Hannah Arendt investigates just this aspect of public intimacy in her book *The Human Condition*, 14 years earlier. "Seen from this viewpoint, the modern discovery of intimacy seems a flight from the whole outer world into the inner subjectivity of the individual, which formerly had been sheltered and protected by the private realm."⁶ This also explains the

distinction between person and individual which one finds in Sennett. For him a person is a human living a public life whereas the individual is the nominally liberated subject that escapes public action in the broadest sense. A distinguishing feature of this development is the replacement of distance, cosmopolitan manners and public living by a diffuse search for tenderness, closeness and affection between individuals. Individuals subsequently try to protect themselves from supposed alienation by searching for intimacy in the public sphere. According to Sennett however, it is hardly the ambiguous concept of alienation which leads to the decline of public life. Rather, it is the lost ability to maintain distance and act as a public person.⁷ This is exactly what we expect of the Single's guests when we assume that the project is about creating a stage. This is where the dramatic rupture takes place and we should consider how much the guests live up to this expectation, if one can live up to it at all.

Defining the Single as a public space becomes more complicated on closer inspection. The designation 'club' transforms all present into members and an entrance fee replaces the induction ritual. Historically, the term club represents the opposite of 18th century coffee houses which offered class transcendent spaces of exchange. In contrast, clubs, popular since the dawn of Industrialization at the beginning of the nineteenth century, constitute exclusive communities and are, per definition, private spaces. Though one can hardly compare a 19th century English gentleman's club with a contemporary nightclub, all clubs nonetheless share the premiss that guests or members can find a more or less familiar community there. The Single also facilitated this. Although the Single was accessible to everyone only a limited number of visitors could be let in for security reasons. While regular visitors were naturally aware of this, poorly informed outsiders tended to arrive later only to be rejected at the door. The Single further reinforced this tendency by limiting advertisement to a small circle, presumably to prevent further overcrowding. The Single only moves at the edges of the public sphere and visitors can expect to find a relatively familiar environment there. Public activity however, does not benefit from an environment where people jump straight into intimacy without the ability to maintain distance. Though, the Single came to offer this in time as the circle of visitors expanded with each event, the largest constituent remained students of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. The difficulty of putting on a public performance remained. "For what is wrong about the notion of building a community against the world is that it assumes that the very terms of intimate experience would

indeed permit people to create a new kind of sociability, based on the sharing of their feelings.”⁸ It is difficult to expect that the Single’s participants behave according to public principles given their pre-existing relationships, not to mention those that develop over the course of the night. According to Sennett, the shift from performance to intimate relationships is an essential symptom of the crisis of public life. “The artfulness which is squandered in self-absorption is that of playacting; playacting requires an audience of Roles strangers to succeed, but is meaningless or even destructive among intimates.”⁹ The problems of intimate society, mentioned by Sennett, arise from its exclusivity. For him, an intimate community is simultaneously the exclusion of outsiders. Hannah Arendt also considers the presence of outsiders and a stage like setting as essential requirements of public living. “Every activity performed in public can attain an excellence never matched in privacy; for excellence, by definition, the presence of others is always required, and this presence needs the formality of the public, constituted by one’s peers, it cannot be the casual, familiar presence of one’s equals or inferiors.”¹⁰ Arendt’s emphasis here differs from Sennett’s in her concern with excellence. One however, can assume that she is speaking of the excellent performance of a role and in this way Arendt’s and Sennett’s predications are closely related. We could consider Arendt’s thesis as positing that an excellent delivery, an excellent performance, cannot be recognized in a familiar or intimate community. A public appearance is necessitated by a community of strangers. Ultimately, a good performance runs the risk of existing for its own sake. In the club, self interested performances, so to speak, are definitely desirable though only in combination with a life outside of the club. A community whose primary interest is performance for its own sake, the empty presentation of self, conquers the process of excessive socialization but when this community forgets how to perform roles, a socialization of desire and intimacy takes place.

As a consequence of the movement away from performed roles towards intimate relationships, self representation has become increasingly replaced by a tendency towards a sort of self incarnation.¹¹ Instead of guests at the Single taking on more or less appropriate roles, they try to embody and convey their deepest most natural beings, their ‘true character’ while simultaneously trying to conceal said ‘true character’ in the interests of self defense. Without the mediation performed roles, the paradox of the situation becomes clear. Thus the participants impose themselves on all present, contrary to any form of festive sociability. The supposed liberation of

the individual ultimately also means that individuals become limited by their selves. Richard Rorty asserts that “the vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument.”¹² Going beyond one self is impossible when this increasingly proves to be merely a form of introspection. Going beyond oneself means overcoming oneself by means of generally valid principles or at least in reference to them, not overcoming generally valid principles for the sake of the self. The relationship between the growth of the self and the growth of freedom is merely superficial. Individuals, as it were, prefer to flaunt their needs rather than don a performative mask that would allow them to go beyond themselves. Guests of the Single thus enter a sphere of hysteria, a den of perversion. One hysterically observes the effect of the self on others. Every sense of distance gets lost and performances are assumed to be the innate characters of individuals rather than mere acts. The relationship of guests to each other is markedly perverse on account them finding themselves in a system of reciprocal dependency. One can speak of an encompassing debt of intimacy where any attempt to dissociate oneself from this debt can be interpreted as a betrayal of the intimate relations between participants. Hysterical introspection and the resultant system of intimate debt prevent the participants of the Single from going beyond themselves. The actual concern of the Single is a parody of going beyond oneself which remains unredeemed. A later poster for the Single Film, also drawn by Wissel, indicates just how central the performance of masks and roles are for him. It shows once more the grinning, balloon heads of Wissel and Agi but this, time each donning of the mask of the other. Wissel wears Agi’s face and vice versa. The significance of their cat and mouse game is transferred onto and expanded by the Single: Which part does Agi play? Who’s pulling the strings? Whose puppet is whose?

Speaking off camera, Wissel emphasizes that his interest lies in the moment when presentation becomes participation. Meanwhile, the camera swivels to a plastic clad Johannes Kithil, zooming in on his flaccid penis... If public participation depends on performance, reducing a person to their biological essence means the ruin of participation. Another significant loss to public life, according to Sennett, is the abandonment of anticipation in favor of passivity, silence, staring and voyeurism. For a club, this is a bitter tragedy. The guests hide behind a wall of silence even while dancing, trying to disclose their true selves as little as possible. They transform the club into a waiting room full of individuals who long for a future satisfaction of their desire for the perfect

fetish while remaining immersed in their own pasts. Though, it should be pointed out that the Single can only be compared with other clubs up to a certain point. In the Single, unlike other clubs, the relationship between active individuals and the wall of silence is constantly shifting. In the Single we find appreciably less silence and more participation although, the mediation between self and public appearance by means of performance is largely dispensed with. A vacuum develops in which individuals who've decided for action don't adopt roles which would unleash the situation. A performance of drives as opposed to a performance of persons develops and in the worst case one must speak of the Single as a condition rather than a situation. "All the branches that overhang the water negate the river's movement. Likewise the bare, barkless limbs of large trees that are stuck in the bottom. Every object the river's flow takes hold of sways and swings according to the rhythm of its own strength or weakness. Some react rapidly, some languidly, some with majestic slowness, some nervously, but all in almost compulsive resistance."¹³

Alongside the fetishization of communication, fashion accessories being a case in point, we also find an entropy of the erotic. Sennet remarks that "in the last four generations, physical love has been redefined, from terms of eroticism to terms of sexuality. Victorian eroticism involved social relationships, sexuality involves personal identity. "¹⁴ The club as a stage for sexual relationships finds itself in an identity crisis when the charged field of the erotic ceases to exist. The actions of those present becomes essentially vacuous or at least unilateral. The mounting intimacy of the relationships impedes debauchery in the literal sense. Persons, i.e. those whose perform as public persons, often take no part in the excess, rather it is the individuals who reduce themselves to their base desires. For Sennet this accompanies a loss of a public language of eroticism. "The language of extramarital sexual affairs showed many of the characteristics of other forms of public discourse."¹⁵ Thus sexual excess was also something that could be publicly shared and functioned as an representative act. The Single does not allow the naked and self conscious intercourse between two or more participants to be discerned as anything relevant to public action. Arendt remarks that "(...) even the greatest forces of intimate life--the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance."¹⁶

At this point, the notion of ecstasy comes into play. The Single's guests often seem to be trying to regain some lost Dionysian aspect through the excessive consumption of alcohol. The cult of Bacchus was part of an appreciation for festivity, ecstasy and transcendence that is difficult to conceive of today. The participants of ancient fetes enter an exchange with the gods. One could speak of a cross dressing of god and man. The inebriated are ecstatic, possessed or otherwise pervaded by a role. "At present however, Society as a whole has lost an understanding of what it could mean to party in an agreeable way and what that would have meant for everyone's ambition."¹⁷ We can hardly try to overcome this vacuum arising from the absence of mediating performances between individual and anticipation with the consumption of alcohol. Ecstasy becomes excess and nothing remains but mere intoxication. The individual who cannot free himself from silent voyeurism uses alcohol to generate enough self confidence to participate. The self remains arrested by failing to participate in a role. Under the influence of alcohol, this self becomes increasingly reduced to its basic drives. "But today I could immediately tell from the color of the water that nothing had changed. The (river) had risen by only twenty centimeters"¹⁸ It becomes clear why the Dionysian and the Civilized are not antithetically opposed. Rather it is the Dionysian which sustains civilization. "Eroticism is condemnable insofar as being a human being means accepting the limits without which we would be animals. Meanwhile, leaving the limits behind oneself means (...) to exceed human and animal, to enter the kingdom of the prohibited and the prohibited is as we know the sacred."¹⁹ The Dionysian maintains civilized performance even in the midsts of debauchery or limitless ecstasy.

The forked relationship between performance and alcohol becomes particularly evident in a scene from the film where one of the protagonists, Pavel, accuses Wissel of being nothing more than a cardboard cutout. Here Wissel brilliantly plays the role of the tragic hero. As he, the actor, the cardboard cutout, empties his beer on someone who refuses to perform, he also holds a mirror up to him. He drenches the one who jeopardizes his project with the same alcohol that threatens the Single. The almost criminal effects alcohol are made public. The individual stinking of beer is the enemy of the cardboard cut out.

Though the twenty-four hour format would indicate that duration plays a central role for the

Single, another scene in the film suggests a lost awareness of the relationship between ecstasy and duration. In this scene, two individuals lie on the grass, now condemned to perpetual reverse photosynthesis, installed at the first opening. "Perhaps the modern, European discontentedness is to be looked upon as caused by the fact that the world of our forefathers, the whole Middle Ages, was given to drink, owing to the influence of German tastes in Europe: the Middle Ages, that means the alcoholic poisoning of Europe."²⁰ These two lying on the floor are the last guests and the better part of twenty four hours has already passed. A third person enters the room, sober and neatly dressed. The scene reveals that few guests experience the full twenty four hour experience although fully developed ecstasy can only unfold over a long period of time. The new arrival interrupts their incomplete ecstasy. No one interacts with each other. Nothing develops. The scene is almost painful in its clarity. "We discussed whether we would find an entire petrified river out here, like petrified wood. It would be recognizable because leaves that had fallen on its surface would be frozen in place and would not move. The water would consist of diamonds (...). We pictured the diamond river lying there in its grand, timeless tranquillity."²¹

Our short examination of the Single Club is conducive to a similarly short analysis of the relationship between the Single Club and film. This relationship is essentially determined by a process of transformation and inversion. Arendt clearly describes this in the previously cited text when she speaks of private matters: unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The single provides just this, a translation from the private to the public sphere. This becomes particularly evident in a love scene where Wissel and his girlfriend dissolve their commitments. Though the scene is being acted so to speak, it also occurred, somewhat less artificially, shortly before the Single was opened. Legend holds that Wissel started the Single primarily to win his girlfriend back or, at least, to impress her. Their break up was common knowledge amongst the visitors since Wissel and his girlfriend had been a rather prominent couple in Düsseldorf. This fact is particularly problematic for the club since Wissel named it largely after his then status and in doing so decided against the Single being a public space. The name "Single" refers to the fundamental significance of the club as a place for intimate relations and makes every guest into an accomplice. And, as we have already seen, intimate relationships represent a threat to every kind of public interaction. A single person usually isn't someone who has liberated himself from

every kind of intimate relationship but rather an individual who identifies with his relationship status. They flaunt their lack as a fetish. Wissel, though christening the film as such, simultaneously goes in an opposite direction with the film. By naming the club after his relationship status, he transforms his singleness into something public and complies with Arendt's imperative for the private to be made into something publicly accessible. He distinguishes himself from the usual single individual by making his case into something of general relevance which does not merely concern his self interest. Certainly, Wissel seems more or less uniquely positioned in this undertaking since most of the Single's visitors remain mired in the previously mentioned behavior patterns that thoroughly resist the idea of public activity - this means being alone amongst ones equals. In the film however, the guests' behavior ultimately becomes public.

Through this complex structure the film mirrors the similarly complex relations of its protagonists to the public sphere. The fact is that everything happening in the film automatically becomes public on account of it being part of the film. A film that shows private scenes is a film that makes the private public. Furthermore, a film which purposefully avoids disclosing which scenes were originally private and which were originally public explicitly questions the public sphere. The distinction between private and public gets blurred here much like our reality or at least the reality in which such boundaries exist. Here Wissel counters with a radical tactic of making things public. He tries to reverse the progress of intimacy by making his own private relationships public, thus making contingencies into tangible and shareable public objects. The viewer can never know whether the tears Wissel cries over his lost relationship are an act or not. According to Goffman, this can't be known anyway since all behavior is to some degree an act. Furthermore, according to Arendt and Sennett, one can only say if it was well performed or not and Wissel's performance is certainly successful in that it no longer allows one to make that distinction. His performance distinguishes itself, in the club as well as in the film, by being in the position to communicate his person as a distraught public figure precisely because he is able to communicate his feelings perhaps a little too publicly. We can all participate in his feelings and are taken beyond intimacy. Wissel does not expect consolation in the form of compassion. Rather he is consoled by the knowledge that the participants compel him to perform as a stage director rather than a psychic wreck or private individual to be pitied. If Wissel's breakup was the

reason or catalyst for starting the Single, it becomes publicly relevant and, as previously mentioned, deeply erotic. Hollywood film production and the porn industry have the opposite effect. They also make the intimate public but they offer no transformation. Rather, they merely plague public space with intimacy and closeups.

In his undertaking, Wissel reminds one of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Gatsby. The Great Gatsby is a figure of tragic grandeur and much like Gatsby, Wissel tries to win back his lost love by staging exceptional parties. In the introduction, Fitzgerald chooses a quote from Thomas Parke D'Invilliers which prefigures how important themes of performance and conquest will be for both Wissel and the novel:

Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her;
If you can bounce high, bounce for her too,
Till she cry "Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover,
I must have you!"²²

Despite the similarities between Wissel and Gatsby, it's perhaps more relevant to point out their differences at this point. On one hand there is the fact that Gatsby's identity is altogether fabricated. It is only by deception that Gatsby becomes great. He is in fact the son of a poor farmer. Here Gatsby goes further than Wissel who, despite being a master of the stage, only styles himself as a nightclub manager but does not deceive. As far as Wissel is concerned, he surpasses Gatsby since he does not remain a tragic hero and unlike Gatsby, will not ultimately withdraw from public life. Fitzgerald precisely describes the fading appearance that Gatsby undergoes in a previous novel. „The growth of intimacy is like that. First one gives off his best picture, the bright and finished product mended with bluff and falsehood and humor. Then more details are required and one paints a second portrait, and a third - before long the best lines cancel out - and the secret is exposed at last; the panes of the pictures have intermingled and given us away, and though we paint and paint we can no longer sell a picture.“²³

Wissel uses the film to pull himself out of a swamp. In turning his personal drama and the drama of the Single Club into a film and thereby giving life and club dramatic significance, Wissel stays on top of his private life. It is he who styles himself as hero or antihero when he and Jan Bonny produce a film about himself and the club. While Gatsby needs a narrator to tell of his rise and

fall, *Wissel* is his own narrator and writes his place in history with his own hands. As he recounts his potential failure as a club manager, he stages a tragic comedy without catharsis in any proper sense. *Gatsby's* tale speaks of the conflict between intimacy and public life much like the *Single*. Fitzgerald and *Wissel* bring their stories into public view and provoke the possibility of a new kind of public life. In much the same way that public life degenerates in the *Single Club* and *Gatsby* retires into privacy, the *Single* film slowly crystallizes the meaning of public life. The film is diametrically opposed to the entropy of a public addicted to intimacy. He unplugs the drain. "The river, now quiet, is withdrawing more and more into itself." 24

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