

On Circlejerk

Chicago School of Countercultural Inquiry December 18, 2021

The logic of capitalism is reproduced in online communities as circlejerks, where quantified affirmation supplants monetary profit. Like capitalism, democratized Internet culture is inadequate to its own promise of freedom. Originally published in 2017.

Published December 18, 2021. Available at <https://thephilosophersmeme.com/articles/on-circlejerk-part-1/>.

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ON CIRCLEJERK (or, NEW REENACTMENT, PART 1)

Original text by the Chicago Long March Reenactment Society (2017)

Translated by the Chicago School of Countercultural Inquiry (2021) (counterculturalinquiry.com)

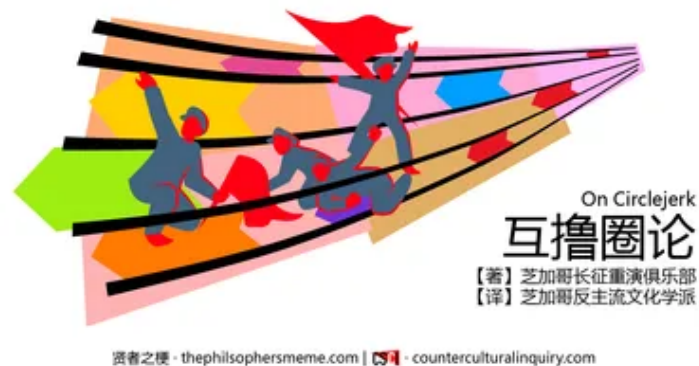
TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

New Reenactment was the centerpiece of the Chicago Long March Reenactment Society (CLMRS), and CLMRS was embedded in the world of Weird Facebook. The various arguments and disappointments on Weird Facebook served as the connective tissue between *New Reenactment's* disparate, contradictory

parts. But Weird Facebook, more or less, no longer exists. To fit *New Reenactment* into 2021 is to sever its tissue and render parts of it incomprehensible. So much is true of any translation.

The way in which *New Reenactment* might still fit today is the way in which it is – or was, in the first place – valuable. CLMRS was always ambivalent on this point. Certainly, it had specific views and goals: among other things it was a critique of subcultural preoccupations with “good content” and a satire of Left-wing LARPing (“reenactment”) on the Internet. But these goals were very limited in scope, and CLMRS always admitted that its counterculturalism could not change the world, or even the Left, in any significant way. It did not claim to be political praxis because it expected that pseudoactivity would be a dead end.

At the same time, CLMRS was never fully honest with itself – certainly, it *wished* to change the world, and in many moments it acted as if it really could. In its satire it also embraced its satirized object. This ambivalence, symptomatic of the dead Left and common to many Leftists, is what persists beyond the death of Weird Facebook. It serves as a key connection between the world of *New Reenactment* and our world today. We aim to walk the same line of self-ambivalence in our translation.



CHAPTER 1. THE CONCEPT OF THE CIRCLEJERK

I. Circlejerk as Alienated Form

Content, that is a single unit of cultural output in the language of the Internet, is never produced in and of itself, but always speaks to a specific social context, which leaves its particular imprint on all content produced therein. This dialectic forms the basis of our investigation: proceeding from Marx, the interplay of society and its products is part of a whole in which production is both determined by and, in turn, recreates society in ever-changing ways. Individuals, too, can recreate themselves via production. A

person can produce art to become an artist, and an artist that reflects upon their own art can become a better artist. In other words, production is not necessarily a one-way process by which subjectivity is deprived; the object grants the subject its subjectivity and vice versa. Production in general, including cultural production specifically, bears this liberatory potential.

The phenomenon of the circlejerk is an emergent property of content production en masse. Whereas the term is typically used pejoratively, it is not in itself detrimental. An individual who wishes to join a group or subculture begins by observing and aligning themselves with the prevailing consensus and preferred style of content, i.e. the existing circlejerk. Once accomplished, they produce content for the group along the lines of the perceived circlejerk. Depending on the perceptive and creative ability of this individual, their content will be either affirmed or rejected, at which point they may attempt to improve upon their content based on the received feedback. At the same time, upon evaluating the content of the new member, the older members gain a better understanding of their own criteria for good content, however vague and diverse they might be. The new member has not only gained feedback with which to improve their content, but has also advanced the entire group by changing the existing circlejerk, if only slightly.

This is the basis of freedom. On a subcultural level, content is not merely evaluated, but the conditions for evaluating content are constantly, and perhaps consciously, revised. Similarly, on a broader level, the social self-contemplation of all products allows society to transform the conditions in which it produces itself.

We should now speak of the circlejerk in detail: first, we should establish the relationship of the circlejerk to content and content producers. Earlier, we spoke of the circlejerk as group consensus, which requires a two-sided interaction between group members and their content. This means that the circlejerk is not just the accumulated content of a group, but must explicitly relate to the producers themselves. Colloquially, when we say that a community has a circlejerk, we mean that its members exhibit a certain behavior around each other. The circlejerk must then refer to the particular *configuration of content producers*, not to the accumulated content directly, although content does reflect and feed the circlejerk. We may therefore speak of the circlejerk instead as the set of *social relations* between each member of the community; this is not identical to any set of individual members nor to any set of content, but related to both.

So, what of our society? It is no mistake that the word circlejerk conjures up only negative connotations. We know from experience that circlejerks do not bring freedom, but always dominate their respective communities by enforcing uniformity. Once again we should look to society as a whole: capitalist society is characterized by the commodity-form, where the produced object is alienated from its producer. In the classic Marxist critique, objects appear as things in themselves. A machine in a factory seems to suck away at workers' lives, where in a different society it may improve and free them. The circlejerk too becomes reified into an object of pure contemplation, where the dialectic of content and content producers becomes a total schism.

The circlejerk in capitalism is not just an objectified form of group relations, but is a blueprint to which group relations must conversely align. In the subjective view, an individual interacts with other members of the group by submitting content, receiving affirmation, and using the affirmation to improve upon their content as they see fit: we may call this the C-A-C' (content-affirmation-further content) cycle. However, the circlejerk in an unfree society manifests most commonly as an A-C-A' (affirmation-content-further affirmation) cycle. The purpose of production becomes the accumulation of affirmation, and the need for affirmation escalates ever higher. This is, after all, the origin of the term circlejerk: like a *literal* circlejerk, it finishes in sensual gratification.

II. The Circlejerk for Affirmation

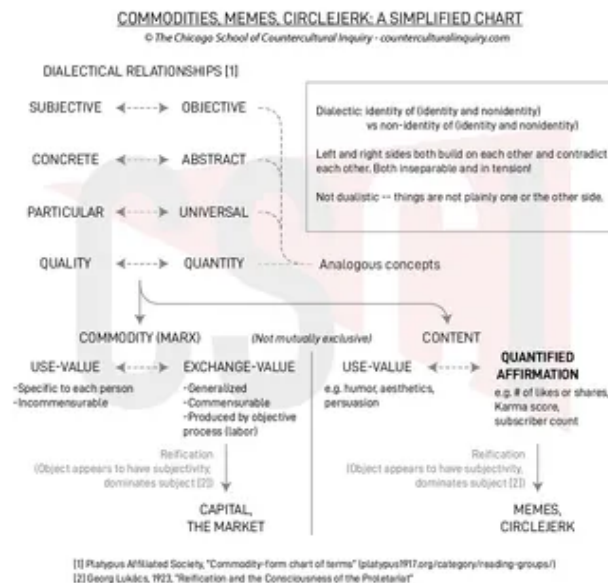
The circlejerk never operates as C-A-C' or A-C-A' exclusively; it is, after all, a cycle. There are surely some situations in which one produces content for affirmation, and some situations in which one produces content to build on existing content; most likely, though perhaps unconsciously and in uneven amounts, most people intend to do both. Neither is society at a standstill: even if it appears that the world is alienated, it is nevertheless shaped by the actions of subjects. The question should not be of which version of the circlejerk is *correct*, but of which is *dominant*. What do we mean, then, by the dominance of the A-C-A' circlejerk?

Our work is made easier by the convenient, though not coincidental, fact that we live in a society dominated by online media.

(1) Affirmation is quantified

On almost all social media platforms, content is evaluated with one or more point systems. On reddit, these are *votes*. On Youtube, these are *views*, *likes*, and *subscribers*. The primary purpose of point systems is to quantify content, or to make content commensurable, which becomes necessary when the total amount of content on any platform far exceeds the attention span of an average user — between qualitatively different posts, an algorithm can safely prioritize ones with more points without judging the user’s individual taste. On the other hand, earlier platforms e.g. message boards and chatrooms produced only small amounts of content that users could plausibly consume in full, and these platforms developed either only very rudimentary point systems or none at all.

In terms of the circlejerk, the *thing* being quantified in all point systems is affirmation. Qualitatively distinct responses such as enjoyment, empathy, agreement, or even polite disagreement are flattened into a single metric, and increasingly a single *feeling*, for all content producers. Quantified affirmation also allows for the accumulation of affirmation, which becomes an end-in-itself. On reddit, the net score of each post added to one’s overall *Karma* score; on Youtube, these are one’s View and Subscriber counts. Where there is no explicit accumulation of points, such as on Facebook, affirmation appears subjective, but one still keeps a mental count of one’s average *Likes* received per post per friend or group member.



Since quantitative affirmation accumulates across different content in different circlejerks, the qualitative character specific to each piece of content and each circlejerk is subsumed. The production of content serves as an intermediary for quantitative incrementation. The concrete analysis and adaptation

of content production to each circlejerk becomes a tactic used to receive more and more abstract affirmation.

An imageboard like 4chan, with anonymous posting and the absence of any point system, appears at first as an exception. However, the quantification of affirmation need not be explicit. The number of replies, the average number of words in each reply, and the number of reaction images are all potential sources of affirmation. Screenshots of 4chan posts, for instance, frequently include and emphasize the number of comment replies on the post, without presenting each reply individually. This implies that quantitative affirmation is not forced by or intrinsic to large social media platforms, but that it already permeates consciousness and is reproduced wherever convenient.

(2) The circlejerk is based in affirmation

If we can speak of content as a discrete unit of cultural production, we must also be able to speak of a discrete “turn” of the circlejerk in which a single individual produces a single piece of content. The composition of a turn is simple: it must involve the production of content and the reception of affirmation for the content. But for what reasons does a single turn begin?

The Internet meme provides the prime example for analysis. At first glance a meme appears to be a form of inside joke, that is a joke that one gets because one gets it. While memes are indeed tautological, a meme differs from an inside joke in that its producers and consumers need not know the specific context from which it had arisen and the contexts in which it is used: a meme is enjoyed as a meme by being recognized as a meme, whereas an inside joke is still tied to particular memories in particular friendships. In other words, *a meme is an inside joke made universal by stripping it of specific context.*

The universality of a meme emancipates it from the internal dynamics of a specific subculture. Its universality also emancipates it from the individual producer, even as the producer feels tied to it. The freedom of movement that it gains requires it to speak the common language of society; to be mutually comprehensible and commensurate with all other memes in all subcultures, it converts itself into quantitative affirmation. The producer must also speak this language, and in doing so loses all reasons for production except quantitative affirmation. The meme, being the highest example of universalized content, is also the highest example of content for affirmation, and the highest example of commodification.

This is a simplified picture, however, and in many cases memes also resist universalization. Memes can, in some situations and for some people, become overused. Memes can also build upon each other in ways that require viewers to understand their genealogy, and in doing so partially revert to being inside jokes. To account for this phenomenon there must be a contradictory force in society that promotes fragmentation against the universalization of the meme. This force, which we term “Counterculture,” will be the main concern of future chapters. For now, though, we will ignore minority dissent and focus only on the millions of uncritical consumers on the Internet’s largest communities: the popularity of the Internet meme points to a mode of content production that springs from the pursuit of affirmation. Note, too, that just as the commodity’s use-value is subsumed by exchange-value, the concrete Content (*Inhalt*) of a meme is diminished; the important thing is that they take on the specific character of memes, which means that they derive affirmation from Form *independently* of Content.

Combining points (1) and (2), we find that the A-C-A’ circlejerk arises from forms of content defined by affirmation and continues to the end of quantitative affirmation accumulation. It is also characterized by the subjugation of quality to quantity, of Content to Form, and ultimately, of subject to object.

III. The Grand Circlejerk, or the Will to Circlejerk

We have thus far revealed the character of the circlejerk in modern society. However, the question remains: what could this mean? Why do people produce content for affirmation? This is the central question of this work, and we will expand more on this topic as we develop our theory. For now, though, we will introduce the concept of the Grand Circlejerk, or synonymously the *will to circlejerk*, as the subjective factor driving the formation and continuation of circlejerks, which links every turn in each circlejerk into a coherent totality.

The will to circlejerk is not just a subjective force. It is the subjective force itself objectified: will to circlejerk is simultaneously also a circlejerk. The Grand Circlejerk is the alienated and perverted form of human agency; it is the productive will to circlejerk set upon a world of things, turned conservative without a means of consciously exercising its subjectivity.

Such an understanding of the will to circlejerk is important in a society in which the totality of the circlejerk is broken. As we shall see, the circlejerk cannot merely be avoided, and the problem of the circlejerk cannot be abolished directly. The path to human freedom viewed through the lens of circlejerk

theory must instead be the sublation of a self-contradictory Grand Circlejerk; or, more generally, it must overcome the estrangement of humanity from itself.

CHAPTER 2. THE SOCIETY OF THE CIRCLEJERK

I. Affirmation and the Commodity-Form

It is often claimed that the development of Internet culture has transferred cultural production from the profit-motive of capitalists into the hands of the masses. Circlejerks can be forgiven if the Internet is a democratizing force. There is, of course, truth in this statement. Creating content on the Internet requires only basic Internet access, which is available to nearly everyone in industrialized countries. Almost everyone has a platform, with a far lower barrier to entry and far less bureaucratic oversight compared to older media like television, radio, or print. The defenders of this apparently democratic situation claim that it awakens the critical consciousness of the masses, as they engage in the open mockery of Mainstream culture. Advertisements and politicians are ruthlessly parodied, and those attempting to use Internet culture for their own benefit are called out as spammers or shills.

This is all, of course, as much of an illusion as consumer choice has always been. In the first place, the titans of Internet culture should be given more credit. Plenty of for-profit content mills are well-versed in Internet language, and plenty are able to disguise themselves as Countercultural entities while pitching their products. Even the relatively crude and direct forms of product placement are becoming more and more accepted. Blogs that derive profit from ad revenue have brought an unending flood of clickbait listicles that only barely pass as original content, as the quantified affirmation of pageviews translates well into money. The scourge of purposefully inflammatory political headlines is best evidence of this. For any such editorial, those who agree with it will share it sincerely, and those who disagree will share it with friends to laugh at its ridiculousness. Either way, ads are seen and profit is reaped — what is important is that *any response*, that is some amount of *abstract affirmation* is derived, as the specific content of politics is flattened by the machine of quantification. The continued existence of BuzzFeed and clones indicate how successful such scams can be in practice.

We might also look at independent channels on Youtube, where content producers earn money based on their number of views, without having to pay royalties to Youtube directly (of course, Youtube takes its share of the profit before any money changes hands). This seems like a good deal, but the lower cost of doing business need not entail any deviation from quantitative affirmation. The drive to maximize

accumulation by catering to and manipulating the viewers' every emotional reaction is not always an economic one, as quantitative affirmation has become a principle in itself, even when money is involved. "Let's Play" videos are especially guilty of this. Frequently, viewers watch each video having already played each game and having already predicted all of the reactions that the host(s) will make. Those who have not played the game will still tend to find satisfaction in aligning themselves with the emotional state of the hosts, or vice versa. Moments of genuine surprise are not necessarily appreciated, and are just as often points of tension within the fan community; on the other hand, the most broadly appreciated moments are oftentimes the most predictable ones.

Even surreal or experimental videos suffer from the same disorder, if only more subtly. Everyone knows before an unusual video begins that the video will be unusual, and it is good only insofar as it is appropriately unusual. The precise content of the video is relatively unimportant. In fact all such videos are made with the same principles as *Goatse*, where the point is that the content is shocking enough, and that it delivers enough of a response in exchange for affirmation. They are enjoyable as much as one's friends are shocked, or pretend to be shocked, after one sends them the link, and everyone bonds over their mutual conformity to each others' expectations.

It is by these mechanisms that a content platform like Youtube maintains its stranglehold on the masses, even as it delegates all real production of content to the masses themselves. The profit motive runs naked here precisely because of the democratization of cultural production; that is, because democratization, under present conditions, both requires and reinforces the profit motive within the masses. The Internet advertising scheme has, therefore, widened even further the chasm between exchange- and use-value, already torn apart by industrial capital. The domination of Content (*Inhalt*) by Form has melted away the distinction between the genuine and ironic. In the society of memes, all things acquire the character of memes (really, commodities).

That the A-C-A' cycle resembles the M-C-M' cycle of the commodity-form is no small coincidence. Circlejerk-affirmation is a means of relating between individuals that has become fetishized into what appears as a thing-in-itself. On an individual's Facebook wall, Likes from different people may still be differentiated qualitatively on the basis of personal relationships with them; this does not mean that small-audience content is liberated, but only that its commodification is somewhat hidden. More often than not, anyway, small-audience content is nothing more than recycled mass-content. In large enough groups, the commodity character of content is completely exposed. Likes in the thousands-strong

Facebook groups are effectively anonymous, and the people behind them lose all meaning except that they have attributed a Like to a single post. In the largest groups, posts have Likes, not people who have had various personal relations. A successful post, then, appears that it is itself affirmed, just as it is the commodity itself that appears to have value. But these posts are not autonomous — really, they depend on the circlejerk.

We discussed in the last chapter that the circlejerk-for-affirmation means two things: that that affirmation is quantified into abstract Internet points, and that the circlejerk has its basis in affirmation. What unites the two is the commodity-form. With commodities, the abstraction of use-value into exchange-value is also a process of quantification; it is only by the comparison of two numbers that the value of one thing relative to another can be determined. For any process to produce a commodity for the purpose of exchanging it with other commodities, the commodity must first acquire some quantifiable value. Similarly, a circlejerk that produces content with the primary intent of accumulating affirmation must also provide some basis on which content can be assessed with affirmation: affirmation must be quantified.

Monetized content is the intermediary between pure commodity and pure affirmation-content. Clickbait articles hold identical exchange-value and quantified affirmation, as each pageview directly corresponds to however much money a pageview pays. Really, this was the case of all of mass culture even before it became widely available for free, as the observation that culture is commodified is hardly new. Mass marketing on radio and TV were earlier versions of this phenomenon, which in turn provoked the formation of Countercultural movements in the 1960s. But, when the 60s Countercultural movements rejected Mainstream culture without critically addressing capitalism, they created a vacuum for some other fetishized object, which mutual affirmation quickly filled. Then, as elements of 60s Counterculture reentered Mainstream society, they quickly reacclimated to commodification in the form of monetized concerts and band merchandise. The full displacement of money onto affirmation did not occur until Internet ad revenue allowed the money side of things to fade entirely into the background. The democratization of culture under capitalism is really the highest stage of the fetishization of affirmation.

An important insight should be made here that will be important later. Since affirmation is the basis and outcome of the circlejerk, the will to circlejerk is essentially an equivalent phenomenon to the fetishization of affirmation. Furthermore, since fetishization is displaced from commodities and money onto affirmation, the will to circlejerk is likewise a modified version of the profit-motive.

II. The Universality of the Circlejerk

It is universally acknowledged that we live in the most culturally interconnected period in history. Save for the most remote islands and jungles that resist external contact, it is impossible to speak of a single enclosed community in the midst of other enclosed communities. Since a circlejerk is a set of objectified social relations within a community, and since an individual is simultaneously a member of a multitude of communities, any circlejerk in any particular community must be linked with all other circlejerks of each member in that community, and so forth. We discover that while it may be productive to speak of discrete circlejerks within society, there really exists a *world-circlejerk* that permeates all of society.

Just as the 60s Counterculturalists failed to escape the commodification of mainstream society, so must any attempts at escaping the world-circlejerk. Any attempt at founding a community with “less” circlejerk is woefully misguided in its very understanding of the circlejerk — in adopting some preexisting notion of what it wants to avoid, this notion must instantly become a circlejerk itself, as a new means of evaluating affirmation against the old. Two opposed groups will always perceive of the other as a circlejerk, and any current within a group that goes against the main circlejerk will always be perceived as a “counterjerk.”

Insofar as the fetishization of affirmation is endemic to our society, any individual who lives in this society will find it impossible to not circlejerk. The society that ingrains in us the will to circlejerk must too be reflexively attached to that which it has ingrained in us. The result is a tailspin into an ever-conservative society.

III. Conservative Society

Modern society is conservative, but not because it is ruled by oligarchs with conservative agendas. Democratized culture is in many ways more conservative than when there was actually an authority to subvert. The previous sections of this chapter have established that the circlejerk mirrors the commodity-form as a product of capitalist society. We will now explore the effects of the circlejerk on society.

The trouble with the commodity-form is not just that exchange-value is objectified and independent of use-value. It is still possible, as was imagined by early political economists, that the subjective and objective sides of the commodity can interact. To them, the laws of supply and demand were abstractions of human activity that could allow production to meet humanity’s own freely-chosen demands, provided only that society is well-developed and the state follows a reasonable set of policies.

Their imagination, of course, remains unfulfilled. In the era of industrial capital the commodity-form is so thoroughly alienated that it actively hinders social emancipation. Most people can feed themselves adequately, but persistent unemployment and overproduction mean that abundance exists both *because of* and *in spite of* capitalist society. The pure estrangement of exchange-value from use-value means that a homeless person can starve while food expires uneaten in a nearby supermarket.

The internal contradictions of a circlejerk manifest in a somewhat different way. A piece of content confronts us with two opposing approaches to its evaluation: the first is to treat it as use-value, and to respond to it with an amount of affirmation related to its usefulness (for example, the enjoyment or information that it provides). But, since this approach depends on one's own taste, it is subjective and qualitative, and cannot be directly represented by quantified affirmation. We find that the translation of the subjective to the objective necessitates a second approach that grasps at an abstracted quantity behind all content. The only thing that all content share in common is that they must all be produced, so this approach must be derived from the act of content production itself. As with commodities, assuming an abundance of raw materials in nature (which is certainly true in this case, as Internet content is not derived from raw materials in any traditional sense), the only quantity that can mediate production is labor-time. In Internet terms, this is *effort*.

The fact that we sometimes evaluate content based on the perceived amount of effort spent in making it should come as no surprise. There is a stigma in most communities against reposts, overused memes, or more directly, "low-effort" content. However, this approach contradicts the aforementioned subjective one, without a productive relation actually developing between the two. It is *conceivable* that what is more or less effortful is generally also more or less creative, useful, or at least appealing, but we know that this is untrue. Memes and reposts get shared in spite of any stigma against them (really, popular stigma against overused memes develop long after they first become overused).

The will-to-circlejerk demands that the maximum amount of quantified affirmation is obtained when producing content. Since time is the limiting factor, content producers will invest a small amount of effort that allows for previously successful content to be presented as new and unique. Content production therefore becomes a balancing-act of conserving sameness and mixing-up the words or images just enough to mitigate the problem of diminishing returns. The two contradictory approaches to content are degraded to mere criteria to be checked off in a whole that is not understood. "me_irl" memes are all technically different, but the self that they supposedly represent is really the same one. In

this case, the self conforms to the universal in order to sell the effort expended in creating the post, and the effort expended ends up justifying the whole cycle over again. Neither contribute meaningfully to advancing the content itself; content, therefore, becomes a mere vessel for the circlejerk-for-affirmation, as contemplation upon it brings nothing but the circlejerk's repetition. Where content appears to acquire an independent existence, then, it is really the mystification of the circlejerk, that is actually nowhere close to the ideal of autonomous art.

What this means is the obvious insight that the circlejerk is conservative. Specifically, the circlejerk contains contradictory elements that, unresolved, compel individuals to identify with an ideal universal type. As individual pieces of content bear the patterns of the collective, so is the individual content producer liquidated into the collective. The typical conception of democratized culture is flipped: the masses have not gained power over culture, but have instead given culture power over themselves. Reference humor is a good example of this: the jokes themselves are variations on name-dropping targeted at specific in-groups, but it is really the recognition that one belongs in an in-group that provides enjoyment. The affirmation given for a reference joke is a reward both for the effort made in placing the reference into a coherent context, and for the effort made in conforming to the collective.

Distinct in-groups manifest as distinct clusters of circlejerks, which we shall term "subcultures." To an extent, each subculture has a different collective ideal, and each becomes reified into its own sub-collective. The society of the circlejerk, therefore, appears irreversibly fragmented among such collective entities of political affiliation, generation, or nationality. On the other hand, the existence of a world-circlejerk necessitates a simultaneous unification of all of the fragments into a single world-collective. This collective is characterized by the shared Grand Circlejerk. The ideal type of this collective is that of the bourgeois individual.

So long as the collective model of society is the free individual, and so long as its unfreedom can be objectified as the Grand Circlejerk, humanity retains the ability to contemplate itself. And, so long as humanity can contemplate itself, it can also overcome itself. The world-circlejerk cannot be escaped, but it *can* be fulfilled.