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Post-Cinema: The Hall of Mirrors

Joel Blackledge, Birmingham City University, joelblackledge@gmail.com

This video explores both the persistence and transformation of cinema as a recognisable formal phenomenon. These post-cinema processes are articulated by mirror routines, assembled in a supercut that both links cinematic "essence" to online media and points to the affordances of videographic methods in post-cinema research.

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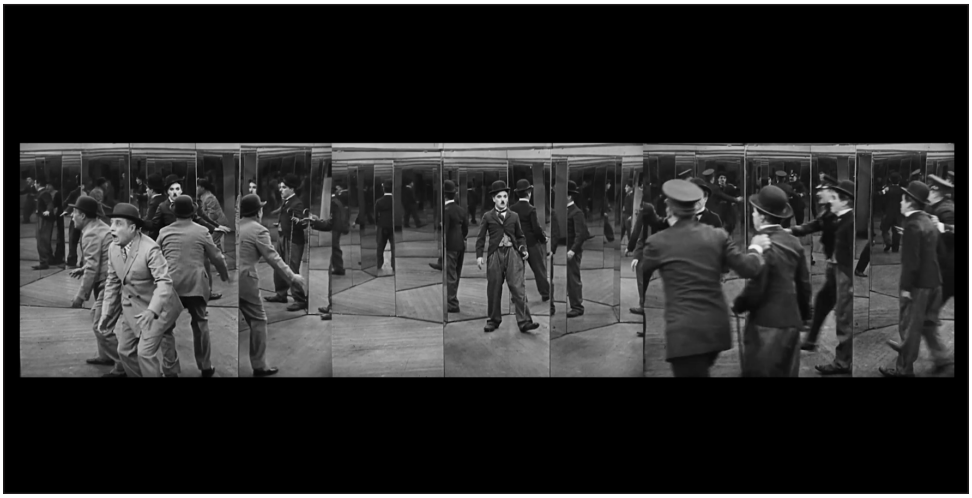

Creator's Statement

This video explores Francesco Casetti's (2015) concept of 'recognition' in post-cinema as it applies to scholarship in that field. Casetti defines the cinematic as an experience—a way of sensing—which can be relocated to different screens, practices, and contexts. Beyond how an image looks, cinema is recognised as such according to the *idea of cinema* that audiences perform in rituals of spectatorship, memories, imagination, and other contextual factors around the image itself. The changing shape of cinema is then a matter of which of its aspects are 'recognised' and which are ignored. Post-cinema is therefore both the persistence and transformation of this idea of cinema amidst technological and cultural changes, and to study it is to pay attention to the tensions generated by these two processes. "Post-Cinema: The Hall of Mirrors" is an explication of this concept and the first of a series of video essays produced for my doctoral research on internet memes. While it stands alone, the video is also an attempt to configure a kind of videographic practice that will allow me to analyse internet memes as post-cinematic media.

For this video, I translate Casetti's act of recognition into a visual metaphor and use the videographic genre of the supercut to draw out the implications of Casetti's argument for post-cinema scholarship. The metaphor I use is the 'mirror routine', a type of performance (far pre-dating cinema) in which one performer mimics another. Perhaps the most famous example comes from *Duck Soup* (dir. Leo McCarey, 1933), where Harpo Marx mimics Groucho Marx in place of a destroyed mirror. I begin with this image and follow a supercut trail through other variations on the scenario of a character looking in a mirror and seeing something that is almost—but not quite—their own reflection. As each image contains an imperfect reflection, it also imperfectly reflects the images either side of it. Typical mirror routines become distorted reflections, interfaces with

the mirror itself, and mimicry without a mirror at all. The result is both a procession of sameness and an accumulation of difference. This is also the reason for the use of Maurice Ravel's *Boléro* (1928), a piece of music that generates tension between melodic repetition and dynamic transformation. The mirror routine therefore stands in for post-cinematic recognition: facing something that is understood to be a mirror (no matter the material differences) and seeing a reflection that contains differences but is nonetheless recognisable. As Casetti notes, '"almost" can mean "not at all," but it can also mean "nearly completely"' (2015: 31). Cinema is recognisable not only despite the differences but *because* of them: cinema is a thing that shapeshifts.

The metaphor takes on a secondary level in the logic of the supercut genre itself, a cinephilic video form that indicates a fannish, completionist, and even obsessive attention paid to film texts (de Fren 2020). This kind of spectatorship typically runs contrary to the ephemeral internet meme, yet with its database logic and remix ethos the supercut is also a quintessentially online form. In a nod to post-cinematic breakdown of medium specificity, the steady pace of the images suggests a rolling film strip, a walk through a gallery, and the digital scroll of a website or app. For Ian Garwood (2020), the critical capacities of the supercut are best understood when it is framed as a kind of distant reading as practiced in the digital humanities. Creatively recontextualising images in volume can 'activate thinking in the viewer about the knowledge effects these audiovisual combinations can yield' (14). In this case, it prompts the viewer to reflect on how the scrolling images are the same as each other, and how they are different. With no original explanatory text but select quotes from Casetti, the audience are further encouraged to apply these questions to cinema itself. This is an intentional use of what Garwood calls the video essay's 'excess of meaning' (25): the images speak for themselves, both to the audience and to each other.

If the mirror routine is a metaphor for the process of recognition in cinema, then the hall of mirrors—the visual theme of the final part of the video—is a methodological mission statement for post-cinema scholarship. It signifies the deliberate march into disorientation and uncertainty, enacting recognition in multiple directions at once—including beyond the bounds of what would previously have been recognised as cinema. The video climaxes with clips sourced from TikTok, each an instance of a meme format whereby the performer lip-syncs multiple song parts in a three-panelled mirror. In the one remaining cinematic image, Bruce Lee's careful steeliness is repurposed as he is surrounded by these new-yet-familiar images, connoting both a scepticism and resolve required to navigate the post-cinematic hall of mirrors.

One of the foundational values for post-cinema is that cinema—as an idea, institution, or set of practices—is plural. Yet despite all connections, memes belong to distinct social and technological histories different than cinema's (something

indicated by the switch to a vertical scroll). I aim, in my research practice, to creatively perform my own processes of post-cinematic recognition upon them. In other words, I make sense of them both as and with cinema. In doing so, I want to demonstrate not only the persistence of a topos (used here as a metaphor), but also that cinematic and memetic processes of sense-making are similar: an ongoing and unresolved flux of imitation, reflection, and imperfect recognition. Videographic practices like this can usefully explore those processes and clear methodological ground for the post-cinematic analysis of internet memes.

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Biography

Joel Blackledge is a writer, filmmaker, and doctoral researcher at Birmingham City University. His research looks at the ways in which internet memes, as post-cinematic media, evidence both the persistence and transformation of cinematic aesthetics, practices, and ideas.

Review by Jonah Jeng, University of Pittsburgh

This video creatively expresses Francesco Casetti's idea of "recognition" in post-cinema, in which cinema, despite being "relocated to different screens, practices, and contexts," is still recognized as cinema "according to the *idea of cinema* that audiences perform in rituals of spectatorship, memories, imagination, and other contextual factors around the image itself." The video does so through compiling examples of the "mirror routine": a trope in which one performer imitates the movements of another, but not quite perfectly, such that resemblance and deviation are simultaneously evoked. This almost-but-not-quite mirroring signals the way a reflection is materially different from what it reflects but is still experienced and recognized *as* a reflection, as being in the image of something else.

As a metaphor for post-cinematic recognition, the mirror routine is powerful. The author draws out the various implications of this metaphor through the inspired form of

their video: a "supercut trail" in which mirror routine examples from throughout film history glide across the screen in a continuous moving strip. The form of the supercut trail activates a dense and fascinating constellation of ideas. It recalls a traditional film strip, conjuring up a more "classical," "analog" sense of what cinema is (or was). Simultaneously, the synchronous juxtaposition of clips—in contrast to typical supercuts that present clips in sequence—evokes the spatial simultaneity of much digital media, in which various frames/windows appear side by side (see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's "hypermediacy" and Lev Manovich's "spatial montage"). Meanwhile, the supercut trail also mimics the author's central figure of the "hall of mirrors," whose adjoining reflective panes are (indeed) "mirrored" in the form of the video itself.

By presenting familiar film clips in a novel form, the video also embodies a second-degree metaphor for how post-cinematic scholarship should be conceptualized and conducted: for the author, this kind of scholarship involves a "deliberate march into disorientation and uncertainty," a form of "distant reading" that "recontextualiz[es] images in volume" to yield new insights. The power of this video essay lies in its connotative richness, which befits its object of study.

Review by Alan O'Leary, Aarhus University

"Post-Cinema: The Hall of Mirrors" is a technically assured and conceptually sharp video essay that makes an historical/theoretical claim using specifically audiovisual means. Blackledge builds the video around a supercut of mirror routines from *Duck Soup* onward to model Francesco Casetti's account of post-cinematic "recognition": for Casetti, cinema persists as an experience that can be relocated to other screens and contexts and still be "recognised" through performed ideas, memories, and rituals around images rather than through medium-specific properties alone. The supercut form serves Blackledge well because it can show, rather than merely state, how a motif remains legible while continually changing; Blackledge's own phrasing—"a procession of sameness and an accumulation of difference"—accurately describes the viewing experience. The video is meticulously made: the consistent scrolling/flow of clips gives the compilation a coherent temporal logic that avoids any feeling of database dump, and it enacts the video's claim that post-cinema involves both persistence *and* transformation.

A key aspect of that temporal logic is the choice of Ravel's *Boléro* to accompany the whole video. As Catherine Grant pointed out some years ago, and it's still true, questions of the videographic work's desirable scope and length are still not settled. In practice, one widely used way of solving the problem of length for the videographic

critic is to let a found musical track set the duration and provide something like an editing grid. Grant herself has described how she often uses this technique and how the choice of music will impart a length and tone (perhaps sometimes even a *theme*) to a given video. An impressive example of this approach by another maker is Christian Keathley's *50 YEARS ON* (2011). Keathley explains that he moved from silent-film-style accompaniment in an early draft (too cue-driven) to using almost the full span of John Coltrane's version of "My Favorite Things," because its sustained energy matched the evenness he wanted, and because a "very familiar tune" being "edged toward unrecognizability (without falling into it)" fit his selection and compilation of film clips of sometimes elusive origin. Blackledge is working in this same strand of practice: the *Boléro* accompaniment supplies an external formal constraint (duration, tempo, escalation) and, at the same time, functions as an interpretive frame for recognition across a century's worth of mirror-routine motifs. Blackledge states the intended parallel directly: *Boléro* "generates tension between melodic repetition and dynamic transformation," and the mirror routine "stands in for post-cinematic recognition" as the experience of encountering something materially different yet still recognisable.

My only reservation might concern the *particular* metaphor that *Boléro* invites. Ravel's piece is famous for its unchanging rhythmic ostinato and "long, very gradual crescendo" (Ravel's own description), and for the way it sustains interest primarily through orchestral accumulation rather than thematic or harmonic development. Used under a scrolling supercut, that "inexorable" build can suggest an evolutionary logic: a trope self-elaborates through minimal variations, accruing differences while remaining the "same," and the viewer takes pleasure in recognising the same-but-different pattern. That clearly supports Blackledge's stated aim. But it also raises a question: does the forward drive of the *Boléro* risk implying that cinema had to develop *just this way*—as if the history of cinema/post-cinema were an inevitable crescendo rather than a set of contingent routes, dead ends, and alternative futures (the kind of media-archaeological objection that shadows post-cinema talk)? Put differently: *Boléro* is apt at modelling repetition-with-variation, but less good at modelling historical accident, reversal, or paths not taken. I don't think this undermines the work—if anything, it productively sharpens the conceptual tension Blackledge wants us to notice between persistence and transformation—but it is the point at which the metaphor becomes debatable rather than illustrative.

However one feels about that metaphor, the video is an extremely impressive contribution that develops the quintessentially videographic approach of compilation plus quotation, and argument made through rhythm, pacing, and juxtaposition. It works as a pleasurable and persuasive overture to Blackledge's doctoral project on

memes as post-cinematic media, fashioning a form that does the talking and thinking, and it issues a clear methodological signal about what the larger research programme will be able to achieve.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.