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The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor

by Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky.

Duke University Press.

2020. 336 pages.

\$104.95 hardcover; \$28.95 paper; also available in e-book.

Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky begins her absorptive and accomplished monograph by describing in detail exemplary sequences from a range of different films that illustrate the key characteristics of what she calls the process genre. From *A Visit to Peek Frean and Co.'s Biscuit Works* (Cricks and Sharp, 1906) to *El Velador (The Night Watchman)*, Natalia Almada, 2011), the variety and abundance of examples in this early section of the book reveal both the aims and ambition of Skvirsky's project: to theorize a "phenomenon with which we are all familiar but that does not have a name."¹ She coins the term *process genre* to describe films that organize the representation of processes (usually production processes) into sequentially ordered series of steps. For Skvirsky, it is a ciné-genre since it achieves its fullest expression in moving image media by utilizing the medium's "constitutive capacity to visually and analytically decompose movement and to curate its recomposition."² The process genre is also "a genre of modernity" insofar as its method for representing a way of doing something functions simultaneously "as an index of a mode of production" and "of the status and character of a people or civilization."³ The process genre's robust cultural life in the present, the author argues, marks a renewed anxiety and uncertainty about the conditions of human life in light of today's significant changes in the organization and management of

1 Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 1.

2 Skvirsky, 3.

3 Skvirsky, 52.

production.⁴ In the process genre's methodical representations of technique, Skvirsky finds a humanistic genre that commands fascination, glorifies labor, and allegorizes alternative national formations.

The first two chapters of the book define what the process genre is, first extrinsically and then intrinsically. Chapter 1, "The Process Film in Context," situates the ciné-genre within a longer tradition of processual syntax present in forms such as live demonstrations of crafts and pictorial instructions. Processual representation's stability of form, the author contends, accounts for its persistence across multiple centuries and for a variety of functions. The chapter also differentiates the process genre from established categories of film analysis, including the industrial, educational, and ethnographic film. Skvirsky argues not only for considering the process genre as separate from these other types of films but also against subsuming the genre in a subdivision of these types. The process genre must be thought of as separate lest our theorization fails to seriously consider the genre's anti-instrumentalist ethos as part of its distinctive politics.

Chapter 2, "On Being Absorbed in Work," analyzes the formal elements of the process genre's most notable phenomenological aspect: its mesmerizing sense of absorption. Skvirsky establishes that the genre's appeal cannot be reduced to an "operational aesthetic"—that is, the pleasure in understanding how things work—nor to a basic fascination with watching movement. Rather, it is the process film's overarching narrative structures that drive its signature sense of absorption. The process film lies in the tension between the generic and the singular; though devised as a how-to, or a general protocol of a kind, the genre's reliance on film's indexicality means that each representation of a process is still unique, still a record of an unrepeatable past moment. By analyzing the famous "How People Make Crayons" segment of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (NET, 1968–1970; PBS, 1971–2001), Skvirsky argues that the generic character of processual representation indeed holds the key to its absorptiveness. She then proposes three expository discursive structures that the process film may deploy: surprise, suspense, or curiosity. Close readings of *The Unstable Object* (Daniel Eisenberg, 2011) and *A Man Escaped* (Robert Bresson, 1956) offer representative examples of these three discursive structures and how they can interact within a film. The author concludes by affirming the importance of narrative closure for the process genre. The spectator must realize that the narrative has answered all their lingering questions—that it has satisfied curiosity or resolved suspense—by recognizing that the object or action represented processually has been completed. These three characteristics—the use of a specific expository strategy, the singular representation of a generic process, the sense of closure—provide a simple yet robust framework of what the process genre is.

The next two chapters define what the process genre does. (Note the action verb gerunds in their titles.) In chapter 3, "Aestheticizing Labor," Skvirsky contends with a fraught political question: If the process genre represents a technique in a series of sequential steps, is it not merely the

4 Skvirsky, 220.

formal correlate to the Taylorist way of organizing labor? In her response, the author asserts that the process genre is fundamentally committed to the “metaphysics of labor,” a shorthand that Skvirsky uses to characterize “the view that a flourishing human life has labor—capaciously understood—at its center.”⁵ The genre’s basic glorification of labor could mobilize vastly different political projects, such as a Protestant work ethic on the right or a utopian socialism on the left. This political ambivalence allows the author to parse out the genre’s varied ideological work. For instance, the process genre counteracts the idea that labor must be toil by instead aestheticizing the sensorial pleasures of witnessing a job well done. Likewise, processual syntax belies the conceit that concealing labor is tantamount to not showing the face of the laborer. Contrasting the main narrative of the advertising film *Birth of a Hat: The Art and Mystery of Making Fur Felt Hats* (J. B. Stetson Hat Co., 1920) with its own coda, Skvirsky illustrates how the film eschews commodity fetishism by emphasizing the labor that makes the hat.⁶ While the genre may not be inherently reactionary, its commitment to the metaphysics of labor allows it to energize projects on the political left and right.

Such commitment also allows the genre’s recruitment to various nationalistic projects, which is the subject of chapter 4, “Nation Building.” Skvirsky reveals how filmmakers mobilized the process genre, as in the industrial and ethnographic films of the New Latin American Cinema (NLAC) movement, to allegorize a national community parallel to the state by representing a distinct mode of production. For instance, Skvirsky reads *Aruanda* (Linduarte Noronha, 1960) as a sustained revalorization of the national-popular through the intelligent labor of local peasants and artisans. The film’s processual representation of ceramic houseware production, and its connection to the NLAC’s “artisanal mode of filmic production,” gives shape to a revolutionary, romantic anti-capitalism tied to the representation of “underdevelopment” that Cinema Novo sought.⁷ Focusing on Chilean and Brazilian examples, Skvirsky offers a lens to revisit not only the films of the NLAC movement but also the region’s more recent instances of slow cinema and ethnographic documentary.

After analyzing what the genre is and what it does, Skvirsky ends by discussing the exceptions to and parodies of the genre. Chapter 5, “The Limits of the Genre,” explores the process genre’s inability to represent affective labor by considering the case of *Parque vía* (Enrique Rivero, 2008) in contrast to *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975). Both films depict a person carrying out regular, mundane activities within or around a house. *Parque vía*, however, is an *anti-process* film: it evokes the conventions of the process genre only to reject them and, in doing so, gives visual expression to the self-estrangement of the film’s main character, a domestic worker. By subverting the conventions of a ciné-genre devoted to the representation of material labor, Skvirsky argues, the film suggests there

5 Skvirsky, 120–121.

6 Skvirsky, 137–139.

7 Skvirsky, 183–185.

is no representational solution to restoring the servant's personhood.⁸ The book's epilogue, "The Spoof That Proves the Rule," then turns to four films that, in parodying the conventions of the process genre, reaffirm the genre's commitments and strategies.

Fittingly for a book about films representing the step-by-step making of an object, *The Process Genre* reveals the process of building a theory of genre in its chapter structure, which moves through definition and function to limitations. Within each chapter, Skvirsky's writing is methodical and clear, guiding the reader through the process of formal analysis, theorization, and argumentation. Skvirsky's clear organization and approachable writing when engaging theoretically rich areas make the book appropriate for undergraduate and graduate courses both as a case study in its entirety and through individual chapters that offer new perspectives into the cinematic treatment of topics such as labor, the nation, or affect.

Besides its solid theorization, a particular strength of *The Process Genre* is Skvirsky's employment of formal analysis. That is no small feat; if, as the author suggests, films are particularly suited to produce mesmerizing depictions of processes, then the written word would no doubt fall short of replicating this sense of absorption. Yet Skvirsky largely succeeds in enthralling the reader with her appreciation for these moving images even as she carries out a methodical theoretical argument. Her style eschews a more traditional writing structure that would include description of the film's context and plot, description of formal elements, and interpretation of these elements. Instead, Skvirsky intersperses these elements in the writing. In her analysis of "How People Make Crayons" to illustrate the discursive structure of curiosity, for instance, the rhetorical use of questions simultaneously signposts the description of the video and performs the sense of curiosity evoked while watching the short.⁹ Other similarly compelling segments include the thread-like, almost run-on description of the representation of wicker fibers in *Mimbre* (Sergio Bravo, 1957) and the macro-level summary of shot sizes and framing in *Parque vía*.¹⁰ The book's formal analysis thus reads as propulsive, compelling, and tailored to the films discussed. For a discipline in which the description of audiovisual material is both evidence and argument, Skvirsky's approach reinvigorates a central tenet of the field's scholarly production. For a book about the appeal of watching a precisely accomplished technique, *The Process Genre* illuminates the pleasure of reading a well-executed scholarly work.

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8 Skvirsky, 215.

9 Skvirsky, 99–101.

10 Skvirsky, 159–161, 210–211.