

Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor*

Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

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The status of film genre—as a manner of categorizing cinema—has been debated by film scholars and theorists since the mid-twentieth century. While some scholars doubt that the idea of film genre captures qualities that characterize well-defined categories of films, others continue to develop film genre theory and deepen our understanding of how film genres develop and evolve. Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky's *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor* (2020) focuses on a neglected transmedial genre: the process genre. While this genre has played a part in many different forms of media throughout history, Skvirsky argues, it often remains nameless or understood as absorbed by other genres (mainly the industrial film and education film). In this ambitious text, Skvirsky not only calls attention to this overlooked genre, but also demonstrates its aesthetic, political, and transnational cultural significance.

Skvirsky begins *The Process Genre* with a rigorous introduction that establishes her research questions and the fundamental syntax and conventions of the genre. In this chapter, Skvirsky first sketches out the sequence of the process in six very different types of films (from nontheatrical films to commercial endeavors) spanning a century (from 1906 to 2011).

These quick outlines familiarize the reader with the look and feel of the process genre. Skvirsky follows these vignettes with an examination of the qualities that these very different sequences and films share. She asserts that these sequences share four central characteristics: formal commonality (using a distinctive representational syntax), extent to which they absorb the spectator, depiction of labor (the encounter between human body, instruments, and materials), and their capacity to “provide knowledge about the world” (Skvirsky 2020, 15). These characteristics, while hallmarks of the process genre, are not depicted as “hard-and-fast criteria” (15). Skvirsky asserts that the definitive feature of the process genre is “processual representation” (16). Processual representation, Skvirsky asserts, is the formal manner in which a process is shown/displayed in chronological order. She supplements this definition by demarcating what can be considered a process. A process is a “continuous series of steps or actions that have a particular result and contain definite order of steps” (16). A process always has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Yet, it is significant to note, not all representations of processes can be understood as processual representation. Processual representation operates as a “formal

achievement” that conveys *how* a process is done, rather than simply show what is done (16). Skvirsky offers an example to help illustrate processual representation: she invites the reader to imagine how they would represent the act of toothbrushing (a process) on film. One could “show a five-second shot of a child unscrewing the cap on a tube of toothpaste and, in the next three-second shot, show her leaving the bathroom” (16). While this scene would be a filmic representation of toothbrushing, it would not be considered a processual representation of the toothbrushing process. Such a scene would suggest the process of toothbrushing but would give “no sense of toothbrushing as being composed of a series of steps [and] no sense of *how* to brush one’s teeth” (17, author’s emphasis). Therefore, Skvirsky asserts that while representations of processes constitute processual representation, “not all representations of processes are processual” (17).

Subsequently, after clarifying this defining feature of the genre, Skvirsky then establishes the formal conventions that characterize the process genre. First, she discusses editing and fast motion: techniques which allow a film to elide time and curate which moments of process to show and which to erase. Second, she examines slow motion and animation which can extend a process and give it a longer duration (remembering duration is fundamental to the process). Skvirsky’s third formal characteristic is framing, and she focuses on how framing makes action visible as a process (22). Lastly, Skvirsky considers performance (of actors, machines), and the importance of fluidity and avoidance of digression

or interruption. The process film, relying on these shared conventions, “can be profitably understood as a ciné-genre” which are primarily composed of “medium specific formal features and their concomitant visceral effects on spectators,” instead of shared narrative elements “that easily translate to other media” (47). Therefore, while other media can produce processual representation, the process genre has a particular relationship to the film medium.

Chapter One, “The Process Film in Context,” reflects upon two histories affecting the context of the process genre: (i) the history of processual representation in associated film genres (industrial film, educational film) and (ii) the history of processual representation in pre-cinematic works. In this chapter, Skvirsky attempts to answer her research questions regarding the process genre’s longevity and its relation to medium. Tracking the genre’s formal stability, she traces its history back to fifteenth-century Europe. As a “genre of modernity,” its earliest forms came into being due to changing structures of production (52). Skvirsky notes that shifts in combat, craft, and machine technologies during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries necessitated new ways in which to train citizens. Pictorial instructions, an early form of processual representation, helped codify and standardize effective practices. In these early examples, the method of production represented more than just the literal process; it also acted as “an index of a mode of production—and by extension, of the status and character of a people or civilization” (52). In this chapter, Skvirsky traces the process genre within indus-

trial, educational, and ethnographic films. She asserts that the process genre, prominently represented in such cinema, can characterize such diverse types of film because processual syntax predates cinema. Before cinema, live demonstrations of crafts and machines and pictorial instructions relied on processual representation. With this historical context, we can understand that by the time cinema attempted the process genre, its syntax was already “a well-developed, ready-to-hand, versatile formula” with a proven record of entertaining diverse audiences (76).

“On Being Absorbed in Work” follows Skvirsky’s first chapter with a contemplation of the process genre’s appeal and strange capacity for spectatorial absorption. Skvirsky suggests that this mesmerizing absorption emanates from the genre’s predominant narrative structures. While process genre films generally tend to eschew psychological identification, they create a narrative structure through “the generic, protocol character” and the significance of a strong impression of closure (81). Process narration produces curiosity and surprise through an interplay between the familiar and the unknown. The viewer, who may know and understand the generic object produced through the process, does not grasp the object’s genesis. This ignorance of the process mirrors our relation to “the dazzling commodities of our modern consumer society” (95). Modern customers generally do not know the conditions of a product’s creation, where the product was produced, or who made it. This “alienation from the production of goods” in relation to the familiarity of the actual

object or action being enacted creates an intensely mesmerizing effect, eliciting narrative structures of curiosity, excitement, suspense, and surprise (Elizabeth Cain cited in Skvirsky 2020, 95).

While Chapter Two focuses on the genre’s narrative structures, Chapter Three contemplates the aestheticizing of labor through the process genre. Processual representation articulates process as a demonstration of technique and skill. Rather than emphasize the toil of work, the genre aestheticizes the labor represented and depicts it as “approaching the magic standard of zero labor” (116). Here, Skvirsky considers how the process genre film, through the representation of demystification, produces an air of magic. Processual representation reveals the steps involved in the creation of a product—demystifying the creation process. Yet, by only showing the perfected process (enacted smoothly by skilled laborers), the process genre elides the portrayal of the toil and drudgery of labor. Skvirsky contends that the magic of a process comes from its ability to approach “ideal technology, the magic standard of zero labor” (118). While the process genre’s emphasis on skill results in the aestheticization of the labor represented, Skvirsky argues that this does not mean the genre is inherently Taylorist, solely interested in the management of productivity and efficiency, or politically regressive. Processual representation can be mobilized, she asserts, for both progressive and reactionary politics. Yet, while the genre does not commit to any one politics, it is committed to a particular metaphysics of labor. This metaphysics maintains the view that a

successful or thriving human life centres around labor. Premised on this logic, the genre offers both the right and the left “a future-oriented vision of the good life in which humans could be freed from necessity and the toil of labor, in which our condition would be governed as if by magic” (144).

After considering the metaphysics of labor and its role in the political uptake of the process genre, Skvirsky traces the manner in which filmmakers mobilize the genre for racial and national politics. She returns to industrial, educational, and ethnographic film to examine their historical investments in concepts such as civilization, development, and nation. These types of films, and the artifacts and processes they represent, contain a symbolic capacity: “[t]hey speak of and for the nation or state or community or society that produced them” (147). This symbolic function within the genre generally uplifts ideas of national superiority and the need to locate different cultures’ developmental paths. Skvirsky focuses on New Latin American Cinema films from Chile and Brazil where processual syntax is central to the films’ aims and their powerful capacity to represent “the significance of the practical living intelligence of the mixed, folk subject” (165). The leftist filmmakers producing these process genre films valorized “a new national-popular, non-White subject”—one capable of altering an unjust, hierarchical society through a transformative, romantic, anticapitalist approach (184).

Skvirsky’s penultimate chapter demonstrates the limits of the process genre. Here, Skvirsky focuses on affective labor in the film *Parque vía* (En-

rique Rivero 2008). This film centres on a domestic servant and the affective, and immaterial, labor of his position. *Parque vía* studies affective labor through an intertextual dialogue with Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975)—a film used in Skvirsky’s introductory sketches of the process genre. Skvirsky asserts that while *Parque vía* stages kinetic labor (labor involving the movement of the body), it is not a process film; in fact, she labels it “an anti-process film” (194). While *Parque vía* invokes and explores the complexity of affective and kinetic work, it rejects the practices of the process genre in order to explore the opaque and dense subject of twenty-first century affective labor.

Skvirsky’s concluding chapter considers spoofs and parodies of the process genre. She considers the process genre’s surge in popularity in twenty-first century televisual and new media outlets. She suggests that this uptake of the genre may mark a particular anxiety and uncertainty regarding “the conditions of human life in the face of significant changes to the way production is organized and managed” (220). Processual representation works to separate, classify, and re-form labor, allowing “human beings to appropriate the world for themselves” (236). The utopian idealism of the process genre can work to console a society that has become “too complex to be masterable” (220).

The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor traverses space and time in its excavation of transmedial history. Skvirsky, working through the process genre’s complexities and limitations, gives the reader a new lan-

guage in which to think through representations of labor. The meticulous research that makes up Skvirsky's text becomes only more impressive when one considers the immense and vast historical ground she covers. While Skvirsky's remarkable research asserts many rules, conventions, and stabilities of the process genre, she also leaves her readers with an open ending. Her conclusion invites the question of whether the process genre will

continue its career or wither away. Can the process genre, having survived centuries of employment and experimentation, continue to thrive as labor evolves indefinitely?

References

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