



The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor

BY SALOMÉ AGUILERA SKVIRSKY
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In *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor*, Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky proposes a transmedial genre that is defined by the representation of processes with identifiable successive steps or phases from start to end that demonstrates *how* the process is done. The process genre is a term that will resonate with readers in the YouTube era, during which one can find how-to videos for every possible task. The book traces the process syntax back to live demonstrations of crafts and machines in nineteenth-century exhibitions and fairs and fifteenth-century pictorial instructions. Yet, it is in moving image media that Skvirsky locates the core of the process genre as a ciné-genre (3). As such, the majority of media examined in this book are films. While the process film is often considered as a subcategory of the industrial film in cinema studies, Skvirsky understands it as a part of the stand-alone process genre. Specifically, the term *process film* is used in the book to reference “any *filmic* instance” of the process genre across media (6).

The book demonstrates that the deployment of process syntax in moving images exceeds the boundary of educational cinema.

As the first scholar to systematically theorize this unacknowledged cinematic genre, Skvirsky takes a scalar approach toward a taxonomy. She provides a map of the process genre through close reading a wide variety of examples that are paradigmatic or challenging to the genre. *The Process Genre* sequentially addresses the following questions: What is the process genre, and what is its relation to moving images? (“Introduction”). What is the genealogy of the process genre, or how can the process genre be situated in film and media history? (Chapter 1). Why and how does the process genre produce the effect of absorption? (Chapter 2). How does the process genre mediate, portray, and position labor? Does the genre’s representation and aestheticization of labor assume any inherent political stances? (Chapter 3). What is the sociocultural and political significance of the process genre concerning the ways it represents modes of production in the process of nation building? (Chapter 4). What are some limits of the process genre? (Chapter 5). What is the status of the process genre in the contemporary exploding media landscape? (“Epilogue”).

Chapter 1, “The Process Film in Context,” historicizes the process syntax in related film categories of modernity, such as industrial, educational, and ethnographic films. It offers a fresh perspective to the study of useful cinema by investigating how it represents processes. Skvirsky accurately points out the core problem in the current conception of the industrial film: that the institutional context of production has been the sole criterion to demarcate the genre without taking into consideration its shared formal and thematic markers (53). The narrow categorization of the industrial film based on institutional sponsorship risks marginalizing films that document both artisan and industrial production processes and labor outside of the approved, official, organizational framework. Instead, there is a need to question how the process syntax is commonly used in the industrial film, and for what and whose purpose (54). Considering the relation between industrial and educational films via Ford-produced films in the United States and Walter Ruttmann’s *Mannesmann* (1937) in Nazi Germany, Skvirsky

highlights “the entanglement between industry and state educational entities” and hence the intertwined interests of the nation-state and corporations (58). The chapter also looks at how the process syntax in ethnographic films is utilized to study modes of production of a society, serving an evolutionist construction from savage to civilization. Skvirsky demonstrates how the seemingly neutral process syntax has functioned as a tool of advertising, nation building, and rationalization of conquest in the age of modernity.

Skvirsky turns to the appeal and the spectatorial effects of process films in Chapter 2, “On Being Absorbed in Work.” She introduces perhaps the single most important example in *The Process Genre*, the six-minute film tour of a Crayola crayon factory from the classic PBS kids educational show *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. The clip is repeatedly referenced throughout the book, the film stills are beautifully printed on glossy color plates, and selected stills are also printed on the cover along with color grids. While the segment originally aired in 1981, it has quite an afterlife on the internet as a hypnotic clip. Skvirsky attributes the narrative structures of the genre as the main source for the often noted yet unexpected absorption and fascination among viewers (80). This analysis challenges the human-centered way of conceiving narrative that is often associated with the intentional acts of people. Skvirsky asks us to consider the generic narrative of action undertaken by objects, machines, or nonface body parts, as is often the case in the process genre. The expository narrative structures, such as curiosity, suspense, and surprise, are orchestrated to solicit unexpected effects in processual representations of the “magical” making of a familiar, everyday product from raw materials (82).

The magical representation of the production process necessitates meditations on the relationship among human labor, technology, and nature. Owing to the process genre’s nature to display the marvel of technique and skill, there is the tendency for the labor involved to be depicted as near magic, requiring zero work (116). But the genre is also supposed to demystify the process of how objects came to be. Such contradiction is core to the representation of labor as skillfully discussed in

Chapter 3, “Aestheticizing Labor.” Connected to the contradiction of the instrumentalist and romantic representation of labor is the question concerning the political nature of aestheticizing labor. While the analytic structure of the process genre is closely related to Taylorism and the idealization of labor is dehumanizing, Skvirsky is cautious to deem the genre as inherently sinful. Instead, she raises several questions: Does the analytic nature of representation really conceal labor? Does a messy and cluttered representation necessarily reveal labor? In other words, “what is it, really, to conceal labor; and what is it, really, to reveal labor” (133)? Scholars of labor and visual culture will continue to grapple with these important questions.

The politics of the process genre is explored further in racial and nationalist projects in Chapter 4, “Nation Building.” This chapter extends the discussion in Chapter 1 concerning useful cinema. It dives into the relationship between the process syntax and cultural evolutionism, excavating how these processes captured on-screen “speak of and for” the broader community or society that produces them (147). While the process genre is commonly associated with Nazi Germany, Skvirsky seeks to understand how processual representation has been utilized as a symbol of modernity in the development of non-Western nation-states. She examines early nonfiction process films of the New Latin American Cinema (NLAC) and offers insights to the possibility to rethink the historiography of Latin American cinema in relation to process films. The ambivalent political nature of the process genre also seeps through, as readers are shown how the same tools used by Western imperialists are also utilized by Marxist filmmakers of the NLAC in their romantic anticapitalist political projects. In general, readers of this book will appreciate Skvirsky’s nuanced discussions of the politics of the process genre without falling into the binary tendency of good–bad, Left–Right.

While the majority of the book’s discussions of labor center on physical production labor, it is in Chapter 5, “The Limits of the Genre,” that the author considers how the process genre relates to immaterial labor. It is underwhelming to see Skvirsky exclusively draw from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s

theorization of immaterial labor when there is a rich collection of literature on this topic. Nonetheless, the chapter is a pleasurable read, comparing Enrique Rivero's *Parque via* (2008) and Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) to detail the former's intertextual adaptation of the latter and the challenges they pose to the process genre. *Jeanne Dielman* is a process film in which the invisible housewife gains visibility through the processual representation of her physically performing housework (206). The chapter positions *Parque via* as an anti-process film that uses processes to subvert (194). The close reading of this film stands out as a rare example in the book that attends, not to processual actions, but instead to how the film's mise-en-scène sets up the spatial relation between the servant and his contexts to construct the invisibility of domestic labor. Such invisibility rejects the representability of affective labor in processual forms and exposes the limits of the process genre.

The author of this review developed a major interest in the representation of process and labor across media forms after reading *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor* and believes that this book will contribute to a new wave of scholarship in cinema and media studies that rethinks genre history and theory. The book's relevance to contemporary internet culture and its rather accessible language make it a reading option for general enthusiasts of how-to media. The reading experience, however, is not the most engaging, as most chapters strive to be comprehensive—perhaps overly comprehensive. Except for Chapter 5, which focuses on two texts only, the book runs long and, at times, reads like a listicle. Despite some minor flaws, *The Process Genre* remains a thorough book that will be foundational to future scholarship in varying areas, such as useful cinema, national cinema, the representation of labor, processes, and materiality.

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Hollywood Goes Latin

Spanish-Language Cinema in Los Angeles

Edited by María Elena de las Carreras
and Jan-Christopher Horak

Hollywood Goes Latin: Spanish-Language Cinema in Los Angeles

EDITED BY MARÍA ELENA DE LAS CARRERAS AND
JAN-CHRISTOPHER HORAK

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Daniel Richter

Hollywood Goes Latin: Spanish-Language Cinema in Los Angeles, edited by María Elena de las Carreras and Jan-Christopher Horak, is an intriguing collection of essays about Spanish-language film exhibition and production in Los Angeles during the interwar period and the initial years of the sound era. During the early 1930s and coinciding with the Great Depression, Spanish-language films were produced by major Hollywood studios for both domestic consumption and export, featuring Spanish dialogue spoken by Hispanic actors as well as performers like Laurel and Hardy. This unique moment in the multicultural history of Hollywood has received wider attention over the last decade, and this edited volume joins this wave of scholarship.

The contributors to *Hollywood Goes Latin* represent a diverse group of film scholars

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