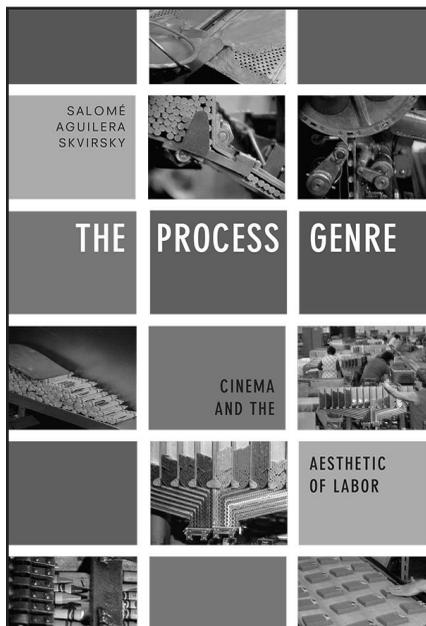


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Review of Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky's *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor*



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The COVID-19 pandemic has produced an unprecedented shock to the international labor market; in the U.S. alone, unemployment rates shifted from an all-time low of 3.5% to a staggering 14.7% in a single month. Despite this uncertainty, certain outcomes seem almost predictable: the majority of jobs will never return in their pre-pandemic form and many jobs won't return at all. While Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky's monograph *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor* was written before our most recent economic fallout, the questions raised are

uncannily relevant: What do periods of labor shortage, economic destitute, and unemployment mean for superstructural formations such as culture? How do these changes in labor conditions manifest on-screen? Moreover, why do massive economic uncertainties produce an increased interest in representing artisanal or machine labor? Skvirsky offers an original contribution to cinema history through a meticulous study of the medium's long standing fascination with depicting human and mechanical labor which Skvirsky dubs "the process genre." This genre visually represents labor in a sequential way and produces concrete knowledge of a craft or a finished product. Consider Skvirsky's book-cover example of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (PBS): in the analyzed episode, Mister Rogers narrates the processual representation of a box of crayons which are shown being manufactured from their primary powder form to their recognizable store package. The pleasure in watching the production of an everyday object such as crayons comes from an interplay between our knowledge of the object and our ignorance about its production. In this way, the processual representation enthralles the audience within its logic which Skvirsky calls "the metaphysics of labor" or the belief that humans find meaning through work. *The Process Genre* weaves history and theory of this everyday form of cinematic representation in surprisingly original ways that subvert ideological expectations of *useful* cinema.

This monograph ambitiously seeks to reexamine cinema's history. *The Process Genre* contributes to a fairly recent approach in cinema and media studies that steers away from canonical filmic texts to underexplored relationships between cinema and governmentality. This

‘utilitarian turn’ in cinema and media studies has recently produced note-worthy publications such as Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson’s edited volume which argued for the scholarly study of ubiquitous cinematic forms produced within (liberal) institutional settings.¹ Acland and Wasson uncover the lesser-known history of cinema as a functional and *everyday* object found in various spaces of instruction, transportation, and leisure; useful cinema was created by and is inseparable from the socio-political aims of institutions producing and disseminating these films. Similarly, Lee Grieveson’s *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations* demonstrated early cinema’s imbrication within the networks of global capital and liberal ideology.² Skvirsky acknowledges the influence of utility and capitalism on the process genre since this form represents human and/or machine labor in accomplishing a closed, repeatable action whilst producing *practical* and widely-applicable knowledge of the world. In this way, processual representation is always already *useful* and particularly suited to a didactic medium such as film for its ability to manipulate duration through montage; the processual representation exists within the universe of both utility and capital circulation. But to what end?

Whereas *Useful Cinema* and *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations* position cinema as the tool of liberalism and global capital, *The Process Genre* complicates the political *a priori* of useful cinema in the aforementioned monographs. The genre muddles the purely positivist relationship between cinema and liberal citizenship in twentieth century’s mass democracies. Skvirsky argues for a non-partisan understanding of the process genre, for it often cannot be reduced, either historically or theoretically, to any political affiliation or social project. Indeed, the process genre interrogates labor’s role in contemporary society rather than represent a uniform vision of labor. The genre’s logic is informed by “the metaphysics of labor” or what Skvirsky reads as an understanding of work as a source of value: “Without work to fill the void, we would need another source of meaningfulness in human life” (144). Because the process genre is primarily a mode of interrogation rather than a representation of labor, the genre was not exclusively employed within the political right’s labor innovations,

such as the assembly line (Taylorization), or in socialist realism’s glorification of labor.

Skvirsky’s politically-unpredictable theory of labor-on-screen is enabled by the process genre’s diverse history. The book’s rich filmography supports this argument; the variety of textual evidence is already evident by the introductory six examples which consist of an industry short *A Visit to a Peek Frean and Co.’s Biscuit Works* (UK, 1906), classical documentary *Nanook of the North* (U.S., 1922), crime film *Riffifi* (France, 1955), new-wave classic *Pickpocket* (France, 1959), feminist film *Jeanne Dielman* (France/Belgium, 1975), and social documentary *El Velador* (Mexico, 2011). Indeed, the process genre is not only found in instructional films such as those sponsored by industries or educational institutions whose sole impetus was to educate. The filmographic diversity allows Skvirsky to weave a powerful argument on the process genre’s widespread appeal which allowed this form to materialize across various national settings and periods. The metaphysics of labor, the process genre’s logic as a mode of interrogation and introspection, separates Skvirsky’s approach from both *Useful Cinema* and *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations* who see useful media as modes of persuasion; *the Process Genre’s* narrative and examples escape the inevitability of liberal ideology and global capital even if processual representation was enmeshed with both at various historical periods.

Skvirsky’s study of the process genre transpires on three levels—historical, theoretical, and spectatorial. These methodological choices are reflected on the monograph’s organisation. Chapter One is dedicated to the process genre’s modern history in the proverbial West. After a rich introductory chapter, the following historical analysis is perhaps the most unsatisfying aspect of the book; Skvirsky’s contextual analysis relates processual representation to ‘the modernity thesis.’ This largely archive-less historical approach repeats tropes found in the 1990s scholarship on modernity and its visual culture which included pre-cinematic examples such as photojournalism, as well as nineteenth century industrial exhibitions such as the Great Exhibition, and colonial human displays. Even when Skvirsky manages to offer an original historical example—the mid-1860s turn from industrial representations of machinery to

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more artisanal representations of human labor supposedly propelled by “imperial nostalgia” for simpler times—the rationale and archival evidence are largely absent. Was Skvirsky aiming to illustrate how the process genre was always already present within the spaces, practices, and experiences of modernity? Whatever the reason may be, the readers interested in archivally-supported historiographies will find Chapter One lacking original archival research and historical insight. However, this impression quickly fades, since the following chapters provide a plethora of imaginative close-readings and impressive contributions to our understanding of cinema’s relationship to labor.

Chapters Two and Three lay out the anatomy of the process genre while simultaneously explaining the genre’s spellbinding effect on the viewers through “aestheticizing labor.” The process genre’s special narrative syntax bids on the interplay between knowledge and ignorance of the labor portrayed which results in surprising new knowledge of an everyday object (e.g., crayons). These two chapters are directly related to Skvirsky’s doctoral thesis on politics and/in/of cinema. Indeed, the process genre derives its power from aestheticizing the repeatable generic production of everyday goods whose alienation from consumers is, Skvirsky argues, partly alleviated by on-screen processual representation. Paradoxically, the most alienating kind of labor (i.e., the assembly line) is often represented as a quasi-artisanal activity through linear narration which does not portray labor as departmentalized in specifically assigned tasks; the on-screen workers seem to assemble the full product within a single sequence. In contrast to this kind of employment of the process genre, Chapter Four presents, perhaps, the strongest case against politically-predictable representations of labor. Postwar New Latin American cinema (NLAC) used processual representation to offer nuanced depictions of Latin American nationhood. In films such as *Mimbre* (Chile, 1957) and *Aruanda* (Brazil, 1960), processual representation

was employed to represent indigenous artisanal skills which subverted “the progressive, linear narrative of development” associated with Western modernity; this Western tradition tended to “sanitize” processual representations of labor in order to equate technological innovation with modern nationhood. In contrast, NLAC offered a complex vision of modern Latin America nationhood which was supported by equally sophisticated albeit ancestral labor.

The final chapter suggests the limitations of processual representation as it is unable to depict the invisible, affective labor associated with domestic work in films such as Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman* (France/Belgium, 1975) and *Parque vie* (Mexico, 2011). Similarly, spoof process films such as Chick Strand’s *Fake Fruit Factory* (U.S., 1986) ridicule the genre’s inextricable relationship to modernity and “the Machine Age” in order to underline the current post-Industrial labor precarity. Hannah Arendt famously warned against seeing human life as meaningful only in relation to labor and productivity since the inevitable technological progress will make humans dispensable—modern society will turn into “a society of laborers without labor” once human work is liberated through automatization.³ What will, then, the post-pandemic labor look like? While *The Process Genre* is not prophetic, it suggests that whatever the outcome of our current labor uncertainties, a provocative way to study labor’s relationship and effects on culture is through ubiquitous on-screen processual representations. In stark contrast to Arendt’s warning, Skvirsky argues that the process genre is a way to *contemplate* the role of labor in human life. In this imaginative book, Skvirsky repoliticizes the process genre through its long-lasting, oft-times paradoxical existence across diverse national, historical, and formalist contexts; perhaps most importantly, Skvirsky’s work liberates useful cinema from its scholarly adherence to shifting ideological currents.

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Notes

- 1 Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds. *Useful Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 2 Lee Grieveson, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital, and the Liberal World System* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).
- 3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018, 5. [1958]