

Benjamin H. Bratton  
**El Proceso (The Process)**

01/10

e-flux journal #69 — #69—january 2016 Benjamin H. Bratton  
El Proceso (The Process)

I.

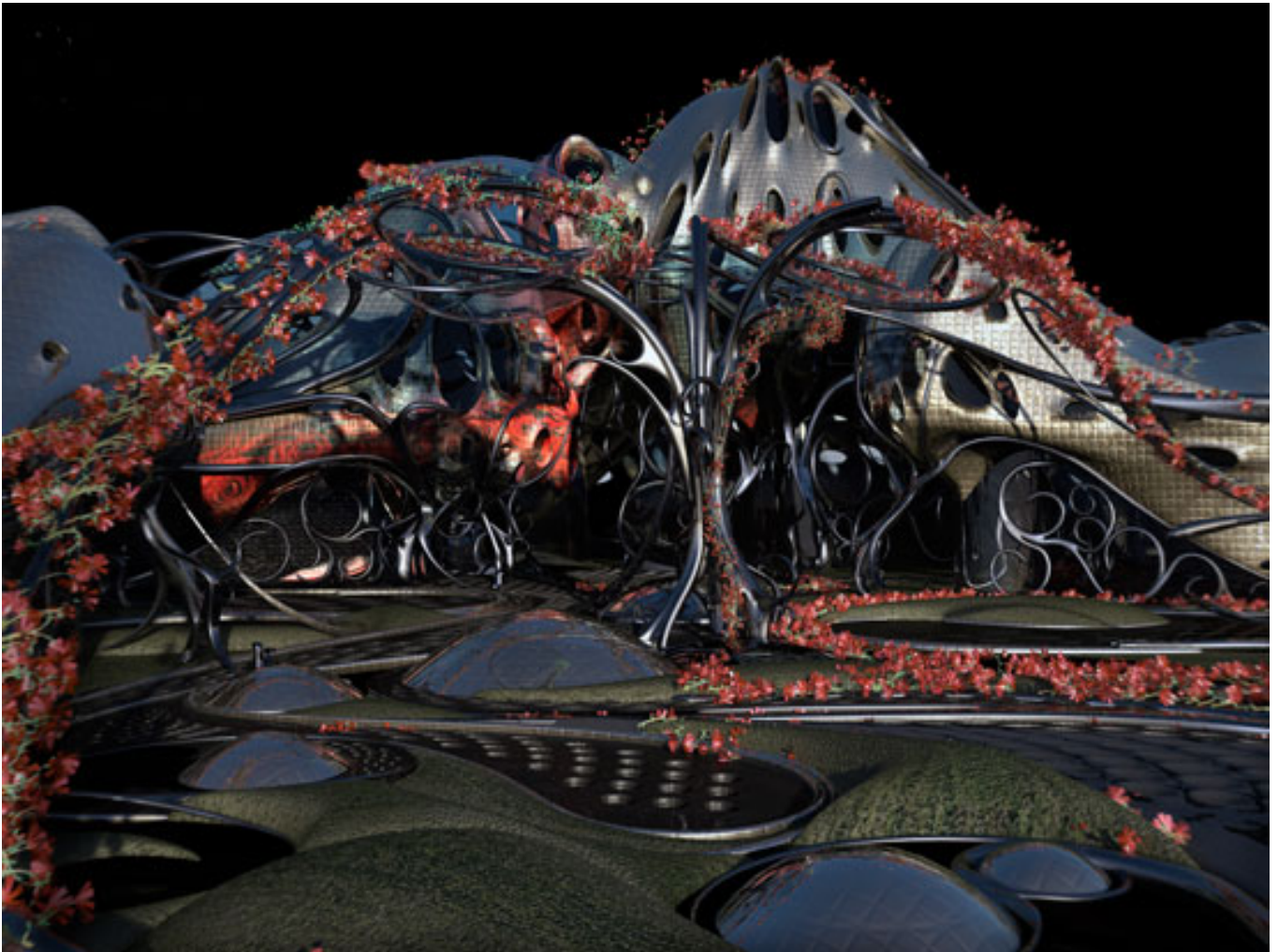
Xefirotarch makes vampire architecture. The reasons for this go beyond the now well-known series of incidents at the group's 2006 SF MoMA show, during which, over consecutive days, several children were left bleeding and traumatized by their encounters with the installation. Each claimed to have been "bitten" by its forms, but more likely, the children had fallen upon one of its dangerous, fang-like angles, and left punctured by the sharp contours. One boy was hospitalized for nearly a week because of his injuries. The linear gash in his abdomen healed, but he remained adamant that the work lunged at him and not the other way around.

Hernan Diaz-Alonso was home in Argentina when the *San Francisco Chronicle* ran coverage of all this, and as I have co-taught several classes with Hernan at SCI-Arc (Southern California Institute of Architecture), the suspicious journalists seeking quotes eventually buzzed my phone instead of his. I patiently repeated that Hernan was not really in the architecture business in any normative sense, that his work was pursuing something else, and that, no, I was not really surprised by what had happened. The quote that ended up in the paper the following week had me suggesting that Xefirotarch was some combination of Victor von Frankenstein, Alfred Hitchcock, and Raytheon. "What began for [Diaz-Alonso] as a pursuit of cinematic botanical monsters, became, in ways he himself does not necessarily control, profiles of allegorical cannibalism ... and probably even actual weapon systems." San Francisco's political culture being what it is, my remarks were positioned as ethical warnings or as criticisms, though I meant them as neither.

II.

Philip Johnson visited the Greek island of Naxos in 1927 and was caught up in a local vampire panic spurred by a cholera outbreak. This visit and its predicament would change his life. Johnson's extensive travels during this period were greatly influenced by his Harvard studies of the pre-Socratics, particularly Zeno and Parmenides. Naxos is the island where, as mythology has it, Zeus himself was raised in a cave. For Johnson, this particular pilgrimage to Naxos's caves, to a primal architecture of sorts, was an important but unplanned addition to his itinerary. His diary notebooks from this period, now in the archives of the Getty Institute in Los Angeles, suggest that this trip through the Cyclades Islands was to last for no more than a few days. "I will be back in Athens before you know I was gone."

Shortly after his arrival, several locals fell ill



Xefirotarch project proposed for the Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Pavilion, 2010. Principal-in-Charge: Hernan Diaz Alonso/ Xefirotarch; Design Team: Ivan Bernal, Nick Kinney, Nicholas Poulos, Brandon Vickers, Michael Young.

with cholera. Though this disease is by no means uncommon in the area, its treatment, including isolation of the bodily fluids of those infected, was unsophisticated. Infection spread quickly across the island from its first point of outbreak in the village of Filoti, where Johnson was staying at the time. Johnson, probably unaware that having type O blood made him unusually susceptible to the bacterium, seemed to register the situation with more annoyance than fear. "They are dropping like flies, and it's even harder to find a decent guide or dinner for that matter," he writes. His guest (and perhaps host as well) on this trip was a mysterious Italian a few years his senior, Aldo Gelli. Little is known of him, other than that he was the older brother of Licio Gelli, head of the notorious Propaganda Due, a "black" Masonic lodge that operated out of Rome from the 1870s and throughout the turbulent years of the 1970s. As we will see, P2's role in the history of vampire architecture would not be understood until years later, during the trials of the secret police involved in coordinating terrorist attacks on civilians that were blamed on the Red Brigades, the so-called *strategia della tensione* (strategy of tension).

The panicked population on Naxos, at the time no more than six thousand in total, had

03/10

their own explanation for the cholera epidemic: they laid blame on *vampires*. This did not bode well for Johnson and Gelli. In the Cyclades, vampires were thought to be indistinguishable from living, normal humans, and the correspondence between the odd American's arrival and the immediately ensuing deaths led many to deduce his direct responsibility for murder. In fact, such vampire/cholera hysteria would continue to recur on Naxos, the last recorded in 1959. Johnson's own diary accounts of the following days are written in an uncharacteristically alarmed prose, too fragmented to produce a clear picture of what happened and what exactly enabled his escape from Filoti. What is known is that Gelli had made arrangements for them to stay on the less-inhabited southern part of the island in a military compound of some sort, perhaps official, perhaps privately owned. Johnson would note several times the compound's proximity to Mount Zas and the cave of Zeus's youth, and he refers specifically to several furtive visits made to that site. Johnson did not reappear in Athens for a full month after his departure, but the exact date and route of return from Naxos remains unknown.

Of the many pages of loose text fragments



Thomas Phillips, *Portrait of George Gordon (1788–1824), 6th Baron Byron of Rochdale in Albanian Dress*, 1813. Oil on canvas. Photo: National Portrait Gallery/Wikimedia.

that comprise his notes from these days in the compound while sheltered by Gelli, perhaps the most striking are several pages of fragmented commentary on Lord Byron's poem "The Giaour." The title of this work is from the Turkish word for "nonbeliever," and the poem itself was written mostly in 1810, during Byron's own sojourn through Greece and "the Orient," and in particular to Naxos. It concerns the fate of a Westerner in Turkey who avenges the death of a slave girl who had loved him and so was cast into the sea by Hassan, her disapproving master. The poem was part of a collection of works by Byron published upon his return to England, all of which painted clashes between West and East, Christianity and Islam, the center and the periphery, in rhythmic Romantic prose. An excerpt from "The Giaour":

But thou, false Infidel! shalt writhe  
Beneath avenging Monkir's scythe;  
And from its torment 'scape alone  
To wander round lost Eblis' throne;  
And fire unquench'd, unquenchable,  
Around, within, thy heart shall dwell;  
Nor ear can hear nor tongue can tell  
The tortures of that inward hell!  
Bur first, on earth as Vampire sent,

04/10

Thy corse shall from its tomb be rent:  
Then ghastly haunt thy native place,  
And suck the blood of all thy race;  
There from thy daughter, sister, wife,  
At midnight drain the stream of life;  
Yet loathe the banquet which perforce  
Must feed thy livid living corse:  
Thy victims ere they yet expire  
Shall know the demon for their sire,  
As cursing thee, thou cursing them,  
Thy flowers are wither'd on the stem.

Johnson makes several entries regarding Hassan's fate, that of becoming a vampire after death and doomed to prey on friend and foe alike. In fact Byron's rendition of this Islamic Turk is sometimes said to represent modernity's first literary vampire.

There are also long passages in Johnson's diary, perhaps written after his escape from Naxos, considering the connection between his own predicament – locked away as an accused vampire – and the local vampire legends that must have inspired Byron and him to innovate with this poem after his travels a century earlier. Here again Johnson's notes become less orderly. He discusses the character of Lord Ruthven in the story "The Vampyre" by John Polidori, Byron's



Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson pose by a model of the Seagram Building in this Irving Penn photograph from 1955.

personal physician, repeating the commonly held assumption that this decadent, aristocratic variation on the vampire character must have been based on Byron himself. Johnson notes that the story was produced by Polidori as part of the same challenge that inspired Mary Shelley to construct *Frankenstein*, on a now-famous night at Byron's retreat on Lake Geneva. Johnson notes that the vampire and the Frankenstein monster are both figures of ritual cannibalism, and that "Frankenstein's electrified *mélange* of corpses – a figure of re-memberment if not also dismemberment who is revived from the grave – and we, the vampires, were born that evening like awful twins" (italics mine).

This is only one of many passages from his diaries in which Johnson refers to himself as a vampire. In others, even more explicit, he cites a "furtive volition of the vampire ethos" in the careers of several historical figures, from Piranesi to Henry Ford. "The power of the machine," he writes, "is its seduction, and the power of its seduction is in its secrecy, which is to say in its natural affinity to the necessary opacity of our positions. Vampires formulate order but do so by hiding in the open, like our work."

Put plainly, Johnson returned from Naxos believing that he had, quite in fact, become an *actual* vampire. How this should be understood in terms of his mandarin power brokering, and

the patrilineality of architecture that became his legacy, is an open question.

### III.

I went on to explain to the reporter from *The Chronicle* that Hernan and I had both started teaching at SCI-Arc at the same time, and that when we first met we had talked about the impact of software on design epistemology, and about the movies, particularly the autonomous function of "special effects." We half-jokingly agreed that in "1993" software had replaced Theory as the most important means by which design thought through itself.

At that time, almost simultaneously, and certainly not just in architecture, software had emerged and Theory had gone away. We toyed with this, presuming impossibly linear causality. Years later, at the time of the SF MoMA exhibition, I had just finished a short essay on our collaborations for an issue of *AD: Architectural Design*. The issue had to do with the pursuit of "elegance" in contemporary architectural design, and Xefirotarch's work was an obvious touchpoint for this. My problem in formulating the piece with the editors came down to a rather basic difference in agenda as to what the elegant *is* and *does* in Hernan's work, and for contemporary aesthetics in general. One might presume that elegance is a kind of graceful, synthetic exclusion of inelegant

05/10



A typical Hitchcockian close-up frames Jon Finch's character in this still from the director's 1972 film *Frenzy*.



complications, such that what is left, what emerges through this exclusion – itself a seemingly effortless finesse – is a rarified, even innocent beauty forged through eugenic subtraction. However, in Hernan’s work (I mean the act of working more than the stuff that results) the revelation of elegance was the result of the reckless pursuit of its *opposites*. Whatever clarity and cleanliness that was there arrived, perhaps counterintuitively, through the direct exploration and amplification of the horrific and the grotesque on their own terms.

I tried, probably unsuccessfully, to explain to the *Chronicle* journalist that this comes from Hernan’s interest (obsession really) with cinematic effect more than anything necessarily native to architecture. “It’s not that he’s influenced by film, it’s that for him the act of designing is itself cinema. The forms you see are special effects minus the representational, photographic content of the camera.” The reporter seemed to be trying very deliberately to not follow along. I read a direct excerpt from the *AD* piece, called “Mayan Cinema,” hoping that might clarify:

Xefirotarch’s design obsessions are based in an appreciation for the perversity of elegant form, a taste learned from the movies and set to work on architecture. That said, perhaps Xefirotarch’s architecture is itself “elegant,” and perhaps it is the inverse of elegant – horrific. Perhaps when the projected figure is frozen in a sufficiently dense, opulent articulation it does achieve a resonant state of elegance. But if so that achievement is derived as much from the act of designing that figure as it is from the intensity of the resulting form. It is produced in the act of design, less through special techniques or processes (though also through these) than in the focused sensations of pointing and clicking. Here that sensation is more like painting than engineering: driven by personal, idiosyncratic gesture more than an application of systematic procedure to material condition.

The genesis of this is internally driven but not intuitive. Having watched hours, weeks, months of Bad Hitchcockian cinema, microtechniques for combing the thresholds of the horrific-becoming-elegant and the elegant-becoming-horrific have imprinted themselves as visual-temporal cues on the design retina. These codes (cut here, blend there, match-on-action, shot-reverse-shot, false POV,

staccato violins, etc.) are processed, mashed up, and re-projected back onto the screen space of animation software. There image-forms are densely layered and then pulled back from themselves, balanced and unbalanced, such that their formal “architecture” within the frame always competes with the strictures of the edit – the latent seam – for the organization of the screen-event. In the course of such moments, he is director, editor, and audience all at once, watching the form materialize and interacting with that emergence. His decisions to speed up and slow down, slice and blend, fuse and separate, repetitions of scenic rhythms he has learned from a lifetime of being awed by cinematic folds and fissures.

Listening again to the recording of the interview, I hear myself pausing and coughing. I go on:

This is visceral. Like the filmgoer engrossed into the cinematic apparatus of yore, this well-immersed designer sweats and squirms and grunts over what he watches before him. This is an exacting processing behavior, like the subconscious mind during dream state, cycling through the raw data of everyday life’s input, cutting and pasting, iterating toward multiple provisional renders on the mind’s eye. The designer settles into the twilight consciousness of productive concentration, into an unfolding practice that is also a kind of cinema played out on the camera obscuras of his glowing monitors. Any elegance you read within the final render is an index of the precision of this processing.

“So it’s like [inaudible],” the journalist asks.

“Perhaps, but from another time I think. Do you know the cockroach scene from Hitchcock’s *Frenzy*?”

“No.”

“*Frenzy* is one of his last films. It’s about a mad strangler in London and his attempts to stay hidden. There is a key allegorical scene in the British version that was cut from most of the American edits in which a swarm of ants eats the severed finger of one of the victims. Hitchcock uses probably fifty cuts in this sequence that is no longer than fifteen seconds total in screen time. Some shots may be POV from the ants. Hard to say. At any rate, the accumulation of edits becomes an accumulation of perspectives around the action of the eating of the finger. This accumulation of perspectives works to trace and delineate what can only be described as a form or membrane *around* the event of the finger. Each

06/10

e-flux journal #69 — #69—january 2016 Benjamin H. Bratton  
El Proceso (The Process)



The Argentinian dictator Jorge Rafael Videla appears at the opening of the Rural Exhibition in Palermo, Buenos Aires, 1976. Photo: Wikimedia

cut notes a different point in the field that together, in the speed of the actual film sequence, somehow ‘add up’ to this visual shape.”

“I see.”

“Hernan and I discussed this sequence a lot. I believe that his own design decisions, his own acts of editing in Maya, are not unlike Hitchcock’s. It is basically the filmic editing techniques of juxtaposition and acceleration and freezing that provide the conditions of emergence for the filmic-formal architectures that we see on the screen. And then later simulated into the gigantic 3-D model in SF MoMA. The one that apparently bit that kid.”

#### IV.

El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional, or “The Process of National Reorganization” – usually known simply as El Proceso – was the official name of the authoritarian agenda of the military junta and its partners that ruled Argentina from 1975 to 1984. The Process took its inspiration from numerous sources, including historically similar adventures in military-corporatist purging and consolidations in Spain and Germany, of Stalinist regimes that were purportedly the junta’s world-historical enemies,

08/10

as well as junta leader Jorge Rafael Videla’s own personal involvement with Robert de Grimston’s Aleister Crowley–inspired cult group, which was also known simply as The Process. In the years 1969–70, Videla spent months studying with de Grimston in London, traveling back and forth at least eight times, and he credits this association with providing the regime with “a philosophy of will through which we will guide and witness the revitalization of the Argentine body and spirit.” The reclusive de Grimston also visited Buenos Aires in the early years of the Argentine version of The Process. As in Santiago, tens of thousands of suspected leftists were detained at football stadiums in and around Buenos Aires and kept in the stands at gunpoint as spectator-prisoners. Survivors have testified that de Grimston would address the assembly over the stadium’s loudspeaker system with cryptic sermons about death, destiny, illumination, and other esoteric topics. In fact, two photographs taken inside the stadium in 1976, which were used in court testimony, show a figure now thought to be de Grimston surveying a lineup of prisoners.

Propaganda Due’s involvement in El Proceso was, at least initially, through the AAA: a strangely elastic organization and acronym that would at times stand for the Alianza



In this promotional image, fully set tables await the Four Seasons Restaurant’s affluent guests.



Anticomunista Argentina and/or the Association Architecturale Argentina (Argentinian Anti-Communist Alliance and/or the Argentinian Architectural Association). The AAA's origins as Isabel Peron's personal security forces preceded the junta, and it was during the years leading up to the beginning of El Proceso that many of the group's most violent adventures were realized. Among these were standing camps in the jungle where barbaric medical experiments were routinely performed and later institutionalized. After the junta took power, Rodolfo Almirón took control of the AAA and dramatically expanded its involvement from a tactical death squad to a full adjunct of other strategic security initiatives, eventually including planning a New Argentina. Also under Almirón's control, the AAA became an active platform for Propaganda Due's attempt to remotely influence the long-term future of Latin America as a whole (as well as in Italy). P2's ongoing research into an "architectural eugenics" and a "eugenic architecture" was beginning to bear fruit in Europe and its core participants were eager to test their conclusions beyond laboratories and studios, at the scale of a large population. They strategized that Videla's Argentina and El Proceso could provide that opportunity.

With Videla's enthusiastic blessing, P2 enrolled prominent members of Argentina's architectural community in a new AAA, which would provide cover for the original AAA. The outrageous medical experiments of the AAA were used as the basis of both a new Argentinian national body, as well as a new platform for its architecture, its cities, and its infrastructure. Ideas and techniques moved freely between the eugenic experiments in the jungle and the forms and plans in the designers' studios. What might begin as child's severed appendage may end up as the formal basis of a new water treatment facility that would allow for the settling of an otherwise inaccessible terrain. Conversely, the profile of models for a new federal satellite complex to be erected in the north would be abstracted into an indexical method for ranking the scars on the broken palms of captured students.

We now know that between 1977 and 1979, at least half a dozen international masterplan competitions were conducted in secret, and largely orchestrated by P2 on behalf of the ruling regime. Philip Johnson was secretly enrolled to oversee the jury process for these, and it is from notes in his personal diaries that what is known of these competitions can be partially reconstructed. The entries ranged from the monolithic to the monstrous. One entry, perhaps that of Oscar Niemeyer's office (though it is impossible to know and there are many reasons

to doubt Niemeyer's participation), called for the dissection of the entire western half of South America into a vast grid system of concrete avenues running across the continent. Spaced ten miles apart both north/south and east/west, each avenue would house necessary infrastructure such as plumbing and transportation, as well as an uncertain population of laborers. The squared landscapes in this gigantic grid would be left feral and lawless, allowing for, as we read in Johnson's notes, "a ferocious zone of maximal natural selection, from higher mammals such as the Indians to carnivorous plants and poisonous frogs." Another (again without assignment of signature) called for the relocation of the Vatican to the jungle in a New Rome, from which an ongoing project for the "fulfillment of the Christian vocation, design [of] new wombs, new bodies, convert[ing] the entire Amazon into a bridge of bread and blood. Built with the genitals of pagans."

## V.

News site clipping:

In March 2007, self-proclaimed vampire hunters broke into the tomb of Slobodan Milošević, former president of Serbia and Yugoslavia, and staked his body through the heart into the ground. Although the group involved claimed this act was to prevent Milošević from returning as a vampire, it is not known whether those involved actually believed this could happen, or if the crime was some kind of political theater.

The secret of the vampire, as Johnson intimated, is that there is no secret. It's all in your mind. You want to be controlled, and so the ritual assignment of the spell is all the news you need to respond to suggestions coming from within, not from without. That suggestion is all the more real for its psychosomatic origins, and for the weight of the soldier's hammer on flesh. One of Hernan's professors, when himself a young student in Argentina, had his right hand smashed by the junta. He disappeared and returned, like a ghost, like the living dead. Once a brilliant draftsman before his instrument was destroyed, and still an adamant Communist of sorts, he instilled a different vision in his young student, turning him away from an interest in film toward an architecture of sorts.

Vampires have a complicated relationship to patrilineality. They bite, consume, and pass along the right to bite and consume. This is their asexual reproductive strategy. The occult telos of patrician cultural governance includes secret

09/10

e-flux journal #69 — #69—january 2016 Benjamin H. Bratton  
El Proceso (The Process)

meetings atop the Seagram Building and dinners in the Glass House in New Canaan, where architecture's own Skull and Bones met in the 1960s and '70s. Philip Johnson did die, without heir apparent, and architecture's own menu as a particular private parlor of national new-old money went as well. That death was a function of a globalization that would open up the game of urban-scale formal symbolism to colorful Malay-Chinese plastics fortunes and Chelsea-Dubai oil futures in ways that cannot be controlled, or even supervised, from a permanently reserved table at the Four Seasons. As if they ever could.

×

*"El Proceso" is an excerpt from Benjamin H. Bratton's Dispute Plan to Prevent Future Luxury Constitution (Sternberg Press – e-flux journal series, December 2015).*

10/10

Benjamin H. Bratton is a theorist whose work spans Philosophy, Computer Science, Art and Design. He is Associate Professor of Visual Arts and Director of D;GP The Center for Design and Geopolitics at the University of California, San Diego. He is also Professor of Digital Design at The European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland. His research is situated at the intersections of contemporary social and political theory, computational media & infrastructure, architectural & urban design problems, and the politics of synthetic ecologies and biologies. His most recent books, both published in 2015, are *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* from MIT Press, and *Dispute Plan to Prevent Future Luxury Constitution* from e-flux & Sternberg Press.

e-flux journal #69 — #69—january 2016 Benjamin H. Bratton  
El Proceso (The Process)