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The Fugue of the Five Senses. Semiotics of the Shifting Sensorium

ART



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Beyond Senses: the existential agony of David Bowie in the “Blackstar” video-clip

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Abstract

Released just two days before his death, “Blackstar” is David Bowie’s swan song. In the “Blackstar” video-clip, Bowie dramatizes and communicates a trans-conscious experience of failing/ impairing senses. In this video, Bowie operates as the central architect of a musical-visual universe that is philosophical in nature and poetic in structure. Connecting the dots in retrospect, we can’t help wondering whether there is a hidden and personal in nature discourse linked with Bowie’s impending death. In this paper, we will discuss the relationship between the lyrics, the music, and the visuals – the cohesion /opposition between telling and showing – and the emergent meanings, focusing on the connotations of mortality (cultural, spiritual, ontological, and philosophical), which derive from the vagueness and the polysemy of the narrative. Our semiotic analysis will draw on Cook’s work for multimedia studies, on Goodwin’s theory for music videos and on Barthes’ study of images. Also, we will correlate the representational (mise-en-scène) and non-representational signs (music, editing, lightening, colors, drama) to determine to what extent they bring out the video’s main concept of the (dying) senses and the beyond.

Keywords

Bowie, **Blackstar**, **music video**, **dying senses**

Introduction

David Bowie was one of the most intriguing figures within the popular culture. For almost five decades, he gave lessons of non-conformity, challenging all conventional, social, cultural, and artistic norms. One thing that made him stand out was his persistence to bring the intellectualism into the mainstream (Power *et al.*, 2015). Speaking to the BBC in 1976, Bowie claimed that his career was built on the desire to be the investigator of new ideas and to turn people's attention to new things and new perspectives (see Johnson, 2015, p. 9).

Bowie's polysemy in expression is reflected on the subversive tone of his art, on his tendency to overcome the aesthetic boundaries and bring different music genres together, and on his various personas he had deployed throughout his career as well (Power *et al.*, 2015). Kathryn Johnson (2015) argues that Bowie's extraordinary sophisticated work can be interpreted not only as an external form of expression but also as part of a process of becoming a 'medium' himself (p. 15). We may claim that Bowie was a kind of "homo symbolicus", in Ernest Cassirer's terms.

Released two days before his death (January 8, 2016), "Blackstar" is David Bowie's swan song. It lasts 9:59 minutes and can be described as an avant-garde jazz fusion piece close to Bowie's tendency for eclecticism. It is a *mélange* of art-rock, jazz, ritualistic chanting, and dramatic ballad. The tune was originally conceived and used as the opening theme for the Sky Atlantic television series "The Last Panthers". The song seems to be about the intertemporal issue of mortality. Inevitably, everything ends.

Blackstar

The "Blackstar" video-clip was directed by Johan Renck and created in collaboration with Bowie. It has cinematic aesthetics and is a multiplex work with various layers of meaning. It is netted by autonomous stories, performed by various characters. The stories unfold on 3 different levels of narration: the real, the surreal or hallucinational, and the infinite. The characters that narrate/ sing and link the stories between them are mainly three and are impersonated by Bowie himself: the Button-Eye, the Dramatic Singer and the Missionary. The video could be considered as an amalgam of genres: conceptual, narrative, and dramatic.

The video-clip begins in a remote planet somewhere in the Universe. There lies the corpse of a dead astronaut. The Serpent approaches the corpse, detaches his skull and delivers it to the mythical Villa of Ormen, where a death ritual is about to begin. Behind Villa of Ormen, three crucifixions are taking place as a heavy storm approaches the village. At the same time in the 'real world' Bowie bandaged, with buttons for eyes is standing outside an attic trying to defend himself from an imaginary enemy. As soon as his projections, the scarecrows on the crosses, are fatally attacked by the enemy, the storm

blows away the light in Villa of Ormen and suddenly everything sinks into darkness. The video ends with a frame of a black star and its components.

Instruments of Analysis

The analysis of the video is based on Goodwin's theory for music videos, on Cook's model for multimodal text analysis and on Barthes' studies. Andrew Goodwin (1992) focuses on the relationships between the lyrics and the visuals, and between visuals and music as well, examining whether the visuals illustrating, amplifying or contradicting the lyrics and/or the music. Nicholas Cook (1998) made one of the first attempts to construct a model of how music, lyrics, and moving image can function together and interact in various multimedia environments, based on the notion of metaphor. He identified three types of interaction: (a) conformance (when the media are considered to be communicating the same message) (b) complementation (when a medium adds, independently from the others, functional non-redundant information in the overall project), and (c) contest (when the media function in a competitive manner, such as when the meaning of each contradicts the other). All these generate associations from where new meanings arise. Barthes (1977) discusses the denotations and connotations of a visual text trying to net them together. The more connotations derive from a visual sign, the more meanings come out of it. The Barthesian semantic and hermeneutic codes constitute a basis for deepening into the video's multimodal world. Hence, the ambiguity of lyrics, the innovative musical elements, and the surreal images make the "Blackstar" video-clip's analysis a complex one.

Failing Senses (or *Trans-consciousness*): the core representational code

In Blackstar video-clip, all frames almost share one thing in common: Bowie who is standing a little off center of the frame and uses all his expressive means to send over a multi-layer message. In this paragraph we will examine the video-clip's frames as images that ontologically add to the process of signification for the whole artistic outcome. After deepening into them separately, we bring them together to come up with their



Figure 1



Figure 2

common representational “code” which indicates whether the meaning of the song ends in its artistic vagueness or goes *beyond*.

In the video-clip, the senses have a protagonist role and are either stretched or deprived. *Sight* is bound or failing. The lack of vision is resulting to an inability to react, predict or think. First in the video-clip appears Button-Eye, one of the main characters impersonated by Bowie, having his eyes bound, with buttons for eyes. Although he is trying, he cannot see. His regular vision is not helping him make out the enemy. Because of this deprivation of sight, he is standing at the same place and his moves are restrained. His image conveys vulnerability and intense agony.

Often the image of the film blurs, until the final scene when the screen goes black and we stop seeing altogether. This short repetitive blurriness in the video implies gradual loss of physical contact. Sight is falling apart. Oddly, eyes are used in an erotic way as well. During the film extreme close up shots bring them in front of the viewer, awkwardly close. The Serpent is flirting Bowie. This flirting is surreal as if it is taking place in a hallucinational mind. Her sight is cool, steady and unearthly, whereas Bowie is nervous and frightened. She is sure of herself whereas he blinks nervously as if he is trying to clear his vision. From the coloring of the scenes we can see that the Serpent and Bowie do not belong in the same dimension. The Serpent’s frame also is blurry at the edges whereas Bowie’s is clean. This blurriness adds to the inexplicable of the Serpent’s nature. One thing is sure; she is not human. Their eye contact is metaphysical.

Finally, the photography of the video enhances the vagueness of the lyrics. The use of dark and dull hues in the picture-frames serves to bring out a side of the song which is dark and black. The video-clip ends up in a blank, empty screen. We have completely lost sight of what is coming. At the same time the reappearance of the black star icon creates a cycle.

Hearing is not any better in the film either. Button-Eye, along with his eyes, has both his ears bound as well. Although he makes efforts, his hearing is very weak. Hence, he is unable to keep efficient contact with his surroundings. During the film we hardly hear any filmic sound. In the remote planet (outer space, infinity) no sound is expected anyway as



Figure 3



Figure 4

sound waves cannot be transmitted. The motion is mute. Also, there is no evidence of activity over there. Only the corpse of the dead astronaut is lying absolutely still. Oddly, the dancers in both settings (in the attic and in the Villa of Ormen) make no physical sound. Although the choreographies are dynamic and powerful, although we witness physical and emotional effort, no sound reaches our ears. All the exertion of the intense activity is kept silent. No sound comes out not even in the scene of the crucifixions. It is a characteristic scene when we hear through our sight. From their grimaces, we witness immense fury, horrific howls, terrible threats and loud insults, which betray a fragile emotional state and excruciating pain. However, their voice is struggled.

The sense of *touch* is kind of mystical in the film. The second character impersonated by Bowie, the Dramatic-Singer, has a dual nature. First he touches his heart, then he touches his head and after he makes funny faces. He uses his hands to express himself. The first gesture connotes someone who takes an oath, speaks from his heart, makes a confession or bows out of gratitude. The second one connotes someone who is envisioning or trying to think hard under pressure. The third one connotes irony, pessimism, and sarcasm. At some point, Bowie abandons the farcical style and acts more as a preacher. With his hands joined at heart he starts his sermon ("Something happened on the day he died/ [...] I'm a blackstar"). The melody sweetens as a sad prophecy is being revealed. It is a moment of meditation and catharsis. Now he has come clean. He has shared with his devoted congregation his painful secret. For a moment, there is peace.

The sense of *touch* also attracts our attention during the pagan ritual, when the women touch the ground with their bare hands. Their movement is strong. The touch of the ground is cold and stiff. The choreography implies that a fight against earth and dust is a fight a priori lost. Finally, in the crucifixion scene, the scarecrows upon the crosses have their bodies bound. Their senses are hypersensitive as their killing processes slowly and painfully. The three scarecrows are projections of the Button-Eye character. Their inability to use their hands in order to fight, to soothe the pain or to escape conveys strong feelings of defenselessness and exposition. Like them, Button-Eye is totally unarmed.



Figure 5



Figure 6

As the physical senses in the film are giving up, the mind proceeds to a trans-conscious state. The three dancers in the attic are a visualization of this. From the beginning, they adopt a ceaseless, repulsive trembling. Their reflex movement is repetitive, strong and directed to the ground. They are in shock. Their faces look as if they are possessed. This is possibly associated with the fragile, emotional condition of Button-Eye Bowie; a state of fear, stress and agony.

From our analysis, we can see that the theme of dying senses is the core code of the visual part of the video-clip and is associated with the song's central concept of mortality. Eventually everything sinks into the darkness of inexistence. Bearing that in mind, and knowing in retrospect that Bowie was dealing with terminal cancer the same period he was putting together the single, it is safe to assume that the issue of mortality in "Blackstar" has to do with Bowie's very own existential struggle. Button-Eye character is him. All in all, Bowie demonstrates all signs of a man tragically aware of his upcoming end. The theme of senses seems to be a visualization of dying but also at the same time they give away an ultimate try to cling to life. The real essence of the video is an ontological enigma of the transcendent and the case of one who met his personal physical and emotional limits to get there. The idea of the trans-conscious and of the failing senses pervades the entire work.

The 'Beyond Senses' idea through a semiotic cross-modal analysis of the "Blackstar" video

In the "Blackstar" video, music appears to be the dominant system. The song consists of two parts of music worlds. The first part is based mainly on modal paths (a tempered Phrygian mode) embellished with an eastern aura. The second part is written following the western tonalities. The video underscores the song's harmonic shift from modal to tonal, with a color scheme that moves from orange to blue.

Throughout the song, a connotative lack of energy can be observed in restricted melodic movement (monotone melodies); short, repetitive phrases; slow tempo; descending phrases; musical processes from high to low tension, and from faster to slower vibrations. The editing of the video is rather conventional; it has an exceptionally slow rhythm (the camera constantly moves in slow motion) connoting Button-Eye's slow death. The slow rhythm of the editing can be also associated to the idea of self-reflection. The tempo of the song is not fast, and this is reflected in the pace of the cutting, which most of is happening on the pulse of the song. Most plans change in accordance with music with a rather predictable way (e.g., when melody is moving upwards the camera is zooming at an object). This may imply that there are no surprises: everything in nature is ephemeral, eventually death will come. At the other extreme, the conventional editing presents a remarkable contrast to the cryptic lyrics. Yet, in spite of the slow editing, the video creates a sense of anxiety.

In several instances, the video literally features elements of the lyrics: when the lyrics talk about “a solitary candle” a candle is shown in the video; in the line “I’m a blackstar” we see Bowie holding the book with the black star on its cover; in the line “your eyes” there are close-up shots to the blindfold Bowie. Moreover, the same lyrics are presented with the same images (e.g., the blindfold scene). This conformity (Cook, 1998; Goodwin, 1992) shows again lack of the unexpected.

The video opens with an image of a blue planet during its sun’s perpetual eclipse. The music begins softly with a melancholic instrumental theme (a blend of electronic and acoustic instruments), with an ambient tone (flowing synths) and a chant-like Phrygian melody, establishing a slow dramatic pace. The combined effect is somehow gothic.

In the first two verses, Bowie’s vocal melody is horizontal: he “speaks” the lyrics in a rather weak voice. The recurring “Ah-ah-ah” is the first clear melodic theme of the song. It gives the impression of a certain ritual and ends with the verse “at the center of it all”, where the intensity decreases without finding solution, neither lyrical nor musicological. Throughout the first stanza, the drums are playing in a parade motion giving an epic character to the piece and evoking the idea of wandering. Harmony in this part of the song is more modal, attached to rock conventions.

Then, the music narration becomes tonal. This tension between the modality and the tonality serves to add further to the video the element of ambiguity. From “Ah-ah-ah”, the melody moves on stressed notes. It peaks with a seventh chord in the end line of the first stanza “your eyes”, which is mostly stressed and, most interestingly, not solved. In purely musicological terms, the seventh chord carries the biggest stress and is only the tonal chord that can lead to the promise of redemption. Therefore agony and anxiety are evoked. In this part, we see the Serpent-girl from the Villa of Ormen carrying the skull of the dead astronaut. Although she holds a macabre parcel, and is aware of the content, she carries it light-heartedly. She looks like she is showing off. This contradiction makes us feel as if this unearthly creature is already on the other side.

There is a short bridge between the first stanza and its repetition where Donny McCaslin’s improvises with his saxophone on the first musical theme, with a somber timbre, while drumming sways highly energetic. After this bridge, we see Bowie wearing a blindfold, like a convict waiting for his execution. He sings outside an attic where three people (a black guy, a pale white one, and a girl) jerk like broken marionettes in a peculiarly mechanical way. Bowie seems in physical and mental pain. We hear an internal cry in his voice. Then, we see the corpse of the dead astronaut floating in space like an asteroid, traveling to infinity or even passing to another dimension.

After the “ah-ah-ah” motif, begins an eerie instrumental bridge where the saxophone sounds rather muffling on the erratic rhythmic beat of the drums which might be suggestive of the asymmetric heart operation. It is an aurally striking moment in the song where the five musicians produce a sound worthy of a far larger ensemble. A sequence

of baroque-pop chords bears a sense of a gospel's sonic power. The jazz sound and the hypnotic quality of the music –gregorian-type chants, various electronic beats, and dark vocals– accompany Bowie's transformation to a messianic figure, after his appearance in the attic. Bowie appears holding up a "Blackstar bible", with dumbfounded followers behind him. He is like bravely presenting his concluded musical testament. The music is rather chaotic when we see women quivering and the shaking dancers in the attic. The ad libitum character of the music bridge may connote Bowie's final effort to be released from the bonds of his illness.

When the hypnotic vocals shift to a lyric music part, Bowie, as Dramatic-Singer, appears to sing alone in an attic, with his natural voice (4:42). Coupled with other musical elements, the appearance of Bowie as singer at this point of the narration draws extra attention to this section of the song.

In the attic scene, the style of the song turns to a rock ballad. Bowie sings in serious and thoughtful manner while he acts as if praying. He narrates in third person ("something happened on the day he died") intending to be more distant. The four lines, "something happened [...] and bravely cried" carry a sense of disappointment and loneliness. Bowie's voice glides up and down his register. The vocal melody leaps into a high F# on "spirit" (4:47). In the question-phrases "How many times does an angel fall?" and "How many people lie instead of talking tall?" Bowie appears to communicate a hidden message.

From this part, we observe a cyclical interchange between the first ("I'm a blackstar") and the third person which may imply Bowie's need both to speak directly about the dramatic situation he experiences and his need to take a distance from it. Even though singing in the third person, he still is someone who speaks about himself.

And then, a drastic change occurs. In the lyrics that follow "I can't answer why (I'm a blackstar) [...] I'm the Great I Am (I'm a blackstar)" he adopts a classic rock style, still low though in energy, which confines into the chorus while alternating lead and back vocals. This part is more dissonant and hard, with Bowie's facial expression full of sarcasm. The B tonal center can be linked to the Phrygian chant-melody of the opening and closing sections. The high-register backing vocals repeatedly state "I'm a blackstar" while also claiming other kinds of stars: "porn star", "gang star", "film star," "marvel star" and "pop star", terms associated to the world of entertainment except from the "wandering star" which expresses more his role- playing games of his multiple personas. There is no third person anymore. Bowie emphasizes his present state "I'm a blackstar".

From the line "I'm-a take you home (I'm a blackstar)", there is a difference in his voice in terms of confidence and irony. He operates in a flamboyant manner, making exaggerated eccentric gestures. Taking poses as a fashion model, he articulates the superficiality of show business. The grotesque here may designate the impermanent nature of fame or the dark pleasure of the mass for peeping.

Vocally, this section features Bowie with an almost sneering voice as opposed to his more fragile voice in the first section, stressing the shift to sarcasm. The most stressed word of this section may be “boo” which is sung after a little pause, coupled with a characteristic movement. In one aspect, he may be telling us that a black star is a dead star whose energy will continue to be released in space-time indefinitely. At the same time, he points out that no one is irreplaceable (“Somebody else took his place”). Bowie overall plays off a lot with the idea of a “Dead man singing”.

In the session beginning with “I am blackstar, way up, on money”, Bowie raises his hands, exhibiting bodily tension. He dances; with open arms in the air, he is moving slowly. The high angle use of the camera makes him look weak. This part offers great contrast with the rest of the piece in terms of energy. It is by far the most dynamic session of the song. In the line “I want eagles in my daydreams and diamonds in my eyes” the melody moves to lower pitches adding an irony as it comes to contrast to the image of flying eagles.

When we hear for the second time “Something happened on the day he died” we are introduced to the crucifixion scene, where three scarecrows, Christ-like figures, are upon their crosses. They clearly are in pain. In some snapshots, they seem as if they are trying to release themselves off the crosses while in others they seem like dancing, swinging their hips. In this scene we see various close-ups to the scarecrows and to the Missionary-Bowie.

A short bridge brings the song back to its opening theme, amplifying the song’s cyclical structure. The third stanza is a varied repetition of the first one, with some new orchestration components. The vocals enter sounding almost hypnotic. This time drums are not heard in a parade manner but rather as a heartbeat or as a ticking of a clock. The last part of the video shows a pagan ritual –the funeral ceremony for the long dead astronaut– where we see an expressionless female ritualist and girls forming a circle, kneeling, and worshipping the skull of the dead astronaut. The girls replicate the spasmodic movements of the three figures in the attic. According to the lyrics, the women “smile”, but in the video the girls are very serious and sad, something that is one more shadowy aspect of the video. The last character of the video is a demonic grim figure, a monstrous creature with a hook that moves in a blue fog. It goes towards the scarecrows and finishes them off.

It is only at the end of the video that editing becomes faster and more aggressive, with blended images jumping off from the candle, the pagan ceremony, the blindfold Bowie – his face appears in extreme close-up, the scarecrows, and the monstrous creature. The music induces a distinctly menacing atmosphere and the free improvisations, over an unstable beat, reinforce this feeling.

The song is completed with the arrival at the dominant chord followed by the “ah-ah-ah” descending 3-notes theme which Bowie sings in an intensely expressive manner. Afterwards there is an instrumental cadence with various disparate music sounds contrib-

uting to an atmosphere of confusion and chaos. Here, the saxophone has been replaced by the flute, with a softer tone. McCaslin's flute, Guiliana's drums, and Lefebvre's bass are combined resulting in an improvisatory performance with an ostinato, ascending and vertical. Then the rhythmic beat is gradually driven in decay, along with other musical elements. Reaching the end, the music sound falls silent, giving the sense of sinking into solitude. The cadence is interrupted in a violent way suggesting the unavoidable loneliness in death and Bowie's inability to change the present situation. All that is heard is a sigh.

Concluding Remarks and Discussion

Most music videos are made to promote a song or an album, and increase the publicity of the artists (Goodwin, 1992). This is not the case with "Blackstar". In the "Blackstar" song and video, Bowie opened for us a door to his mind to communicate his hopeless present, making at the same time an indirect statement for his passing: he is nothing but a blackstar. During his last months of life, he had not stopped being imaginative, creative and even, in his dark moments, ironic and sarcastic. He acted as a free-willed human being heavily burdened under the awareness of his forthcoming end. Jean-Paul Sartre (1946/2007) has described the destiny of humans encountering this kind of freedom as a curse: "Man is condemned to be free. Condemned because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does" (p. 29).

Therefore it is not risky to assume that the "Blackstar" project was Bowie's material response to his imminent death. Furthermore, it is documented that Bowie was fully involved in all stages of the creation and production of his music video, in terms of concept, imaginary and narrative content (Power *et al.*, 2015) with lots of his work colleagues and fellow artists testifying exactly the same thing.

Barthes' theory on denotation /connotation has helped us to enrich our interpretation and discuss "Blackstar" video's potential meanings. Based on Goodwin's and Cook's models, we noticed that in most video scenes, the image is initiated with certain musical features (rhythm, melody, harmony, musical structure). Though the visual and the acoustic semiotic systems are qualitatively different we found out that they share several structural and conceptual features. The modes relate to one another through conformance and mainly through complementation allowing for the transfer of attributes from one mode to the other (Cook, 1998, p. 70). Images add to the meaning of the lyrics and do not contradict them. The music illuminates the analysis of the images and vice versa. From the above analysis it became clear that the "Blackstar" song and video have multiple meanings. Bowie himself had stated back in 1995:

Taking the present philosophical line we don't expect our audience to necessarily seek an explanation from ourselves. We assign that role to the listen-

er and to culture. As both of these are in a state of permanent change there will be a constant “drift” in interpretation. All art is unstable. Its meaning is not necessarily that implied by the author. There is no authoritative voice. There are only multiple readings. (as cited in Johnson 2015, p. 2)

Mortality is implied in various ways in the video. The song outlines the dystopia of passing with its poetic language. With respect to death, Philip Tagg (1993) discusses the cultural specificity of music associated with this fact of life and indicates the connection between musical sounds and their paramusical contexts or areas of connotation. For him, certain music structures and elements communicate the idea of death due to their connections with bio-acoustic parameters of human actions and behaviors. In the “Blackstar”, the slow tempo and the atmospheric musical bridges, alongside with the conventional editing, connote lack of activity and maybe our steady pace towards the end. Besides Bowie’s reflections on mortality and transformation were parts of his work right from the start in his music history: since “Space Oddity”, he had returned repeatedly to the themes of illness, death, and mortality, changing them from terminal events into moments of metamorphosis and transcendence (Boyce, 2016, pp. 529-529).

Bowie uses the song as a means of catharsis. The theatrical-sarcastic “boo” session of the video, stands as a sign for Bowie’s notion of death. Life becomes an ironic spectacle in the waiting for the end. His performance manifests a blend of agony and scorning. Bowie is mocking death with a mysterious grin. In Mikhail Bakhtin’s thinking (1968), “In the sphere of imagery cosmic fear (as any other fear) is defeated by laughter. [...] Terror is conquered by laughter.” (p. 336). In this perspective, we also acknowledge the theatrics of Bowie’s shows which include all the pantomimed routines in general (Peraino, 2012, p. 157).

The gradual failing of senses and consciousness is shown by the surrealistic video’s images and narration. As the scenes go back and forth, as stories unfold on different levels of narration, as characters become more and more rash, spasmodic and fictional; the meaning of the video turns more and more symbolical. The trans-conscious state calms down only when the Missionary, holding the Blackstar Book and showered with light, is revealing the only way it is going to be; the mortal one.

Coda

The hidden discourse of “Blackstar” music project seems to be Bowie’s untold struggle with his illness. Bowie turned his audience to mourners of his expected demise. He made his pain a narrative; a way to reflect on his existence both as a rock star and as a human being in a philosophical manner.

The video appears as an existential palimpsest. The visuals enhance the otherworldly atmosphere in which the lyrics’ ambiguity often echoes as the protagonist’s effort to

make a statement. If one was to take this a step further, the rhythmic tension and the vocal melodies, which are often deliberately not tonally centered, along with the occult lyrics and the dynamism of the images paralyze the senses, making the viewing-listening experience a challenging one.

In this paper, we presented a framework which elucidates the most interesting aspects of this video. We incorporated a semiotic analysis towards the video's textual elements, trying to reflect on its meanings through the dialectical correlation between the visual, the lyrical, and the musical languages. While this is by no means an exhaustive analysis of this work, it may become the basis for further studies.

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