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Body-Representation & the Construction of Visual Meanings: A few interpretations

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the body-image discourses currently present in society as I felt it was important to propose a clear notion of the state of the subject today. Positioned in the interface between culture and body, the emphasis on the meanings of body (re)presentations is important since the ways of representing the body have always been implicitly linked with vision, language, perception, cognition, identity, social and cultural involvement, legitimation, difference and plasticity, providing incredible material for social researchers to work with. The associated interpretations, moreover, fall within the aims of social theory and culture. Thus this paper looks at the original – and always interesting – field of body-representations and the implications on the level of their visual meaning, uncovering questions and specific realities usually accepted as natural, though they are in fact naturalized. It enhances the use of discourse and visual analysis to uncover an understanding of those realities and meanings.

Keywords: body-representation; meaning; discourse; visual analysis

Introduction

In recent years, a number of cultural theorists have made significant contributions to the study of the body and its image. Despite their importance, however, none of these contributions provides us with a systematic framework for understanding why and *how body-representation determines the construction of its visual meaning and interpretation.* In this paper, I seek to provide such a framework and, in doing so, to shed light on why the body and the visual seem to share a special and very close relationship. I will start by specifying the ideas that underlie "body-representation" as an analytical concept and then what is meant by "visual meaning". Other distinctions will be made, e.g., between "visual representations of the body" and "social representations of the body", besides a clarification of the difference between "the visual" and "visuality", as central concepts of this analytical framework.

Considering the relationship between the many ways of (re)presenting the body, and their different connotations, this proposal analyses how causal mechanisms of interaction between these visual forms of expression have given rise to different (legitimized) discourses that are recognized and reproduced in society. Thus, to deconstruct visual language and the power relations in which body-(re)presentations are embedded is to deconstruct the way in which they become common, i.e., to examine visual language as a form of cultural and social practice challenging social and visual representations that are accepted as "natural", though they are, in fact, "naturalized". This perspective states that visuality is a construction that is made possible through the mechanisms of production and reproduction occurring between people's practices and discourses, whose significance requires an interpretation and analysis.

(Re)presenting the body

People always have distinguished and represented their bodies with signs of individuality, social status, and cultural identity. Nevertheless time, fashion, style, and manners change and the forms of (re)presenting the body change with them. To understand these changes it is necessary to know their vocabulary, including the shared symbols, myths, and social values within a society (Schildkroupt, 1999). These "rules" dictate how people should dress, walk, behave, and present themselves to others, creating individual forms of body (re)presentations, often called "body-art". Yet, according to Schildkroupt (1999), from make-up or tattoos to the way people arrange their hair or wear their hats, "body-art" makes a statement (i.e. has meaning/signification) about the person who "wears" it, communicating a person's status, class or condition in society as it displays accomplishments and encodes memories, desires, and life stories. "Body-art" is thus a "visual language". "Body-art" is related with traditional values or rebelliousness, freedom or conformity, autonomy or authority, and authenticity and expressiveness. People use "body-art" to cross boundaries of gender, national or social identity, and cultural stereotypes. Although "body-art" can be an expression of individuality, it can also be an expression of a group identity. Its messages and meanings only make sense in the context of a culture but, because it is also a personal art form, it continually challenges cultural assumptions about the ideal, the desirable and the appropriately (re)presented body.

However, besides the numerous forms of representing the body through "body-art", it is possible to identify other ways of representing the body in engravings, paintings, photographs, and film, which, together, are powerful visual metaphors that have been used not only to record cultural differences showing how people are (in different times), but also to state ideas about how specific societies look at people's bodies. Collectively, these forms of (re)presenting the body establish and legitimate particular "social representations of the body", by creating and reproducing the body's visual discourses.

Regarding the above affirmations, at this point I would like to enhance the distinction between "body-representation", "body-art", and the "social representation of the body". Body-art is a form of body-representation which people use to (re)create their image and appearance: to be precise, everyone dresses, adorns themselves, works out, goes on a diet, has plastic surgery or tattoos or changes their bodies in different ways, offering others various visual readings of their individual bodies. Therefore, it is possible, as Schildkroupt

(1999) affirms, to think of body-art as a form of communication – and it is illogical to separate permanent forms of body transformation like plastic surgery or tattooing from temporary ones like clothing, ornament or make-up and hair style, since they are usually signs of a person's life, intended to mark specific moments, or simply a trend expressing a person's individuality or social identification.

However, the concept of "body-representation" is not exhausted by this definition. Indeed, as mentioned above, it includes other forms of representing the body, e.g., in pictures, photography or film, within various fields of expertise such as anatomy, design, biology, painting, sculpture or medical science. Both conceptions constitute "visual representations of the body". Additionally, different types of visual technology like photographic images, advertisements, books, digital media, movies, television, public art, architecture, surveillance, video footage, street art, etc. offer various renderings of people's lives and bodies: different technologies and images offer different views of the world and many social scientists argue that the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary societies (Rose, 2007).

It is important to take into account another conceptual distinction between "visual representations of the body" and "social representations of the body", despite their being intrinsically inter-related. "Body-art" and other "visual representations of the body" contribute to the construction of "social representations of the body" within a society. These are conveyed through the meaning and the interpretation ascribed by individuals to the visual forms of (re)presenting the body. Moreover, they are implicit in culture: "Culture or cultural knowledge is what interests social scientists. Besides, culture is a means by which social scientists understand social processes, social identities, and social change and conflict. Furthermore, culture is a very important concept for social sciences as it is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings. Meanings, on the other hand, depend on individuals interpreting meaningfully what is around them and make sense of the world in broadly similar ways" (Hall, 1997:2, cit. in Rose, 2007:2). These meanings can be explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious, scientific or common-sense and they may be conveyed through everyday speech, elaborate rhetoric, high art, television, soap operas, dreams, films, photography or the body, and different people in society will make sense of the world in different ways. Whatever form they take, these ready-made meanings or

[social] representations structure people's conduct in everyday life (Rose, 2007), creating, moreover, what is called "visuality".

So, at this point, another distinction is perceptible, between "the visual" and "visuality". In fact, as Rose (2007) puts it: "the visual" is what the human eye is capable of seeing, while "visuality" is the way in which vision is constructed, which is closely related with the term "scopic regime". Both terms refer to the ways in which *what is seen* and *how it is seen* are culturally constructed. Additionally, they are objects of Visual Culture that recognize the modern forms of understanding the world, depending on a scopic regime that equates seeing with knowledge, and also recognize that all forms of communication are particular, connected not only with the visual (*Ibidem*), but also with the body (because we both see and are seen). In its more systematic usage, the term "scopic regime" indicates a non-natural visual order operating on a pre-reflective level to determine the dominant protocols of seeing and being under a specific society's public eye (Martin Jay, 1988). In addition, many aspects of Visual Culture in contemporary reality cover the study of science and technology, including hybrid electronic media, cognitive science, neurology, and the latest performance studies, and image and brain theory. Donna Haraway (1991), for instance, notices the contemporary proliferation of visualizing technologies in scientific and everyday use; she also characterizes the scopic regime associated with these technologies as "unregulated gluttony", since vision is mobile and embedded in ordinary practice. Haraway is concerned with the particular forms of power relations that are articulated through this particular form of visuality. However, she argues that contemporary, unregulated visual gluttony is available to only a few people and institutions, in particular those that are part of the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy. She argues that what this visuality does is produce particular visions of social difference – or hierarchies of class, gender, race, sexuality etc. Haraway claims that this is intimately related with tyranny, the oppression of capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism: part of her project is to examine how certain institutions mobilize certain forms of visuality through which people should see and order the world. This dominant visuality denies the validity of other ways of visualizing social difference, but Haraway insists that there are indeed other ways of seeing the world, and she is especially interested in efforts to see social difference without the interference of hierarchies (1991:188 cit. in Rose, 2007: 5).The scopic regime of post modernity is, thus, neither historically inevitable nor uncontested. There are

different ways of seeing the world and the critical task is to differentiate between the social effects of those different visions. These particular forms of representation produced by specific scopic regimes are important to the study of the visual and its meanings (visuality) because they are intimately bound into social power relations (Rose, 2007: 5).

Having understood what the visual is, and that body representations are part of (constructed) human visuality, it is now time to discover how to interpret them and how social scientists manage to deconstruct their meanings.

Visual Meaning and its interpretation

According to Rose (2007:6-12), although most of the studies on visual images are concerned with interpreting their meaning, a number of others are more focused on the "practices of visuality" or the "agency of visual objects". These perspectives have been developed from different standpoints, such as art history or cultural studies. While some follow either a more structuralist or a post-structuralist line, others prefer a more historical account, as most of their methods are qualitative. This diversity makes generalizing about visual studies a difficult task. Nevertheless, the author suggests five aspects (which somehow entail those foundational positions) of recent literature on visual culture engaged with the visual, which should be valuable when interpreting the meaning of visual images; She also critically examines their effects. These aspects are: **a)** the way in which images visualize social difference; **b)** the concern not only with what images look like but how images are looked at ("ways of seeing" – we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relationship between things and ourselves (Berger, 1972:9, cit. in Rose, 2007: 12); **c)** the emphasis in the very term "visual culture" on the embedding of visual images in a wider culture, i.e., culture and its connotation as a "whole way-of-life" (though the meaning of an image is embedded in a particular cultural practice that is far more specific than a "way-of-life", i.e., images exist in a particular social context that mediate their impact); **d)** the argument in visual culture that the particular audiences of one image will bring their own interpretations to bear on its meaning and effect; finally, **e)** the affirmation that images have their own agency: "an image is at least potentially a site of resistance and recalcitrance, of the irreducibly particular, and of the subversively strange and pleasurable" (Armstrong, 1996:28, cit. in Rose, 2007: 11). In brief, according to this author, these five points reflect the importance of current debates on visual culture to an

understanding of how images work: an image has its own visual effects (one should look carefully at images); these effects, through the ways of seeing mobilized by the image, are crucial in the production and reproduction of visions of social difference; but these effects always intersect with the social context of viewing and with the visualities spectators bring to their viewing. Consequently it is important not just "how images look" but "what images can do". An image not only reflects meanings created elsewhere, such as in catalogues, magazines and newspapers; images work in conjunction with other kinds of representation (such as representations about food, the body, gender or sexuality). Although virtually all visual images are "multimodal", i.e., they always have a meaning in relation to other things, including written texts and very often other images – they are not reducible to the meanings carried by those other things (Rose, 2007:11). In particular, images must be understood both in themselves, as they have their own power (intrinsic or representative), and in a particular visual or discursive context, given their relationship with other visual (and social) objects – which gives rise to different interpretations of them. Consequently, Gillian Rose (2007) distinguishes various sites (production, audiences, and image itself) and modalities (technological, compositional and social) for the interpretation of (found) visual materials[1], according to which various methods of analysis can be applied, e.g., content analyses, semiology, audience studies, anthropological approaches, compositional interpretation, and discourse analysis. These methodologies are ways of analyzing images and their meanings or effects according to their particular contexts, current conditions and visual specificities.

Therefore, not underestimating other methodologies, I would now like to enhance the use of discourse analysis in examining visuality or visual meaning. Discourse refers to groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought and the way people act on the basis of that thinking. In other words discourse is a particular knowledge of the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it (Rose, 2007:142). Discourses are articulated through all sorts of visual and verbal images and texts, and also through the practices that those languages permit. Therefore, the diversity of forms through which a discourse can be articulated entails "intertextuality", i.e., the way meanings of any

[1] Instead of examining images to answer research questions, social scientists can also make images; thus images can be used as research tools as they can be research objects. For further clarification of this matter as related to the sites and modalities of visual analysis, see Gillian Rose, 2007: 5-31.

discursive image or text depend not only on that text or image but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts which are important to understand discourse (Rose, 2007: 142). To Foucault, for instance, discourse was a form of discipline that led him to concern himself with power, the power enacted through discourse that produces a certain thought and action. He suggested that the dominance of certain discourses occurred not only because they were located in socially powerful institutions but also because that discourse claimed absolute truth. According to Foucault, the construction of "claims to truth" lies at the heart of the intersection of power/knowledge (Rose, 2007: 143-144). In his view, images, ideas and representations are constructions that are made possible through dominant positions which change to new ones over different periods, constructing new meanings and interpretations as to who occupies those positions. He did not study language but rather discourse as a system of representations, paying attention not only to passages of connected writing or speech but also to the rules and practices that produced meaningful statements and regulated discourse in different historical periods (Hall, 2001:72).

However, one should not reduce discourse to social power relations or, as Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2001) state, social analysis to discourse. They propose, instead, a dialectical view of the social process, in which discourse is a moment among other moments. As examples of these moments the authors point out: institutions, power, social relations, material practices, and beliefs or values. From this perspective, discourse analysis starts from the perception of discourse (language, though other forms of semiosis, too, e.g., visual images) as an element of social practices, which is part of other elements besides being shaped by them. Social questions such as class, gender and race relations are *in part* questions about discourse and a careful linguistic and semiotic analysis of texts (e.g., newspaper articles or advertisements) and interactions (e.g., conversations or interviews). They therefore play a role in social analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2001:6), but not in a deterministic or reductionist manner, since they only represent a part of social reality. Authors position discourse analysis between a constructivist structuralism, reflecting Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), and the narratives or general account of late modernity, following Giddens (1990).[2]

[2] For further explanation of this account and the origins of CDA, see Lilie Chouliaraki & Norman Fairclough, 2001:1-10.

Thus, concluding the analysis of visual discourse means not only that we can focus on the relationship between power/knowledge and discourse, studying the way in which social power is performed, reproduced, and accepted or rejected, in the social context (van Dijk, 2001: 352): it also means that we can evaluate its links with other segments or "moments" of reality, i.e., evaluate its links with other practices and its relationships, such as interaction contexts, production and disclosure conditions, etc. In view of that and the fact that the focus of this paper is the meanings of body representation, there are other important contributions to discourse analysis and the interpretation of visual materials that are worth noting. For instance, Panofsky's iconographic method, which was introduced in art history, is a significant contribution to interpreting images (the "pre-iconographic" and "iconographic" phases, i.e., the perception of a work of art in its most untainted form, the absence of any knowledge or cultural context following interpretation, and the identification of their iconographic referent) and to explaining their intrinsic meaning and symbolic signification (the "iconological phase", i.e., consideration of a work of art as the product of a historical and social scope) (Panofsky, 1939). This is a practical means of analysis if the interest of the researcher lies in Rose's (2007) classification of the "image itself" (in its compositional or technological modalities) and its significance (its social modality). Other methods such as compositional interpretation, content analysis and semiology, mostly applied when studying advertisements, have also brought important advances to the analysis of the image (in this case, the focus usually continues to be on the compositional and technological modalities and the site of the image itself). Not only have composition or content and meaning played a central role in the expansion of images in postmodern society but the interest in effects and "ways of seeing" has been essential as well. In this scenario, audience studies as a method of analysis have also increased. Given the excessive weight that visual images have acquired in postmodern societies, Baudrillard (1988, cit. in Rose 2007:4) has pointed that the real and the virtual are often confused, stating that the scopic regime of post-modernity is dominated by *simulacrum*, which is not a copy of the real but rather the way the virtual becomes truth in reality. Hence, new readings are necessary to reveal how that happens. As new media and their proliferation give a new place to representations, the focus of visual analysis gradually adjusts from content to effects and spectator studies, not just because visual images are more and more common or because, increasingly, knowledge of the world is visually articulated, but

because we interact more and more with totally constructed visual experiences (Mirzoeff, 1998:1, cit. in Rose, 2007: 4). As pointed out earlier by Haraway (1991), these visual experiences are largely mobile nowadays.

Thus, the way in which images are transmitted is another important aspect of visual analysis. As seen above, content is not everything in an image. In particular, when the interest is to determine how images reach people, their form is also important, despite the fact that separable form dictates or mediates content[3]. The characteristics of the materials used constrain the possible format or content of an image. Consequently, social investigators must take into account both the type of image that they are examining and the medium carrying it. For example, in a painting or photograph these two elements are easy to separate, but in a film that is more difficult. A study of the relationship between form and

[3] "The earliest experience of art must have been that it was incantatory, magical; art was an instrument of ritual. (...) The earliest *theory* of art, that of the Greek philosophers, that art was mimesis, imitation of reality. § It is at this point that the peculiar question of the value of art arose. For the mimetic theory, by its very terms, challenges art to justify itself. (...) [But] Whether we conceive of the art of work on the model of a picture (art as a picture of reality) or on the model of a statement (art as the statement of the artist), content still comes first. The content may have changed. It may now be less figurative, less lucidly realistic. But it is still assumed that a work of art is its content. Or as it's usually put today, that a work of art by definition says something (...) Whatever it may have been in the past, the idea of content is today mainly a hindrance, a nuisance, a subtle or not so subtle philistinism (…). What the overemphasis on the idea of the content entails is the perennial, never consummated project of interpretation. And conversely, it is the habit of approaching works of art in order to interpret them that sustain the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art. § Of course, I don't mean interpretation in the broadest sense, the sense in which Nietzsche (rightly) says: 'There are no facts, only interpretations'. By interpretation I mean here a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain "rules" of interpretation. § Directed to art, interpretation means plucking a set of elements (the X, the Y, the Z, and so forth) from the whole work. The task of interpretation is virtually one of translation. (...) Thus, interpretation is not (as most people assume) an absolute value, a gesture of the mind situated in some timeless realm of capabilities. Interpretation must itself be evaluated, within a historical view of human consciousness. In some cultural contexts, interpretation is a liberating act. (...) [Thus] what kind of criticism, of commentary on the arts, is desirable today? For, I'm not saying that works of art are ineffable, that they cannot be described or paraphrased. They can be. The question is how. (…) What is needed first is more attention to form in art. If excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more through descriptions of form would silence. What is needed is a vocabulary - a descriptive rather than prescriptive vocabulary - for forms. § I'm not saying that a work of art creates a world fully referent to itself. And of course, works of art (with the notable exception of music) refer to the real world - to our knowledge, our experience, our values. They represent knowledge and judgments. But its distinctive feature is that it generates not a conceptual knowledge (which is the distinguishing feature of knowledge or scientific discourse - for example, philosophy, sociology, psychology, history), but something like an excitement, a commitment, a judgment in a state of servitude or enchantment. That is to say that the knowledge gained by experience of art is a form or style of knowing something, without the knowledge of something (as a fact or a moral judgment) itself. This explains the prominence of the value of expression in works of art and as the value of the expression - that is, the style - just takes precedence over content (when content is falsely isolated from style). (...) In art, 'content' is almost the pretext, the goal and the seduction which involves awareness in manufacturing processes essentially formal" (Susan Sontag, 2001[1966]: 1-43). Despite referring to "the work of art", Susan Sontag's words illustrate superbly what Banks means and can also be attributed to images in a general way, particularly to help us understand the implications of interpretation. And she reminds us that the act of seeing is also an individual experience, between the person who sees and what is seen: once more the body performs a crucial role here. However, the question of style and artistic self-expression, in some cases related with this, are different questions which do not fit into the aims of this paper.

content should pay attention to how this happens, the way one takes precedence over the other in any particular context. Attention to the materiality of the visual image and the materiality of the context may reveal the distinctive texture of the social relations in which the image performs its work (Banks, 2001:51). Thus, despite the earlier reflections in this paper on content, effects or spectators, it is time to affirm that images also derive their meaning from their relationship with other images (Rose, 2007; Banks, 2001; Becker, 1995), i.e., to understand the significance of images it is necessary to consider their context. This means paying attention to the interaction frames, network relationships, disclosure and acceptance conditions and cultural movements in which images are embedded: in fact, as Becker states, photographs acquire meaning from their context, like all cultural objects. Even paintings or sculptures, which seem to exist in isolation (hanging, for example, on the wall of a museum), obtain their meaning from a context made up of what has been written about them, either in the label hanging beside them or elsewhere, from other visual objects, physically present or just present in a viewer's awareness, and from discussions going on around them and around the subject of the works. If we consider that there is no context, this only means that the maker of the work has cleverly taken advantage of our willingness to provide the context for ourselves (Becker, 1995:8).

Therefore questioning images is also to question their production contexts, and their expressiveness to acknowledge their power, functions and effects determining how they create a visual system. On this point, it is also important to focus on the agency of images, as presented above, in order to understand what they are, how they act and what they do. The social relationships surrounding an image are very different, in each case and in accordance with where they are located. In some cases the medium has more importance, in other cases it is the material form of the image, while in other cases the most important aspect is the content. Even so, they all have different meanings and are inserted in a set of social relations (i.e., context) defining their importance (Banks, 2001:53).

These are some of the most significant aspects when the deconstruction of images and visualities is being discussed; however this is not a recipe. Thus the standpoint I seek to defend in this paper is that when visual images and particularly body-(re)presentations are

being analyzed, it is useful to use complementary methods[4]. However, each conceptualization must be understood in the context of research objectives and starting questions, and suitable methods and tools must be chosen and applied according to which modality(s) and site(s) of the image constitute the researcher's interest. Methods do not exclude particular modalities or sites for visual image.

Conclusion

Having considered the relationship between the numerous ways of (re)presenting bodies and their different connotations, it may be concluded that causal mechanisms of interaction between these visual forms of expression give rise to different legitimized discourses about them, which are recognized and reproduced in society. Body-art (self-presentation), other visual representations of the body, and its social representations are important conceptual features in the comprehension of the construction of its visual meanings and interpretations. They can be evaluated if the contexts of practices or visual objects themselves are considered, and each one of them is particularly inter-related.

Regarding **body-(re)presentation**, various dualities were detectable: body-image means both the way people present themselves to the world and the way they represent themselves, in different societies and cultures. The body can also function as a "canvas" that can be decorated, adorned or changed, while, at the same time, it is a "repository" for life, experience, encoded memories and specific trajectories. Furthermore, the body is a medium for transmitting and communicating messages in the world; at the same time, it plays a supporting role, as the basis of an experience of living. In this way, body-(re)presentation conceptualizes visual representations of the body as social representations of the body. Providing "optical schemes of vision" as "scopic regimes of communication", the body and the visual are thus fundamental to an understanding of this analytical construction, i.e., comprehension of the visual meaning of body-(re)presentation.

Thus what is **visual meaning?** Given the account above, I would say that visual meaning is acknowledging a sense of reality based on visuality. It is to understand reality

[4] In the sense that it is very difficult to focus on just one aspect of visual representations without considering other aspects of their reality and, as demonstrated earlier in this piece, it is necessary to separate visual from social representations of the body – first and foremost after necessarily making an analytical (also constructed) distinction, given the complexity, and almost paradoxical reality, of the body.

based on individual visual perception, which, by social mechanisms of acceptance or resistance, production and reproduction, is discursively constructed in society's classification systems, providing them with social recognition and legitimating them. Very often objects submitted to visual analysis must be contextualized within a specific reality in order to obtain a certain acquaintance between the elements of visual constraint which make it possible; usually it is also in order to interpret visual objects on the basis of certain assumptions related with their symbolic realities. Consequently, to create visual meaning is to relate visual signs and their referents, ascribing some significance to them. Thus, I think discourse analysis is a fundamental method for interpreting and deconstructing visual significations. There are different ways of seeing the world and the critical task is to differentiate between the social effects of those different visions. These particular forms of representation produced by specific scopic regimes are important because they are intimately linked to social power relations (Rose, 2007: 5). Visuality is thus an important part of reality itself, like textual or oral conversation but, instead of just being a language, it is a system with specific rules and practices within different spheres of society, e.g., art, science, and technology. With regard to visual analysis (or the analysis of found visual materials), it is possible to distinguish various perspectives: some specially favor context (production practices, disclosure, interactions between elements of the visual field), and others lay greater emphasis on the agency of images (the effects and symbolic power of depiction; the spectators' ways of seeing and interpreting). They are intrinsically inter-related and, jointly, also make important contributions to visual culture, which interests social scientists in general and visual sociologists in particular, since, as a type of discourse which reflects on the visual, visuality is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings. It is clearly not a matter of language *per se* but, in a broader way, a question of human meaning-making and its transmission and reproduction. For the reasons given above, body (re)presentations symbolize this kind of visual human meaning-making and were thus the subject of this paper.

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