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In Between Fact and Fiction. Queering the Borders of Documentary and Fiction[1]

Abstract:

The essay focuses on films between documentary and fiction, and their categorization by both film theory and audiences, particularly in the case of so-called mockumentaries. Using a semiotic and pragmatic perspective, I examine these films as practices of negotiating audiovisual identity in terms of genre. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of "queer", I aim to describe the blurring of boundaries and the binary representation of fact and fiction in audiovisual media.

Key words: Documentary and Fiction, Identity of Film, Genre and Genre Concepts, Self-Reflexivity and Performativity of Film

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[1] This text emerged out of some points from my PhD thesis (see Blum, 2017).

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This essay explores the ambiguity of films situated between documentary and fiction.[2] Such films stand 'transidentically' between the genres of fiction and non-fiction, as well as between the audiovisual production of fact and fiction. These films have a diverse formal range, including essay films, fake documentaries, docudramas, scenic reconstructions, speculative visions of the future, drafts of the past, and seemingly unambiguous forms. Sometimes, these films resist being described with *one* generic concept. For instance, Orson Welles' "F for Fake" (1973, Orson Welles) could be described as an 'essay film', a so-called 'fake-documentary' or even a 'reflexive (or even 'performative) documentary' – in the sense of Bill Nichols (1994, 2001) – about art and authorship fakery. As a documentary that deceives its audience, this reflects on its subject by tricking the audience on the screen and through the screen. Is it now a fake or a truthful documentary that becomes 'truthful' precisely by deceiving its audience? This question, as I would like to emphasize, is posed by the film itself. In the following text, therefore, I want to look at films that aesthetically and sensually offer a perspective through the concepts of factuality and fictionality by being neither fiction films nor documentary films. To examine such films, however, the terms 'fictional' and 'documentary' must first be clarified.

As Roger Odin argued in his semio-pragmatic approach, I do not start from firmly established genres but from reading instructions. Already in 1986 Jean-Marie Schaeffer states, "Insofar as classificatory genericity (i.e., genre) is a category of reading, it naturally contains a prescriptive component, so it is indeed a norm, but a norm of reading."[3] (Schaeffer, 1986, p. 199f) According to Odin, it is the reader's construction of a real enunciator that establishes a "documentarizing reading" (Odin, 1984, 2022: 81-84, also Hediger, 2022, p. 13-15). Odin also addresses the documentarizing mode and the fictionalizing

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[2] By the word fiction I mean works of fictional discourse, not the poetic process of producing these works. Fiction in this sense includes novels as well as fiction films or plays, but is not identical with these works, nor is it identical with 'narrative' or 'fictitious/fictive worlds, beings, times etc.' in the sense of something that exists only within a fictional work. For example, The Lord of the Rings names a fictional novel as well as three fictional films on a fictitious/fictive world: Middle-Earth, while both the novels and the films under the title Harry Potter place several fictitious/fictive characters in a world that refers to the real world – London in the Harry Potter-novels/films is not an unreal one it is a fiction of the real London, supplemented by fictitious/fictive characters and therefore produced within a fictional discourse, while it nonetheless persists in reality without these characters. The concept becomes more complex the more realistic or reality-bound the respective fictional (not necessarily fictitious/fictive) content presents itself and therefore does not demarcate itself from the documentary, but is open to it. (for more on this topic see Hamburger, 1987, Iser, 1993).

[3] Original: "Dans la mesure où la généricité classificatoire (c'est-à-dire le genre) est une catégorie de la lecture, elle contient bien entendu une composante prescriptive, elle est donc bien une norme, mais une norme de lecture [my translation]".

mode, amongst others, as 'modes of production of meaning [*modes de production de sens et d'affects*]' that I cite here:

Definition of the documentarizing mode:	Definition of the fictionalizing mode (preliminary approach):	Definition of the fictionalizing mode (new proposition):
- At the level of discourse: the production of information (with no constraint on the form)	- At the level of space: construction of a world (a diegesis)	- At the level of space: construction of a world (diegetization)
- At the affective level: undetermined	- At the discursive level: construction of a narrative	- At discursive level 1: construction of a narrative (storytelling)
- At the enunciative level: the construction of a real enunciator who can be asked questions in terms of identity, ways of acting, and truth	- At the affective level: relationship between *mise en phase* and narrated events	- At discursive level 2: construction, from the narrative, of a "discourse" that conveys information and values
	- At the enunciative level: construction of a fictitious enunciator	- At the affective level: *mise en phase* with the story and thus with the values it conveys
		- At enunciative level 1: construction of a fictitious enunciator of the story and of characters […]
		- At enunciative level 2: construction of a real enunciator of information and values, who is hidden – masked beneath the fictivization contract

Fig. 1. Documentarizing mode, fictionalizing mode (preliminary approach) and fictionalizing mode (new proposition) (Odin, 2022, p. 84, 77, 86)

Obviously, the documentarizing mode is not limited to documentary films, just as the fictionalizing mode is not limited to fiction films. For example, when watching documentary films, spectators also construct a world – diegesis/ diegetization (for this concept see also Odin, 2000, p. 17–23) – which is usually identified (or should be identified) with that world belonging to both the spectators' and the screen's. Fiction films also produce information from time to time about the 'fictivized'[4] worlds they are telling of and showing (and thus

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[4] By using "fictive" in contrast to fictional I refer to Käte Hamburger who differentiates fictive [fiktiv] as in not existing outside of a work of fiction from fictional [fiktional] as in the attribution of a work of fiction (see Hamburger 1987).

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realizing) on screen. Additionally, fiction films produce documents in the very literal sense: sounds and visions as once recorded of a world which is un-real outside the work of fiction – fictive – but is somehow real in the imagination of the audience and realized by the sounds and images which indicate the fictional existence of this imaginative world on screen. Jean-Marie Schaeffer argued that there are not two different kinds of representation, one fictional and one referential, but only one: referential. Even if a representation aims at a non-existent object, it cannot represent it as non-existent, because to represent something is to pose that thing as representational content. Schaeffer points out that fictional representations posit exactly the same classes of referents as those of any representation: external environment, bodily and mental states and acts. And this applies to all representations, regardless of their source, mode of access or mode of existence (see Schaeffer, 1999, p. 153f.). In conclusion, the terms "documentary" and "fictional" cannot be defined by privileged or unprivileged access to the real world. In film especially, the terms blur under the very aesthetic definition of the medium itself: to give an audio-vision of something which is as much a representation of something absolutely out of space and time by its presence as another something (the famous 'imaginary signifier' by Christian Metz[5]) but in the same way this presence is realizing the very (audio-visual) shape of a vision of a world being both: a text made out of sounds and images and textures which address the senses and the body of the spectator. And in this unique condition the question of the generic identity of film is still significant

Genre-Troubles, or 'Queering' the Identity of Film

Representing facts in difference (not in contrast) to representing fictions involves a – I want to say – binary of two basic paradigms of film reception. Ironically, many concepts that address films in the intersection of fictional and non-fictional filmmaking name this binary by combining, for example, documentary and drama (as 'docudrama' as well as 'dramadoc'), fact and fiction ('faction'), or the wide field of the so called fake-documentary, mock-documentary and so on (for more on these concepts see Lipkin/Paget/Roscoe 2006). These concepts literally summon a lack of documentary or even documentary authenticity. Especially the term mock-documentary seems to aim at a film which is only pretending to be a documentary, but why is it not? Jane Roscoe defines mock-documentaries as films that "look and sound like documentaries, but are not factual". (Roscoe, 2007, p. 908, see also Roscoe/Hight, 2001) This definition in my opinion is rather unsatisfactory from two perspectives:

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[5] In order to understand the film (at all), I must perceive the photographed object as absent, its photograph as present, and the presence of this absence as signifiying." (Metz, 1982, p. 57)

> It defines documentary films as factual, which they are not. We can think of numerous instances of documentary films whose facts are false, such as propaganda documentaries from early examples up to the present, including cinematic conspiracy theories and infamous lies. Such films that claim or present false facts as true are in no way films that push our perceptual habits to the limit of their identification competence; quite the opposite. (for more on this subject, see Blum, 2021)

It presupposes that documentary film could be defined beyond its basic material: sounds and images. Of course, there are many documentary films, or even a wide majority of documentary films, that correspond to other images, separated knowledge, and generally the whole imagery of views and visions as well as sounds and tones of the world [*Weltbilder* and *Weltklänge*]. Finally, this short definition makes it impossible to think of the documentary film in terms of its fictional content, which it undoubtedly possesses.

To avoid any misunderstanding: of course, the theoretical tableau designed by Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight for the so-called mock-documentary is much more complex than the quoted definition suggests. They already prove their thinking with the subtitle of their book: "The Subversion of Factuality". The three degrees they examine in regard to 'mock-documentary' – parody, critique and hoax, and deconstruction – demonstrate the non-binary logic of their thinking. But I argue that if there are films whose most significant characteristic is their unambiguity between fact and fiction, why then should we define them according to this very binary? Conversely, we could also say: mockumentaries are fiction films, but they don't sound or look like them, so they are not fictional, or they may be fictional but their fictionality is not visible or audible.

The identification of fictionality and/or factuality of a film by the spectator, however, can only happen based on how the film looks and sounds. Certainly, there are historically grown habits of perception, and there are undoubtedly institutional framings that decisively influence the reading of the film (see Odin, 1984). Expressed in the genre terms "fiction film" and "documentary film", the partly oppositionally conceived conception of fact and fiction thus refers to a binary coding of audiovisual utterances that translates into patterns of perception and shapes the genre identities of films in a binary and, as it were, 'heteronormative' way. This binary coding is precisely what is opposed in films such as those Roscoe and Hight call 'mock-documentaries'. These films leave the conventional genre distinction behind because they cannot be understood as either documentary or fiction films. At the same time, however, they also alienate the spectator from their hitherto secure ability to identify. Therefore, under the impression of

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such films, one can turn to Judith Butler and ask: "To what extent does discourse gain the authority to bring about what it names through citing the conventions of authority?" (Butler, 1993, p. 13) Unlike Butler, I am not concerned with gender, but with cinematic genres. I think that, in view of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, we can speak of a binary coding of aesthetic acts of enunciation, which in itself leads to heteronormativity.

The heteronormative scope of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is evident in terms such as 'fake-documentary' (see Juhasz/Lerner, 2006) and 'mockumentary', which has become internationally the most popular since the 1990s, as well as in the German terms "*fingierter Dokumentarfilm* [feigned/faked/fictitious documentary]" or "*Dokumentarfilmästhetik* [formal aesthetics of the documentary film]" (for more on these concepts see e.g. Berg, 1990, Hattendorf, 1994), and the French term "*documenteur* [documentary liar/editor]" (see Niney, 2009), which is inspired by the the Agnes Varda film of the same title. In contrast, the underdetermination of the generic form is to be understood and formulated here as the strength of such films, which entails a narrowing of the aforementioned corpus. I am interested in films that, while they cannot be defined as a subset of either fiction or documentary film, make the identification of fictionality and factuality the starting point of their audiovisual discourse on the formal-aesthetic level. In this regard, one's gaze first falls on the essay film, which, while conspicuous for its openness, is often also characterized by an intellectually advanced cinematic discourse that assumes an aesthetic subject. In contrast, however, the same is true for films whose identification liquefies generic perceptual practices and genre pragmatics, which can hardly be named using the term essay film. These are the films I call 'queer' (in inverted commas). It is clear to me that the term, which is occupied by queer theory and queer politics on the one hand and queer cinema on the other, is in this context seemingly detached from its environment of identity politics and the emancipatory project associated with it. I do not want to conceal this problem – if it is one. The term refers to a re-functioning not only in the sense of identity but also in that of identification and can also be used productively for identities beyond embodied beings such as human beings:

> If the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes. (Butler, 1993, p. 228)

Thus, there is little to be said against transferring the term's political purpose to the field of perceptual politics and testing it out in the practice of cinematic

aesthetics. For those films I have called 'queer' practice the crossing and lique-faction of identities mentioned in the quote. 'Queer' films are thus sensually concrete sites of negotiation of acts of identification between fictionality and factuality in the domain of audio-visual media. 'Queer' as a term for their label-ling is not an attribution that identifies them as trans-generic or trans-identical, quasi as a genre through the back door, but the very moment of their aesthetic practice as a semiological act. In other words, 'queer' does not describe a holistic ensemble of films between documentary and fiction but refers to those very mo-ments of audio-visual practice when we as an audience are unsettled while trying to identify whether we are watching a documentary or a fiction film. 'Queer' in this sense denotes, on the one hand, an aesthetic or even semiotic act of creating an audiovisual world (diegesis) where we cannot decide if it is our historically real world or a created one (fantastic or realistic). On the other hand, the term names an effect from the pragmatics of film, which aims at the question of how to handle a film (a sequence, a frame) for itself and how to handle audiovisual representation in general.

'Queer' Films: Addressing Genre as Non-Genre

According to François Niney, the fiction film shows a world in a frame, while the documentary film puts a frame in the world. In this relationship, the 'queer' film treats this same frame as the film's reference to a/the world. For example, "The Forbidden Quest" (1993) by Peter Delpeut compiles a variety of historically authentic footage taken during expeditions to the Arctic and Antarctic. It uses a total of 18 films, with footage from "South" (1919, Frank Hurley), "The Great White Silence" (1924, Herbert Ponting) and "Med Maud Over Polhavet" (1926, Odd Dahl) dominating quantitatively. Narratively, "The Forbidden Quest" is structured as a metafiction, where an otherwise anonymous filmmaker, only present as an off-screen voice, narrates his encounter with the sole survivor of a South Pole expedition in 1905/06. The survivor, J.C. Sullivan (performed by Joseph O'Connor). keeps film footage of this expedition given to him by the so-called 'picture-man' shortly before his demise. Thus, Sullivan claims to be able to substantiate his recollection with film recordings, reports on the discovery of a passage between the North and South Poles, and the expedition takes on the form of a metaphysical journey or *quest*, in keeping with the film's title, narrated by Sullivan, who is questioned by the filmmaker, now transformed into an in-terviewer in the *hors-champ* (on the separation of sound-off = non-diegetic sound from the off-screen-space and sound-*hors-champ* = diegetic sound from the off-screen-space, see Chion, 1992). In the montage of the film that the audience sees, the interview is underlaid over long stretches with the authentic footage. I want

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to mention one sequence here in which the existence of a passage between the poles is to be proven for the first time:

Fig. 2a-c: "The Forbidden Quest"
Double-shots of the doubled bear

By claiming to have seen a polar bear in Antarctica, Sullivan clearly arouses the interviewer's scepticism, which probably goes hand in hand with that of the spectator. Sullivan also confirms in addition, "White bears belong to the other end of our earth." (Joseph O'Connor as J.C. Sullivan, "The Forbidden Quest", 0:20:35) The following images which follow that sentence do not show the same bear, so they do not represent a bear in a visual sense, but rather a narratively continuous hunting sequence constructed from the montage of archival images and performed audiovisually. By inserting the additional audible death shot into a loop, by increasing the angle of the shot in such a way that the grain and pictoriality of the film image become more and more apparent, the animal body coagulates into a mere cinematic embodiment (fig. 2).

The authentic document of a dying polar bear takes on a broader meaning in its audiovisual appearance: the audible rifle-shot and the repetition of the *shot* – as taken by the camera and through the editor's hands as well as a plot-point – with increasing enlargement of the detail draw attention away from the film as an event of recording a profilmic reality preceding the shot and redirect the attention towards a definition of the shot as a genuinely filmic event. The semiotic conception of the shot [*prise de vue*], defined by François Niney as a hybrid of an ultra-analogue icon, an index detached from the causative object and symbol adhering to the concrete,[6] comes to formal fruition here on a sensually concrete,

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6 "Les prises de vues sont des hybrides: des indices mais détachés des objets réels qui les causent; des icônes mais ultra-analogiques; des symboles mais adhérents au concret. Et aucun rasoir logique ne saurait trancher cette ambivalence des images ainsi prises (de vues et de vie). C'est ce mélange original qui fait leur puissance et leur vanité, entre réel et illusion (l'illusion est à proportion de l'effet de réel), reproduction et représentation, témoignage et tromperie." (Niney, 2009, p. 136)

i.e. audio-visually perceivable level, and thus audio-visually perceptible, while on the other hand on a performative level – since, according to the thesis, film here vividly reflects itself through its signifying material, insofar as it is not a dying polar bear that is shown and presented in the film, but first and foremost a cinematic polar bear that is made comprehensible as an audiovisual event. The supposed animal body formerly made of flesh and blood is not an animal body any longer, but a cinematic body made of grain. Such films offer access to the ways in which cinematic meaning and affect are produced by crossing the traditional pragmatics of genre. We can think of, for example, films like "Forgotten Silver" (1995, Peter Jackson, Costa Botes), in which an undiscovered New Zealand film pioneer is revealed through (mostly false) archival footage, "The Wild Blue Yonder" (2005, Werner Herzog), in which footage from NASA and from the Antarctic Ocean under the ice become documents of a journey to an alien planet and its natural world through the poetic power of the images themselves, or "This Ain't California" (2012 Marten Persiel), in which a fictional biography of a skateboarder from East Germany is created through fake and real footage as well as animated sequences. In the present case of "The Forbidden Quest", this point of reference is directed towards its very own material: image and sound. The example also shows that such films enter an exchange with horizons of knowledge and are linked to the forms of cinematic presence and absence in space and time. On the one hand, 'queer' films aim at the contingency and strategic orientation of knowledge, while on the other hand, by emphasising its medial genesis, expose it as being equally affected by reality and phantasmatics. The interplay of reality and phantasmatics also characterizes the aforementioned dimension of cinematic presence and absence, if the term phantasmatic and the phantasm on which it is based is not merely understood pejoratively as a mirage, but also productively as an image of desire or wishful thinking.

In order to point out the aspect of cinematic presence and absence, I'd like to refer to another example: The highly popular "The Blair Witch Project" (1999, Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez), which Roscoe and Hight mention as one example of their degree 'critique and hoax' (Roscoe/Hight, 2001, p. 191). Of course, similarly to the way in which "The Blair Witch Project" criticizes the manner of using archival footage as self-explanatory documents of the past from one point of view, "The Blair Witch Project" could be seen as a critical examination of staging authenticity, firstly by using techniques of 'direct cinema' and secondly through the simple operation of fictionalizing a recording camera as part of the plot as for example "C'est arrivé près de chez vous" ("Man Bites Dog", 1992, Rémy Belvaux, André Bronzel, Benoît Poelvoorde), or already "Die Delegation" ("The Delegation", 1970, Rainer Erler) and "David Holz-

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man's Diary" (1967, Jim McBride) also did. I think in its textual arrangement the film by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez performatively reflects on the constitution of cinematic meaning against the background of cinematic absence and presence in space and time. Like "The Blair Witch Project", the film is structured as a meta-fiction and initially presents its recordings of images and sounds as found footage. Through the use of two cameras and the narrow ensemble of acting figures, the film establishes a perceptual dispositive in its diegesis that not only shows what is visible in the images, but also implies their invisible makers – conspicuously exposed at the beginning of the film, in which the two cameras are presented as circling around each other and establishing the film as its very own subject (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. "The Blair Witch Project" Film spinning around itself.

In this way, the film refers to the dimension of off-screen space. And in this context, first of all, to the distinction between a diegetic off-screen space, the *hors-champ*, and a non-diegetic off-screen space (that of the real filming) the so-called *hors-cadre* or *hors-scène* as it is conceptualized in French film theory (for more on this subject see *pars pro toto* Vernet, 1988). While these two functional aspects are traditionally strictly separated in fiction films, in most documentary film they coincide, at least since direct cinema, if we understand diegesis as a cinematic, and not necessarily fictional or fictitious universe. In "The Blair Witch Project", this synthesis achieves the effect of seeing a film that is shooting itself, but whose shooting will never be completed, only interrupted. Referring to Burch's division of the *hors-champ* into six segments (see

Burch, 1981, p. 17[7]), Marc Vernet has conceptualized the sixth *hors-champ* behind the camera as 'the cinematic of this world' [*l'en deçà*]. He states that the perception of this world presupposes a belief in a superior instance of surveillance – in a religiosity of the gaze or spirituality of movement that goes back far before cinema but is imitated in it to be played. This determination first shows that the perception of the film necessarily always includes the perception of its production – even if the fabula marginalizes this perception, as is usual in the classical fiction film. Here, Vernet basically takes up the common division between utterance and what is uttered and thinks it through for cinematic invisibility. Looking at "The Blair Witch Project", one can note the present absence of the recording devices – not only the cameras, but also the two different sound recording devices. The synthesis of *hors-champ* and *hors-cadre* is a basic conception of cinematic practice that can be interpreted as conventional in documentary films and as alienating or reflexive in fiction films. However, through the diegetic construction of the film as found footage and therein unfinished and fragmentary, this world, or the here of cinematic space, is transformed into a beyond, or there of cinematic time. The sameness of *hors-champ* and *hors-cadre* is thus supplemented here by a '*hors-temps*' – an out-of-time. 'Out-of-time' as it does not take place on screen but is simultaneously performed by the film. The term *hors-temps* – to clarify briefly – thereby narratively bundles the difference between narrated time and narrative time, in terms of the apparatus the film's own structure of seeing as a repetition of seeing, for each spectatorial gaze is inevitably preceded by another gaze, and textually the ruptures, voids and discontinuities of the filmic textual genesis. The only thing that makes "The Blair Witch Project" perceptible is the making of a film along with an apocryphal making-of. However, precisely in this, the imaginary signifier of the film contains a folding of reality and phantasm, or, one could say, as a 'queered' perception of both reality and fantasy, visible and audible facts of recorded sounds and images, and fictions of their comprehension. Film as a medium is fundamentally characterised by the reality of its perception and the imaginary it allows to be perceived. The 'queer' film capitalises on this mediality of film by textually translating this tension inherent in the medium.

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[7] In the English version of Burch's Une praxis du cinéma (1969) "hors-champ" is translated as "off-screen space". Since there are several off-screen spaces: that of the story, that of the film shooting, that of the apparatus, that of the historical context and so on, I would like to stick to the French vocabulary in which hors-champ is the off-screen space of the story, or as I call it: the diegetic off-screen space.

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Conclusion

To conclude, calling films between documentary and fiction 'queer' does not only make the reality of fictional discourses perceptible or warn against the false evidence of documentary images and sounds. Rather, it leaves behind the logic of identity categories of documentary and fiction film and relegates them from the place of cinematic genre pragmatics to a cultural pragmatics of the latter. Thus, on a performative, playful level, one is not set against the other, but the drawing of the border itself is radically questioned and revealed as a form of accessibility. The term thus makes it possible to understand films between documentary and fiction not only as false documentaries or as disguised fiction films. Rather, in the emphasis on performative play, the negotiation of identity categories in terms of genre, lies on the one hand in the reference to film itself as having always been both documentary and fictional. On the other hand, if we now move them closer to documentary after all, it is expressed in these forms that the real world is inconceivable without fictions. Reality is not only found, but is made of ideas, desires, convictions, ideologies ..., in short, fictions (for more on this point, see Heller, 2001). If there is a cinematic practice that can represent this reality permeated by fictions, it is transversal to the categories of documentary and fiction film. The 'queer' film would thus be a form of audiovisual approach to the world.

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