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Robert Rodríguez's *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) and the Monstrous Caricatures at the End of the Road

Keywords**:** caricature, grotesque, horror film, monster, Robert Rodríguez, *From Dusk Till Dawn*

Abstract**:** Robert Rodriguez's *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) may be described as a mashup of two cinematic genres—the road movie and the horror film. Despite its seemingly unserious plot of an outlaw couple of brothers fighting monsters in Mexico, *From Dusk Till Dawn* takes advantage of its exaggerated, violent, and comedic elements to criticize issues entrenched in North-American society. In this case, the notions of Mexico as a lawless, savage place and the stereotype of monstrous, savage Latinos are subverted as Rodriguez depicts them in such an exaggerated fashion it borders on the comical. The use of road (and horror) movie conventions in equally exaggerated ways enables Rodriguez to dispel those prejudiced notions and turn the Anglo-American characters into targets of criticism, subverting their typical heroic portrayals as well. As such, drawing mostly from Frederick Luis Aldama and Noelia Gregorio Fernández's arguments, I aim to analyze *From Dusk Till Dawn* as a denunciation of these stereotypes regarding the "Other." In order to do so, I seek to outline how the grotesque and the monstrous operate in this film. I also connect the image of the Mexico-United States border to the idea of the road as a place of liberation, as the main characters see the border as way to escape the law. Instead, I contend that the protagonists of *From Dusk Till Dawn* find punishing ends in Mexico through their encounter with animalistic, feral creatures they cannot comprehend or overpower, and which also function as caricatures of the idea of the border as a barrier separating the "civilized" United States from the "savage" cultures outside of it, directly addressing a filmic tradition of portraying cultures south of the border as barbaric, and, therefore, inferior.

Robert Rodriguez's *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) may be described as a mashup of two cinematic genres – the road movie and the horror film – weaved together by a formulaic narrative. Despite its B-flick structure and seemingly unserious plot of an outlaw couple of brothers fighting monsters in Mexico, *From Dusk Till Dawn* takes advantage of its exaggerated, comedic elements to criticize issues entrenched in North-American society that the road movie of the 1990s was beginning to explore. In this case, racism and xenophobia regarding Mexico and Mexicans are the main target. Through his grotesque Latino monsters, Robert Rodriguez criticizes the image of moral Anglo-American heroes protecting the United States from the "barbarians" south of the border that had been upheld by many Western and border movies produced by Hollywood.

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As such, drawing mostly from Frederick Luis Aldama and Noelia Gregorio Fernández's analysis of *From Dusk Till Dawn*, I aim to explore the film as a denunciation of such stereotypes regarding the "Other." In order to do so, I seek to outline how the monstrous operates through grotesque caricature in the film. I also connect the image of the Mexico-United States border to the idea of the road as a place of liberation or escape, as the main characters see the border as way to salvation. Instead, I contend that the protagonists of *From Dusk Till Dawn* find punishing ends in Mexico through their encounter with animalistic, feral creatures they cannot comprehend or overpower, and which also function as comical caricatures of the idea of the border as a barrier separating the "civilized" United States from the "savage" cultures outside of it.

The first half of the film employs the structure and the main motives of a road movie. This genre includes films whose main characters, usually rebels or misfits, turn to the open road on a quest for freedom from either an oppressive social order or as a way to escape the law (Eyerman and Löfgren 65). These films picture the road at once as a physical and a mental landscape, since the characters not only traverse the country from one end to the other, but they also experience deep psychological changes. According to Neil Archer, the road "is never just a background: it is typically both the motivation for the narrative to happen, and also the place that allows things to occur" (Archer 3). Furthermore, as Eyerman and Lögfren uphold, the road functions as a metaphor for life: those who travel it do not come out unchanged. The road is a transformative site where its travelers are given the space to grow and evolve in such ways that, by the end, they become new people. By virtue of the road's wide and open nature, the travelers are able to explore and discover other sides of their personalities. However, these changes do not necessarily lead to good, benevolent characters; wickedness manifests just as often (Eyerman and Lögfren 67). The journey and the idea of constant movement play important roles in these processes. Mobility, a hallmark of North-American culture, has been regarded as a synonym of freedom and opportunity, a notion translated into the text of the road movie. A car or a motorbike accomplish this goal by providing "extended vehicular flight" (Archer 3). However, geographical movement tends to affect the moving subject, encouraging reflections on identity and self-discovery. As Christopher Morris contends, "roads are usually figures for something of the utmost importance–for example, 'self-discovery'" (Morris 26).

The road, then, may be regarded as a threshold, a border, a space where changes occur once it is crossed. While on the road, the promise of freedom and escape fuels the characters. To Michael Atkinson, road movies "express the fury and suffering at the extremities of civilized life, and give their restless protagonists the false hope of a one-way ticket to nowhere" (16). At the same time, however, they constitute "warnings that once you enter the open hinterlands between cities, you're on your own" (Atkinson 16). This dangerous feel manifests itself especially during the moments when the characters stop moving. Stopping, in road movies, is often a precursor to significant

transformations, because it is when characters come across obstacles and dilemmas that motivate change. Such is the case of *From Dusk Till Dawn*, in which its protagonists, the Gecko brothers, are criminals who look to the road as a way to escape the American law enforcement system, but find hindrances to this goal every time they stop driving.

The initial scenes establish a stereotypical background of the road movie, with cars, motels, gas stations, diners, cowboy-like characters, a main outlaw couple, and a wide, open road. A twist occurs in the narrative when Seth and Richard Gecko make their first stop at a motel, and Richard sexually assaults and kills their hostage. Seth, then, realizes that they need to leave the country altogether and head toward Mexico, where they believe they would be free from the American enforcement system. They also take new hostages in this motel: Jacob Fuller, a former priest who lost his faith after his wife's death, and his two children, Scott and Kate. Together, they head for the Mexico-United States border in Fuller's caravan. However, the most significant turning point of the movie coincides with a geographical change, when they arrive in Mexico, encased in the bar *Titty Twister*. This also triggers a change in genre, as the characters leave the road movie setting and walk into a bar decorated in a mix of Gothic and Aztec elements, where ferocious monsters reside. This point is corroborated by A. Bowdoin Van Riper, who claims that once the North-American characters arrive in Mexico, they "enter not just a different space but a different genre: the world outside the bar belongs in a Western, the world inside in a horror movie" (97).

Quentin Tarantino's involvement in the making of *From Dusk Till Dawn* also contributed heavily to this genre mashup. The movie is a combination of both directors' styles; the first half heavily relies on Tarantino's influence, with a more realistic scenario, as the Gecko brothers' psychopathic behavior appears to be the most violent and monstrous element of the film. As Frederick Luis Aldama points out, both Tarantino and Rodriguez rely on the creation of a grotesque atmosphere, but they go about it differently. Tarantino cultivates scenes of ultrarealistic violence, with the grotesque functioning as its culmination In turn, Rodriguez's style hinges entirely on the grotesque, where the repulsive and the attractive meet and fuse (Aldama 61). The grotesque is closely related to the abject, a confluence of fascination and repulsion, according to Julia Kristeva (2).

Indeed, grotesque is perhaps the most apt description of the second half of *From Dusk Till Dawn*, where physically monstrous characters manifest and reality is inverted in a near Bakhtinian carnivalesque way. It is aptly illustrated by the setting of the *Titty Twister* bar, where the Gecko brothers and their hostages find refuge as soon as they reach Mexico. Its neon, colorful lights beckon them inside, where they find a place to replenish themselves with food and drinks, and to satisfy their sexual desires as beautiful dancers walk among them. However, the *Titty Twister* is also a den of vampires where humans become their prey. According to Aldama, this contrasting nature of the bar functions "as part of the carnivalesque—a central ingredient to the grotesque" (59). The

carnivalesque, as proposed by Bakhtin, is essentially "degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (19-20). It is an inversion of categories, providing a release from social norms, "a divergence from everyday life that provides a space wherein conventions are overturned or eradicated" (Edwards and Graulund 38). Likewise, caricature is at the core of the film, pointing to Rodriguez's particular use of grotesque aesthetics to portray his characters and to deliver his narrative in a comedic, yet subversive manner. As Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L. F. Nilsen explain, "[c]aricatures are probably the oldest form of pictorial humor. *Caricare* in Latin means 'to overload, or exaggerate.' The main stylistic devices in cartooning are distortion and exaggeration" (44).

In *From Dusk Till Dawn,* the stereotype of monstrous, savage Latinos is subverted as it is turned into a comical caricature. It falls in line with Noël Carroll's considerations of the ways horror and humor can overlap when anchored on the idea of incongruity, that is, the fusion of opposing ideas (153), and also on the violation and exploration of the limits of norms, concepts, and commonplace expectations (154). To Carroll, horror and humor are often able to work alongside one another as "these two states, despite their differences, share an overlapping necessary condition insofar as an appropriate object of both states involves the transgression of a category, a concept, a norm, or a commonplace expectation" (154). With such transgression, Rodriguez turns the monster into a cartoon, which "denotes a full-size drawing made on paper as a study for further work" (Nilsen and Nilsen 44). Rodriguez's "further work" is made possible as he dispels the prejudiced notions the monsters are based on, and turns the Anglo-American characters into targets of criticism, subverting their typical heroic portrayals as well.

Going back to the *Titty Twister* and its initial introduction as a refuge for truckers and bikers, it seems, at first, that the fugitives are rewarded: not only do they successfully escape the American law, but they also find a place where they are free to indulge in their appetites and passions. However, what appears to be salvation soon reveals itself as punishment, once the Mexican characters at the bar turn into ravenous vampires. These creatures, as Riper argues, are "a threat not just to the heroes' physical well-being but to the moral order of which they are a part" (Riper 99). As a consequence, the Anglo-American characters, who up until that point had been portrayed as anti-heroes, suddenly become quasi-heroic figures who must put their differences aside and fight the unreasoning, inhuman monsters (Riper 101). At this juncture, *From Dusk Till Dawn* borrows the structure of a horror movie, in which human characters fight "hellish" monsters and survival becomes their primary concern.

The fact that these monsters appear in Mexico is significant, as it evokes the ideas surrounding the border as a crucial barrier that separates the "civilized," "lawful" United States from the "barbaric" Mexico. The Mexico-United States border is often depicted by the U.S. media "as a necessary barrier to unwanted traffic while the borderlands are often represented as a repository of

all things illegal" (Fojas 2). This opposition has characterized the Western genre since its origins (Gregorio Fernández 56), and has found prolific ground in the border movie genre. According to Camilla Fojas, the border that separates the United States from Mexico has been used by Hollywood as a way to protect American ideals from undesirable, threatening notions and peoples (Fojas 2). Latino border films, contrary to their Hollywood counterparts, present challenges to American nationalist narratives and their depictions of immigrants, and even allow for the reimagining of Hollywood stereotypes of the "Other" (Fojas 2). Such is the case of *From Dusk Till Dawn*, as Robert Rodriguez, a Latino director, makes use of these preconceived notions in order to denounce the traditional portrayal of Latino characters in American productions. Rodriguez elects the stereotypes of horror B-movie flicks to accomplish this goal, suggesting a way to break one clichéd, simplified image through another. As Christopher González argues, "Rodríguez uses the B-flick aesthetic to suggest a way out of stale, cookie-cutter depictions of Latinidad in cinema. […] Rodríguez embraces a method of storytelling and cinema direction/production that always seeks to engage Latinidad in unexpected ways as opposed to the stereotype — often inverting stereotypes on their heads […]" (122).

At first glance, it would seem obvious to point out that the Aztec vampires in the Mexican bar are monsters; but what exactly does it mean to qualify those creatures as such? When defining the monsters of horror movies, Noël Carroll finds it apt to characterize them as beings that oppose the scientific consensus solely by their existence (148). In more general terms, the monster is often described as a being in between categories, an ambiguous creature who unsettles established, strict definitions. It typically embodies many of the fears, anxieties, and desires that human society represses so as to maintain a notion of order. The Latin term *monstrum* is often considered the etymological root of the word "monster." *Monstrum*, as Timothy Beal states, "is related to the verbs *monstrare* ("show" or "reveal") and *monere* ("warn" or "portend"), and which sometimes refers to a divine portent that reveals the will or judgment of God or the gods" (299). Related to this idea is Saint Isidoro's definition of monster as that which is meant to be shown, which Tomás Martín Hernández relates to the notion of spectacle (91).

However, monsters must not be viewed as distant subjects from humans; they stem precisely from Humanity, springing up as the "Other" within the "Self," the rejected side, the unconscious, if one were to employ Freudian terms. As Timothy Beal upholds, monsters "are paradoxical personifications of *otherness within sameness*" (297), which means that they are anomalies born within the established and accepted order, a strangeness that has infiltrated the normal. That is why the monster is unsettling. It reveals a dissonance, something that should be kept hidden if the norm is to be maintained. This corroborates Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's theory of the monster as that which cannot be pushed away or destroyed, for it is a part of the human, or better yet, what allows the

humans to understand their nature and limitations. Monsters can be cast away, set aside, reviled, suppressed, but that does not eliminate them. Moreover, monsters question humans' understanding of the world and established order (20).

Indeed, to question society's cultural assumptions, particularly American society, are what the monsters in *From Dusk Till Dawn* set to accomplish. In this way, the film also exemplifies the explorations of the road movie genre during the 1990s, such as including new types of protagonists, from women to racial minorities, and tackling new themes, like racism and misogyny. According to David Laderman, the 1980s road movie took a postmodern turn, "characterized by revisionism, self-consciousness, and irony" (133), and the road movies of the following decade built upon these new interpretations. In the 1990s, the road movie offers reinventions of previous narratives of rebellion, primarily via independent productions, by placing characters from historically marginalized contexts (such as homosexuals, women, and people of color) on the wheel, thereby translating its currents political and cultural climate (Laderman 175-176). Indeed, as Laderman goes on to state, the characteristics of the 1990s road movie vary, ranging "in tone and style from garish, tongue-in-cheek cartoonism to a more grim, irreverent realism," offering "various versions of outlaw ultraviolence" (177). So, the 1990s road movie narrative may be expressed through comedic or dramatic lenses. Laderman considers that many road movies of this decade weave narratives hinging on "sentimentalized, heavy-handed melodrama and/or comedy, focusing on the male journey as a means of self-confrontation and revelation" (178). However, as previously stated, new types of protagonists also began to emerge in this decade, and so, from Laderman's perspective, "the genre's core of rebellion and cultural critique [became] greatly enhanced and expanded" (179). These ideas apply to *From Dusk Till Dawn*, as new protagonists take charge of the road movie. In the first half, the Fullers represents a different way of depicting a family, with a single-parent and two children, contrary to the typical two-parent household. It is also significant that one of the children is an Asian-American boy, which suggests an adoption, and, therefore, another kind of family. What is more, Jacob Fuller's renouncement of his faith challenges Christian values and the traditional idea of "home" is also reshaped, as the Fullers are primarily seen in a caravan. This collective mode of transportation also contrasts with the individualist car or motorbike of the typical road movie. However, the most striking protagonists appear in the second half of the film, when the Latino monsters completely switch its genre.

From Noelia Gregorio Fernández's vantage point, *From Dusk Till Dawn* constitutes a transcultural mosaic turned into a discourse on the acceptance of the "other" through its female protagonist's monstrosity (56). As previously stated, the movie mirrors the opposition between the United States and Mexico through the border that separates them, as well as the ideas of monstrosity and barbarism associated with Mexico and civilization and lawfulness with the United States. In a

similar vein, Riper suggests that Rodriguez's film is a contemporary Western. This genre hinges on the idea of conquering a wild and dangerous space, the frontier, and creating a civilization, a domination of a land (97-98). *From Dusk Till Dawn*, indeed, retains a similar principle, as that which is outside the American border is dangerous, unreasoning, animalistic, and savage. The film, like the classic Western, is "concerned with threats to civilization and the heroes' struggle to overcome them" (Riper 2012, 99).

Confronted with the monsters, the American characters suffer a major shift in their personalities. Jacob Fuller regains his faith; Seth Gecko, after the death of his brother, becomes a hero intent on fighting the vampires; and Kate Fuller is forced to kill when necessary. Their order is put into question, and the line between good and evil becomes blurry: Seth and Richard Gecko were, up until that point, the 'evil' element in the film, whereas the Fuller family were portrayed as its 'good,' innocent counterpart. However, in the face of new, inhuman creatures, those barriers become meaningless. To Riper,

> The mingling of the Western and horror genres—the intrusion of the supernatural into the dangerous but seemingly stable world of the frontier—confronts the heroes with threats to the moral order that they do not fully comprehend, and may not (at least initially) understand how to defeat. Compounding those challenges is the very real possibility that their enemies may be not just inhuman, but more-than-human: stronger, tougher, or driven by some dark, mysterious magic. (110)

Gregorio Fernández, on the other hand, contends that the introduction of monsters in the dangerous, but supposedly stable frontier forces the Anglo-American characters to face a threat from a remote past, the original inhabitants of those lands, in the current case, the Aztec vampires, which indicates at once a physical and a moral defeat, as not only are the vampires stronger, but the humans also partake in extremely violent acts in hopes of destroying them (60). Indeed, the questioning of Anglo-American superiority is most flagrant during these final scenes where the fight takes place, and the human characters begin killing the monsters. I bring up Neil Archer's criticism of David Laderman's view of the road as a universal metaphor for life, since there is an association between "American" and "universal," thereby making this definition reductive (12). *From Dusk Till Dawn*, indeed, stresses the shortcomings of this definition. The film's criticism of North-American supremacy is further accentuated when the traditional redemption of the Anglo-American characters is subverted when Satánico Pandemonium, the vampire Aztec princess, murders Richard Gecko (Gregorio Fernández 2021, 59). This scene attests to a previous point when I claimed that crossing the border does not lead to salvation, or, as Fojas writes, "a place of escape at the far reaches of the

nation that is often beyond the limits of the law" (3), but to retribution, where the Anglo-American "heroes" meet painful ends, in the case of Richard Gecko, Jacob Fuller, and Scott Fuller, or face extreme changes in their worldview, in Seth Gecko and Kate Fuller's, the sole survivors of the group.

Moreover, the grotesque representation of the monsters further accentuates this punishing end for the American characters. Satánico Pandemonium particularly embodies that notion of the grotesque as "a mixture of the beautiful and the ugly" (Aldama 59). She is a vampire with horrific animal characteristics mixed with a beautiful human physiognomy. Her fellow vampires are portrayed in the same fashion: scantily-clad figures of thin, shapely women with seductive, inviting, and entrancing smiles that later turn into skeletal, feral figures with unkempt hair, wide and animalistic yellow eyes, and sharp teeth that resemble fangs. It is through this grotesque depiction of the Mexican monsters that Rodríguez reverses the traditional border movie narrative, "asking his audience to disidentify with the main Anglo characters (psychopaths) and to appreciate, think, and feel for the Latinos in more complex, hybrid ways" (Aldama 61).

Indeed, despite their humanness, the Anglo-American characters do not come across as morally superior to the monsters: Seth Gecko is an assassin and a bank robber; Richard Gecko is a sex offender, and the Fuller family, despite at first being portrayed as innocent victims of the Gecko brothers, ends up embodying the American myth of regeneration through violence, as Richard Slotkin describes it, which was first practiced by Puritan colonists during the 17th Century and was anchored on the idea of salvation through a violent confrontation between the heroic human and the "dark," or evil, nature (Slotkin 47). Accordingly, Jacob Fuller regains his faith and fights the "hellish" vampires like an avenging Christian; Scott is forced to kill his father once he is bitten, as the vampires' bite turns humans into monsters, which is regarded by Riper as a metaphor for the fear of miscegenation that many classic Westerns explore (101); finally, Kate joins Seth in the fight against the monsters and their violent acts gain "a higher purpose: not merely self-defense, but righteous extermination" (Riper 101). The true moral corruption of the human characters is revealed in the way that the vampires' inhumanness renders them enemies meant to be exterminated. In fact, as Riper claims, the alterity of the vampires, their monstrous, alien nature, inverts the moral order, making suicide and murder viable and desirable options. In this case, the threat of turning into the monstrous "Other" is the worst outcome (Riper 101-12). Therefore, Gregorio Fernández argues that the exaggerated portrayal of the monsters paradoxically emphasizes their humanity. What is more, the human characters' negative attributes enable the audience to feel for the Aztec vampires, as they symbolize the struggle against North-American hegemony (65).

The use of vampires and other Gothic elements in the film are also significant, playing at once with monsters from North-American popular culture and the symbology of the vampire as the untamed 'Other,' according to the nineteenth century understanding of the creature. From Tudor

Balinisteanu's vantage point, late nineteenth-century urban cultures portrayed vampires in literature as symbols of the desire to control Nature (Balinisteanu 150). As the "Other," vampires represented not only Nature, but also every other marginalized figure in society, such as women, the working classes, indigenous peoples, and "Queer" individuals:

> The entire paradigm of otherness in fact hinges on the articulation of feminine-identified nature to culture, so that the otherness of class, colonial populations, and deviants is inflected by feminine nature: natives, queers, and workers are feminized through perceptions of their otherness in terms of ungovernability, hysterical behaviours, or lack of the ability to participate in the structured hierarchy which therefore needs must subordinate them. (Balinisteanu 151)

It is, then, fundamental that the ruler of the monsters in *From Dusk Till Dawn* is a woman, drawing on ideas of feminized, ungovernable nature contrasting with a male-dominated civilization. In this case, Mexico is the feminized subject opposed to the 'masculine,' law-abiding United States. However, it is noteworthy that Satánico Pandemonium is not simply a woman, but a Mexican, monstrous woman with a name that conjures a half-angelic/half-demonic figure (Gregorio Fernández 63). Satánico Pandemonium is also depicted in a way that recalls the stereotype of the Mexican woman as a "sexually promiscuous and loose woman, typically a prostitute" (Fojas 6): she wears very little clothing, only covering her breasts and bottom; a crown adorns her long, black hair, and a snake hangs loosely from her shoulders, transmitting at once ideas of danger and lust. Later, she transforms into a snake-like monster, with fangs, and angry yellow eyes; her hair, one of her most striking features, disappears, replaced with green scales. This way, she also evokes theories of the monstrous feminine, of which I would like to highlight Rosi Braidotti's. According to Braidotti, the association between women and monsters is ancient, conceiving women as anomalies, variations "on the main theme of man-kind" (63), and as embodied difference. Indeed, as Braidotti claims, "she" became "associated to unholy, disorderly, subhuman, and unsightly phenomena. It is as if 'she' carried within herself something that makes her prone to being an enemy of mankind, an outsider in her civilization, and 'other'" (64). Thus, the woman, often viewed as monstrous in herself, would be the ideal head of the monsters in *From Dusk Till Dawn*, at once evoking these negative notions of womanhood as the "other" of man, and of Latinos as the "others" of the United States, lesser beings in constant need of control. Her name is also noteworthy, as it may be a nod to homonymous 1975 Mexican film directed by Gilberto Martínez Solares, about a nun who is haunted by visions of a world where the Devil is her lord, and where she freely commits acts of violence. Sister Maria represents corrupted purity, whereas Rodríguez's Satánico Pandemonium embodies corrupted beauty. Furthermore, Satánico

Pandemonium, in *From Dusk Till Dawn*, embodies the notion of monster as divine portent, delivering a punishment to the "civilized," prejudiced members of Anglo-American society.

This way, *From Dusk Till Dawn* qualifies as a road and border movie, but also a monster movie in which its monsters are used to rethink Anglo-American notions of Mexico as a lawless, savage place. Taking the typical quest of the road movie for freedom and caricatures of Mexicans as monsters intent on consuming the Anglo-American characters, Rodriguez plays with the fear of the "Other," of miscegenation, and criticizes American Imperialism by facing his protagonists with ancient, voracious, but comical creatures they are not equipped to handle. Moreover, by fighting and killing the Aztec vampires, the Anglo-American characters face two sorts of unfortunate fates: either violent deaths, like that of Richard Gecko, or moral corruption, in the case of the Fuller family. Therefore, the monsters placed at the end of the road, whose representation combines fearful and humorous elements, contradict the idea of liberation the road and the border symbolized and function as a form of punishment for the Anglo-American characters, directly addressing a filmic tradition of portraying cultures south of the border as barbaric, and, therefore, inferior.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, I.P. by project reference 2025.05476.BD and DOI identifier https://doi.org/10.54499/2025.05476.BD.

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