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Wilde, Beardsley and Beyond. *Salomé* in the Cinema: From Charles Bryant to Al Pacino

Abstract: Cinematic versions of Oscar Wilde's works – and life, such as 2018 *The Happy Prince* by Rupert Everett – span the entirety of cinema history from the silent era to the present age. *Salomé* is undoubtedly the most *decadent* of Wilde's plays; the author's debt to the Symbolist poets clearly emerges here in the disturbing music which characterises Wilde's literary *score*. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the play had an enormous influence on cinema and on popular music. The 1923 silent version directed by Charles Bryant is considered one of the first art films ever made in the history of cinema. The highly stylised costumes, exaggerated acting and minimal sets created a screen image much more focused on atmosphere and on conveying a sense of the characters' individual heightened desires than on conventional plot development. The film was shot completely in black and white, matching the illustrations done by Aubrey Beardsley in the printed edition of Wilde's play. The most recent filmic version of *Salomé* – the 2011 celebrated docufilm *Wilde Salomé* by iconic director and actor Al Pacino – documents, instead, a period in which Pacino performed in a production of *Salomé*, directed by actress and theatre director Estelle Parson at Los Angeles' Wadsworth Theatre, while he was also making a movie documenting the mounting of the show and shooting a narrative film version of the play. The film is for Al Pacino, and of course for the audience, a journey, and, most importantly, a *process* in which Pacino re-writes not only the play but Wilde himself. The film stages, indeed, Pacino's 'love affair with Oscar Wilde' and his desire to explore Wilde's legacy in contemporary culture.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde. *Salomé*. Cinema. Aubrey Beardsley.

1. *Oscar Wilde on Film: Performing Oscar in-between the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*

The online Internet Movie database lists Wilde – as David Weir has recently observed – as a "screenwriter of roughly 250 films, almost 100 more of those credited to Ben Hecht, possibly the most prolific screenwriter in cinema history". Weir notes that "many of Wilde's IMDb credits are for film adaptations of his stage plays, which were extremely popular in his own day", but he also stresses how "film versions of Wilde's plays span the entirety of cinema history from the silent era to the present".[1] Interestingly, a consistent part of these films was shot in the 1990s and indeed Julia Wood notes how, although the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) has always commanded interest and curiosity, "it has been since the mid-1990s that there has been

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[1] D. Weir, *Decadence. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, OUP, 2018, p. 110.

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a revaluation of Wilde's cultural legacy, as well as a re-examination of public feeling towards him".[2] During the 1990s there were, indeed, a multitude of events, publications and intermedial adaptations commemorating the centenary dates of Wilde's life, which, in between the two millenniums, was to become a paradigm of otherness, difference and resistance to the 'order of discourse', to echo Michel Foucault, a paradigm to be performed and *reproduced* in a number of different contexts.

This reproduction also took place within the end-of-the-century's fascination for (and *consumption* of) British heritage cinema,[3] which often translated into the success of biopics based on a conservative idea of history as a simplified model of great individuals, providing a coherent version of identity,[4] strongly at odds with postmodern – but also *Wildean* – views of the self as unstable and 'fictional'. This process turned *Oscar Wilde* into a (film industry) commodity; yet, as often happens, in Wilde's discourse this very form of consumerism was also able to activate critical processes, that is, spaces of reception and re-articulation of Wilde's paradigm of outsideness, through productions – as, for instance, Todd Haynes's 1998 film *Velvet Goldmine*, which salutes Wilde's birth in terms of the advent of the first British pop star of history – based on creativity, unpredictability, and transgression of any pretence of faithfulness.[5] Before focusing on *Salomé*'s afterlife in the cinema, it is important to stress how Wilde's most influential *play*, namely *Oscar Wilde* (his life as theatre), has been reproduced on the screen.

One of the most successful films of the late 1990s was Brian Gilbert's acclaimed but – as we will see – too reassuring 1997 biopic *Wilde* based on Richard Ellmann's 1987 biography; here Stephen Fry plays Oscar in a performance which exceeded the screen to become a kind of visual reincarnation of Wilde for that period.[6] As Wood observes, in the late 1990s

> the image of Stephen Fry became sufficiently associated with Wilde's that the two figures were discussed in conjunction, as if they were the same person. In terms of the mourning urge, the substitute or surro-

[2] J. WOOD, *The Resurrection of Oscar Wilde. A Cultural Afterlife*, Cambridge, The Lutterworth Press, 2007, p. 8.

[3] British heritage films produced in the 1980s and 1990s – following a trend started by Hugh Hudson's *Chariots of Fire* (1981) – show a tendency to articulate "a nostalgic and conservative celebration of the values and lifestyles of the privileged classes". In short, the heritage films, which very often portray the white community in a semi-rural Southern England, avoid addressing the social and racial diversity of a changing Britain. In doing so, those films reinvent "an England that no longer existed [...] as something fondly remembered and desirable" (A. HIGSON, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980*, Oxford, OUP, 2003). See also R. MURPHY (ed.), *British Cinema of the 90s*, London, BFI Publishing, 1999.

[4] See H. SHACHAR, *Screening the Author. The Literary Biopic*, London and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 3.

[5] See N. SAMMELLS, *Wilde Style. The Plays and Prose of Oscar Wilde*, Harlow, Longman, 2000.

[6] In 1998, a bronze memorial named *A Conversation with Oscar Wilde*, sculpted by Maggi Hambling, was unveiled in Adelaide Street by Stephen Fry himself. Inscribed with Wilde's famous epigram words "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars", the memorial depicts him rising from a granite sarcophagus. The idea, as Hambling said, is that he is "rising, talking, laughing, smoking from this sarcophagus and the passer by, should he or she choose to, can sit on the sarcophagus and have a conversation with him" (L. REYNOLDS, "Is the Oscar Wilde Memorial a Bench?", *Londonist*, 1 November 2016, https://londonist.com/2015/07/is-the-oscar-wilde-memorial-a-bench, last accessed on 13 October 2023). Interestingly, the idea of a permanent memorial was suggested by the late gay film director Derek Jarman. Several prominent figures, including former Labour leader Michael Foot, leading actress Dame Judi Dench and Irish poet Seamus Heaney, supported the cause. The unveiling also saw Dench and Nigel Hawthorne read an extract from *A Woman of No Importance* (1893).

gate Wilde, satiated the demand for an incarnation of Wilde. Fry, in fact, answered the need for a figure who could play Wilde, not merely on stage or in film, but continually, upon the stage of the centenary.[7]

Besides physical resemblance, Fry shares Wilde's eclectic approach to writing: he has written novels, autobiographical pieces, and plays (like *Latin! Or Tobacco and Boys*, 1980), and worked for television and cinema (not only as an actor, but also as a director of famous films such as *Bright Young Things*, 2003, which he adapted after Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*). Nevertheless, as Robert Tanitch observes in his encyclopaedic work *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*, "Fry had a physical similarity to Wilde but not the emotional range as an actor to manage the hubris at the end. He tones Wilde down. There was no flamboyance, no energy, no sparkle. He was gentle, shy and softly spoken, a sad, somewhat detached Oscar, who identified with *The Selfish Giant*".[8]

In short, *Wilde* was a film that perfectly fitted with the late 1990s' British heritage *Zeitgeist*, in which cultural products were very often devised for an easy, pleasant form of consumption; as French wrote in *The Observer*, "for all its sexual frankness, *Wilde* is a discreet work that amuses and moves us, but never shocks or disturbs".[9] O.S. Buckton points in this sense to the continuity between *Wilde* and the string of Hollywoodian adaptations of his literary texts in the following years – namely, *An Ideal Husband* (with two 1999 versions directed respectively by Oliver Parker and W.P. Cartlidge), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2002), and *Dorian Gray* (2009)[10] – noting how this embracing of "Wilde by mainstream cinema has come to the cost of sacrificing the most cryptic, transgressive aspects of his depiction of sexual identity".[11] And yet, in a short article entitled "Playing Oscar", Fry himself – besides speaking about his lifelong obsession with Wilde and of how he prepared to play Oscar – declared that "Wilde's courage lay not in his 'alternative sexuality' but in the freedom of his mind".[12]

[7] J. WOOD, *The Resurrection of Oscar Wilde*, p. 105.

[8] R. TANITCH, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*, London, Methuen, 1999, pp. 72-73. This reference, as well as the main topics investigated in this paper, are all highlighted in detail in my recent *Wilde Now. Performance, Celebrity and Intermediality in Oscar Wilde*, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, which is here a fundamental source.

[9] R. TANITCH, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*, p. 73.

[10] Regenia Gagnier observes how, by means of the character of Lord Henry, Wilde managed to catch "the essence of modern economic man when he named the cigarette the perfect type of a perfect pleasure because it left one unsatisfied. For this reason, of course, the cigarette is the perfect commodity" (R. GAGNIER, "On the Insatiability of Human Wants: Economic and Aesthetic Man", *Victorian Studies*, 36 [2], Winter 1993, p. 299). Interestingly, in Wilde's iconic story it is Dorian who, under the influence of Wotton, surrenders to consumerism and yet, despite the 'exquisite' quality of the treasures he collects, he feels ultimately restless and unfulfilled. This very restlessness informs the portrayal of Dorian in adaptations and rewritings within contemporary popular culture, from major American productions such as Albert Lewin's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945) and Oliver Parker's *Dorian Gray* (2009), to cult film versions like Massimo Dallamano's *The Secret of Dorian Gray* (1970) or Allan A. Goldstein's *Dorian*, and Will Self's literary parody *Dorian, an Imitation* (2002). In a way, Dallamano's film has really captured the decadent atmospheres of Wilde's book by setting the story in the present, which at that time coincided with the late 1960s' sexual revolution; this, of course, gave the director ample opportunity to explore the world of swingers, uninhibited sex and gender bending through the eyes of the curious Gray.

[11] O.S. BUCKTON, "Wilde Life: Oscar on Film", in K. POWELL and P. RABY (eds), *Oscar Wilde in Context*, Cambridge, CUP, 2013, p. 354.

[12] S. FRY, "Playing Oscar", in O. WILDE, *Nothing... Except my Genius*, ed. A. ROLFE, London, Penguin, 1997, p. XIX.

In the 2010s Rupert Everett identified with the protagonist of another story by Wilde, namely "The Happy Prince", writing, directing and playing Oscar in a film released in 2018 and entitled like Wilde's story, focusing on the years left out from Gilbert/Fry's narrative (that is, his post-prison ones, in which he played the role of the pariah and exile first in France and then in Italy). Interestingly, Everett rewrites Wilde starting from the very years and experiences which are usually expunged in conventional accounts. For instance, Ken Hughes's *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1960) had Oscar – played by Peter Finch with an Irish accent – coolly refuse to speak to Bosie on the railway station platform before he headed off to his unimaginable future, while Gilbert's *Wilde* halted after a sentimental embrace between the reunited Oscar (famously played, as we have seen, by Fry) and Bosie in Naples.

Everett insists on how, when watching these films, one finds it difficult to grasp what society really did to Wilde in terms of punishment, both in prison with hard labour, and after prison, during an exile that could be considered another form of imprisonment. In this sense, Everett's idea of the last 'great vagabond' of the late nineteenth century, of the celebrity famous for being famous, and the pop idol on the skids,[13] becomes a very potent and poignant story to address. A story that, in a way, complements Haynes's narrative about Wilde's self-invention as a pop icon and the fall of glam stars such as Brian Slade in *Velvet Goldmine*.

In his film, Everett takes us through the devastating horror of poverty and humiliation, which however Wilde faces with gallows humour and wit. Tellingly, in one of the first sequences of the film we see him vomiting in agony on his deathbed before declaiming: "Encore du champagne!". Here the director has clearly been influenced by Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) and David Hare's 1998 stage play *The Judas Kiss*, in whose 2012 revival, directed by Neil Armfield, Wilde was played by Everett himself.

In a way, even in his last, very difficult days, Wilde, the lifelong performer and man of theatre, found a new world to perform to, where the stars were rent boys, petty thieves and street urchins. He was endlessly being cited for extraordinary empathy with people, while at the same time being an incredible snob, as well. Again, Wilde's most interesting feature is his determination to escape fixed identities, which also implies a capacity to harmonise dissonant, contrasting positions.[14]

The film also shows how the enchantment of Wilde was his humanity; although the iconic writer had some of the bad traits most of us have, as human beings – that is, snobbery, greed, vanity and egomania – he appeared to overcome them. As Everett himself notes, many people are tempted to throw themselves over the edge, but most of them perceive a natural constraint and natural borders before going that far, so that they eventually step back, while "Oscar Wilde for some reason, didn't".[15] In this sense,

[13] See S. PROKOPY, "Interview: What Oscar Wilde Means to Rupert Everett, and the Most Poignant Scene in *The Happy Prince*", *Third Coast Review*, 29 October 2018, https://thirdcoastreview.com/2018/10/29/film-interview-rupert-everett/ (last accessed on 13 October 2023).

[14] See T. EAGLETON, "The Doubleness of Oscar Wilde", *The Wildean*, 19, July 2021.

[15] S. PROKOPY, "Interview: What Oscar Wilde Means to Rupert Everett, and the Most Poignant Scene in *The Happy Prince*".

commenting on the film – and comparing it to screen portrayals by Robert Morley, Finch and Fry – Merlin Holland affirmed that Everett's can be considered as probably the most fascinating of the biopics on his grandfather. While Gilbert's film was very intellectual, Everett's is mostly emotional.[16] If it is true that, in Wilde, there is both the intellectual and the emotional component, at this stage of his existence the author is living on what is left of his emotions, and that is exactly what Everett excels in conveying.

In the film, Everett is both the director and main actor of Wilde's drama; as Peter Bradshaw observes, "that of Wilde is a part Everett was born to play, and he does it with exactly the right kind of poignantly ruined magnificence".[17] Besides, Everett can also be defined as an outsider in the world of cinema, who suffered discrimination because of his homosexuality. In this sense, the film establishes a fascinating dialogue between two artists and actors who have always lived out of the box. Focusing on the director's stylistic choices, Everett was inspired by what happens when a brain starts collapsing and how it throws off images and ideas and starts playing with a kind of spatial awareness; more specifically, he was really impressed by his own father's death and seeing how his brain was falling apart, coming up with bubbles of memory.[18] There is, indeed, a sort of feverish dimension, a magical, dream-like quality to the film, especially when we are faced with a room that seems to shrink and expand as Wilde dies (in tune with his brain's last memories).

One of the most intense scenes of the movie refers to a real event: the sad circumstance when, in Clapham Junction train station, Wilde was transferring trains on his way to prison and was yelled at and spit on by others on the platform for thirty minutes. It was the rush hour and the policeman escorting him was reading the newspaper while this big crowd gathered around him. In a way, what happened is one of the most extraordinary scenes in the whole of Wilde's life. A man who had recently been the most famous, lauded and wanted author in London, was reduced to being spat on by a crowd of commuters.[19] This is an extremely strong and dramatic episode, which even reminds of the Passion of Christ. Experiences and humiliations such as these, suffered by Wilde during the last years of his life, would turn him into 'Saint Oscar', the first homosexual martyr of history. It is also important to stress that Wilde's connection with the Queensberry family amounted to both a gender and a class transgression; in this sense, in another sequence Everett shows Wilde with a portrait of Queen Victoria

[16] See D. ALBERGE, "Oscar Wilde's Grandson 'Terribly Moved' by Rupert Everett's Biopic", *The Guardian*, 5 June 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/jun/05/oscar-wilde-grandson-terribly-moved-rupert-everett-biopic-merlin-holland (last accessed on 13 October 2023).

[17] P. BRADSHAW, "*The Happy Prince* Review – Rupert Everett is Magnificent in Dream Role as Dying Oscar Wilde", *The Guardian*, 22 January 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/22/the-happy-prince-film-review-rupert-everett-oscar-wilde (last accessed on 13 October 2023).

[18] See K. PAGE-KIRBY, "It took a decade for Rupert Everett to get 'The Happy Prince' made – and in the end, he had to do it himself", *The Washington Post*, 19 October 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/express/2018/10/19/it-took-decade-rupert-everett-get-happy-prince-made-end-he-had-do-it-himself/(last accessed on 13 October 2023).

[19] A permanent plaque commemorating Wilde on Platform 10 at Clapham Junction was unveiled in July 2019 as part of a combined project by Wandsworth LGBTQ+ Forum and Studio Voltaire. David Robson, chairman of Wandsworth LGBTQ+, explained that, at a time when people are still under threat because of their sexuality, the plaque would act as a reminder that hate crime is not tolerated in the rail industry.

by his deathbed; he died in 1900, one year before her, and the film hints that his vindictive treatment was part of the sense of shame and mortification linked to a form of aesthetic indulgence that the 'manly' and 'masculine' slaughter of the First World War would arguably redeem.

In the script, Everett also imagines Wilde, *in extremis*, befriending a young Parisian rent boy and his kid brother, holding them spellbound with "The Happy Prince" story. Everett's recent memoir *To the End of the World. Travels with Oscar Wilde* – which documents the ten years the actor dedicated to the film project – significantly opens with the memory of little Rupert in his bed listening to his mother reading him "The Happy Prince": "[I]ntroducing me to Oscar Wilde is Mummy's most audacious move, and her greatest contribution to my emotional development", and it was through Wilde's stories that Everett learned "for the first time that there is a thing called love and that it usually has a price".[20]

In the very first sequence of the film, we see Wilde recite, to his entranced sons, the iconic tale of a statue who allows a swallow to denude him of all his gold in order to feed the poor. The story of "The Happy Prince" was included in the collection *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, published in May 1888 and extremely well-received.[21] As Matthew Sturgis writes in his recent biography of Wilde, at the time of its publication "there was general recognition that, although there was much for children to enjoy, the stories were likely to appeal rather more to adults".[22] When reviewing the collection, Walter Pater wrote that "there is a piquant touch of contemporary satire which differentiates Mr Wilde from the teller of pure fairy tales".[23] And yet, in these stories, which very often involve an ultimate sacrifice on the part of their main characters, the satire seems to be "subordinated to a sadness unusual in fairy tales".[24]

Focusing on "The Happy Prince" story, Jarlath Killeen insists on the assumption that "it is society that must align itself with the Prince, not the Prince who must somehow forcibly alter society. The Prince does not overthrow capitalism, but he sets an example of radical self-sacrifice for others to follow". In this perspective, "the major point is that only the Prince and the Swallow are blessed by God which justifies them both. Wilde's story offers a Catholic response to social problems rather than either a socialist or a realist one".[25] Therefore, we can state that "in Everett's hands, the 'The

[20] R. EVERETT, *To the End of the World. Travels with Oscar Wilde*, London, Abacus, 2020, pp. 14-15.

[21] Among recent rewritings of *The Happy Prince* collection, one should mention *Wilde Stories*, a 2016 artistic transmedia project designed by Athena Media. The project brings together Irish artists like composer Michael Gallen and visual artist Felicity Clear, committed to re-imagining the stories in a broadcast collaboration with *RTÉ lyric fm*. Each reading/performance by actors/narrators Robert Sheehan, Lauren Coe and Brian Gleeson, together with Gallen's music, is followed by a commentary offered by Wilde scholars such as Anne Markey, Jarlath Killeen, Eleanor Fitzsimons, and Merlin Holland. All five readings are available as podcasts on Soundcloud, while the original artworks were brought together in a Live Event which took place in Temple Bar in October 2016. The project website, with links to podcasts, videos, musical performances and a project blog, is accessible at http://www.wildestories.ie/index.html

[22] M. STURGIS, *Oscar: A Life*, London, Head of Zeus, 2018, p. 364.

[23] K. BECKSON (ed.), *Oscar Wilde, The Critical Heritage*, London and New York, Routledge, 1970, p. 60.

[24] R. ELLMANN, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 282.

[25] J. KILLEEN, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007, p. 38. See also A. MARKEY, *Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales. Origins and Contexts*, Kildare, Irish Academic Press, 2011, in which the author extensively

Happy Prince' tale becomes an ambiguous parable for Wilde's passion and (possible) redemption, the unhappy prince who makes a lonely discovery that love is the only thing worth worshipping".[26] This tale is indeed a story that somehow reflects Wilde: we have a gilded, jewelled character who is gradually stripped of everything and ends up being thrown on the rubbish heap. And yet, even then, Wilde experienced a different kind of happiness, one which allowed him to retain his irony and humour.

In a sense, what we have in Everett's film is life as *writing*, since the film recounts the great drama of Wilde's life by constructing the whole narrative on the powerful intertext represented by the story of "The Happy Prince". As a fairy-tale constantly retold by contemporary cinema, Wilde's life as writing tends to become immortal. Thanks to these filmic portrayals, Wilde the outsider has thus become an eternal icon. This very sense of eternity is also what defines one of the most fascinating characters created – or, better, recreated – by Wilde, namely Salomé.

2. *Beardsley and Beyond.* Salomé *in the Cinema, from Charles Bryant to Ken Russell*

Salomé – which Wilde originally wrote in French in 1892 – is undoubtedly the most *decadent* of his plays; the author's debt to the Symbolist poets clearly emerges here in the disturbing music and in the powerful images which nourish Wilde's literary script, or *score*. The play had an enormous influence on twentieth-century cinema and music (both classical and popular). As Alice Condé observes:

> The figure of Salomé was adopted from the biblical Gospels of Matthew 6. 21-29 and Mark 14. 6-11. The daughter of Herodias, named as 'Salomé' by Flavius Josephus in Jewish Antiquities (c. 93- 94 A.D.), but not mentioned in this text as responsible for the death of John the Baptist (Iokanaan, in Wilde's version), is a girl whose dance pleases her stepfather (and uncle) Herod Antipas so much that he promises her whatever she desires. On her mother's advice she asks for the head of John the Baptist. From these short biblical and historical passages a whole host of Salomés emerged in visual art and literature. In the nineteenth century, Salomé attained the characteristics of a decadent *femme fatale*, becoming the emblem of female nature in its most fearful and appealing state. Her dance became the dance of a sexually alluring woman, and the fatal request for John the Baptist's head was reinterpreted according to the stereotype of fatal female sexuality. The fact that this is a holy man's head only intensifies the perversity of the tale.[27]

The influence and the impact of the Salomé character and, most importantly, of Wilde's play on twentieth-century arts were highly significant. It is worth starting from the iconic 1923 silent version directed by Charles Bryant, considered one of the first art films in the history of cinema. Here, the highly stylised costumes, exaggerated acting,

explores Wilde's connections with Irish folklore in the conception and writing of his tales.

[26] P. Bradshaw, "*The Happy Prince* Review – Rupert Everett is Magnificent in Dream Role as Dying Oscar Wilde".

[27] A. Condé, "A 'shadow of white rose in a mirror of silver': The Disembodied *Femme Fatale* in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*", in L. Giovannelli and P. Martino (a cura di), *Wilde World. Una tavola rotonda su Oscar Wilde*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2022, pp. 70-71.

minimal sets, and absence of all but the most necessary props created a screen image much more focused on atmosphere and on conveying a sense of the characters' individual heightened desires than on conventional plot development. The film was shot completely in black and white, matching Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations for the printed edition of Wilde's play (although, as is widely known, Wilde was not particularly fond of them). In a fascinating study, Susan Owens focuses on the complex genealogy of the 'Beardsley-Wilde' project, stressing how

> the production history of Beardsley's illustrations for the English edition of *Salomé*, played out during the late summer and autumn of 1893, was complex and fraught. A number of the illustrations that Beardsley submitted contained such outrageous instances of nudity and eroticism that they were completely suppressed or partially censored by the publishers. Despite these editorial interventions, what most astonished critics on the play's publication in February 1894 was, firstly, the pointed anachronism of Beardsley's use throughout of a bold black-and-white style derived from Japanese prints to illustrate a play set in Ancient Judaea, and, secondly, the apparent irrelevance of some of the illustrations' subjects, such as Salomé at her toilette, an episode that does not occur in the play. In addition to these problems, an extra-textual staffage of satyrs, dwarves and putti appear in many of the designs where they point and grin directly out at the reader, flash erect penises and stick out their tongues, and generally amount to a carnivalesque subversion of the ostensible subjects. However, on another level Beardsley used the illustrations to make a range of more subtle and complex jokes about Wilde and his play, and incorporated numerous pointed references to three principal targets: the author's homosexuality; the censorship of the stage version of Salomé; and the plagiarism of which Wilde had widely been accused in reviews of the first French edition of the play. These jokes, which largely went unmentioned in the critical response to the illustrations, were tailored to amuse Beardsley's own social circle.[28]

Wilde objected to the artwork exactly because much of it – *The Woman in the Moon*, *A Platonic Lament*, *Eyes of Herod*, *Enter Herodias* – included grotesque and obscene caricatures of himself. As he said,

> They are cruel and evil, and so like dear Aubrey, who has a face like a silver hatchet, with grass-green hair […]. They are all too Japanese, while my play is Byzantine. My Herod is like the Herod of Gustave Moreau – wrapped in jewels and sorrows. My Salomé is mystic, the sister of Salambo, a Sainte Therese who worships the moon; dear Aubrey's designs are like naughty scribbles a precocious schoolboy makes on the margins of his copybook.[29]

The 1923 film centered on Russian-born stage and film actress Alla Nazimova, who also wrote the script under the pseudonym of 'Peter M. Winters' and who, legend says, employed only homosexual actors as a homage to Wilde. And yet, as Tanitch observes,

> Nazimova's *Salomé*, a slip of a girl in a slip, was a pouting 1920s 42nd street vamp, who looked all set to audition for the chorus of a Broadway musical, The Dance of the Seven Veils was in the manner of Loïe Fuller enveloped in tulle. Jokanaan, his body white as snow, looked quite demented. Herod was a grotesque, rouged baby. The executioner was played by a giant. The scantily clad, half-naked cast wore extraordinary headdresses and waved palms.[30]

[28] S. OWEN, "Aubrey Beardsley and *Salomé*", in K. POWELL and P. RABY (eds), *Oscar Wilde in Context*, p. 112.
[29] J.P. RAYMOND and C. RICKETTS, *Oscar Wilde. Recollections*, London, Nonesuch Press, 1932, pp. 51-52.
[30] R. TANITCH, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*, p. 159.

Instead, in a study beautifully entitled "*Salomé* on the Screen, or the Dance of the Seven Arts", David Weir prizes the film, insisting on how

> Nazimova's *Salomé* […] is undeniably a remarkable mixture of several arts. The *mise-en-scène* incorporates *art-nouveau* design elements borrowed from the *fin de siècle* mixed with a contemporary art-deco fashion sense identified with the Jazz Age. This sense of aesthetic mixture also obtains in the performance of the actors, with most of them using the exaggerated, pantomime style common to many films of the silent era but with Nazimova adopting a more naturalistic manner, no doubt the product of her experience on the stage as one of the premier interpreters of the plays of Henrik Ibsen in the early twentieth century. The wildly hybrid nature of Nazimova's *Salomé* is, paradoxically, something that makes it true to Wilde's play and to the decadent tradition generally, which is nothing if not hybrid.[31]

Weir notes how Nazimova aims "to incorporate multiple arts (poetry, painting, sculpture, dance, etc.) into the filmic representation of Wilde's play". On the other hand, "Wilde himself participates in the decadent-symbolist tradition of one art crossing over into the domain of another when he describes *Salomé* as 'coloured' and 'musical'"; of course, colour and music were "unavailable to Nazimova in 1922, working in the medium of silent, black-and-white film. Hence her efforts to produce an 'art film' (the term did not really exist until the 1960s) were handicapped from the start". Nonetheless, adds Weir, "as writer, director and producer of the film, aided by Natacha Rambova, her production designer, Nazimova very nearly succeeded in creating a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a 'total work of art' that had once had the operas of Richard Wagner as principal exemplar".[32]

One of the most hybrid and experimental filmic versions of Wilde's play is Carmelo Bene's 1972 *Salomé*, a psychedelic re-writing characterised by extremely fast cutting, obsessive/repetitive dialogues and an intelligent satire. For the cult Italian actor and director, *Salomé* represents "the impossibility of martyrdom in a current, no longer barbaric, but exclusively stupid world".[33] Interestingly, when asked to describe his work at the 1972 Venice Film Festival, Bene used the word 'degenerate'. In his experimental and profoundly grotesque vision, we have close-ups of peeling skin and of female buttocks spanked with feathers, while an actor speaks as he lustily eats grapes from a woman's body; in a Last Supper scene, Christ appears with vampire fangs, while in the second half of the movie a Christ-like figure tries to crucify himself. The film also features beautiful and evocative sequences, in which human faces interrogate and are interrogated by the moon, and a use of cutting and colours which seems to anticipate Derek Jarman's aesthetics. As Gideon Bachmann puts it: "Bene is on the screen (in the part of Herod) practically the whole time", and he also notes how "his favourite form of delivery is to slobber the words across dripping lips, not always intelligibly, to repeat them, to have a second voice speak them simultaneously, and to writhe pitifully the while, in close-up before up",[34] in what we perceive as a very clever

[31] D. WEIR, "*Salomé* on the Screen, or the Dance of the Seven Arts", in L. GIOVANNELLI and P. MARTINO (a cura di), *Wilde World. Una tavola rotonda su Oscar Wilde*, pp. 63-64.

[32] *Ibidem*, p. 43.

[33] C. BENE and G. DOTTO, *Vita di Carmelo Bene*, Milano, Bompiani, 1998.

[34] G. BACHMANN, "Salomé", *Film Quarterly*, 26 (2), 1972, pp. 20-23, quoted in R. TANITCH, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*, p. 173.

and respondent tribute to Wilde's extraordinary musical approach to language in the play. Interestingly, in the film – which also features a bald and naked actress Veruschka wearing colourful jewels only, and powerfully recalling the Living Theatre – Salomé was played by the black American model Donyale Luna, who had worked with the American pop artist Andy Warhol.

In another (cult) filmic version of the play, that is, British director Ken Russell's controversial *Salomé's Last Dance* (1988) – which, like Bene's work, was read in terms of an experimental approach to Wilde's text – we are faced with an adaptation in which characters are at once inside and outside the play. On 5 November 1892, Wilde and Bosie find themselves in a Victorian male brothel run by Alfred Taylor – the man who procured rent boys for Wilde and who was similarly convicted of gross indecency in 1895 – and watch a private performance of *Salomé* (which had just been banned in England by the Lord Chamberlain's office). In this performance, all the roles are played by prostitutes or their clients, and each actor plays two roles, one in the brothel and the other within the play, with Bosie being featured as John the Baptist. According to Weir, "the play-within-the-film device is one means of realizing the pop-culture appeal of Wilde himself, who was after all, something of a pop-culture celebrity in his own day".[35] In this perspective, as Neil Sammells puts it in his pioneering study *Wilde Style*, "the progressive aspect Wilde chose to develop and emphasize has become powerfully influential upon modern 'pop cultural' versions of dandyism which are similarly crystallized around notions of style and attitude".[36]

3. Wilde Salomé *by Al Pacino*

The most recent version of *Salomé* – that is, the 2011 celebrated docufilm *Wilde Salomé* by director and actor Al Pacino – documents a period in which Pacino performed in a production of *Salomé*, directed by actress and theatre director Estelle Parson at Los Angeles' Wadsworth Theatre – with him performing the role of Herod and Jessica Chastain as Salomé – while he was also making a movie documenting the mounting of the show, and shooting a narrative film version of the play. The Los Angeles performance was actually a staged reading in modern dress, with no music, a choice which surprised both critics and audience, but which – as Al Pacino explains in the film – allowed the latter to "become entranced by Wilde's words", by their "magic"/music.

For Al Pacino, and of course for the audience, the film records a journey and, most importantly, a *process* in which Pacino re-writes not only the play, but Wilde himself. The film stages, indeed, Pacino's "love affair with Oscar Wilde" – an author he loves, as he confesses, "for his fragile power" – and his desire to explore Wilde's legacy in contemporary culture. In a fashion that recalls his approach to rewriting Shakespeare in his 1996 documentary *Looking for Richard*, Pacino visits different world capitals (London, Dublin, Paris, New York) in order to learn more – and provide insights to

[35] D. WEIR, *Decadence. A Very Short Introduction*, p. 111.
[36] N. SAMMELLS, *Wilde Style*, p. 121.

the spectators – about the world of Wilde, thus gaining a deeper understanding of how *Salomé* was conceived.

In a way, the sequences about Wilde and his world seem to make up 'a film within the film', a biopic in the larger frame of the Los Angeles rehearsals and performance footage. In order to investigate Wilde's complexity and multiplicity, Al Pacino stages fascinating dialogues with several writers and celebrities who, in different and at times unpredictable ways, are linked to Wilde's world. Besides Oscar's nephew Merlin Holland, who provides biographical details and acute observations about Wilde as an uncomfortable figure within Victorian society, we have Gore Vidal referring to the author in terms of "one of the early socialist and a very good political thinker", a portrayal which contributes to explaining why he was imprisoned in Reading Gaol; as Vidal remarks, the English government "feared him not for sex but feared him for his ideas".[37] The film also features a precious contribution by Tom Stoppard,[38] who, besides dwelling on the Marquess of Queensberry's infamous card and its accusation of Wilde posing as a sodomite, associates the author's decision not to flee abroad, during the fatal afternoon at the Cadogan Hotel, with a determination to become a martyr for posterity.

The most fascinating sequences are, however, those in which Pacino himself *stages* phases of Wilde's life. When in Dublin, he visits Wilde's birthplace and the National Gallery of Ireland (featuring paintings of both Salomé and John the Baptist), and salutes Wilde's statue in Merrion Square, saying "we love you for everything you've given us and we will continue to". Some minutes later, we can watch him performing Wilde in London's Cadogan Hotel room, with two actors from his company in the roles of Robert Ross and Bosie. After visiting Wilde's house in Tite Street and other Wilde-related locations, Pacino reads passages from *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, underlining how ironic it is that the prison should inform the two works considered his best. Interestingly, the prison section of the film hosts a number of sequences from Gilbert's 1997 *Wilde*, drawing on a form of intertextuality which points to Wilde's complex intermedial position within contemporary popular culture.

One of the most fascinating and moving sequences of the film is the one in which Pacino acknowledges his debt to Wilde; in a way "you marry", he says, "your favourite writer", and you become "half of each other". In the final part of the docufilm, Pacino appears on a train: besides perfectly translating the idea of his film as a journey, this image becomes particularly relevant on the grounds of the association of *Salomé*'s symphonic and yet dramatic ending with Wilde's iconic lines from *The Ballad of the Reading Gaol*, namely "Each man kills the thing he loves", which the actor reads with extraordinary intensity. In the very last scene, we see Pacino in a desert, giving voice to Wilde himself through famous passages from *De Profundis*, such as "All trials are trials for one's life, just as all sentences are sentences of death". In short, in Pacino's film we can perceive a degree of urgency and directness in approaching and narrating Wilde as a pop icon and celebrity. What we have in *Wilde Salomé* is nothing less than a postmodern celebrity investigating the life of the first real celebrity in the history of modern literature.

[37] See P. MARTINO, *Wilde Now. Performance, Celebrity and Intermediality in Oscar Wilde*, p. 34.

[38] It is worth recalling that Stoppard's 1974 play *Travesties* focuses on Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Quite sadly, the film, which premiered at the 2011 Venice Film Festival, had a very limited distribution. However, in 2014 it was published by Universal in a special box-set double DVD, an edition which perfectly responds to Wilde's intermedial potential. The DVD[39] can be considered as both a media resource and a space capable of investigating the fascinating dialogic relationship involving image, music and literature. If, according to Barry Brummett, "a text is a set of signs related to each other insofar as their meanings all contribute to the same set of effects or functions",[40] then the DVD, and in particular *Wilde Salomé*, stands as a "multimodal text",[41] one where the visual, musical and literary components enter into a fascinating dialogue which allows them to constantly redefine themselves. The 2014 DVD edition features two discs suggesting the image of two films – the *Wilde Salomé* documentary in disc 1 and the *Salomé* narrative film, plus a Q&A at London's BFI with Pacino, Chastain, and Fry, in disc 2 – interrogating and mirroring each other, with the reader/viewer invited to negotiate and create his/her own space within the cinematic process of construction of Wilde and his play. Once again, Oscar seems to ask each of us (and not only Al Pacino) to be *part of* his life and plays.

4. Salomé *in Pop Culture*

It is important to stress how music is a central aspect in Wilde's play. During her most intense and fascinating speech at the end of the play, Salomé, seizing Jokanaan's head, utters the following words:

[39] As Paul McDonald notes: "Digital Versatile Disc or Digital Video Disc (DVD) […] introduced [in 1996] a new media object. Videocassettes had always remained a linear medium, working along the single plane of record, play, rewind and fast-forward. DVD, however, provided access to many different sources of content via menus. DVDs increased the storage capacity of video software units, providing space for the inclusion of other types of content beyond the main programme. By multiplying textual content, DVD has raised questions over whether there is a core or essence to the video commodity" (P. MCDONALD, *Video and DVD Industries*, London, BFI, 2007, p. 1). The DVD has also posed new challenges for specialists in the field as well as literary scholars, forcing them to keep pace with the ongoing transformation of the landscape of media and culture industries. As Bryan Sebok observes: "The fact that the DVD entered into and helped define a shift in technology and culture from 'analog' to 'digital' is of paramount importance to the processes involved in making DVD meaningful. 'Digital' suggests a massive shift in culture and industry, away from a particular understanding of technology and technology-user interface into an age of instant, random access to information and entertainment" (B. SEBOK, *Convergent Hollywood; DVD, and the Transformation of the Home Entertainment Industries*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2007, p. 227). Many commentators have underlined the analogy existing between DVDs and the Internet, not only for the hypertextual structure of their interface – allowing each user to freely, creatively (and *vertically*) construct his/her reading of the text – but also for the encyclopaedic access to knowledge they both offer. In short, we are faced with a shift from a critical discourse *on* the text, linked to contents strictly related to the film or series (as shown by critical paratexts), to a larger public discourse *about* the text, expanding its context. For further details, see M. FRANCHI, "Il vecchio e il nuovo. Il DVD e l'ambivalenza della comunicazione in epoca digitale", in L. QUARESIMA and V. RE (a cura di), *Play the Movie. Il DVD e le nuove forme dell'esperienza audiovisiva*, Torino, Kaplan, 2010, pp. 16-31.

[40] B. BRUMMETT, *The Rhetoric of Popular Culture*, London, New Delhi and Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2006, Second Edition, p. 34.

[41] G. KRESS and T. VAN LEEUWEN, *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*, London, Arnold, 2001.

Ah, Jokanaan, Jokanaan, thou wert the only man that I have loved. All other men are hateful to me. But thou, thou wert beautiful! [...] There was nothing in the world so white as thy body. There was nothing in the world so black as thy hair. In the whole world there was nothing so red as thy mouth. Thy voice was a censer that scattered strange perfumes, and when I looked on thee I heard a strange music.[42]

The "strange music" Salomé seems to hear while looking at Jokanaan is actually the complex music the audience hears via the compelling sonic textures and sensual rhythms created by Wilde, especially through the repetitions and variations of key imperatives such as "you must not look at her", uttered by Herodias; "Let me kiss thy mouth", which Salomé addresses to Jokanaan; and Herod's "dance for me, Salomé". As Robert Ross reported in one of the first editions of the play, "Wilde himself, in a rhetorical period, seems to have contemplated the possibility of his prose drama for a musical theme. In *De Profundis* he says: 'The refrains, whose recurring motifs make *Salomé* so like a piece of music, and bind it together as a ballad'".[43] Interestingly, it was the only play by Wilde set to music by a major composer writing on the cusp between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, namely Richard Strauss. As Kerry Powell remarks,

Strauss, who saw *Salomé* in max Reinhardt's production at the Kleines Theater in Berlin in 1901, used an abridged German translation of Wilde's text as the libretto of an opera more famous than the play which inspired it. First performed in Dresden in 1905 to a reported thirty-eight curtain calls, Strauss's violent score was the outcome of his realisation that Wilde's play "was simply calling for music".[44]

We could add that *Salomé* is still calling for music, that is, for musical rewritings, adaptations and tributes from contemporary musicians coming from very different areas. Interestingly, in Al Pacino's *Wilde Salomé*, Irish global celebrity Bono, the singer of U2, focuses on Wilde's universal appeal "not just for gay people, but for anyone who feels that their part in their society is being marginalised". Bono, who, in the interview, speaks of Wilde as the only writer "who can take on Shakespeare", also points to Salomé's destructive power of sexuality, a possible hint at Wilde's own destiny and fall. Lynn Ramert establishes an interesting connection between Wilde and Bono:

One element that links these men is that they put themselves out in front of the world for the sake of their art. […] Oscar Wilde paved the way for modern artists to insist on ambiguity in both life and art and on the active performance and enjoyment of life. Artists such as Bono and U2 carry on the tradition of a unique Irish spin on personality performance and the creation of thought-provoking, deeply felt, and yet also often thoroughly entertaining works of art.[45]

It is worth mentioning here the 1991 song by U2, entitled *Salomé*, an outtake from the *Achtung Baby* sessions, where Bono quotes from Wilde's play via the lines "Baby please / Baby don't say no / Won't you dance for me / Under the cherry tree". These lines are sung on a hypnotic, danceable bass line, with the effect of turning the song

[42] O. WILDE, *Salomé*, in ID., *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, p. 604.

[43] R. ROSS, "A Note on *Salomé*", in O. WILDE, *Salomé*, London, Bodley Head, 1907, p. XVI.

[44] K. POWELL, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, Cambridge, CUP, 1990, p. 37.

[45] L. RAMERT, "A Century Apart: The Personality Performances of Oscar Wilde in the 1890s and U2's Bono in the 1990s", *Popular Music and Society*, 32 (4), October 2009, pp. 457-58.

into a mini play, a musical/theatrical adaptation of *Salomé.* Another song from *Achtung Baby*, namely *Mysterious Ways*, represents a further tribute to Wilde's play by Bono, who, in the opening stanza, sings "Johnny, take a walk with your sister the moon / Let her pale light in to fill up your room / You've been living underground, eating from a can / You've been running away, from what you don't understand".

In the late 1980s another iconic artist, Australian singer Nick Cave, paid a direct tribute to Wilde by rewriting *Salomé* in a drama consisting of five extremely concise acts, or, better, "mini plays",[46] respectively entitled "The Seven Veils", "Dialogue with the Baptist", "Salomé's Reward", "The Chop", and "The Platter". Some acts are so terse ("Salomé's Reward", for instance, consists of only twenty-six spoken words) that one can assume Cave conceived *Salomé* to be appreciated more as a poetic exploration in *abjection* than as material for a live performance. And yet, at a different level, one has the impression that we are faced with a score to be performed by the reader, with a form of writing whose very clusters, dissonances, and broken rhythms perfectly translate Cave's post-punk and, to an extent, goth musical aesthetics.

Play One, entitled "The Seven Veils", opens with the character of a young girl representing the Vestal Virgin, who, in the work's economy, has the function of announcing the title of each of the five acts (or plays). She tells the audience that they are going to watch (or read, or *listen to*) the story of Salomé and John the Baptist in five parts, defining it a "mess of thorns". This verbal/semantic cluster of ritual and religion, pleasure and pain powerfully connects with Wilde and with his practice and conception of opposite stances as simultaneity.

In his rewriting of Wilde, Cave interestingly mixes high and low language, the biblical and the colloquial, as when Herod asks the princess: "What ails thee, my precious Salomé? What is it that has put your pretty little nose so *out of joint*?". Cave's carnivalesque stance seems almost at odds with the extreme, cynical and almost punk Salomé character, with her aggressive disturbing sexuality. Interestingly, while Wilde names Salomé's dance in an iconic stage direction ("Salomé dances the dance of the seven veils"), Cave's Salomé triumphantly introduces herself as a young girl would do with a pop song: "Music! Let's have some life! Your Majesty, 'The Dance of the Seven Veils'". King Herod's voyeurism is brought to an abrupt end in coincidence with the entrance of John the Baptist; it is worth underlining that Cave decided to forgo the queen's presence and chose to stage the relationship between Salomé and men only.

In Act/Play 2, entitled "Dialogue with the Baptist", Cave's Salomé is engaged in a sexual activity of self-gratification – while Wilde's character yearns for Iokanaan's love – in which the man, the sacred prophet, does not seem to be necessary to satisfy her. The fact that Salomé is experiencing sexual pleasure while simultaneously eating an apple provides an insight into the psychological structure of her character. Salomé is the threatening other, as she revels in the taste of a forbidden fruit. John the Baptist significantly speaks of Salomé's "Cloven gender", referring to her 'split' gender in Wilde's text, exhibiting signs of ambiguity and a variable oscillation between masculine and feminine attributes.

[46] N. CAVE, *King Ink*, London, Black Spring Press, 1988, pp. 68-75.

Act/Play 3 is provokingly entitled "Salomé's Reward". If a reward is usually bestowed upon a person as a recognition for doing good, in this case she gets rewarded for acts of evil; Cave's idea is however profoundly Wildean, conceiving Salomé herself as a disturbing and yet fascinating 'work of art' distancing itself from any moral implication.

In the stage directions of Act/Play 4, entitled "The Chop", Cave makes reference to the remarkable painting by Puvis de Chavannes, *The Beheading of St John the Baptist* (1869), to which the scene should resemble in light of the presence of a negro with an axe. While, in the picture, John the Baptist is kneeling with his hands roped and Salomé's head appears as modestly inclined, as she is clasping her cloak to cover her body, Cave smashes the sexual taboo and once more presents Salomé in an act of sexual self-gratification. What we have here is an intersemiotic association, which again powerfully chimes with Wilde, who not only was a master in describing portraits and paintings in his literary and critical works, but often invited to think and conceive reality through the lens of the arts.

In the last act, entitled "The Platter", we are again faced with Salomé's disturbing abject eroticism. The executioner enters with John the Baptist's head on a platter and offers it to Herod, affirming that this is the head of John the Baptist "minus the tongue", which Salomé demanded for herself, in a profoundly ambiguous, open finale. Cave's fascinating rewriting of Wilde's play reflects his idea and practice of art as an open space, inhabited by angels and daemons, beauty and ugliness, a world in which the voice of the singer and the pen of the writer translate Wilde in terms of multiplicity and unpredictability.

More recently, besides U2 and Nick Cave, English songwriter Pete Doherty paid a personal and lyrical tribute to Wilde through his ballad *Salomé*, included in his 2009 solo album *Grace/Wasteland* and containing several lyrical references to Wilde's play. Interestingly, in the song, Doherty mentions another *mythical* dancer: Isadora Duncan, one of the greatest performers of all times, who in a sense stands as a modern counterpart for Salomé. At the end of the song, the singer adds that, as she dances, she "demands the head of any bastard on a plate". Most probably, Doherty is "the bastard" in question, appearing as though hypnotised and consenting to give his own head, while Salomé could stand for his ex-partner, super-model Kate Moss.

Other songs based on Wilde's play include Kim Wilde's *House of Salomé* (1981), in which the singer mixes 1980s synth-pop and Arabian melodies, and *Dance of the Seven Veils* by Velvet Underground founding member John Cale (1991), which features dark, hypnotic piano figures and spoken words by Judy Nylon. A very specific and extremely relevant space in contemporary pop culture is held by The Smashing Pumpkins' *Stand Inside Your Love* (2000) and, more specifically, by the video of the song directed by British director W.I.Z. and based on singer Billy Corgan's idea. A fascinating black and white filmic adaptation of the play, this stands as a tribute to Beardsley and it takes us to where we started, that is, to Bryant's silent film version.

As a concluding remark, we can note how the many afterlives and filmic adaptations of *Salomé* are able to show how, in Wilde's discourse, the visual and the aural are necessarily complementary. Through *Salomé*, we are once again invited to inhabit landscapes and soundscapes in which each of us – readers, spectators, and listeners – ultimately becomes the real protagonist of that constitutionally *open* play entitled *Oscar Wilde*.

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