



Received: 18 November 2018
Accepted: 16 February 2019
First Published: 22 February 2019

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VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS | CRITICAL ESSAY

Art, art education, creative industry: Critique of commodification and fetishism of art aesthetics in Indonesia

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Abstract: This paper analyses one of the dark or negative side phenomenon in the creative industries, with particular focus on art and art education in Indonesia. It is the hegemony of economic considerations in its discourse. As a result, culture and creativity itself, as the essential spirits of the creative industry, are subordinated to considerations of materialism and profit calculation. In this discourse, art tends to be defined not as a subject but as an object and functions as a medium of fetishism and commodification. In this way, the ideals and philosophy of art have been distorted. In this context, the role of art education is pivotal to the strategic creation of new cultural meanings in the discourse of creative industry. The paper argues that art education in Indonesian higher education contexts needs to take steps to reorient and revitalize itself in the context of creative industry.

Subjects: art aesthetics; art and cultural industries; art education; commodification and fetishism

Keywords: art; art education; creative industry; aesthetics; commodification and fetishism



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

I am interested in offering a dissenting opinion on the existence of arts and aesthetics as well as art education in Indonesia, that tend to be under hegemony of economic considerations of materialism and profit calculation as they face culture and creative industry discourse. I expect that this critical perspective could play significant roles in the process of reorientation and revitalization of arts, aesthetics and art education in the context of creative industries, particularly in Indonesia and also other nations having similar phenomenon.

1. Introduction

The discourse around what is known as the “creative industry” has attracted increasing public attention. The concept is not truly novel and has been examined in numerous studies. In the western world, especially in Europe, the embryo of creative industry can be located in the industrial revolution (Willner, Weiner, & Hero, 2007, p. 3) that was triggered by the scientific revolution of the Renaissance era (Spielvogel, 2013, p. 358). The period was marked by the emergence of scientists such as Bacon (1561–1626), Galilei (1564–1642), Descartes (1596–1650), Newton (1642–1727), Voltaire (1694–1778), and Diderot (1713–1784), who laid the foundation of modern science and technology (Deming, 2012, p. 203; Jin, 2016). The plethora of inventions from this era has become the driving force behind the development of industrialization projects as phenomena in contemporary cultural discourse.

In Indonesia, the concept of creative industry drew particular public attention when the government used the term in the legal context of Presidential Instruction No. 6, Year 2009, which sought to develop the creative economy and launched the Instruction to mark Creative Indonesia Year. The term had never previously featured in government policy but, in 2014, the new government established Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy. The concept of creative industry was later included in the remit of the Creative Economy Board, which was established through Republic of Indonesia Presidential Decree No. 6, Year 2015.

Since that time, the creative industry paradigm has assumed iconic status worldwide, including in the discourse of the discipline of art. In the main discourse of the creative industry, art is seen to best represent the concept of creativity and, the spirit of the creative industry, as well as being its main focus. In Indonesia, for example, data on the creative industry from the Tourism and Creative Economy Ministry (2014) identify 14 sub-sectors, in which art-related fields dominate. The sub-sectors were: advertising; architecture; artworks and antiques; crafts; design; fashion; video, film, and photography; music; performance art; publishing and printing; computer service and software; television and radio; and research and development.

The creative industry is claimed by many to be capable of making a significant contribution to the growth of the economy and profit-generation. In Indonesia, for instance, the so-called creative economy is growing by 5% annually. In terms of gross domestic product, the creative economy contributed 185 billion rupiahs in 2010 and 215 billion rupiahs in 2013. In the same period, creative industry employed on average 10.6% of the total national labour force of about 12 million people. Overall, it accounted for 5.4 million of the business sector workforce (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, Republic of Indonesia, 2014, p. xvii).

It is important for those involved in the discourse of creative industry, especially stakeholders, to approach the topic from a critical-reflective perspective, especially in relation to the basic paradigm of the creative industry, which is anchored in materialistic-economic analysis and ignores the universal values inherent in cultural production. Certainly, people can be seen as *homo economicus* and their lives will always be characterised by materialistic and economic calculations (Dixon & Wilson, 2013; Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010, p. 83). However, people are also *homo sapiens* (Porter, 2003, p. 206), creatures with common sense, who also aspire to higher order values and ideals. In Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, material considerations form part of humans’ physiological needs, which fall into the lowest need category. Other needs above it are based on values and ideals (Ryckman, 2012, p. 301; Taormina & Gao, 2013).

Art and art education is highly relevant in this context. From a critical and reflective perspective, art and art education should be positioned more as subjects rich in possibility rather than only as objects to be exploited in the discourse of creative industry. Throughout the history of humankind, art has always been endowed with noble values, as an important part of the process referred to as the “humanization project” (Austin, 2016). Yet whenever art brushes up against various materialistic-economic domains, it is generally perceived only on the most basic level of an artefact

rather than as the highest and most valuable culmination of consciousness. Art is a significant domain of civilization which, together with other pillars of civilization, guarantees the existence of ideal values of humanity. Indeed, the existence of art is often seen as a defining characteristic of humanity.

For this reason, art must be carefully interpreted in the dominant contemporary discourse around creative industry. Thus, attention must be paid to identifying distortions and negative consequences for the existence of art in creative industry texts, which generally adopt a political economy perspective.

2. Creative industry and the distortion of the meaning of creativity

As discussed previously, there is a well-established discourse of culture and creative industry. It is related to the sociological discourse of urban development, especially from an economic perspective. As Gibson and Klocker (2004) suggest, “creativity and the creative industries are increasingly common components of urban economic development discourse”. Similarly, Moeran and Pedersen (2011) argue that this discourse exploits the term “creativity” on behalf of political and economic interests.

There are various historical examples of these interconnections, especially in the West. In 1977, for example, a group of urban planners in Washington teamed up with architects and artists in a program called *Partnership of Livable Place* to develop a concept later referred to as the “creative city”. This was an ideal, humane, and comfortable city where environmental and cultural considerations were emphasised (Stevenson, 2013). In Australia in 1994, the Department of Communications and the Arts released a report entitled “Creative Nation: Commonwealth Cultural Policy” (Craik, 2007, p. 14; Stevenson, 2013). In a more practical policy development, the link between culture and creative industry was developed in England by New Labour to challenge the ideas of Old Labour. The policy was driven by Tony Blair. In 1997, the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) established the “Creative Industries Task Force”. DCMS defines creative industries as “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent, and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property and content” (Barrowclough, 2012; Coates & Lawler, 2000). This perspective reflects Giddens’ (2013) notion of “the third way” in politics that seeks to reconcile the approach of socialism-collectivism on one side with that of liberalism-individualism (capitalism) on the other.

The concept of creative industry has been warmly received by the community. In his book *Creative Economy, How People Make Money from Ideas*, Howkins (2013) defined creative economy as an economic activity that is driven by creativity. Similarly, Florida (2003, 2005) has argued that all humans are naturally creative, but their class status affects their ability to derive economic benefit from their creative activities. Hesmondhalgh (2007) defines creative industry as “cultural industries or creative economy, refer to a range of economic activities that are concerned with the exploitation of knowledge and information”. For this reason, creative industry is also referred to as the culture industry (Howkins, 2013; Susen & Turner, 2013, p. 185; Meen, Prior, & Lam, 2015; Keane, 2016, p. 10).

This idea of creative industry parallels the transformation of the economy in the era of advanced capitalism, which is based on limited natural resources, to a paradigm of unlimited human resource that characterises the era following the “third wave revolution” (Toffler, 1991).

If one accepts this meaning of the creative industry—that is, one in which political and economic power is the main pillar—this suggests that the creative industry is based on the neo-capitalist system and its philosophy (Léger & Léger, 2011, p. 10; Lazzeretti, 2012, p. 237; Flew, 2013, p. 73). Miller (2009) proposes that “neoliberalism is at the core of the creative industries”. Neo-liberalism has become a hegemonic discourse with pervasive effects on ways of thought and political

economic practices to the point where it is now part of the common sense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world (Harvey, 2007).

Discussions about the culture of creative industry, especially in relation to its grounding in capitalism and neo-liberalism, often involve debate about whether the cultural or human dimension should be emphasised. There is a long history of intellectual criticism of the idea. In Europe in the twentieth century, for example, members of the Frankfurt School criticized the industrialization and commercialization of culture under capitalist relations of production (Miller & Stam, 2008, p. 202; Wasko, 2009, p. 30; Nealon and Irr, 2012, p. 32). These critics, led by Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse, Habermas, Gramsci and others, argued that the development of the cultural industry was no more than a project of ideology manipulation (Schindler, 1998; Wiggershaus, 1995).

From this perspective, the concept of creative industry has the potential to create cultural vulnerabilities. These problems arise when creativity as the fundamental spirit of every cultural expression is subsequently, in the context of creative industry, distorted and reduced to its relationship with politics and the economy (O'Connor, 2000) and becomes part of the culture of commodification within the process of commercialization (Lazzeretti, 2012). According to Edensor et al. (2009, p. 90), "contemporary capitalism is characterized by more recently dominant forms of accumulation, based on flexible production, the commodification of culture and the injection of symbolic content into all commodity production". Hence, in the concept of creative industry, there is a subtle conspiracy between culture text and capitalism,¹ and this phenomenon is often regarded as the "convergence of consumerism with cool capitalism" (McGuigan, 2009; Flew, 2012, p. 6; Fuchs & Mosco, 2015, p. 249).

Hence, the creative industry may find its relevance questioned if it is only considered from a cultural perspective. This is because the creative industry has positioned all cultural and artistic processes as no more than pragmatic activities of "craftsmanship" that are enslaved in the capitalist system and worship the artificiality of material profit (Galloway & Dunlop, 2007, p. 17). The distortion of creativity in the pragmatic context (as the pillar of industrial culture) results in the vocabulary of creativity losing its idealistic meaning. Indeed, Schumpeter, an Austrian-American economist, has argued that the discourse of creative industries is actually about "creative destruction" (Potts, 2011, p. 2) resulting from what Pang (2012, p. 2) describes as a sad "cultural politicization".

3. Commodification and fetishism of aesthetics in art

When the problem of creative industry is examined in relation to the wider community of citizens, for example, in art, it is easy to see that the aesthetic dimension is subsumed under the power of the economy. In this context, the meaning of art and its aesthetic qualities are no longer a driving force for the values of transcendental idealism; rather, immanent pragmatism tends to prevail. As a result, the creative industry has forged a relationship between art/aesthetics and capitalism, which Michelsen (2014, p. 63) refers to as "aesthetic capitalism" and which can be seen as part of what Kaplan (2008) calls the "culture of fetishism".

As such, the representation of art often becomes no more than a means for industrial products to be made more aesthetically appealing and eye-catching in the politics of consumption and consumerism (Stettler, 2014; Stolle & Michelett, 2013). The troubling outcome of this is the subjugation of the cultural ideal to the philosophy of materialism, with its associated consumerism and hedonism (Leonard, Barry, & Geus, 2013; Staufenberg, 2011). The philosophy of materialism is inexorably linked to hedonism (Mikolaski, 2013), or the doctrine that humans should pursue only their own pleasure. Philosophical materialism is the view that the real world is composed exclusively of material things (Bunge, 2012, p. ix).

In this context, the creative industry positions art as merely an object which, along with other cultural elements, is exploited for political and economic gain. According to Kerrigan and Ozbilgin (2007, p. 140), "creative industries demonstrate a move away from 'art for art's sake' and towards

an acceptance of the economic, social and aesthetic value of culture, where the arts are treated as ingredients in a new cultural mix". In other words, the creative industry seems to have swung the pendulum of the role of art and aesthetics towards a purely utilitarian function that is highly pragmatic in nature (Singh, 2014, p. 150).

From this perspective, it becomes clear why the role of aesthetics and art—which are supposed to be understood as a bedrock of humanity, a “*pandhapa agung*” or “great house” that serves the value of authenticity, enhance quality of life and progress civilization (Sayuti, 2014)—is often questioned. This also applies to texts of art, which always tend to be regarded as opposing any kind of cultural abstraction and generalization that can blunt self-awareness and consciousness. However, arts fails to perform this function as it confronts the hegemonic discourse of the creative industry.

4. Creative industry and “the treason of the intellectuals”

In the face of this “dark side” of the creative industry, art sciences, especially in universities, are expected to play a strategic role in facilitating processes of re-orientation and revitalization in the enlightenment tradition. This expectation reflects the position of universities, which the community continues to regard as the home of intellectuals who, by definition, are part of middle-class society and who have always been seen as avant-garde agents of social and cultural change (Keele, 2013). In this context, the poet Rendra (Hartoko, 1980), for instance, described those intellectuals as those who are “housed in the winds”, and whose existence has often proved cathartic in troubling times.

In the contemporary context, discussion of the role of intellectuals has identified a number of disturbing issues. For example, in relation to crucial cultural transformations such as those occurring in the creative industry, many intellectuals in all disciplines, including art, seem to prefer to be consumers of ideas rather than producers who direct the course of the debate. Hence, much of their discourse merely affirms the hysteria instead of presenting a meaningful critical dialectic. Ultimately, the voices of intellectuals will slowly fade away amid the hustle and bustle of the ill-defined changes that characterise the present era.

An example in Indonesian contexts can be seen in the approach of the social disciplines (including art) in that country, where being an agent—even a slave—to political or economic power seems to be preferred. Hadiz and Dakhidae (2005, pp. 2, 24) have argued that more and more social scientists in this stage of Indonesia’s development are becoming power brokers for the regime. Therefore, it is no wonder that the social disciplines in Indonesia are becoming more instrumental-pragmatic than critical-reflective. The same critique is offered by Laksono (2005, p. 221), who reviewed the performance of social discipline associations in Indonesia, such as the Association of Indonesian Bachelor of Economics, Indonesian Society for the Development of Social Sciences, Association of Anthropology of Indonesia, Indonesian Pre-history Association, and many others. He concluded that their performance grammar tends to be couched in the idiom of “role”—ways of thinking, speaking, acting, and working—which is in line with the functionalist theory of Parsons, who sees the role of the social disciplines as developmental. Hence, we can expect more research specifically oriented to presenting positive images of various policies that will have the effect of maintaining power.

When a new domain of cultural discourse appears, for example, in the context of the creative industry, it is not enough for social scientists to only possess the analytical skills to examine the premise. This simplistic view perpetuates the uncritical proliferation of the new term. What is pursued is not reflection, but domination. Heryanto (2005, p. 66) has proposed that, under the “developmentalism” jargon, social disciplines in Indonesia have become a kind of guild, having great power but merely following directions, almost like soldiers or machines.

If this is really the case, it seems that intellectuals are no longer adequate as reference sources or as avant-garde agents of social and cultural change and enlightenment. Rather, they have

become the main compradors of civilization and humanity. This is reminiscent of what the French philosopher Benda (2009) described as “the treason of the intellectuals”, as an expression of his concerns about their retreat from with their role as agents of the enlightenment.

5. Creative industry and revitalization of art sciences

In these circumstances, we need to take strategic steps, particularly in relation to the discipline of art education in universities as one of the main institutions that are expected to play a significant role in developing and conserving the world and sciences of art. At least three main steps need to be taken: first, the reaffirmation and strengthening of the three “discipline matrix” pillars of arts and sciences; second, the development of a multidisciplinary approach in the art sciences; and third, the development of art sciences’ “authenticity” based on the local wisdom of self-culture. Each of these is elaborated below.

The reaffirmation and strengthening of various disciplinary matrix pillars in art sciences require the re-orientation and revitalization of the current art science paradigm towards a more equal balance between the three existing matrix pillars: productive (creation), reproductive (absorption/dissemination) and receptive (audience). The productive pillar, or creation, involves creators or artists, the reproductive pillar involves reviewers and researchers, and the receptive pillar refers to the community who is the main support for the existence of art itself.

The problem is that the art sciences in Indonesia have a crucial weakness, in that these three pillars are not treated equally. Most weight is given to the creation pillar, which has been positioned almost beyond the existence of art itself and seems to deny the role of the other two pillars, reviewing and receiving. In Foucauld’s (1980) view, the reproductive dimension, which is based on reviewing and receiving, is perceived as a meaningless form of “othering”.

This phenomenon can be observed in Indonesia, where the discipline of art tends to be more closely associated with “emotional desire” rather than with “intellectual desire”. Accordingly, there has been a lack of sociologically and historically informed discourse in the implication art sciences in that country. This is reflected in the way the arts fail to challenge the creative industry discourse through critical-reflective processes.

Second, the development of an interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary perspective in art sciences is crucial. As discussed above, the praxis mainstream of art sciences in universities tends to have been drained of values in an overly rigid monodisciplinary structure. Yet the cultural and creative industrial discourse, which has mostly been inspired by the spirit of this postmodern era, has experienced a paradigm shift that reflects the spirit of post-structuralism and is characterized by a multidisciplinary framework.

The affirmation of the importance of multidisciplinary paradigms in art is not at all intended to negate efforts in art’s core competence, which is monodisciplinary in character, but rather to emphasise how essential it is to enrich it with ideas from other disciplines. It is also in line with the spirit of cultural and creative industrial texts as a site for constructing new knowledge by bringing together various possibilities and approaches without the burden of an overly rigid structure. This, for instance, can be seen in the history of cultural and creative industry concepts that fully supported by the new generation, who describe themselves as “no colour class” and who prefer to dress informally, preferring T-shirts to ties. This group consists of artists from various disciplines, scientists and even professors who often seem relaxed, but are in fact always serious in their thinking and creating. This new paradigm can be seen as a form of antithesis to the terminology of the creative generation of the previous era, often referred to as the “blue colour” and “white colour” generation, who applied the monodisciplinary ideology in a very structured way (Peters & Besley, 2013, p. 4).

Third, the development of “authenticity” in art sciences should be a priority in universities. The discussion of “authenticity” texts in relation to art in particular or culture in general is substantively related to the main issue, which is the scope of creativity in the wider sense, understood as the

construction of new ideas as the cumulative result of interaction between inner and outer self-knowledge. Engaging in a series of encounters between the internal and external cultural self, then disseminating the products of creativity, including the art itself, can be seen as a sign of a highly meaningful cultural self. This ideal dialectic can only be accomplished when each cultural entity, including the art, is grounded in its cultural self-locality in its encounters with aspects of foreign culture. The concept of aesthetics in art is more a part of local-particular subjectivity than of universal space (Farenga & Ness, 2015, p. 322; Quintero & Nor, 2016).

This understanding, as emphasized by Sayuti (2014), implies that locality capital is essential in the global dialectic, because it can be used by the artist to construct his or her identity in the idealized artistic world. As capital, with it and through it the artist can be known by and introduce himself to “others”. The acknowledgement by “others” of those values legitimates the artist as legally and culturally equal. The process of relating to and interacting with “others” inevitably allows various values to enter. In this case, locality values function as the foundation. This is how the cultural reasoning process works in relation to the importance of the authenticity of aesthetics and art which is based on self-local values.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that locality values as the source of identity construction in the world of Indonesian art and aesthetics disappeared long ago as a result of the unbalanced dialectic experienced in encounters with foreign cultures, especially Western cultures, which have destroyed the value of the spirit of locality in Indonesian culture. These locality values, particularly in the Indonesian context, are based on Eastern philosophy, art and culture, which have been almost completely eradicated by those of the Western philosophical tradition.

Up to the present day, for instance, the world of Indonesian art development (including the other branches of art) has remained completely connected to the discourse of art development in the West (Burhan, 2006, p. 275). Because of this, it is no wonder that aesthetics discourse in Indonesia is dominated by Western philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristoteles, Plotinus, Agustinus, Aquinas, Baumgarten, Kant, Tolstoy, Croce, Collingwood, Santayana, Gasset, Langer, Bell, and so forth. In contrast, there is seldom reference to local philosophy masters such as Kanwa, Panuluh, Prapanca, Ranggawarsita, and others, who have generated philosophy that is equal to that of the West.

On a broader scale, globalization and the revolution in information and communication technology, which intensified encounters with the West, have spread the treatise of helplessness and dependency in the face of Western values to the whole society, which perceives them as inherently superior and not to be questioned. There is almost no element of civilization in this country—be it on the level of idea fact, socio fact, or artefact—that is free of Western influence. The preoccupation with the West has become obsessive, overwhelming other desires and impacting on contemporary art creation in this country. The historian Purwanto (2006) refers to this as the failure of this country to construct an Indonesia centric history and historiography. The time has come for the aesthetics sciences in Indonesia to address this situation (Sumardjo, 2000, p. 353).

The bitter and dull reality is that Indonesia, as a nation, do not appear to possess any capital and art and cultural strengths at all. Yet, it is not so. Even in the pre-Indonesian era, and prior to any Western contact, we had a long history of art and culture. Many of the highest achievements in art and culture were accomplished in the past, whether in the “old Java” period centered on Middle Java or in the “young Java” period centered in Eastern Java—such as temples, *batik*, *gamelan*, *keris*, puppets, and many others (Fontein, Soekmono, & Sedyawati, 1990). Spanning more than 1,000 years, this artwork heritage, which has been acknowledged by UNESCO as Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (Smend & Harper, 2011, p. 9), is proof of the authentic identity of Indonesian art and culture. These achievements are not confined to Java, which has long been seen as the cornerstone of Indonesia as a cultural entity but are spread all over the Indonesian archipelago. In Sulawesi, for instance, an ancient literature belonging to the Bugis Makassar community, known as *I La Galigo*, is one of the greatest literary works in the world, surpassing others such as *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* from India,

as well as the monumental works in classical Greek literature, like *Odyssey* and *Illiad* by Homerus (Rahman & Adiwimarta, 1999, p. 182; Koolhof, 2004, p. 99). Other examples of rich ethnic art and culture are found all over the Indonesian archipelago.

As a result of the failure to develop authentic art and aesthetics based on Indonesian locality, the current world of Indonesian art and culture is overwhelmed by external influences, particularly Western, whose superiority has been assumed. This can be seen in the dominance of Western values in cultural and creative industrial discourse.

Therefore, every effort should be made to re-orient and revitalize the art discipline in universities by developing more appropriate frameworks for the art sciences, be it fine arts (based on the spirit of textual/essential justification) or art education (based on contextual justification) (Soehardjo, 2006). If the role of the art discipline, particularly in universities, can be reoriented and revitalized, then it becomes possible to expect the enlightenment dream to be more easily realised in the context of cultural and creative industrial discourse. We acknowledge that all activities of daily living tend to be subject to technological-scientific reasoning which prioritizes accounting, objectivity, efficiency and, especially, material, and that many view the arts and aesthetics as trivial and vain (Sugiharto, 2013, p. 11). Clearly, we disagree. As Merton (2005) has proposed, “art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time”. Art is a medium for the enlightenment of culture and humanity (Garratt, 2010; Roberts, 2006).

6. Conclusion

This discussion can be considered as a dissenting voice from the mainstream celebration of the culture and creative industry, especially in relation to the domain of art. It does not constitute a complete rejection of the culture and creative industry, because every social and cultural change, in any period of time, always has two sides. On the positive side, the creative culture industry is based on the dictum of unlimited human resources for creativity. On the negative side, as discussed above, its main thrust is to deny the humanistic dimension by focusing on *homo economicus*.

In this context, it is also important to realize that the materialistic economic dictum only supports basic human physiological needs but neglects more important, higher level needs. This awareness is pivotal, especially when the expression of aesthetics in art and art education in Indonesian contexts has to confront the negative narrative of the culture of industrialization. It is expected that the aesthetics of art and art education in this country, with all its ideals, will be able to free itself from its role as merely an object and means of commodification and its enslavement by mainstream materialism. With a more critical interpretation, aesthetics and arts should be able to play a strategic role as catharsis and enlightenment for the dark side of the creative industry.

Funding

The author received no direct funding for this research.

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Citation information

Cite this article as: Art, art education, creative industry: Critique of commodification and fetishism of art aesthetics in Indonesia, Kasiyan, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2019), 6: 1586065.

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