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Between the dirty and the pretty Bodies in utopia in *Dirty Pretty Things*

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ABSTRACT ● This article demonstrates how Stephen Frears' 2002 British film *Dirty Pretty Things* can further our understanding of the paradoxical structures of globalized space. In examining the interdisciplinary relationship between geography and film, it will examine the ways in which a contemporary, globalized London is constructed of two conflicting, but mutually reinforcing geographical imaginations. Western political parties have often been quick to proclaim the boundless, utopian freedom that the economic process of globalization brings to bear. However, as *Dirty Pretty Things* demonstrates, this powerful geographical imaginary of utopia is in fact sustained by the exploitation of migrant bodies, who service the lifestyle of the city's burgeoning tourists and professional classes. These two contradictory geographical imaginations are, in turn, examined through Michel Foucault's well known notion of 'heterotopia' and the geographer Doreen Massey's writing on the 'double imaginary' of globalization. In doing so, the article will show how illegal migrants, whose bodies are exploited and commodified, inhabit a 'placeless place' between the two geographical imaginations: between London as a utopian 'pretty' place on the one hand, and a 'dirty' hidden place of surveillance and exclusion on the other. ●

KEYWORDS ● bodies ● circulation ● Stephen Frears ● globalization
● immigration ● utopia

Stephen Frears' 2002 *Dirty Pretty Things* eloquently captures the experience of migrant workers living in London. In common with other British

films such as *In This World* (Michael Winterbottom, 2002) and *The Last Resort* (Pawel Pawlikowski, 2000), Frears' film explores the multiple ways in which the recent global flows of capital and migrant labour have impacted upon contemporary Britain. It centres upon the lives of Okwe (Chiwetel Ejiofor) and Senay (Audrey Tatou), a Nigerian and a Turkish migrant respectively, who, like many migrants, imagine London as both a means of escape and a better life. The promised land for which they had hoped, however, is dramatically eclipsed by the material reality of precarious employment and poverty, thereby illustrating Pierre Bourdieu's claim that neoliberalism creates 'a *utopia of endless exploitation*' (1999: 95). Western political parties have often been quick to proclaim the boundless, utopian freedom that the economic process of globalization brings to bear. It therefore follows that, as a truly globalized city, London has frequently been projected as a harmonious and plural space of opportunity. However, as *Dirty Pretty Things* demonstrates, this geographical imaginary of utopia is in fact sustained by the exploitation of migrant bodies, who service the lifestyle of the city's burgeoning professional classes and tourists. Indeed, it is the quite literal commodification of the migrant body – either whole, or in parts – which provides the narrative thrust of Frears' film: Okwe and Senay find themselves embroiled in an shady organ trafficking ring, which exchanges the body parts of illegal immigrants for forged passports. As Brunson has written, identity in the film is thus not only left behind 'but it is also bought, traded and assumed ... it is a forgery, a commodity to be bought and sold' (2007: 116).

The film's evocative title, *Dirty Pretty Things*, provides an effective segue into exploring the various social and spatial mechanisms of globalization present within the film. As its title suggests, the bodies (and body parts) of migrant workers such as Okwe and Senay are indeed reduced to 'things': they are sites of production which are exploited and dehumanized within the film. Moreover, as subaltern immigrants, they are simultaneously vilified and exoticized in the film: as this article will show, they are depicted in turn as both 'dirty' and 'pretty' things. The second part of this article will extend this analysis to a consideration of space, examining the construction of global London as both a pretty utopian place of opportunity and a dirty site of social exclusion. These two contradictory geographical imaginations are, in turn, examined through both Michel Foucault's well-known notion of 'heterotopia' and Doreen Massey's writing on the 'double imaginary' of globalization. In building on this interpretive framework, the final section will investigate the symbolic role of circulation in the film, and its analogous relationship with the human body. As it will show, systems of circulation – whether the liquid mobilities of capital and migrants, or the arteries and blood which sustain the human body – enable us to understand more fully both the dirty and pretty paradoxes of globalized space.

Dirty pretty bodies

Prime notes that on its release, *Dirty Pretty Things* generated a certain ‘genre anxiety’ among critics (Prime, 2006: 60). For some, the film’s gritty urban location, traditionally central to the iconography of social realism, sat uncomfortably with its narrative of enigma and suspense – a dynamic more squarely associated with the thriller. Romney, for instance, designated the film as both an ‘oddity’ and a ‘bizarre drama’ (cited in Prime, 2006: 60), while the London-based author Iain Sinclair dismissed it outright as a piece of ‘tabloid sentimentality’ (2002: 34). These criticisms, however, appear rather harsh. Far from contradicting each other, both the form and content of the film work together effectively to reinforce Frears’ engagement with contemporary social issues. According to the director: ‘The beautiful people, the romance, the thriller – I like using popular forms. Its politics are built into it, you can’t take them out’ (Shoard, 2002: 6). That Frears should mention ‘the beautiful people’ in his film is pertinent here. While on the one hand, in its emphasis on the seedy and the subterranean, the film represents ‘the underside of cosmopolitan London from glossy tourist imaginations’ (Gibson, 2006: 699),¹ it also has a noticeably attractive visual surface. Menges’ striking cinematography, which tends to accentuate amber and yellow tones, infuses the *mise en scène* with considerable warmth, while his dynamic interplay of shadow brings forth the photogenic contours of Tatou’s and Eijofor’s beautiful features. Indeed, a reviewer drew attention to Menges’ cinematography, which ‘glows with an unusual texture ... which gives the otherwise grim landscape an incandescent quality’ (Menges, 2004: 18). It also, I think, manufactures a vision of London hinged on the tension between the squalid and the scenic, the bleak and the beautiful – or, as the film’s title suggests, between the dirty and the pretty.

This contradiction has informed the aesthetic of many British social realist films. From Tony Richardson to Mike Leigh, British filmmakers have repeatedly turned to the gritty *mise en scène* of city life. While the cityscape in their films is often presented as one of social and geographical exclusion, it is also filtered through a lovingly poetic visual style. In reference to the British New Wave films of the late 1950s and the early 1960s, John Hill explores this particular dynamic through the writing of Walter Benjamin: ‘[Photography] has succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment ... it has turned the struggle against misery into an object of consumption’ (cited in Hill, 1984: 133). The glossy, slick production values of *Dirty Pretty Things* may, for some, generate a similar kind of voyeuristic conflict. Whether or not this is case, the tension between the dirty and the pretty clearly serves to dramatize the contradictory structures of global capitalization.

As is well known, subaltern immigrants to the first world have been conceptualized frequently as both dirty and pretty; they have been cast

simultaneously as objects of both repulsion and fascination. For instance, the association between the poor and the dirty has been a long-standing one, and the language of racism, in particular, has often constructed immigrant identities in terms of images of dirt and defilement.² At the same time, however, Orientalist discourse has frequently re-imagined these immigrants as their racial 'Other', a sexualized and exotic identity waiting to be colonized by the West (Said, 1978). This can be seen clearly in the character of Senay, whose virginity is ascribed a significant degree of narrative and thematic importance throughout the film, and is mentioned even before she makes her first appearance in the film. Ivan (Zlatko Buric), a burly Russian doorman who is working at the same hotel as Okwe, teases him about their relationship: 'You know she's a Muslim, which means she's a virgin – like a little angel.' Ivan's comment is immediately followed by the appearance of the mixed-race prostitute Juliette (Sophie Okonedo): in a skimpy dress, she saunters down the hotel stairs, carrying a pair of red high-heeled shoes in her hands. The sexuality of Senay and Juliette is again thrown into pointed contrast towards the end of the film, where the latter, on discovering that Senay was a virgin, quips: 'What a pair – the virgin and the whore.' Desperate for a passport, however, Senay is eventually made to prostitute herself with Juan, the hotel manager. Prostitution here is presented as symptomatic of the violence of global capitalism, where sex is a commodity to be bought and sold within a greater network of asymmetrical exchange and power. As the film would suggest, in losing her virginity, Senay's body falls prey to this economic system; her 'angelic' innocence becomes 'colonized' and sullied in the hands of the black market – the dark underbelly of Western neoliberalism.

Elsewhere in the film, the experience of living in London is inextricably bound up with the pernicious snares of capitalism. In the opening sequence, for instance, a Jamaican cab controller (played by Jeffery Kissoon), asks Okwe, his employee, to inspect his penis which has become inflamed from a sexually transmitted infection after sleeping with a prostitute. As Okwe reluctantly kneels down to look, his manager curses: 'That *bitch* – this shit dustbin city ...' Again, prostitution, as his misogynistic attitude would suggest, entails a negotiation of power that is strikingly unequal. Sexual exchange here is again presented in terms of defilement, which is accentuated by the threadbare squalor of the taxi office: after examining his boss, for instance, Okwe washes his hands in a unhygienic, mould-ridden kitchen, which contains no soap. Crucially, the dirty exploitation of prostitution is here intimately bound up with spatiality: it is the corrupting force of London, the 'shit dustbin city', which lures immigrants into its dark web of commodity exchange. This is underscored through the use of ironic framing: as the controller mutters these words, a low-angle shot emphasizes the presence of an African ornamental plate which is mounted on the wall, depicting an idyllic waterside scene – a mythical pastoral vision strikingly at odds with their current surroundings.

A dirty pretty city

As both a dirty and a pretty city, London is constructed of two, contrasting geographical imaginations, which, in turn, are brought about by the recent flows of global capitalism. These two geographical imaginations can be examined through the writing of Michel Foucault and Doreen Massey, who both concern themselves with the contradictory and multi-faceted ways in which contemporary space has been socially produced. According to Foucault, contemporary society is made up of two kinds of spaces: utopias and heterotopias. Utopias, for Foucault, are:

sites with no real place. They are sites that have a *general relation of direct or inverted analogy* with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these *utopias are unreal places*. (1986: 3)

Foucault compares utopias with the spaces of heterotopias, which he describes as real spaces. They are ‘*a kind of effectively enacted utopia* in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously *represented, contested and inverted*’ (1986: 3). Although Foucault places utopias in direct opposition to heterotopias, the relationship between the two does not rest upon a clear-cut contrast between the idealized and the real; rather there emerges an altogether more fraught and contradictory arrangement. As Foucault points out, a heterotopia is an ‘effectively enacted utopia’, a space in which utopias find their material expression. A heterotopia is therefore an imagined *and* a real place, a site of fantasy *and* a geographical entity.

Foucault’s notion of utopia resembles the kind of discourse which surrounds neoliberal economics, where champions of globalization have often been quick to proclaim the utopian freedom that it brings to bear. However, as Massey writes, it is also dependent on ‘a geographical imagination which ignores the structural divides, necessary ruptures and the inequalities on which the successful projection of the vision itself depends’ (1999: 37). While the dominant discourse presents neoliberalism as a utopian ‘powerful vision of an immense, unstructured, free unbounded space’ of ‘unfettered mobility’ (Massey, 2005: 83), the reality for the poor and the subaltern bears out a starkly different story:

There are two apparently self-evident truths, two completely different geographical imaginations which are called upon in turn. No matter that they contradict each other because it works. And so in this era of globalization we have sniffer dogs to detect people hiding in the holds of boats, people die trying to cross the Rio Grande, and boatloads of people precisely trying to ‘seek out the best opportunities’ go down in the Mediterranean. *That double imaginary, in the very fact of its doubleness, of the freedom of space on the one hand and ‘the right to one’s own space’ on the other, works in favour of the already powerful. They can have it both ways.* (Massey, 1999: 39, emphasis added)

This 'double imaginary', which posits an imagined unbounded space on the one hand but a material process of control on the other, resonates with Foucault's description of a heterotopia as both a utopian and real space. As in the heterotopia, where the creation of space is largely a product of utopia, the 'double imaginary' seeks to legitimize neoliberalism through a utopian discourse. In this way, the spatial discrepancies of difference and inequality are largely occluded, giving rise to what Massey terms 'a geographical imagination which ignores its own real spatiality' (1999: 37).

As a truly global city, London similarly generates a 'double imaginary'; it is both a utopian and real space. Its geographical imaginary, which constructs a vision of the city as a harmoniously heterogeneous realm of opportunity, is as far-reaching as it is alluring. However, as we have seen, this vision is in turn sustained by the low-paid migrant workers who service the lifestyles of its burgeoning professional classes. This ever-widening gulf of inequality, therefore, has been integral to the growth of London as global city. This disparity between utopia and reality is further illuminated by Gibson (2006), who demonstrates how the film illustrates New Labour's recent policies on immigration. Although New Labour has maintained a 'rhetoric of hospitality and tolerance' towards immigrants, it has simultaneously welcomed some but expelled others (Gibson, 2006: 696). According to Gibson, this is a 'way of narcissistically imagining Britishness precisely as generous, tolerant and hospitable' which, in turn, affirms the 'British host's position of mastery' (2006: 696). Yet this utopian geography of hospitality is so powerful and all-encompassing, that it ensures that the very the real processes of exploitation and social exclusion which sustain this vision remain out of sight. When, for instance, Okwe, Senay and Juliette hand over the kidney to a wealthy organ trafficker in the dimly lit, subterranean car park of the hotel, the latter asks why he has never seen them before. The protagonist responds: 'Because we are the people you do not see. We are the ones who drive your cabs, we clean your rooms, and suck your cocks.' In the film, it is the invisible labour of Okwe and his peers that ensures that the utopian vision London holds sway. As Juan tells Okwe: 'strangers come to hotels in the night to do dirty things – and in the morning it's our job to make things pretty again'. The lustrous success of global London, the film suggests, is dependent on the exploitation of migrant labour. Indeed, as Gibson writes, although the underclass of asylum seekers are 'paid for their services, this does not reflect the degree to which these marginal services maintain the state and its economy' (2006: 700). As such, the two geographical imaginaries of London as a pretty and a dirty city are locked into a mutually reinforcing relationship.

The notion of utopia has a particular resonance with the likes of Senay and Okwe, for whom Britain represents both a means of escape and a better life. However, while they have been granted asylum by the British government, they are forbidden to enter the official workplace. The promised land for which they hoped does not exist. Indeed, as Frears himself has commented in reference to this dimension of the film: 'The truth is, nowhere is utopia'

(Cythia, 2003: 11). Significantly, this is borne out in the Greek etymology of the word 'utopia', which is derived from two different roots: 'eu'-topia (meaning 'a better place') and 'ou'-topia (meaning 'nowhere'). The overlapping of these two meanings can be found in the location of the airport. Figuring in both the film's opening and final sequences, the airport conveys both Senay and Okwe's anticipation of pastures new, and their lack of cultural and geographical belonging. According to Gibson in reference to the film, 'the airport, as a place of transit, is a place of arrival and departure, one of the "doors" into the British nation' (2006: 699). In the final sequence, the pair bid a tearful farewell to each other; Okwe prepares to return to Nigeria, while Senay flies New York to work in her cousin's café. For Senay and Okwe, the utopian London which they originally sought is what Foucault (1986: 3) has described: a 'placeless place'; it is a nowhere which exists only within the realms of fantasy. As London for Senay ceases to be the utopian space she once imagined, she now projects the image of New York instead as the promised land. In an earlier scene, she enthuses about it to Okwe, imagining the city as a place of white police horses, trees with hanging lights and skating rinks. In invoking this image of New York, Senay is able momentarily to transcend the drudgery of life in London. Before she embarks on her flight, however, she finally realizes that utopia is but a powerful construct of the imagination. In a brief moment of emotional indecision, she tells Okwe to describe Lagos to her, and asks if they have hotels that need maids. Attempting to convince her to accompany him to Nigeria, Okwe replies: 'When you arrive at the airport, you will see a whole line of yellow cabs. The guy will take you across the bridge. When you cross the river you will see lights in the trees, policemen on white horses ...' Senay then interrupts: 'No, I know that it won't be like that. Goodbye Okwe.'

Bodies as circulation, circulating bodies

The spatial tensions of globalization which are played out in the film are also reinforced and sustained through systems of circulation, and this is most vividly revealed in a crucial early scene. On inspecting one of the hotel bathrooms, Okwe finds that the toilet is blocked and water is seeping out onto the floor. Investigating the cause of the blockage, Okwe makes a grisly discovery: a human heart. An impossible POV shot, from an underwater angle deep within the toilet bowl, registers Okwe's horrified face as he dislodges the heart from the pipe. As he carefully lifts the organ from the toilet, the swirling eddies of the water become infused with blood. The human heart is, we will see, is also the figurative heart of the story; it serves as a *mise en abyme* which dramatizes several of the spatial and economic concerns of the film. First, the discovery establishes a thriller-type enigma which, in turn, leads to Okwe's subsequent uncovering of an organ trafficking ring at his hotel. Second, and on a more symbolic level, the heart is central to the greater network of global

capitalism in which the characters of the film are caught. As Richard Sennett (1994: 255–6) demonstrates, the English physician William Harvey's discovery that the heart pumps blood through the arteries of the body not only transformed our understanding of the human body, but also helped to forge the structure of modern capitalism. Like the body, capitalism is dependent on a system of circulation: just as the heart circulates blood through the body, so labour and goods circulate efficiently through the myriad routes of the free market. Although clandestine, organ trafficking is intimately embedded within a similar system of circulation.

As we have seen, the system of circulation in which they find themselves is far from founded on equal and individual choice. In a recent article on the relationship between organ trafficking and globalization, the anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes writes:

[t]he global traffic in organs follows the modern routes of capital and labour flows, and conforms to the usual lines of social and economic cleavage. In general, the organs flow from South to North, from poor to rich, from black and brown to white, and from female to male bodies. (2001: 45)

These structural inequalities are clearly manifested in the film. As Okwe soon discovers, Juan exchanges the kidneys of poor, illegal immigrants for forged British passports, the organs are then sold on to wealthy receivers for £10,000. As Juan tells Okwe, his business is 'based on happiness': the receiver of the kidney gets cured, while the giver gets to opportunity to stay, he says, 'in this beautiful country'. But it is the unequal channelling of capital, from organ giver to organ receiver, that sustains both Juan's so-called business of happiness and the utopian vision of the free market. Moreover, this system of circulation is dependent upon a stark tension between invisibility and visibility, absence and presence. While the givers are anonymous, dehumanized objects, whose bodies become dangerously sick and impaired, the receivers are wealthy patients, who, in obtaining the required organs, become cured and complete. Ironically, it is because of the immigrants' desperation to become officially recognized – and, therefore, visible – subjects that they are forced to reduce themselves to anonymous objects. Their attempts to be included and accepted, therefore, result in their subsequent status as damaged and incomplete; they become fragmented, both physically and symbolically. In common with the typical protagonist of thriller, however, Okwe is an active, goal-oriented character, who, unlike the majority of the victims of organ trafficking, is eventually able to resist and transcend the economic system which regulates him. In the film's denouement, Okwe cannily (and somewhat implausibly) ensures that Juan gets his come-uppance: in getting him drunk and anaesthetizing him, Okwe is able to remove his kidney, and exchange it for passports; as a result, Okwe and Senay are therefore able to leave the country legally. Therefore, much like blood or any other liquid, the movements of immigrants do not always keep within the walls that contain them. Like blood

cells that occasionally are able to seep through the walls of the arteries, illegal migrants may similarly escape through the borders that seek to both channel and regulate them.

Elsewhere in the film, the theme of mobility is similarly presented as both precariously liquid and closely regulated. The narrative is firmly focalized through the constant movement of Okwe, who by constantly chewing betel nut, is able to both move between and stay awake through the lengthy shifts of his two unofficial jobs. The opening sequence sees Okwe weaving his way through the departures lounge in the airport, touting for potential customers for the minicab that he drives. A fidgety, hand-held camera underscores the dynamic movement within the scene, while the prominent use of shallow focus in one shot alienates the protagonist from his surroundings. In the following shot, we see Okwe in his minicab, driving his passengers through a tunnel; the warm, amber illumination of the overhead lighting creates a pronounced zebra-like play between shadow and light, which flickers across the actors' faces. The presence of the tunnel serves to further develop the metaphorical relationship between the body and mobility: it functions as the arteries of the city, a submerged space which channels the constant flow of people in and out of London. A long shot then captures Okwe's minicab snaking its way through a dark, imposing railway arch; a further shot pans and tilts from railway track above to the minicab office below, where Okwe finally parks the vehicle. While this opening sequence clearly conveys the importance of movement to the narrative, it also exposes the ways in which the 'unofficial' mobilities of illegal immigrants like Okwe are bound up with an underlying dynamic of social exclusion and dislocation. As the hidden, shadowy location of the minicab office suggests, Okwe is only able to inhabit and pass through clandestine and unofficial spaces. Movement in the film, therefore, is mediated by a structural division between high and low, freedom and exclusion and, most significantly, the visible and the invisible.

This division is played out in the *mise en scène* of the hotel where Okwe and Senay work, a large, resplendent Victorian building. Early on, an establishing shot captures the hotel all its grandeur, illuminated at night. The static camera, along with the fixed, established solidity of the old building, throw into relief the presence of the hotel's constantly revolving doors, through which its guests and foreign workers alike enter and exit. While tourists and businessmen are free to pass through the doors when they please, their stay within the hotel is dependent on the precarious employment of foreign workers, whose movement is subject to surveillance and control. The hotel in the film therefore becomes the interface between 'the cosmopolitan global mobile elites and the "invisible" people who clean up after them and service them' (Gibson, 2006: 700). Senay, for instance, can first be seen in the film as a flickering image on a CCTV monitor, as she enters through the doors of the hotel. It is at these doors, moreover, that the immigration officers later unsuccessfully await Senay in order to arrest her for working illegally. As a grainy, depthless image, Senay is presented as symbolically absent – a notion that, as

we have seen, is played upon ironically in Ivan's description of her as an incorporeal 'little angel'.

In a slightly later scene set in Senay's flat, the global mechanisms of mobility are brought vividly into play. Attempting to run a bath, she finds that there is no hot water; she soon discovers that this is because Okwe is doing the washing up in the kitchen, and is therefore using up the little hot water that they have. Senay promptly tells Okwe to stop, explaining to him: 'Can't you see? Everything here is connected to everything else.' Here, the liquidity of capitalism is symbolically conveyed as a global network of interconnections, and this particular dynamic can be further examined from a spatial perspective through both Foucault and Massey. As a space in which 'all other real sites' are 'simultaneously represented, contested and inverted', a heterotopia is not just a characteristic of one specific place, but a particular *relation between* different places. Indeed, Foucault writes elsewhere in the lecture that '[o]ur epoch is one in which space takes for us the *form of relations among sites*' (1986: 2, emphasis added). The interrelatedness of spaces, it would appear, is also integral to the transnational success of neoliberal capitalism. While Foucault does not specifically mention space on a global scale, Massey develops the same concept within the context of globalization. According to her, contemporary space should be understood *relationally*: it is 'the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the tiny' (2005: 9). She goes on to argue that 'precisely because space is a product of relations-between, relations which are embedded in material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made' (Massey, 2005: 9). The heterotopic space of globalization can thus be seen as a patchwork of economic interdependencies that forges connections from the international to the local. Senay and Okwe, therefore, are presented as being caught up in this nexus of global flows: their regulated movement, like the unequal channelling of liquid capital, contributes toward the production of heterotopic space.

If global capitalism projects a utopian vision of the world, this is because, according to Massey, the story of globalization has predominantly been told from the geographical speaking position of the powerful (1999: 43). As we have seen, *Dirty Pretty Things* seeks to address this imbalance: in focalizing the experience of the free global market from the perspective of its victims, *Dirty Pretty Things* seeks to reveal the exclusionary mechanisms on which the implacable logic of globalization has sustained itself. While migrants like Okwe and Senay may once have imagined a boundless and unfettered utopia of opportunity, as this article has shown, it is only the powerful who can truly experience it as a reality. In examining the contradictory geographical imaginaries of London, the commodification of the migrant body and the various systems of liquid mobility on which neoliberal capitalism depends, this article has shown how *Dirty Pretty Things* how can further our understanding of the paradoxical structures of globalized space.

Notes

- 1 Its representation of London, therefore, is antithetical to what Charlotte Brundson (2007) has termed 'Landmark London', which can be seen in recent films such as *Closer* (Mike Nichols, 2004).
- 2 The geographer David Sibley (1995) traces the association in Britain between defilement and the poor from the Victorian era to the present day. According to the author, once living conditions had improved and the poor were sanitized, the same notions of the dirt and disease were later used to construct images of immigrants, thereby conflating defilement with the language of racism (1995: 58).

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