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Reflections on the Aesthetics of Violence

Arnold Berleant

Abstract

Violence has long been a factor in human life and has been widely depicted in the arts. This essay explores how the artistic and appreciative responses to violence have been practiced, understood, and valued. It emphasizes the difference between the aesthetics of distant, disinterested appreciation and the engaged appreciative experience of violence in the arts, and insists on the relevance of their behavioral and ethical implications.

Key Words

aesthetic appreciation; aesthetic engagement; aesthetic experience; disinterestedness; ethics; morality; negative aesthetics; perception; violence

1. Aesthetics positive and negative

The words 'aesthetic' and 'aesthetics' are often used casually to refer to the arts, to the pleasurable experience we have with them, and to beauty as the distinctive mark of that experience. In its most general import aesthetics concerns sensible experience, experience centering around perceptual events and the elaboration and refinement of sensory awareness. This is reflected in the etymology of the word 'aesthetics,' which derives from the Greek *aisthesis*, perception by the senses. Such experience is not purely sensory but is colored by culture, education, and personal history. Developing a sensitivity to perceptual experiences is one of the gratifications of living: delight in the subtle signs of seasonal change, in the curved volume of a Chinese vase, in the imaginative unfolding of the intricate plot of a Dickens novel, in the spontaneous expression

of a child's response. But at the same time as this perceptual capacity is enhanced, it becomes more vulnerable to abuse and to pain.

All these possibilities derive from the philosophical sense of those terms, which identify the aesthetic as the value we recognize in the largely perceptual experience we have in appreciating the arts and natural phenomena. Often those experiences and the value we find in them are called "beautiful" and "beauty," and philosophical aesthetics is the study concerned with identifying and exploring them. However, we must recognize that not only are some experiences of art and nature not beautiful in the positive sense of the word, but they may be disappointing, demeaning, offensive, or even hurtful. Thus the aesthetic value of an object or experience may be negative as well as positive, and this requires us to recognize the range of aesthetic value in its various degrees and modes. We can call an aesthetic experience negative, then, when the aesthetic value in such experiences lies beyond being merely neutral, that is, insipid, bland, or unmoving, but rather is offensive, demeaning, repugnant, or even painful.[1]

It is important not to confuse negative aesthetics with aesthetic failure, that is, bad art, bland architecture, formulaic writing. Failure occurs when an artistic attempt does not succeed in creating the direct perceptual participation of aesthetic engagement that is the mark of successful art. Of course, here, too, there are degrees of failure as there are degrees of success, but in all such cases the value we call aesthetic is more or less inadequately realized. Recognizing aesthetic failure is important in extending the range of aesthetic perception. My concern here, however, is not so much with failure as with its contradiction.

Aesthetic negativity is widespread in daily life but its presence is often obscure and hidden, in part because it is commonplace and unremarked. I want to explore here one of the manifestations of such negativity: the conjunction of the aesthetic with violence. This critique does not oppose the artistic appropriation of violence. It condemns its social acceptance through turning the presentation of violence into an object of disinterested appreciation. When aesthetic appreciation of violence is engaged, however, it becomes a humanizing force by giving negative testimony to the moral import of aesthetic experience.

Negative aesthetic experience occurs in many guises, from the offensive environmental conditions that shadow daily life to the drama of terrorist attacks, but perhaps the most egregious instances of negative experience are those that inflict physical or emotional pain. A distinctive feature of pain is the difference

between the experience of one's own pain and the pain of others. We blindly avoid the first, whereas the pain of others seems to exert a strange fascination. How is such pain experienced? Wherein lies the fascination with the pain of others? Our understanding of aesthetic experience may help reveal some of the contours of these questions.

Rather than aesthetic failure, the issue here concerns the relation of aesthetics to violence. This discussion, however, does not honor the aestheticization of violence; that is, I am not concerned here with the motives, significance, or consequences of efforts to idealize violence by turning it into an object for delectation.[2] Violence has often been made appealing by prettifying, romanticizing, or sentimentalizing its appearances, that is, by aestheticizing it. The present discussion, however, centers not on how or why violence may be given a positive cast but on ways of understanding the aesthetic experience of violence as it occurs in the arts.

2. Art and violence

The practice of joining aesthetic values with violent content is found in most societies, and its frequency in recent times suggests that it has become a dominant theme. Because violence so permeates the media, it is easy to overlook the fact that the fascination with violence has ancient origins. Not only are prehistoric images of hunting scenes found on Paleolithic cave walls; ritual sacrifice was practiced in the early history of many cultures. National art museums feature paintings that depict famous historic battles. Uccello's fifteenth century depiction of *The Battle of San Romano* is a classic example,[3] as is J.M.W. Turner's dramatic painting of *The Battle of Trafalgar*. [4] Many other artists turned to the drama inherent in violent events for their inspiration, and embodied them in graphic scenes of the chaos and horror of massacres and battlegrounds, the most famous modern example of war-borne violence undoubtedly being Picasso's *Guernica*. [5] Paintings of the crucifixion of Jesus constitute a genre in their own right, and extend from the beautified portrayal of Rubens [6] to Grünewald's grisly depiction. [7] It is easily overlooked that the prevalence of the cross in Christian iconology idealizes an instrument of torture, turning the cross into a symbol and an ornament. Nor is literature far behind in its dramatization of violence, from the bloody battles in the *Iliad* and the murders that inform the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, to the dramatic accounts of Shakespeare and Tolstoy. The violence of battle has been romanticized for English-language schoolchildren, who are taught to admire Tennyson's Crimean War poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade." [8] And from war slogans to the titles of laws that by legal strictures and

oppression terrorize the lives of refugees, immigrants, and simply poor citizens, rhetoric is regularly put to the purpose of sanitizing legal violence.

All of this is familiar to those who find in the arts distinctively rich occasions of experience and recognize the prevalence of violence in art. Indeed, we can easily trace the fascination with violence in multiple aspects of contemporary popular culture. Ranging from deadly chases to full-fledged battles in space, violence is as vividly depicted today in film, television, and video games as it was in the past in painting and theater. Moreover, this pattern continues in sports and in contemporary ritual and performance art. Here the vision has changed from paintings that recall past violence to enjoying and even participating in actual violence in the process of occurring. What kind of aesthetic pleasure is found here? What kind of aesthetic is at work when the perceptual experience leads not only to the enhancement of awareness that is one of the marks of aesthetic appreciation but also to dismay, pain, and the mortification of moral feeling?

This brings us to the crux of the issue. A concern with the aesthetics of violence is a matter quite separate from the perpetration of violence that, in its many forms, so imbues the world of the present. The ubiquitous association of violence with the arts has special significance, not only as an issue in philosophical aesthetics, but as a problem in its relation to ethics. The larger question, of course, concerns the appeal of violence in human social behavior, an attraction that encourages commercial as well as political exploitation in addition to its artistic appropriation. My discussion here centers on one aspect of this issue: the influence of aesthetic appreciation on the acceptance and promotion of violence. For questions of aesthetic appreciation are not only about the distinctive experience of art and nature *eo ipso*: appreciative practice also carries moral implications and social consequences.

Human violence has changed in form and extent over the course of human history and, as I noted earlier, it is obvious that acts of violence are experienced differently by the perpetrator and the victim. But what of the spectator? Institutionalized exhibitions of violence have long-standing popularity. There was a large Roman audience for gladiatorial combat in the Coliseum, and jousting was a frequent martial entertainment in Europe in the Middle Ages. Many sports are combative, even if not as overtly as football and fencing. Violence has proliferated in ways other than by direct physical harm. Many social critics are devoted to exposing the subtle and ingenious forms of institutional violence and structural violence that infuse modern societies, and they urge peaceful alternatives.[9]

I am concerned here, however, only with the aesthetics of violence, violence that assumes various forms of perceptual experience in art and culture. This is far from a purely theoretical philosophical fancy. Not only a subject-matter, the arts are regularly used to contribute to war frenzy and have long played a role in romanticizing violent events. I have noted how the history of painting is replete with renderings of violence, from crucifixions to battles and executions. Think of the many versions of Judith with the head of Holofernes, a favorite subject in Italian Renaissance painting.[10] Where would Elizabethan drama be without murders? Where would film be without chases, fights, and war scenes? Not only is violence widespread in human societies; it has long been reflected as a subject in the arts. The history of the arts displays no evolution toward moderation and benevolence but, on the contrary, shows increasingly imaginative exhibitions of violence. Consider Kovalcik and Rynnänen's account of the contemporary Viennese actionists:

Their Orgies-Mysteries Theater (1970-) at Schloss Prinzdorf has included a large number of performers and spectators who have performed Dionysiac orgies of blood and gore. The activities of this group performance included ritual disembowelment of different animals (bulls, sheep), the act of stuffing entrails back into hacked-open carcasses, pouring blood on actors representing Christ and Oedipus, and night-time processions around Prinzdorf with goats, pigs, horses, sheep dogs and cattle, not to mention actors who bore flaming torches. One member of the group, Günter Brus, drank his own urine, and sang the Austrian National Anthem while masturbating in another performance, and Hans Cibulka posed with a sliced open fish covering his groin.[11]

Vienna is not alone in attracting artistic expressions of violence. Violence in art has become a reflection of the ever-increasing social violence of the present world. Witness the continuing popularity of the quasi-documentary (mondo) horror film, *Faces of Death*, and its sequels. Performance art that disfigures the body, temporarily or permanently, is common, and self-mutilation is a frequent feature. Marina Abramović is an early and major exponent of such performances, and some of her work involves audience participation in body deformation. Sites of natural as well as human violence have a grisly attraction, and disaster tourism has become a profitable commercial enterprise. The popularity of the American crime drama, *The Sopranos*, in which murder is as casual as eating breakfast, confirms the observation of the rock musician who commented, "Violence is as American as apple pie." [12] Violence takes imaginative forms with different degrees of subtlety in the various genres of art. It is an easy matter to document the prevalence of violence in the arts, not to mention the larger

society, and those I have cited are but a small sample. But it is as a philosophical issue that the role of the aesthetic appreciation of violence has evaded critical analysis.

3. The aesthetic enjoyment of violence

The aesthetic enjoyment of violent spectacles may seem sadistic; yet, as we have seen, it has a long history. Violence has had an eager audience, from the throngs that filled the Roman Coliseum to the onlookers at public hangings or lynchings. Some people attend boxing and wrestling matches or football and hockey games from similar motives. These spectacles are ritualized performances, and the dynamics of such displays are not unlike those of theater.

Yet what is their aesthetic? The question calls to be asked, How can witnessing violence be satisfying? How can violence, with its attendant brutality and pain, provide aesthetic pleasure? When art romanticizes, idealizes, or glorifies violence, does it mean that it is being used to sanitize and justify such acts? Is this what Henry R. Giroux calls an aesthetics of depravity, "an aesthetics that traffics in images of human suffering that are subordinated to the formal properties of beauty, design and taste—thus serving in the main to 'bleach out a moral response to what is shown'"? Giroux mourns the growth of a "culture of cruelty" in which people find aesthetic satisfaction in images of violence. [13] These may be ethical concerns more than aesthetic ones, yet they demand attention here since moral issues are embedded in the aesthetic on which the enjoyment of violence rests. As an ethical phenomenon, such enjoyment may confound the moralist more than the aesthetician, who has been told to keep aesthetics clear of ethical interests.

Psychological questions are intimately involved, as well. Theodor Adorno put the key issue squarely: "The inability to identify with others was unquestionably the most important psychological condition for the fact that something like Auschwitz could have occurred in the midst of more or less civilized and innocent people." [14] The incapability of empathizing is a crucial question for social psychology, yet it also has an intimate bearing on the aesthetics of appreciation. But while the enjoyment of violence clearly implicates ethical and psychological issues, the attraction it holds also has social and political dimensions, as Benjamin recognized when he identified violence as central to a fascist aesthetic. [15] However, the question for us here is not psychological or political but aesthetic, and it concerns the aesthetics of appreciation: how is the appreciation of violence possible and what are its implications? And I return to the issue with which I began, the philosophical issue lurking behind this question: what kind of aesthetic is at work here? For this is an aesthetic issue as well as a moral one.

Aesthetic appreciation follows many forms and occurs under many conditions, not only in the arts but in the informal experiences of daily life: the passing delight in the color and texture of a piece of fabric, the momentary illumination of a shaft of light, the play of shadows on winter snow, the panoramic view of a landscape. And the many forms of the popular arts evoke appreciative responses, from boisterous enthusiasm to maudlin emotion.

When aesthetic satisfaction is sought deliberately, different patterns may prevail. One pattern is exemplified by the spectator disinterestedly contemplating a painting in a gallery or witnessing a theatrical performance. This pattern incorporates the "official" aesthetic conventionally employed by critics and scholars and embodied in formal exhibitions in museums and traditional performances. It is grounded on an ontology of objects separated by use, function, and interest. This is the pattern of most inquiry, scientific as well as practical problem-solving: the pattern of an observer regarding a distinct and separate object. It takes a special, distinct form in the disinterested contemplation of art as object or spectacle. And it enables the aesthetic enjoyment of violence.

4. Violence and aesthetic engagement

There is another pattern of aesthetic enjoyment, one that reflects a distinctive sense of the world of human experience. It is found in many places and situations that exhibit a particular sense of involvement, of a connection and participation with an object and the occasion. It can be found in the wild enthusiasm of the audience at a rock concert but also in the imaginative participation of the viewer of a film, the engagement of the reader in the world of a novel, and in the absorption of the listener at a musical performance. We easily experience appreciative engagement with drama in film, theater, and the novel, as well as in dance. Sometimes this perceptual engagement is spoken of as empathy; sometimes the experience is described as being "caught up" or "carried away." It is important to make clear that this is not just a state of consciousness, a psychological condition, but an act of full bodily engagement. There may be overt physical participation in foot tapping, head nodding, muscular tension, tears, perspiration, an increased heart rate, and other signs of physical involvement. But it may also be restrained, intense, internalized participation, though no less engaged. Vastly different from the distancing of disinterested contemplation, engagement in an aesthetic process is familiar to both the creative artist and the performing artist. Such experience embodies a different worldview from the contemplative aesthetic usually assigned to the spectator. Engaged appreciation is more familiar to Eastern

cultures that have been deeply influenced by Taoism and Buddhism, worldviews that emphasize a continuity of humans and nature and that embrace the particularity of perceptual experience.[16] When manifested in the aesthetic appreciation of art and nature, this aesthetic is known as aesthetic engagement.

What kind of aesthetic theory supports the satisfaction of regarding violence? I suggest that there is indeed an aesthetic that underlies the benign appreciation of violence. It is an aesthetic that turns the focus of aesthetic experience into an object of contemplation, that separates aesthetic satisfaction from personal interests and regards aesthetic pleasure as disinterested. This is the familiar aesthetic of Western cultures, first developed by British theorists early in the eighteenth century and later given theoretical formulation by Kant. It identifies aesthetic enjoyment as a contemplative state of consciousness directed toward an external object. This is an aesthetic in which "taste in the beautiful is alone a disinterested and free satisfaction...The object of such satisfaction is called *beautiful*." [17] Kantian aesthetic pleasure projects a distanced spectator and enables aesthetic gratification without concern for uses or consequences and without incurring moral judgment. It recognizes aesthetic satisfaction but interprets its condition as the disinterested contemplation of a perceptual object. It is an aesthetic that abets the representation of violence.

An aesthetic of disinterested satisfaction tolerates and even encourages the appetite for violence of an uninvolved voyeur. It objectifies the material of aesthetic gratification and insulates the subjective enjoyment from any misgivings or moral qualms. [18] An aesthetic of distance allows violence to be tolerable, acceptable, even pleasurable because it projects appreciative experience as the enjoyment of a disinterested spectator toward an object insulated from any moral or practical interest. [19]

An aesthetics of engagement, by contrast, identifies a different kind of aesthetic sensibility, one that rests on an interpenetration of subject and object. Indeed, it transcends that dualism in a continuity of perceptual experience and concern. Moral interests are not foreign to an engaged aesthetics. Such an aesthetics recognizes that the inhumanity of violence is germane to aesthetic engagement and is not reluctant to recognize the moral concerns inherent in negative aesthetic experience. Far from the aestheticized paintings of Uccello and Turner, paintings that encourage disinterestedness by muting the violence in their representations through painterly grace and sensory delectation, an aesthetics of

engagement leads to a quite different experience. It is the direct encounter with violence that is the aesthetic force in Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece[20] and Pieter Brueghel the Elder's "Triumph of Death." [21] An aesthetics of engagement encourages empathetic human feeling. It recognizes the inseparability of the moral and the aesthetic in the confrontation with violence in the arts. Moral interest is inescapably present; it is inherent in the encounter with the image. To exclude or ignore the moral content in such depictions of violence is to eviscerate the image, to render it lifeless. By the standard of such experience, the aesthetics of violence is unqualifiedly negative: It is not contemplatively benign or complaisant but appalling. The engaged aesthetic of violent occasions produces experiences that are never pleasant but are genuinely distressing emotionally and repugnant morally. It is a direct encounter with negativity.

5. Aesthetics and the moral significance of violence

In our age of widespread violence, perhaps its most egregious manifestation is the proliferation of acts of terrorism. Terrorism is an especially vicious expression of violence. Acts of terrorism, by their very nature, have dramatic impact; this, indeed, may be their larger purpose. The aesthetic character of terrorism lies largely in its bizarre drama, its deliberately staged theatricality. Thus we may speak of an aesthetics of terrorism.[22] Through their aesthetic impact, acts of terror overpower the boundaries of objectivity. Their audience, the public, is not disinterested; it feels threatened and vulnerable. The perpetrators of terror may themselves be disinterested, their specific effects arbitrary, and their victims impersonal and abstract—an ethnic group, a nationality, a race, a religious community. However, the experience of the onlooker or witness is personal and compelling—an engaged aesthetic.

Such a critique does not oppose the artistic appropriation of violence; it condemns its benign or tolerant appreciative acceptance. Turning the presentation of violence into an object of disinterested appreciation acts as a vindication of violence. An aesthetic that promotes the distancing of violent acts and events reinforces acquiescence in the public and private violence that pervade the world of the twenty-first century. By contrast, engaging with violence aesthetically can sensitize and chasten those who encounter it. Disinterested appreciation has the effect of condoning violence by aestheticizing it, whereas when aesthetic appreciation is engaged, it can become a humanizing force by leading us to confront the aesthetic negativity of violence. Aesthetic experience then becomes a testimony to the moral significance of aesthetic experience. The aesthetics of violence is a decisive test for aesthetic theory.[23]

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Endnotes

[1] Negative aesthetics is a substantive domain of aesthetic value that is not identical with aesthetic failures, as in kitsch, insipid art, or thoroughly unsuccessful art. Identifying and recognizing negative aesthetics is a critical dimension of aesthetic appreciation. See Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2010); *Aesthetics beyond the Arts: New and Recent Essays* (Farnham, UK & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012); Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar* (Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 169-170, 214-216.

[2] The writings of the Marquis de Sade are an extreme case but hardly representative of the common phenomenon of aestheticizing violence.

[3]
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Battle_of_San_Romano#/media/File:Uccello_Battle_of_San_Romano_Uffizi.jpg

[4]
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Battle_of_Trafalgar_\(painting\)#/media/File:Turner,_The_Battle_of_Trafalgar_\(1822\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Battle_of_Trafalgar_(painting)#/media/File:Turner,_The_Battle_of_Trafalgar_(1822).jpg)

[5]
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernica_\(Picasso\)#/media/File:PicassoGuernica.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernica_(Picasso)#/media/File:PicassoGuernica.jpg)

[6]
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peter_Paul_Rubens,_Cr

ucifixion,_c.1618-1620.jpg

[7]

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isenheim_Altarpiece#/media/File:Grunewald_Isenheim1.jpg

[8] Alfred, Lord Tennyson's narrative poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854):

Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

[9] One famous example is William James's essay, "The Moral Equivalent of War," which advocates disciplined social service as an alternative.

[10] Giorgione, "Judith," 1504.

http://www.dailyartmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Giorgione_-_Judith_-_Eremitage-449x1024.jpg

[11] Jozef Kovalcik and Max Ryyänen, "The Art Scenes," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 16 (2018), §4.

[12] I owe this quotation and some of the examples to William Pardue.

[13] Henry A. Giroux, "Disturbing Pleasures: Murderous Images and the Aesthetics of Depravity," *Third Text*, 26/3, (May 2012), pp. 259–273. Giroux quotes Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 263.

[14] Theodor Adorno, "Education after Auschwitz," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, Henry W. Pickford, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 201.

[15] Cf. Giroux, *op. cit.* p. 263: "Walter Benjamin's claim is that in late modernity the mesmerising and seductive language of power underlies captivating spectacles that inextricably fuse aesthetics with a Fascist politics. To his credit Benjamin recognised the affective force of aesthetics and its at times perverse ability to 'privilege cultural forms over ethical norms' while mobilising emotions, desires and pleasures that delight in human suffering and become parasitic upon the pain of others. Benjamin's notion of the aesthetic and its relation to Fascism is important, in spite of appearing deterministic, because it highlights how fascist spectacles use the force of titillating sensations and serve to privilege the emotive and visceral at the expense of thoughtful engagement. In his analysis of Benjamin's notion of the aesthetic, Lutz Koepnick develops this point further by exploring how the fascist aesthetic 'mobilizes people's feelings primarily to neutralize their senses, massaging minds

and emotions so that the individual succumbs to the charisma of vitalistic power.”

[16] The union of nature and the human is a central feature in the philosophy of the twentieth-century French aesthetician, Mikel Dufrenne. See Maryvonne Saison, *La Nature artiste. Mikel Dufrenne de l'esthétique au politique (Nature as Artist: Mikel Dufrenne, from aesthetics to politics)*(Paris: Editions de la Sorbonne, 2018).A brief summary can be found under Recent Publications in *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 16 (2018).

[17] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), §5, pp. 4-5.

[18] As Adorno famously observed, “Auschwitz begins wherever someone looks at a slaughterhouse and thinks: they’re only animals.”

[19] In an interesting parallel, Joseph Kupfer associated the aesthetics of what he terms “ultra-violence” with objectifying its victims. See his *Experience as Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), pp. 54-55. He also found a social aesthetic implicit in the prevalence of violence. Cf. pp. 61-65.

[20]
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isenheim_Altarpiece#/media/File:Grunewald_Isenheim1.jpg

[21]
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Triumph_of_Death#/media/File:TheTriumphofdeath.jpg

[22] The aesthetics of terrorism is the subject of “Art, Terrorism, and the Negative Sublime,” first published in *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 7 (2009). Reprinted in *Arts and Terror*, ed. V. L. Marchenkov (Cambridge Scholars Publ., 2014), pp. 1-15. Reprinted in *Artenol*, Winter 2016, pp. 24-31. Originally published in Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2010), Ch.10.

[23] Other works consulted include Anna Mirzayan, “Creating Killing Machines: On the Relationship between Art and Predation in Surveillance Capitalism,” *Evental Aesthetics*, 7/2 (2018); Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*(New York: Schocken Books, 1986); Scott Nethersole, *Art and Violence in Early Renaissance Florence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

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