Arts-based research and the creative PhD

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Art and dreadful manners

'Great art has dreadful manners', writes Simon Schama at the beginning of his book *Power of Art*.[1] Of course, we may ask, just what is 'great' art? Or dreadful manners, come to that. Nevertheless, Schama further suggests that the greatest paintings are merciless and wily, they 'grab you in a headlock, rough up your composure and then proceed in short order to rearrange your sense of reality.' This idea – that art can in some way precipitate internal change, promote a changed perception of reality – is an important one that I used in my doctorate. Yet, held tightly in the jaws of academe by the sharp teeth of the paradigms that have come to rule it (think, for example: funding, staffing; the need for publications; firmly held preconceptions about the nature of the arts), how can we produce arts-based research and be taken seriously? How do those 'dreadful manners' sit with supervisors, examiners and academic institutions?

I managed to chart my course through the shoals of an arts-based PhD (completing in 2006), miraculously without getting either totally shipwrecked or eaten by sharks. Though I did have to survive the odd sharp nibble, my working parts are still basically intact. This paper incorporates some of the ideas that were my PhD life-belts, my Floaties, interspersed with ideas concerning arts-based research from the literature.

My thesis concerned autobiography, memory and identity. Its final form was two artist's books (one is autobiographical, containing many images, and the other is theoretical and is illustrated) enclosed in a cardboard box painted to look like a steamer trunk, despite university regulations about formal bindings for the cover. This badly-mannered breach of regulations was achieved with support from my supervisor and panel. You can see a digital representation of my books on the web as part of the Australian Digital Thesis program.[2]

Despite my allusion to 'great art' at the start of this paper, the kind of art I am writing about in this paper is not that found in the pieces that are sold at Christies or Sothebys to multi-millionaires to confirm their own self-worth (although many of them are indeed admirable works – and I do mean the paintings), but is the 'ordinary', generic art that has not yet been 'discovered,' but may be explored in a creative doctorate. This kind of arts-based research encompasses creative writing, visual art, electronic and digital art – and belongs to those of us who are developing our skills, trying to express ourselves in unusual ways within the framework of an academic institution (as a starting point for future development, perhaps).

Outside our creatively-based academic work, arts-based research is being widely (though I think rather uncomfortably) espoused in research in the social sciences, particularly in Europe and the Americas. Last July I presented a paper at an Arts-Based Educational Research conference at the University of Bristol, and had food for thought about the quality of the creative product on display.

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[1] Schama (2006) p. 6.
[2] http://erl.canberra.edu.au/public/adt-AUC20070510.151236/index.html

Art? Why bother?

Robert Henri, a well-known American art teacher of the early twentieth century, wrote in his book *The Art Spirit*:

> 'There are moment in our lives, there are moments in a day, when we seem to see beyond the usual–become clairvoyant. We reach then into reality. Such are the moments of our greatest happiness. Such are the moments of our greatest wisdom.
>
> 'It is in the nature of all people to have these experiences; but in our time and under the conditions of our lives, it is only a rare few who are able to continue in the experience and find expression for it.'[3]

I call myself an artist – but what does this actually mean? Why did I choose a creative doctorate? Why did I choose to represent my life with an artist's book? Contemplating the answers to these questions led me to consider the arts and aesthetic education, and the lack of value they are generally given in a technologically- and consumer-driven society. I originally trained as an agricultural scientist and worked for many years as a researcher in the biological sciences. But this early training was grounded in life processes: there was no separation between theory and practice. Perhaps this connected attitude travels within me to my creative work in the arts. I know now that I am also a poetic and visually-oriented person, and, for me, art and science are but two paradigms out of the many that I could choose to use in my endeavours to make sense of life, of the world.

Many twentieth century artists, and art critics such as Clement Greenberg posit the doctrine of 'art for art's sake' (i.e. art is an aesthetic activity independent from everyday life as such). Nevertheless other artists and critics have argued vehemently that art and life should respond to each other.[4] My personal attributes, beliefs and tendencies put me in this camp. Like Finnish art educators, I believe that art is embodied enquiry: that imagination is as important as rigour, meanings as important as facts and that the heart is as important as the mind.[5]

Maxine Greene separates the kind of art she sees as vital (to human development) from didactic practices that contain moral or political messages, from decorative devices, from self-indulgence and from consumerism. She argues that involvement in creative practice can bring multiple domains of meaning to an idea or concept, and as such allow for the creation of new perspectives. New experiential connections and patterns of thought may be formed and new vistas opened through nurturing particular kinds of reflectivity and expressiveness that reach out for meaning. She believes the arts and aesthetic education to be essential to cognitive, perceptual, emotional and imaginative development, and that this kind of activity breaks through the 'cottonwool' of 'dailyness', passivity and boredom to engage better in the world with all its complexities. Uncoupling from the ordinary, as she puts it. Further, understanding is enriched when working with the raw materials that become part of the language in which art is expressed. But objects and events take on aesthetic existence only in transactions within the human mind, so a mind educated in art and aesthetics has the power of releasing itself from the trap of literality.[6] If art and life are indeed connected, it is a logical progression to use artistic/creative practice to tell my life story: in my thesis I used words and images within a personal aesthetic framework to make perceptible (to myself and others) my stories,

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[3] Henri (1923/1984) p. 44-45.
[4] Haynes (2003).
[5] Bochner and Ellis (2003).
[6] Greene (2001).

ideas and concepts that until this point had not been expressed, making my internal 'petrified world speak, sing and dance.'[7]

Using the language of art to express what is known, thought or felt is to be continually reminded that this language is not transparent: it can communicate less than is desired; more than the artist intends, and, if sufficiently ambiguous, can communicate completely different ideas from those intended. Under these circumstances, viewers are invited to question their own premises, and art can become a process of inquiry. In qualitative enquiry, novel modes of expression such as fiction, poetry and images may be used for expressing lived experience[8]: these forms of expression are used in my autobiographical artist's book to move towards expressing human meaning and the unfolding of lives.

Art … can it be research?

John Law and John Urry propose that the performative (i.e. any method of displaying information in subjective ways such as art, drama or creative writing) *'produces* realities.' They suggest that *'reality is a relational effect,'* and cite Heisenberg as observing a similar situation in physics: 'What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our questioning.'[9] As in physics, so too in the creative doctorate: something is brought into being, produces a reality and is exposed to questioning.

According to Law and Urry, performative methods do more than just provide a different perspective on a single reality: their results become the enactment of different realities. They also suggest that complex ideas in the social domain require complex descriptive models: they cannot be described or examined in simplicity, and are unsuited to conventional representative forms. The results of this kind of thinking produce innovative notions that travel far from conventional linear analysis.[10] This is the risky part of genuinely original work in the setting of a PhD, because of its innovation: there can be uncertainty in the student, the supervisors and the academy as to whether the new, unconventional work is acceptable. Is it genuinely 'new' or is it merely an aberration?

What is the ambiguous and uncertain space between art practice and art as research? Robyn Stewart[11] suggests that as artists we should develop more integrated and holistic understandings of art practice through research processes that articulate our conceptualisation and findings in meaningful ways.'[12] Sylvia Wilson argues that there are difficulties with the setting of boundaries and that the interplay between art production, the creative process and the product, are integral to the final outcome. It is the uncertainty, paradox and ambiguity inherent in this kind of process that together lead to a place of 'generative possibilities'.[13] This in-between, risky space is one where anything can happen, yet it is bounded by the rules of academe. This is why it is essential to have supervisors and examiners who are both sympathetic to the cause, and who are competent in the required literacies – and there may be several, most of which will emerge during the course of the project.

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[7] Marcuse (1978).
[8] Bochner and Ellis (2003).
[9] Law and Urry (2004) p.395.
[10] ibid. pp. 397-400.
[11] Stewart (2003).
[12] Stewart (2003) p. 2.
[13] Wilson (2004) p. 47.

Action research theorisation supports the position of art-as-research. For example, Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart describe the seven key features of participatory action research (PAR), a soft systems methodology.[14]

- First, PAR is a social process that 'deliberately explores the relationship between the realms of the individual and the social.'
  This is where the exegesis fits in very neatly: it places the creative work in its social/cultural context.
- Second, in PAR, people examine their knowledge, their interpretive categories and their actions in the social and material world.
  Here fits the literature review.
- Third, the work is practical and collaborative, examining the social practices that links it to the social realm.
  Here sits the edgeland between student, supervisor and university.
- Fourth, PAR is emancipatory – i.e. its aim is to help people release themselves from the constraints of the irrational, unproductive, unjust and unsatisfying social structures that limit their self-development and self-determination.
  This feature surely describes the ideal PhD process. It is a process of exploring how practices are shaped and constrained by wider social, cultural, economic and political structures.
- Fifth, PAR is critical. It re-contests and/ or reconstitutes the irrational, unproductive, unsatisfying ways of interpreting and describing their world.
  This is the creative process.
- Sixth, PAR is reflexive, recursive and dialectical, investigating reality in order to change it.
  This is the mandorla that sits between the creative work and the exegesis.
- Seventh, PAR aims to transform both theory and practice through exploring different theories, practices and discourses.
  And here is the transformative aspect of art that Schama mentions.

The traditional PhD is embedded in the problem-solving approach rather than creative production research. Yet Steven Scrivener argues that the traditional process is far from the rational, deliberate and clinical process that it appears, especially if it is a highly creative project, and involves false starts, readjustments, redefinition and uncertainty *inter alia*.[15] It is reflective practice, as is a creative project, but it is not seen in that way because the end product is neatly tied up, omitting the explorations (though they surely should be at the heart of a PhD) to look as though this is the logical outcome of what was intended from the outset. In an arts-based project, goals and issues are less well defined – they may be multiple, diffuse and broad in scope, though nonetheless rigorous and systematic, and there may be a more overt process of reflection when the scope, breadth and depth of the project may widen and deepen.[16] This process certainly happened in my project. I needed to develop several new skills as various imperatives became apparent, and these in turn led to further conundrums about how to fit in all the relevant theoretical discussions into an exegesis of about 30 000 words without being shallow and superficial. In my exegesis I used some poetic and visual devices to condense my thoughts and effect an economy with words.

The creative PhD process

Creative projects delight in, and suffer from, the balance between intentionality on one hand and emergent research on the other. Also, goals may change as the project

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[14] Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) pp. 566-568.
[15] Scrivener (2000)
[16] Scrivener (2000) pp. 6-7.

develops. In the end, I found a dialectic appeared between my concept of what I was wanting to do, and the problem-solving skills that I had (or needed to develop).

I explored ways in which my information could be manipulated to form visual and textual pieces. The process became circular and spiral: the reading and information affected the visual and textual work and the choice of content for the artist's book, and this in turn affected the direction of further reading and information gathering, so a further dialectic was set up between theory and practice.

The action research spiral (planning, acting and observing, reflection leading to a revised plan) is commented upon by Kemmis and McTaggart.[17] It is a complex process, ill-described by the notion of a spiral of self-reflective steps. In the real world, the process may encompass jumps and starts, complete revisions, or being stuck. In my case, one of the most useful things that happened involved the necessity of earning money to pay for computer programs and other items I needed. During the short break from my project I thought about it incessantly, but barely laid finger to keyboard. But, in due course, when I returned to it, many facets of the work had fallen into place and I made more progress more quickly than I would have thought possible.

Dennis Sumara lists four aspects of action research that qualify it as a postmodern practice. First, the researcher needs a willingness to abandon the safety of familiarity and predictability in texts, and to value the ambiguous and the unknown. This attitude makes perceptiveness and re-interpretation necessary tools for the action researcher and encourages the production of new knowledge rather than just reportage. Second, more value must be given to reflection on experience rather than on practice, because reflection on practice does not necessarily engage with the larger field within which practice is embedded. The third aspect is to do with embodiment. He sees each body located in a historical, cultural, political and biological space that inevitably configures its' personal and professional knowledge, that affects its' attitudes and responses to new knowledge, and that must be taken into account when interpreting research findings 'because of the way in which location, human action and desire continually co-merge with one another.' Sumara finally stresses the importance of creating forms that reflect the above complexities rather than producing trite cause-and-effect generalisations.[18]

In this spirit, as I reflected upon my new information and experience, I made decisions about:
- how to fit the whole of my life (longer than I care to admit) into a relatively small book and a short time frame of three years
- what to omit from my book, based on ethical decisions to do with the living and protecting their rights–some of their material was too personal expose in this way
- how to articulate the information I did choose to use.

Throughout the process I undertook a form of self-assessment through journaling to note personal changes (as far as possible in such a subjective area). Through reading and experimentation I transformed my family information into abstracted, concise forms for the artist's book, using electronic technology.

This spiral process of information gathering and reflection could have continued *ad infinitum*, but a stop was called because there seemed little extra relevant information to gather; the time frame of the project dictated a halt, but more than those parameters, I had a feeling of completion.

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[17] Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) pp. 563-566.
[18] Sumara (1998).

Art-as-research … with attitude

In my experience, a common attitude to art-as-research is that it is some kind of soft option, an aberration allowed by a university that is some kind of twilight home for bewildered creative people.

Perhaps positivistic people are threatened by the potential bad manners of the arts. Frances Rapport and her co-authors call the edgelands, transitional areas where interdisciplinary collaboration can happen, places that can appear menacing, that can seem to flaunt participation in activities that are only partially understood by those that stand firmly in one discipline or another. Yet it is those transitional areas where most change can happen.[19] And art-as-research has an unexpected resonance with sociology: Law and Urry write that there has been an 'attribution of extraordinary subversive powers to the discipline of sociology, though this has been deflected to cultural studies, women's studies or science studies (undermining the properly rational appreciation of the scientific basis of Western/ North American) technoscience. Sociology can be treated as a joke on the one hand or a danger on the other. It is almost as if it (sociology) were the Other of scientific understanding,' they write.[20] Is art-as-research, too, seen as a joke or a dangerous pursuit with subversive powers?

Further, they suggest that 'reality is a relational effect', 'produced and stabilised in interactions that are simultaneously material and social. There is little difference between physics and social science here: theories and methods are protocols for methods of questioning or interacting which also produce realities as they interact with other kinds of interactions. … the real is produced in non-arbitrary ways, in dense and extended sets of relations.'[21] In the same way, art-as-research is both real and it is produced.

Art … who can do it, and who can examine it? The problem of multi-skilling in the practitioner, the supervisor and the examiner

How are creative products to be assessed? First, is the creative part an art work as such? Some criteria used to decide whether an artefact is an art work are described by Tony Schirato and Jen Webb: 'whether it was made with a deliberate and conscious act on the part of an artist; whether it shows a deliberate and conscious engagement with a social or artistic issue; whether there is a concern with form and content; whether it demonstrates the desire to communicate something; or whether it incorporates the desire to create an impression, an effect, or some affect. When named as such, it leaves the world of food production, or nature, or industry, and enters the world of art.'[22]

In order to read and critique creative products and artworks, literacies must be developed to assess, classify and categorise both form (the technical aspects of the work as well as practicalities such as size, colour, subject matter etc) and content (what it is about, intertexts, subject matter, the context in which it was made and the context in which it is now being read). [23] This may involve multi-skilling in both theory and practice for intertextual works – for example, my thesis encompassed theories of autobiography, memory, identity, narrative and a smattering of neuroscience. The creative part involved creative writing, creative non-fiction, poetry, graphics and design, and a/r/tography (where text and image become entwined to form a new entity). In addition I learnt three computer programs, elements of graphic design theory and book-binding. All of these I

[19] Rapport et al. (2004).
[20] Law and Urry (2004) p. 391,
[21] ibid. pp. 395-396.
[22] Schirato and Webb (2004) p. 110.
[23] ibid. p. 108.

did not envisage doing at the start, but the necessity developed during the three years of the project.

Scrivener takes the idea of assessment further. He describes the framework in which a traditional problem-solving research project may be judged. The criteria involve the student demonstrating a problem and then proposing a solution that has been arrived at in a reasoned way. As he puts it, 'a problem-solving project is presented as an argument, which is usually a *post hoc* justification for the decisions that were made.'[24] For an arts-based project, this framework is unsuitable. The goals are different: there is seldom a single problem or hypothesis to be studied, and multiple goals and issues are more likely to be appropriate. Initially, while information and knowledge are systematic and rigorous, they will be broad in scope and lacking in depth. As the process continues, breadth and depth will deepen and widen as cycles of exploration and reflection take place, and as multiple and changing issues arise during the course of the project. He places importance on the rigour of the reflective practice, including the stance of the inquirer, and reflexivity: making explicit the process by which the material and analysis are produced. He suggests that the report (or exegesis) should be process-based, outlining the pre-project reflection (including theory), the work episodes and post-project reflection.[25]

Josie Arnold takes this suggestion further to create a table of 33 characteristics of a PhD creative writing project that can be judged on a four-point scale from 'unsatisfactory' to 'excellent.' She has a similar table for judging the exegesis, also with 33 criteria.[26] All criteria are wide-ranging, yet by their very nature are subjective. They would, however, be an excellent framework for thought and discussion, and could be adapted to projects other than pure creative writing.

Both Scrivener and Arnold have put together thoughtful and useful schema for assessing art-as-research. Either or both in combination would be useful for students and examiners to contemplate during the course of the project and in the examination phase. For me, it would have been a relief to have had more idea of what was expected from my work, though, on the other hand, perhaps having these detailed criteria and a schema at hand could force the work in a particular direction rather than allowing it to flow.

Art-as-research and the exegesis (groan …)

'Issues in a creative-production project may originate in a highly personal way, but they are usually rooted in the cultural context, i.e. they reflect culture,' writes Scrivener,[27] and this is where the exegesis comes in. It relates the artefact to the context in which it is produced.

The form of an exegesis and its relationship to the creative component of the thesis has been open to debate since creative doctorates have been accepted in Australian universities. Jeri Kroll suggests that those who undertake this kind of degree need to demonstrate some kind of split personality because of the need to produce both a creative and a critical component.[28] The critical component can be called an exegesis, critical essay, dissertation, annotation, documentation,[29] writing about doing, a linear argument in language, a rhetorical text to valorise the creative work[30] a reflective

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[24] Scrivener (2000) p. 4.
[25] Scrivener (2000) p. 14.
[26] Arnold (2005) pp. 45-48.
[27] Scrivener (2000) p. 5.
[28] Kroll (2004).
[29] ibid.
[30] Nelson (2004).

discourse to validate the creative component,[31] a research paper that informs and positions the studio work.[32]

Barbara Milech and Ann Schilo outline three exegetic models. In the first, the Context Model, the exegetical component 'rehearses the historical, social and /or disciplinary contexts within which the student developed the creative … component of his or her thesis.' The second model, the Commentary Model, involves an annotation, explication or commentary on the creative work. The third model is called the Research-Question Model, where 'both the exegetical and creative components of the research thesis hinge on a research question posed refined and re-posed by the student across the several stages of a research program.'[33]

The strength of the Context Model lies in the breadth of language that can be used and the way in which it can conform with the institutional needs of universities, but the disadvantage is that the relationship between the two components of the work is not addressed. The Commentary Model, while it explores the relationship, positions the creative work as secondary to the written component. The Research-Question Model addresses the relationship between the two components by suggesting that 'both the written and creative component of the thesis are conceptualised as independent answers to the same research questions.' The advantages of this model lie in its resistance to the divide between artist/scholar and other similar binaries, its language is acceptable for university purposes because it fits to some degree 'formal' research models, and it frees the student 'to research a single question in two languages. …[it] mediates the "split" between theory and practice.'

I chose this third model, the Research-Question Model, for my exegesis partly because of the advantages previously outlined, but mainly because it logically fitted the way in which I worked. I gathered information and then looked at ways in which that information can be used visually or textually to tell my story, so both forms of expression pivoted on the same basis, the research questions. It fitted my action research procedure, the spiral framework of observing, reflecting, imagining, making, writing, observing, reflecting, imagining and so on. It overcame the need for a 'split personality'.

The purpose of my exegesis did not lie in validating or valorising my artist's book. It was not a linear argument in language. It was not a critical essay or annotation. Its purpose was to explicate the present but unseen discourses that lay behind and under the book's content. As Barbara Bolt puts it, I wanted 'to produce movement in thought, to take the form of concrete understanding' through the more overt form of words.[34]

While some people believe that analysis or reflective thought interferes with the experience of art, Greene believes that self-reflection and critical consideration can be liberating and educative, having the potential to open multiple worlds.[35] My experience of making my autobiographical artist's book was immeasurably enriched and developed through the contemplation, writing and making of the theoretical component.

The Arts-Based Educational Research Conference – some comments

Many of the presentations raised concerns for me about the quality of the creative products that were on display. In general, the contributions related to social work, and emphasis was on a feel-good response. I felt there was a lack of literacy in the audience in determining the boundary between personal expression (valid, of course) and the quality of the artistic work displayed. But the work was described as art. Is arts-based not

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[31] Barratt (2004).
[32] Fletcher and Alan (2004).
[33] Milech and Schilo (2004) p.6.
[34] Bolt (2004).
[35] Greene (2001).

the same as 'art'? The criteria described by Schirato and Webb clearly were left aside in favour of admiration that the boundaries of personal expression could be stretched. In my opinion, either artistic literacy in this field needs to be developed by both practitioners and audience, or a new terminology should be used to describe these kinds of contributions.

An accessible example of what I mean is given by Kim Etherington (a social researcher) who captured stories from women and re-wrote them as poetry by changing the lineation, putting the women's stories aligned left and her comments/questions as researcher in a right hand column (for example, pp. 57, 117, 214-225).[36] While the text looks poetic, I think the material doesn't stand up as poetry, and I'm not sure what quality it adds to the data. The form is there but undeveloped, and the content is unfocused.

While at the conference I came across Pauline Sameshima's book – *Seeing Red, a Pedagogy of Parallax (an Epistolary Bildungsroman on Artful Scholarly Inquiry)*.[37] It is based on Pauline's doctoral dissertation at the University of British Columbia. She was the winner of the 2007 Arts Based Educational Research Outstanding Dissertation Award by the American Educational Research Association. According to the book cover, the award is for the best dissertation that explores, is an exemplar of, and pushes the boundaries of arts-based educational research. The book is written as a series of letters (some are poetry) between the protagonist, Julia, and her academic supervisor, as a critical personal narrative. The author uses the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal and water) as chapter headings and throughout there are illustrations of the author's artworks: mosaics, paintings and black and white botanical line drawings.

According to the prologue, the book is 'a didactic novel of personal developmental journeying. It shares possibilities of how artful research informs processes of scholarly inquiry and honours the reader's multi-perspective as integral to the research project's transformative potential.'

The author makes three claims: that shared stories encourage reflexive inquiries in ethical self-consciousness, enlarging paradigms of the normative and thus acceptance of diversity; that the format opens new spaces for form and content, and that intentional aesthetic wholeness can deepen transformational learning through fostering openness to learning, modelling wholeness and through the acceptance of ecological and intuitive resonances.

Most of the book is written in a diaristic, conversational style that incorporates references to scholarly writing, and plunges into poetry at intervals so the poems are not separate entities but part of the text. Structure is provided by the five elements as five sections. Sameshima's work can be classified as art according to Schirato and Webb's criteria. It is an exhilarating and interesting book to read.

It was interesting and encouraging to see that not only was there a prize awarded for arts-based research, but that a publisher was willing to take on the material of a creative thesis.

More dreadful manners, please

Now, a year after my PhD was awarded, I wish I had stretched my ideas further. I wish I had been bolder. I wish I had really understood what I was trying to do. I wish I hadn't been so polite. I wish I had had the courage to exhibit more dreadful manners than I did. Yet the effort needed to avoid shipwreck, to complete and get rid of the smelly albatross that was permanently dragging at my heels, took all my available energy.

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[36] Etherington (2004).
[37] Sameshima (2007).

I hope the ideas given here on documenting the process and having a frame for both working in and assessing creative doctorates, will provide some kind of navigational chart that will allow doctoral candidates comparative safety in which, paradoxically, they can display some really, truly, dreadful manners.

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