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Roberto Bolaño's 2666, the Funneling Effect of Capitalism, and
the Production, Consumption, and Proliferation of Violence for
Profit

by John Timlin

10,407 words

The critical responses to Roberto Bolaño's *2666* tend to orbit around similar ideas: the text as a critique of neoliberalism, or the text as an examination of the intersection between postcolonialism and neoliberalism, or the text as a dystopian novel in which Bolaño takes "the elements of the present that look most threatening or dangerous and amplifies them in a projected future" (Eve 100). Sol Peláez correctly points out the reductive nature of criticism that assumes these "morally alert" positions, but where this essay will divert from her analysis is in the belief that the novel is a realist text, one that reflects the simple fact that in contemporary capitalism, the physical destruction of female bodies is a profitable enterprise; one that forces its readers to confront their complicity or outright participation in violence against women; and one that relates directly to violence against women as consumable entertainment in American mass culture (Peláez 36).

The novel contains five parts: in order, they are, The Part About the Critics, The Part About Amalfitano, The Part About Fate, The Part About the Crimes, and The Part About Archimboldi. The (four) critics who serve as the protagonists of the first part are translators of, experts in, and singularly focused on the novels by the author who serves as the protagonist of the fifth part, the German Benno von Archimboldi. They are: Jean-Claude Pelletier, of Paris; Manuel Espinoza, of Madrid; Piero Morini, of Torino; and Liz Norton, of London. Amalfitano is Oscar Amalfitano, who appears in the first section as a guide to the critics when they arrive in his city, the fictional Santa Teresa, in the real state of Sonora, on the Mexican side of the border with the United States, in a search for Archimboldi, and who in his own section is revealed to be a father and professor slowly going insane. Fate is Quincy Williams, who is called Oscar Fate by his colleagues, for reasons never given; he is a journalist sent to Santa Teresa to cover a boxing match. The fourth and longest section provides the reader with forensically tinged

descriptions of the bodies of over one hundred homicide victims, all of them women. These vignettes are broken up by scenes of the Demon Penitent, so named in the text because of his (often violent) destruction of the various churches in and around Santa Teresa.

While realist texts are often didactic, as in Sinclair's *The Jungle*, some are not – Frank Norris' *McTeague*, for example, does not seek to educate its readers on the perils of greed but to present one man's descent into madness caused, in part, by greed, but more wholly by his inability to carve out an existence in his time and place. *2666* is a novel which, similarly, does not teach the fact that violence against women is endemic in contemporary society but explores the implications and ramifications of violence against women. Martin Paul Eve attributes the didacticism of the novel to its “attempt to evaluate critically the academy: the neoliberal university as a site of revolution, teaching, and resistance” (102). He further states that *2666*, which he calls “contemporary fiction that teaches,” should be considered as such because “the university is awarded a central place – and is indeed explicitly depicted – in this novel” (Eve 90). This analysis is flawed due to the simple fact that the university is never “explicitly depicted” at all. The Part about the Critics contains only three scenes that take place inside the university; the first, early in the novel, will be discussed in the following paragraph. The second occurs when, upon learning a fact which he is not immediately capable of processing emotionally, Morini withdraws from his personal relationships and professional obligations. This forces his friends Espinoza and Pelletier to call the German department at his Italian university in an attempt to track him down. We see the inside of a university only when a secretary, and then a student, answer their calls. The next - and last - time the reader is placed inside a university is with Oscar Amalfitano; by this point, “his nerves were in tatters” and “his classes [were] entirely incomprehensible” (Bolaño 199, 211). Neither of these moments come close to an explicit

depiction of the university nor is any of it meant to represent neoliberal universities as sites of revolution, teaching, and resistance; the professors never revolt, never teach, and never resist. They do, however, provide the reader with a framework for understanding how men act (react) when confronted by attacks, real or imagined, on the things they hold dear, on their masculinity, and on their intellectual capabilities, or simply to escape emotions or situations they find uncomfortable.

Indeed, for Bolaño, violence is not solely perpetrated by maniacal characters, violent thugs, or sexual predators; he uses the critics, ironically enough, less as a critique of academia than to indict even intellectual, refined, non-Mexican (important given the novel's location, and reductive critical focus on, Santa Teresa-as-Ciudad Juarez readings of the novel) characters. After reading his first Archimboldi novel, a young Pelletier searches for additional works by the writer, only to find that "almost no reference to Archimboldi could be found in the university's German department. Pelletier's professors had never heard of him. One said he thought he recognized the name. Ten minutes later, to Pelletier's outrage (and horror), he realized that the person he had in mind was the Italian painter" (Bolaño 1). This is one of the rare times in the entire novel that any character expresses outrage and horror, and there are much more horrible things to come; later, when Pelletier is in Santa Teresa and learns about the ongoing murders of women there, he pores over any article he can find: "after deciphering the newspapers, Pelletier felt like showering and washing off all the filth that clung to his skin" (Bolaño 139). Feeling like filth is clinging to his skin is perhaps an admission of feeling something like outrage or horror, but in response to the underwhelming professor in the beginning of the novel Pelletier goes out himself, finds every Archimboldi novel he can, translates them, earns his doctorate and takes on a full professorship by the age of twenty-five, becoming the preeminent Archimboldi scholar in

all of France. In response to the murders in Santa Teresa, a shower suffices; in fact, he soon settles back into his obsession with Archimboldi, and it is to the German writer that his melancholy is directed, as when he tells Espinoza, “Archimboldi is here, and we’re here, and this is the closest we’ll ever be to him” (Bolaño 159). Worth noting is the fact that the critics likely could get closer, in fact they could probably meet their favorite writer. After all, the critics only travel to Santa Teresa because they believe Archimboldi is there; and Archimboldi *is* there; readers learn in later sections that Archimboldi goes to Santa Teresa in support of his nephew, the German-American Klaus Haas, after Haas is arrested as the suspected murderer ravaging Santa Teresa. So, it seems prudent to ask: how do the critics, who “visit the offices of all the newspapers in Santa Teresa” and look “through all the papers dating from a month before Almendro saw Archimboldi in Mexico City to the previous day” fail to “find a single sign to indicate that Archimboldi had passed through the city” (125)? We know from later sections that Klaus Haas has been in the newspaper, since Fate meets a reporter who wants to interview Haas in jail. Wouldn’t critics thinking critically perhaps ask themselves if there was a connection between the recent arrest of a German-American murder suspect and the subsequent arrival in town of the German author they seek? Bolaño gives us a clue: “sometimes people are staggeringly ignorant of what’s under their very noses” (48). This applies not only to the critics in the search for their beloved author but also to Pelletier’s and Espinoza’s inability to recognize their complicity in the web of global violence.

The part about the critics serves to subtly (or not so subtly) inform the reader as to the capacity in every man for acts of extreme violence. Regarding the young Espinoza, living in a tiny apartment while he undergoes his own studies, Bolaño writes: “Espinoza...discovered that he was bitter and full of resentment, and that he might easily kill someone, anyone, if it would

provide a respite from the loneliness and cold and rain of Madrid” (7). Later in the novel, Espinoza very nearly does kill someone, and it is, in a way, to provide a respite from loneliness, or a respite from the fear of potential loneliness; by this point in the novel, Pelletier and Espinoza have been involved in a love triangle with the English professor Norton. Norton has informed both men that she wishes to end her relationship with each. Three months pass, and Pelletier and Espinoza decide to take a trip, together, to London, to surprise Norton. When they arrive, they see that she is not alone; in her apartment is a young Englishman named Alex Pritchard. The two professors are immediately on the defensive, and therefore choose together to attack. When Pritchard says he “thought German literature was a scam,” they have their opening: Pelletier asks what Pritchard knows of German literature, and when the young man admits, “not much, really,” Espinoza calls him a cretin and Pelletier calls him an ignoramus. Espinoza then calls him a *badulaque*, and explains: “‘A badulaque,’ said Espinoza, ‘is someone of no consequence. It’s a word that can also be applied to fools, but there are fools of consequence, and a badulaque is a fool of no consequence.’” Pritchard admits to being insulted by this tirade and Pelletier calls this the “typical reaction of a badulaque” (Bolaño 66). The scene nearly escalates into a fight before Norton asks Pritchard to leave. The damage is done, however, and Espinoza and Pelletier are primed for violence. The three professors go out to dinner, and then take a taxi back to Norton’s apartment. The driver, a Pakistani, is offended by the open discussion of their prior arrangement and tells them there is a word in his language for what they are, which for Norton is “bitch or slut or pig” and, for the two men, “pimp or hustler or whoremonger” (73). They tell the driver to “stop this filthy car,” so he does, “punching the meter as he pulled up to the curb and announcing to his passengers what they owed him...which was absolutely the last straw for Espinoza, who stepped down and opened the driver’s door and jerked the driver out” (74). He

proceeds to kick the driver until he is curled up, defenseless, on the ground, with Pelletier eventually joining in the assault “when Espinoza flagged.” In addition to beating the man “until he was unconscious and bleeding from every orifice in the head, except the eyes,” the two men hurl racist and vitriolic language at the driver as well: “shove Islam up your ass, which is where it belongs, this one is for Salman Rushdie...this one is for the feminists of Paris (will you fucking stop, Norton was shouting), this one is for the feminists of New York (you’re going to kill him, shouted Norton), this one is for the ghost of Valerie Solanas, you son of a bitch.” After the assault, Bolaño explains that “Pelletier felt as if he had come. Espinoza felt the same” (74). (As an aside, the mention of Valerie Solanas, the would-be assassin of Andy Warhol, demonstrates that Bolaño knew something of the history of radical Americans, and makes one question whether Pelletier, the name, is supposed to call to mind Leonard Peltier, the man convicted on spurious evidence of the murder of two FBI agents, which would cast an additional pall of violence or the presumption of violence over the novel and what constitutes an appropriate reaction to imperialism. It remains in the realm of possibility in particular because Bolaño named his own son Lautaro, after the indigenous Chilean who led a violent uprising against his own conquistadors). The next day, as the two men eat “a big breakfast” (75) they ruminate on what caused them to assault the driver: “Pritchard, no question about it” (76). We can therefore establish that Espinoza’s earlier belief that he could kill someone as a respite from loneliness was in fact foreshadowing.

We can also, through a brief analysis of their behavior toward Norton, and other women, dispel any notion that the feminism expressed by the two men during their violent episode was in any way genuine. Pelletier, “frustrated” that “after the sexual act...Norton preferred to talk about academic matters than to look frankly at what was developing between them,” decides he

must break down what in his mind “seemed a particularly feminine mode of self-protection.” He draws up “a long list of the women he had known” and exposes them to Norton’s “frosty or indifferent gaze” (32). This is an attack not only on the women he had known, who presumably have no desire to be exposed by him or to anyone else, and certainly not in an effort to break down another woman’s defenses, but also an attack on Norton directly, an attack on her “feminine” self-protection, and an attempt to make her a willing participant in the exposure of the women he had known before. Pelletier’s disregard for Norton is evident in other ways; while “before he left, he would spend a few minutes watching her, sprawled on the sheets, and sometimes felt so full of love he could burst into tears,” he never actually translates that love into kind action. Norton, upon waking, would discover that “the living room and bedroom were almost always a wreck, and that bothered her...she would gather up the dirty glasses, empty the ashtrays, change the sheets, put back the books that Pelletier had taken down from the shelves...and then get dressed and go to the university” (32). After their relationship with Norton ends, the two professors begin visiting prostitutes, and Pelletier becomes enamored with a particular woman named Vanessa. Espinoza makes his feelings on the matter clear: “‘Whores are there to be fucked,’ Espinoza said on the night Pelletier talked to him about Vanessa, ‘not psychoanalyzed’” (84). But Norton, to Espinoza, was also there only to be fucked; from the very first moment he conceived of his feelings for his fellow Archimboldi scholar, “among the ideal images of Norton that passed at supersonic speed through his head...there were more sex scenes than Pelletier had imagined. Not many more, but more” (16). This disregard for Norton’s feelings and sole interest in her capacity to provide sexual gratification is demonstrated as such by the fourth critic, Morini, who, upon first hearing about Pritchard from Espinoza and Pelletier, “only asked if either of them, or both, had asked Norton whether she loved Pritchard or was

attracted to him” (71). When the two men state that they hadn’t, “out of consideration for Norton, essentially,” Morini replies, “well, that’s where you should have begun” (71). That is likely where they would have begun, if consideration for Norton, and not a challenge to their masculinity presented by Pritchard, was at the root of their problem.

When Grant Farred states that “it is Bolaño’s ability to make us deal directly, dialectically, with death in its intimate relation to neoliberalism, that lends his work its critical salience,” he is either overlooking or intentionally ignoring that affronts to masculinity are in fact more often the cause of violence against women than neoliberal capital’s indifference to, as he puts it, “the life or death of the state in which it operates” (692). Farred’s argument relies on a reading of the novel that identifies all of the femicide victims in Santa Teresa as victims of the maquiladora system, which is then used to further his argument that the novel is an indictment of neoliberalism: “Rape or death, by itself, as itself, no longer possesses any autonomy (individualized violence). The individual woman’s right to be singular has been ceded to the overdetermined structure because it has been appropriated by—the rhizomatic “connection” of Sonoran deaths of—the maquiladora” (696). However, enough of the women who are killed have no explicit association with the maquiladoras at all that we can question the validity of such a reading. The second victim, for example, was having an affair: “Romero confessed to having maintained intimate relations with the deceased behind the back of his friend and partner” (Bolaño 355). The victim, Luisa Celina, “had decided to put an end to these relations, which Romero refused to accept.” As a result, “after a few months, when Luisa Celina wouldn’t change her mind, he decided in a fit of insanity to kill her” (355).

In another example, Bolaño explicitly distances a victim from her work: the eighth victim, “Guadalupe Rojas...didn’t die on her way to work, which might have made sense, since

the area around the maquiladora was deserted and dangerous, best crossed in a car and not by bus and then on foot since the factory was at least a mile from the nearest bus stop” (359). Here Bolaño achieves several things: first, an indictment of imperialist capitalism, which now generates revenue through simply exporting capital through investment (the construction of the maquiladoras in a city bordering the United States) without even bothering to build up an infrastructure or provide basic services or safety to its foreign employees (as evidenced by the distance to the nearest bus stop). Second, as noted, Bolaño separates Guadalupe Rojas from the idea that her death was caused by the maquiladoras; in fact, while that explanation “might have made sense,” it did not in this case make sense. To reduce the novel down to a critique of neoliberalism requires an effort to ignore the reality within the work itself as well as Bolaño’s own opinions: when asked in an interview what things “bore” him, Bolaño replied: “the empty rhetoric of the Left. I take for granted the empty discourse of the Right” (Between Parentheses 365). This is a man who either left Mexico to participate in Salvador Allende’s revolutionary socialist movement in Chile and was subsequently jailed for nine days during Pinochet’s military coup, from which he only escaped when two guards, former classmates, recognized and took pity upon him, or a man who lied about doing so, as the New York Times has suggested, which perhaps would make him even more identifiable as a leftist than if he had. This is a man who named his son after an indigenous warrior, revered in his native Chile for revolution. Simply critiquing neoliberalism would absolutely fall under the category of empty rhetoric; *2666* is a call to arms. That a critique of neoliberalism was far from Bolaño’s intent is evident in another response from the same interview; asked what hell is like, he replies: “Like Ciudad Juarez, which is our curse and our mirror, the unquiet mirror of our frustrations and of our vile interpretation of freedom and of our desires” (BP 365-366). The responsibility, it seems, for the violence in

Juarez, lies with the people engaged in violence. I think it is fair to accept that while “our vile interpretation of freedom” is quite likely a reference to capitalism, it is not a reference to neoliberal capitalism, because capitalism is only capitalism; the word “neoliberalism” is akin to the phrase “final solution;” an attempt to veil with language what is really occurring: “imperialist capitalism” and “genocide.” Third, and finally, Bolaño draws attention to the victim’s proximity to capitalism; we can recognize that the maquiladora did not cause Guadalupe’s death while acknowledging the importance of the fact that it would have made sense if Guadalupe *had* died on the way to work. As if to amplify his lack of intent to place responsibility for the deaths in the hands of neoliberal capitalism, two of the first seven victims described in the novel are portrayed as traveling *to* the United States, in direct defiance of a reading that places responsibility for their deaths on the influx of capital *from* the United States to Mexico. It is tempting to consider risky illegal immigration as an indictment of neoliberal capitalism, but the fact is that such movement is based on the often mistaken belief that life is better on the other side; if Farred’s argument is correct, the influx into Mexico of neoliberal capital and the development of the maquiladora system has rendered Mexico unsafe in comparison to the safe United States, where women may live without fear, but the United States is no safer for female bodies than Mexico, because capitalism in the United States, regardless of neoliberalism or any other purposefully obfuscating delineation, relies on the destruction of female bodies for profit.

Still, in addressing the notion of physical proximity Bolaño is inserting himself into a long line of theoretical work on the physical, magnetic quality of capitalism. Modern marketing techniques rely on the concept of “funneling” prospective customers, where the funnel is a visual aid to learning the technique of reducing people down to their need to consume; picture a funnel: wide on the top, thin at the bottom. We are all at the top, prospective consumers, because that is

the only role to play in capitalism. A certain number of us become aware of a certain product; fewer remain interested in the product; fewer still consider purchasing; once purchased, we have been converted into consumers; still fewer of us remain loyal to the product; some of us even go on to advocate for the product. One can visualize how the initial draw of the product funneled some people into the machine. Such is the work of capitalism, but on a global scale, this phenomenon plays out on our physical bodies.

Catherine Chaput writes that “we have not fully grappled with how the human body’s animality (its instinctual, automated, biological process) interacts with and informs its reasoning capacities” (90), but one can guess: Chaput continues, “capitalism grips the body so that it accords with its historically specific needs but is unable to determine precisely what causes this gripping” (94). In other words, capitalism works by preying upon our human, animal, needs, and in fact we are prey, as in the animal kingdom, because this predatory economic system grips our bodies and positions us according to our needs, and as importantly, according to its own. Chaput calls for new materialist theories which “account for this physiological materialization” (95), a new “view of affect as the biochemical and energetic alterations that increase or decrease life potential” (96). Her analysis requires an appreciation of the fact, as stated by Kelly Happe, that “historical materialism provides a way of demonstrating how and why the forces of capitalist modes of production materially create bodies (e.g. in the ways in which assembly-line work produces disfigured bodies)” (Happe 82). Hence Chaput’s call for a new materialism: we must advance a new language of the impact of predacious capitalism on physical bodies, and this essay in part is intended to suggest that the difficulty in such new work arises in part because, unlike stooped bodies on an assembly line, it is not immediately apparent that capitalism is at fault for the femicide currently underway not just in Juarez, as neoliberal criticism of the novel, so

reliant on villainized Others, would suggest, but in fact in the United States as well.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, too, understood that the manipulation of physical bodies relied on both the satisfaction of basic needs as well as for comfort, and that these structures have an impact on human bodies at an unseen level: “just as the occupants of city centers are uniformly summoned there for purposes of work and leisure, as producers and consumers...” similar to the process Bolaño describes in *2666*, with men and women alike summoned to Santa Teresa for new employment opportunities, “...so the living cells crystallize into homogenous, well-organized complexes” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 94). Happe has a similar take, stated in her work on Epigenetics and “Biocitizens,” in which she states, “If the epigenome is the agent of those material forces (racist acts of aggression, denial of basic health needs, environmental pollution), then we can say that epigenetics merely documents the ways in which the body is quite literally the outcome of material conditions” (Happe 82). In the case of *2666*, in the case of Ciudad Juarez, in the case of every city in America, in the case of every interstate highway in America, in every case in which an unsuspecting (or even wary) person is brought by capitalism into close physical proximity to a predator, that outcome, those material conditions, for women, often result in death.

These deaths are then packaged for consumption by the living and in this form, they generate profit. Before we get to the deaths of women for profit, however, we need to return to *2666* and examine the ways in which Bolaño brilliantly weaves together a fabric of history, of death, and of consumption; early in the novel the Archimboldi critics meet a former ‘cultural promoter’, the Swabian, who tells the critics about an evening spent, during the course of his duties, dining with Archimboldi. The Swabian notes that although he cannot remember what novel Archimboldi was there to promote, Archimboldi’s “jacket was unforgettable...a jacket

that brought to mind, why I don't know, the jackets worn by some Gestapo officers" (19). This sets the reader in motion, to wonder if Archimboldi was in fact a Nazi, and ensures that Nazi imagery is present in the mind during the following event: Also present at the dinner was the widow of a former cavalry captain and herself somewhat of an expert on art and culture. She tells the group about a trip taken with her husband, "an unforgettable ocean crossing, gone as far as Buenos Aires..." (20) – if one noted on the imagery of the Gestapo jacket, surely the voyage to South America reinforces the understated theme of Nazi Germany. This reading is confirmed when the widow continues: "...when the city was a meat emporium and the refrigerator ships left port laden with meat...The view of the port was startling...the parade of immigrants like ants loading the flesh of thousands of dead cattle into the ships' holds, the movements of pallets piled with the meat of thousands of sacrificed calves" (20). Here we can pause to appreciate the intersection of capitalist consumption, symbolized by the bustling port full of refrigerated meat, and the sacrifice that consumption entails; of death; and of history, in the references to Nazi imagery, Nazi movement, Nazi murder (surely the "thousands of sacrificed calves" call to mind the victims of the holocaust); and the present-day, with immigrants called to Santa Teresa's maquiladoras as surely as they were called to Buenos Aires' ports.

The "sacrificed calves" motif returns later in the novel. Two years after the birth of their daughter, Amalfitano's wife, Lola, leaves him. Two weeks after that, she sends him a letter: "every day hundreds of thousands of cows are sacrificed, every day a herd of herbivores or several herds cross the valley, from north to south, so slowly but so fast it makes me sick, right now, now, now, do you understand, Oscar? No, thought Amalfitano, I don't, as he held the letter in his two hands like a life raft..." (167). We are calves in contemporary society, all bodies

propelled in unthinking movement, all calves, sacrificed.

Of course, some of us have it better than others. It is time now to turn to the subject alluded to earlier: the destruction of female bodies for profit. Theodor Adorno believed that “the commercial character of culture causes the difference between culture and practical life to disappear.” There is no better example of this predatory culture industry than the television program *Law and Order: SVU* (Special Victims Unit), which first appeared on NBC in 1999, is now in its 22nd season and has aired 494 episodes to date¹. The program focuses on the Manhattan division of SVU in the New York Police Department. So-called special victims are special when they are children, or when the crime has a sexual component; a homicide would be assigned to the homicide division, but a homicide victim who had been sexually assaulted would fall under the purview of the special victims unit. The show has therefore aired 494 episodes, ostensibly for the purpose of entertainment, all dealing with extreme sexual violence, and in a particularly formulaic manner; each episode begins with the discovery of a victim, followed shortly thereafter by a humorous quip by one of the detectives (in SVU, this function is usually performed by the stand-up-comedian-cum-television-detective Richard Belzer), then by the forensic description of the event; ubiquitous within the show are the phrases “vaginal tearing,” which signifies rape, “ligature marks,” which signify forced restraint, and either “signs of,” or “no signs of,” “forced entry,” which exclusively refers to the breaking-into of a home or business but which of course signals back to the very content of the show. This endless repetition of fact in mass culture has the function, identified by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno as early as the 1940s, of denying “its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination... [these facts are] so constructed that their adequate comprehension requires a

¹ <https://www.nbc.com/law-and-order-special-victims-unit/episodes>

quick, observant, knowledgeable cast of mind but positively debars the spectator from thinking, if he is not to miss the fleeting facts” (100). These fleeting facts are the most important element of SVU and other mass culture; they give the impression of participation in the action while forbidding any thinking outside the action, which is the consequence that allows the reality of the entertainment to subsume reality outside the cinema or living room.

In fact, this essay will argue that the program does not serve to entertain at all; that is to say, it does not serve its audience, but its creators, and that its only value is derived from its propagandistic qualities, its ability to generate profit, and the simultaneous destruction of its audience’s ability to think critically and experience a reality outside of the program. It achieves all this by capitalizing on real-life violence against women, by amplifying and broadcasting violence against women, while ensuring it can have no positive impact in preventing such acts from occurring. After all, preventing the acts from occurring would only limit the available material for production companies bent on repurposing violence for profitable consumption; as Adorno notes in *The Culture Industry*, in programs like these, “The outcome of conflicts is pre-established, and all conflicts are mere sham. Society is always the winner” (163). Society here is the one that preys and profits upon women’s bodies, the media which repackages this predation as entertainment, and the entrenched systems (criminal justice, for example) which ultimately exert control.

Let us first address the notion that the show serves primarily as a propaganda arm of the criminal justice system; the narrated introduction to the program, which plays before each of the 494 episodes, states in part: “In the criminal justice system, sexually based offenses are considered especially heinous.” A simple examination of available data reveals this claim to be

false; the NYPD has made available all of its arrest records from 2006-2019², helpfully a period of time during which the show also appeared on television. In that timeframe, the NYPD made 35,292 arrests for what they label “sex crimes.” However, in that same period of time, they made 46,634 arrests for “prostitution;” 66,177 for “burglary;” 153,339 for “robbery;” 1,077,449 for “dangerous drugs.” We can therefore demonstrate that by far the greatest resources are devoted to the arrest of people engaged in drug use, or the selling of drugs. There were more than twice the arrests for dangerous drugs than the next category, misdemeanor assault, for which 491,877 people were arrested. That doesn’t happen because people sell drugs outside of police precincts, it happens when a department makes a concerted effort to surveil, investigate, and apprehend those involved in drug crimes. That is by far the main focus of the New York Police Department, and it is drug use that is considered especially heinous by the criminal justice system. Note also that more people were arrested for prostitution than for the commission of sex crimes; the criminal justice system is more intent on prosecuting women who engage in sex work as a means of survival than prosecuting those who engage in sexual violence against women. The narrated introduction is only the first lie meant to deaden viewers to reality.

Another is the astounding success of the televised SVU detectives in apprehending and prosecuting those who commit crimes of a violent sexual nature. In nearly every episode, a suspect is apprehended and put on trial; this is codified into the show’s reality in a season eight episode (“Haystack”) in which one of the main characters, Detective Stabler, is himself accused of a crime. So enamored of her colleague, the character Judge Donnelly (formerly Assistant District Attorney Donnelly) takes a leave of absence from her position as a judge and represents Stabler as his attorney. During her opening statement, she tells the jury that Det. Stabler has had

² <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/d/8h9b-rp9u/visualization>

a stellar, 20- year career with the NYPD, and touts his *97% clearance rate*. In reality, the clearance rate for sex crimes, nationwide and, coincidentally, within the NYPD, is 47%. The show advertises that the criminal justice system considers these crimes to be *especially heinous*, that the criminal justice system does everything in its power to prevent and prosecute these crimes, and that as a system it is especially successful in doing so. In reality, however, the crimes are not considered especially heinous, very little is done to prevent them from occurring, and when they do occur, the police are not especially effective at identifying and arresting the perpetrators.

The un-real success of the television detectives in SVU seems also to call into question which characters in the program actually serve as the heroes; Adorno notes that in mass culture, “the hero no longer makes any sacrifices but now enjoys success. He does not come of age and assume freedom through his deeds for his career is simply the revelation of his conformity.” We see the truth of this analysis in SVU; Detective Stabler often ‘sacrifices’ time at home to continue ‘working a case,’ however the consequences are minimal; his wife threatens to leave, sometimes does leave, but always returns; but in fact, his home life is not something he sacrifices because it is of secondary import to his work. The only sacrifice he would make that he would also feel would be one relating to work and those sacrifices are never asked of him. Therefore, if a hero is one who, as Adorno posits, through sacrifice demonstrates growth, one could make an argument that the heroes of the show are actually the rapists and other perpetrators of heinous acts; it is their initiative that generates the propelling action of the program; they are the only characters with a story arc, in that they begin on a high, engaging in their preferred behavior, and end on a low, having been caught and forced to recognize the impact of their behavior (because there is always a moral component, and an almost-universal acceptance of the harm

they have done). That change in status from the beginning of an episode to the end, and the growth exemplified in their acknowledgment of wrongdoing, makes one question whether they are not in fact the heroes. The detectives are simply relegated to an endless, repetitive supporting role. This is demonstrated in the fact that it doesn't actually matter which detective cracks the case; any of the dialogue could be spoken by any detective, any of the action performed by any and all.

The show also engages in a propagandistic effort to distort reality, by making the unacceptable acceptable. In one episode, a Detective Benson tells a rape suspect, "a pretty boy like you is going to be real popular in prison. Maybe when you're raped, you'll understand what you put those women through" ("Perverted"). Here we have a show ostensibly engaged in demonstrating all the good work detectives do in investigating "especially heinous" sex crimes advancing the idea of rape as a corrective measure. Another episode promotes the primacy, the impossibility of incorrectness, of the NYPD and the evidence they gather; when a detective asks a member of the forensics unit if he is sure about his analysis, the man replies: "DNA doesn't lie" ("Savior"). This is in light of the fact that in an earlier episode of the show, a suspect fabricates Detective Benson's DNA in an effort to frame her for a crime; however, and of course, detectives uncover the charade and clear Benson's name. We can therefore demonstrate that even if DNA does lie, and it does lie, it still doesn't lie, because detectives are always capable; if it lies, they'll expose the lie; since it doesn't lie, it can be used as evidence. There also exists a conspicuous amount of racist propaganda; in one episode, detectives are investigating crimes against children when they uncover that each of the children were processed through the same immigrant services center. At the center, interviewing the manager, one of the detectives asks what it's like to be on the frontlines of the immigration debate. Her response: we "ignore the

politics, and try to remind the public that all the wetbacks and ragheads and F.O.Bs are just like them: living, breathing, human beings” (“Anchor”). Remember that she is referring to children under her care; this language is destructive and dehumanizing, and certainly not a reminder that anyone is just like anyone else. Continuing the racist trend, in another episode, detectives investigate a series of rapes targeting lesbians; women form an activist group to protest what they see as the incompetence of the NYPD in either preventing these rapes or apprehending a suspect. Detectives set out to interview one of the women involved and arrive to find the group protesting in the street. Stabler says to Benson: “let’s play this one low-key, the natives are already restless” (“P.C”). This is, frankly, the language of a colonialist overlord; the earliest recorded use of the phrase can be found in the meeting minutes of the New Zealand Parliamentary Debates: Third Session of the Fourth Parliament: Second Volume, Comprising the Period From the Ninth Day of July, 1868 to the Twenty-First Day of August, 1868; a Mr. James O’Neill, House Member representing the Northern Division, states:

As to the Auckland Provisional Government, it is powerless for doing any good; it is an incubus standing in the way of progress; it is unable to pay a sufficient number of police; it is unable to supply an efficient guard of warders over the gaols; it is unable to supplement the assessments of any of the highway boards by a single schilling; and it will be seen by the petition which I presented from a large body of schoolmasters that the Provisional Government can do nothing in the way of promoting the education of children either in town or country...As to the Native

question...[it] has to be dealt with according to circumstances, but not as formerly, with presents of sugar and flour. *The Natives are restless, and seem desirous of fighting.* The House must therefore be prepared to vote supplies to meet any contingency that may arise (387).

We can see that although Mr. O'Neill believed the provisional government was unable to meet the basic requirements of good governance, from a satisfactory police force and the maintenance of roads to providing sufficient education to children, he also believed that there would be money available to engage in combat against a restless Native population, and that the fighting is really because the Natives are desirous of fighting, not because the provisional government of Auckland, like all conquistadors before and after, will always have money and time and energy and manpower to spare in the destruction of Native bodies.

The relentless advertisement of false reality advanced by the SVU program is witnessed by a staggering number of people, and therefore generates a staggering amount of advertising revenue. 18.36 *million* people watched the final episode of the second season, and the show consistently saw over ten million people tune in, every episode, for the first ten years. Even though those numbers have dropped considerably over time, and in fact the least-viewed episode of the show's run aired during this most recent season, that episode still captured 2.95 million viewers. This reduction in overall viewership is not due to any sort of public fatigue regarding the subject matter so much as a loss of interest in this particular show; in fact, the show has only contributed to what Mark Fisher would call "desensitization [which] serves a function for capitalist realism" (11). That function, of course, is the death of individual agency in the interest of the generation

of profit. In a recent episode of Saturday Night Live, cast members performed a parody song called “Murder Shows;” the premise being that women afforded a night off to engage in “self-care” do so by watching ‘murder shows.’ They sing: “some sisters got killed on a cruise to the Bahamas / I’m gonna half-watch it while I fold my pajamas / severed limbs found on a beach in Chula Vista / but I just kind of stare while I chew on my pizza / digging up some bodies / to do an autopsy... bodybuilder chopped up an old lady / I watch it while I text my sister about her baby.” And so on. This demonstrates not only that profiting from extreme violence against women has become ubiquitous to the point of parody, but that the consumption of programs which profit from extreme violence against women is *as ubiquitous as* completely routine, everyday tasks: folding laundry, eating dinner, catching up with family (“February 27 – Nick Jonas”).

It is worth noting the visual component of the parodical music video. Throughout the song, the logos of various real-life ‘murder shows’ flash on the screen: *The Cecil Hotel; Night Stalker; The Hunt for a Serial Killer; The Staircase; The Jinx; Making a Murderer*; what these shows have in common is that they are all non-fiction, that all the events in each documentary or series deal with the disappearance or violent death of women, and that all the women killed were killed by men. Saturday Night Live has identified an ever-growing phenomenon of true crime shows glorifying violence against women (the cast members each exhibit gleeful expressions as they settle into their routine; “late night, true crime, this is my relaxing time”) that is the real cause, other than simply outlasting its prime, of the decline of fictionalized representations of violence such as SVU. SVU’s success (and longevity) is due in large part to its ability to live up to what Adorno identified as a crucial component of the ‘entertainment’ industry: “mass culture, if not sophisticated, must at least be up to date – that is to say, ‘realistic,’

or posing as realistic – in order to meet the expectations of a supposedly disillusioned, alert, and hard-boiled audience” (The Culture Industry 162). Indeed, the show is known in part for its dramatizations of real-life events, and this connection is amplified by the latest technology. The streaming service Hulu, in addition to offering up for viewing each of the 494 aired episodes, also helpfully sorts them by category; one such classification is “Ripped from the Headlines,” available to those viewers who only want to watch events they likely already devoured through news media, repackaged as entertainment for further consumption. Saturday Night Live’s parody song demonstrates this desire to keep consuming: “as soon as I’m done I listen to a podcast / about the same guy as the show I just watched / ‘cause now I’m going down the rabbit hole.” Adorno again is useful to us here: “The omnipresence of technology imprints itself upon objects and everything historical...prototypical here [and relatable to every episode of SVU] is the actress who manages to appear fresh and painstakingly made up with hair perfectly arranged even in the midst of the most appalling dangers,” although the examples Adorno uses – “a tropical typhoon or in the clutches of white slave traders,” betray that even he likely never conceived of shows that would present women with ‘hair perfectly arranged’ even after being beaten and raped (The Culture Industry 78).

One documentary series not mentioned in *Saturday Night Live’s* “Murder Shows” but of particular relevance to this essay is *The Killing Season*, which aired on the A&E network in 2016³. The filmmakers set out to investigate the Long Island Serial Killer, the suspected killer of four women who in December 2011 were discovered buried on Gilgo Beach, near Ocean Parkway, in Long Island. Police and amateur investigators alike believe the women were all killed by the same person because of their shared characteristics; all were prostitutes; and their shared deaths;

³ <https://www.aetv.com/shows/the-killing-season>

strangled, and buried in burlap sacks, 500 feet apart from one another on the beach. In the course of combing the beach for evidence, police in April 2011 discover the remains of six more victims. These remains have little in common with the original four; one is a child, and one is a man, and several of the bodies were no longer intact; despite these differences, Suffolk County Police remain convinced that all 10 victims were killed by the same person, believing that it would be too coincidental if two (or more) murderers disposed of their victims in the same place (“Whoever Fears Monsters”).

Throughout the course of eight episodes the show reveals remarkable similarities to the attitudes and events in Bolaño’s novel, although *2666* was written by a Chilean author living in Spain and writing about femicides in Mexico in the 1990s, and the filmmakers here are American, unraveling an American murder mystery regarding crimes that occurred between 5 and 10 years after Bolaño’s death. For example, in the novel, one character explains the deaths in Santa Teresa: “The women here aren’t worth shit” (318). Timothy Bolger, managing editor of the Long Island Press says of one victim, initially reported missing before eventually being found dead, “Because she was a prostitute, her case kind of got swept under the rug, and didn’t get the attention it deserved” (“The Most Dangerous Game”).

Similar too is the news coverage granted to women murdered by men: as Chucho Flores tells Oscar Fate, “every so often the numbers go up and it’s news again and the reporters talk about it. People talk about it too, and the story grows like a snowball until the sun comes out” (285). In Long Island, for a time, the press (with headlines like: *When Women Go Missing on Long Island, Some Matter. Prostitutes Don’t*) and the people (“I don’t think it’s somebody local, I think it’s somebody from out of town”) talk about the murders and speculate on who might have committed them. Eventually, though, five years pass, and the police don’t hold a single press

conference, and the only ones left interested are a filmmaking crew and a novelist.

Even the victims share similarities – none of the four victims originally found on Gilgo Beach were local to the area. One was a young woman driven by her boyfriend from Connecticut to Times Square for the purpose of finding work as a prostitute (ironically, the boyfriend’s arrest and conviction for human trafficking was for almost a decade the only arrest made with any connection to the Long Island Serial Killer case). Another was a woman last seen in Queens. Of the first victim described in *2666*, two local women pray over the body and tell police, “she isn’t from around here, poor thing” (353). Two more victims are murdered in Santa Teresa on their way to the United States, one found with a bus ticket to Tucson, AZ. The ease of travel, and easy travel as a facilitator of femicide, is a recurring motif in both the novel and the documentary series.

After some time investigating the Long Island Serial Killer, filmmakers discover a similar case from 2006 which occurred outside Atlantic City, NJ; a few miles away, in Egg Harbor, four women were found in a drainage ditch. Like the women found on Gilgo Beach, all four were prostitutes, and all four were mothers, and all four were arranged in the same manner. Filmmakers are quick to note that Atlantic City is only two and a half hours from Long Island, by car, which raises the question of whether the women also share their killer (“Danse Macabre”). Highways are the physical mechanism by which the funneling effect described earlier is made possible: women travel from one place to another, land in unfamiliar territory, and become victims. Killers are able to travel from one place to another with alarming results; in the cluster of six victims discovered on Gilgo Beach in April 2011, police discovered a severed head they were able to match to a decapitated victim found over 40 miles away in 2003. They discovered a pair of severed legs that matched a torso they had found in 1996 (“The Most Dangerous

Game”).

The similarity of the cases in New Jersey and Long Island encourages the filmmakers to seek out additional crimes sharing those characteristics, and to learn about the murders of four women in Daytona Beach, Florida. Four women discovered (albeit in different locations, this time) nude, wearing only socks, and shot in the head. In the course of their work in Florida the filmmakers find an article written by journalist Walter Pacheco in which Pacheco demonstrates the result of his independent research: 19 unsolved murders along the I-4 (which runs east-west from Tampa to Daytona) and I-95 (which runs north-south from Maine to Miami, although Pacheco is only referring to the section around Daytona on Florida’s east coast). Pacheco wrote that all the victims were either known prostitutes or drug users, that all were positioned similarly, that all were shot. As he states, “there are just women all over.” This is a fact confirmed by a private investigator interviewed in the show, a man named Bill Warner (“Different Seasons”).

Warner describes his initial involvement in the cases: “this goes back to 2007, when a woman in the Kentucky area” hired Warner to find her missing daughter. He did; she was dead, and her body was in Cincinnati, Ohio. He tells the filmmakers that, “in Florida, it revolves around I-4, I-75, and up the coast to I-95, and across I-10.” The filmmakers ask, “how many are we talking about?” and Warner replies, “all together, maybe 60.” 60 women murdered in Florida and left alongside every major highway in the state. It’s a fact that seems unbelievable until the facts are confirmed by the very people a society entrusts with preventing, or at the very least, investigating, these crimes (“Different Seasons”).

Vernon Geberth, a forty-year veteran of the NYPD and author of several textbooks used as training materials by police agencies around the country, among them *Practical Homicide*

Investigation, calls the FBI's estimate that there are 30 active American serial killers at any one time "bullshit," and tells the filmmakers, "I have a dataset of 476 sexual serial killers in my files, but my dataset might be different than somebody else's." Here we can elaborate on the dual implications of his statement: first, Geberth emphasizes *sexual* serial killers, and there are of course serial killers for whom sex is not a motivating factor, so the number is likely quite a bit higher than his 476; second, in his explicit mention that other investigators might have different data, he is only leaving open the possibility that there are yet more sexual serial killers, but not fewer. Mark Safarik, a former forensic profiler with the FBI, explains the proliferation of serial killers and the inability of law enforcement to prevent these crimes from occurring: "We really don't have time to say [to local law enforcement agencies], 'hey, if you need help on that serial murder case, we're here...the unit is so small that we have so much work already...you have eight profilers for the entire country.'" The ineffectiveness of the shockingly small unit at the FBI led the organization, in 2004, to develop the Highway Serial Killer Initiative ("Whoever Fears Monsters").

Through the Initiative, FBI analysts "compiled a list of more than 750 murder victims found along or near U.S. highways, as well as nearly 450 suspects⁴." Here we have finally returned to the inadequacy of literary critics in their treatment of Bolaño's *2666*. Farred asks, "How does one live in our time now that the postglobal moment has so fatally failed the women of the maquiladoras" (696). Eve calls Santa Teresa "a thinly veiled rendition of the ongoing, horrendous reality in Ciudad Juarez" (89) and states that "Bolaño's true focus in this ethical setup is upon a critique of postcolonialism's entanglement with neoliberalism...situating *2666* within an ethical framework of globalization that teaches us of the ills that it darkly reflects"

⁴ <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/violent-criminal-apprehension-program-part-2>

(94). Sol Peláez effectively dismantles these arguments, because, for her,

the women killed at Santa Teresa are not brutally murdered because they are ‘enemies’ of the polis or civil society. They are neither friends nor enemies, for that matter. They are killed and this killing has to do with their female body. In their death they seem to enter finally into the (patriarchal) norm of being a woman, into the norm that makes all women the same. They are killed because their bodies are “female,” because they “are” women...the repetitive natures of their dead female bodies calls into question the notion of Woman as a whole set (39).

Peláez’s comment on the repetitive natures of dead female bodies is an excellent summation of this essay’s issue with American critics who focus on neoliberalism as the cause of women’s deaths in Ciudad Juarez; women are killed, everywhere, because they are women. It is capitalism, not neoliberalism, which capitalizes on the endless repetition of violence against women, packages the dead bodies for consumption, and feeds it to a viewer stuck in an abject reality where, sure, these crimes occur, but they all get solved, and everyone gets “justice.” As Adorno noted, “the pre-digested quality of the product prevails, justifies itself and establishes itself all the more firmly in so far as it constantly refers to those who cannot digest anything not already pre-digested. It is baby-food: permanent self-reflection based upon the infantile compulsion towards the repetition of needs which it creates in the first place” (The Culture Industry 67). Mass culture has always served up this kind of content, but we have reached a new

low, where dead female bodies are in fact necessary to capitalist culture, as the repetition of their deaths serve as raw material for the repetition of representations of their deaths, which viewers consume for the profit of the creators and to their own detriment.

Even Bolaño accepted his role in this enterprise, as I do. I am using dead female bodies to obtain my own profit; if this essay is acceptable to the academy then I will earn my degree, a not-insignificant award for merely relating facts. Bolaño too expected *2666* to sell. His “heirs” – their word – include a note as a preface to the novel. In it, they state:

Realizing that death might be near, Roberto left instructions for his novel *2666* to be published divided into five books corresponding to the five parts of the novel, specifying the order in which they should appear, at what intervals (one per year), and even the price to be negotiated with the publisher. With this decision... Roberto thought he was providing for his children's future. After his death...another consideration of a less practical nature arose: respect for the literary value of the work, which caused us, together with [the publisher] Jorge Herralde, to reverse Roberto's decision and publish *2666* first in full, in a single volume, as he would have done had his illness not taken the gravest course.

There is no reason to doubt the family when they offer that they made their decision out of respect for the work, out of respect for the form the novel would have taken had Bolaño not been facing

an early death from liver failure. However, and even if they believe otherwise, publishing the novel in one volume is absolutely what enabled its author to provide for his children's future. How many copies would an esoteric novella about four literary critics on an ultimately unresolved hunt for a fictional author really sell? In contrast: the market for violent female death is impossible to calculate. In literature, in television, in film, in podcasts, there is an endless appetite in capitalist culture for dead female bodies.

Here this essay diverges from that of Sol Peláez. For Peláez, it is of great import that women are “killed, abandoned, and forgotten in the border city of Santa Teresa...Santa Teresa instead of Ciudad Juarez...Santa Teresa in Sonora, Mexico, instead of Santa Teresa in New Mexico, US...both cities are border cities, and in both, violence is border violence” (31). The border, in Peláez's reading, “disrupts hegemonic collective meaning and imagines a non-whole world” (35). It is the position of this essay, however, that the setting of *2666* on a border is in fact a trap, a trap laid by the simple fact that the murders which caught Bolaño's attention were occurring in Ciudad Juarez. He wrote: “a few years ago, my friends in Mexico got tired of me asking for information...about the killings of women in Ciudad Juarez...a unique case in the annals of Latin American crime: more than three hundred women raped and killed in an extremely short period of time, between 1993 and 2002” (Between Parentheses, 231). Bolaño notes that Juarez is “a city on the U.S. border with a population of just under one million” (231), however, the placement of the city on the border seems like a fact relayed, with no more or less importance than the population, to allow the reader to understand where the city is (and how many people live in it). In other words, Juarez/Santa Teresa is where Bolaño chose to set his novel because that is where the violence that captured his imagination was occurring. Had he first heard of the rape and murder of thousands of women over the same time in the United States, he could have

easily set his novel in Denver, for example, and perhaps Chucho Flores would have been named Chuck Flowers and Oscar Amalfitano would teach at the University of Colorado, but other changes would have been minimal; first, because as we've established, in capitalist society women "aren't worth shit" anywhere, except as victims, as dead bodies; second because the borders surrounding Santa Teresa – that of the United States, that of the other states in Mexico – play no role in delineating any actual border at all; in fact, every character who appears in the novel freely passes through whatever border they choose. The four literature critics travel all over Europe to various conferences, on trips for pleasure, on trips for leisure; to Mexico City to meet with the one man they know who has seen Archimboldi in the last 50 years; from there to Santa Teresa; from Santa Teresa to Tucson, where Norton catches a flight to New York, and from New York a flight to London. A Pakistani cab driver is beaten nearly to death, but in London, and by men from Spain and France. Amalfitano and his daughter arrive in Santa Teresa from Spain. Archimboldi himself travels from Germany to Mexico City to Santa Teresa, and Fate travels from New York to Detroit to Santa Teresa; women (and men) in other Mexican states travel to Santa Teresa either for work or because it is on the way to the United States, which they are able to enter without any authority allowing the trip. Nazis, so prevalent in the imagery of the first part of the novel (and the side for which Archimboldi, like so many other Germans born in 1920, fought during the Second World War) respected no borders at all, before, during, or even after the war, when so many escaped to far-off locales, like the widow on her trip to Buenos Aires.

For Bolaño violence is not border violence; borders are imagined, or real, but of no practical significance; men are violent everywhere, women are victims everywhere, and the inhuman capacity for violence so embodied by fascists in Germany a half-century earlier is one

end of a thread connecting not just to Santa Teresa, but, as this essay asserts, to the United States as well; in the period from 1993-2000, roughly the time frame of the crimes in the novel, over 34,000 women were murdered in the United States⁵ (at least; the federal government has been sued, successfully⁶, for underreporting homicide victims in this country, and the National Institute of Justice estimates that more than 100,000 unsolved homicides “have accumulated in the past 20 years alone”⁷), while another 1,100 women went missing (never to be found)⁸, the bodies of 471 unidentified women were discovered⁹, and an additional 19 homicide victims were identified but never claimed by family or friends¹⁰. The only people for whom borders matter are the law enforcement officials whose jurisdiction stops at a border. *The Killing Season* relates the animosity between police officers in Nassau and Suffolk Counties on Long Island; further, that our interstate highways pass through county and state borders is what causes a disconnect for local law enforcement agencies investigating the epidemic of highway violence; killers are capitalizing on the fact that police officers are the only ones who cannot freely travel across borders. For Bolaño, though, this is an epidemic that goes beyond any border, a violence perpetrated by people who pass freely through borders, a violence endlessly used by capitalist producers to dull a barely conscious consumer class into submission to an ultra-violent reality.

⁵ https://public.tableau.com/profile/thomas.hargrove#!/vizhome/Victims_15571805795660/SHRMain

⁶ <http://www.murderdata.org/2019/08/map-files-lawsuit-for-federal.html>

⁷ <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/serial-killer-connections-through-cold-cases>

⁸ <https://www.namus.gov/MissingPersons/Search#/results>

⁹ <https://www.namus.gov/UnidentifiedPersons/Search#/results>

¹⁰ <https://www.namus.gov/UnclaimedPersons/Search#/results>

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