

Writing about Art: Addressing the Problem of Art Appreciation and Criticism in Nigerian Universities/Colleges

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Abstract

Writing about art is a complex task that differs considerably from other forms of writing because it requires detailed understanding and application of certain theoretical frameworks for visual analysis. This has proven to be a major challenge amongst university and college students in Nigeria who grapple with interpreting visuals into text. The objective of this research is to identify the factors that impede students' writing abilities in art departments through literature review, then develop a conceptual guide to art appreciation and criticism for undergraduates and budding art critics. The research demonstrates that emphasis on the aesthetic philosophy of art and the predominant creative pedagogy used for art tutelage in Nigeria is responsible for the poor approach to art writing amongst students. To address this problem, a combination of three theoretical frameworks: *Ekphrasis*, *Formal Analysis* and *Iconographic Analysis* are used to develop a new five-step-system for art appreciation. Results show that the juxtaposition of analytical elements from *Ekphrasis*, *Formal* and *Iconographic Analysis* leads to the development of a simple but effective theoretical framework for writing about art which covers five key areas of description, analysis, context, meaning and judgement. Having tested this new framework with tremendous success, this research concludes that the application of this five-step-system will improve writing about art in Nigerian tertiary institutions by acquainting students with the theoretical tools/lexicons to effectively analyse their own works and those of established artists.

Keywords: *Art Appreciation, Art Criticism, Ekphrasis, Writing, Iconography, Artifactuality, Nigeria*

Introduction

The significance of text in the understanding of artistic expression can best be appreciated when discussing art in the context of modernism and postmodernism, the period when the philosophy of art changed from aesthetic concerns to embrace conceptualism. Art critics such as Andre Salmon, Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg and others initiated this new paradigm of interpreting artistic experiences and expression through the interplay of form and text at the turn of the 20th Century. Whilst their approach centred on contextualizing art in the context of modern and postmodern cultures/societies, writing about art in the contemporary context is rather more integral to artistic conception, expression and reception. According to Gilda Williams, as the art universe continues to expand, a worldwide audience now absorbs art primarily through text-and-image, since artworks created by the youngest generation of post-postmodern, post-medium, post-Fordist, and post-critique artists require decoding even for specialists (Williams 2014: 112). This is because contemporary art is complex in conception, multifaceted in genres and ambiguously innovative in technical approaches, thus, requiring accompanying text to demystify

its artifactuality in order to connect with viewers. Textual matter, thus, play a very vital role in understanding contemporary art. However, because of the eclectic nature of writing about art, students and young art critics struggle with mastering the parameters deployed in transforming that which is visual (form) into that which is literal (text). This problematic arises firstly because of a misconstrued simplification of the concept of art appreciation by many as an enjoyment of artworks based on the satisfaction of one's emotional/aesthetic appetite. On the contrary writing about art is a complex and detailed exercise that extends beyond mere emotional responses to art forms. It is an experience that requires translation, starting with a keen observation of a particular art form. As Majorie Munsterberg points out, writing about art is a great deal of visual description that consists of two separate acts of translation; the first transforms a visual experience into a verbal one and the second turns a private experience into one that can be communicated to someone else (Munsterberg 2009). Writing about art, therefore, begins with a translation of that which is visual before an objective interpretation of forms into emotional responses that are based on a sound formal analysis. For this to take place, the critic must understand the specific elements that create the visual effect in the formalism of an art object in order to provide explicit details about it. These qualities cannot be imagined by a reader who has not acquired the skills or encountered the art form closely. This is because writing about art requires a keen sense to discern from what is obvious and what is not and once one attains the ability to discern these subtleties, he or she becomes better positioned and informed to judge an artwork and acknowledge the finer points that do not meet the eyes (Sanger 2012). What this means is that for one to engage in effective art appreciation and criticism, he or she must first learn such skills to discern, then interpret the hidden content of art. This is a mammoth task as Williams observes in '*How to write about Contemporary Art*', that writing well about art is not easy because it requires a sort of inclination for words and for writing. The author argues that this inclination for words are affected by the lack of *Sapere Vedere*;

Text provide meaning in a way that mere looking cannot but it is most difficult to make someone really look at art - it is almost impossible. Students spend hours and hours reading philosophy or cultural theory to 'explain' an artwork, but won't spend a single long hard minute just looking at it...this is because like most people they have no training in reading visual information, but we can all read words... (Williams 2014: 29).

What Williams alludes to is that writing about art in schools is affected by lack of visual literacy and keen observational skills to read visual information and transform forms into words, as well as the attempt by most students to superimpose cultural and conceptual philosophies on art forms. This is the major problem amongst art students in Nigerian universities and colleges.

A few art commentaries and essays provide insights into this problematic by interrogating its causes in Nigeria. In his essay '*The Problems of Art History as a Course in Nigerian Universities*', Olu Amo points out that the quality of theoretical courses in Nigerian universities with regards to students' grades is relatively poor compared to their Western peers. The rationale for this disparity he emphasises lies in the structuring of art history courses which he believes are too historical in content. This current framing of theoretical courses along historiography framework is believed to only equip Nigerian art students with knowledge of past artistic traditions rather than analytical tools needed for comprehensive writing about art (Amo 2012: 49). Balogun Gbadegesin observes that there exist a chasm between art production and art writing in Nigeria that devalues

formal art training into a mere apprenticeship system. He argues that whereas Nigerian universities and colleges produce highly skilled artists in various specializations in the visual arts when such professionals are confronted with the task of writing about their works and those of other practitioners they end up with very sketchy backstory (Gbadegesin 2013: 79). What Gbadegesin alludes to is the tendency in Nigeria were in an attempt to describe artworks, art students and even established professionals jump into backstory drawing upon uncoordinated occurrences and cultural philosophies to superimpose meaning on their art often out of context and lacking actual visual analysis of the formal configuration of the artwork in question.

In a research carried out in 2017 which analysed grades obtained by 798 students in Art Appreciation and History of Art examinations at the Cross River University of Technology - Nigeria, Clement Akpang observes that the problems associated with writing about art in Nigerian Universities and colleges are a result of the overarching emphasis on art production and the adoption of the creative pedagogy for art tutelage in all Nigerian institutions of higher learning without a corresponding emphasis on critical approaches to art theory/writing. This is because framed in the *Aesthetic Philosophy*, the crux of art in Nigeria problematically centres on visual appeal and technical profundity as oppose to conceptualism. He posits that,

Although the creative pedagogy used for art tutelage in Nigeria fosters the attainment of creative profundity, its inability to provide a framework for integration of theories in practice impedes research in art/design needed to advance art writing skills. This emphasis on art production does not provide students with the necessary conceptual/analytical tools to deploy art as a mechanism for inquiry or framework for the interpretation of their ideas/concepts and the works of established artists. Thus, it is responsible in part for the near lack of research in visual arts and the poor quality of art analysis dominant amongst students in Nigerian Universities and colleges (Akpang 2018: 140).

His essay establishes a direct link between poor quality writing in arts and Nigerian higher education art curricula framed in the aesthetic and creative philosophies of art. In her widely read book *'Writing for Art Appreciation'* Priscila Zimmerman postulates a theory that explains why the emphasis on art production directly affects writing about art. Zimmerman argues that teaching only self-expression in form as is the tradition in art schools, does not automatically translate to proficiency in art articulation in verbal or written context.

The teaching of art production usually focuses entirely on composition, artistic procedure, and skill development and this does not provide students with an appreciation for art. If art classes teach only the knowledge and skills necessary for self-expression and do not prepare the student for reflection on and discussion about art, they do nothing more than teach a trade. By itself, the artist model cannot lead a student to an appreciation of art. In other words, art appreciation does not always occur with art production...I have found that many students skilled in using several art media are able to make only superficial responses to the work of other artists...(Zimmerman 1985: 32).

The findings of Akpang's research corroborates Zimmerman's theory because it proves that the art-production model adopted in Nigeria since the introduction of formal art training from the 1920s only accounts for the production of skilled professionals, many of who lack the requisite theoretical skills to discuss art and contextualize their individual practices. What this brief survey does, is identify the factors responsible for poor art writing in Nigerian universities and highlight

the un-researched gap which still exists because till date no study has developed frameworks to address this problematic, in order to improve visual research and writing about art. The existence of this gap underpins the rationale for this current research, which aims to draw upon established art writing genres (theoretical frameworks) to develop a system of writing about art that will improve art appreciation and criticism in Nigeria. The research's main objective is to define a new approach to the teaching of art appreciation and criticism that will equip students analytically to engage in a comprehensive art description, evaluation and judgement.

Theoretical Framework

To address the problem of writing about art in Nigeria Universities and colleges, it suffices to formulate a systematic approach deriving impetus from established art writing genres. Thus, this research draws heavily from three main theoretical frameworks: *Ekphrasis*, *Formal Analysis* and *Iconographic Analysis*. An *Ekphrasis* is a literary form of description that makes the reader envision the thing described as if it were physically present. This form of artistic writing was introduced by Homer in his description of Achilles' shield in '*Book 18 of the Iliad 800BCE*'. In introducing the Ekphratic tradition in this piece, two things became central to the genre – to implicitly compare visual and verbal means of description most dramatically by weaving elements that could not be part of a shield (like movement and sound) with things that could be (like physical material and visual details). Second, the thing being described comes to seem real in the imagination of the reader. Homer, hence, succeeded in introducing a kind of vivid description that combines actual and implied features/experiences to provide in-depth analysis and appreciation of a thing being described. In the 19th Century, ekphrastic writing took on a new contexts. Victorian writers such as William Hazlitt, John Ruskin and Walter Pater, published grand set-pieces of *Ekphrasis* about older, as well as, contemporary art. For these writers the fact that the object existed mattered a great deal, thus, they focused on using text to make readers feel like participants in the visual experience. Ruskin's ekphrastic passage of J.M.W. Turner's *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On (The Slave Ship)* for example epitomises the advancement of this writing genre in the 19th Century with the admixture of visual details of the picture with allusions to movement and sound to create dramatic effects through text of what the painting looked like, which persuades the reader to believe in his/her imaginative understanding of an actual work of art.

Unlike *Ekphrasis*, *Formal Analysis* provides a visual description that is not meant to evoke the work in the reader's mind but instead engages in a detailed explanation of the visual structures of a composition. It analyses how visual elements have been arranged and function within the piece to convey an idea or concept. This form of writing does not consider the subject matter, concepts nor historical or cultural context of an art piece rather it focuses on formal configuration. In its purest form, formal analysis is limited to what the viewer sees as the point of departure in understanding such art genre independent of its context or meaning. Since *Formal Analysis* explains how the eye is led through a work, this kind of description provides a solid foundation for other types of analysis. This is because the features or formal configuration of an art form constitutes a window into its meanings and context. Developed by the British art critic Roger Fry in 1909 later reprinted in '*Vision and Design 1920*', this kind of art writing escapes the interpretative writing of Victorian writers like Ruskin, in order to focus on describing what the viewer sees independent of its

emotional impact. Because of its reliance on visual perception and in-depth analysis of physical features, formal analysis constitutes a kind of rigorous scientific interrogation of art. It breaks a work of art into component parts of *Colour, line, plane, texture, shapes, rhythm, forms* etc., before treating them as units of a homogenous whole. Its framework, therefore, advances detailed description/analysis of artefacts as the basics of art writing.

Iconographic Analysis differs slightly from the aforementioned writing genres. This genre considers a work of art in terms of the life of the person who made it, to create a kind of historical context. It establishes the meaning a work of art had at the time it was made drawing by examining the societal circumstances, the experiences and lifestyle of the maker during that historical period. This may or may not include what the maker of the work intended or, usually a more important factor, what the patron who commissioned the work wanted. Iconographic analysis always depends on assembling historical evidence through primary or secondary research to construct the meaning and significance of art objects. The art historian Erwin Panofsky is credited with formulating the genre of iconographic analysis. Panofsky in '*Early Netherlandish Painting 1953*', argued for a very particular/contextual way of understanding pictures made in Northern Europe during the 15th Century. He suggested that in the case of 15th Century Netherland, many apparently ordinary objects symbolized religious ideas, with the result being a total sanctification of the visible world. He, thus, argues for a form of writing about art that involves asking questions beyond formal qualities or contemplative meaning-making. But rather focusing on finding out the symbolic significance of a given motif, whether or not a symbolical interpretation can be justified by definite texts or agrees with ideas demonstrably alive in the period the work was made and presumably familiar to its artists. His art writing genre also centred on examining to what extent such a symbolical interpretation is in keeping with the historical position of the civilization where it is or was created and personal tendencies of the individual master. If art is looked at symbolically according to Panofsky's theory, the viewers and art critics will demystify such art by deconstructing its formalism using the understanding of iconography and semiotics (Panofsky 1953). This will lead to a deeper understanding of the meaning of art, as well as, the cultures where it is created.

These theoretical frameworks each define different perspectives in interrogating the nature of art. For example *Ekphrasis* combines visual forms with allusions to heighten imaginative effects to enable the viewers to experience art as a force that connects visuals with emotional responses; *Formal Analysis* provides detailed connections between elements of a composition, creativity and visual sign to heighten visual literacy and the aesthetic appeal of art, while *Iconographic Analysis* deconstructs visual forms to reveal historical context to provide deeper meanings and significance for a particular art form. When combined these theoretical frameworks constitute a comprehensive guide to art appreciation and criticism because they address the entire nature of art. This research, therefore, juxtaposes analytical elements from these three to develop a simple guide in the form of a five-step-system for art appreciation and a two-step-system for art criticism to enable art students in Nigerian Universities and colleges acquire the skills needed to write about art.

Five-Step-System of Art Appreciation - a New Theoretical Framework

Appropriating analytical elements from *Ekphrasis*, *Formal* and *Iconographic Analysis*, informs this simple systematic approach to art appreciation/writing base on five steps: a) Description, b) Analysis, c) Context, d) Meaning, and e) Judgment. This writing model is designed to interrogate both the physical and intrinsic qualities of artworks, so as to use text to advance understanding of form.

Description: This involves analysing the visual configuration/attributes of an art piece readily observable to the viewer. As the first step, the writer is to describe what he or she can see that is the physical qualities such as lines, colours, forms, textures, rhythm, patterns, shapes etc., A description should also consist of identifying the genre of art, that is stating if it is a sculpture, painting, textile art, ceramics, graphics, print art etc., and should begin by detailing the major features of the piece before treating the fine details. As Munsterberg points out, the visual parts of the artwork must be sorted into the more and the less important, since no description can include everything and assumptions must be separated from actual observations (Munsterberg 2009: 2). Description encompasses identifying the style of the piece. By style, I refer to the unique ways in which an artist, group of artists, a school, culture or civilization etc., manipulate art materials and combine the elements and principles of art to convey certain ideologies and concepts. A descriptive analysis should examine how the elements and principles of art and design are deployed in the piece. At this stage, no judgment is required rather it should be a simple interpretation in the textual form of a work's formal properties. In describing art, the writer is to consider the following questions: - what does it look like? Is it a representation of something? What is shown? Is it an abstraction of something? Is it a non-objective work? What elements are visible? What elements are dominant? Once these questions are answered, a comprehensive interpretation of a works formalism will be achieved.

Analysis: After examining formal qualities, the next step is to analyse the art object. Analysis refers to a detailed look at a work of art that combines physical attributes with subjective statements based on the writer's initial reaction to the work. In analysing art, the critic should attempt to determine what the physical features suggest and discuss why the artist used such features to convey specific ideas. Analysis goes beyond description. It should involve a detailed examination of how the various elements and principles of art are combined in a composition to visually assert the artist's views. It requires identifying the centre of interest and what visual manipulation techniques the artist deploys to draw one's attention to certain parts of the composition. It should further interrogate the pattern of the repeat of specific elements and distribution within the picture plane and discuss how such combinations and presentation creates a sense and look of energy and movement, peacefulness or stillness. The critic is required to then proceed to analyse how such elements or visual structural systems contribute to the overall appearance of the image in relation to the title and subject matter. The critic's perceptions of balance, proportion and scale with emphasis on the relationships of each heterogeneous part of the composition to the whole, as well as his or her emotional reaction to the work should be discussed to determine whether the artwork is successful or not.

Context: This analytical feature is informed by the theoretical framework of Iconography. Context involves examining the historical, religious, or environmental information that surrounds a

particular work of art, to understand its meaning. As Eugene Kleinbauer points out, 'a work of art is symbolic' which means it is a visual sign, that constitutes a codified documentation of the historical socio-political and cultural societal condition that gave rise to it (Kleinbauer 1971). This means that every work of art is defined by a context and understanding that context helps in writing about such art form. In this phase of writing about art, the critic should advance beyond formal description or analysis of elements/principles of art, to a more sophisticated interrogation of meaning through research. The critic is expected to read about the time period a work of art was created, the circumstances surrounding that timeframe, what inspired the artist, who inspired the artist and how the art object imparted that context. Such information can be obtained by reading art reviews, artist's statements and interviews with the artists themselves. Unless the context of a piece is fully researched, effective and comprehensive appreciation of its artifactuality is impossible because art is culture/context-specific. As Arthur Danto observes, the socio-political, economic, religious and philosophical interpretations which a culture attaches to art objects constitutes the objects' art-hood, making contextual interpretation crucial to understanding art (Danto 1965). It is by uncovering and articulating the context of an artwork that a full understanding of the ideologies embedded in its forms can be attained. In other words, defining the context surrounding a piece of art leads to a deeper understanding of its formalism.

Meaning: Refers to a statement of a work's content, a message or narrative expressed by the subject matter. By content, I refer to the information codified in visual form by the artist (that is what the work is about). Meaning encompasses the ideas which defined and influenced the artist's composition which he employs his skill to express through forms, lines, textures, shapes, colours etc. Form and content (meaning) are two inseparable interrelated philosophical categories, therefore, meaning cannot be deduced independently of form. Content is the sum of all the components of an object—its properties, internal processes, relations, contradictions, and tendencies, while form is the internal organization of content. The relationship between content and form can be described as a unity, because one transits into the other. Therefore, a coherent analysis of the form of a magnum opus in relation to its context leads to the understanding of its subject matter and meaning. It is important for budding art critics to realise how to deconstruct form textually to reveal different layers of meaning which Robert Belton identifies as primary, secondary and tertiary meanings (Belton 1996). To identify each of these layers or the overall content of an art piece, the critic needs to first analyse the visual features of its composition, by taking inventory of what he or she can see, as in literal images, straightforward subjects and imagery; and then describing facts, actions, and/or poses. This should be closely followed by ascertaining if the subject is religious, traditional, political, satirical, social, subversive, or controversial etc. Meaning also requires engaging a convergence and mutual modification of form, content, and context. This can be achieved by looking at the title, reading about the artist's inspirations and what other critics have written about the work. By reading about the artist's ideas and inspirations at the time of the creation of the artwork, a link can be established between concept, ideas and form that can lead to a sophisticated understanding and analysis of art. Generally, meanings can be identified/deduced by asking the following questions: what is the artist saying? How is the artist saying it? And how does the central theme reflect in the compositional configuration? These questions will help writers relate form, content and context.

Judgment: This refers to passing a critical point of view about a work of art concerning its aesthetics or cultural value. What is expected when conducting basic judgement or evaluation of

art is to provide a peripheral critique after careful observation, analysis, and interpretation of its formalism, subject matter and context. Judgment is a subjective evaluation based on one's understandings of the artwork, hence, it is important for art critics at this stage to discuss why they think the piece has intrinsic value/worth or not. To carry out this critical exercise, one should begin by examining the value in the work which could be its aesthetic appeal, the conveyed message or ideologies, etc., then make connections between its content and significant impact in disseminating certain ideologies or reaffirming established belief systems or philosophies. It is also important to ascertain if the piece has any contextual value by critically evaluating the success of the artist's deployment of the elements and principles of art and design in the composition in relation to the societal circumstances surrounding its creation. Based on initial response upon encountering the piece, an art critic is to proceed in stating his or her subjective analysis if they find the subject matter appealing, unappealing, expressive, original, unimaginative, creative, or repulsive. Summarily, judgment at this stage is simply stating one's positive and negative perceptions of an artwork or genre.

Art Criticism - a Two-Step-Guide

Art criticism is the evaluation of works of art or objects of creative expression tied to a theory. Art criticism is interpretative and involves efforts to understand a particular work of art from a theoretical perspective and to establish its contextual significance in the history of art and the *Artworld*. It is an evaluation that requires drawing upon certain aesthetic philosophies and theoretical frameworks that underpin the creation of art in a particular culture/civilization and context. Every work of art is defined by certain theories and it is the job of the art critic to establish such art forms within that theoretical context (Weitz 1956). This goes beyond peripheral judgement or formal description - it requires establishing the impact a given art form had on the development or rethinking of artistic expression and production. The parameters for critiquing art are not universal but genre-specific. This implies that approaches to critiquing photography, music, film, sculpture, dance, literature, etc., differ considerably according to the genre's aesthetic ethos. Art criticism, therefore, should involve in-depth interpretation to demystify a particular art form or genre and establishing its significance to the larger society. David Strauss observes that this form of writing about art is a viable mechanism for defining the link between art and society, the past, present and possible future; "art needs something outside of itself as a place of reflection, discernment, and connection with the larger world...If you want to engage, if you want a discourse, you need criticism (Strauss 2012: 2). Strauss's theory is corroborated by the fact that art criticism is a form of literature that helps to condense, amplify or emphasize the visual and contextual connections of an art form, thus, bringing into harmony all the ideas that come to the mind when it is confronted by artistic phenomena. To engage in comprehensive art criticism, a deeper approach to interpretation and judgement is required, as a result, appropriating analytical elements from *Iconographic Analysis* and *Ekphrasis* this research formulates a simple two-step-guide to art criticism to improve art writing in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Interpretation: This is crucial to art criticism. It involves analysing the visual configuration of a given art piece, its content and context to form an opinion on the aboutness and rationale for its creation. Artistic interpretations according to Barrett Terry "are often based on a worldview" (Terry 1994: 17). Thus, it involves analysing art based on several philosophies and theories or

cultural cosmologies. This is because all art is in part about the world in which it emerged and all art is in part about other art and the philosophies that govern its existence that extends from societal philosophies and ideologies (Op Cit: 49). Interpretation, therefore, answers the main questions: what is the artist trying to say? Or what is going on in the picture? Critics should also address other questions such as, what does the artwork mean? And what theoretical frameworks or philosophies are identifiable in the piece? Answering these questions requires the deployment of theories and philosophies of art to authenticate the critic's interpretation of the piece. When interpreting an artwork one is required to assume a number of roles - a translator thinking of the artwork as something written in visual language that has to be translated into words; an archaeologist viewing the artwork as a layer of physical information about human life or an idea, in order to be able to dig through the layers to unveil what each layer tells us. Finally, the critics should assume the position of a scientist looking at the artwork as a piece of an experiment, to examine the materiality of each media used to develop the hypothesis of what the artist was trying to prove and the ideas expressed. In assuming these varying roles during art criticism, and answering the questions discussed earlier, the critic will be able to deconstruct an artwork by preening its formalism to determine the actual crux of its artifactuality with regards to societal and contextual significance and references.

Judgment: In conducting art criticism, judgment means giving a work of art rank in relation to other works, and considering a very important aspect of the visual arts - its originality. This means that beyond being a subjective analysis based on an individual's aesthetic tastes, it requires evaluation properly grounded in the sound application of the philosophies that govern art conception and creation in varying contexts. The main questions to address when conducting judgment in art criticism include: is it a successful work of art? And how impactful is the piece in relation to other art forms of the same period? These questions enable a critic to form a personal opinion of the artwork been evaluated. Judgement also involves determining the degree of artistic merit of the piece and ascertaining if it is an original creation or a reprise. To do this the critic must conduct good research around the time period the work was created, examining similar works and influences to establish its uniqueness as a one-off masterpiece or its relation to other art forms as a variant of a movement, style or genre.

Conclusion

This research examined the problems associated with writing about art in Nigerian Universities and colleges, identifying the emphasis on art production and aesthetic philosophy of art in Universities' curricula as the responsible factor. An interrogation of the writing genres of *Ekphrasis*, *Formal* and *Iconographic Analysis* proved that if complex theoretical frameworks are juxtaposed and localised, a basic guide that can improve writing about art can be formulated. This provided the conceptual framework used to develop a new five-step-system and two-step theoretical guide to art appreciation and art criticism respectively. Having put this new theoretical guide to the test and recording tremendous success in the 2017/2018 academic session in teaching *Art Appreciation* and *Contemporary African Art*, this research concludes that the current art curricula in Nigeria tertiary education system needs an urgent review to re-define theoretical courses to become more critical and analytical rather than based on historiography. If this is done

it will improve university and college students' writing abilities and research in the visual arts in general, hence it is strongly recommended for implementation.

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