

Önder Çakar, Rojava Film  
Commune, and Hito Steyerl  
**“I don’t have  
time!”**

01/10

**Hito Steyerl:** How did the Rojava Film Commune come into existence?

**Önder Çakar:** During the war in Kobane, many artists from all around the world joined the resistance. I was one of them. After the war receded to other fronts and some cities were liberated, it became necessary to build up and organize life in the liberated territories.

Cinema was a way of doing this. Particularly because of the Amûde Cinema incident, the people of Rojava have issues regarding cinema, but also a great desire for it.<sup>1</sup> The Kurdish language was forbidden until 1996 and it was not used in any cultural artistic products. Kurdish poetry was forbidden too. Therefore, there is a great need for local cinema. The Rojava Film Commune was one of the first organizations founded in the liberated territories. There were some filmmaker friends who made a few documentaries about the Islamic State massacres in Shengal, also some other folks who came to Rojava as internationalists and had experience in filmmaking. We joined forces and founded the film commune.



In 1960, hundreds of Kurdish schoolchildren were killed by a fire in a movie theater in Amûde, Syria. In this photograph, the ruins are inspected by locals after the fire.

**HS:** And how did you start the movie *Stories from Ruined Cities*?

**ÖÇ:** I will try to answer this question from my personal experience. I didn’t go to Kobane and Rojava to make a movie. I didn’t think it was ethically acceptable to popularize the place, and go there with the purpose of filmmaking. I thought: What can I do? The answer was, I can transfer my experience to younger people. I went to Rojava for this reason. Then things went well. We founded a film academy. We had twelve students. A new generation of filmmakers was being trained. Along those lines I met a really talented filmmaker in the commune. And there was a good cameraman. Within six months, I



Filmstill from the movie *Stories of Destroyed Cities* (2016).



Filmstill from the movie *Stories of Destroyed Cities* (2016).

gradually started to believe that a film could be made. We didn't even have technical equipment. Later, we found some funding. With that money, we bought equipment from Istanbul. We smuggled the technical equipment over the border to the film academy as if we were smuggling weapons or other criminal goods. Things gradually came together and made me think that it was possible to make films. I didn't have any idea about doing it myself, but I was trying to encourage other friends to do something.

**HS:** It sounds like the construction of the film and the commune went hand in hand. In that sense, there is no difference between this film and the student films; both are pedagogical and institution-building practices. They train people, besides being seen by audiences.

**ÖÇ:** Precisely.

**HS:** And the films that are still being produced now are the same – they are all part of this construction period.

**ÖÇ:** Yes, and the making of *Stories from Ruined Cities* served as a second stage for the students. They graduated from the academy by making their student films, and got their field experience by taking part in the making of this film.

**HS:** It's interesting that *Stories from Ruined Cities* itself serves as a device for reconstruction. If we talk about the film itself, what is it about?

**ÖÇ:** I would like to tell you how I came to the point where I decided to write the script for it.

I went to Shengal. It was two months after it was liberated. There were bodies of Daesh fighters in the streets. The city was in a terrible state. And there I met Comrade Dilşar, who appears at the end of the first part of the film. He was a very emotional fighter. He knew I was a filmmaker, and he wanted to talk to me. I told him about the reasons for my visit. He complained about the documentary films that were made during the fight for Shengal. He didn't find them strong enough. He said, "You are an experienced filmmaker. Maybe you can make a better film about what happened here." I answered, "The Kurdish language was decriminalized just recently. It will take time to build up the cinema of this region. We are training young people and I am sure they will make beautiful films."

**HS:** What were his disappointments about the previously made films?

**ÖÇ:** He said they were not good and effective. This is a place where the course of history has changed, but he thought the films did not have the potential to convey this. Then he remembered a French documentary that was made for Arte. He said that filmmaker was alone when he made the film. Sound, light, camera –

all done single-handedly by him. And he didn't even speak Kurdish. "He came here, and made the film. And it was a good film," he said. "Why can't we make films like that? He was a young guy." And I smiled. I said, "Maybe this guy saw two-hundred thousand movies, and read twenty thousand books, and got himself a strong foundation in cinema education. Of course he is a great artist and a talented friend. Our young people have just started in this. There is an expression in Kurdish: 'hedi hedi' (slowly)," I said. But he said, "I don't have time!" I said, "What do you mean?" He answered, "All my comrades that are in that French documentary have been killed in battle. I am the only one left. And I don't have all the time in the world. I will get killed soon too. Who is going to record us then? We are writing history here. Isn't anybody going to record what we do?"

I am a scriptwriter, and I write fiction. I was moved by this request of his. I started to wonder if I could write a small and modest story in which he could appear. This is how I started to write the first script for *Stories from Ruined Cities*.

**HS:** Is he the character that appears at the end of the first part?

**ÖÇ:** Yes he is.

Finally, I broke my promise not to make a movie. I proposed to my filmmaker friend that direct it. He lost his wife in a Daesh suicide-bomb attack in Qamishlo when she was six-months pregnant, shortly before we started shooting. He was emotionally wounded by this.

Our director of photography lost his brother in the Amûde Cinema fire, when he was twelve years old, back in the 1960s. Despite this tragic loss, he wanted to become a filmmaker.

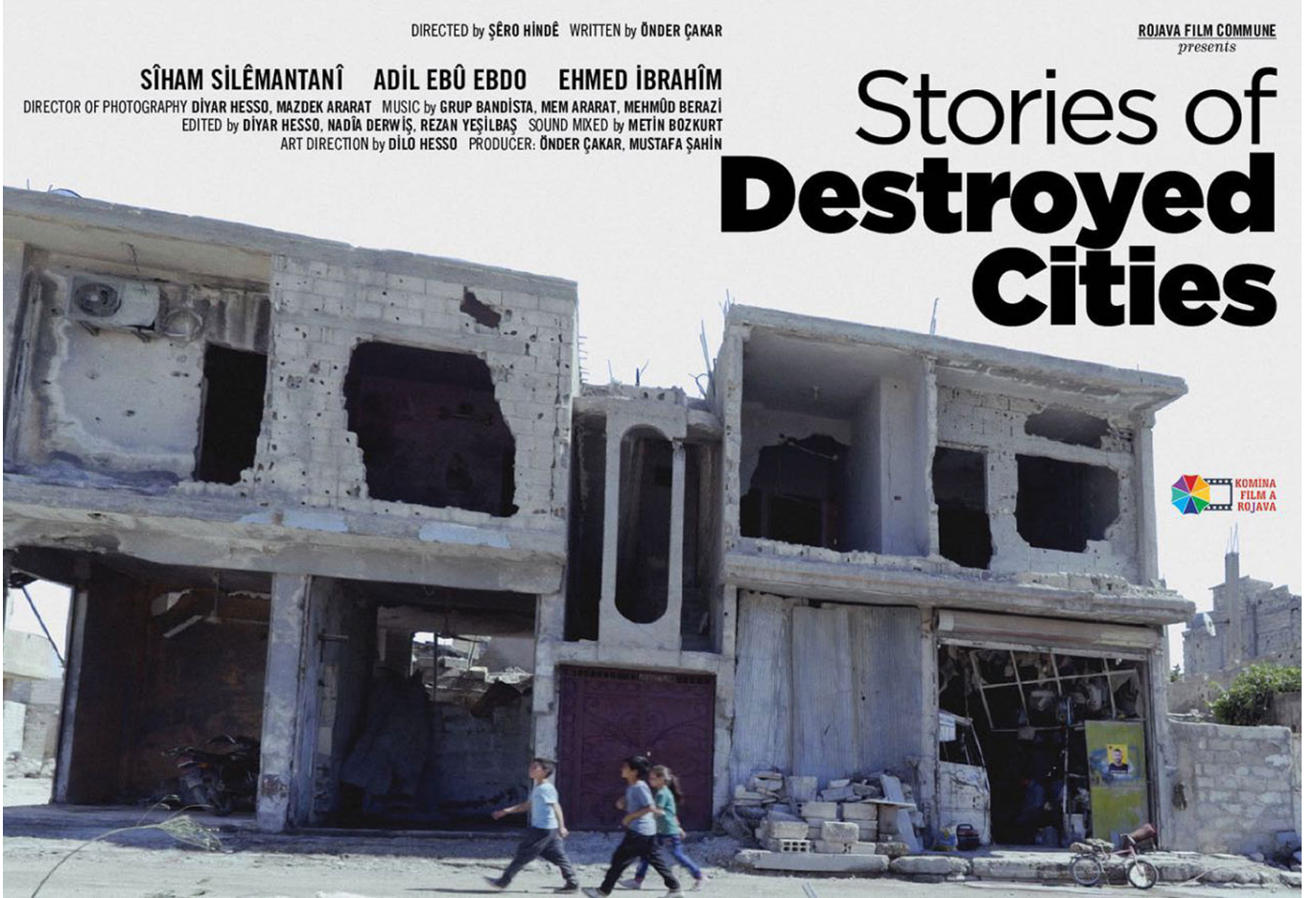
We went back to Shengal and did the shoot for our script. It took one week to film. We came back and did the editing. The result was satisfactory. We thought, by telling short stories like this one, we can make a film that can talk about the "reconstruction" of the whole territory.

**HS:** There was a story about women fighters that were guarding you in Shengal.

**ÖÇ:** Shengal is a war zone. There were bodies in the streets. They were moving the bodies and cleaning up the place. When we were filming, Daesh was two kilometers away. Nothing you see in the film is a prop. We didn't touch or change anything.

There were only fighters around, so we were their guests. When we arrived there were not enough teacups for everyone. Some of us were drinking tea, others were waiting for the cups to be washed. I said, "Are you crazy? The whole city, which was home to one hundred thousand people, is empty. All houses, shops, everything is deserted. Let's go and get twenty more cups, and everyone can have tea!" They said, "We are





Poster for the movie *Stories of Destroyed Cities* (2016), the first feature film by the Rojava Film Commune.

guerrillas. We can't touch any of it, it's not ours. We have what we need." I said, "I need a cup, so I will get one." They said, "If you need one, go and get it yourself."

Then we went to a unit of women fighters. They were on a hilltop and we needed to get some shots from above. The women fighters there were all young girls, twenty or twenty-one years old. There was a camp there where Yazidi people lived. We needed Yazidi people to do the voice-overs in the film, because they have a particular Kurdish accent.

When we arrived there, the girls saw us. We had the logo of the Rojava Film Commune on the van. They approached the van and said, "You go and do your filming now. But you have to come back here for tea." I liked the strict tone in their voice, and I replied, "Yes, we are absolutely not going to drink tea elsewhere." We went on and did the shoot, and came back to where the girls were. There were eight or nine of them. And they brought us beautiful cheese buns with the tea. They were so tasty. I haven't had anything like them in my whole life, and I am fifty-four years old! We might even find some footage of this gathering, because friends were filming. I ate almost all of them myself. Then I asked, "Which one of you made this?" The youngest one raised her hand and said, "I baked it." I asked, "Where did you learn how to make such tasty treats?" She said, "I am from Diyarbakir, and my mom taught me. She told me, 'Learn how to bake well, and you will bake for your father and older and younger brothers. And when you grow up and get married, you will bake for your husband. And then you will have kids and you will bake for your kids. And they will all tell you how tasty your cheese buns are.'" I said, "And?" She answered, "The truth is, I didn't want to bake for any of them. I joined the guerilla fighters and I am baking these buns for my friends here!"

**HS:** What did you do after the shoot ended?

**ÖÇ:** We did not use actors in Shengal. But I can only write fiction, so I need actors. I told Shero (the director), "The camera work looks good. You are also doing great. But can we find some actors here?" He got really pissed off with my question and answered, "Are you crazy? We are in Mesopotamia. We have had theaters here for ten thousand years. How can you ask if there are actors here?" I told him, "Maybe they left because of the war?" He said, "The ones that make music videos and TV serials have left, but the theater actors are still here."

The conditions were not totally safe. There were explosions every now and then. The cleanup operations were going on, and we were accompanied by armed guards. I visited all the theaters in Rojava and saw their plays. I didn't speak any Kurdish. I watched their acting. And I

realized that my Western mind was a bit crooked. Of course there were very good actors. Then I went back to Kobane. Kobane means a lot to me. I also got wounded there. So I went back there with Shero. We wandered around the city. We were moved by the kids in Kobane. We, as grown-ups, are living something, with great ideals and great resistance in our minds, but there are these little kids there. How is all this war affecting these little kids? All the martyrs, the ideology, the leadership, the new life ... we all talk about these things, but what do they mean for these little kids?

**HS:** Was the city ruined when you were there?

**ÖÇ:** No, the city and I were ruined together. Later, I revisited the place after it had been liberated. During the filming, it was all right. It was free.

**HS:** What motivated you to cross the border and join the fight?

**ÖÇ:** What can I say ... I couldn't take it anymore. The people over there were going to be massacred and murdered. We saw that happen in Shengal just three or four months before. If Kobane fell and an Islamist-fascist state was established in the region, it would have had big repercussions for the Middle East, including Turkey, and even for the whole world. If Kobane fell, Istanbul would have fallen also. I was defending Istanbul in Kobane. Even though we won the fight, the consequences were very painful. Through explosions in Istanbul and Ankara, the Syria War expanded and intensified. We are living in bad times, even though we won.

**HS:** When we were watching from Suruç, we could see the buildings collapsing and the city being blasted to pieces. Big explosions were happening by the minute, along with machine-gun fire, mortars, air strikes. It seemed impossible that people were still living over there, in the city.

**ÖÇ:** I was in one of those buildings myself. I was wounded in a mortar attack and my foot was sprained, so I couldn't walk. I was placed in the medical center with the other wounded. There was a young person assisting me. Because I couldn't walk, he was walking me around.

I fell asleep. When I woke up, there was no one in the room. My friend who had helped me wasn't there. I called out his name, thinking that maybe he was upstairs. I was thinking of making soup and taking some painkillers afterwards, because I was in pain.

I thought that maybe there was a meeting that everybody went to. Soon after, two fighters speaking Turkish came in. They said, "We have to evacuate this place. Everyone else evacuated already. This neighborhood is falling." This startled me, because the medical center was

located in the safest area of town. If this place was falling, the situation was very bad. The headquarters was there, other administrative buildings were there. The medical center was located in the safest place in town next to the Turkish border-gate. I thought, "If this place falls, we are finished." I wanted to ask, "How is this place falling?" I don't remember if I managed to say this or not. There was an explosion and all my internal organs wanted to tear through my skin and get out. I'd never heard such a sound before and don't want to hear it ever again. There were three of them and we were all scattered to different parts of the room. I fell on my back and my whole body ached. I raised my head and saw the wall across from me fall apart, just like in a cartoon, brick by brick. I remember that my mind went blank. I couldn't think anything.

Then I heard one of the fighters say, "C'mon, hurry up, get up." I tried to get up but I couldn't. They carried me out of the room on their shoulders, towards the stairway. They asked me to move my hands and feet. I moved them. They were both very young; they could've been my kids. One of them gave me a slap in the face and said, "This time you were fine. Let's hope so next time too!" While they walked me downstairs, there was a second explosion. The wall next to us

collapsed, but we were okay. The young fighters were constantly saying, "It's alright, it's alright."

Things I learned afterwards explained the situation. In the area there is a no-man's-land border zone between Turkey and Kobane. Because it is under Turkish control, the Kurdish fighters assumed that Daesh could not use it to cross over, so they did not watch it very well. But Daesh brought a truck loaded with explosives across the border. They threw everything they had at us that day. There were very intense clashes. And Turkey, in the presence of international institutions, also committed a crime by letting them pass.

The truck was spotted by our forces before it reached the medical center. It was destroyed right there, so we were saved. There wasn't only the medical center but also many other administrative institutions around. During that first explosion, I fell. The second explosion that happened when we were in the stairway was caused by a Daesh suicide bomber with an explosive vest who was following the truck. He was crawling in the dark. There was a young female fighter, seventeen or eighteen years old, on the second floor of a building nearby. She had no bullets left because she had used all her ammunition to stop the truck. She saw him

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Filmstill from the movie *Stories of Destroyed Cities* (2016).



**ROJAVA FILM COMMUNE**  
*presents*



# Stories of **Destroyed Cities**

**Sîham Silêmantanî Adil Ebû Ebdo Ehmed İbrahim**

DIRECTED by ŞERO HİNDÊ WRITTEN by ÖNDER ÇAKAR

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY DİYAR HESSO, MAZDEK ARARAT MUSIC by GRUP BANDİSTA, MEM ARARAT, MEHMÛD BERAZI  
EDITED by DİYAR HESSO, NADİA DERWİŞ, REZAN YEŞİLBAŞ SOUND MIXED by METİN BOZKURT ART DIRECTION by DİLO HESSO  
PRODUCER: ÖNDER ÇAKAR, MUSTAFA ŞAHİN



Poster for the movie *Stories of Destroyed Cities* (2016), the first feature film by the Rojava Film Commune.

crawling. If he managed to get through, many people would die. She threw herself on him to reduce the impact. And she died with him.

We are alive because of that girl. I didn't learn her name, so I don't know who she is. Maybe this is just a metaphor, but I personally witnessed the collapse and resistance of Kobane. Since then, whenever I go to Kobane, for filming or for activities related to the film commune, I feel a great pride. We were there and we defended the place with our lives, and it didn't fall. Whenever I go there, it feels like I am going to my mother's home.

For example, I fought together with the old guy that we see at the end of the second part of *Stories from Ruined Cities*. He lost a son and a daughter in the fighting. He was wearing his daughter's vest. The press was showing interest in him, but he refused requests for interviews, including from the Kurdish press.

I said, "Let's just ask him." I didn't think he would remember me. We went to his home and he smiled when he saw me. I realized that he remembered me as a fellow fighter. We told him what we wanted to do, and he said, "Alright." We had that beautiful interview with him. But in the end, he cried a lot. We didn't use those parts in the film.

And that was the end of the second film.

I said, "We are doing well. Let's do a third one and make it the best."

Then we made the third one too. We needed two actors. We couldn't find a female actor who fit the character in the script. The character didn't have any dialogue so we asked the head of the Association for Martyrs Families if she would play the role. She had lost a son in the war. Her husband blamed her for it, so she divorced him. She didn't talk much. When we asked if she would act in the film, she said yes. It started very well. We shot the scenes in Qamishli. Then we went to Ceza. When we were preparing for the shoot in Ceza, some fighters came to the set. They were our actors, and had roles in the film. Suddenly the woman went into an emotional crisis. She was crying like mad. As men, we stepped aside and let the women take care of her. They asked her what was wrong. She had mistaken one of the fighters for her son. They looked similar in a certain light. We realized what was going on and tried to console her. That emotional state of the woman helped the film a lot.

There is a photo of a martyr in the film. In reality he was a young boy, fifteen or sixteen years old, working for a drinking-water company. We took a photo of him and used it in the film as a part of the background décor. We needed a young face of that age. From among seven or eight kids, we and Shero picked him.

After the film shoot was done, we were editing in Serekaniye. We were planning to do the final edit in Istanbul and Berlin, but we wanted to do the rough cut with the director. While we were still editing the film, there was an explosion in Qamishli. Sixty people died. That young boy was among them. I understood then why it is important to record things. It is important for those who remain.

It was a difficult time for all of us. But it was also fun. Three films were shot in three different times.

It was very hot. There was no electricity. And there were many mosquitos.

**HS:** Production-wise, how much was the budget for the film?

**ÖÇ:** We spent a lot of money. We shot the most expensive film in Rojava ever! It cost \$1000. It was the most expensive production because it was the first. It's just like the popular cinema PR slogans: "The most expensive film! The biggest project!" Ours is all that, because it is the first.

Then I went to Istanbul with the film. Something funny happened when I crossed the border. Turkish soldiers got angry with me because I went to Rojava.

**HS:** Did you cross the border between Kobane and Turkey?

**ÖÇ:** Yes, from Dirbesiye to Kızıltepe. There was a Turkish soldier on the border. I went there with my passport and told him I was a Turkish citizen and was returning to my country. Suddenly there were screams and shouts. They treated me as if they had captured a terrorist. I said, "Who did you capture? I came here by myself." The commander was shouting and hitting his fist on the table. I said, "Don't shout. I went there to make films." He said, with a condescending voice, "How come? Do they make films over there?" I said, "Yes." And I put the hard drive containing the film we shot on his table. I said, "Look, we made this film." He asked me, "What other movies have you made before?" I told him the names of some of them. He said he saw some of my earlier films. He relented after recognizing me. He let me pass. But he didn't even look in the hard drive. He wasn't scared of that work! I said to myself, "I failed by not becoming a filmmaker that could scare him. If I was, he would have seized the film and not let me pass."

I brought the film to Istanbul. There we worked on it together with some friends. We made music for it. Then we brought it here to Berlin. We have applied to Venice and other film festivals. It was not selected by the Berlin International Film Festival or Cannes. Yilmaz Güney, a great master of Kurdish cinema, once said that a movie is complete only when it is shown to an audience and when the audience



starts to think about it. We have to deliver the film to its audience or it will not be complete.

We are following the procedure of sending the film to festivals, to introduce the work of the Rojava Film Commune to different groups of people. It is also part of the training both for our students and for our friends in the film commune.

**HS:** What is the next phase for the Rojava Film Commune? What will you do with the students in the film school? Any new projects?

**ÖÇ:** The film school started its second year while I've been here. Now they have eight new students. The Film Commune has also active. The female members of the commune formed a group and made four short videos, in the form of public education spots, about domestic violence against women and child marriages. Shero made a documentary and a short film called *Mako Sare* (Mako is Cold).

Because they are Kurds they work all the time! They made all these things in eight months!

I myself am currently working on a script about Kobane that will be directed by Fatih Akın.

**HS:** The Turkish state is prosecuting you because of your activities in Rojava. What is the situation?

**ÖÇ:** Initially it looked okay, when I first crossed the border. But soon after, Tayyip Erdoğan solidified his power and came after everyone from the opposition. Then there was the coup and the state of emergency. So they came after people like me – filmmakers, doctors, journalists who went to Rojava for humanitarian purposes. We are all accused of supporting a terrorist organization. Currently, I cannot go back to Turkey.

**HS:** What are the charges?

**ÖÇ:** Supporting a terrorist organization. This is a serious accusation for me. That's why I wanted to make the film *Stories from Ruined Cities*. How can one call all those people I told you about terrorists? And how does the world keep silent about it? Even here in Berlin, the symbols of the YPJ [Yekîneyên Parastina Jin; Women's Defense Units] and the YPG [Yekîneyên Parastina Gel; People's Defense Units] are banned. What an ingratitude is this? In Rojava, I've witnessed it myself. They have done nothing. It was their home, then Daesh came and they resisted and defended their homes.

The technological advancements are immense. There are all sorts of satellites and surveillance systems. The whole world knows very well what has been going on there. It is very clear who is committing crimes against humanity and conducting ethnic cleansing. Calling people who are defending their homes terrorists is a historic disgrace for all humanity.

I saw this with my own eyes. And you can see it in our film as well; a lot of young and old men and women are carrying weapons. I am an artist. Of course weapons are not machines that serve humanity very well. But this is a very serious situation. You can't just say, "I am against weapons," and end the discussion. Why are these people carrying weapons? One should think about it. If they didn't have weapons, what could they do? Are they deliberately choosing weapons over other valid methods?

I get angry just thinking about it.

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*The interview was conducted in Berlin, June 17, 2017. Translation by Reşit Ballıkaya and Baran Yoldas.*

09/10

e-flux journal #86 — november 2017 Önder Çakar, Rojava Film Commune, and Hito Steyerl  
"I don't have time!"

On November 13, 1960 a blaze at a cinema in Amûde, Syria killed between 180 and three hundred Kurdish schoolchildren, most of whom were under the age of fourteen. The Egyptian horror film *The Midnight Ghost* was being screened. Attendance was mandatory for schoolchildren, as proceeds were supposed to go towards Algerian fighters seeking independence from France. During the last showing of the day, the projector overheated and ignited the projection room. Flames spread quickly throughout the building, which was made of straw, clay, and wood. The children inside panicked. The fire exits opened inward and the children were pushed against them. There was no fire department in the city, and emergency services from other cities came too late. Due to the political oppression of Kurds, the incident became seen as a deliberate massacre by the Syrian state. See "50 years: Remembering the Amûde cinema fire," Kurdistan Commentary, November 11, 2010 <https://kurdistancommentary.wordpress.com/2010/11/11/50-years-remembering-the-amude-cinema-fire/>.

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