

The Signature Elements of Stanley Kubrick's Filmmaking

How has Stanley Kubrick refined the signature elements of his filmmaking over the course of his films following his independence as a film auteur?

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the late 20th century, audiences, critics, and filmmakers around the world were fascinated, inspired, and captivated by the films of Stanley Kubrick. To this day, Kubrick's filmmaking is still held in high regard by everyone mainly because he was a very complete film auteur. An auteur is widely regarded "a singular artist who controls every aspect of a collaborative creative work, a person equivalent to the author of a novel or a play."¹ With every film Kubrick made as an auteur, he would discover, create, or popularize a certain element of the filmmaking process. Thus, over the course of his films, the signature elements in Kubrick's filmmaking would be constantly refined as they became part of his oeuvre. The signature elements used by Kubrick in his films consisted of the following three components: Theme, Cinematography, and Directing. These three signature elements are significant because they are the aspects of Kubrick's filmmaking that are considered by audiences and critics alike as the most memorable and iconic. More importantly, however these three signature elements are significant because they are also the aspects of his filmmaking that were refined the most over the course of his films. Not only was the constant refinement of the signature elements in Kubrick's films a part of the success of his films as a whole, but they also facilitated the cultural and emotional impact that these films would have on audiences, critics, and filmmakers alike for years to come.

Despite his incredible film credentials early on, it took Kubrick a while to finally gain his independence as a filmmaker. For many of his early years, he was heavily restricted creatively

¹ p.18, Santas, Constantine. *Responding to Film: A Text Guide For Students of Cinema Art*. Chicago: Burnham Publishers, 2002.

due to his collaborations with producers from Warner Brothers, who placed clauses in their contract with Kubrick which “gave them complete control over every aspect of the film”². This all changed after his move to England soon after the release of *Spartacus* (1961), where “the Eady plan permitted producers to write off costs if 80% of the crew were English. Instead, they signed a \$1 million deal with Eliot Hyman’s Associated Artists Productions, and a clause which gave Kubrick the artistic freedom he desired”³. Kubrick’s years in England allowed him to create his first major budget feature films without any studio or producer interference. Such films included his adaptation of Vladimir Nabokov’s, *Lolita* (1962), and also the political satire black comedy film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), an adaptation of Peter George’s *Red Alert* (1958), and also the first film Kubrick produced on his own. It is also from this point on in his career that Stanley Kubrick finally became a film auteur, a role he had been seeking for a while by then, as this complete creative control over his films allowed him to “perfect” his films by aligning them as close to his vision as possible, while also allowing him to create a sense of consistency and similarity within all of his films moving forward. Moreover, from the point of becoming a film auteur in *Dr. Strangelove*, Kubrick was able to evolve the signature elements of his filmmaking by further developing and refining them over the course of his films, up until his final film, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), which proved that even in his last days, Kubrick’s oeuvre was still in a process of refinement.

All great film directors have great signature elements. The primary purpose of this paper, however, is to discover and analyze Kubrick’s signature elements in particular due to their

² p. 76, Duncan, Paul. *Stanley Kubrick: Visual Poet 1928-1999*. Köln, Taschen, 2011.

³ Ibid.

emotional and cultural impact on the craft and experience of filmmaking. Especially with the rebirth and popularity of auteur filmmaking and filmmakers in recent years, it is now more important than ever to understand the art of Stanley Kubrick's signature elements after his independence as a film auteur. Kubrick is widely known as a successful auteur due to his perfectionism, creation, and revolutionization in the incorporation and application of signature elements throughout his films. However, at the core of his success, and the focus of this research, is his ability to refine every aspect of the signature elements in his films over time through enhancing his filmmaking abilities by way of innovation and revolution of the signature elements in his films to utilize and develop them for future projects.

SIGNATURE ELEMENTS

Theme

The first signature element of Stanley Kubrick's films that was refined over the course of his films is that of theme. In the context of this paper, the themes of a film express the main points a film attempts to convey. Kubrick was always "very careful not to present his own views of his films and leave them open to interpretation",⁴ creating an abstract view to his films for audiences, critics, and fellow filmmakers alike, as every person that watches a film of his would interpret it differently. The open interpretation to his films stir one's imagination and require one to think about his film through the creation of thematic connections between many aspects within them in order to decipher its underlying themes. With the imaginative freedom given to the general audience through their interpretation of the film, one is also in turn able to create

⁴ Ibid., 12.

thematic connections between one Kubrick film to another, letting viewers distinguish the refinement of theme in Kubrick's films.

An argument for a common, refining theme in Kubrick's films can be observed with his thematic interpretation of inner conflict throughout his films. In Kubrick's films, a character who is not necessarily the protagonist can be seen having some sort of inner struggle. However, no matter how much they have this inner conflict, they tend to succumb to their demons. Their good side never wins. This frequent theme of inner conflict in Kubrick's films is regarded to have started with his interpretation of Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) in his similarly titled film *A Clockwork Orange* (1972). In this film, the protagonist Alex DeLarge (played by Malcolm McDowell) goes through numerous treatments that were aimed towards treating his aversion towards violence or sex. Although the treatments seemingly cured him, it is alluded to at the end of the film that Alex still contemplated violence after the treatment when he has intense thoughts of himself having sex with a woman in front of an accepting crowd, thinking: "I was cured, all right!"⁵ This proved that despite the advanced treatment he was given throughout the film to cure his "disease", he still succumbed to his demons at the end of the film by giving in to sexual temptation. Alex surrendered to his immoral side through naturalistic means as a result of the corruption of society's system and approach to the mentally unstable, as well as his own grotesque state of mind.

Even though this theme was also seen in Kubrick's film *Barry Lyndon* (1975), it wasn't until his film *The Shining* (1980) where this theme was further refined. In the film, the

⁵ *A Clockwork Orange*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Prod. Stanley Kubrick. Perf. Malcolm McDowell. Warner Bros. DVD. Turner Entertainment Corp, 2011.

protagonist-turned antagonist Jack Torrance (played by Jack Nicholson) descends into the madness brought upon by the spirits of the Overlook Hotel.⁶ The theme evidently is seen to have evolved from when it was portrayed in *A Clockwork Orange*, as in this film, there was seemingly more emphasis on the concept of inner struggle, as we were able to slowly observe how the Overlook Hotel was skewing his mental state, and how his subconscious, and his family dealt with combating these demons respectively. One is also able to catch a glimpse of how Jack was before his stay at the Overlook Hotel, demonstrating to us that he wasn't always a crazed psychopath, which was eventually what he became towards the end of the film. Furthermore, instead of surrendering to his dark side through naturalistic means, as Alex did in *A Clockwork Orange*, Jack succumbs into madness through supernaturalistic means as a result of the hotel's influence.

The theme of inner conflict is once again explored and refined one last time in Kubrick's ultimate film *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), where the protagonist Dr. Bill Harford (played by Tom Cruise) gives into his dark, sexual curiosity after his wife Alice (played by Nicole Kidman) confesses to dreaming of cheating on him with a naval officer they met on a vacation.⁷ This curiosity guides him to visit a prostitute's home, and to attend a super secret sexual ritual in a New York mansion. What makes *Eyes Wide Shut*'s interpretation of inner conflict different compared to *The Shining* and *A Clockwork Orange* is that instead of exploring either the naturalistic or supernaturalistic downfall of a character's descent into darkness or madness, the

⁶ *The Shining*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Prod. Stanley Kubrick. Perf. Jack Nicholson. Warner Bros. DVD. Turner Entertainment Corp, 2011.

⁷ *Eyes Wide Shut*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Prod. Stanley Kubrick. Perf. Tom Cruise. Warner Bros. DVD. Turner Entertainment Corp, 2011.

film explores the Dr. Harford's downfall through both natural and supernatural means. By addressing Dr. Harford's naturalistic and supernaturalistic downfall in *Eyes Wide Shut*, Kubrick is able to refine the theme of inner conflict in his films by taking what he explored in his previous films and connecting them to this film. Through refining the theme of inner struggle for *Eyes Wide Shut*, Kubrick proves that he can take thematic concepts and ideas he uses in previous films and mix them together to create a brand new take on the theme, where an entirely new means in which the protagonist's character deteriorates can be observed.

Cinematography

The second signature element of Stanley Kubrick's films that was refined over the course of his films is that of cinematography. Kubrick always had ease with creating stunning and compelling visuals, which he has often credited to his early years as a photographer.⁸ However, despite his already incredible acumen to creating compelling visuals through a camera lens, with every film he made, he was able to revolutionize the craft of cinematography and somehow outdo what he did in a previous film through the refinement of his cinematographic techniques. Since Kubrick was so adept at creating the visuals for his films, he would seldom add camera instructions into the script, preferring to handle the instructions following the creation of the scene.⁹ When it came to choosing the props and setting that were going to be used, Kubrick put painstaking attention to detail, and he always tried to collect as much background material as possible.¹⁰ According to Cinematographer John Alcott, who won an Oscar for Best

⁸ p. 196, Ciment, Michel. *Kubrick: The Definitive Edition*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2003. Print.

⁹ Ibid., 177.

¹⁰ Ibid., 176.

Cinematography on Kubrick's film *Barry Lyndon* remarked that Kubrick would "question everything" during his film's pre-production, production, and post-production processes.¹¹ Due to Kubrick's perfectionism, he was always involved in all of the technical aspects of filmmaking such as choice of lens, camera placement, scene composition and even operating the camera.¹² Alcott considered Kubrick as being the "nearest thing to a genius i've ever worked with, with all the problems of a genius".¹³ Kubrick's incredible work ethic drove his cinematographic ingenuity, and it was with such brilliance that he was able to refine this signature element over the course of his films.

The first major refinement with Kubrick's cinematography came after *Dr. Strangelove*,

when he released the now iconic *2001: A*

Space Odyssey. With this film, he made the

massive jump from the black and white

colour-based film noir cinematography in *Dr.*

Strangelove to the use of 35 millimeter

release prints on technicolor and 70

millimeter release prints on metrocolor¹⁴

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Morton, Tevan. "Composition Shots | 2001: A Space Odyssey." Digital image. Thedisc0nnect. <https://thedisc0nnect.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/full-shot-copy.jpg>.

in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Kubrick didn't just make the jump from black-and-white to color in

2001: A Space Odyssey, he also established some key elements of his cinematography that he

¹¹ Ibid., 407.

¹² p.391, LoBrutto, Vincent. *Stanley Kubrick: A Biography*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1999. Print.

¹³ p. 391, Ciment, Michel. *Kubrick: The Definitive Edition*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2003. Print.

¹⁴ Gedult, Carolyn. *The Production: A Calendar*. Reproduced in: Castle, Alison (Editor). *The Stanley Kubrick Archives*, Taschen, 2005

would continue to use and build on for the rest of his films. One of those key elements includes a frequent technique in Kubrick's films: staging, or other otherwise called leading lines. This technique consisted of the camera shot drawing the angle of vision towards the center or object that is the subject of the screen.¹⁵ This element of Kubrick's filmmaking wasn't just a staple of this film, as it also created iconic shots in all of Kubrick's other films following *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Furthermore, the employment of staging wasn't the only key element of Kubrick's cinematography established in the film, as *2001: A Space Odyssey* marked the first film in which he also frequently began to use close-ups and medium close-ups to create a claustrophobic atmosphere for the viewer, another staple of Kubrick's cinematography that evolved over time.

The next step in the refinement of Kubrick's cinematography could be observed with his period drama film *Barry Lyndon* (1975).

His work with cinematographer John Alcott

in the film was aimed towards creating a

"painterly look"¹⁶ of William Makepeace

Thackeray's novel titled *The Luck of Barry*

Lyndon (1844) by attempting to make

every camera shot in the film look as if it

were a painting from the 18th Century. To

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"Directed Viewing: The Humour and Tragedy of 'Barry Lyndon'." The No-Name Movie Blog. June 09, 2012. Accessed November 12, 2017. <https://nonamemovieblog.wordpress.com/2012/05/02/directed-viewing-the-humour-and-tragedy-of-barry-lyndon/>.

¹⁵ Proferes, Nicholas. "Directing POSTS." Mastering Film » Staging for Film. Accessed July 7, 2017. <http://www.masteringfilm.com/staging-for-film/>.

¹⁶ Morrow, Justin. "Watch: How the 'Revolutionary' Cinematography of 'Barry Lyndon' Drives Kubrick's Story." *No Film School*, 14 Aug. 2017, nofilmschool.com/2017/08/watch-how-barry-lyndons-revolutionary-cinematography-drives-its-story.

achieve such effect, Alcott and Kubrick decided to attain the photography in the film “without recourse to electric light”¹⁷. To carry out photography without electric lighting, meant the movie was to be “shot by candlelight”¹⁸, a feat known to be difficult in photography, “let alone with moving images”¹⁹. This was a massive challenge for Kubrick, as filming in candlelight meant that the actors in the shot would be out of focus due to the intensity of the candle’s fire taking the focus away from the actors. This problem required Kubrick to use different lenses than the ones he used previously for *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *A Clockwork Orange*. For those films, Kubrick’s films commonly used spherical and wide-angled lenses to achieve and convey “the fantastic, dream-like quality of the story”²⁰. However, for *Barry Lyndon*, these types of lenses suffered from the previously mentioned focus problems caused by the candlelight illumination of the scenes. This required Kubrick to spend months tinkering with lenses that would do the job for the film.²¹ This long process of searching for the right lens for the film was the reason for the next step in his cinematographic refinement, as it proved that he became willing to step out of his comfort zone for the first time and revolutionize the art of cinematography. Kubrick eventually found what he was searching for in the Carl Zeiss planar 50 millimeter f/0.7, a super-fast 50 millimeter lens that was “developed by Zeiss for use by NASA in the Apollo moon landings”.²²

¹⁷ Robey, Tim, "Kubrick's Neglected Masterpiece", in *Telegraph Review* (31 January 2009) pp. 16-17

¹⁸ Ibid.,

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "*A Clockwork Orange*". *Chicago Sun-Times*. 11 February 1972.

²¹ Two Special Lenses for "Barry Lyndon", by Ed DiGiulio (President, Cinema Products Corp.), *American Cinematographer*

²² Ibid.

The use of a NASA lens in filmmaking was unheard of, and its discovery for film use proved to be a huge accomplishment for the refinement of Kubrick's cinematography, as it demonstrated that he could overcome whichever cinematographic obstacle thrown at him, and innovate or revolutionize a process as a result. He demonstrated the culmination of his cinematographic refinement in *The Shining* (1980), when Kubrick used the relatively unused

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cinematographic tool known as the Steadicam to its fullest potential by giving the audience a "smooth, stabilized"²³ camera shot in the sequence when Danny Torrance (portrayed by Danny Lloyd) hastily rides through the carpet-floored labyrinth of the Overlook Hotel's corridors on a tricycle²⁴. Kubrick's use of the steadicam in *The*

Stolworthy, Jacob. "You can now tour The Shining's Overlook Hotel in virtual reality."

The Independent. January 20, 2016. Accessed November 12, 2017.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/you-can-now-tour-the-shinings-overlook-hotel-in-virtual-reality-a6822506.html>.

Shining made the device a staple of cinematography in films for years to come, most notably in reputable films such as Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990) and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997).²⁵

²³ p.426, LoBrutto, Vincent. *Stanley Kubrick: A Biography*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1999. Print.

²⁴ *The Shining*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Prod. Stanley Kubrick. Perf. Jack Nicholson. Warner Bros. DVD. Turner Entertainment Corp, 2011.

²⁵ Pico, Marcelo. "Celebrating 40 Years of the Steadicam." Talk Film Society. December 15, 1970. Accessed August 13, 2017. <http://www.talkfilmsociety.com/articles/celebrating-40-years-of-the-steadicam>.

Directing

The third and final signature element of Stanley Kubrick's films that was refined over the course of his films is his element of directing. This is the signature element of Kubrick's filmmaking that the general audience recognize him most for, primarily due to his early work under production companies such as United Artists, Universal International, and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer with films such as *Paths To Glory (1957)*, *Spartacus* and *Lolita*. In these films, Kubrick was able to establish his strong capability of not only directing the shots in the film, but also directing the actors to Academy and Golden Globe winning performances, such as those of Peter Ustinov in *Spartacus* and Sue Lyon in *Lolita*. However, these films merely only created the foundation for Kubrick's directing in his independent films from *Dr. Strangelove* onwards. Despite his already strong directorial abilities from his previous films, it wasn't until he started directing his independent films that he was able to truly develop and refine his signature element of directing.

The first evolutionary step of Stanley Kubrick's directing can be observed in his second independent film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In this film, Kubrick establishes his knack for unconventional and progressive directing through his division of the film into three time-skipped sequences titled "The Dawn of Man", "Jupiter Mission", and "Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite" respectively.²⁶ Time-skipping is a narrative device in which an intentional gap in time is created in order to advance the story without having to address the irrelevant material that makes up the

²⁶ Camarena, Rev. E. M. "Why Is This Hard To Get? 2001: A Space Odyssey Has Only THREE Sections." Rev. E. M. Camarena's Blog. October 10, 2014. Accessed Aug. & sept., 2017. <https://emcphd.wordpress.com/2014/10/10/why-is-this-hard-to-get-2001-a-space-odyssey-has-only-three-sections/>.

time in between.²⁷ Dividing a film into distinct parts separated by the narrative device of time-skips was unheard of at the time. However, Kubrick was able to revolutionize film through the creation of a coherent and fluid film through his incorporation of distinct segments in the film. The influence of this narrative device popularized by Kubrick can be observed in films such as *Goodfellas*, Alex Proyas' *The Crow (1994)* and Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America (1984)*²⁸, all of which drew inspiration from such device and used it to help tell the story. Kubrick was able to make such good use of this element that the division of parts within a film became a signature element in his future films, most notably in *Barry Lyndon* and *Full Metal Jacket*.

The next step in the evolution of Kubrick's directing can be seen with his direction of actors. As established previously, Kubrick already had a very proficient ability to work with actors based on his previous films, however, his independence as an auteur filmmaker allowed him to take a step further and evolve his working relationship with actors during production. The most important signature element in his direction of actors, and an important factor of Kubrick's evolution as a director can be observed with his work in *A Clockwork Orange*, through his direction of Malcolm McDowell in the role of the protagonist, Alex DeLarge. Kubrick more often than not, let McDowell take charge of their performances.²⁹ In order to accomplish this,

²⁷ "Images in Time: Expressing and Manipulating Time in Cinema." Videomaker.com. Accessed November 12, 2017.
<https://www.videomaker.com/article/c18/17968-images-in-time-expressing-and-manipulating-time-in-cinema>.

²⁸ Bigtiggie23. "Movies: Home Media." Your favorite movies that feature a time skip. - Movies: Home Media Message Board - GameFAQs. Accessed Sept. & oct., 2017.
<https://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/228-movies-home-media/72479061>.

²⁹ Oscars. Oscars. November 12, 2012. Accessed October 2, 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boQQRyMjLTc>.

Kubrick came to the conclusion in the filming of *A Clockwork Orange* that it was necessary to try scenes over and over again to let the actors experiment with the dialogue and actions of the characters. This directing technique led to McDowell improvising in one of the takes of a scene in the film by singing “Singin’ in the Rain” while destroying a couple’s household, a scene which is now an infamous classic scene of 20th Century films.³⁰ Actor Peter Sellers, who worked with Kubrick on *Lolita* and *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* once explained how involved he was in the direction of his acting as well, stating, “If a scene didn’t seem quite right, we’d sit round a table with a tape recorder and ad-lib on the lines of the passages we’d chosen; in that way we’d get perfectly natural dialogue which could then be scripted and used.”³¹ By letting the actors take charge of their acting through many takes, Kubrick was able to refine the directing of his films from that point on and take them to the next level through a new brand of acting most notable seen again in future films such as *The Shining* and *Eyes Wide Shut*.

The third, and final evolutionary step of Kubrick’s directing can be observed through the extensive shooting time of his films. Since Kubrick was an independent film auteur, he was able to decide on how long the production process of the film lasted. Most of the time, Kubrick wouldn’t even put a wrap-up date for the production as he wanted to take his time with the filming in order to not make it seem rushed. Over time, this element of Kubrick’s directing slowly evolved into an important aspect of his directing, so when actors signed up for a Kubrick

³⁰ *A Clockwork Orange*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Prod. Stanley Kubrick. Perf. Malcolm McDowell. Warner Bros. DVD. Turner Entertainment Corp, 2011.

³¹ Lewis, Roger. *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*. London: Arrow, 2004.

film, they were always aware what they were getting into. This ties into Kubrick's directing of actors, because as previously stated, due to the long production time of his films, Kubrick could afford having his actors improvise and try something new in different takes for each scene in order to give the actor more creative freedom and liberty with the interpretation of the character. The shooting time for Kubrick's final film *Eyes Wide Shut* was so long, that it still to this day holds the Guinness World Record for the longest constant movie shoot with 400 days of filming.³² Despite the film being released in 1999, no film has even come close to surpassing this record. This record can be seen in a different light now as a metaphor for the lasting influence of the evolution of Kubrick's directing in cinema.

CONCLUSION

All in all, the three signature elements of theme, cinematography and directing not only were the most iconic elements of Kubrick's films, however they were each refined in their own unique ways throughout his films. Through refining such signature elements, Kubrick was able to improve on and grow as a filmmaker, as well as revolutionize the way such elements were used in films from then on. Such refinement in his filmmaking allowed him to showcase and cement his position as one of the most emotionally, culturally, and technically impactful filmmakers of his time.

With the incoming wave of new independent film auteurs in the early 21st Century, one can visualize the effect that Kubrick's signature elements has had on them as well. Actor turned director Todd Field, who appeared in Kubrick's final film *Eyes Wide Shut* was notable one of

³² *Guinness World Records 2000: Millennium Edition*. Britain: Guinness World Records, 2000.

those influenced by Kubrick, as seen with his film *In The Bedroom* (2001), where according to film critic William Arnold, who said about the film that “Like Kubrick, Field's direction manages to feel both highly controlled and effortlessly spontaneous at the same time”.³³

Kubrick’s uncanny ability to not only influence others, but also influence himself through the refinement of his signature elements is constantly present throughout his work, and is key to the success of his films.

Despite the success and influence of his work, an aspect of Kubrick’s oeuvre that he is not given enough credit for is his ability to film with no limits. There are many obstacles in filmmaking that disallow a good film from being a great one. Such obstacles include monetary, technical, or practical obstacles. While some films have the money to be able to create whatever they wanted with the best equipment, their technical skills in the film are not quite there to achieve what is needed, and vice versa. In order to film with no limits, Kubrick had to overcome such obstacles through evolution, when he ran into a problem in his filmmaking process, he would solve it and grow as a cause of it by gaining more knowledge and creating more tools that could help him further along the way in his future films.

Nevertheless, at the core of Stanley Kubrick’s success, was his ability to refine every aspect of the signature elements in his films by constantly seeking to improve himself and his craft through challenging himself as much he could by stretching the boundaries of filmmaking as far out as possible to create the “perfect” film. Through the innovation and revolution of the components of his signature elements, Kubrick is able to come closer in achieving such perfect

³³ Arnold, William (December 25, 2001). "Pulling Back the Covers on an Idyllic Life". *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

film, as his meticulous attention to detail in the elements of theme, cinematography, and directing in certain projects permitted for them to be improved down the line for his future films at the time, as well as for the filmmaking industry in general for years to come.

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