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When the Passion has Cooled

Reflections on Mel Gibson's *Passion*

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Introduction

[1] This essay originated in the confluence of three events: a New Testament Greek course, the release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (hereinafter *The Passion*), and the stimulating conference sponsored by the *Center for Study of Religion and Society* and the *Journal of Religion and Film* that is at the heart of this issue of *JRS*. We found that the questions we were asking supplemented, rather than overlapped, those in the other discussions published here, in part because we had the benefit of seeing the film in its final form. We have submitted our work in the belief that it might help round out the picture that emerged at the conference. Our primary questions were these three: Why should critical reaction to the movie have been so hostile? Why did Gibson make this film in this way? What artistry has he employed in making the film? While we did not set out to write apologia for the film, we did find that critics' hostility had blinded them to undeniable artistry in its making, and that the critics' response was (perhaps unsurprisingly) more interesting than what they said.

Gibson and the Critics

[2] From the buildup in the press, we expected the worst. What we found was an honest attempt to tell a cinematic story (a significant qualification) based on the four Gospel accounts. The director's concern to give what he considers a version honest to the Gospels in letter and spirit has trumped political correctness, and this probably contributed to setting the critical establishment against him. Here in Omaha, we encounter people daily who not only see nothing much wrong with the film, but in fact view it as a great good; some, at least, interpret the vast gulf between what their common sense tells them about the movie and

what has been said by the critical establishment in the great organs of middle class literary culture (such as *The New Yorker*, *New York Times*, etc.) as the product of a perhaps tacit conspiracy among the critics not to let any traditional religious feelings rise to the surface in the national debate without offering an attack (see Greenberg's review).

[3] A critic can dislike this movie without being the victim of any particular animus against religion. The crux of the matter is taste. Gibson approaches his artistic task with reactionary premodern tastes, whereas the best critics exhibit a set of highly educated tastes deeply informed by modernism and postmodernism. Gibson, alas, sins greatly in both areas, alienating the modernists with his literal representationalism and sentimentalism and the postmodernists by telling his story in deadly earnest. Gibson's spitting in the eye of current cultural sensibilities gets him into critical hot water, and the maxim *de gustibus non est disputandum* ("there is no accounting for tastes") does not apply to professional critics. We might focus on what we like about the movie, but critics (interesting ones, anyway) are paid not to affirm but to analyze and expose artistic weaknesses. Gibson has courted censure by indulging his tastes and then, by flaunting them publicly, bringing himself voluntarily before the tribunal of critical opinion: and though he has his defenders, he has been roundly attacked. For the most part he has borne his cross with a proper detachment, though his resentment has occasionally bubbled to the surface, as when he told Diane Sawyer, "Critics who have a problem with me don't really have a problem with me in this film . . . they have a problem with the four Gospels. That's where their problem is" (2004c). For an artist to associate criticism of his work with criticism of the *subject* of his work is a grave lapse! But because of the effects of the distorting lens of religious feeling on both ends of the critical transaction ("never talk politics or religion"), a strongly worded criticism of a movie like Gibson's on artistic grounds of taste may wrongly be interpreted as antireligious. It *will* be antireligious sometimes, of course. In any event, we do well to remember that in the critical world, the more, and more strongly held opinions, the better. Let us therefore perform an examination of conscience for Gibson and see how he got into trouble by sinning against current tastes.

[4] Whereas the fundamental rule of filmmaking is "don't tell, show!", the Gospels do not show, but tell, and they can be frustratingly reticent. For example, only a couple of verses are devoted to the anecdotal details of Jesus' suffering en route to Golgotha (see Matt 27:32-33; Mark 15:20-22; Luke 23:26-32; John 19:16-17). By "anecdotal" we intend neither to diminish nor disparage the actual suffering of Jesus but to emphasize that the entire account of the trip along the *via crucis* authorized by scripture boils down to mentions of Simon of Cyrene and a few words like Mark's "they bring him to the place Golgotha" (15:22). Luke has Jesus' speech to the "daughters of Jerusalem" at 23:27-31, which Gibson omitted. Perhaps the evangelists expected their audience to have sufficiently developed imaginations (from seeing crucifixions) to make a detailed description of Jesus' torments unnecessary, or perhaps they felt the redemptive fact of his death was more important than the details of his suffering. What we can say is that as proselytizing documents (as opposed to straightforward historical accounts) the Gospels feature narrative compression (among other things) to make them more effective by limiting their content to the essentials to multiply their punch.

[5] It is important to remember that everything you *see* in the movie is the director's supplementation of the Gospels' compressed verbal accounts with anecdotal visual detail,

even when a scene is generally based on scripture. This is nothing new. Christians reacted to the paucity of scriptural information surrounding these key events from a very early period by producing their own unauthorized apocryphal supplements. Elliott does no more than express the obvious when he notes, “as with many apocryphal writings, the motive for the original composition was to satisfy the curiosity of those who found the canonical biblical writings inadequate” (165). Elliott here refers to the apocryphal Pilate cycle (which Gibson exploits through the work of Anne Catherine Emmerich, who got there first), a motley collection including a *Gospel of Nicodemus*, the *Acts of Pilate*, *Christ’s Descent into Hell*, and other pious imaginings filling in melodramatic details not to be found in the Gospels. Gibson has followed in the apocryphists’ footsteps through his excerptation of Emmerich’s devotional tract *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (hereinafter Emmerich: for more on her work, see De Giglio-Bellemare). Emmerich herself borrowed heavily from apocryphal works, creating a vividly visual account that made it an obvious candidate for importation into a screenplay and storyboarding. Gibson’s supplementation, therefore, was practically forced upon him by the gap between his medium’s demands and his canonical source material’s limitations. He expects of his audience what the apocryphists expected of theirs two millennia ago: a taste for the gritty details. Emmerich may rightly be stigmatized as a dubious source, but if Gibson had to acquire supplementary material somewhere, her tract at least offers Gibson the protection of the Catholic Church’s *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*.

[6] Whatever its source, we have often heard the detailed depiction of the tortures inflicted on Caviezel’s Jesus disparagingly called “medieval,” connecting it to the well-known tradition of the passion plays (see Mork). The indisputable similarities between Gibson’s film and medieval passion plays are not so much a deliberate homage to that genre as a convergence of our cultural predilection for literalism (it feeds our poverty of imagination) with the medieval fascination for the physical tokens of Jesus’ suffering (which were symbolically important to them). Gibson’s cinematic curiosity about the passion is more closely related to the older tradition of the apocrypha.

[7] The insistence upon the incredible cruelty visited upon the person of Jesus appears at least in part to be the director’s response to the backgrounding (or perhaps drowning out) of his conservative Catholic worldview by indifferent or conflicting cultural movements (see Lawler): it is hard to imagine Gibson did not have the dismissive Rolling Stones lyric from “Sympathy for the devil” in mind at some point in the development of the movie (I was around when Jesus Christ/ Had His moment of doubt and pain/ Made damn sure that Pilate/Washed his hands and sealed his fate), and the film does look from one angle like a rich man’s turning of all of the tools of the trade that made him rich back upon that trade. His exploitation of the cultural hyperphenomenon inseparable from cinema these days feeds suspicions of hypocrisy already growing in the fertile fields of contempt for his taste.

[8] First, then, let us consider sins of commission, elements that Gibson added with little or questionable authority. The brutality of the temple guards (scripturally unattested) and the Roman soldiers (attested, but almost entirely without detail as to severity, nature, and duration) stands out even among the numerous cruelties depicted elsewhere in the film. It was clearly important to the director to show us a patch of Jesus’ skin about the size of a playing card torn by a cat o’ nine tails from his side, exposing several ribs. Likewise, it was important to him to show the ruin of Jesus’ right eye. Unattested (except in Emmerich) is

the Marys' cleaning up of the spattered blood surrounding the scourging pillar with a heap of linens. The linen, ostensibly a gift from Pilate's wife, serves the clear cinematic purpose of emphasizing the quantity of blood. Judas, overcome with remorse, duly hangs himself, but the director was not confident enough of his audience's ability to discern Judas' emotional torment from the Gospels' elegantly brief accounts. He instead resorted to a hackneyed importation of actual demons on-screen to make sure we understand that Judas is wracked by his inner demons. The bad thief was a bad man blinded to Jesus' divinity, as even the most unimaginative viewer can comprehend thanks to the director's unauthorized supplementation of the Gospel accounts by having a crow peck out the bad thief's eye.

[9] For critics, the problem here lies in the witless simplification (and amplification) of the violence, every bit of it revealing the director's choice (and tastes) because there was no canonical imperative to include it (cf. Denby: "the movie Gibson has made from his personal obsessions is a sickening death trip . . ."). Paul Fussell put it well:

Where you used to go [to the movies] to watch Cary Grant and Irene Dunne, fully clothed, playing out their subtle flirtations in the witty mode of indoor social theater, now you watch rapes, beatings, the lopping off of limbs, faces ruined and bleeding, eyes hanging out on cheeks, blood spurting from arteries, sharks devouring children - the whole sadistic stagecraft of the Jacobean drama or of Grand Guignol. Everything demeans the audience, and the sole technique is overemphasis . . . As Mark Miller says, today's movies, blockbuster or run-of-the-mill, go in for "that systematic overemphasis deployed in advertising (and all other propaganda). Each shot presents a content closed and unified, like a fist, and makes the point right in your face: big gun, big car, nice ass, full moon . . . big crash (blood, glass) . . ." (124-25).

[10] Or in the case of this movie: bad guards, nasty scourge, vile traitor, naughty thief (runnels of blood, shrieks). The point is that heaping suffering upon a cinematic Jesus with a documentary grade of literal representation in no way betters the redemption stemming from his death, and in a way participates in the general trend towards treating a movie's audience as too simple to disengage a message couched in anything less than overwhelming hyperbole. Put another way, critics dislike that patch of Jesus' skin being yanked off before their eyes because it looks like the filmmaker underestimates their intelligence and ability to perceive unaided that flogging is horrible. Carry this reasoning one step further: if the director despises his audience's intelligence, what sort of message can his film hold?

[11] While many people complain about the escalation of violence in movies, these movies continue to be made because violence sells. Gibson may not seek our dollars for selfish reasons (let us grant him that and ourselves avoid a witless simplification in the process), but he does want the movie to sell its message. Gibson might have sidestepped accusations of hypocrisy (trading his message on the strength of the violence in which it is couched) had he stuck relentlessly to a vision authorized in its parts by the canonical scriptures. They mandate some violence, because they attest to it; but to go so much further in seeking dubious (and in any event extra-scriptural) sources to beef it up seems to betray a fundamental suspicion that we "just won't get it" on the strength of the Gospels alone. And again, smart sensitive people (like most critics) do not like being patronized by a hypocrite.

[12] So Gibson appears guilty of the sin of omission of not crediting his audience with the wit to disengage his thesis without the cinematic equivalent of bullet points, triple underlining, and yellow highlighting. This extends far beyond the literality of the violence. Casting out the scenes with Satan, forgetting the homage to Fellini in the scene at Herod's orgy, suturing over the rending of the temple, and turning a blind eye to the tear of God at the end, this film is still not a historical representation of the story presented by the Gospels. Nor is our point that the dubious aids to imagination provided by Emmerich hurt the historicity of the film. They do, but the damage is minor. Everyone who sees *The Passion* should repeat to himself the phrase "what I see is a collaborative artistic product primarily of the minds of the director, cinematographer, and actors" - or as Gibson himself put it to Diane Sawyer, "this is my version of what happened, according to the gospels and what I wanted to show - the aspects of it I wanted to show." Extending this thought, the images that strike your optic nerves may be plausible, but they are without exception extra-canonical, a situation underlined by the fact that Christian art began about 200 CE, and that there are accordingly no images from life (or eyewitnesses) of Jesus, Mary, or any person depicted in the film. Indeed, representations of the crucifixion appeared much later, early in the fifth century. Among the earliest is a small panel exhibiting a crucifixion in the great carved doors of the church of Santa Sabina in Rome. These carvers valued a symbolic representation of God's coordinated action throughout Old and New Testament history, and while the crucifixion - or what it represents - was clearly important to them, it was fairly certainly not the most prominent carving in the door. It must be admitted that we do not know the original arrangement of the panels, so some aspect of the doors' original appearance might have given the crucifixion panel a greater emphasis than its size and somewhat abstract form do (see Lucchesi-Palli 486-88; for an easily available image, [click here](#)).

[13] What kind of images has Gibson summoned from his head for us (backgrounding the violence *per se* for now)? It is instructive to note that he has offered us a literally representational tableau. Being cinema, it is an oddly *dynamic* tableau, but a tableau nonetheless. Gibson makes this obvious by drawing the action to a near halt on several occasions to emphasize the classic elements in the story such as Jesus' falls and the *pietà* at the end. There is, after all, an elevated message in the violence: Jesus suffered for you. But this is too often obscured in a sentimental cloak of lowbrow Catholic tradition, a bit like having the hoary icons of parochial school stations of the cross lectionaries flashed in sequence before your eyes. This strikes one watching minute after minute of screen time eaten up by an artistically unhelpful re-enactment of Veronica's wiping of Jesus' face with her veil (and getting a sweaty "snapshot" for her trouble). Of course we are not meant to see it in the modernist terms used here; it is meant, like so many of the images in the movie, to generate a sentimental response which critics will interpret as lowbrow. Lowbrow does not mean stupid, or wrong. It implies unsophisticatedly and uneducatedly sentimental and literal. Sentimentalism is to the emotions what literal representationalism is to the eyes, and is another of the great sins under modernism.

[14] Postmodernism, on the other hand, is not a return to romanticism or some other premodern mindset. It revels no more in literality or sentimentality than the modernism in which its practitioners were nurtured. Modernism was not rejected but went stale: its

adherents lost their conviction, and it withered (dying with Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, at 3:32 p.m. on 15 July 1972, as Charles Jencks flippantly observed). Postmodernism retains modernist intellectualism but it tempers it: the creative act is no longer a duty or a response to a calling - now it is a *game* of subtle (or unsubtle) learned allusion and self-examination guided by the idea that little in a game is to be taken very seriously. As such, irony is the native idiom of postmodernism, particularly as expressed in an ironising stance or relativistic perspective that offers maneuvering room for its symbiotic companion, political correctness. This is just a sketch, but it helps explain why *The Passion* was such a disaster for so many critics (Reed's damning *New York Observer* review is particularly postmodern in its camp approach). Gibson comes to his task without a trace of introspective irony and a cartload of absolutes. He knows himself and his trade well enough to state the truth that the film is *his* vision, "what I wanted to show." Yet, he claims an absolute truth for his vision higher than that for which he can take personal responsibility as a director (and screenwriter). Gibson gives us Satan on screen, depicting Jesus' self-sacrifice as part of a cosmological battle of good and evil: Jesus' resurrection really happened, and here it is on film. Gibson goaded the postmodern critics by splashing them with his non-negotiable absolutes, and they responded by popping his bubble, as they would of anyone who takes himself too seriously. The effect is very much like John Brown vs. Oscar Wilde.

Why Make Such a Violent Movie?

[15] Having thus won some insight into why critics saw damning flaws in the movie, we can now try to set aside this hostile perspective (without writing its concerns off) and try to look at the movie sympathetically in order to do a better job than the critics in discerning its genuine intellectual and artistic merits. The first question is perhaps the most obvious: why did Gibson make a movie about religious redemption that seems to break all records for cinematic violence?

[16] Gibson has discussed his motivations in making this film often enough that a basic picture emerges. Until about a decade ago he suffered terribly from addictions that were ruining him, nearly (he says) to the point of suicide. He states that he had to reach "rock bottom" before a religious epiphany gave him the strength to come back. This is not to be made light of, and has apparently colored his whole view of redemption and led him to an interesting personal christological vision. His interviews constantly come back to the concept of redemption when he attempts to explain the movie's purpose, and he closely connects Jesus' redemptive act (as he sees it) with four key concepts: faith, hope, love, and forgiveness (Gibson 2004a: 22).

[17] Some care is needed at this point. On the one hand, Gibson clearly envisions Jesus as a "quintessential hero" or the "hero par excellence" (2004a: 21) who has paid a terrible price to save people, and this suffering hero has been a staple of Gibson's repertoire of acted and directed roles since long before his epiphany. Put another way, Jesus the tortured hero fits easily into Gibson's cinematic vocabulary, and the degree of his torment, coupled with the high-stakes risk (humanity's soul in the balance), and the overwhelming victory at the end are reasonable logical extensions of the disembowelments and other excruciating tortures Gibsonian heroes regularly endure (always with at least a clear moral, if not physical victory in the end).

[18] However, there seems to be more in play here than Gibson helplessly slipping into a congenial formula. Gibson behaves very much like a modern evangelist, using film to get his Christ-centered message across instead of the words, radio, and TV exploited by other preachers. His method is to make the audience undergo an orchestrated version of his own epiphany by making them hit a cinematically constructed emotional “rock bottom” through hyperviolence in order to shock them out of whatever moral lethargy or obtuseness they have fallen into (see Smith for a similar psychological analysis). This movie goes beyond anything seen from Gibson before - the disembowelment in *Braveheart* is still just a scene, not carefully extended through the whole movie. People suffered heart attacks because of viewing *The Passion*, and a murderer confessed. This reveals the power of Gibson’s “rock bottom” and suggests strong ties to revivalist Christianity.

[19] Put another way, to reach a morally obtuse audience, one needs to reach down past layers of detachment and lethargy and grab them by the collar. One way to achieve this is to shock and scare them, and use the psychological reaction to help drive home the point. But when movie violence has become so habitual as to be approaching moral invisibility, Gibson had to devise a new evangelical vocabulary of suffering to break through the audience’s resistance to getting engaged and make the good news register.

The Artistry of *The Passion*

[20] Even if Gibson made the movie with earnest, respectable intentions, we must still ask whether he *succeeded* in doing more than (as we might infer from critical response) creating a ratcheted-up version of *Lethal Weapon*? How much control over the violence did Gibson retain, and how much subtlety does the movie possess in ways perhaps masked to hostile observers by the violence? As Gibson told Bill O’Reilly (2004b), “it needed to be . . . shocking, and I wanted to push the audience to the edge,” adding, “. . . if you’re going to push the audience to the edge, try and hold their hand a little bit, and, if it’s going to be horrible and ugly, try to make the violence - try to find the beauty in it, try and find the lyricism in it, and also implant within the story many escape hatches, places where you can go when it gets too much, and I feel I used a fair amount of those trap doors to . . . flashback, flash out.”

[21] Jesus’ perseverance in the face of torture and temptation was a remarkable act of courage that could be considered beautiful. Again, after being beaten with rods, he rises and braces himself, bravely inviting another round of punishment. When Pilate tells Jesus that he has the power to release him, Jesus righteously rejects this escape, telling Pilate that the only authority that he has comes from God. The symbolism of Jesus’ voluntarily crawling onto the cross at Calvary does not escape us. Jesus resolutely, even heroically, undergoes his suffering, and, just as the martyrs who died for their faith historically increased the faith of the living, so too might the depiction of Jesus’ suffering affect sinners now.

[22] The soundtrack artfully interacts with the violence, seeking to add a measure of beauty to (or reveal it in) Jesus’ heroic suffering. *Passion* composer John Debney relates (Bond: 12-14) how difficult it was to write music for the driving of the nails into Jesus’ hands: “one morning I just said that I was going to write the most beautiful music I could write, because the idea was - and Mel kept pounding this into me - was that when it’s most horrific that’s when the music should be the most beautiful just to help us all get through it, and also to

play up the heroic nature of what this person Christ is doing, this self-sacrifice.” The contrast of beautiful music behind ugly violence fits Gibson’s heroic image of Jesus in that the music uses irony to support the message by suggesting the underlying beauty of the redemptive act despite the superficial ugliness on the screen. As Debney says, “my belief is that normal people are yearning to have that cathartic feeling you get when the music is powerful and melodic at points, so that is what the score is.” Gibson worked closely with Debney to find places in the movie where the score ought to emerge more strongly from the background.

[23] Debney’s - and Gibson’s - work with the score serves to highlight the significance of certain scenes and actions. For example, the force of the music elevates didactically just when Jesus picks up the cross to begin his march to Golgotha, a thought that recalls (although certainly not in melody) the Catholic hymn “Behold the Wood of the Cross.” This is not just wood but the instrument of salvation, one of the most recognizable symbols of Christianity and the archetypal cross to which all sufferings are likened in metaphors about bearing one’s own cross - a metaphor Gibson employs in referring to combating his addictions. We might also point to the chanting and drums employed while the Romans raise the cross as an example of significant emotional underscoring.

[24] In addition to violence and music, Gibson also exploits nonlinear narrative (through significantly juxtaposed flashbacks) to further his evangelistic task. For Gibson, as we have seen, the flashbacks are in one sense escape hatches offering the audience moments of relief throughout the movie by, e.g., showing the humanity of the characters. Another important function of such scenes is emphasis on or clarification of ideas perhaps otherwise opaque to the audience. In this he is doing nothing new or unorthodox. The canonical evangelists are known to have rearranged their material for their own purposes: John has Jesus drive the merchants from the temple at the beginning of his ministry (2:13-25), while Matthew places it at the end (21); Mark has Jesus heal the blind man as he departs from Jericho (10:46-52), while Luke places the event before Jesus enters Jericho (18:35-43); Matthew puts the Lord’s Prayer during the Sermon on the Mount (6:9-15), while Luke has it on trip to Jerusalem (11:1-4).

[25] Let us examine a few characteristic examples of how Gibson uses flashbacks to highlight the themes of faith, hope, love, and forgiveness in his movie. While Jesus is being scourged, we are taken away from the scene for a moment as we are shown Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. Rather than to discount the flashback and overemphasize the violence, we ought perhaps to see that in addition to giving the audience an island in a sea of suffering, Gibson ably illustrates the theme of Christ as the Suffering Servant (the small service for the disciples by washing their feet and enduring a humbling experience for them echoes the immeasurably greater service inherent in the passion).

[26] The theme that there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for a friend (explicitly included in a flashback) is also indirectly present in a flashback interrupting the scene in which the Marys collect the pools of Jesus’ blood in cloths given to them by Pilate’s wife. As Magdalene kneels down to collect the blood, a flashback takes us back to her, about to be stoned for adultery and kneeling before Jesus. This episode comments on the deeper issues surrounding Christ’s passion. The flashback, with its story of forgiveness, comments

by analogy on the nature of Jesus' suffering and asserts that it is *not* pointless. The flashback Jesus saves a woman facing death for her sins (cf. John 8:3-11) while the foreground Jesus, on the cross, is held to be doing the same thing for all of humanity. The importance of this scene (and the ideas latent in it) is clear from the fact that it has been reused as a visual echo during the crucifixion scene, when Magdalene, kneeling before the raised cross, drops pebbles at its base.

[27] The theme of hope runs through the flashback that shows Jesus falling as a child, which interrupts the scene of Jesus as an adult falling in front of Mary under the weight of the cross. In the flashback, Mary sees her child fall and runs to him out of a mother's natural fear for his well being, while in the foreground, she sees just these hopes apparently dashed. The image of Jesus as a child is particularly effective, for children, with their great amount of potential, embody their parents' hopes. It is at this point in the movie that Jesus gives the great statement of hope for humankind, "I make all things new." Here, too, the music enters a different register and becomes very beautiful, for beneath the tear-provoking sorrow on the surface of the scene lurks a statement of hope.

[28] One more, example, perhaps the clearest of them, will suffice. The climax of the movie, the crucifixion, is juxtaposed with flashbacks of the Last Supper. After the cross has been raised, there is a flashback of Jesus raising the bread, saying, "This is my body," and shortly after follows another flashback of Jesus raising the cup, saying, "This is my blood." The crucifixion provides the meaning for the Last Supper (and the sacrament associated with it), and the flashbacks make this lucidly clear. As Gibson says (2004a: 22), "the Last Supper flashbacks show the whole reason why he came: his sacrifice, for our salvation. That's the secret to everything, the explanation of everything."

Conclusion

[29] It is arguably the case, therefore, that Gibson had an earnest moral purpose in making the movie as violent as it is. He certainly succeeded in imbuing the film with nontrivial artistic elements which add an intellectual dimension to the enterprise. But while Gibson is to be admired for the uncompromising way he follows his inner vision in presenting this story, he has opened himself to critical attacks, also on nontrivial grounds. With regard to such attacks, the most important thing to remember is that *The Passion* is just a movie, and that what you see up there on the cross is an actor, not Jesus. Movie, director, and actor are suitable and fair targets for critical praise or pans.

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