

Aesthetics and participation ...

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Does it ever happen that a theoretical perspective is articulated, accepted and then sealed from further debate? There is a process of development, application, critique and assessment. Among other things, scholarly journals offer their communities of readers and writers a space for continuing debate about the implications of concepts and conversations. We look at our own critical and theoretical worlds through the frames of those whose works we read, and we write in response. This themed issue on aesthetics and participation offers twelve perspectives on a wide ranging conversation to which many colleagues have contributed. The perspectives offered here all engage specific examples of theatre, drama or performance practice, from examples that range from the moving of soil to waiting on tables, from youth theatre projects to burlesque circus performance, from issues of pedagogy to examples of playful therapy. The authors writing for this issue have taken a range of positions in relation to their examples. Some write from a position that is more or less separate from the work that they discuss, as detached observers. Other foreground their various engagements with the art work as it was created or performed: as spectator-participants; as directors, facilitators or project designers; as teachers or trainers of novice artists; and finally as performers.

... Or, “Aesthetics” and “Participation”

This themed issue has engaged with the implications of debates about aesthetics in the context of participatory work. These terms are variously employed and defined throughout this issue, and we have not tried to develop a consensus on their boundaries. As has been noted on numerous occasions, the word *participation* in the context of theatre and performance means so many things that it cannot be tied down in critical or analytical terms except to blur the status of audience and art work or spectator and art maker. This blurring, though, is precisely what is useful. ‘Participation’ stretches the boundaries of example: it could refer to anything from standing at the back of the chorus in an amateur production to engaging in immersive theatre, or in youth or disability arts in forms of work known sometimes as community theatre. For scholars in applied theatre, there is an extension of the term into concerns with social and political participation; a connection between participation in the arts and participation in our communities, cultures and societies. The visibility of groups of marginalized people as makers of culture is a crucial aspect of the work that is made and discussed within the pages of this journal. Participation is used in Gareth White’s book, *Audience Participation in the Theatre* (2013), as a frame for a particular way of looking at dynamics of audience involvement and engagement in theatre. For Jen

Harvie in her book *Fair Play* (2013), it is a politically ambivalent, yet powerful, way of looking at the framing of political agency and analysis through art works. For the scholars and practitioners in this themed edition, it bisects complex theatrical practice, enabling us to focus on a blurring of artist, product and audience or spectator, and offers lines for the analysis of the interaction of art work, social engagement and response. In this issue, there is a marked engagement with questions of agency and participation, and it is interesting to see how these questions predominate in this issue. Kennedy Chinyowa and Ben Fletcher Watson both draw on Cooke and Kothari's idea of the tyranny of participation. Nandita Dinesh writes about the process of foregrounding characters' lack of agency through spectatorial role play; Lynne McCarthy establishes a critique of agency through the moving of soil, blurring boundaries of spectatorship.

Aesthetics, if only because of the hectares of print material on the subject and the utter lack of consensus about the use of the word, is harder to organize and activate as a concept. Philosophical aesthetics is a strategy for framing, valuing and understanding the non-conceptual content of art works and the natural world. The cognitive and the conceptual world of philosophy meet the sensory and physical world of the aesthetic. According to this strand of thought, the beautiful and the sublime are *direct* experiences of human beings, whereas the world of ideas and concepts is mediated through language. That humans have individual responses to beautiful objects, and that these can be thought of as simultaneously universal *and* individual *and* provoked by the intense relationship between the individual and the world, offers the foundation for a model of human similitude and agency. Aesthetics enables us to activate analysis of the experience itself, to think in terms of our visceral and sensory responses, and to extrapolate these into understandings of human agency and experience. In the present issue, Ananda Breed focuses on the power of environmental aesthetics to engage with issues of agency and identity and Andrew Gaines looks at the activation of play in adults as a way nostalgically accessing aesthetic experiences of childhood.

For Pierre Bourdieu the *process of discriminating* between the sublime and the agreeable is a profoundly political act of philosophy, creating and maintaining inequality on the basis of a difference of responses to art and culture. His study, *Distinction* ([1979] 1984) offers an analysis of the various ways in which individuals of different social classes express their taste through responses to different objects and artworks in the world around them, and the ways in which this taste comes to stand as a marker of class distinction. Bourdieu sees Kantian aesthetics and the whole notion of 'disinterested' pleasure as a mechanism for performing class difference and denying the sensory 'animal' pleasures such as eating and sex. Far from being non-conceptual and disinterested, the 'free play' experienced through a distanced mode of aesthetic experience is pleasure that expresses freedom from want. It is transformed through a partisan education system into a notion of abstracted 'cultivation' of the senses, particularly the visual senses. Framed in this way, discourses of taste appear as expressions of class interest, autonomy and identity. Discourses of taste receive investments of leisure time from the individual, along with the effort and education required to master

these discourses and to turn them into experiences. In return, art offers the experience of agency, immediacy and abstracted or 'disinterested' pleasure.

Aesthetics and applied drama

The separation of the world of art from the everyday world of human needs and desires has continued to have ambivalent appeal, and while this ambivalence is expressed throughout theatre and performance studies, the area of applied theatre is one in which this ambivalence has extraordinary importance. Beauty and the sublime are philosophical tools for talking about certain forms of human experience, and the discipline of philosophical aesthetics is a place to focus thought about the experiences of art and the sensory world. Bourdieu's work is only one attempt to unpack the boundaries of this field of inquiry (although in my view it belongs firmly to this discourse, setting up a theoretical hinge upon which we may hang questions such as those we develop in this themed issue). Applied theatre and drama seem to demand a cognitive focus for the work, a form of analysis which applies concepts to practices that can be regarded as primarily aesthetic. The debate in this area has been rich and productive. Perspectives on artist education are offered to this current issue by Sara Hunter Orr and Kate Collins, whose dialogic work intersects with the process of preparing to engage with students and audiences aesthetically.

Like me, many who work in the field of applied theatre and drama education, find in Joe Winston's book, *Beauty and Education* (2010) a valuable set of arguments to focus attention on the value of beauty. Winston develops a compelling and wide ranging set of encounters with the importance of the experience of beauty in education. He characterizes the experience of beauty as fragile and valuable to us in all aspects of our lives, of being a force for good because of the desire it instills in us to repeatedly experience and to value beauty. Winston traces a line from classical philosophy through Kantian aesthetics to underline the experiential, creative and fundamentally social value of beauty. He then persuasively refocuses attention on the centrality of the experience of beauty to all creative and educational projects. This book offers a tool for those of us who wish to argue for the intrinsic and transformative value of beauty in a culture which seems sometimes to be too heavily influenced by the instrumental aims of a neoliberal society. The themed issue of this journal (Haseman and Winston, 2010) continued this argument. The crucial distinctions between aesthetic and applied work are eroded in these works, and these writers underline the extent to which we must find and defend the space to talk about works of art as art.

Instrumentalism, transcendence and value

Over the last fifteen years or so, debates in this field follow some serious analysis and dissent from the notion that art and the realm of the artistic should in some way earn its way. Instrumentalism is articulated in critiques of arts funding policy. Claire Bishop's (2012) critique of 'the social turn' in art underlines the extent to which participation can be used politically in any number of political projects, to the detriment of art and artists. The neoliberal appropriation of artistic practices through the interpellation of 'problem' groups

into participants seems to make theatrical a phony process of inclusion and participation, falsely conflating social and artistic participation. In his essay 'Consumed by the political: the ruination of the Arts Council' (2006), which appeared in *Critical Quarterly*, Andrew Brighton claimed that in the UK, the public subsidy of the arts has made the sphere of arts into an adjunct of political policy. For Brighton, the current system of public subsidy traps art and artists in the logic of art versus social tool. According to this argument, there is no necessary connection between art and the social purposes of art, and indeed the demands of each category mitigate against likely correlation between the two. Art transcends its specific context, but when arts policy drives funding arrangements, art is political. Within the terms of the definition of art as transcendent, political art is an oxymoron. Brighton claims that community arts encourage "arts activities which have no significance except for those who make it" (5).

While Bishop's critique is of the left, and Brighton's critique is of the right, the discussion of the aesthetics of participatory arts is manoeuvred into an assertion that the aesthetic response to art work is *the opposite* of the instrumental response. Aesthetics and participation are part of a language game here, creating a dialectic in which the defence of the separate space of aesthetics needs to be protected by emphasizing the creative autonomy of the artist. I would argue that the process of assuring this creative autonomy for *all* participants is a central and abiding concern of all forms of applied and social arts work. Where the argument becomes problematic is in the status of the artist, imagined as an autonomous and professional individual. This professional model of art work is both an aesthetic and an economic model. The expectation of artistic expressivity creates a mirage of autonomous creativity that sits uncomfortably within, or is problematized by, the practices of applied theatre and performance. The inseparable enmeshing of works of art in the world, and the aesthetic strategies of revealing or concealing the relations of support and dependence that make art work possible, are brilliantly expounded by Shannon Jackson in *Social Works* (2011). This aesthetic enmeshing is reflected throughout this issue, with works by Adam Alston and Amelia Cavallo, and through Astrid Breel's exploration of the enmeshing of aesthetics and ethics.

For me, the arguments for artistic autonomy expounded by Bishop and Brighton, on the left and right flanks of this discussion respectively point towards a view of art in which theoretical development and formal innovation proceed at the highest levels of a hierarchical institution of art. One example of this lies in responses to disability arts. This example serves by offering a tension between the formal innovations of professional disability arts and the claim to inclusion from participatory groups. The example serves because the conflation of disability with applied and participatory work is strenuously resisted by some professional artists with disabilities, which leaves participatory works themselves in something of a vacuum of reception. What about work that doesn't 'look' as if it is produced by professional artists? What do we make of their need for audience and for (critical) reception? Here is an example which we might frame as disability arts, but which has wider application in the process of considering participation in arts and society.

An example from disability theatre

At the start of the performance, a group of actors in formal academic dress process onto the stage. They are grave and serious and they are holding books. There are fifteen people on stage. They are all adults, male and female, aged between their late 20s and their mid 60s, affecting the lifetime of learning of Faustus, showing solemnity, gravitas, self-importance, showing the audience what they see when they see scholars. They address the audience directly:

Jenny: Imagine now a library . Jacky: Shelves and shelves of books, , ,

Mary: Imagine us as people who love books. (Everyone hold books close to their hearts) . Roy: Imagine us as scholars, professors, men and women of learning. (Pause, enter Brian) Imagine us reading

*All: Reading. ...
(everyone reads) .*

Faustus by Firebird Theatre Company.

The sequence is the opening of a play by a theatre company of disabled people. The brief example is interestingly complex. To ask that we imagine the actors reading engages us in a dissonant awareness that as people with various disabilities, including learning disabilities, they may or may not be able to read. As learning disabled people, the actors know academia through its representation in theatre and other media, and not from direct experience as students or as scholars. Dressed in academic gowns, they tell us to imagine them reading. Then they read.

This is the opening fragment from a full length play. Activated within this one moment are a series of questions, each of which could be the subject of an extended conversation about participation and aesthetics. A great wealth of discussions of participation and performance intersect interestingly with this discussion, and a series of more mundane, or more commonly repeated questions occur. The actors are telling a story. Part of the story offers to connect the appearance of their bodies, the way they move and their voices to the actors' identities as disabled people. To the audience, the actors are legible as disabled people, carrying with them series of questions and assumptions (although often not knowledge) that the audience may have about people with learning disabilities. Which aspects of this reading are aesthetic responses to the performance, and which are social or ethical?

Somewhere at the base of the discussion is the debate about the merits of the work as participation and the merits of the work as *aesthetic* work, or, conversely, its social status as staging a claim for equality, or else its value to the individuals on stage and their near communities. Within the terms of theatre scholarship, the work of disabled and non-professional performers frequently arrives in the debate pre-framed by a distinction between the aesthetic and the participatory. Who is the audience? Who is the work *for*? What does the work *achieve*? It is difficult to resist the pattern or the habit of

dividing the experience of the participants from the experience of the audience, of dividing the social or ethical implications of the piece from artistic or aesthetic responses to the piece. The outcome of the debate confers social worth upon art because the aesthetic is a sphere in which art is valued. But the terms and approaches are muddy and sometimes even injurious. For example, how do audiences watch the work of disabled people? What standards do they apply when judging the work of disabled actors? Part of the framing of these questions involves awareness that the institutional frame of 'quality' regulates access to funding and opportunity for disabled artists. Disabled artists must insist that they are artists, as against all the disabled people who are not artists.

At the root of these approaches is the recognition that the art work of disabled people is often not apprehended on the same terms as the art of non-disabled people. The theatre and performance of disabled people may transform the ways we see the world by paying close attention to the formal and sensory innovations that disabled audiences and disabled artists have created in the decades of their interactions. However, it might equally be said that critical responses to the art work relies on a fissure between professional and non-professional art works: work produced for an audience, and work that is produced for the participants. As can be seen in Brighton and Bishop, this fissure is seen in many contexts, not just in disability arts.

Aspects of disability theatre and performance may be seen as formally innovative and adventurous, a new line of exploration of the *avant garde*. Yet the question of innovation and experimentation is conferred institutionally and is associated with elite discourses of form and critique. Yet theatre can also be a vernacular form, an accessible and easily understood mode of storytelling and mimesis. Firebird see themselves as story tellers. They use vernacular and accessible forms of theatre and storytelling to engage audiences. "We have put all our experiences of being human into telling this story", they say.

If the *formal* innovation emerges from the audience's presumed reading of the bodies of these performers, and the novelty of experiencing the performances of marginalized people, then we establish the grounds for inequality, rather than seeing the staging of equality. Value is conferred by the audience in the act of apprehending disabled people on stage, rather than being created and delimited by the conventions of performance. This runs problematically counter to the intentions of the performers.

Quality and Inequality

This is where the process of valuing aesthetics reemerges for me as an interesting subject of research. For Rancière, it is aesthetics that provides the grounds, the *a priori* conditions for political and social organisation. Aesthetics isn't confined to art and art works. In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière says:

Aesthetics refers to a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making,

their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships. (2004c, 10)

Drawing from Rancière's glossary, aesthetics is a specific regime for identifying and thinking about the arts. Rancière names this the *distribution of the sensible*. The sensible is that which can be apprehended by the senses, and the distribution of the sensible produces a system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible and also the possibilities of what could be said or thought or made or done. This includes the form of social organisation and political interaction. As we think about the arts we also consider the world of politics, the ways in which social organization and social deliberation are realized as perceptible forms by the senses. So, to quote from the glossary; the distribution of the sensible:

Refers to the implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed. (85)

The grounds for experiencing a common world and common perception of that world lies in the rules that also establish the shape of that world. The aesthetic design of figures of community is an important analytical tool. Ways of creating representations, whether these are theatrical or political, are therefore always built upon the realm of the sensible. The means of reflecting on and articulating social and political circumstances are aesthetic. One of the patterns for analysing political and representational realities is rooted deeply in thinking and has come to figure importantly in arts practice. The notion of diversity has become bound up with political and artistic representation. Rancière points towards an analysis of the political implications of this concept.

From the perspective of a theatre scholar, Rancière's writing is sparse in terms of detail. Of course it is: he is a philosopher using a vernacular cultural form as an example to communicate an idea that is located beyond that form. He imagines the figure of the theatre and the theatrical in a very broad sense and constructs the figure of the crowd and the theatrocratic in order to develop his analysis. The image of theatre is the medium for developing a theoretical perspective on democracy. As is the case with metaphor, it is probably unhelpful to pursue the image in extended analytical detail. This leaves us with a problem. Rancière explains why the cognitive world of ideas requires separating from the aesthetic world of form and reception. Rancière tells us that the form of democracy is literally theatrical (Hallward 115). For example, in theatre there is a theoretical presumption that the audience can speak or disrupt at any moment. They are visible, united in a momentary purpose. They are deliberately present and addressed as a *crowd* of sentient *individuals* on roughly equal terms. Their decision to respect the conventions of aesthetics, their competence with levels of fiction and rules of behaviour reveal a connection between autonomy and collectivity that brings us to an understanding of the fragility, beauty and comprehensibility of politics (and art).

Whilst it is thrilling to read Rancière's thoughts about theatre, it might be said that they cannot be directly applied to the example of participatory theatre, which has practices that don't work with the metaphor that Rancière has employed. For example, attempts to renegotiate the rules of participation and reception, or even to teach or otherwise impose these formal rules create a distinction in which the participant groups and the artists lack an equal mode of address. It may be said that participatory and applied theatre has its audience as an object, with all the problems that implies, politically. It may also be said that participatory work has its aesthetic qualities tied firmly to the inclusion of audience as object. If we think of traditional theatre as polysemic, the process of analyzing participatory performance may be cacophonous. The experience of the art work and the experience of the non-art (real?) world may share complexity, immediacy, reality, at which point the separate term 'art' may seem unnecessary.

In citing Bourdieu, I have already pointed towards a body of work that sees as political the separation of aesthetic pleasure from the world of work, balancing this reading of the politics of taste against recent arguments *for* aesthetic disinterestedness and against 'the social turn' in art. Rancière takes on the arguments of Bourdieu in his early book *The Philosopher and his Poor* (2004b). Rancière argues that Bourdieu's strategies *presume* inequality, treating 'the poor' as a category of people, from which emerges a description of the features of the group. It is a teleology, mistaking cause and effect. When Bourdieu investigates the differences between social classes, he readily finds that they are indeed different, and he describes these differences as if they were part of the cause of inequality. Brighton and Bishop are worried about the 'impoverishment' of aesthetics by the 'social'. Perhaps the creation of experiential cacophony and formal uncertainty may reduce the political efficacy of the form of theatre because it lacks the dimension of rewarding and pleasurable 'disinterested contemplation'. It may be that we can't be 'disinterested' where we are participants. However, Rancière's work firmly underlines the formal imbrication of aesthetics and politics. In dismissing the 'social' side of the aesthetic-social relation as figuring those who are somehow in need, or in deficit, critics of 'the social turn in art' reproduce the exclusive categorisation of the 'poor' generated by philosophers and also miss the rich and plural connections of the aesthetic and the social implied across Rancière's work¹.

Trying to gain an understanding of how the aesthetic and the social work together is crucial to developing a critique of aesthetics and participation. Both Rancière's *theatrocracy* and Bourdieu's *distinction* offer interpretative frames, but they seem most of all to be interested in the art work as political metaphor. How, then, can these analyses intersect with a way of examining the multiple points of contact and influence of art work, individual and world? How can the polysemic and social aesthetics of participatory performance start to be analysed?

¹ I thank Jenny Hughes for helping me to work this out.

Order and Transgression: Aesthetic Norms

Raymond Williams (1977) makes the claim that art (although he was writing about literature) is a particularly accessible way to apprehend and critique the operations of ideology, not just because it is a part of the everyday world of politics and economics, but because it has a formal structure which meant that it could be analysed in such a way that the reader could understand the formal qualities of the ideas that held together and which made the art work coherent. Like Rancière, Williams saw a coherent relationship between aesthetic form and social and political form. Reading back briefly through Williams' sources, the influence of structuralist theory is very much apparent (and acknowledged). Mukařovský in particular, offers some analytical possibilities for thinking about my Firebird example. Here I give an abbreviated version of Veltrusky's synthesis of Mukařovský's analysis.

Jan Mukařovský developed the notion of the 'aesthetic object' – the structural correlation in the perceiver's consciousness of the art object. (Veltrusky 1980-81, 122).ⁱ The gulf between the individual and the collective experience is bridged with this idea. Mukařovský's theory of aesthetic norms permits us a way to understand Rancière's perspective as a mode of analysis, rather than as metaphor.

Aesthetic norms are an example of a series of cultural norms – these are general factors in social life and help to create our attitudes to reality. They are 'social facts' lodged in the collective unconscious and they are regulatory, in that they determine responses to the world, by and large. One such norm might be a norm that leads to expectations about the appearance of social actors. These norms may manifest themselves as a mere 'feeling' of approval or disapproval which is difficult to formulate. They are derived from our relationship to the world. They are not 'ideals' as such, but are guideposts to make the world legible, to found a principle of order in a system of perpetual change. Transgressing these norms outside the world of art produces dissonance, displeasure and a feeling of 'bad taste'. Works of art intentionally violate the canon of aesthetic norms, producing pleasurable disorder and dissonance, since there are no practical implications of this transgression. Mukařovský envisages a process where art produces aesthetic innovation (or, to put it another way, norm transgression), that moves us away from systems and order and towards individual pleasures. The process of developing new aesthetic forms only gradually produces a consensus, shifting aesthetic norms within the shared life of society. These in turn reach canonical status, reinstating order (145-148).

The advantage of this way of looking at the problematic separation of art and life is that it theorises the ways in which the separate sphere of art is precisely its claim for political efficacy. Theatre serves for Rancière as a literal form for politics:

Politics is always about creating a stage [...] It always takes the form, more or less, of the establishment of a theatre [...] For me, politics is about the establishment of a theatrical and artificial sphere. (Rancière, cited by Hallward 111)

The artificiality of the sphere is crucial because it facilitates the transgression of social norms about who may speak or act. This becomes comprehensible in the context of theories about the transgressive space of the arts, which is to say, aesthetics. The polysemic nature of theatre or the complexity of the relationship between the social world and social concepts are not part of Ranciere's analysis at this point.

For Firebird theatre company, there was no attempt to develop an experimental style, no desire to push the theatrical form beyond mimetic enactment of drama. Instead an easy knowledge, a supposition that what they were doing was telling a story using drama, acting out their perspective and their characterization, performing, through their own humour and integrity, a canonical play. There was a semi-visible structure of support for the performers, a series of moments of focus or control that failed or missed. There were broad jokes in which the actors laughed so much they couldn't continue. There was a moment of shared hilarity at the bawdy cross dressed Helen of Troy. The Pope was played by an actor who was reluctant to stop repeating a gesture for as long as the audience laughed at it, with the result that the audience got completely hysterical. It was, and remains, one of the best evenings I have had at the theatre. Their ability to 'play' the audience, to subvert the habitual expectations of audience and performer was the crucial element of the performance. Yet they brought to the performance with them the knowledge of all the assumptions and prejudices they had experienced as learning disabled people. The audience brought these ideas – these norms, to use Mukařovský's frame – with them, too.

Firebird used their mastery of the aesthetic presentation of cultural norms to disrupt the habitual methods of relating to a play. They and we share a series of aesthetic norms which they manipulate through their use of the formal space of theatre. At the end of the performance, the company merge with the audience, chatting and receiving comments. They shake hands with people or hug them, thank them for coming, ask them whether they enjoyed the performance. The boundaries of the art work blur and the suppositions about who is 'in charge' of this space or this form or this encounter remain shaken.

The company grew their own artistic and political agenda from more than a decade's work. They have developed accessible and democratic methods of rehearsing and decision-making. The company has survived for more than twenty years against remarkable odds, with the increasing desire and ambition to work as a company, *together*, to make art, *together*, acting as a catalyst to shift their work from the category of social service provision to the category of art.

For Rancière, the gap between theatre maker and audience is very precisely political. Theatre is not political simply because it refers to a world outside itself. It is political *because it is theatre*, because it is an art work, because *we can apprehend it aesthetically and on equal terms*.

Equality is fundamental and absent, current and untimely. From which was clarified the struggle of those proletarians who could not be the equals of the bourgeoisie whether through the education that the

bourgeoisie provided them or through their own culture, but rather through the transgressive appropriation of an intellectual equality whose privilege others had reserved for themselves. (2004b 223)

Many people with learning disabilities spend their time in enforced and impoverished leisure except when they engage in arts practices. It is sometimes assumed that most learning disabled people cannot work and this assumption is challenged politically in the art work of Firebird. It is easier to discuss the social benefits of the art work in terms of inclusion and diversity, and to avoid the analysis of the work itself as an aesthetic object. The discussion of aesthetics hinges on the notion of form, which for some reason often is reduced to *style*, and this piece of theatre is not something that we can mistake for part of avant garde theatrical conversation. It belongs to the sphere of the amateur, and also the participatory, but it is no less transformative for that. Firebird's work is not, for example, of professional *quality* in that it doesn't look like or sound like professional theatre. The company's existence is an important part of members' lives and the social identity of a group of people who have otherwise little employment. The members are not paid and the workers are frequently voluntary. In these respects, the company exists for its members. Yet the company is not a social club. It is a theatre company. The work of Rancière, decoupled from Bishop's institutional view of art, serves to remind us of the importance of transgression as an aesthetic goal, as an artistic outcome and also, importantly, as the foundation and the means of enacting the political.

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