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On *The Magic Mountain*: The novel as liminal affective technology

Paul Stenner and Monica Greco

Abstract

In this paper we build on Szokolczai's analysis of the sociological relevance of the novel to propose that novels can be regarded as a historically specific instance of what we call 'liminal affective technologies'. We develop this proposition through a reading of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, to demonstrate that this novel not only represents – as Szokolczai already argues – the reflexive culmination of a historical movement towards permanent liminality, but also a performative meditation on the role of 'liminal affective technologies' in metabolising experience and channelling psychosocial transformations.

On *The Magic Mountain*: The novel as liminal affective technology

Paul Stenner and Monica Greco

In his two recent books, *Novels and the Sociology of the Contemporary* (2016) and *Permanent Liminality and Modernity* (2017), Arpad Szakolczai develops the proposition that modern novels constitute a ‘royal road’ for ‘analysing a theatricalised reality in order to help find our way back to a genuine and meaningful life’ (2016: x). A *royal road* – thus not just one of many possible avenues: what might justify the elevation of the novel to a role of such singular importance, and through such a remarkable choice of words? Following an analogy the expression suggests, novels would be to reflexive historical sociology what, according to Freud, dreams were to psychoanalysis: at once symptom of a certain unconscious reality, and yet also simultaneously elaboration, working-through, transformation of that reality. So it is with modern novels: works of fiction characterised by their realism, they symptomatically embody, in their very form, the disconcerting in-distinction between the real and the unreal, the genuine and the fake that, for Szakolczai, characterises the modern condition of permanent liminality. In thus re-presenting the modern condition, however, they also offer the possibility of a diagnosis, and of reaffirming ‘the unadulterated truth of the real world: that only concrete human lives and relations have substantial reality’ (2016: 334). The great modern novels, in other words, are isomorphic to the permanently liminal condition of modernity at a very fundamental level, not as a mere epiphenomenon of that condition that merely reflects it, but as a vector of becoming through and out of it.

In this contribution, we build upon Szakolczai’s own analysis to propose that the novel can be regarded as a historically specific instance of what we call ‘liminal affective technologies’. We will develop this proposition through a reading of Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, to demonstrate that this novel not only represents – as Szakolczai already argues – the reflexive culmination of a historical movement towards permanent liminality, but also a performative meditation on the role of ‘liminal affective technologies’ in metabolising experience and channelling psychosocial transformations.

Liminal affective technologies

One of Szakolczai's bold proposals is that novels can be viewed as a cultural response to another cultural process or medium: theatre. More specifically, the great novels are understood to provide a means for studying – for capturing, displaying and perhaps overcoming – a social reality that has been *theatricalised*. So although the focus of both books is on the novel, the theatre looms large in the background. Szakolczai has a quite particular and negative notion of 'the theatrical', at least in the modern context. For him, as we have seen, the phrase 'theatricalisation of modern life' implies a blurring of the distinction between the genuine or meaningful and the artificial or fake, and hence a deterioration, or even loss, of personal and social direction. This critique of the theatricalisation of reality is comparable to Plato's critique of the 'sophistry' of those who would manipulate appearances and exploit the resultant deception and liminal confusion for (short-sighted) reasons of personal gain. In an earlier work, Szakolczai examines the thorough transformation of European culture that accompanied the eventual collapse of the Renaissance, giving rise to the trilogy of modern economics, modelled more on the fairground than the market; 'carnavalesque', commodified politics; and modern 'alchemic' science. These developments together constitute the theatricalisation of modern life. Szakolczai traces their genealogy to the rebirth of theatre in the sixteenth century when, he says, following historian Jean-Christophe Agnew, theatre began to function as a medium where 'new types of social relationships characteristic of the market society ... were "experimented" with', as in a 'laboratory' or 'incubator' (2013a: 2).

If indeed the theatre lurks in the background of the great modern novels, then it is no less pertinent that religious ritual lurks in the background of theatre. This proposition is not so explicit in Szakolczai's work, but it is certainly implicit in so far as the concept of liminality is, of course, drawn from the anthropological study of the rituals enacted during rites of passage first identified van Gennep (1909) and later discussed by Victor Turner (1969; 1974). In ascribing such an important historical role to theatre Szakolczai follows Turner, who proposed that the 'subjunctive' modes (and moods) of experience that are characteristic of liminal situations in cultural practices are fundamental to the (re)generation of social relationships, and that, in this sense, symbolism and culture can be said to have 'ontological value' (Turner, 1969).

For our purposes, it is necessary to make explicit that transition rituals, theatrical performances and novels share certain features in common. Each can be considered as a cultural resource, tool, medium, or technology that affords liminal experiences of a particular ‘self-created’ kind (this phrase ‘self-created’ does not exclude but implies and assumes sociality). These artfully induced experiences of liminality bear interesting relations to experiences of liminality that occur spontaneously through, for example, natural disasters or sudden illness. The distinctive worlds created by cultural technologies like rituals, theatre, and the novel may be said to ‘recall’ spontaneous experiences of liminality, *summoning* the feelings associated with such experiences in a context that supplies those involved with a sense of their existential importance, thus *capturing* their value in, and for, the becoming of the group or community itself. Each of these cultural forms achieves this through the devising of an occasion during which the routine world of ordered and ordinary life is a) experienced as suspended, and b) doubled by the performance of a virtual ‘world’, which c) engenders unusual affectively charged experiences, associated with d) distinctive experiences of sociality, time, and space; all of which e) can recursively play upon the difference between the world of daily life and its emergent double. We mark this interesting commonality between ritual, theatre, novels and several other forms, with the generic name: ‘liminal affective technologies’ (for background, see Stenner, 2017a & b).

The notion of a ‘liminal affective technology’ was indeed partly inspired by Szokolczai’s labours to reveal the profound psychosociological relevance, not just of ritual, theatre and the novel, but also of the pictorial and plastic arts like painting and sculpture (see Szokolczai, 2007). In suggesting that these can be thought of as a sort of soft technology for occasioning liminal experiences of a particular kind, we are drawing upon the meaning of ‘technology’ and indeed ‘technique’ that was introduced by Marcel Mauss (1935) and developed by Michel Foucault in connection with ‘technologies of the self’ (e.g. 1988). Liminal affective technologies are distinct and specific in that they concern the creation of liminal experiences in order to facilitate, accompany, or engender relevant social transitions and associated personal transformations. Although we will not develop this proposition here, we posit that different liminal affective technologies emerge at crucial epochal junctures of transition to ‘metabolise’ and channel experiential novelty through new forms of

cultural re-presentation.¹ The transformative potency of any such form is never given once and for all, or in any general sense: how capable or not it is to convey what is most ‘vital’ (both in the sense of *alive* and in the sense of *important*) about a historical juncture is a function of the specific situation in which it occurs, as is the value of the transformation it effects. The qualification of these cultural technologies as ‘liminal’ is crucial, therefore, in distinguishing them from any form of technology designed to produce determinate effects: indeed, there is no guarantee as to their efficaciousness or as to the quality and value of the effects they produce; in the hands of ‘tricksters’, each of these forms can degenerate into mere ‘effect mechanisms’ designed to arouse and manipulate emotions (cf. Szakolczai, 2016: 98).

Our concept also builds upon Szakolczai’s rough distinction between *staged* and *unstaged* liminal experiences, itself inspired by Victor Turner.² Szakolczai follows Turner in describing Van Gennep’s rites of passage as ‘staged liminal situations’ because, although they usually involve unpredictable and even dangerous moments, they are nevertheless highly contrived or devised: ‘even staged liminal situations are dangerous, as the temporary suspension of stable structures opens up... forces... and unleashes... energies... Thus such rites are only performed in the presence of ‘guardians’ of order’ (Szakolczai, 2000: 218). As Szakolczai is well aware, however, the concept of the *stage* used in the expression ‘staged liminal situation’ is too narrow to capture the ways in which liminal affective technologies manage to devise, conjure, shape and otherwise work with experiences of liminality. The stage is in fact merely one of the devices used as part of just one of many such technologies, namely theatre. Rituals, by contrast, existed for many thousands of years before theatre, and they required no stage. According to Harrison (1913), the theatre of the Ancient Greeks emerged slowly from the Dionysian rituals known as *Dithyramb* (but see Rozik, 2002, for a critique of the Cambridge Ritualists). In his *Poetics*, for example, Aristotle

¹ This hypothesis, further developed in Stenner (2017a), builds on the insights of, among others, Suzanne Langer (1978) and Georg Simmel (1971).

² Turner (1982) for example wrote of ‘social dramas’, some of which he described as ‘unstaged’. With respect to variations in ‘staged’ liminal experiences, he also wrote of various liminoid spheres in post-industrial societies, including the specialized domains of art, theatre, sport and other leisure pursuits. An important difference between ‘liminality’ in the context of non-modern cultural practices and the ‘liminoid’ practices of industrial societies lies in the *obligatory* character of the former versus the *optional* character of the latter. Optionality trivialises participation in such activities as mere ‘entertainment’ and, by the same token, renders it in-different from ordinary life (1982: 42-3). This description is consistent with Szakolczai’s account of modern life as characterised by permanent liminality and theatricalisation.

writes that the ‘Chorus’ at the core of ancient theatre was originally composed of ritual singers of the Dithyramb. Athenian tragedy was considered an act of worship, taking place on holy ground during high festivals with the front row reserved for priests, and with actors wearing ritual vestments (see Harrison, 1913). Through time, what would become the actors on the stage gradually split off from the activities of the Chorus in order to offer interpretations or commentaries on the ritual activity. The novelty of the theatre, from this perspective, was not just the invention of a separate ‘stage’, but also that the Dionysian rites enacted by the chorus in the orchestra were observed by spectators in the theatron. The *dromenon* (or ‘thing done’) of ritual thus, in Harrison’s account, passed gradually into the *drama* of theatre. As Harrison puts it:

the kernel and centre of the whole was the *orchestra*, the circular *dancing-place* of the chorus; and, as the orchestra was the kernel and centre of the theatre, so the chorus, the band of dancing and singing men—this chorus that seems to us so odd and even superfluous—was the centre and kernel and starting-point of the drama. The chorus danced and sang that dithyramb we know so well, and from the leaders of that dithyramb we remember tragedy arose, and the chorus were at first, as an ancient writer tells us, just men and boys, tillers of the earth, who danced when they rested from sowing and ploughing (Harrison, 1913: 124).

If Harrison is correct, the transition from *dromenon* (ritual) to *drama* (theatre) is concretely expressed in the tripartite architectural design of Greek theatres, with their orchestra, their theatron, and their stage. This in turn affords all parties (the spectators, the actors and the chorus) the critical distance from their activities that might seed a mutation from sacred experience (directly connected to religion) to aesthetic experience (which might ‘degenerate’ to mere ‘entertainment’ or to the forms of manipulation that Szokolczai associates with theatricalisation). This allows us to envisage an ideal typical contrast between theatre (where actors self-consciously perform parts) and forms of ritual in which active and serious participation is the rule, with no place for a stage separating the actors from the observers, and where the transformations that are produced can be dead serious. Consistent with our description above, a genuine ritual (like one of van Gennep’s transition rites) could be described as: a) an occasion during which the routine world of daily life is temporarily held in suspense, b) to enable the performative enactment of a distinctive ritualized ‘world’ of

experience, c) which involves elements (e.g. physical tests or trials) devised to engender unusual and strong affective experiences, d) affording the distinctive mode of sociality that Turner calls ‘*communitas*’, e) all of which permits a dynamic interconnection between these distinctive experiences and the world of normal life. Ritual can thus be considered one type of liminal technology, others – such as the theatre or the novel – could be analysed in similar fashion (where each of the ‘components’ or ‘ingredients’ is likely to have distinctive qualities and features, yielding a distinctive emergent whole).

In short, the concept of a liminal affective technology gets us beyond the limitation of a category of ‘staged’ liminal experiences, and invites us to examine in empirical detail exactly how experiences of liminality are culturally occasioned. The concept still permits and presupposes a distinction with another kind of liminal experience that is not, as it were, artfully occasioned or deliberately devised. We prefer to call these contrast cases *spontaneous* liminal occasions, since they involve experiences that *happen to us* rather than experiences we, as it were, *do to ourselves* (although by the very nature of these phenomena, no clear line can be drawn between the two within concrete experience). Occurrences like illnesses, disasters or other crises and unplanned momentous events can, however, equally generate ruptures with respect to existing ‘order’ or ‘structure’, and hence these can also occasion liminal experiences in the sense of sensitive points or junctures at which unexpected, but perhaps also new and important things happen. Szakolczai (2000: 218) writes in this context of real-world liminal situations:

In a rite of passage, social order is purposefully but temporarily suspended, and this very same order is solemnly reasserted at the end of the performance. In the case of real-world liminality, the previously taken-for-granted order of things has actually collapsed. It cannot therefore simply be restored. This means that the central task in a real-world large-scale liminal situation is an actual search for order, with all the existential anxiety this entails...

In drawing attention to the relation between the novel and theatre in the transformation of European modernity, then, Szakolczai – in our terms – is pioneering the investigation of the sociological (and indeed psychological) significance of liminal affective technologies. He is raising questions concerning the relations

between *liminal affective technologies of different kinds* (in this case the novel, theatre and ritual); the relations between *experiences of liminality occasioned through liminal affective technologies and spontaneous liminal experiences of various kinds*; and the relations between *both kinds of liminal experience and the societal order of routine daily social life*.

We now move to add flesh to these introductory statements through a reading of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. As Szakolczai has already devoted a chapter to *The Magic Mountain* in the volume *Permanent Liminality and Modernity* (2017), it is fitting to begin by summarising his analysis before supplementing it with our own. First, however, a little context is required, since this is Szakolczai's second book on the novel.

Intermezzo: Thomas Mann's place in the unfolding of permanent liminality

The first of Szakolczai's two books on the novel, *Novels and the Sociology of the Contemporary* (2016), is a lengthy demonstration of the centrality of the novel to modern European culture and society. Part I discusses three concrete space/times (or 'chronotopes') relevant to the emergence of what is typically called the 'modern novel': the *Don Quixote* chronotope in Spain; the Rabelais chronotope in France; and the English chronotope. Essentially, Part I deals with a time period stretching from the first half of the 16th century, through to the birth of the realist novel in England during the first half of the 18th century, when modern capitalism gained momentum. In the midst of this, Cervantes (1547 [assumed]-1616) lived through the liminal experience – decisive for the future of European modernity – of the Anglo-Spanish war for European hegemony (1585 - 1604), and his *Don Quixote* is also often considered the first modern novel. His work had a notable precedent in the novels of Rabelais (1494 [assumed]-1553). Szakolczai follows Bakhtin (1984) in drawing attention to the liminal ingredient of the carnivalesque Lyon fairs – core to the emergence of a modern notion of economy – which entered a golden age whilst Rabelais was living in Lyon and writing works like *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*. Thirdly, the English chronotope deals with the birth of the modern realistic novel in 18th-century England at the hands of Defoe and Richardson, in tight connection with the theatrical plays of Lillo and innovations of Garrick. Szakolczai ties this modern novelistic realism

directly to realist theatre, the creation of the public sphere and the birth of modern political parties.

Part II of *Novels and the Sociology of the Contemporary* leads us up to and through the French Revolution. It discusses Burke (and the sublime more generally), Diderot and Lessing, the latter two of whom are characterised as trickster figures directly influenced by theatre. It is followed by Parts III and IV which discuss the writings of Goethe, Dickens and Dostoevsky. This trio wrote several of the modern novelistic masterpieces and were iconic not just in Germany, England and Russia but across the modern world. Their visions, as Szakolczai makes clear, are remarkably similar in that they reject Enlightenment premises and aim to renew their culture with less corrupt and more enduring values. They all wrote after the revolutionary birth of the modern world but before the devastations of the early 20th century, which would dampen any optimism concerning cultural renewal.

Permanent Liminality and Modernity takes up where the 2016 book ends, and addresses the novels of the new historical stage that Szakolczai identifies with the permanent liminality of unfettered fairground capitalism, alchemic technology and carnivalesque politics. It is this advanced stage of the theatricalisation of social life that, for Szakolczai, is the central theme of the novelists whose work he discusses: Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Hermann Broch, Hemito von Doderer, Mikhail Bulgakov, Karen Blixen and Béla Hamvas. The chronotope of central significance for these 20th Century developments was that of fin de siècle Vienna, associated with the liminal phase of the collapse of the Eastern Empire. The book is structured around World War I, with Part I ('Before the storm') dealing with Hofmannthal's and Rilke's pre-war writings, Part II dealing with Kafka as 'suspended in the in-between', and Part III dealing with the post World War I hypermodernity. It is in the first chapter of this third part (chapter seven) that we find Szakolczai's analysis of Thomas Mann.

In chapter seven Szakolczai discusses two novels: *Death in Venice* (1912) and *The Magic Mountain* (1924) which, he asserts, when read together 'deliver a coherent and still most valid, even untapped message' (2017: 139). Effectively, this is a message about the sinister and dangerous implications of liminal experiences which threaten to become permanent, thus combing melancholic meaninglessness with escalating chaotic violence. Szakolczai compares the two novels and also provides important

context, pointing, for instance, to the theme of melancholy in Mann's work, which is particularly obvious in these two novels, and to the influence of Dürer, particularly his engraving known as *Melancholia 1* from 1513/14. We will discuss only *The Magic Mountain*, the plot of which is disarmingly simple. It follows the adventures of a young German would-be engineer, Hans Castorp, as he begins a *spell* (ambiguity intended) of seven years in the Davos Sanatorium in Switzerland, initially to visit his cousin Joachim (a soldier on temporary sick leave), but soon as a tuberculosis patient himself. The book is set seven years before the outbreak of World War I and it ends with Castorp leaving the *Magic Mountain* to participate in the trench warfare back in *the flatland*. The novel thus details the personal transformations Castorp and his companions go through over the course of his stay at Davos, but in so doing, Thomas Mann uses figure of Castorp in the Sanatorium to seek a 'diagnosis' (and perhaps a 'cure') for the wider civilizational disquiets that erupted in the early twentieth century. Mann deploys the distinction and tension between the deathly spells of timeless enchantment and reverie cast in the *Magic Mountain* and the grim realities of *the flatland*, to unfold the character of these discontents.

There is no doubt that Szakolczai is correct that this novel deals profoundly with questions of liminality, and that the Davos Sanatorium itself serves as the main figure of liminality, and, more specifically, of the permanentization of liminality (the originally temporary suspension of ordinary life expands to *become* ordinary life). The Sanatorium is not liminal simply by virtue of the fact that it is isolated and situated 5000 feet above sea level, but also because it is an institution for treating and managing the liminal experience of chronic and life-threatening illness, with a specialism in tuberculosis. Since tuberculosis tends to afflict young people, Davos contains a high proportion of young people, most spending several years there in a kind of 'limbo', while many die there. Also, as will be discussed below, the Sanatorium is not just a medical institution, but serves in the novel as a sequestered space/time within which a range of liminal experiences are cultivated by means of a multiplicity of technologies and activities.

Building upon a significant amount of existing scholarship, Szakolczai makes a number of important points about how the *The Magic Mountain* is concerned with existential problems of liminality, and their solution. First, the book was initially

intended as a short story, conceived around the time that *Death in Venice* was coming to completion (1912), but in fact the process of writing it was interrupted by the outbreak of war, a distinctly liminal experience which drove Mann to a much longer and more serious project. Second, Szakolczai points to the theme of alchemy (a hermetic concern with transformation), which infuses both the content and the structure of the novel. He suggests that its seven chapters correspond to the ‘seven stages of alchemic initiation’ (2017: 140), and Hans Castorp (the novel’s hero) spends seven years in the Davos Sanatorium in Switzerland, likened in turn to the sleep of Snow White (with her seven dwarfs) and the Siebenschläfer (seven sleepers’) feast day. Likewise, the Sanatorium itself can be considered an ‘alchemic incubator’ for the production of psychosocial transformations (ibid.). Third, he connects the alchemic theme of change to the various and often substantial reflections on the nature of time within the novel, and particularly the notion of becoming subsumed in the ‘continuous present’ of an ‘ocean of time’ where the familiar dimensions of time are lost, along with any sense of a knowable duration or extent of time (an *adynton* experience). Fourth, this loss of familiar limits is applied to space as well as time, with a preoccupation with the loss of spatial limits in experiences of mountains which may lie ‘for six or seven months’ under snow (and Mann at several points compares this spatial experience of mountain snow to that of seaside beaches). Finally, these liminal themes are seen to sum up to a collective melancholy-inducing nihilism that ultimately undoes the powers of perception and thought. Faced with the impotence of Enlightenment rationality, and indeed its contribution to the evaporation of limits, this nihilism can be countered only by setting bounds to reason. Szakolczai takes from the Italian scholar Crescenzi (2011: 129–38), the idea that for Mann, the primary aim of education (and *The Magic Mountain* concerns the ‘education’, broadly understood, of its hero Hans Castorp) should be less about learning to think ‘rationally’ than about learning *how to see*: a learning that is deeply experiential and requires contact with emotions and barely conscious dreams, visions and other limit experiences. It is this ‘learning to see’ that offers the saving possibility of new limits.

In these ways, Szakolczai makes a compelling case that ‘Mann is clearly circling around the idea of liminality and characterises liminal conditions with two crucial terms: they are bewilderingly confused (*verwirrend*), and also generate a sense of helplessness (*Hilflosigkeit*)’ (2017: 143). These experiences of liminality are, in this

sense, negative and even, to use a term that Mann repeats several times, 'sinister'. Hans' cousin Joachim, for instance, resists the liminal lure of the Sanatorium, striving to keep his military discipline, preferring to risk his life by returning to the flatland despite not yet being cured of his tuberculosis.

Szakolczai's (seventh) chapter ends with detailed readings of the three final chapters of the novel (chapters 5-7). In dealing with chapter five, particular attention is drawn to the liminal nature of the Bioscope-Theatre (cinema) scene in *The Dance of Death*, and to the carnival scene in which Hans Castorp finally declares his feelings for Clavdia Chauchat (in *Walpurgis Night*). When dealing with chapter six, Szakolczai concentrates attention on the contrast between the two versions of modern Enlightenment rationalism embodied in the intellectual figures of Settembrini and Naphta, and Hans Castorp's life and death dream vision experienced after being trapped, almost fatally, in a mountain snow storm. Finally, from chapter seven Szakolczai gives great importance to the newly introduced character of Pieter Peeperkorn, Clavdia Chauchat's new lover. Szakolczai presents Peeperkorn as a singularly positive character who maintains balance in the sanatorium 'by the sheer force of his personality' (144). For him, this old-fashioned, aristocratic, retired coffee-plantation owner is a symbol of how far 'the human person [can] stand up against the diluting, levelling, destructive, nihilistic forces of the modern world, as embodied in the alchemical operations jointly performed by individualistic rationalism and the image-magic of movie theatre' (148). From this perspective, it is Peeperkorn's death that leads events first through the phase of melancholic paralysis and frenzied trivial pursuit described in the section entitled *The Great God Dumps*, and then into the phase of polarization characterised by escalating and contagious ill-temper, aggression and conflict described in *Hysterica Passio*.

Of course rumbling in the background of these phases of paralysis and polarization within the sanatorium is the outbreak of World War I, with which the novel comes to its famous culmination. Like most of the patients, Castorp, after seven long/short years, quickly leaves, in his case to join the fray and meet his fate in the horror of the trenches. And it is here that Szakolczai formulates most clearly what he takes to be Mann's message, not in the form of an answer, of course, but of 'a question mark, which is still our question today, as so far we not only failed to answer, but even

forgotten it' (149). Namely: 'since the First Great War... we – all of us in Europe, and increasingly in the entire, apocalyptically globalised world – are just wandering around, aimlessly, losing sense and purpose, as many Dantes lost in the forest, unable to handle Mann's final question: whether Love can re-emerge once, out of this 'universal feast of death' and 'extremity of fever'' (150).

The novel as initiatory rite: delirium and transformation

Our observations concerning the liminal nature of *The Magic Mountain* are intended as a supplement to Szokolczai's analysis. They are informed by the contrast introduced above concerning spontaneous liminal occasions and liminal occasions devised by means of liminal affective technologies.

A first issue to grapple with is the sense in which a novel might be considered a liminal 'technology' at all. Certainly reading a novel might produce 'affects' for the reader, but the conventional understanding is surely that a novel is merely a story designed to entertain. From this perspective it is far-fetched to compare literature to, for example, a rite of passage such as an initiation ritual. The theatre, perhaps, resembles a ritual a little more, even though the actors (who usually mediate the author's text, informed by the director) are also relatively more separated out from the audience. But when dealing with literature, the 'product' (a book) can be spatially and temporally separate both from the author who wrote it and from the reader who reads it, and so the whole 'technology', if we were to use that word, is implausibly dispersed. And yet we should pay attention when a thinker as profound as Gilles Deleuze insists that great literature has nothing to do with recounting 'one's memories and travels, one's loves and griefs, one's dreams and fantasies' but rather 'is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any livable or lived experience' (Deleuze, 1988: 1-2). Like Szokolczai – who stresses that the great novels are often inspired by a vision which they communicate – Deleuze also points to the importance of the visual or indeed visionary experience in literature, which 'does not consist in imagining or projecting an ego. Rather, it *attains* these visions, it *raises itself* to these becomings and powers' (Deleuze, 1998: 3, our emphasis). He goes as far as to identify literature with a certain

‘delirium’ (1998: 4). ‘Becoming’ and ‘delirium’ indeed suggest a close affinity with ritual and with rites of passage in particular, the liminal phases of which precisely induce delirium as a key part of the passage of psychosocial transformation (Greco and Stenner, 2017).

There is no doubt that *The Magic Mountain*, like most of Mann’s work, was indeed inspired by significant visions and dream experiences (not least, the famous snow-storm dream-vision at the end of chapter six in the novel). But we must also include amongst the liminal experiences that inspire a novel those that are at play in the actual process of writing. Mann himself expresses this very clearly in his autobiographical essay on *The Writing of the Magic Mountain*. The initial idea for the book, he writes, was a short and ‘humorous companion piece’ dealing with the same theme as *Death in Venice* (the triumph of delirious disorder over the forces of life). But this idea of a mere satire on the Sanatorium was soon swept up and carried away by the fact that the subject matter itself ‘tended to spread itself out and lose itself in shoreless realms of thought.’ (1999: 722). In short, *The Magic Mountain* became liminal as it ‘outgrew the limits its author had set’ (726). Mann goes on to insist that the ambition at play in a novel ‘must not come *before* the work itself’, rather the work itself ‘must bring it forth and compel the task to completion’.

If the novel began as little more than a jest, then it grew, much like Goethe’s *Faust*, into a ‘very serious jest’ (723). The initial and evidently superficial ‘jesting’ ambition was hatched following a visit to his wife between May and June 1912 when she was a patient at Davos. Mann devised the intent to write a humorous exposition of the moral dangers young people face in the ‘substitute existence’ of the Sanatorium milieu. One can easily imagine a certain jealousy motivating Mann as he observed his wife in this ‘charmed circle’ in which everything ‘including the conception of time, is thought of on a luxurious scale’ such that ‘after the first six months the young person has not a single idea left save flirtation and the thermometer’, rendering them ‘completely incapable of life in the flatland’ (721). But after the intervention of World War I, Mann was incapable of unfolding this simple jesting message. Indeed, he went through what he describes as a phase ‘of painful introspection’ concerning his own existence as an artist, which included writing *The Reflections of a Non-Political Man*. It was only by ‘living through my problem in deadly, human reality’, that he could

‘rise, as an artist, above it’ (723). Once through this liminal passage, Mann arrived at a new conception of art: “‘This very serious jest.’” It is a good definition of art, of all art, of *The Magic Mountain* as well’ (723). It seems that Mann was able to write the novel due to new insights about the political and existential aspects of his own activities as a writer, activities he could no longer take for granted, or treat as separate (and in ironic detachment) from what he had experienced at Davos. So much, then, for this ‘odd entertainment’ (724). But even more striking is the fact that, post-passage, Mann himself makes a direct identification of *The Magic Mountain* with a rite of passage. He could not be more explicit than the following: ‘It is this... that makes *The Magic Mountain* a novel of *initiation*’ (727). And lest this be missed, it is repeated on the following page: ‘In a word, the magic mountain is a variant on the shrine of the initiatory rites, a place of adventurous investigation into the mystery of life’ (728).

If we accept that *The Magic Mountain* is not just a ‘novel of initiation’ but in fact a ‘variant on the shrine of initiatory rites’ then we grasp the key to its thoroughly musical structure and content, especially if we are able to hear in that word ‘musical’ precisely the call of the muses of sacred Helicon, those who initiated Hesiod into the art of epic poetry. We grasp in the *nunc stans* or seamless whole of a present occasion the sense in which the novel must also be what Mann calls a ‘time romance’ (725) and that it must also say a great deal of ‘an alchemic, hermetic pedagogy, of *transubstantiation*’ (728). Furthermore, it is a time romance in multiple senses: it ‘seeks to present the inner significance of an epoch’ (i.e. a historical sense); it deals with time as ‘one of its themes’ (728) (i.e. in the sense of ‘content’); and it conveys both of these thanks to a musical structure composed of different tempos, refrains and its leitmotiv (i.e. in the sense of structure or form), in other words, the book ‘itself is the substance of that which it relates... its aim is always and consistently to *be* that of which it speaks’ (725). Mann describes the musical leitmotiv, for example, as ‘the magic formula that works both ways, and links the past with the future, the future with the past. The leitmotiv is the technique employed to preserve the inward unity and abiding presentness of the whole at each moment’ (720). If we take seriously this notion of *being that of which it speaks*, the novel is not just *about* initiatory rites, it *is* an initiatory rite: that of the author and that of the reader to come.

The idea that novels can form a liminal affective technology in a direct lineage with ritual is not limited to *The Magic Mountain*. Mann himself gratefully cites the argument of Howard Nemerov in *The Quester Hero: Myth as a Universal Symbol in the Works of Thomas Mann* to the effect that his own work is part of a great tradition of literature that is effectively universal and reaches back into folklore. Hans Castorp joins a long line of heroes – notably including Gawain, Galahad, Perceval and Faust - who Quest after the holy grail of wisdom, consecration, the elixir of life or the philosopher's stone by ranging heaven and hell to forge pacts with the unknown. The word 'passage' in 'rites of passage' designates the sense in which the Quester must *go through* an experience which forever changes them. Just as Mann himself needed to outgrow his limits to write his book, so Hans Castorp must overcome 'his inborn attraction to death' if he is to arrive 'at an understanding of a humanity that does not, indeed, rationalistically ignore death, nor scorn the dark, mysterious side of life, but takes account of it, without letting it get control of his mind' (726). Just as redemption presupposes knowledge of sin, so Hans Castorp 'must go through the deep experience of sickness and death to arrive at a higher sanity and health' (727).

If *The Magic Mountain* is a novel of initiation and hence quest, then it is because, having taken Mann through it, it takes us, or can take us, through precisely this passage. It is thus important, one more time, not to limit the issue of initiation to a theme within the content of the book, since then we would be dealing merely with a question of being 'entertained' by a 'Quest narrative'. As noted above, transformation is not just a topic in the book but also its very 'substance', and both in turn express the sense in which the novel can diagnose the historical significance of an epoch. Hans Castorp can transubstantiate *qua content* only because of the mutations that Thomas Mann experienced when he 'outgrew' his 'limits', and the novel could affect its readership in a comparable fashion only after the international tectonic shift of World War I: 'it needed the experiences that the author had in common with his countrymen: these he had betimes to let ripen within him, and then, at the favourable moment, as once before, to come forward with his bold production' (724).

The two horns: presentation and representation

The following excerpts from the novel are both from *The Fullness of Harmony* section of chapter seven, where Hans discovers the joys made possible by a newly acquired gramophone, and we, the reader, learn of some of Hans' favourite records. Both excerpts deal with musical instruments: the first a pipe within a dream induced in Hans by a French orchestral piece ('with all the apparatus of modern technique and shrewdly calculated to set the spirit a-dreaming' [p.646]); the second a bugle played within the opera *Carmen*, listened to by Hans upon awakening from that dream. To understand the musical magic of *The Magic Mountain*, we must hear their two very different sounds:

Excerpt 1. Here is the dream Hans Castorp dreamed: he lay on his back in a sunny, flower-starred meadow, with his head on a little knoll, one leg drawn up, the other flung over – and those were goat's legs crossed there before him. His fingers touched the stops of a little wooden pipe, which he played for the pure joy of it, his solitude on the meadow being complete. He held it to his lips, a reed pipe or little clarinet, and coaxed from it soothing head-tones, one after the other, just as they came, and yet in a pleasing sequence. The care-free piping rose to the deep-blue sky, and beneath the sky stretched the branching, wind-tossed boughs of single ash-trees and birches whose leaves twinkled in the sun. But his feckless, day-dreaming, half-melodious pipe was far from being the only voice in the solitude. The hum of insects in the sun-warmed air above the long grass, the sunshine itself, the soft wind, the swaying tree-tops, the twinkling leaves – all these gentle vibrations of the midsummery peace set themselves to his simple piping, to give it a changeful, ever surprisingly choice harmonic meaning. Sometimes the symphonic accompaniment would fade far off and be forgot. Then goat-legged Hans would blow stoutly away, and by the naïve monotony of his piping lure back Nature's subtly colourful, harmonious enchantment, until at length, after repeated intermission, she sweetly acceded. More and higher instruments came in rapidly, one after another, until all the previously lacking richness and volume were reached and sustained in a single fugitive moment that yet held all eternity in its consummate bliss. The young faun was joyous on his summer meadow. No "Justify thyself," was here; no challenge, no priestly court-martial upon one who strayed away and was forgotten of honour.

Forgetfulness held sway, a blessed hush, the innocence of those places where time is not” (p.646).

Excerpt 2. *One heard Carmen’s voice, a little brusque, yet warm, and very infectious in its folk-quality, saying she would dance before the sergeant; one heard the rattle of castanets. But in the same moment, from a distance, the blare of trumpets swelled out, bugles giving a military signal, at which sound the little sergeant starts up. “One moment, stop!” he cries, and pricks up his ears like a horse. Why? What was it then, Carmen asked; and he: “Dost thou not hear?” astonished that the signal did not enter into her soul as into his. “Carmen, ‘tis the retreat!” It is the trumpets from the garrison, giving the summons. “The hour draws nigh for our return,” says he, in operative language. But the gipsy girl cannot understand, nor does she wish to. So much the better, she says, half stupidly, half pertly; she needs no castanets, for here is music dropped from the sky. Music to dance by, tra-la, tra-la! He is beside himself. His own disappointment retreats before his need to make clear to her how matters stand, and how no love affair in the world can prevent obedience to this summons. How is it she cannot understand anything so fixed, so fundamental? “I must away, the signal summons me, to quarters!” he cries, in heavy heart. And now, hear Carmen! She is furious. Outraged to the depths of her soul, her voice is sheer betrayed and injured love – or she makes it sound so. “To quarters? The signal?” And her heart? Her faithful, loving heart, just then, in its weakness, yes, she admitted, in its weakness, about to while away an hour with him in dance and song? “Tan-ta-ra!” And in a fury of scorn she sets her curled hand to her lips and imitates the horns: “Taran-tara!” And that was enough to make the fool leap up on fire to be off! Good then, let him be off, away with him!*

Now that we have suggested that *The Magic Mountain* is a liminal affective technology, like ritual, we must observe that at the core of any such technology there is a distinctive liminal phenomenon: an ambiguity fundamental to any experience whatsoever. In the book *Liminality and Experience*, the argument is made that what is ostensibly the same experience (although, strictly, no experience can actually happen twice) can ‘always be taken in at least two very different ways’, crudely: as

‘presentation’ and as ‘representation’ (Stenner, 2017: 75). An example, modified from Alfred North Whitehead (1927: 84), is the sound of a horn. Taken as a ‘representation’ the sound serves as an informative signal of the adventures of entities in the spatially configured world-around-us. When we hear a car horn, for example, we unthinkingly locate the car and, if we are quick enough, we get out of the road. We stress that this applies to any sense experience, but particularly to the distance experiences derived from sight and sound. We routinely use these to rapidly situate local relations in the surrounding world the better to act. In this pre-linguistic representational mode, the hearing and seeing are, as it were, invisible: we hear the car *through* the horn and we see the pavement through the visual imagery at play in our consciousness. This representational mode is dominant within the daily life of mundane practical reality that Mann calls ‘the flatland’. In Excerpt 2, the military bugles serve as a signal to the sergeant, whose ears prick up like those of a horse. The signal calls him to the garrison from whence the sound came. It is to be acted upon at pain of court-martial: retreat.

In the presentational mode, by contrast, we relate differently to the sense experience: we *enjoy the sound of the horn as such*. We linger with reverie on its tonal qualities and timbre and on the emotions these evoke for us. In this mode, Carmen does not use the sound of the trumpet to locate the whereabouts of the instrument the better to coordinate her action towards the garrison: she holds her practical action in a timeless suspense the better to enhance her present enjoyment of what is passing: the better to dance. This difference is so great that the sergeant is ‘astonished’ that she cannot ‘understand anything so fixed’, and ‘that the signal did not enter into her soul as into his’. The sound, for Carmen, is no ‘transparent means of representation but an iridescent and expressive *presentation* to be lingered on for its own sake’ (Stenner, 2017: 76). As described in Excerpt 1, it is like Hans’ ‘little wooden pipe, which he played for the pure joy of it’. These are the enchanting experiences that Mann associates with the magic of the mountain. What applies to a simple wooden pipe applies also to an ‘instrument’ like a novel. When Mann writes that ‘the book itself is the substance of that which it relates’ he immediately adds that it ‘depicts the hermetic enchantment of its young hero within the timeless, and thus seeks to abrogate time itself by means of the technical device that attempts to give complete presentness at any given moment to the entire world of ideas that it comprises’ (725).

In short, the book *as such* is a ‘technical device’ for expressive *presentation* (aiming for ‘complete presentness’). In our terms, it serves as a liminal affective technology.

This technology, again to quote Mann himself, ‘employs the methods of the realistic novel, but actually it is not one’ (726). It ‘passes beyond realism’ because is not a device for faithfully depicting an existing state of affairs, but for summoning and shepherding the passage of an initiatory becoming (i.e. a *liminal* experience). Mann describes the passage of becoming that is fostered and enacted by these means as a ‘heightening process’ or ‘enhancement’ (*Steigerung*), and sometimes as an alchemical ‘transubstantiation’. If a loaf of bread is enhanced and rises to new heights in the baker’s oven, then so do Hans Castorp and his companions find themselves somehow *heightened* in the liminal incubator that is the isolated mountain Sanatorium of Davos: ‘in the hermetic, feverish atmosphere of the enchanted mountain, the ordinary stuff of which he is made undergoes a heightening process that makes him capable of adventures in sensual, moral, intellectual spheres he would never have dreamed of in the flatland’ (725). But, again, it is not simply that his is a story of a heightening, but ‘also as a narrative it is the heightening process itself’ (726). No less than the faun’s pipe, the narrative of *The Magic Mountain* is an enchanting and heightening *presentation*.

A horn which *presents* a new ‘world’ (as distinct from a horn which signals an element within a familiar one) functions, in no matter how minimal a sense, as a *portal* to that new world with all of its enchantments. As a portal, the sound of the horn is *devised* no less than the narrative of a novel (the musician, with hard-acquired technical skill, knows what they do with their no less carefully crafted instrument). But experiences that are devised by means of liminal affective technologies build upon, amplify and cultivate meaningful experiences of self-enjoyment which may also be, or may originally have been, *spontaneous*. We can be spontaneously transfixed by the song of a lark, or by the view from a snow-covered mountain, or by an expanse of sand on a beach, or by the grandeur of a cave, or by the splendour of a sunset, or by the scent of a strawberry, the tingle of a caress. From early childhood, we can also become absorbed in physical play, or captivated by the eyes of another, or engrossed in the reverie of a daydream, or an actual dream. Each of these experiences can be a portal through which we temporarily take leave of the mundane practical

world in which one must ‘justify thyself’, and taste the value, as it were, of a world-beyond that world (a kind of ‘stock-taking’ p. 651).

The more sophisticated liminal affective technologies are built out of such spontaneous experiences during which we become, for a time, strangers in a strange land. Put differently, these technologies do not leave such experiences of reverie to chance, but devise ways to reliably summon or ‘occasion’ them. Mann gives us a good sense of how liminal affective technologies ‘evolve’ when, in chapter seven, he describes the newly arrived gramophone as ‘the elegant product evolved by a tireless application of technical means to the muses own ends’ (636). Our prehistoric ancestors, for instance, chose stunning naturally occurring landscapes for their ritual activities, and in so doing they *built on* what was already there (in caves, on mountains, etc). They devised reliable ways of making sounds, creating images, and cultivating enjoyments that could be combined to maximal effect in the context of their rituals (which might involve dance, song and music, the wearing of masks, the decoration of the body, the use of intoxicants, etc). The implication is that there is always a zone of indiscernability between ‘spontaneous’ and ‘devised’ liminal experiences. This indiscernability is evident in Hans’ dream in Excerpt 1, where we see a delightful resonance between the ‘devised’ sounds he makes with his pipe, and the harmonious vibrations of a spontaneously responsive Nature. But we must not neglect that these technologies are no less built out of experiences which shock us away from the worlds of our daily-lives in negative and traumatic ways: experiences of illness, of violence, of death, of shame and humiliation. These too are spontaneous portals to a profound ‘sense of importance’ adhering to a glimpsed ‘world-beyond’. Indeed, it is the bitter-sweet combination of joyful spontaneity and anguishing pathos which tends to define the affectivity of the most potent of devised liminal experiences, such as that afforded by a sustained encounter with *The Magic Mountain*.

Liminal affective technologies in The Magic Mountain

If, as we have suggested, *The Magic Mountain* is itself such a technology, then as a story it is also packed with manifold examples of these technologies, and shows a preoccupation, not just with how they function, but with how they relate one to

another, and how they can backfire and become problematic, blocking, parodying and bodging our becomings rather than facilitating them. Hence, through the vehicle of Hans Castorp, Mann explores the liminal effects of cinema, of carnival, of séances, of music, of painting, of gambling, of absorption into medical science literature, of collective captivation by an inspiring ‘personality’, of romantic love and its ramifications, of hallucinations and dreams, of intellectual debate, of secret religious societies (notably, the Jesuits, as symbolized by Naphta, and the freemasons associated with Settembrini: ‘Not for nothing do Freemasonry and its rites play a role in *The Magic Mountain*, for Freemasonry is the direct descendent of initiatory rites’ p.728). Proper to the crisis concerning his own craft that the author needed to pass through in order to write it, *the Magic Mountain* is a thorough exploration of the nature of liminal affective technologies and their relations one to another, to spontaneous liminal experiences (both joyful and painful), and to the routines of the flatland.

The dream of Excerpt 1, as noted, features in the section called *The Fullness of Harmony* in which Hans takes control of a new device acquired for the patients by the Davos management: a state-of-the-art gramophone. This section follows *The Great God Dumps* which begins with Hofrat Behrens (the chief medic) announcing his observation that Hans is depressed: ‘Castorp, old cock, you’re bored. Chap-fallen, I see it everyday, disgust and ennui are written on your brow. You collapsed like a punctured tire – if some first-class entertainment doesn’t come along every day, you pull a face...’ (624-625). If a liminal affective technology produces a ‘heightening process’ or ‘enhancement’ which raises the spirit like a loaf in the oven, then this also carries the risk of the opposite effect: a sinking or rapid deflation. Indeed, throughout the novel, under the influence of a range of spontaneous and devised experiences of liminality, Hans had gone through a series of enchantments and disenchantments, elevations and deflations. With respect to the dynamics of romantic love, he had been enchanted with Clavdia Chauchat, who had left Davos the day after he revealed his love to her during an encounter afforded by the ritual ‘device’ of the Spring Carnival celebrations. She had returned many months later accompanied by the equally spell-binding ‘personality’ of Peter Peeperkorn, whose enchantments had burst the initially captivating bubble, not just of Clavdia, but also of the once-absorbing intellectual debate created and sustained by Settembrini and Naphta. Peeperkorn then dies,

Clavdia leaves for a second and final time, and Hans is left fully deflated with *The Great God Dumps*.

At this point in the novel, it was as if a demonic power had taken control of Hans, leading him ‘permanently and increasingly awry’ to the point where ‘all the uses of this world unitedly become flat’ (627). The section documents how this dead life was occupied by a series of dissatisfying crazes (each a failed and hence purely ‘theatricalised’ liminal affective technology). Some became obsessed with the mathematics of squaring the circle, or with other *idée fixe* such as the recycling of newspaper. There was a fad of amateur photography which ‘became a perfect mania, lasting weeks and months on end’ (627), followed by an ‘obsession’ for the ‘collecting of postage stamps’ (628), and then the drawing of ‘geometrical teasers which for a time consumed all the mental powers of the Berghof world (628), and then the playing of cards. While Settembrini holds forth on the precarious nature of world politics, ‘Hans Castorp went on playing patience – and gazing into the eye of the demon, whose unbridled sway he foresaw would come to an end in horror’ (635).

It is this phase of paralysis, in which souls are puffed up with diseased air, that comes to an end, or enters a new phase of ‘heightening’, with Hans’ encounter with the gramophone and its musical possibilities. As soon as he saw the device, Hans felt that ‘within him something was saying: “Hold on! This is an epoch. This thing was sent to me!”’ (639). He jealously took possession of the new acquisition, and would explore its wonders deep into the night. We have already encountered two of Hans’ favourite records: the unnamed French orchestral piece that sent him a-dreaming, and Carmen, which he played on awakening. Just before his dream he listened to a third: Aida. Radames, unlike Carmen’s sergeant José, does not renounce his lovely Aida, and forsakes Amneris’ saving love, along with the call to ‘justify himself’, preferring to be buried alive under the temple with his love intact. Aida manages to find a way to join him in the tomb to share his fate forever in one last intoxicating union, sung to the tune of Verdi’s famous aria. Hans is enraptured by the intoxication, and ‘what, finally, he felt, understood, and enjoyed, sitting there with folded hands, looking into the black slats of the jalousies whence it all issued, was the triumphant idealism of the music, of art, of the human spirit; the high and irrefragable power they had of shrouding with a veil of beauty the vulgar horror of actual fact’ (645). Two soon-to-be

rotting corpses in a cavern, wrapped in the song of Orpheus, come to symbolize the source and meaning of life.

It is this insight into the nature of art that infuses and pervades Mann's mountain with its magic. The message is further elaborated by Mann's discussion of the last of Hans' favourite records: that same *Lindentree* by Schubert that we find Hans singing to himself whilst facing the bitter blasts of the tempests of war on what was probably his last day on earth. This, Mann tells us on page 651, is the point in the novel when Hans becomes conscious of the 'meaningfulness' of his love and its object, love being, as we know, the final word of the novel. What did these songs mean to him? How did *Aida* and *Carmen* and *Am Brunnen vor dem Tore* reach beyond themselves and open a world of genuine emotional participation for and with Hans Castorp / Thomas Mann / us readers? We who know who Clavdia Chauchat really is and who have cousins like Joachim who resist the call of the wild in the name of the bugle call of duty, only and always to die. Why did Hans love these musical creations so? 'Let us put it thus: a conception which is of the spirit, and therefore significant, is so because it reaches beyond itself to become the expression and exponent of a larger conception, a whole world of feeling and sentiment, which, whether more or less completely, is mirrored in the first, and in this wise, accordingly, the degree of its significance measured. Further, the love felt for such a creation is in itself "significant": betraying something of the person who cherishes it, characterizing his relation to that broader world the conception bodies forth – which, consciously or unconsciously, he loves along with and in the thing itself' (651).

Conclusion

The Magic Mountain, like any work of art that functions as a liminal affective technology at its best, reaches beyond itself to express a larger conception, and in so doing expresses that very transformation, that very passage to a 'larger conception'. As a world within a world and between worlds, the novel betrays the becoming of the author it brought into existence, and it summons the becoming of the reader who cherishes it, and who is carried away on its misgiven promise of return.

The paradox of the novel – that, in a world 'turned upside down', its fictional form

should serve as the most reliable path out of the *impasse* of permanent liminality and into authenticity – mirrors the apparent paradox inherent in the critical activity of reflexive historical sociology. Franz Borkenau, Norber Elias, Michel Foucault, Lewis Mumford, Eric Voegelin and Max Weber – whose life-works are the objects of three of Szakolczai’s earlier books (1998; 2000; 2013b) – each questioned the realities most self-evident and valuable to the modern mentality: those described by science as truth, and operationalised through technology; those of subjectivity and personal identity; and those of (regulated) time and (enclosed) space, as moderns have come to experience them through institutions. Their critical activity has typically been perceived as a challenge to those pinnacles of ‘reality’ and, in some cases, characterised as nihilism. But this challenge, looked at another way, can in each case also be thought as an endeavour to *restore* a sense of reality and concreteness, previously lost to the abstraction of universalising norms and narratives (Szakolczai 2000: 215-6). Szakolczai’s two volumes on the novel prolong this critical and reflexive endeavour by aiming at – and striking through – the very heart of the nihilistic paradox: it is in fiction that our best hope lies of getting closer to ‘simply what there *is*’, to the gift of reality.

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