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Caricature: The Distorted Mirror
Caricature is a double thing; it is both drawing and idea, the drawing violent, the idea caustic and veiled. Charles Baudelaire, “On the Essence of Laughter,” The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays, trans Jonathan Mayne (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), p.151.

Living in a figural reality, where everything is not as it appears, is the art of caricature. Caricature presents for the viewer a concrete witness to the moments of history that they depict. They are an expression of the culture that creates them and also influence how people of that culture conducts itself. Social groups that would not normally meet, the we and they, are forced into an ‘artificial intercourse that causes the participants to revert to natural acts of primordial envy’. Caricature is a visual language and operates by deforming the exterior of a person in order to reveal aspects of his character. It favours the internal workings and private motivations more than the external public façade. It draws the viewers attention to the inauthenticity of representation while also striving for the possibility of an authentic representation. It is a revealer of truths. What is the meaning of truth? Is truth a matter of context? Can we know what the impact of a caricature was on a group of readers in the past? What can this generation attempt to understand about another generation’s politically charged images? How best should we of interpret them? Some images, within the genres of portrait photography or painting, are the direct representation of external properties. Caricature tries to reveal a hidden truth, unmask a deception, or mount a morality play by distorting the external properties of its subjects. It makes connections with devices like metaphor and metonymy to present a certain argument. Much like a dreamscape, caricatures play with incongruous images, visual puns, and inner irrational desires. We immerse ourselves in the distorted mirror of the caricature. The caricature is not only a distorted physiognomy it is also is distorted by our relationship to its context and its subject. They are reflections of culture, politics and humanity. In this way, can they be said to be reflections of ourselves?

The meaning of a caricature depends upon who is doing the reading. It is a creative process between the image and the reader. Reading caricatures is complex when dealing with images that are culturally or historically remote.

1 Banta, Martha,
Barbaric Intercourse,
Caricature and the Culture of Conduct, 1841-1936,
The University of Chicago Press, 2002 p. 4

‘One generation’s meat is another generation’s poison’ and one culture’s laugh is another culture’s call to arms. Caricature throughout history relies upon allusions that may be challenging to today’s public due to a lack of knowledge about the day-to-day cultural and political context in which they were created. The reader plays a part in the process of the systematic decoding of the caricature. To decipher information we must be able to relate to the method of coding. The social psychological conventions, paradigms or codes may inhibit comprehension. Conventions of image presentation also play a role in the reading of these iconic images. Every action, object, or image means something to someone somewhere. Gestures, costumes, physiognomy are all signs that have meaning beyond the object itself. Caricature speaks in a broad allegoric or archetypal language. Caricaturists exaggerate for the sake of revealing truth, as opposed to distorting in order to conceal the truth. This is a sophisticated language that needs decoding on many levels. Caricature deals in narrative visual suggestions to persuade the viewer into active engagement and question making. Political and social caricature may comment on particular individuals at its most benign or be potent moral satire when they address ideas about the nature of a culture or of the state of humanity.

A theoretical framework of caricature involves an understanding of the techniques of caricature itself, the caricaturist, his publishers and/or audience, and the historical epoch and social structure within which the caricaturist operates. A modernist reading of caricature reveals a rejection of tradition, encourag-
ing experimentation and freedom of expression. It supports the notion the we can change our environment with technology, knowledge and the pursuit of justice. A possible point of encounter with the caricature object, whether from a graphic illustration, film or theatre piece is that of a collaboration between the capitalist system and the economics of desire. The two exist in socially layered relationships and reveal a dichotomy of allegory. One reading of a political caricature could be the trauma of a betrayal of trust of government or society and the violent reaction to it. At times they are hysterical laughter in the face of an unbearable situation. At times this is a story of an unendurable truth and the ghastly will to obliterate it. These images are part of an intermediary scene that fulfills the desire to reveal the unconscious impulse. They are a projection of dissidence and regression on the political or social body. The subject is transformed, transmutated into an archetype. However, to read these images without context is to miss some of the potence of their poison.

A viewer moves in and out of an image and if there is engagement with the subject, is changed by the experience. Within the charged imagescape of a caricature one may be moving through the site of a morality play, a parable, an allegory. Physiognomies are distorted to identify and draw attention to the site of a wrong-doing, bodies are mutilated, exaggerated, manipulated. This is the domain of the grotesque. The object’s plasticity has been subjugated by the judgement of the caricaturist, who threatens the viewer with the power of his brush stroke.

These images are warning signs, like barbed wire fences or chastity belts for the mind. They are interacting with the viewers’ psyche and playing upon their fears.
In *How Images Think*, Ron Burnett says that the relationships of meaning and communication drive the process of interaction in image-worlds and the outcome can not be predicted. There is a hybridization working that frames how meaning circulates through the use and abuse of subject/object relationships. How does the caricaturist manipulate this relationship to his advantage? If the caricaturist is a propagandist, in the sense of using rhetorical persuasion, the image-worlds are dangerous ground for passive meandering. Using rhetorical persuasion is a way to communicate a point of view through reason rather than emotion. If the caricaturist is deliberately attempting to directly or indirectly persuade people to think in a desired way that benefits the persuader, is this cause for censorship?

Caricature is derived from the Italian verb *caricare*, which means *to load* or *to surcharge* as with exaggeration. The verb *caricare* is a source for the noun caricature but may also have had some influence from *carattere* which in Italian means *character*, or from *cara* which in Spanish means *face*. The point of departure for most caricatures is the face. The word cartoon on the other hand is derived from the Italian *cartone* meaning paper. Traditional practitioners of cartooning work to capture the essence of an image and simplify it, while caricaturists appear to make it more sophisticated. Historically, the term caricature, in the sense of a portrait, reveals features of the sitter that are exaggerated to the point of distortion, yet it is precisely by means of this distortion that a striking impression of fidelity is con-
veyed. The most sophisticated portraits contain traces of caricature, and this technique enables the artist to grasp the perfect deformity and reveal the very essence of a personality. The caricature is more true to life than reality itself.

**The Cognitive Power of Visual Rhetoric**

The caricature is a means of persuasion. Aristotle defined rhetoric as the art of finding, in any given case, the available means of persuasion. The success of the persuasive effort depends on the disposition of the audience. To persuade others, arguments are constructed and, to be effective, they have to take into account the purpose of the communication, what the message is, who it is addressing and, where and how it will be delivered.

1. satirical allusions are implicit arguments that must be “decoded” by the listener or reader;
2. often, allusions can be understood at more than one level, depending upon the sophistication of the audience;
3. for an allusion to be fully successful it may not contain elements that appear to contradict the satirist's central thrust;
4. for an allusion to be at all successful its surface meaning must be comprehended by the audience, even if details of interpretation are missed; and
5. some allusions are “richer” and more apt than others, even though we may simultaneously hold several allusions in our mind with respect to the same object.

The caricaturist’s repertoire contains visual devices that alter the usual meanings or denotations of signs, such as outrageous juxtaposition, exaggeratory hyperbole to create emphasis, metonymic associations with one idea or person with another thing or concept, and visual puns, in addition to analogy, allusion and metaphor.

**Pictorial Metaphor and Allusion**

A pictorial metaphor allows the caricaturist to work with intangible or abstract concepts in concrete ways. A caricaturist may imbue his image with properties not normally associated with that image in order to get his point across. Pictorial metaphor is distinct from linguistic metaphor in that it can make use of the mechanism of a fusion of images in order to combine their various properties and make metaphorical claims. These metaphors can work simultaneously at several different levels. Deciphering visual metaphors is based on cognition and cultural codes. If the pictorial material fails to evoke or connote any connection in the mind of the audience, it is because it is not part of any of their cultural models. Contemporary audiences will read into the allusion different meanings, depending both upon what is triggered and the knowledge of the historical context of the work.

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2 Ibid.
3 http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/#4.1
Getting the Joke or Falling Flat

It is critical for the viewer of the caricature to ‘get the joke’, to be able to decode the satirical allusion. Contemporary political and cultural satirists are more likely to take their references from current mainstream media than from such traditional sources as philosophy, the Bible, Greek mythology, and Shakespeare. Intellectual references lend spice to political satire, but are misunderstood by the masses. Topical references are more popular but only at the cost of making such satire as skits and political cartoons appear dated in a short time.5

Metaphor is sometimes used as a generic term that encompasses all other figures of speech. Caricature is overflowing in visual analogues to these figures of speech. They have the potential to be a very complex method of connection and coding Images. It is by defining or characterizing an object in a way not meant to be taken literally that the power of the image works. Like a metaphor, ‘allusion can have a power to enlighten by creating a coherent pattern that is imposed upon a series of otherwise rather disjointed observations6. The 1970s comic routine by David Frye Richard Nixon as Superstar is an example of contextual knowledge aiding in the deciphering of a caricature.

The allusion to Nixon as Pinocchio works on more than one level. Nixon was perceived by many as physically stiff (wooden) in his gestures, a cold personality who very much wanted to be thought of as just one of the guys (human). Enemies of Nixon (the routine is pre-Watergate) certainly regarded him as a liar. Moreover, close students of Nixon’s career were aware of the role of Murray Chotiner as the mastermind (puppet maker) of Nixon’s early political career. However, only the most highly sophisticated members of the audience would be able to recognize the last similarity between Nixon and Pinocchio 7.

Caricature can quite easily be an allegory or emblematic drawing, whose purpose is not to make us laugh, but to make us think. What the form usually implies is some degree of fantasy or exaggeration to place it in the realm of a popular idiom. This last point is crucial. There is plenty of evidence to show that one alternative definition of caricature is to be found, not by examining any particular manner or method of persuasion the artist happens to adopt, but by trying to discover what kind of audience he has in mind when he is coding his caricatures.

5 Ibid, p 9
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid, p 7
Elements of caricature appear in ancient and medieval art. Satirical caricature and deformations of character in mime, dramatic performance, tapestries, sculpture and vase painting are older than graphic caricature. In the sense of a drawing intended for publication and comment on political, social, or religious conditions it rose as a minor art form in the seventeenth century. Charles Philipon began the first comic weekly, *La Caricature* in France in 1830. Philipon published many artists in his weekly paper including Honore Daumier, who executed wicked social satires of the most important French politicians during the July Monarchy.

Daumier was, of course, the great master of social comedy with or without political content. His series of affectionate if disenchanted comments on married life, the theatre, the courts, concierges, musicians, painters, bluestockings, bathhouses, and children constitute as full a report on Paris in his time as Rembrandt’s drawings were for 17th-century Amsterdam. [...] His often untidy line and knowingly casual accents of tone produced (at will) sensations of chill weather, of ecstasies of gluttony, of juvenile pride, or of legal craftiness.

By breaking conventions, using distortions and incongruity and expressing his political convictions with a sense of moral urgency, Daumier developed caricature into a serious art form. In France in 1863 Charles Baudelaire wrote three essays on caricature, ‘On the Essence of Laughter’, ‘Some French Caricaturists’, and ‘Some Foreign Caricaturists’, these essays are compiled in ‘The Painter of Modern Life’.

Baudelaire divided caricature into two types: i). *the significative comic* who parodied human behavior in polite society whose reliance was on mere observation of social facts, who is in effect honouring, instead of challenging the status quo, and; ii). *the absolute comic*, who is driven by the grotesque, revealing a malicious intent, who relied upon the hysterical laughter, that is more interesting, and makes a stronger point. ‘He locates its origin in what he calls satanic laughter, or the feeling of superiority one gets when laughing at the misfortune of others.’

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10 Swain, p 9


Caricaturists had a strong journalistic voice in the 1800s and governments were often wary of their power. Honore Daumier, Baudelaire’s favorite print maker, was thrown in jail for his etching *Gargantua*, a reference to Francois Rabelais’ series of grotesque stories called, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532). This caricature portrays France’s King Louis-Philippe as a ravenous enthroned monster, who is devouring all of the food provided by the National Assembly while a group of starving citizens looks on. Caricature, a key tool of allegory, is linked to the 19th century’s obsession with physiognomy, the interpretation of outward appearance, especially the features of the face, to discover a person’s predominant temper and character. Baudelaire wrote about caricature in an attempt to create a respect for it among the literati equal to its popular influence in the papers and magazines of the times. The ephemeral nature of printing lends to this disregard as an art form. Its topicality, the cheapness of materials and rapidity of production added to its popularity, and one needn’t even know how to read to enjoy the images. He wanted it to be seen as a serious art in the same way that painting was.
For Baudelaire exaggeration reveals what lies beneath the surface of society. It needs to be exposed so that the ‘darker workings of human nature can be dealt with’ \(^{15}\). He was fascinated by caricature and viewed human types as allegorical figures full of the experience of modern times. They are a pictorial shorthand, of symbolic meaning and moral value, a fugitive art capable of recording the events of modern life \(^{16}\). ‘The modern city is the space of the comic, a kind of caricature, presenting the \textit{flâneur}, like the laugh, with an image of his own dualism, self-ignorance, and otherness’ \(^{17}\). This idea that one’s experience of life, of existing in a place and contributing to the allegory of a culture invests the idea of modernity with a give and take. If you are both the laugh and the object of laughter you prevent the ‘subjective construction and appropriation of the world’ that is referred to as modernism. ‘Comic art reflects what Walter Benjamin later defined as Baudelairean allegory, at once representing and revealing the alienation of modern experience’ \(^{18}\).

For Baudelaire the caricature and the grotesque are not only a visual phenomenon but one of allegory, forms of endless combinations and implausible hybrids. It might be possible, as Walter Benjamin suggested after Baudelaire, that allegory could take over the role of abstract thought \(^{19}\). An allegory is a narrative which has both a literal meaning and a representative one. There are two main types of allegory: i). the historical or political, in which historical persons and events are referred to; and; ii). the allegory of ideas, in which abstract concepts and the story has a didactic purpose. Baudelaire expressed his experience of the city in allegory. In \textit{Le Cygne}, he allegorizes the \textit{flâneur} of Paris as a swan,

\begin{quote}
As Paris changes, my melancholy deepens. The new palaces, covered by scaffolding and surrounded by blocks of stone, overlook the old suburbs that are being torn down to pave wide, utilitarian avenues. The new city’s coils stranggle memory. As I stand gazing at the everyday activity surrounding the Louvre, I have an oppressive vision – my frenzied swan’s desperation is the condition of the multiplying exiles on this globe.
\end{quote}

Walter Benjamin applies Marx’s \textit{Kapital} to the idea that allegory can play a contemporary role in one’s experience of modern life. This theory states that the elevation of a market value onto the sole measure of worth reduces a commodity to nothing but a sign - the sign of what it will sell for. Complicit in this game, controlled by the whims of the market, things relate to their actual worth as arbitrarily as a frenzied swan’s desperation to a city dweller’s subjection to the industrial age. ‘Emblems
make an unexpected return to the historical stage in the form of commodities which, as Marx had warned, "(abound) in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties". Allegory, Benjamin argues, is exactly the right mode for an age of commodities. The ideal public in a consumer society consists of passive consumers satiated by their consumption of goods and services and their expression of themselves through objects, giving them the illusion of power. People’s desires are in charge in this environment. They are driven by desire.

"The objects and figures that inhabit the arcades, gamblers, whores, mirrors, dust, wax figures, are to Benjamin emblems, and their interactions generate meanings, allegorical meanings that do not need the intrusion of theory. Along the same lines, fragments of text taken from the past and placed in the charged field of the historical present are capable of behaving much as the elements of a surrealist image do, interacting spontaneously to give off political energy. In so doing the fragments constitute the dialectical image, dialectical movement frozen for a moment, open for inspection, dialectics at a standstill: “Only dialectical images are genuine images.”"

Dialectics is based around three or four basic metaphysical concepts:

i). everything is transient and finite, existing in the medium of time,
ii). everything is made out of opposing forces/opposing sides,
iii). gradual changes lead to turning points, where one force overcomes the other,
iv). change moves in spirals not circles.

**The Allegory of Alfred Jarry and Ubu Roi**

Ubu Roi written by Alfred Jarry incited riots and scandal when it was first performed in the Theatre de l’Oeuvre in Paris in 1896. It is described as a subversive anarchic theatrical experience. The play tells the farcical story of a grotesque figure named Père Ubu, an officer of the King of Poland. Coerced and abetted by his wife, Mère Ubu, Père Ubu kills the King and claims the throne. Having amassed a great fortune by executing his subjects and seizing their property, he is finally driven out by the Whole Russian Army and flees across Europe.

The caricature of Père Ubu was for Alfred Jarry "the symbol of all the ugliness and mediocrity he already saw in the world"; and he in turn became the inspiration for Père Ubu. The figure of Père Ubu was to be a potent one for Jarry, who became obsessed by his creation, to the point that he began to imitate him, adopting an odd way of speaking, referring to himself as Père Ubu and behaving in a highly eccentric, Ubuesque manner [...] "talking about things that are understandable only weighs down the mind and falsifies the memory, but the absurd exercises the mind and makes the memory work". 23.
Allegory exists in the realm of the other, from the Greek allos, and refers continually to otherness. Allegory requires a double reading, a literal and symbolic one. Proposing two dissimilar meanings with a single expression, allegory is continually different from itself.

Allegory is a discourse that is first presented under a proper meaning, which appears to be something completely other than what one needs to convey, and that nonetheless only serves as a comparison to make clear another meaning that one doesn’t express...in allegory, all the words have first to figural meaning; that is all the words of an allegorical phrase or discourse first form a literal meaning that in not the meaning one intends it to convey - Cesar Chesnau Du Marsais (1676 to 1756) 24

Allegory, in other words, gives way to experience in a fashion that is a typically modern one and can be applied to one’s life of engagement with our culture and with the way we experience images, especially those loaded with contextual references from the past. The image-world is made up of many layers that may be evidence of a living archaeology. Everything about a work of art is contrived to force us to perceive it as a unique object occupying one place and having unusually integral properties of material, technique, form and significance. Our habit of meeting it in a museum or on a stage or in a concert hall, where it bids for our attention with the illusion that it is a single point in space, time, and feeling, further masks the historical reality of every work of art. That reality is totally different from the illusion of uniqueness.

Historically, every work of art is a fragment of some larger unit, and every work of art is a bundle of components of different ages, intricately related to many other works of art, both old and new, by a network of incoming and outgoing influences. These larger units, these bundles of components, and these interrelations across time and space, constitute the study of historical style which is also called stylistic analysis 25.

A possible definition of the grotesque via Baudelaire, is one of a turn of events, whether they be time or tragedy, when one signifying system is supplanted by another. This ‘substitution’ or paradigm shift causes the original serious meaning of the original system to fall away. This brings about the laughter that is a diagnostic symptom of the grotesque 26.

**Definition of a Caricaturist**

A caricaturist is “a man who closes his heart against the sensibilities of human nature [he] insults inferiority of mind and exposes defects of body [he] aggravates what is already hideous and blackens what before was sufficiently dark”. (Grofman p 14)
Looking at the Dadaist caricatures of John Heartfield, immediately one addresses the historical and cultural context of the images. The movement of images from their location in geography and time to our present moment perception of them is rather like the light we perceive from a star four light years away. They are imbued with political satire and violence. They are almost overwhelming. Would these symbols mean something else if one was in another culture? Can one be overwhelmed by images? It depends on personal history and identification. Might it depend on proximity? A personal identification with the images, perhaps? Does the printed image have more power over the digital image? The printed image, like the printed word is a hard copy. The digital image, referring to film and video projections, are not stationary. They replace themselves at 24 to 50 frames per second depending on which format is used to view them. These images are static and were used in print design. Where digital images on a television screen are transitory, the printed image holds one’s attention longer asking for longer engagement, a different intellect and therefore a discourse based in the typographic realm.


* Neil Postman in Amusing Ourselves to Death, Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business, Pengkap, 1985, posits that the epistemology created by television is not only inferior to a print-based epistemology but is dangerous and absurd.


26 Swain, V., p 16
Laughing About Hitler All the Way to the Bank

Parody is derivative and is meant as a criticism of its subject, which recognizably copies the style of a known personality or their work to communicate a particular message or point of view to the public. It has been a long-standing method of dissent to parody politicians, cultural icons, symbols of power, public figures and celebrities. A parody exists when one creates, for satirical effect, a work of art that imitates another piece of work, literature, music or artwork. The Greek roots of the word are par, which can mean beside, counter, or against and ody which refers to song, as in an ode. The original Greek word parodia has sometimes been taken to mean counter-song, as in an imitation that is set against the original. Often they mock the physical characteristics of their subject but also the essential moral character as well. Parody is a frequent ingredient in caricature.

The metaphor of images as windows onto and into worlds that could not otherwise be seen has remained very powerful even in the digital age. Yet, what does this window depict? The anonymity of the landscape and location is as important as the image itself. Perhaps, images provide people with the very plasticity that the act of looking at a scene cannot supply 27.

Through the different kinds of caricature, simple and complex or, significant and absolute, and their techniques of exaggeration, conjuration and accentuation we can understand what is pictorially distinct about how the caricature operates through the pictorial means. Sigmund Freud open up a discussion of caricature through the unmasking of ugliness, 28

*If what is ugly is concealed, it must be uncovered in the light of a comic way of looking at things: if it is noticed only a little scarcely at all, it must be brought forward and made obvious, so that lies clear and open to the light of day.* 29

Freud also contends that caricature can produce ugliness independently of how the object looks in reality. In his definition, caricature is obtained by two separate means, one of revealing what is hidden, the other of conjuration or exaggeration.

“Caricature...brings about degradation by emphasizing in the general impression given by the exalted object a single trait which is comic in itself but was bound to be overlooked.” and on the other “if a comic trait of this kind that has been overlooked is lacking in reality, a caricature will unhesitatingly create it by exaggerating one that is not comic in itself” 30

When the exaggeration goes too far it results not in degradation or satire, but in a transformation like that of Charlie Chaplin’s character in *The Great Dictator*.


29 Ibid.

30 Ibid 138
The Power of Political Caricature

In contrast to John Heartfield’s polemic ferocity and Daumier’s satire is Thomas Nast an American caricaturist working in New York City. Before there was The Colbert Report, John Stewart and Saturday Night Live there was Thomas Nast, whose devastating caricatures in Harper’s Weekly lead to indictment, conviction and prison sentence of New York State Senator William ‘Boss’ Tweed. Nast turned out one acidic cartoon after another in an aggressive campaign to take down the city’s notorious criminal politician.\(^{31}\)

The symbols used in this caricature and the one on the upper left use culturally specific signs and symbols to exaggerate their claims. This style of satire includes a text based caption that adds to the signifying and encoding of the image. Umberto Eco defines semiotics as, the discipline of studying everything which can be used in order to lie, in his book, A Theory of Semiotics. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth. In fact, it cannot be used to tell at all. He also says ‘Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else’. Any piece of information can be used to distort the meaning.\(^{32}\)

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\(^{31}\) Boss Tweed, When the King of New York was the King of Corruption, New York Times Review of Books, 2005

\(^{32}\) Eco, Umberto, A Theory of Semiotics, Indiana University Press, 1979, p 7
The Distorted Mirror Reflects What is in Front of it

Our whole purpose was to integrate objects from the world of machines and industry in the world of art. Our typographical collages or montages set out to achieve this by imposing, on something which could only be produced by hand, the appearances of something that had been entirely composed by a machine; in an imaginative composition, we used to bring together elements borrowed from books, newspapers, posters, or leaflets, in an arrangement that no machine could yet compose 28.

The disparate elements, scraps of text and photographs, are collaged on the surface, but still remain legible. These placements signify a language by their contrast, incongruity and relationships, but not by virtue of a grammatical role in a sentence. There is arrangement and composition of the parts, and these arrangements signify a patterning of images rather than the constructions of grammar.

Their layers are like the archaeological image-world of caricature. Caricature takes place within symbolic representations of signs and the context of the signs and of our place within culture. Reading these complex images out of place and time reveals more than hidden truths about the nature of the artist that made them, his audience and subject. Reaching back into history or across geographic borders, these images reflect scenes of recognition and patterns and similarities. Mirrors, even distorting mirrors, reflect only what is placed before them. If the funhouse image of a culture’s caricature shares something with another culture then they must both share something in order to have a common reflection. What traits do they share, and what are the consequences of this commonality?

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