

## The Semiotics of theatre décor: Reading the Communicative implications of the HIV Red Ribbon in Emelda Samba's *The Boomerang* (2004)

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### Abstract

Considered as a visual representation of a play, theatre décor or scenery communicates to the audience in a comparative manner as verbal or auditory signs. In the process of communication, visual signs have the power of permitting multiple interpretations by the audience. Signs used in normal life are interpreted differently when integrated in a performance. In theatre, ordinary logos are used to transmit messages to the audience purely as visual signs which are more recognizable and approachable. In this paper, focus is on the HIV Red ribbon used as the main décor in the performance of *The Boomerang* (2004). Using visual semiotics, the interpretation shows that visual signs are more effective in communication than verbal signs. Their creation and evaluation takes into account the context of utilization as well as the audience's horizon of expectations. In this perspective, semiotics and communication permit four guidelines to be highlighted - accuracy, cultural relevance, comprehensibility and narrativity – as principles to facilitate the creation and evaluation of visual signs in theatre.

**Keywords:** multimodal communication, visual communication, semiotics, décor/scenery, HIV Red Ribbon, theatre1.

### Introduction

Communication is the process of transferring information from one source to another. It is commonly considered as the imparting or interchange of thoughts, opinions, or information by speech, writing, or signs. Communication is perceived as a two-way process in which there is an exchange and progression of thoughts, feelings or ideas towards a mutually accepted goal or direction. It can also be considered as a process whereby information is encoded and imparted by a sender to a receiver via a channel/medium. In theatre, this two-way process is transformed into a more complicated system in which the receiver decodes the message and gives the sender a feedback.

For communication to be effective, it is required that all parties involved in the scheme have an area of communicative commonality. There are auditory means such as speaking, singing and sometimes tone of voice, and nonverbal; physical means such as body language, sign language, paralanguage, touch, eye contact and by using writing all categorised under verbal, written and non-verbal communication which operate in this area of commonality. Effective communication within this framework requires a vast repertoire of skills in intrapersonal and interpersonal processing like listening, observing, speaking, questioning, analysing, and evaluating. If these processes are used, it is noticed

that they developmentally transfer to all areas of life: home, school, community, work, and beyond. It is through communication that collaboration and cooperation occur.

In theatre, communication as a process of information transmission is classified in two broad categories: verbal and non-verbal or visual. Studies have elaborated on these signs in theatre and shown their capacities to serve as transmitters in the process of communication (Peirce 1955, Carlson 1990, Alter 1990, Elam 2002, Kress 2002, Besbes 2007, Helbo 1981, Helbo et al. 1991, Ubersfeld 1999). This present study looks at visual communication in theatre with particular attention to stage decor used in *The Boomerang*, a 2004 musical play written and directed by Emelda Ngufor Samba in Yaoundé, Cameroon. The interplay of signs in theatre does not go without hindrances to their understanding. How can visual signs effectively communicate to the audience? When used in the performance, how universal can the red ribbon remain? To answer these questions, visual semiotics is applied in this paper as a guiding theory.

### **Visual semiotics and communication**

Visual semiotics or signs are those designed with a visual signifier. This signifier can be seen, rather than heard. The area of visual semiotics is often combined with visual communication to foster interpretation and understanding. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is filled with visual signs in almost every area of life. These visual media are more available, less expensive, and almost impossible to censor. With the dawn of new media, visual media is increasingly being used for entertainment, education and communication. The domain of visual semiotics and communication can be applied on art forms, logos, maps, diagrams, pictographs, and other visual artefacts and symbols.

According to Hill (2009), visual communication studies are distinct from other theories of communication not so much by their theoretical background or methodology as by their targets of analysis (p.1002). Semiotics is considered as the first theory that falls under visual and multimodal communication. In its conception and understanding, any image can be viewed as a sign. The sign understood here as something that stands in for and elicits in the viewer's mind an object, person or concept separate from the sign itself. Visual semiotics is considered as a teaser, debunking the complex and more subtle meanings represented by the sign. A sign, according to Eco is anything that generates and conveys meaning (1976). These two continuums (signifier/signified) function inseparably in the process of communicating with the viewer as emphasised by Peirce stating that "nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" (1958, p.172). This leads to the understanding that visual media can be looked at from three positions: production of the image, the image itself and the audience that receives it which in visual and multimodal communication, is interpreted from four structures; colour, perspective, framing and composition.

Gillian Rose (2012) holds that the interpretation of an image is drawn from three sites "the site(s) of production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences" (p.19). From this, emanates three critical points to contribute in the understanding of visual images: technological, compositional and social. Technological refers to visual technology as any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil paintings to television and the internet. Visual technological is relevant in the understanding of how an image is made, how it travels and how it is displayed.

Compositionality on its part, refers the specific material qualities of an image or visual object like content, colour and spatial organisation. As for the social component of the image, Rose (2012) points to the range of economic, social and political relations,

institutions and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used. This third modality is that which is of interest in this paper as its composition is the most important factors in understanding visual images. Though the image understudied in this paper is not a photograph as embedded in Rose's description of the social modality, the backdrop painting is viewed and understood as a visual representation of a social phenomenon since "visual images are always practised in particular ways, and different practices are often associated with different kinds of images in different kinds of spaces" (2012, p.31). This implies, the HIV Red Ribbon in a health campaign poster or advert will not have the same effect on the audience as it will in a theatre performance. Commenting on this, Rose holds that a "cinema, a television in a living room and a canvas in a modern art gallery do not invite the same ways of seeing" (2012, p.31). The appearing of the HIV Red Ribbon in a theatre hall as part of the décor, mediates the visual effects which spectators have in a different way as it would do in a poster or campaign.

The ways therefore in which viewers respond to visual signs are influenced by visual elements that draw on established cultural codes, values, and icons. The analysis of these cultural codes, values and icons is an essential method and key to understand all types of communication having the latent rules that facilitate sign production and interpretive response (Mick, 1986). Codes entail a process of encoding and decoding which takes into consideration, the cultural baggage of the emitters and receivers. Though the signs functioning in the system of codes can be studied separately, a sign can actually only be understood in the particular context of its utilisation, and in relation to other signs. The rhetoric of the sign will evoke the denotative and connotative functions. The denotative function refers to the signs content while the connotative function reveals the values and emotions triggered on the viewer. In this way, the denotation of a mother and a child is simply two human beings along with other concrete objects in the frame while the connotation of the same representation may portray aspects of motherhood, protectiveness, anxiety or comfort. This implies, the representation of the HIV Red Ribbon might just be seen as a red line drawn with curves while its connotation will point to a more complex understanding.

Visual semiotics as applied in this paper is dedicated to the study and interpretation of images. It is approached from the viewpoint of visual and multimodal communication. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), there are several ways visual communication can be interpreted. An image for instance, can be interpreted from the point of representation and interaction. Representational and interactional pictures deliver different messages. In representational images, the participant is representing him/herself; whereas in interactional images, the participant plays a more interactive role and seeks to communicate with the viewer (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Images in general involve two types of participants: represented participants, who are usually people, places, or other things depicted in the pictures; and interactive participants, who communicate with other people. The content of images has three types of relations: those between the participants present, those between interactive and represented participants, and those between the interactive participants of the given image. Interaction occurs between the producer and the viewer of the image (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).

This paper applies the principle of multimodality from the standpoint that it "describes approaches that understand communication and representation to be more than about language, and which attend to the full range of communication forms people use – image, gesture, gaze, posture, and so on – and the relationships between them" (Jewitt, 2009, p.14). Viewing theatre décor from the communicative perspective is not out of place since

it is made of visual media. Décor has always been a mode of communication viewed as visual and multimodal. In line with this, Stöckl (2004) holds that communication has essentially always been multimodal. This causes the décor to be considered under the representation axis of visual semiotics. In this light, visual semiotics describes the relationship between the participants and the viewer as illustrated in the image of the HIV Red Ribon, which was used a décor in the performances of *The Boomerang* in 2004.

### **Data**

As mentioned earlier, the data used for analysis in this paper is the HIV Red Ribon used as main decor in the performances of *The Boomerang*. The play which is on HIV/AIDS was written and directed by Emelda Ngufor Samba in 2004. It was produced by the Fobang Mundi Theatre for Social Change with a stage recording for TV broadcasting by Kwasen Ngwangwa. The dramatic or context definition of the title points to something that caused an unexpected harm to the person at the origin. That is, what goes around comes back around.

*The Boomerang* presents the story of a man, Pa Ngong who has a son, Frank studying in the city. The son has a girl friend, Bih, also a university student with whom they are planning to get married. When the story begins, Frank has just discovered that he is HIV positive and deliberately decides to contaminate Bih. Bih on her turn goes for her research in Frank's village and coincidentally comes across Pa Ngong who assists her in footing her bills. The result is that they finally have sex without any condoms. Pa Ngong is infected and on his turn infects Titi, a village Belle. A few years after, Pa Ngong dies of HIV/AIDS, and Bih accompanies Frank for the burial. At the burial, Bih on hearing the name Pa Ngong asks for his picture, and discovers that she had dated her boyfriend's father. With this tragic discovery, Frank decides to reveal the secret he has been keeping for quite a long time. This is the Boomerang effect: what goes around comes back around. Little did Frank know that the girl he had infected was going to infect his father who would later infect his mother. Because of his evil intentions, he has killed his entire family. The pertinent question is to know what Bih and the entire community will do to Frank for this abominable act. Through the interaction of a chorus representing the community, the fight against stigma and hate is initiated and this prevents Frank from committing suicide and Bih forgives him at last. From this, it is envisaged that the representation of HIV, the boomerang effect and the fight against stigma is captured on the decor or scenery.

### **Theatre décor or scenery**

The history of scene design moves back and forth between open theatre spaces with little scenic definition and theatres or productions where the scenic environment is of utmost importance to the presentation of the drama. In theatre, décor is used synonymously as scenery. It refers to the stage decoration or scenery or setting in a theatrical performance and ranges from a single chair to an elaborated re-created street. The use of scenery in theatre started in the pre-renaissance period where the rear wall of the theatre was considered as the scenery. Occasionally, scenic elements were introduced. The notion of scenery then grew and its understanding today sprung from the renaissance period. It was considered as the planes of architecture on which actions are realised in space, taking into account the distortions necessitated by theatre perspective. With the rise of theatre designers like Adolph Appia and Gordon Craig, the scenic practice that was dominant in Europe became a subject of opposition. In this former practice, there was a three-dimensional actor standing on a flat floor surrounded by acres of "realistically" painted canvas. Appia proposed three-dimensional sets that included steps, columns, rams, and platforms revealed in directional light. He believed that shifting light should create an

inner drama which flows and changes with texture of the music. Lighting became part of the décor as it was designed to change the atmosphere or mood of the play through intensity, colour and direction (Palmer 2015, p.32; Arnold, 2001, p.401).

Though this tradition has gained most of theatre scenery the world over, there are still cases where characters are placed on a set built simply with painted canvas. This was the case with *The Boomerang* where the scenery was simple, made of a painted canvas of the HIV Red Ribbon. This is contrary to the tradition of stage design in musicals which usually use “very elaborated scenic effects as do the productions of Robert Wilson, although with different goals and a different impact on the audience” (Arnold, 2001, p.401). Rather, the approach adopted in the scene design of *The Boomerang* is in line with the open stage tradition which relies on the talents of the actors and the language they speak to express the essence of the world of the play.

Usually, the physical layout of the scenery includes stage properties or stage objects which are built on the stage before the play begins. In this case, they are not considered as properties but as part of the scenery especially represented in the ground plan. Stage properties or objects can also be referred to as set decoration. Helbo et al. (1991) state that “if there is any element in the performance which lends itself to semiotic analysis, it is surely the stage object” (p.155) in confirming the importance of looking at the role it plays in the comprehension of a performance. Stage objects are finite and possess a semic richness. They are discrete in nature and can easily be identified as compared to other semiotic codes in a performance or on the ground plan.

Any discussion on stage objects as signs refers to what Peirce defines as something that stands for something, to someone in some capacity. This is the notion of his triadic relationship in sign system. The significance of this is that an object as a sign, is a relation between the sign vehicle (which in effect is the specific physical form of the sign or object), a sign object (which is the aspect of the world that the sign carries meaning about) and an interpretant (which stands for the meaning of the sign as understood by an interpreter). According to Wilson and Goldfarb (1999, p.96), it is necessary to bring out the ground plan of the scenery which shows exactly how a door closes and opens, where a sofa is placed, at what angle the objects are placed on the floor. This is important as the performers need to move freely between them. In *The Boomerang*, the intention was not to create an aesthetic performance with an elaborate use of objects, but rather to use the play to effect change in the participants and audience. In another direction, the play was more symbolic than realistic which permitted the utilisation of symbolic objects as opposed to the realistic theatre of André Antoine who used chairs from his mother’s kitchen on stage.

Stage objects on their own are not signs until they are used in combination with other signs in the performance. Commenting on this, Helbo et al. iterate that the objects do not “serve a purpose in the real world” but rather become “a sign of the real world” (1991, p.156). The object in this case acquires “a double semiotic status”. This double status is as a result of the object as a sign in the real world (standing for an object in the world), “it is an icon of that object, and has a more or less mimetic relationship with the object it represents ... but, as an element of the performance, it has an autonomous existence: an aesthetic value within the performance, and a semantic value in the building up of meaning in the performance” (Helbo et. al., 1991, p.156).

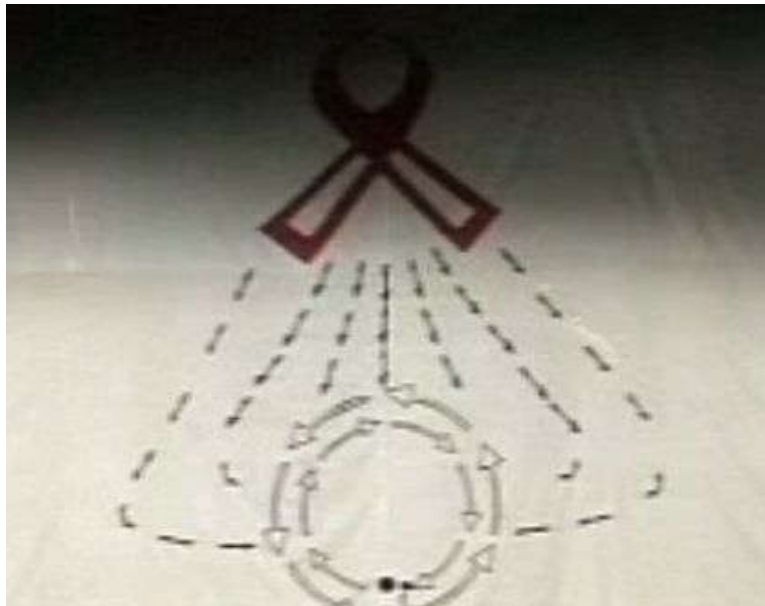
Taking another semiotic stance, a stage object can be regarded “as a sememe” which in effect is, “an organized body of semes (one or more semes corresponding to a distinctive feature)” (Helbo et. al., 1991, p.156). An illustration that can be made here is from a chair. In *The Boomerang*, the chairs that are used do not only have the distinctive features of

ordinary chairs, but also have the features relating to the material or their origin and nature. Those used in the performance are made from wood and locally designed. The features of style and of state portray that they are new. They were made to be used in the performance. Set objects, as the chair, are combined with other elements of theatre, as the backdrop canvas, to make up the scenery or décor. Their coexistence is primordial as they complement each other as elements of visual inanimate signs.

Another important semiotic consideration of theatre décor or scenery is to examine the iconicity. The objective of producing this type of scenery is to relate to the idea of a central image or metaphor. Commenting on this, Wilson and Goldfarb state that “stage design not only must be consistent with the play; it should have its own integrity. The elements of the design – lines, shapes, and colors – should add up to a complete visual universe for the play” (1999, p.93). This implies that focus is on the way in which the scenery resembles that for which it stands (duplicate, replica or simply a stimulus).



**Figure1: HIV/AIDS Red Ribbon on the backdrop canvas of *The Boomerang***



**Figure 2: The Boomerang effect of HIV/AIDS**

In figure 1, the sign used on the backdrop canvas is illustrative of the HIV/AIDS combat. This logo, represented by the red ribbon which was created by the New York-based Visual AIDS Artists Caucus in 1991, has been widely used when referring to programmes and information on HIV/AIDS, and it symbolises a blockade to the spread of the virus as well as the fight against any related stigma. Since its creation, this visual symbol demonstrates compassion for people living with AIDS and their caregivers. It has become an international symbol for AIDS awareness worldwide. Dominated by the colour red, the significance can vary from one setting to another.

The colour of an image influences its level of multimodality (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Colour saturation, differentiation, and modulation all have an effect on the message the given image delivers. Colour saturation occurs on a scale from full-color saturation to the total absence of color; usually, this refers to transition from black to white. Colour differentiation varies widely, on a scale from the maximum amount of diversified colour to absolute monochrome. Lastly, colour modulation ranges on a scale from a very modulated and multi-toned color to a plain, pure, and unmodulated color (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).

Other factors also affect the level of modality in a given image. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) listed the most important ones, including contextualization, level of representation, depth, and brightness. Each of these, but especially the last two, are useful for interpreting photographic images. Contextualization describes the level of background presence in the image. On the one end of the scale, the background has no content; while on the other, the background is filled with detail. At the level of representation, the scale measures the axis where, on one end, there is the maximum level of abstract illustration and, on the other, there is the maximum amount of representational and detailed picturing. The next scale is depth, which runs from the absolute absence of depth to a deep and rich perspective. The final scale is brightness, which measures the amount of light and

brightness in the given image. This scale runs from a large number of different degrees of brightness to only two degrees, which indicates pure, non-brightened colors like pure black and white (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, the more intense the colors used in the given image are, the stronger message it will send. Colours may highlight or hide the contents of the image. If the colors in a given picture seem flat to the viewer, then the image or its contents will receive a low level of modality and, therefore, a low level of information value as well. Furthermore, the colors themselves may have multimodal value. As some color tones, such as red, yellow, and orange, are seen by many viewers as energetic and warm, use of these colors may increase the level of warmth, energy, and acceptance afforded to the message. Similarly, the use of blue and green tones may increase levels of calmness, comfort, and peacefulness, as these colors are often associated with such feelings. Neutrals, such as white, black, and grey, do not convey strong messages when used in visual communication. Probably for this reason, these colors are more often used in official and professional visual messages, such as in technical charts and diagrams, because doing so will not affect the multimodality of the message.

According to Kniel and Wright, the red colour chosen for this ribbon was for its “connection to blood and the idea of passion ... not only anger, but love, like a valentine” (2008, p.22). From another perspective, the HIV-Web (2004) hold that the red colour explained in the ribbon means:

- Red like love, as a symbol of passion and tolerance towards those affected.
- Red like the anger about the helplessness by which we are facing a disease for which there is no chance for a cure.
- Red like blood, representing the pain caused by the many people that died of AIDS.
- Red as a sign of warning against carelessly ignoring the biggest problems of our time.

In *The Boomerang*, the colour red signifies danger, evil, fire, blood, and anger. All of these attributes are portrayed in the character which Franck assumes throughout the play. Red refers to danger because Franck is advised to take a dangerous decision; to evil because the outcome of his decisions will bring about evil, not only to him but to the entire humankind; fire because the effects of his action spread like a wild fire, infecting not only young girls with HIV but also innocent children; blood because his parents finally die as a result of his wicked and cruel decisions and anger because he is not happy with his infection. To him, the prostitutes who have multiple sexual partners should be those infected and not him with only “three” girlfriends.

In figure 2, the arrows that leave from the logo are directed downwards toward a circle. This circle is *the boomerang effect* which is the core of the play. The boomerang effect, caused by HIV/AIDS is contained within a limited sphere by the fight against stigma dominated by the symbol above. This scenery is present throughout the performance. From the beginning to the end, it stays as the backdrop and this enables the message for change engaged in the performance to be reinforced on the audience. Helbo expresses a similar opinion when he states that “the backdrop of a scene is only reduced to painting if it is removed from the stage location or is involved in a process ‘visible to the public eye’ and does not just present, but seeks to show, and this is dependent on the one addressed” (1981, p.108). From another perspective, he insists on the idea that the “difference between the backdrop of a setting and a painting lies in the fact that the former as soon as it is considered as decor enters into a process directed at the Other so that it does not merely exhibit, but it ‘demonstrates’” (Helbo, 1987, p.33). The use of the backdrop in this



performance therefore demonstrates and informs the audience on the form and content of the play and cannot be reduced to a simple painting or decoration. It establishes a particular dramatic setting and functions in this way as a notifying indicator.

When viewed through the semiotic lens, the backdrop produces in the mind of the viewer, a mental image compared to that within psychology. It is within this framework that Danesi purports that “images allow us to recall events, refer to them in various ways, and to generate hypothetical scenarios of situations or conditions that we may not even have actually experienced” (2006, p.441). The visual representation of the fight against HIV/AIDS and related stigma on the backdrop inevitably propels the audience to generate some inner emotions which can be expressed by physical actions. These emotions can be manifested by a change of attitude towards victims of HIV/AIDS or change of mentality on one’s own sex life. When this is achieved, it is presumed that the desired effect of visual communication in theatre has been attained. In communication therefore, a visual image as that on the backdrop, allows viewers to recall, plan for and predict things. This does not however, eliminate the potential of visual communication being miss-interpreted. It is possible that the letter N is visualised by someone as Z when turned to a certain degree. While a viewer with a high capacity of conceiving mental representations will go beyond the simple interpretation of a sign, one with less capacity will barely succeed to interpret it. This implies, even in theatre, meaning is not universal or automatic. The context of utilisation and other accompanying signs must be taken into consideration in the process of communication.

Can the image therefore of the HIV Red ribbon be considered as a well received visual communicative sign as used in the play *The Boomerang*? It goes without say drawing from the above paragraph that the answer to this question is negative. As a visual sign, the context of utilisation must be taken into account as well as the culture of the viewer’s to understand the code used. A viewer, not versed with the propaganda on/around HIV/AIDS in Cameroon will hardly understand what the sign represents. The ribbon may just be a strange symbol or object. For this category of viewer to be brought to the same level of understanding as the one who understands it, other signs are brought into the communication scheme. In this way, theatre effectively communicates not only through visual signs but by combining them with verbal signs. This permits the viewer to complete gaps left by one category of signs with information gotten from the other. By so doing, the four guidelines highlighted - accuracy, cultural relevance, comprehensibility and narrativity – as principles to facilitate the creation and evaluation of visual signs in theatre take their rightful place. They are pivots in any visual communication scheme and much be treated as such failure of which, a visual sign, beautifully conceived and produced will signify little or nothing to an audience with a different cultural background as that of the emitters.

### **Conclusion**

The use of visual signs in communication is as important as that of verbal ones. In as much as these signs are important communicative tools, when used in theatre or any art form, their interpretations is complete when viewed from the perspective of the context of utilisation and the cultural baggage of the receivers. The use of scenery or décor as a visual sign in theatre communication is just one out of many. Scenery or décor as illustrated in this paper cannot be fully understood if the other communicative signs of the performance are ignored. For instance, the HIV Red ribbon used on the backdrop is a visual sign that speaks for itself. This notwithstanding, if used in contexts where a viewer or audience member has the preconception that the colour red represents love, this viewer will interpret the image as an encouragement in love. The implication here is that, the

viewer will turn to maximise his/her sexual practice whereas the real meaning of the sign was to raise awareness against HIV and related stigma.

Through the synthesis of the system of communicative signs used in *The Boomerang*, a fairly complete impression of the message is made. The viewer is called upon to make use of all the signs which the emitter has invoked and evoked in the communicative scheme. Visual communication in this case, reinforces the messages that are inherent in verbal communication dominating most of our theatre performances today. Contrary to verbal communication, visual signs are not limited to language barriers though the viewer needs to be at the same level of understanding as the sender of the message to be able to decode the coded message. It can be said therefore that, scenery or décor can facilitate even the comprehension of the mode of representation incarnated by this play. It was far from realistic. It was more symbolic in nature as it set out not to present characters'/participants' lives in the performance, but to use fiction in representing reality. The fictional story created and written in a script and dramatised, was performed before an audience by actors who fortified the visual message captioned on the scenery by other signs like gestures, facial expressions, body movements and verbal language.

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