

Who Am I? Media Literacy, the Middle East, and Identity Construction

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INTRODUCTION

I teach visual and media arts at an urban middle school. In general, the curriculum consists of creative arts and critical thinking about all kinds of media matters. Ideally, students learn about themselves, others, and a shared world through the production of creative visual and media arts projects. They learn, through experience and practice, about aesthetics and creativity, and they learn about how these qualities may apply to their everyday (and not so everyday) lives.

The subject of the Middle East (or more specifically the Arab and Muslim world) clearly fits into the “not so everyday” category of American life. We hear a lot about it; we know little. Mostly what we do know leaves a sour taste for most Americans. This region of the world is problematic, and it simply means “trouble.” The story of the Arab and Muslim world, repeated over and over again, is mostly a reduced and purely negative media message. So it is *natural*: bad news. No matter its origin, why does this reduction occur? I would suggest that this a “storyline” we have grown accustomed to. I attempt to address this problem through the arts.

In this unit, the Middle East will be used as a window through which my students can learn to think more critically about media messages and the representation of reality. Additionally, students will create projects, including comics and short animated films that explore the theme of Identity. Altogether, the idea is to create a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

The Middle East is probably not the first thing that comes to mind when imagining a group of middle school art students making comics and short movies about identity. It is a bit of a non sequitur, but the hope is to broaden students’ views in an increasingly connected global world. My hope is that a thought provoking cross-disciplinary project will foster an appreciation for knowledge and creativity.

With ongoing conflicts (Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, Iran) the Middle East is a large part of US foreign policy. It is always in the news; however, because conflict is all we hear about, I would argue that we know very little about it. It is a region of the world that is “other” to my students—and me. And, it is a less than favorable other, as well. Repeatedly, people of the Arab world are labeled negatively in the news and popular culture. Consider the opening song of the popular Disney movie, *Aladdin*:

I come from a land from a far away place,
Where the caravan camels roam,
Where they cut off your ear if they don’t like your face,
It’s barbaric, but hey it’s home.

That *Aladdin* was a huge hit in the US with profits over \$200 million dollars is testimony to our dark imagination towards the Arab and Muslim world. This dark message is reinforced by the major news networks. Immediately after the Oklahoma City bombings, commentators were quick to point out that the destructive nature of the attack had all the trademarks of radical Islamic terrorism (*Reel Bad Arabs*); but as it turns out, Timothy McVeigh, the perpetrator, turned out to

be the “kid next door.” So it is *natural* when I ask my students about what comes to mind when they hear the words Middle East, the response is predictable: suicide bombers, religious extremists, deserts, and oil. I find this ironic, that we hear a lot about the Middle East and know so little about it—other than negative images. On the positive side, this is an opportunity to look more closely at the reductive nature of mass media representations. It is perhaps also an opportunity to explore our own nature.

The student demographic at Lanier Middle School is a combination of Vanguard (66%) and general student body (34%), and, therefore, it is a diverse mix of students. The racial mixture is diverse, as well (Caucasian 40%, Latino 32%, African 14% and Asian 13 %). The Middle East is not represented outside the “other” category. In my past six years of teaching, I can count only few students from the region. In other words, the Middle East is a massive part of the world with which my students have no direct contact.

I have been working at Lanier Middle School for the past six years with the aim of developing an innovative Visual and Media Arts Program. Fortunately, the school’s administrative team supports our program as a valuable part of our students’ overall educational goals, which, in large part, is to awaken the intelligence of our students by teaching them to recognize relationships between school subjects and the real world. As globalization continues to spread, the real world is increasingly linked and intercultural awareness will lead to a more compassionate and enlightened student body.

As is known, the arts can cross social and political borders, and it can encourage us to see others, and ourselves, in new ways. The Arab and Muslim world is more than suicide bombers, religious extremists, deserts, and oil. One way to break down this crude misconception is through literary, graphic and cinematic sources. My hope is that through the concept of the “other,” my students will learn about their own identities. The goal is to get them engaged.

OBJECTIVES

While this unit uses literary, graphic and cinematic sources of and about the Middle East to promote thoughtful reflection and self-reflection, the main focus of this unit is *not* to produce deep understanding of Middle East history or US foreign policy, but rather to produce visual narratives (comics and short animated films) that explore the themes of Human Ingenuity and Identity.

Through investigation, planning, producing and evaluation (the “design cycle”) students will develop their projects. This unit offers many opportunities for students to accomplish the required State of Texas standards, as well as standards of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program in which our school participates. These standards include four general components, which are:

- **Perception:** The student analyzes and forms generalizations about identity construction through the visual and media arts.
- **Creative expression:** The student expresses ideas through original artworks, using multiple forms of representation with appropriate skill.
- **Cultural heritage:** The student demonstrates an understanding of specific art works from the Middle East as records of human achievement.
- **Critical evaluation:** The student analyzes the reductive nature of how the Middle East is represented by the West; the student forms conclusions about how issues can be framed by mass media; and the student makes informed judgments about personal artworks and the artworks of others.

These objectives are also in line with the stated goals of the IB. To paraphrase from the IB website, the overarching aim for us, as teachers, is to help our students become thoughtful, creative, and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world. As stated, these components are addressed and achieved through the design cycle.

RATIONALE

In the United States, the beginning of middle school marks the decline of innocence. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as the age of questioning authority can often lead to a sense of independence and individuality, often compassionately referred to as the “American Spirit.”

Remembering my own transition, it’s somewhat tricky to come to terms with the fact that parents and loved ones have been playing the role of Santa Claus. This rite of passage is a bit of a letdown. The possibility of a less secure “worldview” begins to rear its complicated head, and a whole host of questions about personal identity are picked over and contemplated. These are very formidable and formative years. Difficult choices are made, and problems are dealt with or avoided. Is it really enough just to fit in? Questions abound. Students might wonder, “Who am I, really?”

As these situations arise, kids are in the process of finding their element, and it is important for them to be able to have a better understanding and appreciation of their own feelings and talents, as well as those of others. My intention is to encourage students to think more comprehensively about the world we inhabit and to be open to different ways of seeing, creatively, critically, and compassionately.

How do I look?

How do I look? When I propose this question to my students, they usually assume I’m asking them about my looks. For example, is my appearance easy to identify with, or not? But it is a trick question meant to challenge students about how *they* see, intellectually, spiritually and aesthetically. The bigger self-reflexive question concerns how students might imagine the world, and participate in it. When I say, “How do I look?” I am asking how one perceives and constructs the world around them, as well as a personal identity. In large part, our lives are framed by media constructs, but following the media is not enough.

In John Berger’s classic book, *Ways of Seeing*, he shows, among other things, how often-repeated stereotypes can come to take on a life of their own. For example, in Berger’s pictorial essay he *shows* how women have been historically represented in the West as objects to be looked at, viewed, and studied. This (men do; woman are) tradition of the “model” began in the fine arts during the Renaissance and continues to this day in magazines and television advertising, and it is firmly rooted in popular culture today. Presently, this convention is being studied and is being challenged every day by progressive men and women alike. In large part, this limited way of thinking has to do with how media messages are constructed and delivered. This is an example of the precarious balance of media constructs to imprison and/or liberate thoughtful and creative independent mindedness.

What about the Middle East? How does its portrayal affect how I see, in general? While young people are developing their *knowledge-ability, imagination* and *creativity* and discovering who they are, it is important for them to be aware of other points of view, beyond day-to-day stereotypes. The Middle East offers another point of view, although I would suggest the information represents a limited view due to intercultural political tension. In particular, military conflicts reduce the possibilities of seeing beyond foreign policy statements; and therefore, they limit the potential of intercultural awareness. How can we have a better perception of *people* who live far away from home if all we know are automatic associations of “gun toting, bearded, fanatic terrorists, hellbent on destroying the great enemy: the United States” (Said xxvi). Or, as

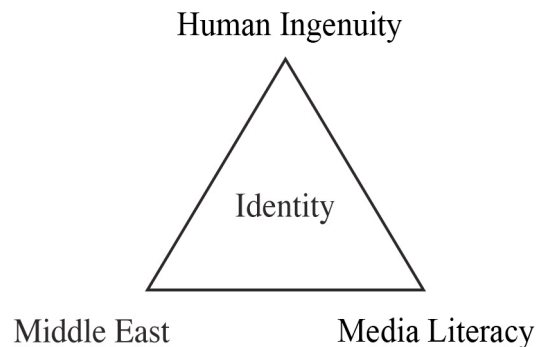
my students are quick to volunteer: “suicide bombers, religious extremist, deserts and oil.” Or, as Marjane Satrapi, the author of *Persepolis* (examined later) has lamented, “crazy Arabs who love God too much” (Satrapi, *Persepolis*, DVD extras). These superficial assumptions are misleading caricatures and, for the sake of the human decency, should be challenged. Students might be asked, “Have you ever heard or seen anything positive about the Middle East or the Arab and Muslim world?”

This unit is meant to be a surprising juxtaposition to encourage students to go beyond the role of “consumers” and become aware of themselves as creative thinkers and co-producers (and producers) of meaning. Perhaps an unexpected juxtaposition can help us see things in a new way; not only others, but our own selves, as well. Students will be introduced to a different part of the Arab and Muslim “story” through literary, graphic and cinematic sources. Concurrently, students will broaden their media literacy skills by creating their own stories, related to the theme of identity construction.

No doubt, an inquiry into media constructs is of value for young students, given we now live in society saturated and covered by media events and generated imagery.

UNIT BACKGROUND

As the title of this unit suggests, the main themes concern Identity construction, around which are the topics of human ingenuity, media literacy, and what I have been referring to as the Middle East (more specifically, the Arab and Muslim world.)



I would like to begin by drawing out how the unit might be put into action, and then go into some detail about the topics explored.

Since this is an art class and students will be expected to produce comics and short animated videos, the introduction to the unit might go something like this: “Does everyone here like cartoons and comic books? Very good, for this project we are going to be creating comic books and short movies about the theme of Identity. In other words, who are we; who am I, really?”

“Before we begin, let me ask your opinion about some things. What is the first thing that comes into your mind when I mention the Middle East?” Additional questions include:

- What comes to mind when you hear the words “Middle East?”
- How would you identify someone from the Middle East?
- Have you ever seen a movie or heard of an artist from the Middle East?

After a few seconds of silence and confusion passes, I respectfully expect that my students will be somewhat crude and negative in their responses. This is a “good” thing, in the sense that it

brings up later opportunities to explore and examine these automatic associations. From where does this overarching (negative) way of understanding the “Middle East” derive?

Next, “Let’s make a comic.” Students work in small groups to make an 8-10 panel comic narrative about the Middle East. When everyone is finished (again, it is my expectation students will be crude with their works) we look at the works (photograph and project them on the classroom screen) and, more likely than not, a gross and superficial theme will emerge: a dark, threatening and pessimistic picture. A good follow-up might be to ask if anyone thought about any of the following while making their work: Family Life, Education, Transportation, Landscape, Recreation, Humor, Art, Animals, Dreams, etc. More likely than not, the answer is, no. Why is this so?

Now we can talk about media representation, specifically how the Middle East is portrayed in the news, as well as in popular culture. As the topic of mass media emerges, Edward Said’s concept of “Orientalism” can be introduced and explored. In Said’s book, *Covering Islam*, Orientalism is characterized by an Occidental (Western) tendency to view the Orient (Middle East) as something “less than” for the purposes of political control (Said xviii). Consider for example, a recent film produced by the Media Education Foundation titled, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, in which professor emeritus of Southern Illinois University, Dr. Jack Shaheen, examines the orientalist paradigm. The film explores media representation and the working paradigm which allows us to so carelessly label people. Dr. Shaheen’s research challenges the Orientalist (reductionist) stereotypes and how they reduce reality and complexity.

Citing the insert booklet from the *Reel Bad Arabs* DVD, “the film challenges viewers to recognize the urgent need for counter-narratives that do justice to the diversity and humanity of Arab people and the reality and richness of Arab history and culture.”

It would be extremely superficial and unfair to reduce the United States, not to mention the whole of Christianity, to “fundamentalist extremism” based on the beliefs and behavior of radical fringe groups such as, for instance, the Ku Klux Klan. Christian extremists do not represent the whole of Christianity.

Similarly, the orientalist characterization that reduces the Arab and Muslim world to a static and monolithic society based on Islamic fundamentalism is wrong. In Said’s words, “A relatively small portion of what actually takes place in the Islamic world, which numbers a billion people, and includes dozens of countries, societies, traditions, languages, and of course, an infinite number of different experiences” is covered by the term Islamic fundamentalism (Said xvi). In other words, Islam reduced to the extremist, fundamentalist element represents an incomplete Islam.

The question here, or the point to be raised, is to what extent does mass media shape not only the Identity of the other but also our own beliefs about our selves and who we are as individuals? Once again, “Who am I, really?”

As Dr. Shaheen would suggest, a re-introduction can help us see things in a new way, and is long overdue. One way to re-introduce, or make a connection with the Arab and Muslim world, is through the study of history. In particular, the historical relationship between the Middle East and the USA, since World War II, and the later oil embargo in 1973. Another is through the arts, which like religion, cannot be eradicated. A “foreign” movie tells a story, and it also says something about the country itself, and the people who live there. After all, that’s how many people from around the world know anything about us. A foreign movie like the *Color of Paradise* speaks on a human level, far removed from foreign policy statements. It speaks of the human condition alluded to above (Family Life, Relationships, Education, Hopes, Fears, Art,

Dreams, etc.) These “foreign exchanges” can help us to recognize false assumptions. They can help us learn about others, and ourselves.

As I am suggesting, the unattractive image of the Arab and Muslim world emerges through the mass media with little or no historical context. Students should be taught about the power of mass media and popular culture through media literacy. According to Southwest Alternate Media Project (<http://www.swamp.org/edu.html>) media literacy is defined as “the ability to access, analyze and evaluate and produce communication in a variety of forms.” In other words, to be media-literate, it is not enough to simply be a consumer of mass media constructions and designs.

This unit suggests that media literacy promotes and develops the critical thinking skills necessary to ask better questions and cultivate a better-informed sense of judgment. Perhaps students might begin to see connections between the roles consumer and producer (consumption and production); whereas before these things were taken for granted. Or possibly even make links between foreign policy, mass media, and popular culture.

As already stated, the juxtaposition of Middle East and the issue of Identity may seem unnatural (particularly in a middle school art class), but perhaps this is the point. Because media is often taken for granted as natural, something odd or even shocking is necessary to get a message across (a concept familiar to modern art movements and increasingly common among ad agencies.) I have found it helpful to state the obvious: media representations are not natural and should not be taken for granted. Media messages are not objective. They are a result of decisions made, and various points of view. In a sense, in that they might be considered a form of “art,” they are *artificial*.

To juxtapose these to subjects (Media Literacy, the Middle East, Human Ingenuity, and Identity Construction) may seem strange, but I have found this method of looking at one thing in the context of another raises the curiosity and participation of the students. The benefit of this juxtaposition is that my students will have an opportunity to reexamine some of their basic assumptions in a creative and productive way.

I want my students to recognize something that might seem obvious: that media messages are not natural, like say, the sun. Media messages are very carefully constructed and meant to influence, not only influence our thinking about others; but also influence how we define and identify ourselves as individuals.

Unlike other animals, people can and do construct their own worlds alongside the natural one. We have a capacity of imagination and creativity that allows us to give shape to the past, present and future. We can mix things in unexpected ways. For good or bad, we use our imagination and creativity to explore and learn and grow. We can plan for the future, we can examine the consequences, and we are obliged to adapt in order to progress.

How can we change and adapt to the new way of living. We are experiencing exponential growth, the likes of which are new to everyone and shaping the future of mankind. A question raised throughout the unit concerns the shaping of media messages and the power of image making. How influential is technology when it comes to what we think and believe, and how we live our everyday lives? To what extent do/can visual and media arts impact the development of society?

As we begin exploring technology, image making and visual storytelling, we will debate concepts such as “Orientalism” and the “Other.” (We will try to see ourselves seeing.) Cinematic sources from and about the Middle East, such as *Reel Bad Arabs*, *Persepolis*, and *The Color of Paradise* will open our eyes to different points of view.

Story telling is an important part of this unit. To imagine and create our own stories about identity, we must first be open to the full potential of creativity.

Conclusion

By researching and developing this unit, my hope has been to develop a thoughtful cross-disciplinary unit to stimulate my students' interest in the "other" through the arts. The primary objective is to raise critical thinking skills through the visual and media arts. Teachers should feel free to use their discretion in how to implement and stagger these lesson plans around the themes of the Middle East, Media Literacy, Human Ingenuity, and Identity. The hope here is to inform and enlighten about our views of others and our selves.

VOCABULARY

Paradigm: an over-arching way of framing any issue, an example serving as a model; pattern.

Identity: the set of characteristics that somebody recognizes as belonging uniquely to himself or herself and constituting his or her individual personality.

Orientalism: characterized by an Occidental (Western) tendency to view the Orient (Middle East) as something "less than" for the purposes of political control (Said xviii).

Imagination: Seeing in the "minds eye." (Robinson 115) As different from creativity.

Creativity: Imaginative processes with outcomes that are original and of value. (Robinson 118)

Human Ingenuity: problem solving. *Human Ingenuity* stresses the way humans can initiate change, whether for good or bad, and examines the consequences. It asks, "Why and how do we create and what are the consequences?"

Representation: a re-presentation of something real or imaginary, often employing words, pictures and sounds; something that stands for something not actually present, as in a picture.

Consumer: a person that consumes, as in the case of buying products or ideas.

Producer: a person who is a problem solver, one who creates or produces cultural or economic value through goods and services. (For example, a director of a movie or an entrepreneur.)

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan One: Identity. How do I look?

Objectives

- Perception: The student analyzes and forms generalizations about identity construction through the visual and media arts.
- Critical evaluation: The student analyzes the reductive nature of how the Middle East is represented to West; the student forms conclusions about how issues can be framed by mass media.

Materials and Resources

Fulla doll and Barbie articles [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fulla_\(doll\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fulla_(doll))

Hijab and head dress <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijab>

Drawing storyboard panels for Middle East comic montage (photo and project on screen)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Storyboard>

Find the Middle East on a map: <http://www.google.com/search?q=middle+east+map&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a>

Worksheet/chart: What does it mean? (What is a Middle Easterner? What is an American?)

Video clips from *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*

Video clips from *Close Up*

Digital Camera

Procedures and Activities

What is identity? Begin with a discussion about identity. Introduce the concept of identity as the theme of the curriculum unit before mentioning the subject of the Middle East. Below is a reference list for discussion, which suggests the complex nature of the concept of identity, as well as potential comic animation projects.

Identical	Cultural identity
Identity	National identity
Identification	Personal identity
Identity real	Identity over time
Identity digital	Race identity
Identity theft	Class identity
Secret identity	Identity formation/construction
Religious identity	Self-determination
Gender identity	Animals
Corporate identity	Plants

After a discussion of identity, the fun begins by adding in the transition to the Middle East. Ask students to list characteristics often associated with the Middle East, and then make a 10-panel comic strip (working in groups.) After they finish, ask if the following cultural characteristics were considered. Most likely, with respect, many students did not get far past suicide bombers, radical extremists and oil.

Family Life	Recreation	Love
Education	Transportation	Landscape
Food	Art	Dreams
Humor	Animals	

Often, we define ourselves as who we are not. Begin introducing the concept of the “Other.” The focus of this first lesson is to get students to entertain different ways of seeing others and themselves. Hopefully, students are engaged now and weary of automatic assumptions. The next lesson explores media messages and media literacy, the cause and cure of this dilemma.

Assessment

Application, Human Ingenuity, worksheets

Reflection and Evaluation

Personal Engagement

Lesson Plan Two: Representation and Media Literacy

Objectives

- Perception: The student analyzes and forms generalizations about identity construction through the visual and media arts.
- Creative expression: The student expresses ideas through original artworks, using multiple forms of representation with appropriate skill.

- Critical evaluation: The student forms conclusions about how issues can be framed by mass media.

Materials and Resources

Looking at Maps DVD (shows how maps can be represented in different ways)

Is a MAP art? Draw an artistic map of the Middle East (assuming 8 countries.)

What is an original?

Sir Ken Robinson

John Berger. Selections from *Ways of Seeing*.

Persepolis Graphic novel

Persepolis DVD viewing

Procedures and Activities

Representation, as I am defining it, is a re-presentation of something real or imaginary, often employing words, pictures and sounds; it is something that stands for something not actually present, as in a picture. We will begin with a discussion of representation by discussing different modes of representation, such as words, pictures and sounds, and debate their strengths and weaknesses.

Media Literacy is a doorway into the representation of reality. According to the Southwest Alternate Media Project (<http://www.swamp.org/edu.html>) media literacy is defined as “the ability to access, analyze and evaluate and produce communication in a variety of forms. A population with a capacity to decode and demystify mass media is the basis of a democratic society who can appreciate and create multi-cultural and alternative media works.”

An everyday representation is a map. Video clips from *Looking at Maps and the Representation of Reality* and *Reel Bad Arabs* are good examples of how representation influences how we experience the world.

“We do not live in a natural world: things like newspapers, news and opinions do not occur naturally; they are *made*, as a result of human will, history, social circumstances, institutions and the conventions of one’s professions” (Said 49).

Mass media messages are influenced and framed according to the interests, ideas and beliefs of powerful interests groups. The culture industry greatly influences the way people think, act, and understand their everyday (and not so everyday) world.

Assessment

Reflection and Evaluation

Personal Engagement

Lesson Plan Three: Middle East and the Arab and Muslim World

Objectives

- Perception: The student analyzes and forms generalizations about the formation of a personal identity through the visual and media arts.
- Cultural heritage: The student demonstrates an understanding of specific cinematic works from the Middle East as records of human achievement.

- Critical evaluation: The student makes informed judgments about personal artworks and the artworks of others.

Materials and Resources

Persepolis graphic novel and movie

John Berger

Elephant story: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_Men_and_an_Elephant

Analysis of selected scenes from Persepolis (comic and movie)

Analysis: transcodification from words to movie

Understanding Comics worksheets

Scott McCloud (speech about comics and the future of story)

Arabs, Islam and Muslim

How can we define the Middle East?

Some facts about the Middle East

- A Muslim is a person who follows Islam
- 1.5 billion Muslims live around the world
- There are 250 million Arabs live in the Middle East
- An Arab is someone who speaks Arabic
- The Muslim world numbers over a billion people, and includes dozens of countries, societies, traditions, languages, and of course, an infinite number of different experiences (Said xvi)

Procedures and Activities

I like to begin this part of the unit telling the story of *The Blind Man and the Elephant* because it is a fable about how we often misjudge things for lack of the “big picture.”

Introducing the theme of the “other” students are debate Edward Said’s concept of “Orientalism” and how Arabs and people from the Middle East are depicted by Hollywood and the Culture industry.

First of all, what is the Middle East? How would it be possible to identify someone as being from the region? Would the defining characteristic be based on how someone looks or acts, by religious preference? As it turns out, the term Middle East is a made-up term brought about by British during colonial times.

Assessment

Application, Human Ingenuity

Reflection and Evaluation

Personal Engagement

Lesson Plan Four: Human ingenuity in Visual and Media Arts

Objectives

- Perception: The student analyzes and forms generalizations about the formation of a personal identity through the visual and media arts.

- Creative expression: The student expresses ideas through original artworks, using multiple forms of representation with appropriate skill.
- Critical evaluation: The student makes informed judgments about personal artworks and the artworks of others.

Materials and Resources

- Sir Ken Robinson
- student works (including pitch)

Panel to panel transitions from *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*

Word/picture relationships from *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*

Common comic and cinematic story telling devices from *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*

Visual storytelling/writing a pitch

Procedures and Activities

Human Ingenuity is about human creativity. In this part of the unit students will be completing their s narratives and begin converting them to digital stories. Human Ingenuity as defined by the IB “stresses the way humans can initiate change, whether for good or bad, and examines the consequences. It asks, “Why and how do we create and what are the consequences?”

Assessment

Application, Human Ingenuity

Reflection and Evaluation

Personal Engagement

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