การเปลี่ยนแปลง 3 รูปแบบ: อัตลักษณ์ใหม่ของมนุษย์ที่ปรากฏในงานวรรณกรรม
Three Ways of Change: The New Human in Literature

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความเรื่อง การเปลี่ยนแปลง 3 รูปแบบ: อัตลักษณ์ใหม่ของมนุษย์ที่ปรากฏในงานวรรณกรรม ดร.ธอมเซน ได้เสนอกรอบความคิดเกี่ยวกับอัตลักษณ์ใหม่ของมนุษย์ในงานวรรณกรรมในศตวรรษที่ 20 สามารถแบ่งออกได้เป็นสามระยะมีลักษณะแตกต่างกัน โดยเริ่มจากยุคหลังนิชชี ความหวังที่จะเปลี่ยนแปลงจิตวิญญาณของปัจเจกบุคคลและความเข้าใจโลกทัศน์ใหม่ที่ต่างจากอดีตที่มุ่งเน้นการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางสังคมเฉพาะด้านกายภาพ นักเขียนที่มีชื่ออาทิเช่น เวอจิเนีย วูลฟ์, โมยัน, ดอน เดลิลโล ต่างได้ศึกษาวิเคราะห์ความคิดเกี่ยวกับอัตลักษณ์ของปัจเจกบุคคลในยุคของตนและพบว่ามีความละเอียดอ่อนเปราะบางและซับซ้อน จากการนำเสนอเรื่องราวของตนเองที่เกี่ยวข้องกับสังคมนั้น ๆ ที่เป็นรูปธรรมสอดคล้องกับวิถีชีวิตในอดีตตลอดจนความคิดต่าง ๆ เกี่ยวกับความเป็นตัวตนของมนุษย์ ข้อคิดเห็นเกี่ยวกับมนุษย์ยุคใหม่และยุคเก่าในช่วงที่ผ่านมาได้รับความสนใจมากขึ้นโดยเฉพาะในงานเขียนต่าง ๆ ไม่เฉพาะการศึกษางานวรรณกรรมทางวิทยาศาสตร์และวรรณกรรมต่าง ๆ ในบทความนี้ผู้เขียนได้อภิปรายประเด็นสำคัญที่เกี่ยวข้องกับวิสัยทัศน์ของนักเขียนต่อการเปลี่ยนแปลงของคนในสังคมในร้อยปีที่ผ่านมาโดยจะเน้นการเปลี่ยนแปลงความคิดทางสังคมและสภาพแวดล้อมที่ปรากฏในแต่ละยุคสมัยโดยมีการเชื่อมโยงกับงานเขียนที่เกี่ยวข้อง โดยเฉพาะงานเขียนของแมรี่ เชลลี และดอน เดลิลโล ตลอดจนนำข้อคิดและทฤษฎีของนิคลาส ลูแมนมาเป็นประเด็นหลักในการนำเสนอซึ่งจะทำให้สามารถแยกประเด็นที่แตกต่างทางด้านความคิดเกี่ยวกับการเปลี่ยนแปลงของมนุษยชาติ เพื่อให้ง่ายต่อการเข้าใจ ผู้เขียนได้นำผลงานทางวรรณกรรมในต่างยุคสมัยมาวิเคราะห์เกี่ยวกับอัตลักษณ์ใหม่ของมนุษย์ในปัจจุบันที่สะท้อนให้เห็นว่าไม่มีใครสามารถกำหนดวิถีชีวิตใครได้นอกจากตนเองเท่านั้น

คำสำคัญ: การเปลี่ยนแปลงอัตลักษณ์

Abstract

Thomsen argues that the idea of a "new human" in literature has had three dominant phases in the 20th century, which literature has responded to in distinct ways. From the post-Nietzschean

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hopes to change the spiritual life and perceive the world in new ways over the historically devastating attempts to create new humans through a change of societies to the posthuman horizon that focuses on bodily changes. Writers such as Virginia Woolf, Mo Yan and Don DeLillo have each in their way and in their time explored how fragile ideas of human identity taken in the abstract gain complexity and relevance through the exploration of narratives of life-stories that must take place with a concrete relation to relations, cultural history and ideas of selfhood.

The idea of the new human or the posthuman has in recent years gained more attention in literary studies, not just in science fiction studies but also in more general studies of literature. In this article I will argue that literature has dealt with different visions of human change in three distinct ways in the past century and a half being focused on respectively the mind, the society and the body. After introducing to the subject's position in literary studies with examples drawn from Mary Shelley and Don DeLillo, I shall argue that Niklas Luhmann's system theory can help to differentiate between different ideas of human change. Following that, I will show how literature in different periods have responded to various scenarios for thinking of a new human.

Keywords: The new human

Mixed desires

Developments in biotechnology at present make the future of humanity more interesting than ever and in many ways also more frightening and full of risk. The plethora of possible changes of the human condition offered by advances in human-machine interaction and genetic engineering give the label "posthuman" a substance that also influences how older literature can be read. It is a subject that is important not only for the life scientists involved in the pioneering research, but also for those working in disciplines as diverse as psychology, law and social science and the humanities.

Despite the potential widespread impact of biotechnology, many people prefer to ignore the issue saying, "luckily I'll be dead and gone when all these things will happen". But 'all these things' not only refer to the more fantastic imaginations of the transgression of humanity, but also to incremental improvements in healthcare and developments that may make a few years difference to average life expectancy.

That the general public finds it hard to relate to the complex issues associated with biotechnical potentials and consequences seems to be underlined by the fact that these subjects have been overshadowed in recent public debate by the issue of global warming. Global warming is a big problem for humanity, but it does not challenge the very essence of what it means to be human, which perhaps makes it less threatening.

Visions of how the future will play out have had and continue to have a strong influence on the present. In the twentieth century the moon landings and the idea of a space age had a very strong influence, and aside from the technological visions ideas of worldwide revolutions had a stronghold in people's imagination. For some reason people do not spot as many UFOs as they used to. However, the interest in the posthuman could be said to fill a void left by the absence of extraterrestrial forms of intelligent life.

Some would say that the posthuman condition is not just something to be discussed in the future tense, but that is a concern of the present, as suggested by N. Katherine Hayles' book *How We Became Posthuman*. This only addresses one subset of the phenomenon - cybernetics, although it is acknowledged that there is more to come (Hayles 1999: 281). Others like Ray Kurzweil in *The Singularity is Near* predict a situation, where machines will become more intelligent than human beings and the Singularity will enforce itself. In Kurzweil's view this day is not too far off as he predicts 2045 to the threshold year (Kurzweil 2005: 136).

At the same time there are plenty of people who feel that the world is not changing so quickly or dramatically. Surgery and medicine may have improved in the past 100 years, but essentially we are still fragile and mortal. There are complicated emotions attached to the notion of whether 'we' are in charge of our destinies. We are more so because of the possibilities within biotech, but on the other hand this also spurns the feeling of not being in control because the technological development has entered a new phase that seriously undermines an idea of a biological human nature that could not be alter. There are national and international rules and regulations regarding technologies such as cloning, but many have serious and well-founded doubts about whether they will suffice.

These rules and regulations don't, however, restrict the world of fiction and over the years the issue of the posthuman or a new human has been taken up by a range of writers who have often produced works that are both fascinating and frightening. In his most recent novel *Point Omega*, Don DeLillo has one of his mysterious characters wondering about the human condition in a way that contrasts with the usual discourses on the posthuman with their emphasis on more advanced states:

> "… Do we have to be human forever? Consciousness is exhausted. Back now to inorganic matter. This is what we want. We want to be stones in a field." (DeLillo 2010, 52-53)

DeLillo also presents visions of humanity that come close to Kurzweil's idea of the emergence of a higher intelligence, described in a way that are puzzling, fanciful and frightening. These themes are not new to DeLillo who touched upon them more than a decade earlier in *Underworld*, which essentially is about the Cold War, but at the end the narrator exclaims:

"Is cyberspace a thing within the world

> or is it the other way around? Which contains the other, and how can you tell for sure?" (DeLillo 1997, 826)

Literature and other arts clearly are in no privileged position when it comes to having a say about the future, and some of the fantasies played out in literary science fictions and films may direct our attention from the real issues facing humanity. But literature is an art form and a medium that is able to combine the presentation of future scenarios with the exploration of likely human emotions through narratives, and through literature we can gain access to the potential thinking of people from other ages and other cultures which may both inspire us and enable us to identify our own blind spots, so contributing to a broader understanding of what it is (and could be) to be human. Not least ideas of what constitutes improvement, perfection and normality should be located in a world view that does not isolate the human body and mind, but sees them as part of a social being with a past, present and future.

Mary Shelley's Last Man and New Man

The British author Mary Shelley both wrote about a new human-or man as was sufficient to say in her day and age-and a last human. What her new human looks like is known to all, being one of the most recognizable faces in modern popular culture, going far beyond the original text of *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus* from 1818. It is Frankenstein's creation, a monster brought to life by a young scientist who is out of joint with his own age. The nameless monster is gentle at times, having learned about human behavior from observing a family and reading their books. But he is eventually misunderstood by the humans who cannot see behind his appearance, and mistakes his attempt to rescue a girl from drowning with an attack on her. Yet, the creature is also cunningly enough to place the evidence for the murder on Frankenstein's younger brother upon the boy's nanny Justine while she is asleep. The monster is not beyond good and evil, but like humanity he contains both sides.

In the end there is no future for this creation in Shelley's universe, but the creation is used as a vehicle to consider human relations with themselves, the world and those they have created. By having created another being, Frankenstein suddenly finds himself in a position usually reserved for gods, and the creation does not like the way Frankenstein handles the situation. He asks for a female companion, but knows that Frankenstein is not likely to grant him his wishes:

> If you consent, neither you nor any other human being shall ever see us again: I will go to the vast wilds of South America. My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment. My companion will be of the same nature as myself, and will be content with the same fare. We shall make our bed of dried leaves; the sun will shine on us as on man, and will ripen our food. The picture I present to

> you is peaceful and human, and you must feel that you could deny it only in the wantonness of power and cruelty. Pitiless as you have been towards me, I now see compassion in your eyes; let me seize the favourable moment, and persuade you to promise what I so ardently desire. (Shelley 2000, p. 129)

In the end, despite demonstrating consideration and a gentle manner, the posthuman in Shelley's fiction cannot find a place alongside humanity. The rejection of a new species seems very much to be in concordance with the general sentiment today. We value the unity of humanity, or at least the idea of unity, even though the valuation is not reflected in politics, where the realist theory of political power often proves itself right in observing the selfish behavior of nations and the distribution of health and wealth among humans.

Indirectly, Shelley furthered this consideration of missing posthuman with her novel *The Last Man* from 1826. This novel envisions the end of humanity by way of a natural disaster in 2100, in this case an epidemic. Humanity is not transgressed, and the end of man is not thought of as a continuation, an evolution, but an end played out to the desperate words of Lionel Verney, which also reveal a great deal about the construction of human identity:

> I form no expectation of alteration for the better; but the monotonous present is intolerable to me. Neither hope nor joy are my pilots - restless despair and fierce desire of change lead me on. I long to grapple with danger, to be excited by fear, to have some task, however slight or voluntary, for each day's fulfillment. (Shelley 1965, p. 342)

Such reflections on the boredom of living without others can be found nearly two hundred years later in the writings of Michel Houellebecq, revealing how important the social dimension is to humanity. Still, one is tempted to question, why even after Darwin consideration of the idea of human evolution has been limited. Perhaps it is because the time frame in our modern historical conception of time for such change has seemed so long?

The Human Being According to Systems Theory

There are many different ways of thinking about the posthuman and human evolution. To bring some order to various literary approaches to the new human scholars have turned to German sociologist Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, such as Bruce Clarke in *Posthuman Metamorphosis* (2008) and Cary Wolfe in *What is Posthumanism?* (2010). Luhmann's systems theory is based on the concept of autopoiesis, developed by the biologists Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela as a way of defining life. They define an autopoetic system as something that produces the elements of which it consists and that can discern between itself and its environment (Luhmann 1995, p. 17). This works on many levels. We know, for instance, that our body renews its cells every

seven years or so, but we do not doubt that our body is the same. Life is a process organized by systems or organisms, and when the system stops producing its own elements, life stops.

Luhmann tries to take this further. First by claiming that consciousness is a system - one that produces meaning rather than life. This also makes sense from a phenomenological perspective by asserting the existence of consciousness, a phenomenon that is still troublesome to explain fully, but whose reality few doubt in spite of the troubles of getting meaningfully around it.

With respect to social systems - communicational systems that operate with a logic of their own detached from human intention-Luhmann asserts that such systems are empirical and not merely theoretical constructions (Luhmann 1995, p. 13). His ideas have been affiliated to all kinds of communication media and to what N. Katherine Hayles calls third generation cybernetics, which is based on the idea of self-organized systems (Hayles 1999, p. 246; Wolfe 2010, p. xxi). Luhmann's theory also stresses the mutual dependence of the systems. Changes in one system mean a change in the environment of another and the consequent adaptation that infers.

Three Kinds of Human Change

Based on Luhmann's theory it is possible to identify three ways of thinking about the new human or a posthuman, each with a deep resonance in the 20th century and in the literature of the period.

The first kind of change envisioned was in the mold of Nietzsche's ideas of the superman, namely a human whose mindset had been changed, not least in order to do away with ideas of the divinity and duality, embracing the Earth as man's home (Nietzsche, 1969, p. 42). Less radical versions than Nietzsche's vision of a new humanity developing through a change of mindset are played out in the works of Virginia Woolf, Williams Carlos Williams and Louis-Ferdinand Céline among others. These writers are fascinated with the idea of the new human or a change in the character of mankind, but they also remain skeptical about the gains and profound nature of change by emphasizing how complex the sensations of the everyday are, and how the visions of grand changes are challenges by the routines of the everyday.

The second kind of change has had much deeper consequences in history, namely the idea of creating a new human through a change in society. It is not just a matter of individual change as a form of personal liberation, but the change of a population of a whole society through various forms of educational strategies and use of power. The idea of "new man" has been used as a political rhetoric in a number of societies. The New Soviet Man. The New Chinese. The New Jew. The New Negro (Hellbeck, 2006; Cheng, 2009). All these labels have been used to promote certain strategies for a change in society which eventually would change humans themselves in a profound way, although very differently from what one now can imagine that machines and biotech would be able to bring about. A less aggressive rhetoric was used, for example, in Turkey after Kemal Atatürk's rise to power after The First World War

to further a profound change of culture. Similarly colonization and missionary work have had a deep effect on numerous societies, documented in literature by Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for instance.

Finally, the possibility of changing human biology in ways that hardly could be imagined before now presents itself as both a reality and a new horizon through human-machine interaction, the potential of cloning, advanced medical techniques and changes in the human DNA. This subject has also been addressed in literature as the last frontier of human change beyond that promised by changes in mind and society.

Each of these kinds of change is part of our history of thinking about the posthuman, and each scenario has been dealt with in literature either as a prophesy of things to come or as an attempt to better understand what has happened.

Virginia Woolf's New Mind and Long Memory

Virginia Woolf famously said that human character changed around December 1910, and although it is unclear what she meant exactly-was she talking about literature rather than the world-she was not alone in being interested in a possible change in the way that humans perceived the world (Woolf, 1967, p. 321). Avant-garde movements such as Futurism proclaimed the beginning of a new age, and this idea of the new human following the influences of Nietzsche, among others, was also a preamble for the political rhetoric of the new human.

Despite all the radicalism evoked by movements like Futurism, it is sometimes the more subtle contributions that proved the most important and prescient. Woolf is interesting from this perspective. In her late work Orlando about a man who travels in time and transcends among other things gender, she writes:

> The sound of the trumpets died away and Orlando stood stark naked. No human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman's grace. (Woolf, 1998, p. 132-133)

This theme of transgressing a border like gender is also central to theories relating to cyborgs, for example Donna Haraway sees the realm opened by human-machine interactions as one where gender is transfigured (Haraway, 2003, p. 9).

Returning to Woolf's work, most of which does not contain supernatural figures like Orlando, it is possible to see how she struggles with ideas of the new and the connection between humans, their society and their pasts. For a moment in *Jacob's room* the hubris of the young students seems to bring everything together-connection and newness:

> They were boastful, triumphant; it seemed to both that they had read every book in the world; known every sin, passion and joy. Civilisations stood round them like flowers ready for picking. Ages lapped at their feet like waves fit for sailing. And surveying all this, looming through the fog, the lamplight, the shades

> of London, the young men decided in favour of Greece. / 'Probably,' said Jacob, 'we are the only people in the world who know what the Greeks meant.' (Woolf, 1999, pp. 101-2)

The importance of feeling a coherence of this kind is a sustained interest for Woolf, and is reflected in her many attempts to make her novels multi-perspective in order to break free from the isolation of the subject. Still true coherence cannot be found and with that the idea of humanity is fragile:

> Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. (Woolf, 1976, p. 72)

Woolf writes that she sees this when she has a chock. The idea of the new human puts identity at stake, puts the coherence of humankind at stake, but at the same time she finds no answer to the true nature of humans-only the paradox that there is something that looks like an artwork, but not one that we can believe in. That is unless the evolutionary process is such an artwork, which Woolf herself points to, when she describes how she connects with thousands of years of ancestors that have provided her with instincts. In such a way, evolution becomes an enchanted process that provide coherence without submitting to the idea of a creator outside of the world, but to processes within the world. Yet, for some the processes of nature was not enough.

The New Man as a Political Project

Early on in the Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky said that the ultimate purpose of the revolution was to "master first the semiconscious and then the subconscious process in his own organism." Much later in the last decade of Soviet communism a pamphlet declared that the country had become the home of "a new and higher type of *Homo Sapiens: Homo sovieticus*" (Cheng, 2009, p. 3). Of course propaganda does not reflect real life, but the ambition of linking political projects with the idea of having insight into the very nature of human beings as well as planning how to fix the mistakes of evolution.

What has been produced in the aftermath of such projects is a literature of resistance to such big projects, which more often than not shows how such projects fail because the complexity of material existence, humans and their way of living together, are too difficult to figure out. The literature often shows how human identity is connected with memory and laments the last human.

This is the case for the Chinese writer Mo Yan, who has written about both the Big Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution with great respect for the victims of these historical events combined with a subtle way of showing how irrational desires, imagination and the need for some sort of enchantment works as a destabilizing element that eventually prevents the grand

projects from becoming reality. His tales are realistic and painful, yet they are also optimistic by showing that no political system can ever gain complete control over these complex beings that are humans. Many of Mo Yan's tales centre around the natural world and folklore figures highly. His approach mixes realistic description with dreamy and fantastic scenarios that apparently counter the pietism of the grand projects.

One story "Soaring" is the bizarre tale of a young woman Yanyan who seeks refuge in a tree and refuses to come down despite the pleas of her family:

> "Yanyan," Hong Xi shouted, "you're still human, aren't you?" If there's an ounce of humanity left in you, you'll come down from there." (Mo Yan, 2001, p. 94)

The story evolves into a discussion of ethics and whether it is legitimate to shoot down Yanyan:

> "In your arms, she's your wife, but perched atop a tree, she's some kind of strange bird." (Mo Yan, 2001, p. 95)

Upon which a policeman shoots and kills her. As she is lying on the ground Mo Yan describes two reactions among the spectators. They want to know whether she is dead, and whether she has feathers (Mo Yan, 2001, p. 96).

The era of grand projects and hyperbolic rhetoric seems to be over. Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge regime stands as one of the last failed and tragic experiments, at least if one holds that there no such agenda in North Korea today. But tales such as Mo Yan's or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* still serve as warnings about projects and politics that claim to have figured out exactly what a human being is and what it needs.

Cloning and Cult

Biotechnology's potential for changing the human condition has found its way into more literature as the technology has developed. Two very different contemporary authors have made rounded novelistic contributions centered on this subject, namely the French author Michel Houellebecq and the British author Kazuo Ishiguro.

Michel Houellebecq wrote an article a few years ago expressing his desire to be cloned. He started out by saying that he despises himself, but that he could identify even less with his son, since he only reflected half of his genetic code. In Houellebecq's novels two works stand out as taking up the issue of posthumanity. In *Les Particules mentaires* the postscript describes a transformation of the human that was genetic and applied by UNESCO to create the first new human on 27 March 2029 (Houellebecq, 2001, p. 263). The afterword talks about humanity as the first species able to imagine and enact its own transgression. After having bashed contemporary society over the course of the novel, the postscript somewhat surprisingly declares that the book is dedicated to the human.

In *La possibilit d'une le* the narrative goes back and forward in time between our

contemporary Daniel, who has been cloned more than twenty times in succession to create some kind of illusion of immortality. Sitting in little cells the clones read about the original Daniel and they grow more and more confused about their role. Eventually the 25th Daniel decides to leave his cell, a universe so boring and controlled that the descendants no longer want to live in it, and joins the tribe of mortal humans in the wilderness (Houellebecq, 2005, p. 283).

Houellebecq thereby makes a very effective double critique similar to that of the postscript in *Les Particules mentaires*: we shouldn't be too happy about our world, but things to come may be worse. It is most of all also a celebration of imperfection. That does not mean that humans should not set goals or aim higher, but that-despite the harsh tone of his work-tolerance is something that should be maintained. And what threatens this *status quo* is, among other things, the cult of the young; a thing that Houellebecq's alter ego finds everywhere in what he calls a perpetual genocide on the elderly.

Another interesting aspect of Houellebecq's novel is of course the scenario that a cult-like group would be able to make radical experiments with human beings outside of democratic control. With all kinds of technology becoming more and more accessible, it is hard not to imagine some mad scientist somewhere trying to be a modern Prometheus-this seems even more likely than the UNESCO model of making advances and new opportunities available to more than six, seven or ten billion individuals.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* from 2005, which has now also been made into a motion picture, is set in England in the 1990s and describes Kathy H. who lives among a secluded group of people in the countryside. Gradually the reader discovers that they are clones of other people and that they have been put into the world to deliver spare parts such as kidneys, livers, etc. for their older duplicates. The reader watches in desperation, as these subjects adjust to their fate and talk about being brave during the last phase, when their bodies are emptied of vital organs.

Ishiguro's novel is of course dystopic and while the theme may seem uncommon at first glance to a writer whose fame owes a lot to the cinematic version of *The Remains of the Day*, it is also obvious that the theme of upstairs and downstairs has been given a further existential turn of the screw in *Never Let Me Go*. An unequal world made even more unequal (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 263).

But one could also hope that Ishiguro's tale is actually behind the technological curve. Perhaps human donors will not even be needed in the future, because laboratories can grow-or even "print"-organs, and provide a future that in certain aspects will be much better than literature could imagine just a few years ago. Still, visions of a better future are scarce commodity at the beginning of the 21st century.

1960s v. 2010: What Happened to the Future?

Literature has been and is a great explorer of the potential reactions of humanity to different scenarios, with the advantage that it can address

different aspects of human change alongside each other. But the critical function of literature is also one that could be described as being as much as a vice as a virtue. Idyllic scenarios do not make great literature, but what is perhaps more interesting is that there is often a general disregard in cultural media for what the world will become in the long run. The popular and optimistic images of the space age developing do not have an equivalent today. Instead our field of vision is filled with images of the problems of climate changes and the perception of biotech and man-machine interaction as developments that dehumanize. The uncanny aspects of the posthuman and of natural disasters seem to comprise the shared visions of the future, even if less bleak futures seem just as realistic.

Can the excitement for and positive attitude toward the future be regained? One could argue that art and literature, at least sometimes, should try to present visions where coherence between body, consciousness (and with that the idea of a self) and society is obtainable. Perhaps art's virtue in this respect is it's ability to be both cautious and adventurous in its dealings with future scenarios. In any case, given the historically close links between aesthetics, ethics, and imagination, it is likely that literature and art will continue to make visions of the future and giving voice to the emotions that we can attach to complex scenarios and thus continue to help us imagine things before they suddenly arrive unexpected into the world for better or for worse.

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