

ON ALI MOINI'S AVATAR HACKING¹

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"The project is a platform where through a 100% mechanical pulley system, a human size marionette and me/performer have the possibility to interact. The machine works as a transmitter/translator of movement, with which I will work on demands, agreements, affection, intersections, differences, transportation, hybridization, accompaniment, anger, violence, manipulation... between me and a double of me."

Ali Moini, FIMFA (2018)

IMAGE 1.

VIDEO STILL: ALI MOINI "MAN ANAM KE ROSTAM BOVAD PAHLAVAN"

LISBON FESTIVAL OF MARIONETTES AND ANIMATED FORMS FIMFA LX18, MAY 15–16, 2018, TEATRO MARIA MATOS (HERE MAY 15, 2018).



1. "MAN ANAM KE ROSTAM BOVAD PAHLAVAN": ON THE MOVEMENT OF USURPATION/POSSESSION

A complex and precise human–artifact relationship questioning the creator and its avatar is enacted in Ali Moini's unique performance that I assisted in May 2018 in Lisbon at the FIMFA international puppet theater festival. Moini provokes a transformation of the digital proxies, doubles, or playable characters such as avatars and electronic placeholders that have become ubiquitous. The dramaturgic strategy of mutual transformation of human into machine—*cyberization*—and machine into human—*anthropomorphism*—is reflected in Moini's performance entitled "Man anam ke Rostam bovad pahlavan." The mysterious

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and strange Persian title of the performance is derived from an Iranian/Persian proverb, of one of its most important cultural figures — *Rostam* — a generous, genius, powerful character of the Persian pre-Islamic myth of the Epic of Kings. In this Persian myth — the only one that has been entirely transmitted, fixed in writing by Ferdowsi in the 10th century as “Shah-Nameh” — Rostam kills hundreds of giants and demons. Whoever utters the proverb proposes a manipulative rhetorical act related to a — I would not say false, but — *plagiary inheritance* of equality of fame and power with Rostam. A possible translation that Moini proposes would be: “I am the one, though/since Rostam is and will be the ultimate champion” (Moini, December 7, 2020, personal communication).

According to Moini, the utterer of the proverb hopes that the listener will not find out about the cheat because of the confusion created. Thus, in the words of Ali Moini, “the proverb is simply a bluff, but as it’s playing with misunderstanding and misleading through linguistic games, it’s not an obvious bluff!” (Moini, December 7, 2020, personal communication).

Let us go beyond the language game of cheating and manipulation and ask of Moini’s performance: What if the unreal and manipulation are taking over our reality, including not only words and actions but the entire physical and fully embodied world, including its actions, actors’ roles, and personae?

2. BEYOND AVATAR DREAMS AND AVATARISM

Moini focuses on the re-materialization of direct body-force manipulation in which the approaches of machine readability and digital motion capture tools (Delbridge 2015; Karremann 2017) are called into question. Moini does not adhere to chimera-identity effects of anticipated imaginations of programmed movements within the cultural *avatar dream* (Fox

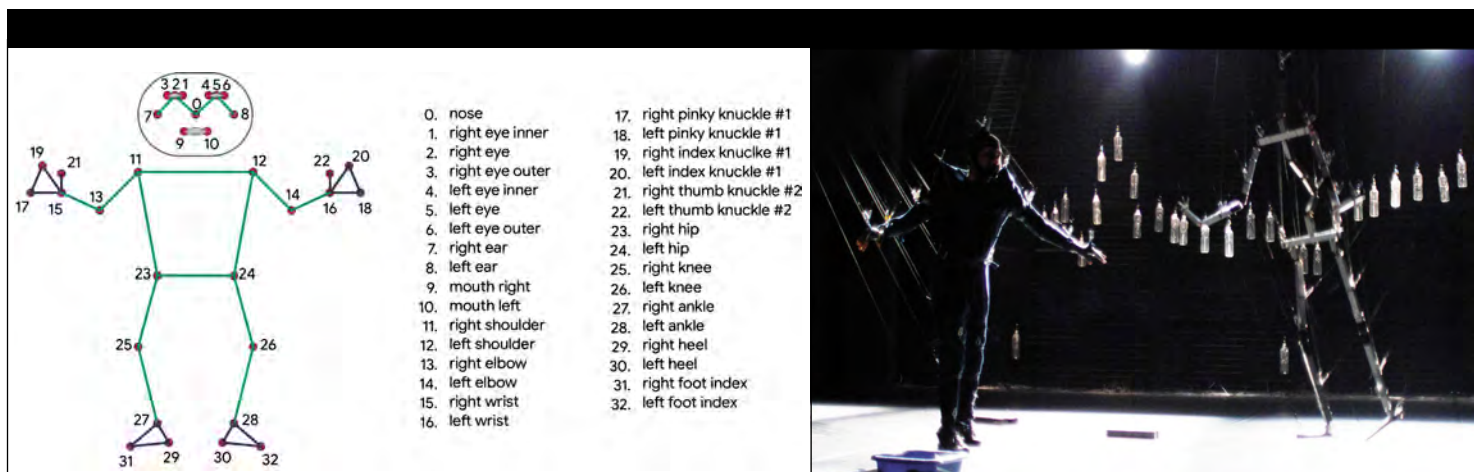


IMAGE 2.
VALENTIN BAZAREVSKY AND IVAN GRISHCHENKO, RESEARCH ENGINEERS, GOOGLE RESEARCH (AUGUST 13, 2020), *ON-DEVICE, REAL-TIME BODY POSE TRACKING WITH MEDIAPIPE BLAZEPOSE*

GOOGLE AI BLOG: RETRIEVED ONLINE SCREENSHOT FROM [HTTPS://AI.GOOGLEBLOG.COM/2020/08/ON-DEVICE-REAL-TIME-BODY-POSE-TRACKING.HTML](https://ai.googleblog.com/2020/08/on-device-real-time-body-pose-tracking.html)

IMAGE 3.
MOINI AND HIS AVATAR PLAYING WITH THE T-POSE.

PHOTO TAKEN FROM “MAN ANAM KE ROSTAM BOVAD PAHLAVAN,” PHOTO: YANN GIBERT, 2018

Harrell & Lim 2017). Moini's performance critically and forcefully reflects his bodily resistance to future artistic visions such as virtual identity surrogates or avatar dreams. Moini does not follow motion-capture performance aesthetics; instead, he critically plays with the zero point or pole position of such endeavors, such as in the *T-pose*, the default shape of the humanoid game models used to calibrate and initiate motion capture and rendering. The T-pose is essential as a placeholder for animations (or imaginations) not yet completed. However, in a repeated sequence at the beginning, the performer slips out of these motion-capture poses—and so does his double on stage after a short delay—as if incapable of being captured, as a glitch in a material system of motion and movement appropriation. The aesthetics of the avatar pushes us into a post-digital age in which we can track movements and create movement skeletons, such as with the digital movement program *Kinect*, with body or face-tracking applications, and then apply an “*avateering*” software such as *Vitruvius* that enables control of any humanoid 3D model, in which not only is motion captured in dance and gesture research, but computer-aided anthropomorphic agents become part of performances.

Nowadays we enter fields of high-tech robotics: dance is co-opted as a slave movement to transpose a movement pattern from one performer to many others, scrapping human uniqueness for the posthuman “singularity” (Kurzweil 2005). In a recent research paper titled “Everybody dance now,” Chan et al. (2019) put forward the idea that we can usurp the dance movement of another dancer/mover, called the *source*, by transferring body movements via algorithms to video image footage of someone else, the *target*, as an elaborate uncanny ghosting movement in *AI puppeteering*. The principle, in this case, is a real-time target matching and a “do as I do” motion retargeting that makes “everybody” (including several virtually re-embodied targets) “dance” in the same way as the source movement. This mechanism should be critically considered a human-mimetic artificially-embodied AI in which dance movement is recorded from one person and transferred in a usurpation of the other's strength, a non-synchronized feedback loop reapplied to a targeted dancer.

This concept of source/target doppelgängers, the limited imitative sameness of mirror-image avatars or digitally and mechanically reproduced puppets (Wolfson 2018), is in steep contrast to Moini's live performance, which no longer fits into digital doubling motion capture tools of digital avatar corpses that have to be animated by the dance moves of others. The uncanny ludic play between “death” and “life” is controlled by the equilibrium between tension and counter-tension.

The game is to play with the other's counterweight resistance and the limits in its choreographies of movement to avoid crashing in the danger zone between freedom and necessary constraints (Serres 1995: 106–107). Only in the end is the tension of the steel cables released, and with rapid moments, the steel cables spring into the air, and the avatar form collapses into disorder. If the avatar performance system of Moini is a defense of liberal *avatarism* (Fodor 2021), freedom of form and the transmitted, animated, or expressed self-image are called into question as the avatar is finally suspended in the air, unbound, and the performer freed not from becoming an avatar, but from his double.

An avatar without a head or eye gaze, such as Moini's or the chimeras of actors/masks without gaze, renders visible the absence of a living human body, in which a human visage (Artaud 1947)/human voice is missing. This absence of the human echoes as well in the work of the contemporary artist and theater-maker Susanne Kennedy and her posthuman avatars on stage: “I see a theatre where the voice no longer belongs to the body, the face is no longer the conveyor of emotion (...). In the end, the actor becomes imperceptible” (Susanne Kennedy cited in Trueman 2018). Moreover, Susanne Kennedy declares, “I see a theatre where the protagonist no longer exists and the stage where he used to stand in the center of it all, is filled with other beings—human and non-human. They speak with voices and faces that are not their own. They communicate in languages we have yet to learn” (Kennedy 2015). Moini's performance resonates with Susanne Kennedy's vision of a post-digital avatar theater, although the two take contrasting approaches to its aesthetic realization.

In the fields of performative arts such as dance and theater, as well as in cinema, the avatar becomes different to a mere playable gaming character. Thus, we can ask what the *lived bodies in time* factor tells us about the differences between theater, cinema, and dance and the missing avatar gaze in Moini: Is it true that cinematic “events” in the sense of transitionless transitions—or theater, and I include dance—as “reactions to events” (Eisenstein 1949: 6), by which the possibility of the other and its gravitas of a persona on stage or screen are given in the first place, are rendered impossible or diminished by the introduction of repetitive avatar play?

Florian Malzacher’s vision of contemporary political theater, *Gesellschaftsspiele* (2020), shows how avatars as digital and perfect representations are re-embodied on stage imperfectly and gain human actors’ flaws. Two examples he gives are the android double of the actor Thomas Melle in *Uncanny Valley* (2018) and Susanne Kennedy’s *Coming Society* (2019), as well as other works by the same artist, in which actors play with avatar-masks of their own faces, thus emphasizing the singularity of the event of acting live on stage and the importance of live characters being unable to repeat hand movements, swallow, tremble, breathe, and sweat despite its repetitive Avatar game:



IMAGE 4.
THE SCULPTURE AND SCENIC
INSTALLATION OF MANNEQUIN-
CORPSES ON STAGE AS AVATARS
AND SYMBOLS OF YOUNGER
SELVES OF THE ACTORS IN
KANTOR’S “UMARŁA KLASA”
THEATER OF THE DEAD.

PHOTO: ADRIAN GRYCUK - EIGENES WERK, CC
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ORG/W/INDEX.PHP?CURID=24274872](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=24274872)



IMAGE 5.
VIDEO STILL SCREENSHOT
FROM THE FILM ADAPTATION:
TADEUSZ KANTOR “UMARŁA KLASA”
(DEAD CLASS)

YOUTUBE [HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/
WATCH?V=A235HHGFIPS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A235HHGFIPS) (05.05.2021)

The perspective of theater is not one from the future, but one directed toward the future. A world in which humanity has dissolved into nature, technology, or data, theater cannot represent, cannot depict. But it can represent the rapid changes from a human perspective and explore scope for action.

“Susanne Kennedy stages a similar game under reversed conditions in *Coming Society* (2019), when she has avatars—inadequately—represented by humans. Their trembling, their rapid breathing, their sweat are the connecting channel to the audience. Just as little as the Melle-bot can dance, so little can Kennedy’s performers embody themselves in a way that would be appropriate for virtual figures.”
(Malzacher 2019: 46, my translation)

With avatars that function as *playable characters* we are not so much concentrated on their gaze, but more on what we can do with them as an *action* play and how we influence the avatar's movement as a complete character. Humans have gravitas when they mimic and play: What does it mean to be human? What is this *ritual of doing* and *enacting* theater to mimic and play a character in film? It is about a live ritual for the still alive but coming dead, about the process of dying—or about playing with the “dead class” puppets or avatars of younger pupil selves as a preparation for our loneliness of memorizing the past and our self-doubles over time, such as in Tadeusz Kantor's *The Dead Class* (1975). The death mask and photography have in common that they are both relics of the past of a person or a moment of time gone, but preserved to see and touch.

3. THE ART OF HACKING THE DIGITAL BY PHYSICAL AVATAR HACKING

We can describe the challenging movement game of Ali Moini's performance, which includes the realization of a metal-rod avatar as a reflexive and reactive double of the performer on stage, as a play between vectors of force and embodied rehearsals of systematic resistance to scalar cultural games of mere synthetic simulation and recursivity of actions (e.g., digitized kinetic avatars). The mechanic details that Moini hacks into show strong resistance to pressure and require a “*vectorialist*” position of attention on the part of both the performer on stage and the audience that partakes. In the words of Yves Citton:

“(...) we should not lose sight of the fact that attention itself is a vector, pressure, orientation, “direction of effort”, Zuwendung, (...) The vectorialist class is not exploitative because of its “power to move anything and everything”, but because of its requirement that “value be realized” in countable terms. Such is THE TRUE CHALLENGE OF DIGITAL CULTURES now emerging: how can you take advantage of the vectorial power of the digital without allowing yourself to be imprisoned in the scalar cages of digitization? Only the art of interference, the elusive strength of hackers, can rise to such a challenge—which is at the heart of the attention ecology in the age of its electrification.” (Citton 2017: 78)

Moini does not define himself as a mere dancer nor as a hacker. I would nevertheless call him a deep cultural hacker—taking advantage of vectorial and material-embodied aesthetic thinking and mechanical movement, power, and strength while interfering in existing patterns of artistic gestures to rebuild systems of acting, involvement, and play within encounters of alterity to install proper performative degrees and qualities of freedom. In this description, Moini's avatar double performance shows movements of resisting and gestures of avatar hacking. By contrasting constellations between the mediating body gestures of the performer and the effected action in the steel puppet we can speak of double movement gestures, which have the peculiarity of showing that they show themselves (cf. Mersch 2014)

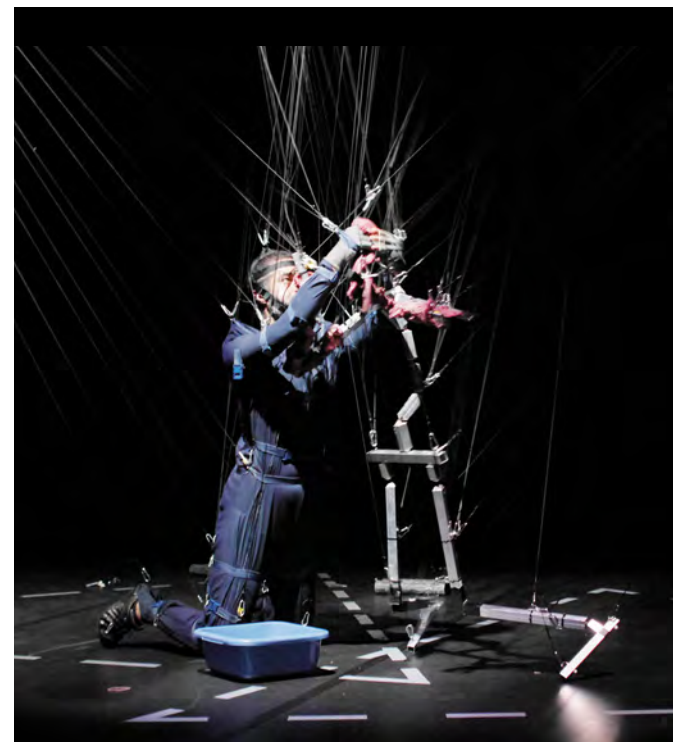


IMAGE 6.

ALI MOINI “MAN ANAM KE ROSTAM BOVAD PAHLAVAN”: MOINI HACKING INTO HIS AVATAR MOVEMENT PUPPET PHOTO: YANN GIBERT, 2018

in this doubling effect in the sense of a direct reflection on stage: “a double perception because it also makes something perceptible, just as it exhibits the perception of this perception, the showing of self-showing, as it were” (Mersch 2019: 219).

Moini does not see the human body as what lies at the core of his choreographic activities, but in his performances he places the human body in a larger context, such as in his architectonic mechanical bond/avatar installation, in which the articulations, the bonds, the counterweights, the strengths, and the pressures weigh as equally essential measures.

Moini has more than only his skin in the game. However, his avatar system mediates his fully fleshed out, embodied world with movement—that no disembodied global data nets, despite any quantitative total availability of digital avatars, could ever offer us. The question is: Has the avatar in Moini’s performance become a representative of a symbolic order in its place that mediates the symbolic *other* that locates it in playful tension? Is this avatar a sovereign or a ghost of a digital order that becomes an “other” in the material world? Does the avatar gameplay lead to confusion and the abolition of differences so that the symbolic order of difference between the living and the non-animate becomes endangered? Or, as it seems, does the idea of the avatar itself become hacked and questioned?

Via a system of strings, pulleys, and counterweights, Moini puppeteers his full-body movements and gestures. After the show *My Paradoxical Knives*, in which Moini was connected with knives and tapes and wore elastics and magnets, he deepened his performative research on human motion in the show “Lives.” In the current show, in joining a metal self-duplicating marionette, the performer requires a third or parasitic noise (cf. Serres 2007) to

provide counterbalance. This equilibrium tension between human and mechanical entity is provided by bottled water as a third balancing weight, which mediates. What mediates is the *weight of water*. Water is the most valuable material of life on planet earth. Water is the most critical resource for human beings, from which our bodies benefit and regenerate. This is a real-life reference to the ecological, nature-life-artifact balance, based on the weight of water, a substance which is under threat and has begun to be treated as a tradable commodity or an asset in the markets of the world economy.

In his performative work of art, Ali Moini deepens artistic research on human movement, exploring the possibilities of a human-machine and its other, by regenerate creating a diagrammatic self: water in bottles as balancing counterweights and as a symbol

for the carrying capacity that sustains the fragility of human life’s material-biological necessities. His choreographic play encompasses almost all of Roger Caillois’s (2001) categories of play, localized between mechanic gamification, *paidia*, and *ludus* play, between vertigo and mimetic mask. regenerate Moini’s performance also engages with agonic occurrences in movement-hunts

between the actor and avatar, with whirling, swinging, and spinning vertigo (another category of play, *ilinx*). This movement doubling leads to a transformative mimetic of fleshing out the avatar in this phase of the performance, where Moini as performer in the encounter dresses the avatar marionette with raw meat, and finally restructures the avatar wiring. The mimetic game of the double becomes less imitative but even more uncanny.



IMAGE 7.

ALI MOINI AND HIS AVATAR SLIDE TO THE SURFACE OF THE STAGE. PHOTO TAKEN FROM “MAN ANAM KE ROSTAM BOVAD PAHLAVAN.”

PHOTO: YANN GIBERT, 2018

Nevertheless, despite the variety of play, no aleatoric moments are shown. In contrast with unthinking chance, Moini's movements need to be precise to avoid his being harmed by the metal avatar.

In Ali Moini's performance, the avatar play shows us the danger of our unconscious attitude towards movement mechanization and the algorithmic doubling of ourselves. Moini confronts us with the threat of handing over ourselves to the algorithmic rationality of the posthuman via contemporary avatars.

4. ACTOR & FULL-BODY MARIONETTE: A STEEL-CABLE BOUND CONTRACT SYSTEM

The movements of the human dancer and the avatar are performed on a threefold diagrammatically drawn and circumscribed performance field of dotted white lines on the surface of the stage—1) a human performer zone 2) an area for the artifact/puppet, and 3) an overlapping zone of human performer-artifact encounter—indicating the attached bonds of the relation between the lifeless marionette and the entire body puppeteer as a comprehensive acting object (Lucie 2020), or the quasi-object bonds of the in-between of weights and movements connecting the two entities. These spatial designations include, to an even more significant degree, a 3-D dimension of pulleys, 2000 meters of wires, carabiners, and 45 water bottles stretched on fine steel cables—revealing the potential of the human-machine hybrid that is never wholly balanced but is almost always under the tension of its cords.

This provides us with a performative thinking similar to what Michel Serres in *The Natural Contract* (1995) describes as a materialized—pre-language—contract. In this contract, a complex system of pulleys and cords between technology, human action, and artifact shows us a state between bondage, constraints, and degrees of freedom of movement—in the case of Moini with his action double, thus a contract with his movement avatar beyond any fictitious bluff:

What kind of contract do we as spectators observe in Ali Moini's performance of strings and bonds of mechanical movement transmission? Moini extends his reach by use of the avatar bonds, the sturdy and thin steel cables, via the carabiners, that bind him to his marionette double, the movement avatar. Together, they choreograph a de-phased double radius of freedom for a human performer and physical double to move and act in a finite playing field, but movements always occur with a temporal delay, during which Moini struggles against



IMAGE 8.

ALI MOINI "MAN ANAM KE
ROSTAM BOVAD PAHLAVAN"

PHOTO: YANN GIBERT

the resistance of the entire system of bodyweights binding him. We hear the strings and the pulleys work together with the two bodies' weight in the performance production process. Because the mechanical pulley block consists of rollers (fixed or loose) and rope or metal strings, if you lift the body load with the help of the pulley block, the avatar body's burden (=the weight of the load) is distributed evenly over all load-bearing ropes.

5. DEEP PLAY WITH THE OTHER

After displaying the performer's body clinging to the strings, the performance enters the approximation phase between the interlinked performer and his avatar. This phase of approximation, with slower and more careful movements, follows a stage of a rapid chasing that transforms the fight for a state similar to the sense of "animal mirrors" (Geertz 2006: 433) of live avatar fights used in "surrogate" (Geertz 2006: 436) cultural and social struggles for superiority. In contrast to avatars fighting animals, the danger and vulnerability fall entirely onto the performer Moini, who has to avoid a bloody crashing into his interlinked metal rod avatar in the serious theater game on stage. In another phase, besides leaning forward, a stasis-like movement of lying horizontally back in space is observable.

This moment is not a movement of gliding to the floor as a slip and error of an initial apprenticeship through failure: an intentional failing in the attempt to move, an intentional falling—as Laurie Anderson² explained it—as a chance to catch yourself from falling, falling as a chance for a new step, a beginning, childlike, slipping to the ground and getting up into a position between upright and floating. I saw Moini as a performer intentionally falling, failing better, and by that underlining what it is to be human on stage. The slipping from the upright position to the stage is performed as a kinesthetic dance that has turned from the attitude of a spectator of surrogates to becoming a co-dependent system with its avatar.

Instead of being an anthropomorphic computer or other, we break out of the simulation; we break out of the substitution of a material human body with an avatar: Moini offers us a performative gift. Each choreographic constellation of playing with the bound steel cables of his metal-rod avatar in counterbalance with the weight of the water bottles via the pulley system is a fresh new start for the material encounter with our unknown other. One might interpret the idea of the usurpation of strength taken from the human and handed over to an abstract double as an avatar-making machine that mimics a mechanical materialized marionette. Later, this fully embodied puppeteering machine leads to a fleshed-out posthuman version of a half-being—half-alive and still dead, an in-between "third," reconstructed between human movement, performance, and skeleton-avatar form, leaving behind mere anthropomorphic mimicry. Both Moini's interdependent problematic avatar double marionette and the human player may be considered each other's non-fictional but force-driven and physically resisting avatar. The two dynamic performance movements crystallize in a constellation of what Spinoza (2018: 161) called *human bondage* that should be translated as our "servitude." This servitude relation is released, and the tension catapults the avatar composed of metal rods, carabiners, and steel cables up into the air at the end of the performance, until the metal rod avatar is left hanging, suspended in a deranged order: inanimate motionless matter.

² In the song *Walking and Falling* of the 1982 album *Big Science* Laurie Anderson expresses the paradox of movement (walking) and falling: "You're walking. And you don't always realize it,/but you're always falling./With each step you fall forward slightly./And then catch yourself from falling./ Over and over, you're falling./ And then catching yourself from falling./And this is how you can be walking and falling/at the same time" (Anderson, 1982).

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