

# The Creation of Cultural Identity through Weekly Newsreels in Germany in the 1950s

As Illustrated by the NEUE DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU and the UFA-WOCHENSCHAU (With a Side Glance at the DEFA Weekly Newsreel DER AUGENZEUGE)

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## 1. HOW THE NEWSREEL DEVELOPED IN GERMANY AFTER 1945

With the end of World War II and the complete defeat of Germany by the Allied victors, the existing German media system was dissolved and subsequently reorganized. The Allies had attributed to the media a strong propagandistic effect on the German population during the Nazi period, especially during the war. So, after the war it was considered necessary to reorganize and re-educate the media for the purpose of democratization. Movie theaters were forbidden to use editions of the Nazi DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU [GERMAN NEWSREEL] still existing, which, from Berlin, had continually announced German victories during the war (though often these were in fact defeats). Instead, newsreels made quickly by the American, British, French and Soviet allies were shown in their respective occupation zones.

However, towards the end of 1945 these were already being replaced by newsreels which were produced in Germany and in German on the instructions of the Allies. They may have had German titles like WELT IM FILM [WORLD IN FILM], BLICK IN DIE WELT [GAZE ONTO THE WORLD] and WELT

IM BILD [WORLD IN IMAGE], but they were still regarded by the populace as a propaganda tool of the occupying powers. The German-language American newsreel FOX TÖNENDE WOCHENSCHAU [FOX SOUNDING NEWSREEL] was the only one to overtly display its American origins.

The propagandistic character that had defined the wartime newsreels had a lasting impact on the image of newsreels as an information tool and was initially retained in the Allied newsreels—albeit with a more moderate tone—and filled with new content. Instead of a final victory, the campaigning was now for the construction of a new state and new values. Between 1946 and 1949, newsreels were aiming to re-educate the Germans to embrace democracy. However, the style and air of communication began to change—albeit slowly. With the beginning of the 1950s more far-reaching changes started to come about, manifesting most clearly in West Germany in the NEUE DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU [NEW GERMAN NEWSREEL] (cf. Hickethier 2006). As early as 1946, in the Soviet occupation zone a new form of communicating political content in movie theaters came about with the establishment of AUGENZEUGEN [EYEWITNESSES], produced by DEFA under Kurt Maetzig; but from 1949, with the founding of the two German states, its reach remained largely limited to the GDR/East Berlin area of circulation. As a prominent film director, Maetzig created an information instrument in AUGENZEUGEN, which, after the wartime newsreels of the Nazi era broke new paths in its production in a way more striking than the newsreels of the West, above all trying out a new form of addressing the audience (cf. Mückenberger/Jordan 1994). AUGENZEUGEN's new, ultimately less fervent tone, wider variety of voices and occasionally personal form of reporting (ibid., pp. 209, 211) were cut back, however, with the intensification of the Cold War, which was played out mainly in the media, along with implementation of new principles of design in the 1950s.

In the West, a new German newsreel was based on the British newsreel WELT IM FILM [WORLD IN FILM] which, through its name, was connected to the German tradition on the one hand, while on the other hand it worked to distance itself from just that—the NEUE DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU [NEW GERMAN NEWSREEL]. My statements in what follows relate to this newsreel.

In 1949/1950 a dedicated company, DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU GMBH [GERMAN NEWSREEL LIMITED], was founded for the NEUE DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU (hereafter, NDW). It was based in Hamburg, first in the

Aby Warburg-Haus in Harvestehude, and then shortly afterwards in Hamburg-Rahlstedt, in close proximity to the Geyer film laboratory, which considerably shortened the production routes. DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU GMBH was a public enterprise belonging to the West German Government, answerable to the Press Office of the West German Government and thus to the Speaker of the West German Government. Nevertheless, it produced newsreels independently and without direct instructions from Bonn. After several changes, its head from 1958 to 1965 was the journalist, screenwriter and director Manfred Purzer, who politically was close to the CDU [Christian Democratic Union].<sup>1</sup>

One cannot dispute that the NDW's basic attitude was governmental, the newsreel having emerged with the aspiration of being a German production and offering a German view of the world. The fact that this was then primarily a governmental point of view and also in turn the view of the conservative-liberal camp seemed to many viewers, if they even noticed it, a matter of course and it was not understood to be an objective reproduction of reality.

With great effort, this NEUE DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU succeeded in asserting itself as the leading weekly newsreel in the West German motion picture market of the 1950s, as described by Sigrun Lehnert (2013). It certainly helped that the DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU GMBH was so closely connected to the West German Government, complying with the authoritarian state mentality of West German society in the 1950s. Though the West German Government wanted to dispense with its film holdings, it met with opposition in the market-economy-minded CDU/FDP [Christian Democratic Union/Free Democratic Party].

In 1956 three new film corporations were founded in West Germany with massive amounts of state aid. These would go on to help German film emerge from being a fragmented, small-scale film industry into new international standing: UFA Film AG, which was closely associated with UFA Theater AG, and Bavaria Film AG. UFA Film AG was designated to DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU GMBH, the West German Government only holding a blocking minority as a stockholder.

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1 Cf. Anonymous: Issue 314. In: *Der Spiegel* dated 8 September 1965 (about Purzer and the CDU). Also digitally available from: <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-46274017.html> [15 June 2016].

But the newly established film corporations were not destined to survive the movie theater crisis that was beginning in 1957 caused by mismanagement. In 1963 the West German Government reacquired the newsreel company from the declining UFA corporation, despite having no promising new approach to communicating news through motion pictures. With movie theaters closing their doors all over Germany, the number of newsreel subscribers fell, threatening loss of the economic basis for the newsreel production. For that reason, in the 1960s the newsreel company also produced more commissioned films and German magazines for the West German Government's work abroad. Despite this effort, newsreel production was discontinued altogether in 1977. Newsreels could no longer compete with the more accelerated and extensive, up-to-the-minute news coverage of television (cf. Hickethier 1998). Viewing of motion pictures in general had also shifted from movie theaters to television.

In the second half of the 1950s criticism of the newsreel was increasing. It was called to account, in particular, for its proximity to the government as well as for its entertaining nature and the fragmentation and diversity of its topics. In a widely published essay, the later famous commentator on politics and current affairs and critic Hans Magnus Enzensberger criticized just that kaleidoscope-like quality (which the newsreel-makers had until then seen as something positive about their product), saying it prevented viewers from developing political consciousness (cf. Enzensberger 1957).

There were fierce disputes in the media when in 1962 the West German Government took the newsreel completely into government ownership, not least with the political opposition, the SPD [Social Democratic Party]. By that time, however, the newsreel had already lost most of its importance as an audiovisual information tool in favor of television. Therefore, even though it took place under the social democratic-liberal West German Government headed by Schmidt/Genscher, the demise of the newsreel was ultimately due to structural causes, not to politics: The newsreel was no longer current—next to television's news programs and behind-the-headlines reports, it was already outdated the day it came out (cf. Hickethier 2011).

## 2. THE FUNCTION OF THE NEWSREEL IN THE MOVIE BUSINESS

In the 1950s, a special public-oriented function fell to the newsreel of educating viewers about the world. Produced relatively soon after the event in question, the newsreel offered an audiovisual report in moving pictures to which audiences ascribed a high degree of realistic character. This perceived accuracy is due to the character attributed to the photographic image by cultural traditions and conventions as well as the socially consensual view that photographic motion pictures were a direct replica of reality (nature) in the image. As a result, newsreels gave the impression that one had seen the actual events—portrayed as they had taken place. The great majority of audiences did not see that the perspective and angle of the camera, editing and montage, commentary and music were all significant manipulations shaping the viewer's experience.

The newsreel was part of the program at movies, a program which always followed a certain sequence stipulated in Germany by the Imperial Motion Picture Law of 1934, which remained unchanged into the 1960s. The sequence ran as follows: advertising films/newsreel/cultural film/feature film. While the advertising films set the stage of the movie event, the newsreel provided the reality-based part of the program, which in most cases was characterized by a nationalist point of view. The cultural film then offered a more contemplative view of the world, before the feature film's dramatic and beautiful fictional interpretation of a possible world. Thus the course of the program followed the dramaturgical principle of crescendo. The audiences did not come to the movies for the cultural film; nor did they come for the newsreel. They came for the feature film, to enjoy a few pleasant hours in a motion-picture world depicted as eventful and emotionally exciting.

With the propagandistic function of the newsreel intended for it during the Nazi era, i.e., to convey and illustrate a certain world view and ideology, it was important that the audience in fact took in that sequenced program in full and did not arrive at the movie theater after the newsreel had run. Seeing the newsreel was therefore mandatory in the Nazi period and in many cases the entrance doors to the movie theater were closed at the beginning of the newsreel. As a result, in the perception of the movies, the shared identity of the newsreel, culture film and feature film as a se-

quenced—sometimes unpleasant—presentation of reality became culturally entrenched as the presentation of a possible, other and more beautiful world (in fiction).

The legal stipulation of the movie program sequence also continued even after 1945. It was not eliminated in Germany until the mid-1960s, when, with the decline of the movies, such stringent regulations could no longer be enforced. New types of movie theaters emerged with a sophisticated program offering and with no weekly newsreels (so-called art-house movie theaters), which were successful until well into the 1980s. Mentally, however, with its different understanding of programming, television had already replaced viewers' perception of the sequenced movie program as a hard-and-fast pattern for showing movies.

It is of interest when looking at the weekly newsreel that audiences had developed an expectation of reality while at the same time expecting entertainment. The conclusion for newsreel makers was that newsreels—even with all the seriousness of their posts—always had to provide entertainment as well.

### **3. VALUE JUDGMENT AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING IN WEEKLY NEWSREELS**

Having overcome its initial teething problems, the *NEUE DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU* focused on re-establishing national self-esteem without explicitly calling into question the regime of the occupying powers. That was realized through the internal program sequence (i.e. the dramatic composition) of each individual report.

If, for example, a report showed the dismantling of some factories in Germany (and thereby the American occupation forces), the next report would present the successful completion of two new cargo vessels at a shipyard in North Germany. The subtext of “We’re back as an industrial nation” counteracted and undermined the previous account of the dismantlement of industry. If the subject had been about refugees and Soviet POW returnees—which would once again recall their defeat in the war—then the next report would show recently completed housing facilities for the refugees.

Newsreels refrained, in most cases, from explicitly uttering such value judgments out loud, thereby appearing to act with maximum objectivity. Value judgments were made by other means. On the one hand, and in addition to the sequenced reports already described, this was done within individual reports through camera angles, the choice of images and in particular by emotionalizing music. In photographic reports, perspectives were chosen that made the successes seem larger: shots of ships were taken at sharp angles from below to make them look bigger, and the commenting on images of the dismantling mentioned above was done by the plant flags set at half-mast; views of the dismantled plant would be shot from a distance and without exaggerations of heights, making them appear rather insignificant. Additional value judgment occurred through the strategy of embedding, through the positioning of reports within the sequence. For instance, when a newsreel reported about conflicts, the conflict report was surrounded with positive messages and thus neutralized. Music was also used to subtly underscore negative or positive emotionalizing effects as needed, ultimately resolving into pleasing harmony to end in a positive fashion. The viewers' sense of well-being had top priority.

#### 4. THE WEEKLY NEWSREEL AS A GRAND NARRATIVE

The tenor of the first weekly newsreels—until into the second half of the 1950s—is shaped by one major topic: the reconstruction of Germany. Through countless reports it was intimated to viewers again and again that everyone is pitching in, that it is possible to pull off the reconstruction together. Newsreels wanted to convey an optimistic attitude and thus also influence their audiences' perspective on the world.

This topic of reconstruction one can see as the *grand narrative* of the newsreels in the 1950s. The notion of a grand narrative is derived from literature and literary studies and is an account of the world that can substantiate and unite a community, cultural group or nation, through creating a sense of shared culture and history. These can be explicit texts, such as *the Nibelungen* in German, or they may also be historical recollection, such as the references to the Teutons established by the Romantic movement, or common experiences, like the unification of the German Empire in 1870/71.

With our media society's oversized supply of stories, grand narratives similarly coined by content and themes have nowadays become rare. Their community-building function has been taken over by big media-savvy product lines, which, through their continuous public presence and permanent reporting of world affairs from a specific, usually national perspective, make themselves out to be grand narratives.

The newsreel of the 1950s combined both aspects: In terms of content, the continuous narrative of the great successes of reconstruction, and for media-savviness, a new narrative of current world affairs every week. In the 1960s the newsreel, however, proved unable to maintain this last aspect in the face of constantly updated television news broadcasts like the TAGESSCHAU [DAILY NEWS SHOW]. The contents of the narrative then became increasingly sophisticated, showing themselves to be more diverse, and at the same time more complex and confusing (cf. Hickethier 1997).

The newsreel in the 1950s was so effective as a grand narrative for the very reason that it did not carry with it any pretense of a grand narrative, instead allowing one to emerge from many small episodes and reports in the form of simple stories of many varieties, especially in pictures. It thereby primed the way for the audiovisual narrative flow of television news.

The newsreel was an ongoing account of a world evolving from week to week, a chronology of day-to-day events, whose value to the audience was *not* the information provided, most of which they had already gleaned from faster media like the radio or the newspaper. Before television, the value of the newsreel to its audience was that it gave a chronicle of current events in the *form of moving images*. The audience was presented with images which claimed to be evidence of what was shown, allowing them to partake in world events as spectators. And they generally considered what they saw to be true and—in contrast to written and spoken texts—not ideologically colored.

Viewers' attention was maintained by the fact that this image of the world was repeatedly re-composed from week to week out of individual reports, delivering accounts of new events. The concept of topicality shifted in the process. While as late as the 1940s the German term *aktuell* [topical] still referred to a rather local account related to the world of the addressees, of the audience, in the 1950s a concept of topicality based on fast mediation times gained acceptance. The establishment of the *temporal concept of topicality* resulted in coverage by the much faster medium of television (cf.

Hickethier 2008), at the expense of newsreel and its audience-related concept.

Newsreels almost always related their coverage to the world of their addressees, sometimes even when it was inappropriate. Great political events outside Germany, atomic-bomb tests in the Pacific, the Korean War, European conferences, etc.—all were very frequently seen by the newsreel with a view to the consequences they had or might have for Germany. Editors would even frame marginal issues by producing a German aspect, tying them in that way. In 1950 a report about wood raftsmen in Japan was introduced with a comment referring to Bavarian wood raftsmen, only afterwards informing the audience about the fact that the images were from Japan. The foreign was assimilated for the German audience, and thus made easier to integrate into a narrative in which foreign things appeared to be an imitation of German culture.

## 5. THE NEWSREEL—BIOPIC OF A NATION AND NATION-BUILDING?

For all the ambivalence of the notion, the concept of topicality was of great importance for the newsreel. Because there was always the aim of *putting across current events of the day*, providing pictures of the here and now, rather than pictures that might have justified the nation or the historical context of the German state through an old ‘grand narrative’. For contemporaneous viewers, the newsreel however was not really a biographical narrative of the nation. The weekly newsreel can only become a biopic in retrospect—for instance by one looking back from the present day to the newsreels of the 1950s—when we see their various issues as an apparently chronological account visualizing the past for us today. But even then it seems to be more than an audiovisual diary, a journal that requires historical explanation and interpretation, which only by calling on cultural contexts can become an account of the cultural biography of a country.

To what extent, however, did the newsreel, through its grand narrative, bring about social cohesion in the sense of nation-building? Germany’s national cohesion, the awareness of belonging to a common German nation—despite the division of Germany by the Allied forces—was, of course, already in place; it did not have to be created from nothing. It did, however,

need to be upheld and reinforced, there being the possibility of losing it in a decades-long drifting apart of the two German states. The newsreel was of great importance in that it emphasized German unity time and again, reminding its audience of a big overarching communality.

The newsreel conveyed such messages unobtrusively, hidden in news items about current events. Political goings-on—as the newsreel alleged—continuously supplied pictures and commentaries about the basic theme of reconstruction and of the necessity for Western, and later German, unity. In the political image it had of itself, the newsreel was ultimately conservative, matching the political image the West German Government had of itself, without any instruction having been necessary. For the CDU-led government, there was no question but that German unity was not to be given up, that nor must the German territories east of the Oder and Neisse rivers be relinquished, nor any decision about them should be taken immediately rather than in a future peace treaty.

That is why time and again the *NEUE DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU* included reports about the GDR and the “Soviet Occupation Zone”, as it was officially called until the early 1970s. A regular part of newsreels were reports about collectivization processes in the GDR, refugees, persecution and oppression, and growing stringencies on the inner German border, usually put to gloomy, grave music to produce the appropriate emotional frame of mind. Memory was also upheld of the German territories east of the Oder and Neisse, which then belonged to Poland, by reporting continuously on conferences of expellee associations, ultimately with the revanchist undertone that they were to be retrieved.

These reports provided an antithesis to the great number of anecdotal reports about reconstruction in West Germany: While people in the West were doing better and better, as the message went, their lives marked by increasing, if modest, prosperity and growing consumption, Germans in the other part of the country, according to the newsreel, were doing ever worse, often in ways that unsettled West-German audiences.

The newsreel was, however, not alone with such reporting and accounts concerning the political situation of one’s own nation, but rather was in keeping with mainstream reporting and the cultural worldview in West Germany. Newsreels confirmed an existing worldview and were for that very reason particularly effective, committing these ideas as certainties in the minds of their audiences.

Of particular historical importance is this tying of newsreels into the main ideological current of social self-understanding, especially in the 1950s and early 1960s, what with East and West German newsreels up against one another. Some reports from the period make clear how recontextualizing particular materials could produce completely contradictory statements. In one instance, the *NEUE DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU* produced a report about the emerging luxury of West German winter sports including a fashion show with parading models, the gist being, “Things are on the up again”, “We are somebody again”. In contrast, the East-German *AUGENZEUGE* promptly showed the same fashion pictures, which were obviously obtainable via one of the international picture agencies, and contrasted them with images of poverty-stricken West German citizens. Here, the East German newsreel aimed to portray the social conditions in West Germany as getting worse; only the capitalists are benefitting. Such examples of the use of images in newsreels show that the accounts were never objective; they were always editorial opinions in the interest of prevailing worldviews.

## 6. THE IMAGES OF THE NEWSREEL

The images in individual newsreel contributions, which as a rule lasted no longer than 1:30 minutes, are highly conventionalized, a fact which is easy to see watching several newsreel editions one after the other. This of course had to do, on the one hand, with the brevity of the reports, it having been necessary for the audience to identify them immediately in terms of their content and pertinent audio explanations. The fact that standardizations and stereotyping came about was also because the situations depicted were themselves standardized: political greeting rituals, contract signings, meetings, openings of events, etc. Recurring picture paradigms arose, for that reason, with less variation. Since they accelerate comprehension, such stereotypes are not usually negative, but they did become problematic if—as often happened in newsreels—they were ideologically charged, turning them into icons of influence.

This produced a strange paradox of image usage: Newsreels (whose advantage over print media was precisely their use of motion pictures and their impression of unfiltered reality) reduced that motion by repeatedly making and reinforcing images that were reminiscent of still images. So,

stereotyping ultimately made the newsreel image return to the conventions of the still image from which it had derived its journalistic form.

In their very use of stereotypes, however, newsreel images can also be understood differently. In the late 1940s the first accommodation of the editorial staff at the NEUE DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU in Hamburg-Harvestehude happened to be the Aby Warburg-Haus, the building in which art historian Aby Warburg had his famous Library for Cultural Studies in the 1910s and 1920s. This points tellingly to two theoretical constructs by Aby Warburg that can also be applied to newsreel images: pathos formulas and image migration.

The concept of pathos formulas (cf. Hurttig/Kettelsen 2012) involves embedded representations of emotion which can often be found especially in the stereotyped images. Their presence points to the canon of similar images handed down through a community's history. Generally, however, they were rarely staged with much thought for their history or influence. Instead they were generally selected from the wealth of image material available with little reflection, following the editors' embedded pictorial knowledge and thus in most cases can claim to be a reflection of the cultural consensus. Prominence was given to pictures of suffering and pictures of triumph. Combined with them in most cases is an emotional charge which is underscored by the way the people pictured and the commentator speak as well as through music.

Secondly, newsreel images involve Warburg's concept of image migrations in which the use of certain picture paradigms in different cultures creates a process of 'migration' of individual image motifs in different cultures and in contemporary history through various media. In composition and arrangement, motif usage and subject, the memory of another picture (which often only turned out to be a current picture in terms of the decor or the physiognomy of the characters) was often embedded in an individual image sequence. This can be determined by a simple examination of newsreel editions. Here, however, a systematic comparative analysis of a large corpus of images would be necessary. Such image use is dependent on the particular cultural group in which and for which the newsreel is made.

Thus newsreels supplied a continuously condensed and exaggerated image of the world whose pathos increased by switching between visual acceleration and emotional stagnation. One of the examples from the NEUE DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU appeared in a sequence about the East Berlin

uprising on 17 June 1953 with the metonymical wording “The tears of the relatives are the tears of the nation”.

Metaphorical images are frequently used in newsreels to show apparently very concrete current events while pointing simultaneously to a larger unifying symbol. They are visual metaphors that refer to something general, frequently a piece with the effect of unifying society: the success of reconstruction, the Western world’s claim of being the better model and thus also a binding of the Federal Republic of Germany to the West (which to audiences in the 1950s was by no means yet a matter of course) as well as to performance consciousness, prosperity and other Western stereotypes of success. Visual metaphors have a community-forming and culture-creating effect precisely because they are based on images that are part of the basic components of a cultural group or nation (cf. the modern metaphor theory of Lakoff/Johnson 1980). Perhaps that is the very source of its community-creating function through its confirmation of national unity.

## **7. THE DRAMATIC COMPOSITION AND STRUCTURE OF THE NEWSREEL**

Returning to the structure of the newsreel, so far the discussion has been about an overall view by this organ of information, about the overarching grand narrative and its implicit ideological messages. When one looks at the dramatic composition of individual newsreel editions, at first glance they follow a different principle—that of entertainment value.

In the 1950s, both in the internal documents of the newsreel company as well as in correspondences between newsreel producers and theater owners, it was repeatedly emphasized that, with regard to the context of the movie program, the newsreel was to be entertaining. “We got a laugh” was considered a positive review for a well-made newsreel issue.

Thus, newsreels were designed such that each ten to twelve minute edition would open with major political issues of a national or international nature and proceed to cultural topics, frequently art and music. The newsreel would then switch to sports and finally present fashion shows, topics from the glamorous world of the movies or odd happenings. Already expected to be seen as ‘previews’ to the entertainment value of the main movie, such

entertainment topics were particularly important for the acceptance of the newsreel.

That formula, which was employed similarly in other media, was not particularly rigid; occasionally entertainment topics would also be placed between political reports to avoid too much predictability. What was important for the dramatic composition was that the audience not be released from the newsreels with a grave issue that might have put them in a ruminative mood unsuited to the main attraction. With few exceptions—mostly when major political conflicts were addressed—it was all about instilling a positive mood: “We’re doing well after all” and “We live in the best of all worlds”.

It is clear that these entertainment topics were not mere encores—especially the repeated presentation of fashion shows and new consumer products—but rather also served the grand narrative of reconstruction and the ‘good life’ in the West. They were meant to show the audience they *did* live in an up-and-coming, affluent society and that doing well privately was a sign of their living in the best of all forms of society. It could be funny or odd, what mattered was that it did not appear threatening to the audience and that, in their here and now, it affirmed in them a sense of their affluent society.

## 8. THE OUTLOOK

So, was the newsreel successful as a social information tool? As a nation, West-German society in the 1950s saw itself as a matter of course as independent of such media imagery; it even claimed sole representation over the East German part of the divided state. The task of the newsreel was to supply increasingly comprehensive audiovisual images *for social self-understanding*, which as a whole created a positive attitude towards the state and gave the impression that, thanks to reconstruction, democracy and the effort of many, audiences in West Germany were doing especially well after all. It also gave the impression that everybody had something to do, sometimes even over and beyond what was usual. The community did not have to be created from scratch, but rather just reaffirmed again and again—also through dissociation from the other German system. The newsreel did this well.

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