

SITUATING POPULIST POLITICS: ARTS & MEDIA NEXUS

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***Populism and Medievalization
of Memory***

Abstract

The paper discusses instrumentalisation of past narratives, specifically, the media portrayal of collective memory of the medieval Serbian state in the TV series “Nemanjići”; so it would serve the contemporary political moment – of the distinct populist political currents. Comparative analysis of several TV series, foreign as well as domestic, shows different aspects of forming national and cultural identity. Based on the theoretical musings of Aleida Assmann and Todor Kuljić, who notes that history is “always creation (...), organizing chaotic events by turning them into narrations” (Kuljić 2006: 324), the paper examines how the TV series positions the period of Nemanjić’s reign as a founding myth (mythomoteur, Assmann 2011; Smith 2010).

Key words: Nemanjići, TV series, populism, mythomoteur, memory

Introduction

The objective of the paper is the analysis of the way collective memory of the medieval Serbian state was constructed in the TV series “Nemanjići”, with regard to current political moment, in which, according to a number of political analysts, populism is omnipresent. In early 2016, a competition for the scenario for the TV series was announced. Gordan Mihić was chosen as the winner.

The first big budget season was filmed in 2017, and premiered in 2018. The airing of the first episodes of “Nemanjići” immediately caused an outburst of criticism in the media and social networks. Much of the criticism and outrage were directed at unconvincing portrayal of the medieval theme, the dramatic narratives were incomplete, and the directing inadequate and error-ridden. However, the viewers’ outrage largely focused on poor attempts to create, or more precisely, redefine the national identity through the sphere of medievalism, particularly by creation of the Nemanjići’s state.

Populism in the artistic representation of memory

The media today is an ineluctable playground for toying with the memory and identity of a nation. However, when analyzing the media programmes, it is necessary to reveal the driving force behind the existing need to revive past in a particular creation. Aleida Assmann, in the study “The Long Shadow of Past” (2011), quotes Susan Sontag: “What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds” (Sontag in Assmann 2011: 31). Assmann’s book is mostly concerned with creation of collective memory, whose features are reduction of original historical narrative, (re)semiotization, or giving meaning, creation of unambiguous, compelling images that invoke powerful emotions (Assmann 2011: 43). Re-establishment of collective memory, as discussed above, is often determined by requirements of a particular political moment. The duration of collective memory pictures “is not limited by the bearers’ passing, but with them becoming dysfunctional and replaced by others” (same: 43). The lasting, established images are called myths: it is eternally accepted, effectively relevant history. A myth enables “past always to exist in a society’s present, from that society draws its direction for the future” (Assmann 2011: 44). Todor Kuljić agrees that “History is, nonetheless, always creation, thus, to an extent solely arranging chaotic events by compiling them into narratives or causation-related connections from the point of view of existing

requirements” (Kuljić 2006: 324). It might seem romantic, “pure” past, as well as “pure” memory do not exist: we always observe them from a group or individual point of view, coloured by a certain ideological need. The mindset that is turning to past is thus either “rooted in present or open to a new future” (Kuljić 2006: 325).

Consequently, the question of need for the memory narrative should be mostly sought in the domain of ideology, or in a certain political climate. The Serbian culture politics in the past decades was not spared of turbulent political events.

From the 1990s in Serbia, the quest and struggle for “return” to the national roots and identity, signified, most importantly, the revival of Slavic and Orthodox spiritual ties, and the constant references to the Byzantine tradition and the Orthodox Spirituality (...) In the first decade of the 21st century, several orientations were changed based the ideology of ruling parties, especially by those who managed the departments of education and culture (Dragičević Šešić 2012: 106).

The TV series “Nemanjići” comes at a time of the expansion of populist ideas not only in our country, but worldwide as well. In populism, a specific attitude towards the building of collective memory is fostered: “Each populist will aim to unite *his own* people – the only authentic nation – and for that matter will confront those who, in his opinion, are not part of *true* America, *true* Turkey, etc.” (Miller 2017: 8).

The populist theorists unanimously agree on one thing: the populists are the enemy of the establishment (same, 10), furious at the elites and those who build their own happiness on the backs of, seemingly, miserable people. Additionally: the populists believe they are only true representatives of people. Essentially, the populists claim everyone else act against the people, making them the only real “chosen” ones who not only understand their own people, but also act in their best interest. Hence, the people are perceived as “righteous and morally pure” (Miller 2017: 15), and anyone who does not support them, the populists perceive as the enemy of the people (same), the dangerous “other”. Thus, the populist leader

actually is an instant dictator, although he hides behind the veil of democracy: “The populists suppress pluralism, critical thinking, limit media freedom, regard the institutions as their own service, and not as common good – there is no correction of the deficiencies of the political system, quite the opposite, their correction is suspended” (Lutovac 2017: 62).

For populists, the issue of national identity is the key emotional issue which is both directly and indirectly invoked by means of direct and indirect political communication. The main features of national identity, according to Anthony D. Smith, are: “1. Historic territory or homeland, 2. Common myths and historical memories, 3. a common mass, public culture, 4. Common legal rights and duties for all members of the nation, 5. Common economy, with the territorial mobility for members of the nation” (Smith 2010: 29-30). Surely, common myths, and especially a founding (*mythomoteur*), can be reworked, (re)elected and even recreated. As mentioned above, the myth is pre-narrative, cathartic (pre) history of past, which “recurs (...), repeats” (Assmann 2011: 258). The historical event on the other hand “can linearize the time” (same). Assmann points out two roles of turning to past in such a construction: the first, founding, it creates a sensible and necessary (hi)story from the past (Assmann 2011: 79), while the other, counterpoint, by calling on the past gives it “the character of heroic times” (80). Such narratives aim to replace “what is missing, what is vanished, lost, hidden” (Assmann 2011: 81). Hence, a *mythomoteur* is a power of (historical) narrative created by specific labeling or uploading of present content.

Naturally, a *mythomoteur* plays a major role at a time when it is required to call upon the heroic (pre)history of a nation. Displaying the unity and integrity of a nation and its heroic past is an essential tool of the populist discourse, therefore, a TV series such as “Nemanjići” has adequately complemented the general political, as well as cultural climate in Serbia. The TV series creates the myth of a unique nation, which, despite poverty and inconsequential economic and human potential (the courts are made from wood, armies are small), tribal system, pagan culture, adopts Christianity and creates their own state, which is able to rival great powers like

Byzantium. The religious and church element is quintessential in invoking the Nemanjić's past. In the series' premiere, the power of St. George, conjured by Nemanja's prayers, "frees" Nemanja from captivity. That is the moment when his closeness to God and spirituality starts to grow. The proto-Serbian state identifies with the church: the national *mythomoteur* is thus inextricably linked to faith. However, by simplifying characters' relations in the dramatic sense, undeveloped director's procedures, and bordering on a contemporary linguistic discourse, a strong connection is made to the present, time when the relationship with church is significantly weaker.

On the opposite specter of the strategy is the TV series "Vuk Karadžić" (1987-1988), also produced by RTS, directed by Đorđe Kadijević, screenplay by Milovan Vitezović. Vuk Karadžić was portrayed as a messiah, someone who will bring literacy and sober as well as rational thinking to a superstition-ridden nation. Consequently, the scriptwriter's focus was on the folk beliefs, in addition to detailed character development and their relationships, it is basis of historically accurate and authentic representation of events. Certainly, the TV series was made in 1987, at the time of redefinition of national identity, in the climate of general confusion and a sense of impending conflict in the Balkans. Here, as in the "Nemanjići", we have an implementation of a founding myth idea of one (or more) figures who had a huge impact on unifying the Serbian people, with one difference, the world of the TV series "Vuk Karadžić" is to a lesser extent "black and white"(with more accomplished performances, among other things, it is less populist orientated) than the one in "Nemanjići". Vuk faces numerous obstacles and there is no "easy way" for him to solve his problems: dramatic tension is more acute, adequately implemented; relationships between characters are realistic. The authors of the series wanted the authentic reconstruction of the age of Vuk Karadžić, in which Serbia of the Uprising is not idealized, and its dark sides are also shown¹. The mastery of Đorđe Kadijević, opens the door

1 This is how Vuk Karadžić wrote about the days of the Uprising, not withholding the claims that the rebels were robbers or that some leaders'

for sublimation of both historical and artistic content, it would not succumb to demands of political moment. The narrative of Kadjević's series is presented as a struggle of one man for national identity by reforming of common alphabet. The series shows that Vuk introduced Europe to results of the Serbian Revolution (the struggle against the Turks) and the beautiful Serbian folk poetry. Along with Dositej, he brought Europe closer to Serbia. In the series, the emphases is on Vuk's criticism of government supported by the rebel leaders.

However, an additional myth-driver for the Serbs is the battle against the Turks in Kosovo in 1389, in which the Serbian army suffered a loss, but the loss, in the myth that later emerged, was transformed into victory: Prince Lazar chose "heavenly", "eternal" kingdom, not the earthly, decrepit, "transient". Assmann (2011) notes that foundations of a *mythomoteur* do not necessarily have to be a victory or a positive example for the nation. Defeats can be myths-drivers as well. This is the case with the Serbian people, who used the loss in a battle, the symbol of the loss freedom and the start of slavery under the Turks, to adopt the ideals of courage, tenacity and unity. The idea was also used by Zdravko Šotra in a film marking six hundred year of anniversary of the Kosovo battle, the "Battle of Kosovo". By means of visual biblical references, emotional display of the martyrdom of the deaths of Serbian heroes, the Kosovo myth was revived in 1989, not coincidentally, in the wake of breakup of Yugoslavia and rapid creation of national states from the constituent republics. It should be noted that the screenplay for "Battle of Kosovo" was based on the drama written by the prominent poet Ljubomir Simović, who, although his poetics is not populist, still somewhat succumbed to "calling" of the political moment, as confirmed by the fact that he later wrote another version, "cleansed" of superficial, "political" elements. It might be said that the TV series "Vuk Karadzic" defines not only the national but also the cultural identity of a nation in step with the reformation of the

sole goal was to attain Turkish properties and houses. See in Popović, Miodrag (1970), *History of Serbian Literature: Romanticism*, Belgrade: Nolit.

alphabet and folk oral heritage; the film “Battle of Kosovo” focuses on the loss for the Serbs; “Nemanjići” as the central theme has the birth of the state (kingdom). The Kosovo battle ends the life of the royal (non-partisan) Serbia, and this is also the *mythomotheur* suggested by the TV series “Nemanjići”.

Melodrama of past

If the first dramatic step when working on a project- TV series- is the re-definition of a national, founding myth-driver – what follows is deciding on genre. The definition of the term is difficult: it is a specific feature that “the world of film [...] has inherited from classifying the works into classes, literary origin (comedy, tragedy, melodrama) or strictly cinematographic” (Stam 2000: 14). “Nemanjići” is a historical melodrama. The elements of historic spectacle are in fact mixture of elements of the Turkish series “Sulejman the Great” (“Muhtesem Yuzyil”, 2011-2014) and epic / historic fantasies such as the “Game of Thrones”, 2011-2019, David Benioff & DB Weiss). Overwhelming ambivalence in the script and directing make defining genres problematic. The TV series “Sulejman” is akin to a TV-drama when it comes to directing, being mostly filmed in interior. The focus is on melodramatic relations and to a lesser extent on battles, historical scenes. When it comes to genre, the “Game of Thrones” is epic spectacle and a melodrama. Following the thread of analysis, we note that in the TV series “Nemanjići” melodrama elements and historical spectacle were just touched. For example, throughout the entire season one of “Nemanjići” the specific melodramatic moment is the relationship between a young ruler Stefan the First-Crowned (Miloš Đurović / Vojin Ćetković) and a girl named Raška (Jovana Gavrilović / Nada Šargin). As far as the historical spectacle is concerned, the scenes were filmed predominately with narrow optics (teleobjectives) with only a handful of extras and they are, sadly, just a shot at spectacle.

Melodrama is a “sneaky” genre because it functions on multiple levels. At first glance it is “designed” to appeal strongly to

emotions, but in fact it is a net for “catching” viewers who initially get attached to the characters and their emotions, and eventually adopt ideological views, in this case the populist idea of repositioning the founding myth of the Serbian state.

The characters in a melodrama are the center of the identification process with the world of film, which evidently happens by viewing the characters as the spectator’s alter ego, the desired and never-accomplished form and world of film as parallel to us. Everyday life is depicted in pictures of extraordinary “madness” through the film as a series of madness, images that become harmless and absolutely free life extension. Unlike standing in front of a mirror, the spectator on the film screen will not see their own face, but will identify with the portrayed character who incorporates characteristics of their personality. In the portrayed character, the spectator and actor alternate, but in certain moments the spectator identifies as much with the idol, as the actor with the character, and the complex of doubles closes the circle. Real satisfaction has been replaced by imaginary, and the film works through a film discourse modified by the viewer’s disposition. (Daković 1994: 147).

This is how the above mentioned “capture net” melodrama works: true love must be forbidden or impossible. Stefan the First-Crowned and Raška are perfect match, however, they are not meant to be: the ruler is obliged to marry a woman respecting state interests. Raška’s tragedy is deepened by her little-known origin. She is a foundling, a foster sister to the brothers. Stefan’s inevitable rejection of Raška, symbolically, sends her back to her childhood, when her encounter with the court guards gave her a (new) identity. Her name, the unambiguous symbol of the nucleus of Serbian state, appears to drive the girl’s need (and search) for her identity: Raška has no personal identity, she can only have a national identity. Since Stefan’s and Raška’s relationship is not in the state interest, the girl must be “dismissed”. A powerful foreigner will take the place Raška desires, which is a common practice in marriages in the Middle Ages that have largely been forged from state interests (notably, King Milutin married the Greek Princess Simonida, who was at a time only five years old). Such a melodramatic setting could

easily turn into tragedy (Raška's character is susceptible to tragic life perception), but the intended message of the text would have been lost. The conflict would shift to (Raška's or Stefan's) moral dilemma (notably, in the case of Raška's death), which would inevitably become backbone of the story.

It could be said, that melodrama² is a fitting genre for spreading different propaganda (populist) ideas: by identifying with emotions, twists, and heroes, the spectators succumb to and absorb the often hidden, "sugarcoated", ideological or politically coloured messages of the film or TV series. In the subject of our analysis, as mentioned previously, this is the case of populist repositioning of the founding myth from Kosovo to medieval, Nemanjići's myth. But this does not sever the connection with Kosovo's myth: the story of a powerful Nemanjići's state, which will experience a defeat in Kosovo, reinforces the drama and tragedy of the Battle for Kosovo. Without a story about the mighty Nemanjići the myth about the Battle of Kosovo would not be complete.

2 The melodramatic elements appear in modern series with a similar historical context: "Medici: Masters of Florence" (2016, Nicholas Meyer & Frank Spotnitz), "The Tudors" (2007-2010, Michael Hirst) and even the "Game of Thrones". The additional part of the "Medici" narrative is about the relationship of Lorenzo and his mistress in Rome, by involving his wife a love triangle is made. "The Tudors" is equally concerned with the indulgent love life of the young English ruler as much as his rule. The series was criticized for being historically inaccurate. In the "Game of Thrones" thin lines are separating politics or governing and (perverse). The series, although based on an epic fantasy, is also a good example for the study of creation of fictitious national identity with medieval elements. Sex and violence are singled out as two crucial, indispensable elements, this time in the construction of a *historical* national identity, which is evidently a strategy for introducing the narrative to the viewers. "Nemanjići" in this regard, can be commended for not including these two elements, although this was not intentional, but lack of inspiration.

Visual medievalism

The creation of such a *mythomoteur* is propped by visual means. The pictorial compositions of the series, achieved with a scenography that implies the simple and modest court life in Serbia in time of Nemanjići and especially the frontal lightening of the hero, remind us of ecclesiastical frescoes from the time of Nemanjići. These frescoes, the most renowned exhibits of church wall painting from these regions, were primarily influenced by the Byzantine and the Western (or Romanesque) traditions³:

In the countries situated between the West and South Morava, on one side, to the sea between the rivers Neretva and Bojana, on the other, the power of the two churches, Orthodox and Catholic Church (...) was growing. At the meeting point of the two religions – that often had contradicting traditions, church service rituals and different church languages – the art in the Serbian state did not merely produce works belonging to separate subdivisions, but, usually, accomplishments that incorporated the beliefs of Byzantium and Western Europe (Đurić & Babić-Đorđević 1997: 50).

Untypically two-dimensional, “ideal”, invisible light source that equally illuminates all figures, Serbian wall frescoes served as a reference to visual identity of TV series “Nemanjići”. Referencing wall painting of the Serbian medieval scene, the series reinforces the connection to historical period it portrays respecting present needs. An example of a similar strategy can be seen in the Italian series “Medici” which finds visual references in the late Renaissance, particularly in Caravaggio’s paintings. The series depicts the turbulent events in Florence during the reign of Medici family. Italian filmmakers, especially photographers, such as Vittorio Storaro, often emphasize the importance and impact of renaissance and baroque paintings on the perception and especially portrayal

3 See Mandel, Massimiliano (2006), *La Serbia: tra Roma e Bisanzio*, u *La storia dell’arte: l’arte bizantina e russa (volume 8)*, Zuffi, Stefano (ed.), Milano: Mondadori Electa, pp. 761-729.

(in films) of the period. The Renaissance and the Baroque brought novel treatment of light to the forefront, while Caravaggio is famous for his use of *chiaroscuro*, i.e. lightening that has a clear, concrete source and reaches the lateral side of the painting, or comes from the depths:

If we set aside symbolism and religious significance, the main hero of the picture is the light. The light defines and accentuates the figures; they are removed from monotone shadow of space and formed in all their details. (...) The light is simultaneously realistic and ideal (Cricco, Giorgio & Paolo di Teodoro 2004: 550).

The TV series “Medici” was filmed so that the light usually comes laterally or from the depths, through the window, if it is an interior setting. Thus, on one side, the reality (i.e. the stability) of the figure is drawn up, and on the other, the “ideal” light reflects the future “ideal” state. The battle scenes are picturesque, three-dimensional, resembling epic fantasy, which is in line with the struggle for an ideal or epic state. A similar tendency could be felt in “Nemanjići”, but it fails (lack of extras, directing that is lacking, mise-en-scene, and so on). Both series, therefore, heavily rely on painting: “Nemanjići” on Serbian medieval wall painting, and “Medici” on Renaissance, Italian paintings and frescoes. In both series, the specific composition of frescoes and paintings is also noticeable in framing. In “Nemanjići” two-dimensional, front-lighted images dominate, and in “Medici” a three-dimensional deep-lighted composition.

Thus, the “reading of light” in both series, compared to corresponding painting traditions, can be used for the purpose of “reading ideology”, or deeper message – modesty and realism in “Nemanjići”, and luxury and idealism⁴ in “Medici”. In the later, on the whole, the path of the family’s rise to power is described as a common good used to create image of Italian national identity. Italy has a long and big tradition in making television shows (RAI), so

4 This is also the difference between the Orthodox Christianity and Catholicism.

the series is another example of a purposefully successful narrative about the most famous part of the Late Middleage-Renaissance of Italian history. *The Mythomoteur* of a subsequently united Italian state (1861) was created as a struggle of the righteous for the just government and at the same time as an action field for rational, talented people who saw the future of the country in political, aesthetic and ethical terms. Both rulers (Cosimo Medici, played by Dustin Hoffman and the Great Prefect Stefan Nemanja, played by Mladen Nelević) built their edifices: Nemanja his church and Cosimo the Cathedral Santa Maria del Fiore, whose construction symbolically equals Brunelleschi's impressive dome. It is unnecessary to explain the differences in the scale and technical and artistic resources of the Renaissance-Italian and Medieval-Serbian architecture. Nevertheless, portraying the nucleus of the Serbian state through the (visually) modest life of the pre-nation (Medievalism is a myth-driver, for the TV Series, and therefore the pre-narrative) in every sense it is the author's choice *par excellence*.

The "Medici" introduces the narrative to the audience using familiar directing and dramatic techniques (precise framing, classical, well-executed narration), but it does not resort to violence, sexual content or other blatant seductive means to lure the audience. It results in a warm family TV series that draws a parallel between private relationships of a distinguished, prominent and powerful family and the tiny state (Florence), i.e. the future state (Italy), visually assisted by late-Renaissance and Baroque paintings by Tintoretto or Caravaggio. The "Nemanjići", on the other hand, (re)position a *mythomoteur* in the Serbian medieval state, whose modesty is deemed a uniqueness. The idea of visual modesty was inspired by Serbian wall painting, church frescoes, close to the Byzantine and Western Romanesque paintings.

The Serbian state may have risen from poverty, but the monasteries and wall paintings it produced are precious, an invaluable gift for the world's cultural heritage. If the "Nemanjići" failed, using their film actions, to make the spectators see the greatness and importance of Serbian culture, as well as the figures of medieval history, then what they tried to do, literally, filming famous Serbian frescoes within certain frames. The mis-en-scene portrayal of the

character of St. Sava in front of his own fresco can be seen as a blunder, but also as a postmodernist “stunt” that tries to note (or quote) not only the historical and spiritual importance of St. Sava but also the artistic value of the saint’s fresco.

Summary

Founding myths usually find a fertile soil to flourish in a politically volatile, unstable regions like ours. Kuljić writes, “If there is no corresponding past, it can always be invented” (2006: 190). In cultural climate of Yugoslavia and Serbia, there are many examples of (mis)use of past, i.e. its application if needed. Kuljić goes on to note that the Balkans’ past, in particular, during the 20th century was reconstructed with the aim of “separation of related nations so it would be presented to the the world in exclusively missionary light” (2006: 191). The purpose of this kind of use of past is to separate one’s own peoples from others, to create an image, to paint their own country as the chosen one. Bearing in mind that one of the populist methods is to leave the impression of “the only power in a particular country” (Mikucka-Wojtowicz 2017: 110), the only one who has the right to represent the people (same), populists need the the memory control politics: “Politics establishes a link between the past and the present. This meaningful construction is a coherent story of past and present, which seeks to explain how the present is past’s extension”(Kuljić 2006: 202).

Re-establishing relationship with past creates a new narrative, that is, a new and specifically “television” memory. For Gutierrez Lozano television is an “emotional concept, linked to a mixture of personal experience and fragments of historical recollection” (2013: 136). Lozano, like Kuljić, insists that “memory” filmed (or shown on TV) is not past, it only refers to past. In the midst of an emotional reaction of viewers to the reconstruction of past, used by “the producers to attract attention” (Lozano 2013: 138), viewers create memory of the remembrance, i.e, television memory of history representation. Hence, the iconic images are removed not only

from history but also from collective memory, and thus become exclusively singular images. The Lozano's theory shows the dangers of diverse past semiotics. Aiming to create a market-based product that will maximize the use of the consumer, creators sometimes do not consider memory of remembering, i. e, remembering the TV series.

Kuljić criticizes the need of small nations to deal exclusively with victories, even if they are only moral victories, as well as their inability to objectively observe their own "size" or realistically find their place in history: "Converting a long vassal subservient past into an unbroken monumental past is a typical source and mirrors the distorted mindset of small nations" (Kuljić 2006: 198). Founding myths are important for establishment of unique collective identity, however, each of the narratives analyzed in this paper can be seen from the perspective of the present's need for past: "When necessary, certain historical periods are skipped, so today, Serbia returns to founding medieval practice, the 19th century tradition of building foundations is completely suppressed" (Dragičević Šešić 2012: 111).

The TV Series "Nemanjići" certainly fulfills the didactic function of memory, substituting the basic, textbook knowledge of the period of Serbian history. The series follows a particular melodramatic formula of many popular series and, by using one of the important myths of the Serbian people, (re) formulates a history outlook corresponding the populist discourse of the ruling ideology. The public opinion was shocked after an episode of "Nemanjići" in which the Belgrade street jargon was repeatedly heard. The poorly developed melodrama, a historic spectacle that just started, was spiced with at times unconvincing directing and dramatist techniques, halted the positive, cathartic television memory of the Serbian audience, an auditorium that, in a historical sense, appeared hungry for the TV narratives. Those who wrote about populism clearly and unambiguously note problems it causes, and unanimously claim: that it is a *digest* politics, an ideology (if we can talk about populism as a complete ideology) that it will quickly and easily bring quick, but not necessarily good solutions. Within such a discussion, it is no surprise that similar *digest* techniques are

found in art, or, in this case, TV series with numerous omissions, addressed to a wide population. With the words of Kuljić: “The instrumentalization of past is unthinkable without creation, the different accentuation, the selective choice of the drama pattern and the mandatory emotionalization of the selected past” (2006: 192). Through the use of cultural images of Serbian medievalism, the populist discourse reveals the idea of a unique, powerful nation with long, heroic and mythic past.

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