

## Screen Cultures: On Archiving, Collective Memory, and the Mainstream Cinematic Culture

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### Abstract

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This paper explores the relationship between film and the creation of historical memory. By looking at examples from films that talk about World War II, and later exemplified by Christopher Nolan's 2014 film *Interstellar*, I try to exemplify the complex role mass distributed films have in creating opinions about historic events and their collective understanding. Once this role is recognized, this paper develops as an approach to further understand what is necessary to create a new paradigm of what it means to be literate in a world where screens are quickly becoming the main platform for communication.

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As we move forward into the Information Age, the shift from traditional media to digital ones has brought many changes to the way society recognizes and creates itself. Nowadays, true literacy has shifted from the understanding of written language to the understanding of messages –mostly made up of images– that find their medium in screens. This proliferation of monitors has translated what used to be written communication into sound and image based events. Thus, videogames, television, film, and online videos have become the primary vernacular through which people communicate and share narratives.

These sensorial messages have also empowered storytelling in a way that has never been seen before. This lays out the foundations for talking about narratives. Tales that are important because they constitute the basis of what human society is: we have created nations, cultures, wars, and peace through stories; and even as technology shifts it is impossible to imagine anything being more important for understanding the human race.<sup>2</sup> The screen brings an increased potential to the way stories –in the broadest sense of the word– are told. Therefore, the massive communication that was once only possible through the printing press now has the ability to incorporate scenes, paintings, music, and dialogue to sustain its message and make it more real. Moreover, audiences are being constantly manipulated –not necessarily in a bad manner– through film and most of the time consumers are not aware of these processes.

More importantly, the communication through screens that facilitates the sharing of images also helps contextualize messages in a way that proves more effective for their understanding. Therefore, film and television have become the most popular platform of communication with the masses, and it is through these platforms that we –as societies– now understand the world around us. To help exemplify the way that social memory has been affected by new media this paper will analyze the way that film has been used to create memories in social and historical settings using World War II as an example and further explaining the process through Christopher Nolan's 2014 film *Interstellar*.

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Societies recognize themselves as groups at the moment that they share a common identity. But what we call identity is really a complex system of signs that can only live within the society that recognizes them and gives them meaning. In other words what we recognize as part of our social identity is really a series of images that have been contextualized since before we were born.

The afore mentioned images are in turn limited by geographic and ideological notions that result in common identities intertwined with socio-political grounds. In other words, societies are created not only by acquiring the ability to decode the set of signs that surround a human being, but also with the geographical idiosyncrasies individuals consume on a daily basis. These identities form a specific approach to History that was explored by Michel Foucault in *The Archeology of Knowledge* in which he explained that statements –what we would call speech acts– are in reality actions that are linked to our material existence.<sup>3</sup> This type of knowledge, or episteme, is at the same time abstract and tangible. Foucault makes this distinction by saying that the episteme is divided into four categories that work at the intellectual level as a set of historical rules, and concretely as experiences. Once these experiences find a place in the community a specific group of people functions within these epistemological boundaries to create a shared understanding of the past.

Social memory –or collective memory– is based on reconstruction rather than on recollection, making our experience of the present largely dependable upon our knowledge of the past. Therefore, the construction of History becomes a palimpsest that doesn't separate the present from the past, but is rather, the weaving of a system of expectations that contextualizes and experiences the present to configure memory.<sup>4</sup>

For example, someone's childhood memories have nothing to do with the actual recollection of events, but rather from the construction of their identity based on the stories people tell them about their childhood. Therefore, what really matters is not the realness of the events, but rather the belief that the stories your relatives or friends tell are true. The same can be said about cultural identity. What a specific group of people remembers is intimately linked to what and how they remember. Recollection, after all, is a cultural tradition that manages to unify different classes, beliefs, and ages under the same discourse. As Connerton explains, memory allows generations that are not physically together to remain indirectly in contact.

One of the most useful tools by which collective memory is created is mass media communications. Once a single message was able to circulate around thousands of households –let's not forget Orson Well's infamous "War of the Worlds" broadcast in 1938– there came an opportunity for feeding political discourses through these channels. First was radio, but during the 1930's, with the creation of the major film studios, it became possible to impregnate society's brains with specific images. Images –that as proverbs suggest– are worth more than a thousand words. In summary, mass media opens up the boundaries of space for the creation of social memory.

During the late 1920's when talking movies became a popular form of entertainment, commercial culture started to be infiltrated by political discourses and manufactured stories. The later, in addition to the transatlantic reach of certain films, created a fertile environment to construct political speeches within the movies. Mass media communications allow a shared understanding of a specific event –history, if one may– whilst allowing the constant archiving of the images they present. Therefore, as stated by George Lipsitz "time, history and memory become qualitatively different concepts in a world where electronic communication is present."<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, there is no longer a temporality to which events are linked to, you can access through moving image and documented literature events that were not considered "relevant" at the moment. And, on the other, events that are considered important at a given time receive important coverage and, are therefore circulated at an international level.

With the mass distribution of film certain movies became part of popular culture, and their subjects too became popular understanding. From this perspective, watching a film becomes relevant in terms of what it portrays rather than how it is portrayed. At this moment it is important to make a distinction between independent –less popular movies– and blockbusters.

<sup>3</sup>Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of knowledge; and, The Discourse on Language*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.)

<sup>4</sup>Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>5</sup>Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages*. (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 17.

Even though the dichotomy between “high culture” and popular culture is only possible when you encapsulate each term in a predetermined description, the real concern with popular films comes from consumption rather than creation.<sup>6</sup> Filmmakers immersed in consumer-based productions do not see themselves as creating lower-end products, but rather a film that will be available to a larger audience than an independent or experimental film.

Nonetheless, since both audiences and studios know what popular culture is *not* –high art and folklore– they are willing to open the possibility for the content to move around the boundaries of commercialized leisure. Nowadays, at any given time, 70% of the screens available at multiplex cinemas project films produced by the major studios in the United States.<sup>7</sup> This means that only 30% of the market is populated by independent –artsy– American film and local productions. Therefore, American film’s role in popular culture is becoming increasingly important for the creation of a global social memory where electronic communication and History cross paths. Thus the importance of popular film goes beyond financial success.

When film is added to the mix, collective memory takes on a new possibility. Cineplex theatres are able to create non-traditional gatherings that attract audiences with no shared set of values. In other words, the limits of the reach of a specific set of recollections no longer matters since they can reach new audiences without the need for a justification. Films are not viewed as independent, foreign entities with a hidden agenda, that’s why it is easier for extremely traditional societies to accept film screenings in their communities, as opposed to other types of cultural documents.

History –as a narrative– is treated differently when it is brought up in film. First, it is important to mention that movies, even the ones that are “based on real events”, are fiction and should be studied as fiction. Nonetheless, movies –much like collective memory– depend on the social environment in which they are projected. Since societies think in totalities and not individual processes, audiences seek for a totalitarian experience when they see a film. When an activity overwhelms the senses in a realistic manner (after all, commercial culture searches for credibility by providing at least the illusion of connection with the past) the distinction between fact and fiction starts to look a little bit unclear. It is in this sense that popular culture –especially when supported by film– has a significant impact on how history is remembered, event narratives are rewritten, and “nation” is reimagined.<sup>8</sup>

At this moment it is important to understand that filmmaking is in itself an independent process that functions and is recognized as entertainment. It does not intend to be mimetic nor does it intend to be historical. The later is clear when we think about commercial motion pictures. Lipsitz argues that:

“Commercial motion pictures generally do not claim to present historical truth. Even when films are set in the past, artists and audiences understand that the function of the movies is to entertain. Few would consider subjecting movies to the kinds of tests about evidence and logic that we routinely apply to printed historical narratives. Yet Hollywood pictures need to engage the attention and the emotion of individuals who live within historical time and who construct their identities, at least in part, in dialogue with the past. If filmmakers have our permission to tell fanciful lies, we nonetheless insist that they make those lies moderately credible. We require “true” lies, depictions of the past and present that are comprehensible to us and that locate our own private stories within a larger collective narrative.”<sup>9</sup>

There is a silent contract that develops between audiences and the film studios. Audiences, for one part, recognize that films are fiction and all that it implies. Film studios, on the other hand, make their movies as realistic as possible to appeal to the needs of the audience. Furthermore, audiences expect the movies to function as an escape from everyday life, so, the multiplex experience must overwhelm the audience’s senses and, to do that the story on screen must be sufficiently real. This process, though sometimes undermined by “high culture” producers, has in many ways influenced the knowledge of several generations about historical events.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>7</sup>Martel, Frédéric. *Cultura Mainstream: Cómo se crean los fenómenos de masa*. (Mexico: Taurus, 2011)

<sup>8</sup>Leavy, Patricia. *Iconic Events*. (United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2007) 150.

<sup>9</sup>Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages* (USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) 163.

History, as Truillot explains, is a social process in which humans are both the narrators and the actors, but most importantly humans are also the ones that limit the participants in the process.<sup>10</sup> History, for the most part, is an exclusive process that only allows one version of the facts to circulate freely, and most of the time this version is distributed through popular culture, making the “side show” of commercial consumption the central rink show for the depletion of history.

One of the most notable examples of this process comes with the depiction of World War II in film. The generations that are going through high school at the moment no longer have a direct relationship with the war, be it living relatives that fought, suffered, or were alive during the years of the conflict. Therefore, it is becoming increasingly difficult for younger generations to understand what was previously explained through oral history. This process, as Henri Bergson explains, is not an uncommon one.

There are two distinct processes through which memory is created. The first one comes as intentional memory, or what each person chooses to remember. When applied to a broader sense, intentional memory deals with what we –as a generation– chose to remember because it is something that is relevant to the time we are living. Nonetheless, intentional memory fades, the details become blurry with the passage of time and there comes a moment when each memory loses something through the simple act of being remembered.<sup>11</sup> Thus, spontaneous memory becomes an important complement for historical events. Spontaneous memory, as described by Bergson, happens just by being immersed in a society. It is what one remembers by means of being exposed to the information even if there is no conscious assimilation of the ideas. In this case, film has been used to fill the void that has been naturally created inside intentional memories. If a viewer only remembers the countries that were involved in the conflict, or the fact that a large number of people died, film will tell them the allies of the Allies and an exact number of deaths –even if this number is far removed from the truth–. But, most importantly, film will feed images of violence and loss of World War II.

Thus, the versions that are published through film are sensational images of artistic violence and dramatized dialogues. Movies like *Schindler's List*, *Inglorious Basterds*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Casablanca* (just to mention a few of the most popular titles) in addition to television shows like *Doctor Who*, *Downton Abbey*, and *The Twilight Zone* (again just a few examples) portray the winner's version of history and suffering of their societies. Not only that, but all of the above mentioned movies and television shows are spoken in English, characteristic that becomes essential when talking about their popularity. Ever since the instauration of cinema as one of the most important sources of entertainment, the catalog presented by the stadiums has to function as a source of leisure and not as a school; therefore, forcing the audience to read subtitles to understand a film, even if it provides a new perspective on a conflict like World War II, diminishes the popularity of *cette* film in the box office condemning the audience to consume one version of the story for the sake of business.<sup>12</sup> The nearly two thousand movies that deal with World War II in their plots are produced by countries that were members of the group identified as the Allies and wrote their modern stories with this victory as a foundation of their history.<sup>13</sup> And, since these major film productions were created by big name houses, people all around the world have seen –and by means of over exposure, trusted– these versions and therefore relies on their accounts to create a sense of understanding of the conflicts. This collocation of film in popular culture gives “history” an impressionistic, interpretive, and allegorical aspect.

This can be seen in the control Touchstone Pictures had in the edition process of the 2001 World War II drama *Pearl Harbor*. The movie, a love story that gets framed in the 1941 Pearl Harbor raid, had a specific cut made for Japanese audiences that had a different perspective of the conflict. Leavy explains the second cut by saying that:

After bombing at the box office in the U.S., *Pearl Harbor* premiered in Japan in the Tokyo Dome, a stadium with a temporary screen that was the size of a basketball court. The dome was filled with 30,000 Japanese viewers. This audience saw a different version from American audiences. This cut contained edits, re-shots scenes and voice-overs, which together with an even heavier focus on the love story angel, had the combined effect of softening the film.

<sup>10</sup>Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>11</sup>Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 38.

<sup>12</sup>Martel, Frédéric. *Cultura Mainstream: Cómo se crean los fenómenos de masa*. (Mexico: Taurus, 2011), 46.

<sup>13</sup>Statistics of the Internet Movie Database.

One author remarked, "The billboard image resembles that for Titanic, Japan's highest grosser of all time, and if the ship is smoking rather than sinking, at least its bombed-out glow might be mistaken for a sunset."<sup>14</sup> Many Japanese filmgoers were dismayed to learn that the film was tailored to specific audiences. Moreover, some audience members were troubled by the one-sided nature of the plot. For example the Japanese pilots were not depicted as having loved ones like the American soldiers and were thus not portrayed sympathetically or heroically (in the context of patriotic sacrifice).<sup>15</sup>

Tailored versions of films have had the power to generate press and higher sales for the product, but in cases like this one, the intention behind the two versions needs to be pondered on. Did the decision to make two movies come solely from the studio's desire to make their film a blockbuster in Japan or did they recognize the power of cinematic narrative when opposed to a previously constructed discourse? The same would happen the other way round. If a Japanese studio were to shoot a solely Japanese produced movie telling their own version of the conflicts they endured, the film would be *a.* immediately compared to Pearl Harbor –due to the visibility of both the movie and the Disney-owned studio– and more importantly *b.* rejected by every person that has been educated under a western canon. Therefore, cinema becomes permeated by the reluctance of the bourgeois to address reality.<sup>16</sup> When talking about film and its contemporaneity, the true power of its methods comes from the efficiency of its editing. As exemplified by Pearl Harbor, film creates an opportunity to hyperbolize reality and make it uniquely suited for the taste of the masses of its time. This only adds to the importance of taking popular culture seriously in the creation of collective memories.

Another prime example of a created narrative through mass media comes years later with the coverage –and constant retelling– received by the United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) when the Apollo 11 manned mission landed on the moon during the summer of 1969. The scene, documented for the NASA archives, was broadcasted live to millions of people around the world. The power of the image comes not only from the act itself but also, from the fact that it is recognizable by virtually every adult in the world. The power of the footage also relies on reproduction. Since these images were recorded they have been broadcasted regularly in documentaries and special programming, and they have even been animated for cartoon shows. Therefore since 1969 most people have seen this footage, and many other NASA videos at least once.

The NASA records are hosted by the National Archives, under public access. The Archives hold records for Research Facilities, Operations, Accidents, and Multimedia related to the United States Space Program. Moreover, the Multimedia branch contains every video, audio recording, podcast, photo, machine readable record, still picture, and videogame that has been published by NASA or by any other corporation or not for profit as long as the object mentions space in any way.

The NASA archive –in all its open source glory– has functioned as a source of inspiration and reference for many people in many different disciplines. One of the most recent patrons of the archive was director Christopher Nolan while doing research for his 2014 film *Interstellar*. NASA scientists and archivists did not only consult on the film –that dwells amongst other things with string theory and space aeronautics–, but provided the queues used to shoot the movie.

Based on the archive footage, the director and production team were able to understand the way in which the NASA videos were shot. In addition, the archives also mention the exact type of camera used for each video. This influenced the director's decision to film using the same 65mm IMAX camera used to film space missions, the same camera that allows viewers to be really immersed in another world.<sup>17</sup> In the same manner, the movie's space shuttle *Endurance* was based on the International Space Station with research made in Hawthorne, California by the production team to obtain the most scientifically accurate version of a space shuttle.

<sup>14</sup>Leavy citing Victoria James "Japan Snores Through Pearl Harbor," 2001, 1.

<sup>15</sup>Leavy, Patricia. *Iconic Events*. (United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2007) 164.

<sup>16</sup>Hansen, M. And Dimendberg, E. *Cinema and Experience*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 11.

<sup>17</sup>Cotta Vaz citing Christopher Nolan in *Interstellar, Beyond Time and Space*, 2014. 58

The realness of the *Endurance* also makes reference to the images known to the general public through different media. The production design of the whole movie was created to be extremely realistic, not for production issues, but to help the audience to immerse into the film.

A part from the extreme meticulousness Nolan displays for filming the movie, this level of attention to detail goes beyond the desired aesthetics the director wanted for the film, this *realness* affects what James MacDevitt calls collective (in)voluntary memory. When institutions –be it governmental ones like NASA or not for profit organizations like museums– self appoint themselves as the flag bearers and protectors of culture and knowledge, they are limiting their own audiences.

Therefore, the images used for school lectures, dorm room posters, and screensavers are not the ones that have been approved by the authorities, but the ones provided by popular culture.<sup>18</sup> In this particular case, it is more likely that teenagers, or audiences from countries with no space program, construct their ideas about space based on the sensationalized depictions on screen, that needless to say are modified to be aesthetically pleasing for the production of the feature. Consequently, the creation of collective memory, in the age of the proliferation of screens, comes from the collection of popular images, thus the importance of mainstream culture.

It is important to acknowledge the fact that the consumption of film is an arbitrary process guided solely by taste. Thus, it would be impossible to even imagine a situation in which a larger number of the global population would have access and means of consuming any given feature release. Nonetheless, given the proper fertile environment for distribution, the ideas, characters, and teasers from a film can travel around the globe and start to be recognized by larger audiences. This process can take decades to be accomplished –the *Star Wars* saga being a prime example– but the message travels effectively over time, thus creating an amplified spectrum of reception.

The fact that the space scenes portrayed in Nolan's movies were based –therefore are reminiscent of– on real footage amplifies the illusion of truth throughout the movie, leaving the viewer with the sense that he or she has “seen this before”, hence the relevance of (in)voluntary memory in the act of watching the film. In this case, instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people they have never seen; they can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection. This capacity of electronic mass communication to transcend time and space creates instability by disconnecting people from past traditions, but it also liberates people by making the past less determinate of experiences in the present.<sup>19</sup>

As it has been previously mentioned, movies are an immersive experience, which means that contrary to other forms of visual artistic expression, it is participatory rather than contemplative. When this effect of realism is obtained through movies, the experience becomes more real than even some of the events that may be happening around the viewer but have somehow been shielded –be it through censorship or lack of information– thus substituting the local images that may permeate into a collective memory.<sup>20</sup> In short, from time to time people are forced to reproduce in thought previous events, and in the process touch them up, to shorten them or complete them so that no matter how convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusions

Lipsitz's claim that the dialogue between the past and the present –the past that underscores the complex role played by historical referents in screen productions– brings credibility and reassurance to the potential to commodify social structures for the present and future as part of a precious collective memory shows the undeniable construction of identity that has been taking place over screen productions.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup>James MacDevitt, “The User-Archivist and Collective (In)Voluntary Memory: Read/Writing the Networked Digital Archive,” in *Revisualizing Visual Culture* ed. Chris Bailey and Hazel Gardiner, (United Kingdom: MPG Books Group, 2010), 110.

<sup>19</sup>Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages* (USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>20</sup>Starr, Paul. *The Creation of the Media* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 307.

<sup>21</sup>Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 51.

<sup>22</sup>Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages* (USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) 70.

Therefore, the archives that are functioning as foundations for the creation of commercial entertainment nowadays play an important role when talking about the references and information that will be dramatized and fed to the general public that will be reconstructing their past at the crossing between what they've been experiencing through media, the approved version of history they were taught at institutions, and the versions of events that run through oral histories –or urban legends– that are claimed by different societies.

This, as long as it is taken into consideration that the people that are watching these productions are averagely educated, in other words, if the audience of these films and television shows is educated enough to recognize the difference between the fictional moving image and the reality of the actions portrayed. The real conflict arises when audiences are unable to make such a distinction. When the only source of historical information that a society has is only available filtered through Hollywood there are bound to be immense holes in the construction of identity.

Collective memory is influenced by figures of those we used to know, be it personally or historically, and the impressions of them that were filtered by our understanding. Thus, this process –that is fragmentary to begin with– represents the oppositions that influence our recollections of the past and at the same time distort the experience of our present, development that is not completely mediated when the creation of social memory is not being completed with this opposition that is necessary to sustain our understanding of the present order of society and its parts.

When the education of a group is not fully developed, movies can be incorrectly used to fill the gaps of the education system. If so, there are only two possible outcomes: mass distributed media will be censored due to the danger of its content contradicting the present social order; or, mass media communications will function as a government approved –lets not forget that government is in charge of rating movies– versions of social problems. What comes as a concern with this paradigm is that the apparatuses of contemporary commercial electronic mass communications dominate the discourses of the modern world. These platforms are designed to communicate desires to promote consumption, and movies are no different. They supply us with endless diversion and distraction mobilized to direct our minds toward advertising messages and rarely do we ask about the origins and intentions of the messages we encounter, forgetting that producers have intentions too.

When confronting the aesthetics of film, Theodor Adorno mentioned that when Capitalism becomes the frame for cultural practice there is no difference to its consumption than any other product provided by the system.<sup>23</sup> But, this undermining that comes when adding Capitalism to any mix, leaves out an important part of the process. If producers of content continue to believe that moving images are something to be consumed and forgotten would be blind to cinema and the power it contains;<sup>24</sup> since, the same media that trivializes and distorts culture to turn art into commodities also provides meaningful connections to our own past and to the past of others. Only, they do so indirectly, within the boundaries of commercial culture and electronic media that is mostly hostile to the kinds of empathy, inquiry, and analysis basic to historical –and human– thinking. If archives and historical databases make their holdings available for the consultation of producers, this platform could function as a bandage for certain injuries that have been inflicted in the understanding of cultures around the world and help in the transmission of local and global history rather than being a barrier for its distribution. Thus creating a new pedagogy of knowledge that uses mass media communications to its advantage

Visual media –like film– are redefining what it means to develop the tools of literacy to understand the changing world with regards not just to their reception but also to its expression. If literacy is to be understood as the comprehension of the primary means of communication of the time, then being literate in the Digital Age is being able to understand that video, just like paragraphs, need to be approached with a critical lens and judged the same way written sources are assessed. The language of screens is only about a century old, and it will continue to develop at a rapid pace during the coming years. And even though most of the conventions established by the movie industry will not change, the moving image has become relevant not just to the passive consumers, but also to any citizen that is participant of these new generations, any citizen who can now “write” using the screens available to them on a daily basis.

<sup>23</sup>Miriam Hansen and Edward Dimendberg citing Theodor W. Adorno in *Cinema and Experience*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 43

<sup>24</sup>Martin Scorsese, foreword in *The Age of the Image*, written by Stephen Apkon, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

The literacy of screens is a two way street. As consumers acquire the technology to become producers too, they need to be aware of the ability of their audiences to understand the messages they are broadcasting. They, too, because of the platforms available to share the information, become archivists of their own information in the most important sense of the term. In a world that is awash in visual storytelling, this generation is more akin to the distribution of videos than any other generation before. Yet, there has been no parallel development towards a cohesive grammar and practical components of this kind of communication therefore rendering society illiterate. As long as visual communication –film as the primary example– continues to be produced and archived, there needs to be a transformation in the way communication is taught and approached.

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