From François Rabelais, with his fantastically scatological Pantagruel, spewing forth flatulent critiques of the ravages of Renaissance utopias, Miguel de Cervantes and the mad Don Quixote, caught in the dream world of a land crushed by the wheels of modernity, Mary Shelley and the bastard child Frankenstein, who still haunts us with his warnings about science run amok, Franz Kafka and the parables of humans turned into bugs, to the more recent work of Donald Trumbo’s soldier who slowly becomes aware that he has been maimed down to a blind and limbless torso by the indiscriminating fury of the fire and sharp metal rained on him by the disease of nationalism and its cousin, war, great writers have been chronicling the nightmares, monsters and epidemics that have haunted and plagued humanity. Tell me about your monsters, your lunatics and serials killers, afflictions and epidemics, dungeons and prisons, madhouses and secret laboratories, zombies and beggars, suicides and homicides, and I will tell you what is killing you and your society. But just as cultures are living and thus changing, resisting the ravages of time, and thus putting death on a hold, we are always in need of new prognoses. Great writers are pathologists of culture, but by the same token, they can just as easily be their forensics. They can both chronicle and reflect on the diseases that afflict their societies. They are doctors of the soul of culture, who at times by providing prognoses are able to point in the direction of a cure. At times, it is enough that they have given a name, and described in detail the dysfunction and malady that ills a culture. At other times, it is enough that they recognized the disease that goes unnoticed and is even confused with health. Some times, it is enough that they have chronicle how the norms of a society are the sickness of culture, and that individual deviance and dysfunction are defense mechanisms against that very sick culture. Literature, seen from this angle, is the doctor’s log of culture’s sicknesses. Literature, in this way, becomes the morticians report: what killed culture by plaguing individuals with its pathology. These are the kinds of reflections that the recent work of the young American writer Chuck Palahniuk evokes. In an age in which “American culture” has become the United States’ number one export, along with its weapons, low intensity conflict, carcinogenic cigarettes, and pornography, it is delightful and even a sign of hope that there are writers who have taken on the delicate and perilous task of offering a prognosis of what ills this culture.

Chuck Palahniuk broke into the literary world by way of the movie version of his first novel: Flight Club (1995). He went on to write three other novels: Survivor (1999), Invisible Monsters (2000), and Choke (2001); a fifth one has been announced for the fall of 2002: Lullaby. Palahniuk has already produced a corpus worthy of careful consideration and analysis. Yet, as a west coast writer, far from the literary circles and brokers of the east coast, indeed far away from the clubs of self-promotion and self-monitoring that censure and hold in tight grip the monopoly of criticism that highlights
“worthy literature,” Palahniuk has not attracted a lot of critical attention. It is only with his most recent work *Choke* that he has began to be widely reviewed and commented on. In the following I provide a thematic reconstruction of each one of the four published novels, in chronological sequence. I will argue that Palahniuk is not trying to write the great “American novel,” although he is profiling himself as a quintessential “American” writer in the midst of post-Cold War megalomania and celebrated Pax Americana. He has taken on a culture that has become so gargantuan, fragmented, and differentiated but at the same time so rich, so self-reflexive, so historicized and also so mimicked that one novel cannot tell its story in one narrative with one dramatic thread. Many novels, many short cuts, many vignettes, are necessary: one polyphonic, asynchronous, temporally bi-directional, hyper-textual, and cyber-encyclopedic novel made up of individual novels, where each novel is the *Bildungsroman* of an American hero but told in reverse. These heroes, I will argue, are testimonies to the resilient power of individuals to resist even the most invasive and persistent onslaughts by culture on the physic life of freedom and individuality. I will also argue that he is neither a commercial nor academic writer; that is, he is not the kind of writer who writes either in order to maintain a living or secure tenure. He is a writer with a mission, a vision, and a very distinctive style. The stories that Palahniuk tells are stories that begin at the end, and end and the beginning: they are turned around *Bildungsromans*. They are in other words about unmaking, uncoupling, and disentangling our selves from the normal self into which we have been socialized. These stories are, thus, about the discovery of moral resources that lay dormant in the very simplicity of human solidarity and trust in our will to survived morally untainted, or at least redeemable. I will conclude by arguing that Palahniuk’s novel are about surviving “American Culture,” and about how deviance is the health of the individual in a sick society.

*How not to be a man*

“If you don’t know what you want…you end up with a lot you don’t”

“May I never be complete.
May I never be content.
May I never be perfect.”

One could characterized *The Fight Club* as the intelligent man’s response to Robert Bly’s *Iron John* (1990), or the fictionalized version of the Michael Kimmel’s *Manhood in America: A cultural history* (1996). Alternatively, one could argue that *The Fight Club* is the fin-de-siècle response to Barbara Ehrenreich’s prognosis in her *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (1983) of 70s and 80s narcissistic and hedonistic masculinity. Chuck Palahniuk’s first novel is a biting and poignant look at men in American culture after the end of affluence and the simultaneous “feminization” of masculinity. It is at the same time about the struggle for a viable sense of masculinity in an age in which earnest is peddle as glibness, callousness is masked as gravitas, and arrogance is passed off as character; in short, in an age of staged heroism and cosmetic masculine beauty. Consumerism, in tandem with de-industrialization and its concomitant
Macdonalization of American economy, along with a wave of unheroic and patently Machiavellian and self-serving wars, have rendered men yearning for integral and worthy of emulation male role models. Commodification has undermined the work ethic, for work itself has succumbed to the logic of the maximization of profit and the minimization of costs. This is sardonically captured by one Palahniuk’s protagonist, who points out that by means of an algorithm, and not a moral or long term value added consideration, a company determines whether to do a recall or to pay damages. Corporate greed can no longer hide behind the veneer of an ethical corporate culture—such culture belongs to the by-gone age of the great philanthropists of the nineteen and early twentieth centuries.

There was a time when American men could be proud of having served in the military, fighting evil Hitlers and malevolent Hiroitos. There was a time when being a man meant having risked his life to save the world from tyranny and despotism. And there was a time when even if one was shammed by one’s government’s decision to rain terror upon a poor people, one could still hold on to the idea that it all had been done for ideals that have been blinded by their zealousness. There was a time when there was pride in a job well done, over the span of a long life, in such a way that this job came to define masculine identity. There was a time when being a man meant having learned how to be a man from fathers, or uncles, or grandfathers, who all had their own war stories to tell. Being a man meant having gone through certain rites of passage, which were overseen and officiated by other men. But that time was long along. How do men become men in a culture that only projects violent male role models, or commercialized and glossed versions of males? How do men become men in a culture in which Rambo, James Bond, and Dirty Harry project an ideal that power does not entail responsibilities, and violence is more gallant than deliberation or understanding? At the same time, and not as iconically, the culture of an Imperial society projects and exudes a plenipotentiary will that begins to infect the very sense of self of its subjects. An imperial, super-power, culture secretes the intoxicant of boundless entitlement. American men deserve everything. They should and can have everything. Physical violence is always a substitute for immediacy and experience, but also a reaction to frustrated expectation. At the same time, once the rush of adrenaline has subsided and the throb of pain eases, the numbness and malaise of consumerism returns. Sough out pain and danger are palliatives for a deeper and graver sufferings: a void of meaning, a lack of direction. Consumerism capitalizes on this sense of lack and awareness of absence. It offers us gratification, but one which can only be momentary. By themselves, alone and left to their devices, men are incapable of measuring to what society promises them, and holds for them in safekeeping. To be worthy, they must allow to be remade in the image of the true men. The catalyst of transformation is always something extrinsic, and always to be bought and consumed. Salvation and completeness are always beyond and ephemeral. The male image is continuously unmade and remade in the image of the perfect male, an image that is asymptotically elusive. But this dreams of unchallenged power, of always to be achieved full masculinity are belied by the reality of unemployment, powerlessness, meaninglessness, lack of connection, of responsibility. The ideal and the real are so irreconcilable, so distant, that men can but only be rendered schizophrenic. Men must create community so as to find meaning, even if this community is based on futility. The Fight Club, which gives its name to the novel, becomes the desperate means to incite
solidarity among strangers by means of a community of secrecy. These men recognize each other, as men, by the wounds inflicted in fight and the secret they shared. It is not ironical that in the Fight Club ontogeny retraces phylogeny: that a quest for viable masculinity ends up re-enacting the very rituals that have eviscerated masculinity in the first place: misogyny, militarism, bulling, terrorism, and gratuitous violence. Tyler Durden, the central character in The Fight Club, is the alter ego that men must exorcise. Men must free themselves from the ghosts of a masculine Olympus, whose only existence is to vitiate any feasible and realistic sense of maleness.

All religion is pageantry and staging

“…distant factories of giant religions”

“People are looking for who to put everything together. They need a unified field theory that combines glamour and holiness, fashion and spirituality. People need to reconcile being good and being good-looking”

Survivor, Palahniuk’s second novel is a satire of American religiosity, with levels of irony, dark humor, and criticisms. One may think of Survivor as a more self-conscious and sardonic parody of religion, of the type we find in some of Philip Dick’s paranoid anti-religion sci-fi stories. A brief and mangled synopsis might be useful. We begin in the cockpit of an airplane flying west over the Pacific Ocean, with Tender Branson, our protagonist, narrating his life story to the black box. He was the last survivor of a suicidal and millennial sect that bred children to send them into the world in order to be servants (literally). As the allegedly last survivor, he becomes a celebrity, an oddity, and a rarity. Who is so improbable merits our worship, as is required by a democratic ethos, in which to have made it is either a sign of predestination or incredible stamina and determination. His improbability thus throws him into stardom, a stardom that then is capitalized and nurtured by advertising gurus. From the religion of the eschaton, he moves on to the religion of the fabricated star, the manicured and made up prophet. He fills up stadiums with gullible masses waiting for a revelation. There is the character Fertility Hollis, who is the clairvoyant, but she remains intractable and also uncommercializable, although she is the only one with any so called extraordinary power. While priests hold us hostage with their fulminations and promises of eternal damnation, the media gurus of today hold us mesmerized with the orthodoxy of the eternally fascinating, terrifying, and statistically improbable, which sometimes is nicely package as the “new.”

In an age of science and secularization, but also of mass culture there still lives on the religion of the unglamorous and quotidian. The masses might have been used by religion, but now the masses use religion. If religion made us unique (by being God’s chosen ones), now it is the belief in the singular and unique that will lift us out of the common and pedestrian. Our faith in the extraordinary becomes the protest against and yearning for a world that is not homogenized and serialized. In a mass culture of mass consumption, the singular becomes the prophetic, but
the prophetic in turn becomes that which is manufactured by the culture industry. The icons of the culture industry thus become like talisman—both curse and benediction. The idols and “stars” of the culture industry have become the saints of mass culture, and along with it come its hagiography and practices of worship and miracle performance. If religion was the opium of the masses, mass culture has become its crack. If priests were the masters of mass hysteria, today the media masters are the priests of deception. Stardom replaces sainthood, just as televised self-immolation replaces martyrdom; or perhaps it is that stardom has become the martyrdom of an age of visual exuberance and omnipresence. Yet, as Karl Marx noted, just as the Reformation liberated us from religion by making each one of us into his own priest, mass culture liberated us from culture by making of each one of us its consumer, and through consumption its producers (the logic of the market: what is consumed gets produced). As consumers we all participate in the sacrament of consumption: buying is good, consuming is salvation. And here, American civil religion merges with its chauvinistic nationalism: to consume is American, and through consumption we enact our civil religion, our duty for country and motherland. Yet, this thorough commercialization and bar-coding of culture results in the inescapable and nagging need to know what to buy, to know what to consume. There is a direct correlation between mass production and mass consumption: the more there is to consume, the more products there are on the shelf, the more one need to consume the same. Massive quantities translate into uncertainty, even angst. Where there is so much, and each choice is a leap of faith, the common and familiar becomes a respite from uncertainty and intractable massiveness. Sameness becomes the solace of the overwhelmed. Where everyone can have the same, each must distinguish herself by being unique. Uniqueness itself must turn into a commodity. “Think different,” “be unique”—consume like everyone else. And in this way, mass culture produces its own need for apocalypse, for redemption, for the end. In this way, religion that was institutionalized ignorance has become in mass culture organized dysfunction: produced and exploited pathology.

There are two other aspects in Palahniuk’s *Survivor* that I want to linger over. The first concerns the inchoate critique of religion as the domestication of the flesh, nay even as a type of human husbandry. Tender Branson is the survivor of a cult that monitored the bodily existence of its subjects to the last details, and each rite of passage is marked by some sort of physical marking. All religions, one can argue, write their book of holiness on the bodies of their subjects. Religions link and bind communities by domesticating the flesh of subjects. Before they are pliant believers, the faithful have to be made docile. Religion is the torture of the flesh for the sake of the docility of the body. The soul is the prison of the body, as Michel Foucault pointed out, but religion is the technique by which the soul disciplines itself. Religion with its rituals is the regime of routine, submission, and patience. In the end, the first and last true technology of bodies is religion. For this reason today body sculpting has become an ersatz religion, and Gold’s Gyms its temples. The second aspect that I want to linger over is related to the technology of bodies that religion presupposes, and it concerns the relation
between Puritanism and an almost boundless fascination with domesticated bodies that is the focus of pornography. One of the most morbid but also sardonic sections in Survivor is when Tender Brason returns to what had been his sect’s land, which he had converted into a landfill for the country’s pornography. What had been the Creedish church district has now become twenty thousand acres of pornography landfill: Was religion the pornography of society or is pornography the religion of our society?

*Beauty that will never fade*

“It helps to know you’re not any more responsible for how you look than a car is... You’re a product just as much. A product of a product of a product. The people who design cars, they’re products. Your parents are products. Their parents were products. Your teachers, products. The minister in your church, another product.”

How does one survive a culture which has made of beauty the ultimate goal and norm, and in which beauty is at the same time recycled with the next issue of *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue* or the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue? Palahniuk’s third novel, Invisible Monsters is a modern version of Oscar Wilde’s *The portrait of Dorian Gray*. For in this novel Palahniuk is concerned with answering two main questions: what are you willing to do in order to be and remain beautiful, and is there a beauty that can never be ravaged by the decay of the flesh? If ‘we are all self-composting,’ already decaying at the moment we are born, then beauty, absolute and unassailable, is unreachable and elusive, a mythology. If beauty is a matter of visual and visible effects, then it is about surface. Beauty is the gloss of a depthless surface. It is the mirror that has for its obverse the repressed monster of an unattained or already lost beauty. Every beauty thus conceals its ‘invisible monsters.’ As people persevere under the strain of having to be beautiful, their monsters well up in rage. On the other hand, what if we succumb to this compulsion to be beautiful, beautiful beyond even what is naturally allowed to human beings—a beauty that cannot be granted by nature, and thus which compels us to erase, overcome, and supplant nature itself. Perhaps echoing the words of the master genetic engineer in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, who says of his replicants that “they are more human than humans,” we live under a compulsion to attain a beauty that is more beautiful than beauty. It is not just a matter of amending it, but of entirely overwriting beauty’s script. If we are already dying when we are born, then we must die to be born beyond the body, beyond what organic matter allows and grants. The beauty that is peddled and tyrannically beamed from every magazine cover, highway billboard, TV add, sit-com, and movie is the neo-Platonism of the ‘society of the spectacle’ that Guy Debord diagnosed so astutely in the eponymous book. On the other side of Baudrillard’s post-metaphysical society of the simulacra, stands the masses clamoring for the really real that is beyond the ravages of nature, of time, of decay, of putrefaction, flatulence, and incontinence.

The idolatry of beauty is the Platonism of the post-modern society. But it is a beauty that in many ways no one has seen, and cannot be seen. It always remains in the
realm of the speculative. It must be circled around, approximated by ways of extremes. Thus, Palahniuk’s *Invisible Monsters* moves around the edges of these two extremes, which in many ways are not so antithetical, but possible responses in a continuum, one that is held together by the burden of imposed beauty. On one side is the Brandy Alexander, who is re-making him/herself, beyond male passing as female, beyond female impersonating male, beyond drag as performance (“I’m not straight, and I’m not gay,” she says [Brandy]. “I’m not bisexual. I want out of the labels. I don’t want my whole life crammed into a single word. A story. I want to find something else, unknowable, some place to be that’s not on the map. A real adventure.”(261)). This is not just trans-genderism, for the idea is to abandon the lexicon of either/or, and not both; it is a trans-sexualism, one that does not transits between, but reaches beyond. Brandy is in search of a world that is not on the map of gender and sexual relations as we have known, and which perhaps has had its prescient cartographers in the fiction of Ursula LeGuin, Octavia Butler, and most recently the Australian sci-fi writer Greg Egan (see *Distress*). Then, on the other side, we have the voice over, the narrator who was/is a model, and who dispossesses herself, exorcises herself of “cosmetic beauty,” in order to fashion a beauty that is beyond even metaphysical Platonism, for it is a beauty that is a function not of the coordination of elements, the symmetry of limbs, the geometry of features, but of a depthless and anarchical will: beauty as fiat. Beauty is performance, the script not of the visual and surface, but of doing, enactment, of defiance and irreverence. This beauty is not seen, but presence. It is both terrifying, and not visible in the way that things seen are seen by the evidences they give. It is the beauty that holds us spell bound before horror. This is the beauty of the grotesque and terrifying. It is a beauty that cheats time by making itself timeless in its very act of fiat. In the beginning, at the beginning of time, was the act. Beauty that is beyond the putrefying body of nature is the beauty of the act, of the pure will that assaults all conventions to articulate itself as what has never been experience. Beauty is the act of world-disclosure of a primordial and inaugurating will.

*Addicted to dependency*

If you’re going to read this, don’t bother.
After a couple of pages, you won’t want to be here. So forget it. Go away.
Get out while you’re still in one piece. Save yourself.

Just so you know, what you’re reading is the complete and relentless story of an addict. Because in most twelve-step recovery programs, the four step makes you take inventory of your life. Every lame, suck-ass moment of your life, you have to get a notebook and write it down. A complete inventory of your crimes. That way, every sin is right at your fingertips. Then you have to fix it all. This goes for alcoholics, drug abusers, and overeaters, as well as sex addicts...Because, supposedly, those who forget the past are condemned to repeat.

Palahniuk’s fourth and most recent novel *Choke* (2001) returns to some topics and themes dealt with in his first novel, *Fight Club*. In this new novel we return to the world of support groups and twelve-step programs. *Choke* is a Rabelaisian look at the culture
that William Burroughs documented, from personal experience, in his classics *Naked Lunch* and *Junky*. Here the issue is how dependency itself becomes an addiction, or rather how in the midst of a culture that flourishes and thrives by promoting and instigating addiction, the very means by which individuals seek to uncouple themselves from these imposed and acquire dependencies becomes a major part of their lives. The Faustian wager is, approximately, what if your cure is as addictive as your addiction, the one you are trying to kick the habit of. The main character is a sexaholic, who is addicted to the most mundane forms of sexual pleasure, but also to its most extreme and bizarre forms. He finds himself in the company of individuals who have the same addictions, and are perpetually relieving or fulfilling themselves of this addictions in the most of particular and unsuspecting places. In contrast, perhaps as a sobering note, we have the main character’s mother who is descending into the disorienting dessert of a ceaseless present tense that Alzheimer induces in its victims. There is disease and then there is disease, to quote the popular saying. Palahniuk offers us a hilarious look at something that is certainly terrifying, but in granting us this jocular picture of a devastating disease he allows us to appreciate its metaphysical wonder: fantastic mythologies begin to unfold in the unchecked imagination of his ailing mother, and how he is able to retain a modicum of communication by indulging her in her fabrications. There is disease that ravages the body and desolates the mind, that unhinges our identities and sunders us from our loves; and then there is the disease of the imposed dependency, the fabricated and promoted addictions, which is not base on a physical and natural dysfunction, but is based on a social and culture pathology. We live in a society that is hyper-stimulated, that is perpetually seeking a thrill. We are a society of junkies perpetually seeking a fix addiction to excitement, the adrenaline rush, the jolt of the heart, the sense of aliveness, immediacy, of utter presence and corporeality. We live for the moment, the now, the go, the leap, the assault, the shock. We become specimens in an extreme sports zoo. The extreme becomes our quotidian existence, and the quotidian becomes the extreme—but of course, this is the logic of life in an extreme sports park, and one that is not sustainable in ordinary, everyday life. This however explains why quotidian existence has become mundane in the most of derogatory senses, meaning banal and crass, un-existing and uninteresting, superficial and unbearable. From every corner of our image and sound inundated society, we are assaulted by the message and advertisements to drink, smoke, smell, and taste the flavors and smells of acceleration, desire, motion, vitality. And we are addicted to those things that promise this rush of youth and beauty. But we know they are dependency inducing and in the long terms, unhealthy and pernicious. So we quit. We go to AAA (alcoholics anonymous of America), we go on a diet, we quit smoking, we try to make our boring lives interesting, by enjoying the small pleasure of quotidian existence. But then we become addicted to quitting, to dieting, to regulating life so as to make it less dependent, less at the mercy of commercial forces. And we are back full circle: we are addicted to our addictions. The moral may be as simple as this: our culture itself is an emapthemine, an opiate, and alkaloid that hyper-stimulates our brains and hyper-excites our bodies. Our culture is perpetually turning us into junkies: junkies to its junk, its poison, the kind of fix that it alone can provide. Still, it is telling that we seek to escape our addictions by taking refuge in the culture of the 12-step programs that have become so prevalent in US society. It is telling because what we find there is the pursuit of ritual, community, a confessional, a reprieve from our invasive and pervasive culture.
This twelve-step is in fact an ersatz religion. In it we find ritual, rhythm, solace from the uncertainty of an overwhelming world turned strange by the monotony of its endless changing. In it we find prayer, and confessions, we find saints and martyrs. In it we find the church of the faithful, a gathering of domesticating and disciplining bodies. In this way, the twelve-step culture become a negative mirror of what our dependency creating culture does and seeks to undo. And thus, what is the means for the cure of our pathology reveals the nature and source of the disease, i.e. a culture that excites by capitalizing on the new, that undoes community by individualizing pleasure, which promotes superficiality and a fabricated authenticity, in which individual angst and failure are anathema and proscribed. The irony is double. The culture sickens and makes us sick, and the very medicine it prescribes become part of its poison, its very mean of perpetuating its hold on us by sustaining dependency. It is for this reason that Palahniuk’s work has been compared to that of Thomas Pynchon. Indeed, there is a profound suspicion of the ‘system,’ of societal good intentions. Nothing hides behind the social concern for the individual other than the tyrannical imperative of society to maintain its grip on the individual. And yet, notwithstanding Palahniuk’s anarchism, and cynicism, he is no misanthrope. Despite the morally desolate landscapes that he paints for us, Palahniuk’s characters are still enduring and sketch with tenderness and sympathy. One may venture to suggest that Palahniuk’s writing is motivated by an Emersonian romanticism that celebrates and idolizes the undiminishable capacity of individuals to overcome the obstacles that society throws on his or her path. It is here where he perhaps differs most fundamentally from someone like writer Don Delillo, with whom he has been compared. Delillo can be labeled many things, but one thing he cannot be called is optimistic, or romantic. While Delillo’s narratives are austere, gray and almost metallic, Palahniuk’s are charming, almost nostalgic, empathetic and softened by the lulled of his rhythmic writing. If Delillo’s writing is muscular in its diction, Palahniuk’s is comforting in its aphoristic one-liners and the aurality of its writing. His writing is marked by what one may call a democratic ethos. On the one hand, there is the orality of the narrative: short sentences, circling back around producing a rhythmic tempo and a creating a thread that sustains a fragmented temporal sequencing. On the other hand, there is the fascination with details, with the collecting of vignettes of the rare and strange. Together, Palahniuk’s novels make a veritable encyclopedia of minutiae and trivia about all sorts of potentially useful information: how to remove sweat stains, how to eat a lobster, how to make a bomb, how to remove wrinkles from the forehead, what kinds of steroids to use and with what supplements, how to make soap from human fat, where to find this fat, and so on. Under the mundane and pedestrian dwells the fantastic and horrific. Calamity and catastrophe awaits, coiled and ready to pounce on us, unsuspecting and blithely walking mesmerized by the wares and neon signs of the city of consumption. Yet, in this jungle of imagines, information, and monsters, stands the dazed but un-overwhelmed individual. Palahniuk, perhaps in contrast to Delillo, is less interested in offering nihilistic chastisements, than in offering the most eloquent and sympathetic portraits of human resilience in the face of inevitable and extreme failure, dysfunction, and pathology that a good old American romantic can paint of his or her people in this age of post-affluence consumerism and post-benign empire. In the end, it is individuals that have survived American society, and not this society that has saved them. Pathology and deviance, as
Palahniuk has chronicle them throughout his corpus is the health of the individual and the illness of society.

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