

Dualism and its Presence in Contemporary Artistic Thought

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Abstract: *This article examines the enduring influence of dualism on contemporary artistic thought, tracing its philosophical origins and exploring its diverse manifestations in modern art forms. Dualism, traditionally understood as the division of two fundamentally distinct entities, such as mind and body or material and immaterial, has significantly shaped artistic expression from classical to contemporary periods. By analyzing visual arts, performing arts, literature, and film, this study reveals how dualistic themes continue to pervade artistic practices, reflecting on complex issues like identity, selfhood, and sociopolitical dichotomies. Furthermore, the article considers post-dualistic critiques and the limitations of dualistic frameworks, proposing new directions for future artistic exploration. Ultimately, it argues for the continued relevance of dualistic thought in contemporary art while acknowledging the dynamic ways artists both engage with and challenge dualistic paradigms.*

Keywords: *Dualism, Contemporary Art, Philosophical Dualism, Identity and Otherness, Materiality and Immateriality, Visual Arts, Performing Arts, Literature and Film, Post-Dualistic Critique, Artistic Practices.*

INTRODUCTION

Dualism, a concept with deep philosophical roots, has long been a cornerstone in the exploration of human thought, reality, and existence. Originating from the philosophical tradition of thinkers like René Descartes, dualism posits a fundamental division between two distinct entities—most notably, the mind and body, or the material and immaterial. This binary framework has profoundly influenced not only philosophy and metaphysics but also the realm of artistic expression. In contemporary times, dualism persists as a significant lens through which artists interrogate the complexities of human experience, identity, and social reality.

In the context of contemporary art, dualism is not merely an abstract philosophical stance but a dynamic tool that enables the exploration of contrasting or opposing elements. Artists employ dualistic thinking to navigate between dichotomies such as presence and absence, reality and illusion, self and other, or organic and synthetic. Through various mediums—including visual arts, literature, film, and performance—contemporary creators continue to grapple with the tensions and intersections that dualism evokes, reflecting its continued relevance and adaptability to the shifting landscapes of modern society.

This article seeks to uncover the multifaceted presence of dualism in contemporary artistic thought by examining its historical foundations and current manifestations. It will explore how dualism shapes artistic practices and critiques in a range of mediums, from the visual arts to performance, literature, and film. By doing so, the article will illuminate how dualistic concepts remain central to artistic engagement with identity, materiality, and sociopolitical discourse. Moreover, it will consider critiques of dualism that challenge its adequacy in addressing the complexities of contemporary life, proposing new avenues for artistic inquiry beyond traditional binary frameworks.

By examining dualism's persistent influence and the evolving responses to it within contemporary art, this article argues for its ongoing significance while recognizing the innovative ways in which artists both utilize and subvert dualistic paradigms. This investigation not only highlights dualism's enduring impact on creative thought but also opens the door to understanding how contemporary art navigates and reshapes the philosophical debates at its core.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The concept of dualism, rooted in the philosophical tradition, has significantly shaped the development of art from antiquity to the present day. Dualism, particularly the mind-body dichotomy articulated by René Descartes in the 17th century, posits a fundamental distinction between two realms: the mental and the physical, the spiritual and the material, or the ideal and the real. This binary framework has provided a rich source of tension and contrast in the arts, inspiring artists to explore and express the dualities inherent in human experience.

Dualism's philosophical foundation can be traced back to the works of Plato, who in his theory of forms distinguished between the world of eternal, unchanging ideas and the mutable, imperfect world of physical appearances (Plato, *Republic*). This early dualistic thinking laid the groundwork for later philosophical elaborations, particularly in the work of René Descartes, who proposed a radical separation between the mind (*res cogitans*) and the body (*res extensa*) (*Meditations on First Philosophy*, 1641). Descartes' dualism has profoundly influenced Western thought, establishing a framework through which many subsequent philosophical and artistic developments have been interpreted (Cottingham, 1992).

Kant's "transcendental idealism" further complicated dualism by suggesting that while phenomena (the physical world as we perceive it) are shaped by the human mind's structuring capabilities, the "noumenal" world (things as they are in themselves) remains inaccessible (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781). This provided a fertile ground for Romantic artists and thinkers, who sought to transcend the perceived limitations of material reality and engage with the sublime, often using nature, the spiritual, and the emotional as vehicles for this exploration (Beiser, 2003).

The influence of dualism on art is evident across various historical periods. During the Renaissance, artists like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci grappled with dualistic themes by juxtaposing the sacred and the profane, the divine and the earthly, often in their depictions of religious subjects. Michelangelo's sculpture *David* (1501-1504) can be viewed as a manifestation of this dualistic tension: the idealized, almost divine form of the human body, representing both earthly physicality and spiritual aspiration (Barolsky, 1995).

Moving into the modern era, dualism became a central theme in movements such as Romanticism, which emphasized the tension between reason and emotion, the natural and the supernatural. For instance, Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818) portrays a solitary figure gazing upon a sublime landscape, representing both the finite human self and the infinite, transcendent nature (Koerner, 1990). Romantic artists employed dualism to explore the limits of human perception, emotion, and experience, and to critique the Enlightenment's emphasis on rationality and scientific understanding.

As modern art evolved, dualism found new expressions in movements such as Surrealism and Expressionism. Surrealists like Salvador Dalí and René Magritte explored the dualities between dream and reality, the conscious and the unconscious, drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis and Cartesian dualism to question the nature of reality itself. Magritte's painting *The Treachery of Images* (1929) famously challenges the viewer's understanding of representation and reality, illustrating the tension between visual perception and linguistic interpretation (Foucault, 1983).

Expressionists, on the other hand, utilized dualism to express inner psychological conflicts and spiritual crises. Artists like Edvard Munch, whose work *The Scream* (1893) captures the tension between an

individual's internal turmoil and the external world, reflect a dualistic perspective on existence—where the visible world is a projection of inner, often chaotic, states (Lüthy, 1996).

In the 20th century, dualism continued to shape artistic movements such as Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. Mark Rothko's color field paintings, for instance, evoke a sense of immateriality and transcendence, suggesting the viewer engage with both the materiality of paint and the immateriality of emotional and spiritual experience (Anfam, 1998). Meanwhile, in Minimalism, artists like Donald Judd emphasized the material qualities of their work while simultaneously inviting contemplation on immaterial concepts such as space, perception, and presence (Meyer, 2001).

In contemporary art, dualism is often interrogated and reinterpreted in light of new philosophical critiques, particularly from post-structuralist and postmodern thinkers who challenge binary thinking. For example, artists like Marina Abramović in her performance piece *The Artist is Present* (2010) explore the tension between presence and absence, reality and representation, using her body as a site to question the boundaries between artist and audience, self and other (Westcott, 2010).

In contemporary art, dualism continues to serve as a vital conceptual framework through which artists interrogate the complexities of existence, identity, and perception. Rather than adhering strictly to classical interpretations of dualism—such as the Cartesian division between mind and body—modern artists often explore and subvert these binaries, reflecting broader philosophical shifts toward multiplicity, hybridity, and the deconstruction of fixed categories. This section examines how dualistic themes manifest across various contemporary art forms, including visual arts, performing arts, literature, and film, highlighting the ways in which artists engage with, challenge, and expand upon traditional dualistic paradigms.

In the visual arts, dualism frequently appears through the juxtaposition of contrasting elements—such as realism and abstraction, light and shadow, or organic and synthetic forms. Contemporary painters like Anselm Kiefer employ dualistic contrasts to evoke the interplay between history and myth, destruction and creation. Kiefer's works often juxtapose materials like lead, ash, and straw, invoking both the materiality and immateriality of memory and loss (Arrowsmith, 1995).

Similarly, the works of artists such as Yayoi Kusama challenge traditional dualistic boundaries through installations that merge the finite with the infinite, employing mirrors and polka dots to create immersive environments where boundaries between object and viewer, reality and illusion, dissolve (Munroe, 2012). Kusama's Infinity Rooms invite viewers to confront the tension between the self as an individual entity and the self as a part of an infinite, interconnected cosmos, highlighting the dualistic interplay between presence and absence.

Dualism is also prominently explored in contemporary performing arts, where artists use the human body to navigate the boundaries between mind and matter, self and other. Choreographers like Pina Bausch utilized dance to explore the dualistic tension between order and chaos, structure and freedom, often creating pieces that juxtapose rigid, repetitive movements with sudden bursts of emotion or improvisation (Climenhaga, 2009). This dualism is not only embodied in the physicality of the dancers but also in the spatial dynamics of the performance, where bodies navigate spaces defined by both emptiness and form.

Performance artist Marina Abramović, in works like *The Artist is Present* (2010), interrogates the dualism of presence and absence, reality and representation, using the medium of the live body. By sitting motionless in the gallery for hours, Abramović collapses the boundaries between artist and audience, creating a dualistic experience that blurs the lines between performer and observer, action and stillness (Westcott, 2010). This engagement with dualism extends beyond the binary, inviting a deeper meditation on human connection and the nature of presence itself.

Contemporary literature and film often utilize dualistic themes to explore conflicts between individual and collective identities, the conscious and the unconscious, and the real and the imagined. In the works of writers like Haruki Murakami, dualism is evident in the interplay between mundane reality and surreal, dream-like elements. Novels such as *Kafka on the Shore* (2002) present a narrative structure where characters navigate parallel worlds that blur the lines between the conscious self and a deeper, hidden reality, reflecting a dualistic tension that echoes both Eastern and Western metaphysical traditions (Rubin, 2005).

In film, directors like David Lynch and Christopher Nolan frequently use visual metaphors and narrative structures to explore dualism. Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) engages with dualistic themes of identity and illusion, using disjointed timelines and mirror-image characters to question the nature of reality itself (Nochimson, 2013). Nolan's *Inception* (2010) similarly plays with dualism by constructing layered realities within dreams, challenging viewers' perceptions of time, space, and consciousness (Page, 2012). Both directors employ techniques that deliberately obscure the boundaries between opposites, such as reality and fiction, sanity and madness, suggesting a fundamental uncertainty that lies at the heart of the human condition.

Olafur Eliasson's installation *The Weather Project*, displayed at Tate Modern in 2003, presents a dualistic engagement with nature and technology, reality and simulation. The installation consists of a large, artificial sun constructed from mono-frequency lamps, mirrors, and mist, which fills the exhibition space with a monochromatic yellow light. Visitors encounter an environment that feels both real and unreal, invoking the duality between natural phenomena and artificial creation (Bishop, 2005). Eliasson's work invites contemplation on the intersection of the organic and the mechanical, the human and the environment, encouraging viewers to question their perceptions of reality.

Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth* (2007), a 167-meter crack installed in the floor of Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, serves as a metaphor for social and political dualisms—such as inclusion and exclusion, belonging and otherness. The fissure represents the gaps and divides created by prejudice, discrimination, and historical trauma. Salcedo's work uses physical space to embody these dualisms, prompting viewers to reflect on the social and psychological rifts that divide human experience (Bal, 2010). The piece illustrates how dualism can be employed to address contemporary sociopolitical issues, using a stark visual metaphor to interrogate divisions within society.

While dualistic frameworks continue to inform contemporary artistic practice, many artists and theorists now critique the adequacy of dualism in capturing the complexities of a globalized, interconnected world. Influenced by post-structuralist and deconstructivist theories, contemporary art often challenges binary oppositions in favor of more fluid, hybrid, and pluralistic approaches. Artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija, who creates participatory works that blur the lines between artist, artwork, and audience, reject traditional dualistic boundaries altogether, emphasizing instead the interconnectedness and interdependence of all elements involved in the creative process (Bishop, 2012).

As the contemporary art world continues to evolve, dualism remains a potent, if increasingly contested, conceptual framework. Artists are exploring new ways of engaging with dualistic themes, often transcending or subverting them to reflect the complexities of modern experience. This dynamic engagement with dualism suggests its enduring relevance while highlighting the innovative directions in which contemporary artistic thought is moving.

Contemporary interpretations of dualism in art are deeply entwined with philosophical debates that have evolved over centuries. While classical dualism, especially as articulated by René Descartes, established a clear demarcation between mind and body, matter and spirit, contemporary artistic practices often challenge, reinterpret, or expand these binary distinctions. This section explores how contemporary artists engage with dualistic concepts such as identity, materiality, and immateriality, as well as how

they respond to critiques of dualism through new theoretical frameworks. By examining these philosophical engagements, we can better understand the persistent relevance of dualism in contemporary art and the innovative ways artists and thinkers push beyond traditional dualistic paradigms.

The concept of identity, a central theme in both philosophy and art, has long been explored through dualistic frameworks, which distinguish between self and other, individual and collective, or subject and object. Contemporary artists frequently use dualism to question and destabilize these boundaries, reflecting broader philosophical shifts towards notions of multiplicity and fluid identity.

For instance, the works of Cindy Sherman interrogate dualism by deconstructing the binary between the self and its representation. In her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), Sherman assumes various identities, challenging the notion of a fixed, stable self and emphasizing the multiplicity of identity as constructed through cultural and visual codes (Mulvey, 1991). Sherman's work aligns with postmodern critiques of essentialism, rejecting the Cartesian dualism of a singular, coherent self in favor of fragmented, performative identities (Butler, 1990).

Philosophically, this aligns with Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist dualism, which views identity as a project in flux, constantly negotiated between "being-for-itself" and "being-for-others" (Sartre, 1943). In contemporary art, such dualistic tensions are further explored in the context of race, gender, and sexuality. Artists like Adrian Piper use dualism to confront issues of race and identity. Her *My Calling (Card) #1* (1986), which she distributed in social settings, directly engages with the dualism between how one is perceived and how one perceives oneself, critiquing societal binaries imposed by racial prejudice (Jones, 2013).

Contemporary art also explores dualism through the relationship between materiality and immateriality, engaging with philosophical debates on presence and absence, substance and void, reality and perception. In the works of artists such as James Turrell, this dualistic engagement is evident. Turrell's light installations, like those in the *Roden Crater* project, manipulate light and space to create environments that challenge viewers' perceptions of materiality and immateriality, making the invisible visible and questioning the very nature of sensory experience (Adcock, 1990).

These artistic explorations resonate with the phenomenological approach of philosophers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who rejected Cartesian dualism in favor of a more integrated understanding of perception as a bodily experience that bridges the mind-body divide (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945). Merleau-Ponty argues that perception is not merely a mental act but a lived experience, where the body is both subject and object, simultaneously perceiving and being perceived. Turrell's installations embody this non-dualistic vision, immersing viewers in environments that collapse the distinction between seeing and being seen, presence and absence (Crowther, 2009).

In digital and new media art, the interplay between the material and the immaterial is also explored through the dualistic tensions between physical and virtual realities. Artists like Nam June Paik, considered the father of video art, challenged the boundaries between the tangible world and electronic, digital realms. His works, such as *TV Buddha* (1974), juxtapose ancient spiritual practices with modern technological media, reflecting on the dualistic relationship between past and present, reality and representation (Hanhardt, 2000).

While many contemporary artists engage with dualistic themes, others actively critique or move beyond dualism, reflecting broader philosophical currents that challenge binary thinking. Influenced by post-structuralist and deconstructivist thinkers like Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, contemporary art often seeks to transcend or deconstruct dualistic categories in favor of more fluid, relational, and multiplicity-based approaches.

Derrida's concept of "différance" destabilizes binary oppositions, suggesting that meaning is always deferred, never fully present, and that all binary structures inherently contain their own contradictions (Derrida, 1967). This approach is reflected in the work of artists such as Sophie Calle, whose art blurs the lines between truth and fiction, public and private, presence and absence. In her project *The Address Book* (1983), Calle explores the tension between knowing and not knowing, using a found address book to create narratives about a stranger, thus questioning the dualistic relationship between the observer and the observed (Auster, 2003).

Similarly, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the "rhizome" offers a model of thought that rejects hierarchical, binary structures in favor of horizontal, non-linear connections (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). This philosophy has inspired many contemporary artists to create works that emphasize connectivity, hybridity, and multiplicity over dualistic separations. For example, in the multimedia works of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, such as *The Murder of Crows* (2008), soundscapes are used to create immersive environments where the boundaries between reality and imagination, subject and object, continuously shift, reflecting a post-dualistic vision of interconnected experience (Huyssen, 2013).

Contemporary art also uses dualism to engage with sociopolitical issues, addressing the divides and tensions that shape modern life. Artists like Ai Weiwei employ dualism to critique power structures, highlighting the conflict between state control and individual freedom. Ai's installation *Sunflower Seeds* (2010) consists of 100 million hand-painted porcelain seeds, a seemingly simple, uniform collection that upon closer inspection reveals individual variation, symbolizing both the collective and the individual, mass production and unique craftsmanship (Pollack, 2011). Through this dualistic metaphor, Ai comments on themes of conformity and resistance, community and individuality, oppression and freedom.

This approach reflects the work of philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who critiques the limitations of traditional dualistic thinking, particularly in the context of ideology. Žižek argues that dualistic frameworks often obscure the complexities of power dynamics and sociopolitical reality, suggesting that contemporary art can offer a way to reveal the "parallax view"—a perspective that acknowledges the irreducible gap between conflicting viewpoints without resolving them into a simplistic binary (Žižek, 2006).

Through these various engagements, contemporary art demonstrates that while dualism remains a powerful conceptual tool, it is also a contested one. Artists today do not merely reflect on dualistic oppositions but often challenge and deconstruct them, proposing new ways of understanding the complex, interconnected nature of human experience. As such, contemporary artistic practices reflect a move towards more nuanced, post-dualistic frameworks, while still drawing on the tensions and insights that dualism provides. This dynamic interplay suggests that dualism, far from being an obsolete paradigm, continues to offer fertile ground for artistic and philosophical exploration.

Dualism has significantly influenced contemporary artistic practices, shaping both the conceptual underpinnings and the aesthetic approaches of modern and postmodern art. The enduring relevance of dualism in contemporary art reflects its capacity to address fundamental questions about the nature of existence, perception, and reality. Dualism's impact manifests in several key ways: by providing a conceptual framework for exploring the tensions inherent in human experience, by serving as a tool for social critique, and by fostering new forms of artistic experimentation and innovation. This section examines how dualism informs contemporary artistic practices and explores its effects on both the creation and interpretation of art today.

Dualism provides a powerful lens through which contemporary artists examine and express the complexities of human experience. The dichotomies inherent in dualistic thinking—such as mind and

body, self and other, reality and illusion—offer fertile ground for artistic exploration. These binary oppositions allow artists to delve into the contradictions and tensions that characterize modern life.

For example, the dualism between mind and body is a recurring theme in the works of artists like Francis Bacon, who used his paintings to explore the fragility and vulnerability of the human body in relation to the psyche. His distorted figures, often trapped within geometric frames, convey the tension between internal psychological states and their external, physical manifestations. Bacon's work draws on a dualistic understanding of existence, one that recognizes the simultaneous autonomy and interdependence of the mental and the corporeal (Sylvester, 2000).

Moreover, the dualism of self and other is evident in the participatory and relational art practices that have emerged in recent decades. Artists such as Tania Bruguera and Rirkrit Tiravanija create works that blur the boundaries between artist and audience, emphasizing interaction, participation, and the co-creation of meaning. This engagement with dualism underscores the dynamic interplay between the individual and the collective, the subjective and the objective, highlighting the fluid nature of identity and community in contemporary society (Bishop, 2012).

Dualism also serves as a critical tool for contemporary artists seeking to challenge social, cultural, and political norms. By drawing attention to the binary oppositions that underlie much of societal thinking—such as inclusion and exclusion, power and resistance, oppression and liberation—artists use dualism to expose and critique the structures of power and inequality.

For instance, the work of Kara Walker engages with the dualism of power and subjugation through her use of silhouette cut-outs that depict historical scenes from the antebellum South. Walker's stark black-and-white images draw on the dualistic opposition of darkness and light, visually reinforcing the racial binaries that have shaped historical and contemporary social relations. Her work critiques the simplistic binaries of race, while also revealing the complexities and contradictions inherent in the narratives of race, gender, and power in American history (Wallace, 2007).

Similarly, the dualism between the visible and the invisible is a recurrent theme in the works of contemporary artists who address issues of marginalization and erasure. For example, in her installation *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* (2007-ongoing), artist Michael Rakowitz reconstructs Iraqi artifacts looted or destroyed during the Iraq War, challenging the dualistic narrative of visible cultural heritage versus invisible destruction. Rakowitz's work confronts the politics of memory and forgetting, using dualism to question who gets to define cultural identity and whose histories are preserved or erased (Bishara, 2020).

Dualism has also served as a catalyst for innovation in contemporary artistic practices, prompting artists to experiment with new forms, materials, and media to transcend or reframe traditional binaries. By challenging and deconstructing established dualistic frameworks, contemporary artists push the boundaries of what art can be and how it can be experienced.

For example, the dualism between reality and illusion has inspired many contemporary artists working with digital and immersive technologies. In the field of augmented and virtual reality, artists like Laurie Anderson and Hito Steyerl explore the boundaries between the digital and the physical, the real and the imagined. Anderson's *Chalkroom* (2017) is an immersive VR experience where users navigate through a labyrinth of floating words and drawings, questioning the nature of memory and the digital versus the material (Anderson, 2017). Steyerl's video installations, such as *Factory of the Sun* (2015), further complicate the dualism of reality and simulation by blending documentary footage with CGI, inviting viewers to reflect on the increasingly blurred line between the virtual and the real in contemporary life (Steyerl, 2015).

Additionally, dualism has driven experimentation in performance art, particularly in works that challenge the separation between art and life. Artists such as Yoko Ono and Marina Abramović have

long used dualism as a conceptual framework for exploring the boundaries between artist and audience, action and stillness, and presence and absence. Abramović's performance piece *The Artist is Present* (2010) is an example of how dualism can serve as a medium for artistic inquiry. By sitting motionless for hours and inviting visitors to sit across from her, Abramović collapses the distinction between artist and viewer, creating an encounter that engages with dualism on multiple levels—psychological, existential, and experiential (Westcott, 2010).

While dualism continues to shape contemporary art, many artists and theorists are increasingly moving towards non-dualistic or post-dualistic frameworks that emphasize fluidity, hybridity, and multiplicity over binary oppositions. This shift reflects broader philosophical trends that question the adequacy of dualistic thinking in capturing the complexities of contemporary existence.

Artists like Olafur Eliasson and Rirkrit Tiravanija exemplify this trend, creating works that defy conventional binary categories and instead focus on relational dynamics, participation, and interconnectedness. Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (2003) at Tate Modern, which used mist and light to create an ephemeral sun inside the museum, blurred the lines between nature and technology, the natural and the artificial, inviting viewers to experience a reality that is both constructed and real (Bishop, 2005).

In embracing a post-dualistic aesthetic, contemporary artists are not merely rejecting dualism but are instead reconfiguring it in innovative ways. This approach allows them to explore a more holistic understanding of human experience, one that recognizes the interdependence of all elements and the complex interrelations that exist within and beyond binary structures.

Dualism continues to exert a profound influence on contemporary artistic practices, serving as a framework for exploring human experience, critiquing social structures, and fostering innovation. At the same time, many artists are challenging and expanding beyond dualistic thinking, reflecting a broader philosophical shift towards more fluid, interconnected ways of understanding the world. This dynamic interplay between dualism and its critique underscores the continued relevance of dualistic concepts in art, while also highlighting the innovative directions in which contemporary artistic thought is moving.

CONCLUSION

Dualism, with its inherent tensions and oppositions, continues to play a vital role in shaping contemporary artistic thought and practice. From serving as a conceptual framework for exploring the complexities of human experience to acting as a tool for social critique, dualism informs the creation, interpretation, and evolution of modern art. Contemporary artists engage with dualism by both embracing and challenging its binary structures, thereby fostering new modes of aesthetic expression that reflect our multifaceted realities. At the same time, many artists move beyond traditional dualistic thinking, exploring more fluid, interconnected, and hybrid approaches that push the boundaries of artistic practice. As contemporary art continues to evolve, dualism remains a dynamic and fertile ground for exploring the profound questions of existence, perception, and identity, demonstrating its enduring relevance in both artistic and philosophical discourse.

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