

Dangerous Aesthetics

Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790) offers a disturbing passage regarding the sublimity of war. "War itself, provided it is conducted with order and a sacred respect for the rights of civilians, has something sublime about it" (Kant 93). Since war is a political tool, by linking war to the aesthetic pleasure of the sublime, Kant opens the door for Walter Benjamin's subsequent assertion that politics can be aesthetic. In "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), Benjamin states that Fascism, as a means of pacifying the populace while maintaining the status quo of property ownership, aestheticizes politics, and that this inevitably leads to war. It is a bold, chilling, and prescient assertion given that he wrote his essay on the eve of the Second World War. More than a century earlier, not only does Kant appear to condone war, but there is also a moral ambivalence with regard to aesthetics in the *Critique of Judgement*. Yet, an underlying ethical component in Kant's philosophy begs for a defense of his aesthetic theories. Benjamin takes liberties with Kantian aesthetics, although not entirely without justification. It would seem that Benjamin is correct in saying that the Nazis made politics aesthetic. However, I will show that Benjamin is only partially correct in using the term *aesthetics* in the Kantian sense. This in turn will shed light on Kant's ethics, especially as it pertains to what seems to be his development of an aesthetic framework that the Nazis exploited with ultimately horrific results. This dialogue between Kant and Benjamin, spanning the Enlightenment to the Nazi era, with further contributions in particular from late 20th-century writers, illuminates the mechanism by which Fascism consolidates its power through visual culture.

In this essay I will argue that Benjamin's theory of the aestheticization of politics is in agreement with Kant's aesthetics, but only in relation to the sublime. I will argue that the totality of Nazi visual culture is sublime in the Kantian sense, yet made up of a plethora of fetishes. If the overall aesthetic impact of Nazism was sublimity, I contend that the components—the individual visual elements (films, uniforms, and logos, for instance), which comprise the totality—were more precisely fetishistic, not aesthetic objects in the Kantian sense. This is a way of saying that on the macro-scale we have sublimity, but on the micro-scale we have fetishism. This is an important point because the visual culture of the Third Reich had an intentionally limiting effect, i.e., it was intended to suppress dissent, for example, by showing the State's power to be boundless and unchallengeable. In contrast, for Kant, aesthetics were a means of personal enlightenment, not of control. The thread in Kant's thought that espouses the ambivalent morality of aesthetics does not really give an artist or regime *carte blanche* to do whatever they wish. The importance of my argument is that in spite of Kant's ambivalent aesthetics, there is still a predominant ethical component; implicit in Kant's philosophy is an inherent demand for appropriate ethical conduct. One reason it is important to seek clarification is that thinkers after Kant are alluding to him when they discuss aesthetics, whether they intend to or not. Therefore, it is imperative to create a dialogue with Kant, which offers an opportunity to illuminate both Kant's and Benjamin's theories.

The inherent ambiguity of some of the terminology related to this exploration poses a challenge. The term *aesthetics* itself is quite problematic because of the different ways that authors have used the term. Broadly, aesthetics means that which gives pleasure, usually visual.

However it can also mean the pleasure that comes from the contemplation of something abstract, like a mathematical equation. The *aestheticization of politics* is the way that a regime becomes manifest through the use of predominantly visual imagery (the swastika being foremost among these, of course, in the case of the Nazis). When Benjamin speaks of “efforts to render politics aesthetic” (526), it is clear that he is also using the term in the sense of an object or experience that can be contemplated, such as the State itself. It is important to bear in mind that an *aesthetic object* does not have to be a work of art, but anything that provides pleasure, usually to the visual sense. A *fetish* is an object or image that is a reminder of, or a replacement for something else. Sigmund Freud’s view of the fetish is that it is primarily sexual. However, later writers broaden the meaning to include other desires. Freud feels that fetishism is normal, but that it becomes dangerous when the fetish replaces the desired object, that is, when it is an end in itself. The later writers who we will explore below, however, take a more negative view of the fetish, seeing it as a replacement for reality. Finally, for the definition of *sublime* we must defer to Kant who describes it as a feeling of simultaneous displeasure *and* pleasure in response to what he calls the “absolutely great.” It is not a feeling of fear, but the displeasure of perceiving immensity and perhaps danger. The pleasurable aspect is that the observer can safely reflect upon the potentially fearful.

One cannot leap from Kant to Benjamin without referring to and relying upon some of the great thinkers who informed the intellectual, political, and cultural debate in the intervening years, such as Hegel, Marx, and Freud. However, for our purposes, it is later 20th-century writers whose work is informed by these most influential writers of the past, upon whom I will rely most, along with Kant and Benjamin, in this essay. Jean-François Lyotard’s “What is Postmodernism?” (1982) has excellent insights into the Kantian sublime and the ills of Modernism, of which Fascism is possibly the worst symptom. Jürgen Habermas, while at odds with Lyotard regarding the “cure” for Modernism, is nonetheless an excellent resource to help us better understand how Modernism affected the individual psyche. Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1973/1975) revisits Freud from a Feminist perspective and elucidates the difference between the beautiful object—something that is aesthetically pleasing—and one that is merely a fetish, a stand in for an unachievable desire. Through a lens that is both Marxist and Freudian, Victor Burgin seconds this idea in “The Absence of Presence” (1984), which posits fetishism, especially in its Capitalistic manifestations as a potentially even more dangerous irrational self-deception. Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 film *Triumph of the Will*, chronicling the Nazi Party Congress, held in Nuremberg in 1934, also illuminates many of these issues. It is one of the best examples available of the Nazi’s aestheticization of politics, unique in that it stands alone as a work of art (albeit propagandistic), and also as documentation of actual events and Nazi visual imagery.

The interwar years in Germany, beset with severe political and economic instability, created a perfect environment for the Nazi program. The Nazis, however, were not an anomaly; Fascism took root elsewhere, and while the causes are outside of the purview of this essay, it is fair to say that Fascism was the logical result of the single-mindedness of modernism’s ultimate quest for efficiency. This demand for efficiency requires specialization, which as Jürgen Habermas points out in “Modernity—An Incomplete Project” (1980), ultimately leads to fragmentation, and despondency (1127). The era in which the Nazis were able to supplant an older value system with a Fascist *Weltanschauung* stems from this crisis of Modernism, particularly the disconnect that people feel due to the specialization of roles, and the inherent sense of incompleteness. It is precisely this emptiness and uncertainty that the Nazis exploited in

1930s Germany. Hitler himself stated, “The German People are happy in the knowledge that a constantly changing vision has been replaced by a fixed pole!” (Riefenstahl). Thus, uncertainty was replaced by delusional self-confidence. The Nazi cure for the Modernist malaise was an even narrower vision of how things ought to be. Beneath a mythic-nostalgic veneer, the Nazis required even greater efficiency than the system they replaced, and it is this quest for efficiency that Benjamin posits as the reason that the Fascists made politics aesthetic.

I will first argue that Benjamin is using the term aesthetic in a manner that coincides with Kant’s theories when a distinction is made between beauty and sublimity. While they are both aesthetic judgments, Kant felt their appreciation used different mental processes. It is my contention that the large-scale visual manifestations of the Nazi regime were sublime in the Kantian sense. When all elements were combined, Nazi Germany became a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a total work of art—that was so large and encompassing that it has to be considered sublime. Nazi visual imagery exuded the idea of unlimited power. Thus, while there is no doubt an aspect of visual pleasure from the images, the aesthetic judgment of the sublime comes from being aware of the immensity of the Nazi state. Kant wrote, “The feeling of the sublime is, therefore, at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement” (88). The Kantian sublime can include an element of fear, at least in the sense that the observer is aware of a potential danger, but is not feeling fearful. “We may look upon an object as *fearful*, and yet not be afraid of it” (Kant 91). Thus, there is an interesting distinction, and one that perhaps explains the Nazi’s propagandistic success: blatant displays of violence are frightening, yet the threat of violence can seem reassuring if no specific victim is specified. Thus, the average German could enjoy the sublimity of the visual manifestations of Fascism without a sense of imminent personal harm, since totalitarianism always shifts the blame to some other person or group upon which it threatens violence, thus promising falsely that it is someone else who is in danger.

Even though Benjamin speaks in general terms of the process by which politics becomes aesthetic, it may be helpful to follow his ominous argument backward, starting with his conclusion, war. It is Benjamin’s assertion that war is the ultimate goal of Fascism, because “Only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today’s technical resources while maintaining the property system” (526). The production necessary for war virtually eliminates unemployment, solving the problem of idle masses, and maximizing the use of available means of production, i.e., factories, mines, and so forth. The Fascist State needs to go to war to fully employ its people, and to satisfy the profit motive of the ruling class. Efficiency is of course not aesthetics, but it is Benjamin’s argument that only war fulfills Fascism’s needs from a practical standpoint. What is pertinent here is his linking war to aesthetic pleasure quite succinctly. Perversely, humankind’s “self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (Benjamin 526). War provides aesthetic pleasure, but so does the State itself, as it creates the drive toward war. In order to achieve this, Benjamin states, “The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life” (526). The regime itself is an object of aesthetic contemplation comprised of a nearly unlimited visual library of emblems, uniforms, rallies, and less visual elements such as written propaganda, and terror campaigns directed at “undesirables.”

The aestheticization of politics deliberately attempts to blur the distinction between the regime and society itself, in order to make the people subservient. Aesthetics, in Benjamin’s sense, becomes a means of control over the populace through “an apparatus which is pressed into

the production of ritual values” (526). Benjamin alludes to this possibility earlier in his essay: It is mass media, such as film, that are merely one part of the “apparatus,” which is the sum of a culture’s means of producing content. Especially because of its reproducibility, Benjamin posits the diminution of the “cult value” of the work of art over time. He feels that art was originally linked to ritual, and that through the removal from its original context of a specific time, place, and function (which he called the *aura*), this sense of connection to ritual is lost (522). Art, especially mass media, becomes something to be passively consumed. Benjamin wrote, “The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one” (526). With the original context diluted, precisely what the Nazis did was to emphasize the cult value of art—to reestablish it—and recreate the link of art to ritual for their own political purposes. Indeed, Benjamin returns to the idea of cult and ritual when he speaks specifically about Fascism and its “*Führer* cult” (526), and its inherent aestheticization of politics. Benjamin appears to be making a distinction between the work of art and politics, but with both as aesthetic objects. This contradiction is illuminating as it clearly shows that Benjamin felt that the role of art had changed over time, from that which was connected to some resonant ritual, to the contemporary situation of it being palliative for the bored, but restless masses. Art is no longer autonomous, but a tool, a diversion waiting to be exploited. “Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception” (Benjamin 526). That is, old experiences and value-systems can be reworked through art to create new meanings.

The Nazis used predominantly mass media, the content of which had been divorced from previous meanings, and reworked it to serve the purposes of the Fascist state in its inevitable preparation for war. It is fascinating to note the subtle, but extremely important distinction between Benjamin’s use of *distractedness*, and Kant’s famous *disinterestedness*. Both denote a kind of openness to visual imagery (or other sensory experiences), but Benjamin’s distractedness on the part of the viewer describes a greater passivity than does Kant’s disinterestedness. Disinterest is meant to be contemplative—not lacking in appreciation—but lacking in a personal desire for what it is that we are looking at (Kant 37, 41-42). It is not meant to proscribe thinking but encourage a pleasurable encounter. Distractedness is in a sense the Modernist version of Kant’s leisurely, refined disinterestedness, but it denotes a greater possibility for manipulation.

On the surface, Kant’s passage about the sublimity of war seems to legitimize violence, especially as he continues that war “gives nations that carry it on in such a manner a stamp of mind only the more sublime the more numerous the dangers to which they are exposed, and which they are able to meet with fortitude” (93). The preceding would sound quaint to our ears, if its underlying message were not so dangerous. However, Kant would no doubt be appalled, given the bloodletting of the 20th Century, to admit that a slaughter of innocents was his intent. If the sublime carries within it a tinge of fear, could we not expect that the appreciation of beauty would have a stronger moral grounding? Yet, for Kant, this is not the case: “I willingly admit that the interest in the *beautiful of art* . . . gives no evidence at all of a habit of mind attached to the morally good, or even inclined that way” (128). However, appreciation of the beauty of nature is linked to moral goodness, “One, then, who takes such an interest in the beautiful in nature can only do so in so far as he has previously set his interest deep in the foundations of the morally good” (Kant 130). This subtle distinction points out Kant’s ambivalence toward art, as something artificial and imitative, versus nature, which Kant describes in vaguely theological terms. In Kant’s view, art has less of a moral grounding than nature (131). Ambivalent aesthetics

aside, Kant's philosophy has a strong ethical component. Celebrating the Enlightenment ideal of the individual of refinement, taste, and good moral judgment, is just one reason for arguing that Benjamin's aestheticization of politics is based only in part on Kantian aesthetics, and that Benjamin has used the term broadly. Kant's ethics was one of personal responsibility. Even in the case of institutions, such as the Church, which claim to be the epitome of morality, Kant cautioned that as individuals we are not absolved of responsibility. "Even in religion—where undoubtedly everyone has to derive his rule of conduct from himself, see that he himself remains responsible for it, and when he goes wrong, cannot shift the blame upon others as teachers or leaders" (Kant 113). This balance between the individuality of subjective experience—an "inner reality"—while acknowledging the existence of a reality outside ourselves, is the hallmark of Kant's philosophy in the broadest sense, and this carries over into his ethics.

In further defense of Kant, we have to see his philosophy as a product of his time. As Jean-François Lyotard writes in his Introduction to *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), there is an expected "unanimity between rational minds: this is the Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end—universal peace" (1122). Naively, or perhaps too hopefully, Kant is expecting proper behavior and a consensus of thoughtful, open minds. Could he not conceive of the potential misuse of aesthetics? Again we may turn to Lyotard and his provocative, difficult discussion of the sublime. He makes a differentiation between the Kantian sublime and the Modernist version in "What is Postmodernism?" (1982). Lyotard feels that the Modernist sublime has a stronger element of pleasure than the Kantian sublime. "Modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one" (Lyotard 1136). In a sense, the Modernist sublime is sugarcoated. It offers "the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure" (Lyotard 1136). The Nazi's project was certainly nostalgic. Nazi Social Realism in the fine arts was a perfect example of kitsch: it was meant to solidify the values of the Third Reich, not to question them. In the case of mass media, such as in Leni Riefenstahl's film, *Triumph of the Will*, there is a vague harkening to the mythic glories of the Teutonic past. The film gives us a sense of the sublime, with its overpowering imagery of phalanxes of soldiers, but it is also meant to reassure the viewer. Early in the film there is even a chubby-cheeked, bright-eyed toddler giving the Fascist salute, and happy farmers in rustic costumes presenting the harvest to Hitler. While it may seem counterproductive to my argument to provide evidence that Benjamin's aesthetics is not the Kantian sublime, Lyotard's remarkable study does illuminate two important points. First, that the Nazi's modernist aesthetic is sublime; second, by separating the modernist sublime from the Kantian, Lyotard leaves room for a defense of Kant. In making the differentiation of the two sublimines, Lyotard points out that Kant was well aware of the dangers of an aesthetic that was not acknowledged to be an *opinion*. Lyotard writes, "Kant also knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror" (1137). For Kant, the aesthetic is a viewpoint, however for the Nazis it was meant to solidify the hold of a party, which in Hitler's words, demanded to be, "uncompromisingly the one and only power in Germany" (Riefenstahl). The Nazi's were using the aesthetic of the sublime to recreate the world. In essence, it was an attempt to reify the Nazi *Weltanschauung*. In Lyotard's view, Kant is aware of the potential dangers of conflating ideas about reality with reality itself.

Benjamin's broad use of the term aesthetics as it relates to politics is problematic because he appears to be referring to the totality of the Nazi regime, not just its visual aspects. Indeed, the aesthetic effect of sublimity is dependent on our thinking of the State as something tremendously powerful. The final section of this essay is an exploration of the visual building blocks of this sublime totality. Lyotard's assertion that Modernist aesthetics is nostalgic not only gives him a

way to defend Kant, but it gives us an insight into the mechanism by which discrete, ubiquitous elements of visual culture, sometimes unassuming on their own, coalesced into a sublime totality, the aesthetic politics of Nazism. To understand this we can see it as an issue of scale: on the macro-scale we have the sublime totality of Nazi aesthetic politics, on the micro-scale we have individual components, which I propose are not aesthetic objects in the Kantian sense, but fetishes.

A concerted campaign, whether one calls it propaganda or merely establishing “an identity,” blanketed Germany and Austria with Nazi imagery. One would imagine it is not unlike a corporate advertising campaign, which brings us the Apple logo everywhere we look today, with its connotation of hip consumerism that hides the reality of the low-wage labor that goes into making the product. This example shows how it is possible to craft a message that creates a positive reaction in the viewer, while effectively suppressing or at least minimizing a negative reaction. It is my sense that the Nazis were creating a *brand* (as we would say today), simply and effectively. Stark, compelling graphic design, dramatic, clean-lined Neo-Classical architecture, and the vaguely mythic narrative of a film like *Triumph of the Will* not only linked the Nazis to an invented, glorious Germanic past (and ironically Imperial Rome), but also created a visual environment that would have been inescapable as corporate advertising is today. I would like to propose, however, that these visual manifestations are fetishes for the most part, especially something like a swastika on a banner, an “SS” logo, or an imposing black uniform. One would be hard pressed to call them works of art, even though they have an intentional aesthetic appeal. In particular these *emblematic* things are fetishes. They are stand-ins for the power of the State, or perhaps the concept of power itself. Evidence for this fetishism, as opposed to seeing these objects as purely aesthetic, can of course come from Kant, who would say that the fact that these objects are conceptual—they specifically refer to something else—means one cannot be *disinterested* in them, as the Nazis were using them. An object judged to be aesthetic in the Kantian sense is divorced from desire and an underlying concept. We must remember, too, that Kant’s view of aesthetics is that it is contemplative. There was room, indeed a demand, for individual thought. The fetish, instead, directs thought toward something. In the case of the Nazis, the fetish directed thought to the sublime power of the Reich.

The Nazi aestheticization program was in essence an advertising campaign that saturated the public with images. The inescapability of advertising is aptly described by Victor Burgin: “advertising is received as an environment and as such tends to pass unremarked (like ideology itself)” (941). It is so ubiquitous as to be as nearly invisible as the air we breathe. Given the ambiguity of the product, i.e. Nazism, it is fair to say that the discrete visual elements that made up the entire sublime experience of Nazism were also a product, something to be consumed as a means of fulfilling one’s role as a citizen of the Reich. As such, it seems fair to call these individual elements fetishes. Laura Mulvey, taking a feminist approach to Freud’s ideas in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” describes one role of a fetishistic object is to be “reassuring rather than dangerous” as it acts as a stand-in for something otherwise frightening or that the individual wishes to suppress (987). In “The Absence of Presence,” Victor Burgin tells us that, “Fundamental to Freud’s account of fetishism is what he calls ‘disavowal’—that splitting between knowledge and belief” (1071). Thus, the implied loss of individuality and drive toward an apocalypse implicit in Nazism can be fetishized with symbols and paraphernalia, things that are nostalgic in that they allude to a glorious Germanic past. These manifest the State as physical representations of its ideas. Visually satisfying imagery and objects created by the Nazis became ends in themselves. As Mulvey puts it, “fetishistic scopophilia, “builds up the physical beauty of

the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself” (987). Scopophilia is not merely *looking* or *voyeurism*, but has an erotic connotation. Thus, the fetish is not an aesthetic object in the Kantian sense, since the viewer has a deep connection with it and cannot be disinterested. The fetish implies a loss of control on the part of the viewer, in a way that Kant feels does not occur with aesthetic beauty. Victor Burgin writes of fetishism as a means of promoting stasis on both the personal and the political level (1071-72). “It is the repression of difference in order to preserve, unthreatened, the same, which generates the symptom ‘fetishism’” (Burgin 1072). A fetish is intended to enforce the power dynamic, not call it into question. If art engenders a process of catharsis and promotes transformation, the fetish instead represents a fixation and promotes stagnation. Thus we can see fetishism perfectly suited the Nazi agenda, because on the micro-scale the fetish would satisfy the individual, and on the macro-scale the plethora of visual manifestations—the sheer magnitude and proliferation—would be sublime, a perfect representation of the State.

Many facets of such a complex topic cannot be adequately addressed in a brief investigation like this one. Specifically, there is the great challenge of summarizing the complexities of Kantian aesthetics in a way that does him justice. Benjamin himself gives us a problem by presenting a very broad picture of the aestheticization of politics while providing few examples of the process. Lyotard, like Kant, is richly complex. We have an embarrassment of riches in terms of the ideas expounded by these thinkers, thus it is worth the effort to try to understand their thought in spite of the difficulty.

Certain aspects of Nazi aesthetics have been intentionally avoided. Nazi architecture is spectacular in its scale and impact on the viewer. However, even though Benjamin discusses architecture in a general way, he does not link it to the aestheticization of politics, although I am certain he would include it as an aesthetic element in Nazi visual culture. The role of architecture in the solidification of Nazi aestheticization would be fascinating, but is beyond the scope of this short essay. I have also chosen to mostly avoid “fine art” as I would agree with Theodor Adorno that there is such a thing as the autonomous work of art, i.e., those objects which still have the aura, which Benjamin so famously discussed (Adorno 528). Additionally, without their being extensively reproduced and disseminated, fine art objects were of little use to the Nazis. Indeed, it is those things that are reproducible, and as reproductions most closely resemble the original (such as a film, or a dish with a swastika on it) that could most easily manipulate the viewer. It is these things that Benjamin feels had lost their aura most distinctly. Thus my argument hinges on the role of mass media or efficiently mass-produced things, as they were more suitable for propagandistic purposes.

There are valid interrelated counter-arguments to what I have proposed. Perhaps the strongest is that Kant could be left out of this discussion entirely. We could always say that we are not speaking of Kantian aesthetics and can thus use the term *aesthetics* in any way we please. I would suggest, though, that this is misleading, as I doubt that Benjamin would use the word disregarding Kant’s theories. If we were to ignore Kant, we could instead focus on Hegel by concluding that Benjamin’s Marxist ideas should be discussed in terms of Hegelian aesthetics. However, I do not think that that is what Benjamin had in mind, since to cast the Nazi’s aesthetic in Hegelian terms would mean a search for the truly spiritual within it. If anything, the Nazi aesthetic is a throwback to what Hegel calls symbolic art, something rudimentary and unsophisticated. “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is not a long essay, of which the aestheticization of politics as a concept is the concluding section. My sense is that Benjamin intended to provide an overview of the dire situation in Europe, expanding his ideas more fully

later. Sadly, his life was all too short.

Immanuel Kant initially appears to be giving credence to Walter Benjamin's assertion that politics can be aesthetic. On the macro-scale, what Benjamin means by the aestheticization of politics—the totality of the Nazi regime—corresponds well with the Kantian sublime. However, the lack of complete correspondence, as pointed out by Lyotard, gives us the opportunity to do two things: first, to explore Kantian ethics by elucidating the moral limits that Kant feels are implicit in aesthetics, and secondly, inspired by Lyotard's idea that the modernist sublime is nostalgic we can delve into fetishism on the micro-scale. The sense of nostalgia engendered by fetishistic objects would pacify the populace, while at the same time reminding them of the totality of the Nazi state, and in the visual sense, massing these objects together created the feeling of the sublime. What is useful in using a Kantian filter is that it helps us understand Benjamin's ideas better, and to also understand the mechanism that allowed the aestheticization of politics to occur. Benjamin is quite clearly warning of the dangers of aestheticizing politics, and is correct in the sense that the Nazi aesthetic had no ethical bounds. It was meant to both display and consolidate absolute power. I hope my contribution has been to show that Kant's ideas can illuminate the argument, and that the grandeur yet subtlety of his thought can help us to understand that aesthetics has a moral grounding.

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