Vertical screen in the digital world: New narrative form of vertical short films

Dijital dünyada dikey ekran: Dikey kısa filmlerin yeni anlatı biçimi

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Abstract

Technology has affected the way cinema is produced and consumed. One of these effects is the transfer of film production and consumption to mobile devices. Mobile phones with vertical screens are not only a means of communication but are also involved in film production and consumption. Given this situation, visual content production for the vertical screen has also increased. This study examines the field of short films produced with vertical framing, which has been increasing, especially in the last decade. For this purpose, the content, form, and characteristics of vertical narrative in short films are revealed by analyzing short films in online festivals organized in the field of vertical short films. The study analyzes the common features of fifty short films and discusses the effects of digital transformation on short films as vertical narratives in the context of narrative form, framing techniques, and camera movements.

Keywords: vertical screen, narrative form, short film, film festivals, vertical narrative

Öz

Sanat dallarından teknolojiyle en iç içe olan sinema, teknolojinin değişmesi ve gelişmesiyle tarihsel süreç içerisinde birçok değişime uğramıştır. Teknoloji, özellikle sinemanın üretim ve tüketim biçimini etkilemiştir. Bu etkilerden biri de film üretimi ve tüketiminin mobil cihazlara taşınmasında gerçekleşmiştir. Kullanımı giderek yaygınlaşan cep telefonları bu değişimin ortasında yer almaktadır. Dikey ekranlı cep telefonları, sadece bir iletişim aracı olmaktan çıkıp film üretimine ve tüketimine de dâhil olmuştur. Bu durum düşünüldüğünde dikey ekran için görsel içerik üretimi de artmıştır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, özellikle son on yıldır giderek artan dikey çerçeveleme ile üretilen kısa film alanına ilişkin bir inceleme yapmaktır. Bu amaçla, dikey kısa film alanında gerçekleştirilen çevrimiçi festivallerdeki kısa filmler incelenerek, dikey anlatının kısa filmlerdeki içerik, biçim ve özellikleri ortaya konmaktadır. Çalışmada elli kısa filmin ortak özellikleri incelenerek; anlatıları, çerçeveleme teknikleri ve kamera hareketleri bağlamında dijital dönüşümün dikey anlatı olarak kısa filmlerdeki etkileri tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: dikey ekran, anlatı biçimi, kısa film, film festivalleri, dikey anlatı

Introduction

The concept of framing in visual arts shows its existence in the times when these types of art were formed, perhaps even in the shapes drawn on the cave walls if we go back even further. The reason for this is that the person or people who create the work try to reflect the image of their imagination on a particular surface by sizing it to the extent and to a certain extent that the surface allows. Especially the art of painting and later photography led to the formation of the first distinct forms of framing, which are still used today in the perception of image surfaces. Human portraits drawn vertically, landscape paintings drawn horizontally, or still images drawn as squares have been decisive in determining the surface on which the image is formed and the boundaries of that surface. On the other hand, while the choice of the surface size and shape is dependent on the artist's original choice in the art of painting, the camera, the primary device that forms the image in photography and later in cinema, has taken this original freedom of choice of size and shape away from the artist, albeit to a lesser extent. Because the camera is a technological and mass-produced tool, and for this reason, since it is produced with specific standards, the artist using it could not go beyond that standard. This situation is also related to the fact that the films used in cameras before the digital era and the projections and screens on which the films were projected were also produced according to specific standards.

The photographer, director or screenwriter, whoever is the narrator of visual art, the forms, and dimensions produced in that field of art and presented to the audience depend on specific standards. It may have even impacted the shaping of the images the artist creates in his/her imagination about his/her work. The fact that television and cinema use a horizontal surface, especially from the very beginning, may have even influenced the person who produces works in this field to imagine the story they will tell with a horizontal imagination. If a writer's language has as many limits as his vocabulary, it would perhaps not be wrong to say that a filmmaker has as many limits as the technical possibilities at his disposal. However, technology, which develops as fast as language, perhaps even faster, and fundamentally affects cinema, has expanded and changed these limits over time.

The impact of technology on cinema has also created changes in framing. Today, while there is still a certain standard in movie theaters, there is an increasing nostalgic return of directors in terms of black-white color or framing. On the other hand, mobile technologies, and more specifically mobile phones, have brought digital platforms and countless websites into the users' hands, and the vertical screen structure of mobile phones has created different narratives and,

thus, different ways of perception for both the creator and the viewer. However, in the last decade, studies on the vertical image concerning cell phones have increased, and there have even been international festivals where short films shot only with vertical images have competed. In the context of these ideas, in this study, firstly, conceptual and practical literature on the concepts and process of framing and aspect ratio in cinema has been created, and then an examination of the use of vertical frames in award-winning films in film festivals that have recently increased the use of vertical images has been made.

Cinematic history of framing

The Technicians Branch of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science met in 1930 with the participation of Sergei Eisenstein and proposed to the Academy to standardize horizontal framing on aesthetic, commercial, and physio-social grounds, citing the horizontality of nineteenth-century narrative paintings, the seating arrangement and staging in theater halls, and the fact that horizontal framing is more in line with natural human physiology, as the human vision has a perception of width rather than height (Clayton, 2021, p. 1). Furthermore, it shows that technology-mediated viewing habits are determined from the very beginning by the perceptions and preferences of people as users. Since there was no consensus on the 4:3 ratio at this meeting, the 35mm full-screen size was accepted as the academic ratio, and then in the 1950s, with the introduction of technologies such as CinemaScope and Panavision, the ratio began to change to widescreen (Clayton, 2021, p. 2). Before the widescreen era in 1953, the cinema used an almost square composition known as the Academy ratio, which was closer to portraiture and had a more vertical structure than widescreen (Cossar, 2009, p. 5). After 1953, the shape of cinema underwent a change that emulated the landscape form and led to a restructuring both aesthetically and practically, a change that would affect the television screens that used the Academy ratio at the time and even computer screens later on (Cossar, 2009, p. 5).

In particular, the size of the landscape changed the ease with which the mise-en-scene could be created in the center or in a purely mise-en-scene-oriented framing, which the Academy ratio allowed more easily (Cossar, 2009, p. 5). On the widescreen, elements on the broader staging area must be compressed for full frame, sets and lighting must be manipulated to compensate for the additional dichotomy frame area, and in failures, parts of the image must be sacrificed and cut out for a narrower but more vertical full frame fit (Cossar, 2009, p. 14). These determinations regarding framing and the widespread use of widescreen have also created habits that have reached large masses, and this

habit has increased the impact of screen technology in every field, which is increasingly encountered in all areas of life. While the boundaries of the screen functionalize the screen as "a frame, mask, aperture or connector", the screen's capacities to move and show movement also fluidize and dynamize its spatial mediations (Rogers, 2019, p. 139-140). Over time, the screen's content, meaning, and role in people's consumption habits have also changed. The screen acts as the boundary between physical and electronic reality, creating a space with no center or ground and guiding the human eye (Bukatman, 1993, p. 108). The screen, which historically served as a divider, filter, or shelter shaped by the space in which it is located, has now become not only a device of representation but also a device of intervention in the world (Buckley, Campe & Casetti, 2019, p. 9). With the change in the screen, there have been transformations in the forms of intervention and its functionality. With the proliferation of screens in life, the functions of the screen have also changed from being just a display space; they have become mobile, mobile surfaces with multiple functions such as writing and collecting messages, storing, sharing, and filtering information (Buckley et al., 2019, p. 7).

In addition, as a result of technologies such as virtual reality, it has turned into a space that can be worn, entered through led screen technologies, and symbolically existed in environments such as the metaverse. As a result of such technologies, it is no longer a space that is mainly perceived horizontally. With new technologies, screens create a sense of width and depth, transforming the construction of verticality within the landscape (Rogers, 2019, p. 145). Therefore, as the perception of the horizontal screen is also transformed, the vertical screen and vertical narrative are increasingly taking their place in viewers' daily routines and viewing patterns.

The return and rise of the vertical in new media technologies

Despite the widespread use of the widescreen, there are works in cinema history in which vertical narratives are preferred experimentally and as a stylistic choice. Although the cinema industry embraced widescreen, vertical framing never wholly disappeared and art cinema, in particular, continued to use vertical, square, and circular frames, with directors such as Robert Whitman (*The Shower*, 1964), Jaroslav Flic (*Vertical Cinemascope*, 1970) and Brian Eno (*Thursday Afternoon*, 1984) using vertical framing (Clayton, 2021, p. 3). This situation may also suggest that vertical expressions are used as an orientation for artists who prefer different forms of expression. Eisenstein also noted that verticality could provide different possibilities for storytelling, and in recent years the themes of vertical narrative in horizontally framed films have become more

evident (Clayton, 2021, p. 4). In addition, the verticality of the phone screen, as the most widely used communication device, has made users and viewers more accustomed to vertical narration. Further, the horizontal habit of using the phone camera has shifted to vertical use, primarily due to social media applications.

The vertical video became popular again in 2012 when the Snapchat app started using vertical video, and later other apps and platforms adopted the feature (Alexandrov, 2020, 23 January). A 2018 study shows that fifty-eight percent of website visitors use small screens (Alexandrov, 2020, 23 January). Moreover, Adidas, Mercedes Benz, and Google used vertical framing in their advertisements and received a positive response (Alexandrov, 2020, 23 January). According to Buffer's research, vertical videos increase thirteen percent more three-second video views and a hundred fifty-seven percent more fifty percent total watch time views (Peters, 2019). The reasons for the rise of the vertical video include its adaptability to easy viewing, its popularity among content creators and consumers, the fact that social media often uses this format, and the fact that it has also become an advertising tool, increasing competition (Waller, 2018).

The negative criticisms and judgments about the phone camera being held vertically instead of horizontally serve the same function as the aperture, which in 1931 standardized the horizontal orientation of the image with the aperture determining the academy ratio and using universal standards as a means of providing an argument for the rhetoric of the image (Hovet, 2017, p. 145). Furthermore, rendering an image as anything other than a rectangle that is longer than it is tall is often considered a novelty or a mistake, as in reactions to vertical videos, and a strong argument about rectangular norms and the limits of the image emerges (Hovet, 2017, p. 165). However, not so long ago, the vertical video was perceived as amateur work, but now it is perceived as something more innovative (Alexandrov, 2020, 23 January). On the other hand, the vertical narrative has also managed to attract the attention of both content producers and consumers. Studies show that smartphones are held vertically ninety-four percent of the time, which is compatible with the ergonomics of smartphones (Thompson, 2017, 7 September). Furthermore, according to AdNews, seventy percent of millennials prefer not to rotate their phones horizontally when watching videos, and Mediabrix research shows that vertical videos have a ninety percent higher completion rate than horizontal videos (Krakauer, 2022, 27 July). According to Facebook Business, sixty-five percent of consumers find brands whose vertical videos they watch innovative (Hayes, 2022, 28 March). This preference of users might be because verticality means

immediacy and is now more often shown in a vertical format, which is the aspect ratio of social media (Thompson, 2017, 7 September).

Expanding vertical film narrative

Elcott points to the vertical screen by suggesting that cinema should no longer be viewed through a different lens but through a different screen, stating that the vertical screen has influenced the orientation towards cinema more than any other factor and that mobile phones as a single technological device have increased access to the vertical screen by penetrating every space (Elcott, 2019, p. 294). Social media applications enable full-screen vertical video; therefore, vertical video has become the normative format for millions of users, and mobile phones have brought users closer to the vertically oriented world of nineteenth-century pre-cinema phenakistoscopes, zoetropes or praxinoscopes (Elcott, 2019, p. 296). Vertical narration, which has a relationship with the past, goes beyond social media and offers the viewers a return to the past in cinema with new technologies. In addition to daily videos, memoir videos, and personal posts, it is a form of visual narrative that has started to be preferred in artistic videos, digital storytelling, and films.

With the spread of the vertical image as a new narrative form, the characteristics of the content produced with this narrative type, especially in the digital field, have begun to be revealed in many different ways. The shift to vertical is changing videos in terms of aesthetics and content, with some becoming harder to shoot and some becoming easier to shoot (Thompson, 2017, 7 September). It is because vertical framing offers more space in height and less in width. Perhaps, for this reason, the vertical video uses more close-ups, as people's field of vision and surroundings are horizontal (Thompson, 2017, 7 September). Several sources indicate the characteristics of an excellent vertical video, especially for social media users. These sources recommend that the video be short, not too moving, especially horizontally, fill the video space with the video object, and focus on whatever the video is about (Wochit, 2019, 19 August). At this point, we should also consider the distinction between video and film.

The change between subject and object at the center of digital cinema is because the film is aesthetic while the video is demotic (Ganz & Khatib, 2006, p. 34). While in film, one usually watches other people, and in video, one watches oneself, in the digital world, these sharp boundaries are blurred, and the real and the photographed are intertwined (Ganz & Khatib, 2016, p. 34)

Vertical imagery is often overlooked by audiovisual media history and film academia, and this is because criticism of vertical video is often not because the

format is not aesthetically pleasing but because the format is seen as a mistake and an error, which a look at today's online environment can prove that vertical imagery is not a mistake or an error (Menotti, 2019, p. 149). The proliferation of vertical images is because digital technologies use specific characteristics of older cultural forms by assimilating and refining them to fulfill their functions (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). Theoretical and practical studies on the vertical image indicate that this format is more of a social media-oriented format today. In particular, there is more evidence of its use for commercial or personal purposes. However, this does not change the fact that the vertical image has always been present in cinema, albeit to a lesser extent, as mentioned earlier. Some developments regarding the vertical image can be seen in cinema recently. In 2020, director Damien Chazelle shot a short film called *The Stunt Double* entirely vertically with an iPhone. In 2021, the feature-length fiction film *V2. Escape from Hell*, directed by Timur Bekmambetov and Sergey Trofimov, was released horizontally for movie theaters and vertically for mobile devices.

On the other hand, the widespread use of vertical videos on social media and the short duration of social media videos have led the field of short films to consider the vertical format. In 2014, the world's first vertical film and video competition was organized in Australia under the name Vertical Film Festival, which was repeated three times until 2018. In 2016, a film festival called Vertifilms with the slogan "A unique global film festival in your hands" was organized periodically with the participation of only short films in vertical format. In addition, under the Vertical Cinema project, the Austrian Film Museum organizes screenings in various venues, features vertical format productions by different artists, works in partnership with various festivals, and maintains the website verticalcinema.org.

Aim and methodology

This study aims to draw attention to how digital transformation affects the art of film with examples of the reflections of the vertical video format, which existed in the past of cinema but is used more frequently today with social media applications and mobile technologies. In this context, the films that can be accessed from short film festivals with vertical video content among the recent events in the field of cinema have been selected in line with the purposeful sampling. Further, the study aims to reveal the common points about how these films use vertical video and, at the same time, how they differ from the traditional widescreen cinema image format.

The analyzed films are reached through *Verticalmovie*[1], *Vertifilms*[2], and *Vertical Film Festival*[3] websites. The films are *Bird Murderer* (Evan Scott Moore and Sawra, 2015), *Purgot* (Matt Richards, 2015), *Theo* (Cedric Martin, 2016), *The Santa Maria* (Erik Schmitt, 2016), *Tilt* (Fred Cavender, 2016), *The Spring Inside You* (Maria Rashova, 2016), *Girl* (Megan K. Fox, 2016), *To Accept* (Daria Kashcheeva, 2017), *Comme Toi* (Jerome Piel-Desruisseaux, 2017), *Bicho* (Mariana Azcarate, 2017), *Golden Delicious* (Veronika Jelsikova, 2017), *Palkattomat Pojat* (Aleksi Lappalainen, 2018), *The Jacaranda* (Purple Lips, 2018), *Tlahuelpuchi* (Alejandro Cervantes, 2021), *You Can* (Anna Frantsuzova, 2021), *Yesterday* (Carlos Avendano, 2021), *New Normal* (Chul Heo, 2021), *Doing is Love* (Cristina Aguilera Ochoa, 2021), *Echo Champer* (Gurkan Maruf Mihci, 2021), *Pop* (Hubert Jegat and Yohan Vioux, 2021), *Work from Home* (Isabella Vidal, 2021), *Trespass* (Kevin Lucero Less, 2021), *Hype* (Maria Zhitkova, 2021), *The Cell* (Marie Yan, 2021), *Lilith* (Nahum Ramirez Maya, 2021), *Princes Do Not Wait* (Sergio Solis, 2021), *Cenzias* (Sergio Suarez, 2021), *Tulipan Rojo* (Alexis Galindo, 2022), *When in Doubt* (Andrea Carro, 2022), *Finale di Partita* (Antonio Ricardo Santorelli, 2022), *La Beaute* (Argam Gevorgyan, 2022), *I Woke Up on a Little Planet* (Arjanmar H. Rebeta, 2022), *Nuvelo d'Oceano* (Carlo d'Autilia, 2022), *Winter Breeze* (Choi Woo Gene, 2022), *The Incredible Casuality of Things* (Daniela Rodriguez Garcia, 2022), *Voice Mail* (David Munoz Velasco, 2022), *The Tunnel* (Diana Aurora Caballero Brito, 2022), *Life: Love* (Diana Belova, 2022), *She's an Art, Isn't She?* (Dito Prasetyo, 2022), *Tic Toc* (Emanuele Matera, 2022), *Branch* (George Morozov, 2022), *Oles Portfolio* (Kyrylo Zemlyanyi, 2022), *Sombra* (Luis Francisco Bohorquez, 2022), *Catapultete* (Matias Irigoin, 2022), *Fu**ed* (Matyas Lada, 2022), *Portrait of a Lovely Day* (Roufy Nasution, 2022), *Imagination* (Sifat Nusrat, 2022), *Chase, Stay on Track* (Tommaso Barbetta, 2022), *Writer's Block* (Wil Francis, 2022), and *A Letter* (YudisAW, 2022).

The analysis lists similarities by paying attention to common points such as formal narrative, mise-en-scene, framing, film content, scaling, and sound/dialogue. Although attention is paid to non-fiction documentaries, video art, or animation narratives among the films accessed, the fiction feature is also required to be at the forefront of the films considered in the analysis. In addition, films with dialog and without English subtitles were also excluded from the analysis because of the possibility of language barriers in the narrative. As a result, fifty short films are analyzed within the scope of the study.

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[1] https://www.verticalmovie.it
[2] https://www.vertifilms.com
[3] https://www.adamsebire.info/vertical-film-festival/videos-screenings

Findings and discussion

Narrative dimension

There is a sense that the precondition determines the narratives of the analyzed films that will be told on a vertical screen. Considering the short duration of the films, the narratives contain a single main story. Concerning this, the number of characters is usually one and, in a few cases, two or three. The narratives are characterized by first-person narration. Most of the stories are dubbed over the image with the voice of the person taking the image or the person appearing on the screen, or what happens to the person on the screen is told through the testimony of the camera. The sense of the screen integrated with the phone, which the vertical screen can create, often serves as a diary narrative. In some films, the fact that the phone is the witness of the narrative is even supported by phone features such as screen buttons or messaging. In addition, some narratives are captured, such as story sharing on social media apps. For this reason, films with visual effects used in social media applications or story sharing attract attention.

In the films' narratives, external voice narration or voice-over image is dominant. It is observed that the narrator is included in the film with the voice, especially in films that are fictionalized as diaries or memoirs. However, natural ambient sound or diegetic and non-diegetic music or sound also contributes to the narrative. Dialogues are rarely used in this situation; therefore, traditional image editing is not preferred as dialogue editing.

In the narrative, rules such as scene connections, continuity, and axis line are not observed. The lack of attention to these rules creates the feeling of amateur or reality, even if a fictional story is being told. In some films, the parts of the narrative that are not completed by images, sound, or music are completed with text. In addition, the screen captions are sometimes supported by emojis, which creates the feeling that the movie is a long-shot social media post rather than a film.

The narrative structure and dimension of the films move between film genres, with drama and horror, which belong to the classical narrative genre, being particularly prominent. Also, narratives close to experimental and essay film narratives, even in the form of memoirs, draw attention. Especially in the films that can be included in the experimental film category, it has been observed that narrative structures in which the fourth wall is broken down with a demonstrative approach and communication with the audience by looking directly at the camera stand out. It is evident in the hand-held forms, where it is clear that the camera used for filming is a phone camera.

Framing techniques

The films' framing reveals the vertical screen's positive and negative aspects. Due to vertical framing, the object of the scene is placed entirely in the center in most of the films, leaving the upper and lower parts of the screen empty. Furthermore, if the framing is intended to emphasize more than one object, the more important objects are placed in the center, while some other objects are placed within the frame. Positively, this makes it easier to emphasize the object the film wants to draw attention to, but negatively, it can distract attention by scattering other potentially essential objects around the edges of the screen. In particular, if framing includes humans, usually only one person is in the frame, and if more than one person is to be in the frame, the screen is zoomed out to include other people. Consequently, the zooming in and zooming out gesture, which takes place more slowly in traditional cinema, is used more quickly and instantaneously on the vertical screen.

Another special note of framing is the use of too many close-ups. A wide-scale shooting scale in traditional cinema was not preferred in most films. In films where wide shots are preferred, this shot is obtained by zooming out or moving the camera away from the close-up object. Especially in the shots where the camera itself moves away, the presence of drone use is felt.

The other technique used is rack focus. In order to add depth to the verticality of the framing space, it is common to switch between objects in front of and near the camera. It draws attention to different objects within the same frame and can also help achieve the same width in terms of distance that can be achieved with a horizontal image. Another contribution of the change of focus is the sense of reality. Even if the story is fictional, both the reality created by the vertical image and the trade-off between sharpness reinforce the feeling of a snapshot.

Camera movement

The films' most commonly used camera movement is the up or down pedestal. Since the horizontal space of the vertical screen is narrow, left and right movement is not preferred in films. In films with fast right and left pan, the clarity of the image content is distorted, or the image content is difficult to perceive. Even if the left-right pan is slow, the narrowness of the screen still does not provide a clear image. In contrast, the up-and-down pedestal is preferable as it is in line with the screen size.

The camera angle also changes with the up-and-down pedestal. The camera switches to a lower or upper angle with the pedestal. Particularly in films that create a first-person view, it is noteworthy that the camera moves in the shape of a human head. These movements create a context with a sense of reality. In particular, it reinforces the sense that the camera is a phone camera, even if it is not.

In some films, the camera moves distinctly with the selfie stick. Just as each new medium of imagery creates its technology and form, the selfie stick may not be out of place, given that the vertical image is associated with the telephone. On the other hand, in traditional cinema, the break in the distance between what is on the screen and the viewer that occurs with the breaking of the fourth wall is realized here with the screen itself. In a fictional movie, the fact that the image content with the vertical screen shows the selfie stick by revealing the camera disrupts the fictional structure of the movie.

Conclusion

Although the vertical narrative is nowadays associated with the screens of social media and mobile phones, it is clear that it also has a new meaning for cinema. Especially the change in short film production and the evolution of visual content in advertising for vertical screens reinforces this meaning. The vertical narrative form, which has become widespread for new technology tools that are more easily accessible and portable, should perhaps develop itself more for cinema. The reason for this is that in the vertical short films analyzed, there is a form that seems more natural than a cinematic narrative that still has not completely broken away from the language of video and has not entirely assimilated the narrative and formal legacy of cinema. However, this should not mean that the contents of vertical narrative should be ignored because the analyzed films show that the requirements of vertical narrative and the digital world differ from the traditional understanding of cinema.

This study has attempted to present an overview of the vertical narrative situation concerning the change in viewing habits in the surface context due to the influence of technology. Although cell phones, considered the most widely used devices today, impact this situation, each device creates its form of consumption. The proliferation of vertical content should not lead one to think that the habit of watching on the phone screen will develop entirely vertically. It is also a fact that many digital film and video streaming platforms with horizontal content automatically switch to a horizontal screen when the play button is pressed on the phone applications. In addition to the prominent horizontal narratives, the vertical narrative has become an option for content

creators, going beyond just sharing personal videos or stories. Rather than transforming the movie screen into a vertical one, what needs to be considered is the new situation created by the vertical image to be watched on the horizontal movie screen. As long as most screens outside the phone are horizontal, the vertical narrative creates short intervals as an image that interrupts the horizontal narrative.

Considering all this, it is perhaps more understandable that vertical short film festivals have created their own space. Since it does not seem possible to completely change the horizontal framing and narrative inherited by cinema, which has a history of more than a century, vertical narrative can create its narrative framework; by thinning the boundaries between fact and fiction, amateur and professional, perhaps by getting closer to small objects that large screens cannot see, it can create fast narratives in a short time. It can bridge the horizontal world of large screens and the vertical window of small screens.

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