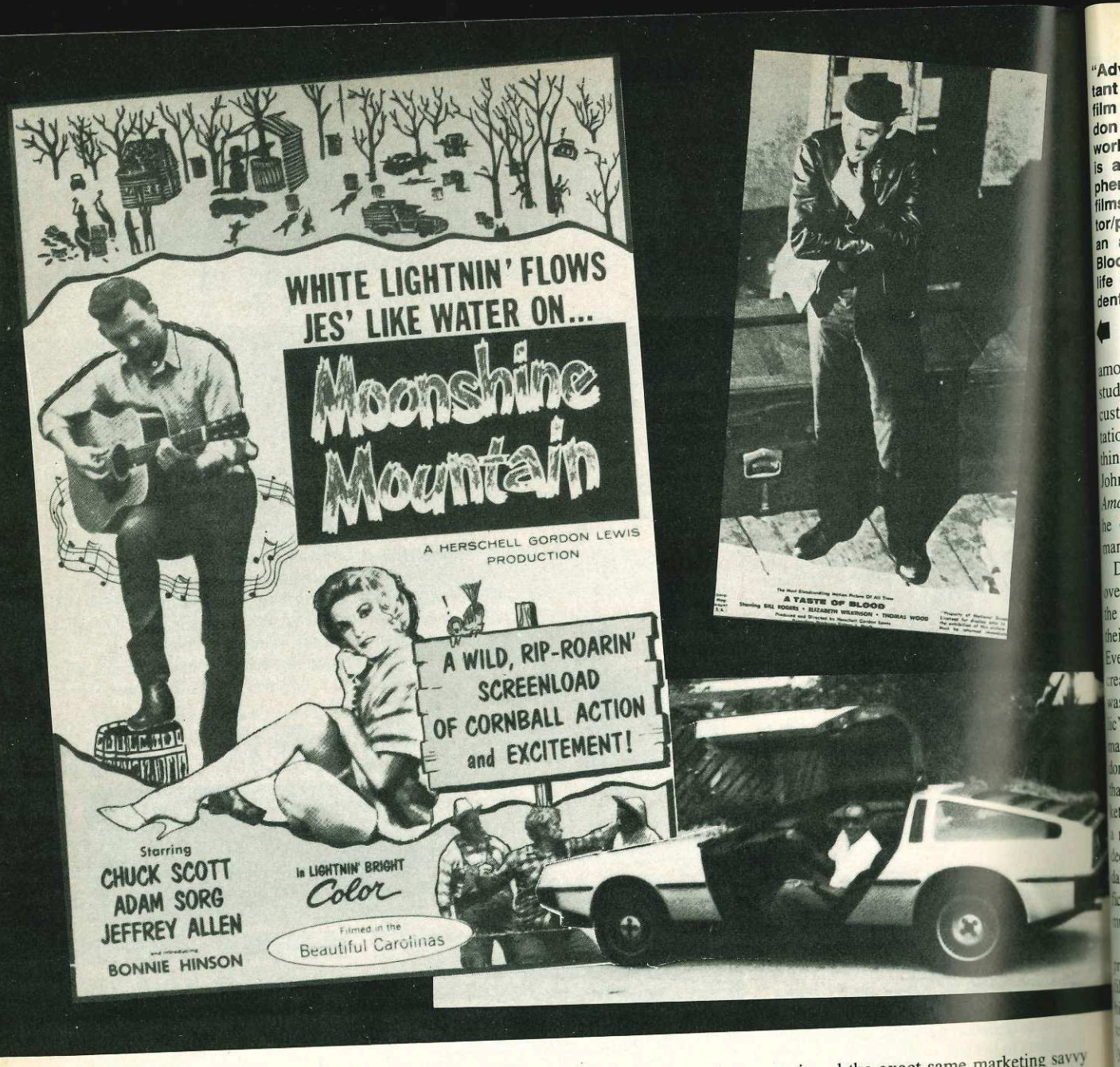

The Power And The Gore — Inside Herschell Gordon Lewis

Pioneer horror filmmaker, direct marketing folk hero, Lewis reveals his bottom-line methods. A profile and interview with maker of "Blood Feast" and "She Devils on Wheels" pins success on market positioning.

By Larry Jaffee, associate editor

"As often as not, your piece of copy goes he[illegible]ead with another approach wi[illegible]y a hungry competing writer who w[illegible]nts to taste the blood of two victims: the reader and you..."

— Herschell Gordon Lewis
Direct Mail Copy That Sells

Carefully chosen words are Herschell Gordon Lewis' forte, as readers of his monthly column in *Direct Marketing* magazine already know. Before becoming recognized as one of the world's most pre-eminent copywriters of our time, Lewis made a name for himself in the 1960s as a pioneer filmmaker responsible for the creation of a new genre — the low-budget gore movie.

In fact, sparked by the home-video explosion, today he's revered by cult fans as "The Godfather of Gore." What makes the Lewis story so interesting is that he evinced the exact same marketing savvy in the movie industry that has made him a direct-response folk hero two decades later.

In his roughly 10-year career as a working filmmaker, Lewis ground out 37 feature films, none of which failed to turn a profit. And during this frenetic, prolific phase of his career, Lewis, as he puts it, "never missed a beat" in his parallel advertising business. What's even more remarkable is that he produced so many movies usually on budgets of $20,000-$40,000, microscopic by today's standards, and production schedules that were sometimes less than a week.

Lewis not only wrote, produced and directed many of his films, but photographed and scored them as well — then went on to devise their advertising campaigns and sell them on a state-by-state basis. His control over a movie's destiny is unparalleled in Hollywood.

"Working on budgets that amounted to pocket change compared with the huge

"Advertising and promotion are as important — maybe more important — than the film itself," according to Herschell Gordon Lewis, recognized as one of the world's most prominent copywriters. He is also known as a low-budget movie phenomenon who turned out 37 feature films in 11 years. Occasionally, the director/producer would also make a cameo as an actor, shown here in "A Taste of Blood." These days, he enjoys the good life in Fort Lauderdale, Florida as president of his own direct marketing agency.

amounts tossed around by the major studios, and yet competing for the same customer's hard earned buck, the exploitation filmmaker had to be before anything else a shrewd marketeer", wrote John McCarty in the 1983 book, *The Amazing Herschell Gordon Lewis*, which he co-authored with ex-Lewis cameraman, Daniel Krogh.

Drive-in movie America was ecstatic over Lewis' brand of the horror flick. For the first time in movies, people died with their eyes open. Blood flowed profusely. Every human's worst nightmare was recreated on the screen. The moviemaker was playing with a segment of the public's fascination and appreciation for the macabre. "We did things no one had ever done before", remembers Lewis, adding that his success all came down to a marketing principle called "positioning", in a recent interview while sitting on the deck of his paradise home in Fort Lauderdale, Florida which also serves as an office for his full-service agency, Communicomp.

In Lewis' opinion, advertising and promotion are at least important as the film itself, if not more so. He attributes his good fortune in the movie business to providing what people wanted and Hollywood wouldn't deliver. That's not true anymore. Lewis' muse inspired a generation of successful young filmmakers in the early '70s, including directors George Romero, John Carpenter, Brian DePalma and David Cronenberg. A week does not go by when a major studio doesn't release a teenage slash/gore movie.

Biographers Krogh and McCarty laud Lewis for his resourcefulness and ability to capitalize on opportunity. "To be successful, the exploitation filmmaker had to be able to smell a trend well before its aroma reached the ratified air of Hollywood. Then he had to be able to exploit that trend quickly, shooting his films and rushing them into distribution with almost lightning speed. No one did this with more acumen than Herschell Gordon Lewis", writes McCarty in his introduction.

Actually, the only reason the entrepreneur got into theatrical filmmaking in 1960 at the age of 34 was because he already had 35 millimeter equipment after

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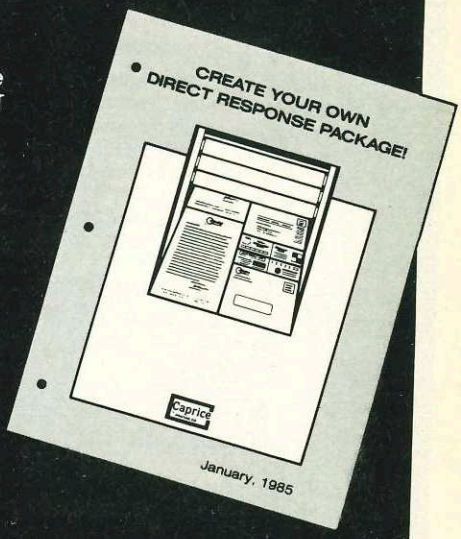

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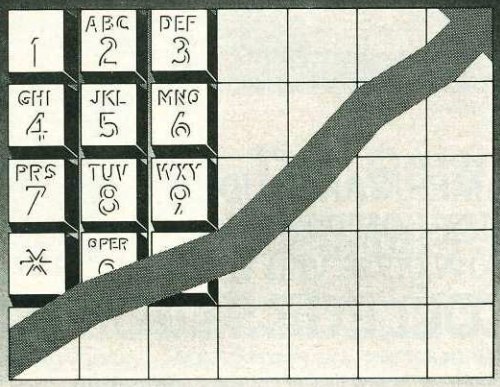

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A movie set was good training ground for his future as a mastermind of direct-response campaigns, he would later find out, explains Lewis. The same concerns for discipline, efficiency, positioning and response determine whether or not a movie — or product — are financial successes. The synergy between the movie business and direct-response advertising is uncanny, he adds.

The professionalism that Lewis demonstrated on his movie sets made an impression on everyone who worked for him, according to Krogh, who began working for Lewis after college without any prior movie experience. "The work was tough, but he wasn't tough. Herschell was never above grabbing a piece of equipment to put into the truck. He was always participating. It was like a team effort — the only way to make a movie in three weeks", Krogh reminisces.

"There is not a wasted frame in 'Blood Feast' — the fastest, most laugh-packed 75 minutes you'll spend this year", raved reviewer Harvey Elliot in the March 1985 issue of *Video* magazine. He goes on to point out that Steven Spielberg was not the first director to yank a beating heart out of a man's chest. "Lewis did it 20 years ago", says Elliot.

On the other hand, reviewers of "Blood Feast" when it first came out were unanimous in their disgust. *Daily Variety* deemed it "a fiasco in all departments". But that didn't bother Lewis. He knew all that mattered were the slews of people flocking to the box-office.

The recent release of his "gore classics" on videotape is the epitome of the supply-and-demand business principle. "Everything that has come from Herschell has done well", comments Jim Maslon, a Los Angeles videotape distributor who owns the rights to several Lewis titles.

Despite the restraints of a low budget, the production values of his movies "stand up very well today. The public still wants his films", says Jim Silverman, president of Continental Video, which released and distributed a Lewis "trilogy".

Lewis' movies have not only caught on in the U.S. The forementioned "Blood Feast" has sold 6,000 copies in Japan, and deals are being made for France. These days, he's a little amused by all of the attention he gets for his previous vocation. In the following interview, Lewis reveals that the gore movie business actually is not so far removed from direct-response advertising.

*

Q. Herschell, I guess your filmmaking experience pervades everything that

you do. I noticed that in the preface of your latest book, *Direct Mail Copy That Sells*, you mention "a hungry, competing writer who wants to taste the blood of two victims..." And then a few pages later, "Lewis' Second Law of Mass Communications should be carved on your forehead in blood..."

A. I guess there is a gory overtone. Well, it's a way of getting colorful writing out of the word processor into the brain of the reader. One of the problems, as you know, in direct-response advertising is to get the reader to do what you want him to do. In fact, since you are into that book, you know "Lewis' Fourth Law", which is "Tell the Reader What To Do." You must get inside the experiential background of the reader rather than inside your own experiential background. In order to get the reader do what you want him to do, you must clarify the instruction in terms that he understands. That's the reason behind the colorful writing.

Q. Was your film career a conscious decision for you to make gore movies and be the first in that new genre, or was it something that evolved slowly?

A. It was absolutely a conscious, cold-blooded decision based on a solid principle of marketing called "positioning". Visualize a circumstance in which a typical direct marketer finds himself. He doesn't have the dollars nor the personnel to compete with the giants. How then does he keep the doors open? The answer — he positions himself. In the motion picture industry, I was in a similar circumstance. I positioned myself. These were films that the major studios could not and would not make. If I made drawing-room comedies without Rock Hudson and Doris Day, or pictures of social circumstances without Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn, how could I compete? I'm looked at with the wrong set of values. By carving the separate position, I dictated and set the values by which the films were judged.

Q. So you developed a new marketing formula for moviemaking. What type of planning went into putting together a movie? Did you first come up with a clever title, and then made a movie around it?

A. Usually, in the case of the horror films, we had the title first, followed at a great distance by a working scenario. Again, one of the benefits of knowing your market is the tailoring of materials to that market becomes progressively easier as you learn more about who your buyers are. It's another parallel between films and direct marketing.

Q. As a kid did you one day decide to become a filmmaker and experiment with Super-8 movies?

A. No, I didn't. In fact, I did, and do, have a profound contempt for people who do that, and the reason for that — I say that laughingly, but with some bite — is because too often it leads to the auteur personality, which ignores public reaction in favor of the reaction of a coterie of friends who tell the individual what a great genius he is. Usually that conclusion is unrelated to the world of commerce in which he's trying to compete. My posture is different. I don't glorify or revere time and effort. I glorify and revere results; and I think that may be one reason why I have had such good luck as a direct-response writer.

I believe that the people in the theater are the ultimate judges, not your cronies in the screening room or, in the case of direct marketing, in your own office. If you mail 200,000 pieces so that the whole world can tell how clever you are as a writer, you have written a losing piece of copy. I'd be delighted to be your competitor, because what a piece should say — and what that motion picture should say — is not how clever the writer is, or the producer or the director. It's far better to have this person say, "I like that" or "I'm going to buy that", reacting to what you're selling, not to you as the individual. The person who needs that kind of ego food should not be either a film producer or a direct-response writer. He will cost somebody some money. To me, that's the way to keep score.

Q. You placed a lot of emphasis on the advertising campaign surrounding the movie.

A. Absolutely. A powerful campaign was my specialty. I felt even though I had a technical facility for being able to make films, the film was less important than the campaign housing it, because it was the campaign that caused people to come into the theater, just as it's the ad that causes people to buy the merchandise. The merchandise itself has to be good enough so that people don't send it back for a refund, but if they don't buy it, the issue of refund becomes academic. So, I paid great attention to campaigning — the ads, the one-sheets, the accoutrements around the film.

Q. In addition to directing and producing these films, you also designed the the ads. Wasn't that unusual control in the film industry?

A. Sure it was. The typical situation was

not control, but responsibilty. There's a big difference. The typical film producer does not want to involve himself with the campaign, because he regards himself as on a plateau above the theater-goer.

Q. In the ads, you came up with flashy copy like "GHASTLY BEYOND BELIEF", "GRUESOMELY STAINED IN BLOOD COLOR", "MOTHERS: Hide Your Daughters, POLICE: Don't Turn Your Backs, INNOCENTS: Watch If You Dare..."

A. It's a test of the ability of the copywriter more than the film producer to get people in that theater to see a low budget film of any kind. But the same is true to some extent with big-budget pictures. I call to your attention a movie recently released, called "The Cotton Club", which cost some $40 million and that will lose most of that investment. Why? People are not going to see it. One of two things has happened. Either the campaign doesn't live up to the picture, or the picture doesn't live up to the campaign.

The rule we used to live by was that if the picture opened strong and then died, the campaign was good and the picture was poor. Or if the picture opened poorly and then became stronger, it meant the campaign was bad but the picture was a success. So, one watches these things. A lot of people in the business don't. They'll just walk away and try to raise money for the next one. That's not a businesslike attitude. That's a spoiled child attitude.

Q. It pervades throughout Hollywood.

A. It certainly does. Again, we see it in direct marketing, too, where people refuse to acknowledge responsibility for their failures. "The world is mad — they didn't buy my merchandise." Why did they not buy your merchandise? They bought the same merchandise from your competitor, but he advertises it better. The key is the same in film and in direct marketing. You project an image inside the experiential background of the reader or the theater-goer — the outside individual, the buyer, not yourself. When your ego gets in the way of your salesmanship, it costs you in any field. That's the humbling experience you get in the film business, which is great preparation for being in direct marketing.

Q. You had your advertising business going on during the time you were making as many as six films a year. That sounds pretty hectic. What was a typical day of Herschell Gordon Lewis then?

A. Not like it is now! Now I play tennis in the morning and afternoon, and I'm on the word processor in between. But then, I would shoot during the "golden days" four to six pictures in a year without missing a beat in advertising. The two businesses were tied together pretty well. I had a substantial amount of television commercials going — the kind of thing I will never again involve myself in.

It was a seven-day-a-week business and not unusual to get a phone call on Sunday morning saying "our film broke here in Des Moines last night, please do something about it before tonight's show." Crisis to crisis — that's how people in the film business live. Some of them revel in it; I did because it makes one feel alive, until the realization comes that there are better ways to feel alive.

Q. How does a movie's advertising campaign differ from what you do for your clients now?

A. In the movies, all you can do is aim your campaign, very much as we in direct marketing aim our campaigns at the right people who can and will buy what you have to sell. In that respect, my movies

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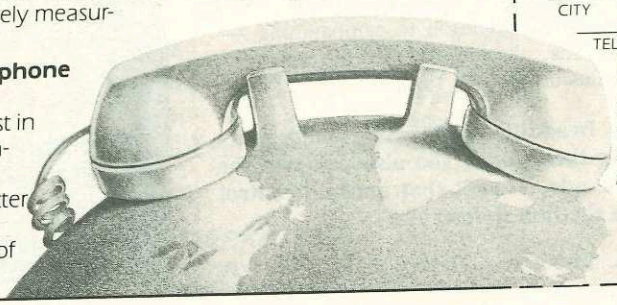

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were fairly successful. It's easier in direct marketing than it is in motion pictures, because in direct marketing, you can target your audience absolutely. We have great demographic information to extrapolate who we want as our target customer.

In theatrical films, we run an ad in the paper, and everyone who might go to a movie that night sees that ad, so your competition becomes universal. Then we have to segregate our audience out of that group. It's a much more difficult marketing problem.

Q. As a filmmaker with your obvious ad copy talent, did you ever have a hard time delivering what you were selling in the newspaper ad?

A. That's a very good question and true now. It was not so very true then because when we promised "gouts of blood", people didn't believe it, because they never witnessed such a thing before. "Gouts", by the way, is a marvelous Shakespearean word that a lot of people say doesn't exist. Yes it does! So, anything we did shocked them. With each subsequent film, you're quite right, people expected more and more spectacular gore, until my last film, which was called "The Gore Gore Girls", when we began to parody our own effects. And the very parody of them became horrifying to theatergoers — another peculiarity of the motion picture audience.

This is certainly true in a lot of campaigns today, especially those that are done thoughtlessly by Hollywood publicists who only know superlative words, but don't know how to motivate people. They make a huge promise which can't be delivered because the promise itself is nothing but a bunch of words. These people could never write catalog copy for me because they wouldn't sell merchandise. They've forgotten my second rule, which is "In this age of skepticism, cleverness for the sake of cleverness will be a liability rather than an asset." So Hollywood publicists are word-users rather than wordsmiths.

Q. In the 1960s, ironically, your films were most popular in the Bible belt.

A. Our biggest payoff on these pictures came in southern "exchange areas". In the Charlotte, Atlanta, Jacksonville and Dallas exchange areas, we would anticipate getting at least half our playing time. There were, in those days, 32 exchange areas, and four gave us half our dates. There were theaters in the south that played "Blood Feast" and "Moonshine Mountain" 10-15 times over a period of years. The films simply didn't wear out there. I had one film called "She Devils on Wheels", which did extremely well in the north. It was about a female motorcycle gang. But the reason it did well in the north was because the film was atypical of what I was making. Once again, I was trying to be careful not to play a one-string fiddle.

This is another parallel with direct marketing, where you specialize your target so greatly that when the target shifts one inch, you miss it. That's another great danger in marketing, and I didn't want to make that mistake any more then than now. So, "She Devils on Wheels" was quite successful in the north, but didn't do all that well in my classically successful Charlotte, Atlanta, Jacksonville, and Dallas exchange areas.

Q. Do you regret that you're missing out on the videotape profits from your movies because you no longer own the rights?

A. I once had a partner who had a wonderful piece of home-spun philosophy. He said nobody ever went bust taking a profit. I remember thinking about the time when the remake of "Superman" was first released. Here were two fellows named Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster who had originated the Superman character. They had sold out for some $10,000 each somewhere down the line, when Superman was somewhat in eclipse. Did they have regrets then? My opinion is no, they didn't. And I don't. They sold their interest, and I sold mine.

If someone else is now making money from my films because cable and home video have become factors: 1) perhaps I should have anticipated that, 2) not anticipating it, I can't blame them, 3) I can't be like some football player who has a miserable season but still wants his contract enforced. And if he has a good season, he wants his salary doubled. That to me is not playing the game. It's like a direct-response writer who says, "the package pulled well; pay me double." No sir. It's supposed to pay well. That's why we paid him at all in the first place. We're not asking for our money back because it didn't pull well. The same principle is true in the film industry. I have no regrets.

Q. Is there any chance of you getting back into the movie business?

A. I think you'll have to ask God that question. According to Margo, my wife, there is very little chance. We enjoy the good life down here. But there may be one film left in me and there are a couple of people talking seriously about it. So it depends on the deal. There is no such thing in this life as saying a flat yes or no. All that does is ultimately make a liar out of you.

(continued on page 115)

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If any reader is tempted to make the trip (not my purpose nor my function), call me before you hit town. It's always a pleasure to welcome direct marketers personally. ●

Herschell G. Lewis
continued from page 101

Q. What do you consider your biggest accomplishment in the movie business?

A. I would guess it is being anthologized. When one talks about biggest accomplishments, it sounds like something on a tombstone. So if I am to have posthumous attention, I imagine it would center around having been an innovator, regardless of cost. My opinion is we got more on film per dollar spent than anybody before or since. There aren't a lot of people who made films in my budgetary category who are remembered at all. I'm luckier than most. ●

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