

cold war impact us art and literature

cold war impact us art and literature shaped a generation's creative output, instilling a profound sense of anxiety, ideological struggle, and technological advancement that permeated canvases, novels, and films. This period of geopolitical tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, spanning nearly half a century, left an indelible mark on the American psyche, which in turn was meticulously documented and explored through its artistic and literary expressions. From abstract expressionism's emotional outpourings to science fiction's explorations of existential dread, the Cold War provided a rich, albeit often terrifying, wellspring of inspiration. This article delves into the multifaceted influences of this era, examining how artists and writers grappled with themes of nuclear annihilation, espionage, propaganda, and the search for individual identity in a world on the brink. We will explore the key movements and seminal works that emerged from this crucible, demonstrating the profound and lasting cold war impact us art and literature.

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The Shadow of the Bomb: Nuclear Anxiety in Art and Literature

The omnipresent threat of nuclear annihilation cast a long shadow over American society during the Cold War, and this existential dread found potent expression in both visual arts and literature. The development of the atomic bomb and its devastating use in World War II, followed by the escalating arms race, created a palpable fear of global destruction. Artists and writers grappled with this newfound vulnerability, exploring themes of doomsday scenarios, the fragility of human existence, and the potential for complete societal collapse. This pervasive anxiety fueled a sense of urgency and a desire to capture the fleeting nature of life, often leading to works that were emotionally charged and deeply introspective.

In literature, this translated into dystopian novels and post-apocalyptic narratives that explored the aftermath of nuclear war or the psychological toll of living under such a threat. Characters often found themselves isolated, struggling to find meaning in a world that could end at any moment. Similarly, visual artists conveyed this unease through stark imagery,

abstract forms that suggested chaos, or works that directly depicted the destructive power of nuclear weapons. The fear was not merely abstract; it was a concrete possibility that shaped the collective consciousness and, consequently, the creative output of the era.

Literature's Response to the Nuclear Threat

Writers of the Cold War era frequently used their platforms to explore the profound psychological impact of the nuclear age. Novels like "On the Beach" by Nevil Shute and "A Canticle for Leibowitz" by Walter M. Miller Jr. painted grim pictures of a world ravaged by nuclear fallout. These works did not shy away from the grim realities, presenting characters facing the slow, inevitable end of civilization. The narratives often focused on human resilience, the search for love and connection amidst despair, and philosophical ponderings on humanity's capacity for self-destruction.

Beyond direct depictions of nuclear war, the anxiety permeated subtler literary explorations. The concept of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) created a constant state of tension, reflected in the often-paranoid undertones of post-war fiction. The fear of an unseen enemy, of infiltration, and of a world tipped precariously close to the edge of oblivion became recurring motifs. This literary engagement served as a coping mechanism for society, allowing for the processing of deeply unsettling fears through narrative and imagination.

Visual Arts and the Atomic Age Imagery

The visual arts provided a direct and often visceral response to the advent of nuclear technology. Artists like Jasper Johns, with his iconic "Flag" series, and Robert Rauschenberg, through his "Combines," engaged with the symbols and anxieties of the era in ways that were both familiar and unsettling. While not always overtly depicting nuclear bombs, their works often hinted at the pervasive presence of technology and the anxieties associated with it. The mushroom cloud itself became a powerful visual metaphor, appearing in various abstract and figurative forms.

The development of abstract art movements also found fertile ground in the emotional landscape of the Cold War. The raw energy and often chaotic compositions of Abstract Expressionism, for instance, could be interpreted as a reflection of the turbulent times. The scale and intensity of these works mirrored the magnitude of the existential threat, offering a powerful emotional outlet for artists and viewers alike. The colors, forms, and textures employed conveyed a sense of unease, power, and the sublime, all heightened by the underlying fear of ultimate destruction.

Espionage and Suspicion: The Spy Thriller's

Rise

The ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union was not fought solely on military battlefields but also in the shadowy world of espionage and intelligence. This constant state of suspicion and covert conflict gave rise to a robust genre of spy thrillers in both literature and film, profoundly shaping the cultural narrative of the Cold War. The fear of infiltration, betrayal, and the unseen enemy became fertile ground for storytelling, creating a widespread fascination with secret agents, double-crosses, and geopolitical intrigue.

These narratives often served a dual purpose: to entertain audiences with thrilling plots while simultaneously reinforcing national ideologies and demonizing the opposition. The spy thriller became a vehicle for exploring themes of loyalty, deception, and the moral ambiguities inherent in a world where trust was a dangerous commodity. The success of authors like Ian Fleming and John le Carré cemented the genre's place in popular culture, reflecting and amplifying the pervasive sense of paranoia that characterized the era.

The Literary Landscape of Spies and Secrets

Authors capitalized on the public's fascination with intelligence operations, creating iconic characters and intricate plots that mirrored the real-world tensions. Ian Fleming's James Bond, with his suave demeanor and penchant for high-stakes missions, became a global phenomenon, embodying a certain aspirational heroism in the fight against communist threats. Conversely, John le Carré offered a more gritty and morally complex portrayal of espionage, delving into the psychological toll on agents and the often-blurred lines between good and evil.

The literary spy thriller explored themes of betrayal from within, the dangers of ideological infiltration, and the sacrifices made by those operating in the shadows. These stories often tapped into deeply ingrained anxieties about the "other" and the perceived threat to American way of life. The intricate plots, filled with double agents and clandestine meetings, provided a thrilling, albeit fictionalized, lens through which to view the real-world conflicts and suspicions of the Cold War.

Cinema's Fascination with Espionage

The allure of espionage also translated powerfully to the silver screen. Cold War-era cinema was rife with spy films that captured the imagination of audiences worldwide. From the suave sophistication of early Bond films to the more grounded thrillers that emerged later, cinema provided a visual medium to explore the clandestine world of spies. These films often featured elaborate chase sequences, high-tech gadgets, and dramatic confrontations that played on the public's fears and desires.

Beyond pure entertainment, many spy films served as subtle propaganda,

reinforcing Western values and portraying the Soviet Union and its allies as nefarious forces. The visual medium allowed for the creation of compelling antagonists and heroic protagonists, simplifying complex geopolitical issues into digestible narratives of good versus evil. The success of these films demonstrated the profound cultural impact of the Cold War's espionage dimension on American entertainment and storytelling.

Propaganda and Persuasion: Art as a Cold War Weapon

The Cold War was as much an ideological battle as it was a geopolitical one, and both the United States and the Soviet Union recognized the power of art and culture as tools for propaganda and persuasion. Governments actively supported artists, filmmakers, and writers who could promote their respective ideologies and undermine the enemy. This led to a significant increase in state-sponsored cultural initiatives, aimed at shaping public opinion both domestically and internationally.

American artists and intellectuals, often funded through organizations like the Congress for Cultural Freedom, produced works that championed freedom of expression, individualism, and democratic ideals. In contrast, Soviet art was largely dictated by socialist realism, emphasizing a heroic depiction of the working class and the triumphs of communism. This artistic arms race played a crucial role in shaping perceptions and influencing the global narrative of the Cold War.

The United States' Cultural Diplomacy

The U.S. government, through initiatives like the Information Agency (USIA), strategically utilized art and literature to promote American values and counter Soviet propaganda. Abstract Expressionism, with its emphasis on individual freedom and spontaneity, was notably promoted as a symbol of American cultural superiority and democratic ideals. Exhibitions of American art were sent abroad, showcasing a vibrant and unfettered creative spirit, in stark contrast to the more state-controlled art of the Soviet bloc.

Literature also played a vital role. American authors were supported and promoted through various channels, their works translated and distributed internationally. These literary exports aimed to showcase the richness of American life, its freedoms, and its democratic principles, serving as a powerful form of soft power in the ideological struggle. The goal was to win hearts and minds, demonstrating the appeal of the American way of life.

Soviet Socialist Realism and Its Influence

The Soviet Union maintained a stringent approach to artistic production, with socialist realism serving as the officially sanctioned style. This artistic

doctrine dictated that art should depict the struggles and triumphs of the working class, promote communist ideology, and serve as a tool for educating the masses. Artists were expected to create heroic and optimistic portrayals of Soviet society, glorifying labor, leaders, and the achievements of the revolution.

While often criticized in the West for its perceived lack of artistic freedom, socialist realism was a powerful propaganda tool within the Soviet Union and its satellite states. It aimed to foster a sense of national unity, promote loyalty to the party, and present a unified and positive image of the communist project. The visual and literary output of this era, though ideologically driven, had a significant impact on the cultural landscape of Eastern Europe and beyond.

The American Dream Under Scrutiny: Literature's Internal Dialogue

While the Cold War often manifested as an external threat, it also served to intensify scrutiny of the American Dream and the societal contradictions within the United States itself. The stark contrast between American ideals of freedom and the reality of social inequalities, racial discrimination, and conformity pressures became a significant theme in post-war literature. Writers used their narratives to question the authenticity of the celebrated American way of life and to expose the underlying tensions and hypocrisies.

The suburban idyll, often promoted as the pinnacle of the American Dream, was frequently deconstructed by authors who revealed its darker undercurrents of conformity, alienation, and superficiality. This introspective literary movement, while occurring under the shadow of global conflict, was deeply rooted in an examination of American identity and the pursuit of happiness in a rapidly changing world. The anxieties of the Cold War, ironically, fueled a critical introspection of the home front.

The Suburbs and the Search for Identity

The post-war boom saw a massive expansion of suburban living, a symbol of prosperity and the American Dream. However, literature of the era began to question this seemingly idyllic landscape. Authors like John Cheever, in his short stories and novels, explored the quiet desperation and emotional emptiness that could lie beneath the manicured lawns and picket fences. The pressure to conform to societal norms and the loss of individual identity within these homogenous communities became a recurring motif.

These narratives often highlighted the disconnect between the material comforts and the spiritual or emotional fulfillment that the American Dream promised. Characters grappled with feelings of isolation, ennui, and a sense of being trapped by their surroundings. The perceived threat from communism abroad paradoxically spurred a deeper examination of the internal fabric of American society and its capacity to live up to its own ideals.

Critiques of Conformity and Consumerism

The Cold War era witnessed a surge in consumer culture, and many literary works critiqued this burgeoning materialism and the pressure to conform. The fear of communist ideology was often juxtaposed with the perceived superficiality of American consumerism, creating a complex cultural landscape. Writers explored how the pursuit of material possessions could stifle individuality and lead to a homogenization of thought and experience.

Beat Generation writers, such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, were particularly vocal in their rejection of mainstream societal norms, including conformity and consumerism. Their works celebrated spontaneity, non-conformity, and a search for spiritual meaning outside the confines of conventional American life. Their critiques resonated with a generation seeking an alternative to the perceived emptiness of the prevailing cultural narrative, a narrative that was being shaped by the broader context of the Cold War.

Abstract Expressionism: A New Language of Emotion

Abstract Expressionism, emerging in the post-World War II era, became a dominant force in American art and is often seen as a direct response to the anxieties and uncertainties of the Cold War. Artists like Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning moved away from representational art, seeking to express profound emotions and the human condition through non-figurative means. The raw energy, scale, and emotional intensity of their work resonated deeply with a public living under the shadow of potential nuclear annihilation.

The movement's emphasis on individual expression and subjective experience was also interpreted as a defiant assertion of freedom in the face of totalitarian ideologies. Abstract Expressionism became a symbol of American cultural vitality and creativity, championed by the U.S. government as a testament to the superiority of democratic ideals. This artistic movement provided a powerful, albeit often abstract, visual language for navigating the psychological landscape of the Cold War.

Pollock, Rothko, and the Expressive Canvas

Jackson Pollock's "drip paintings," with their chaotic yet meticulously orchestrated splatters of paint, conveyed a sense of raw energy and primal emotion. His technique, often described as action painting, involved the artist's entire body in the creative process, mirroring a visceral response to the turbulent times. Mark Rothko, on the other hand, explored the power of color and scale to evoke deep emotional and spiritual states in his large, color-field paintings. His canvases invited contemplation and introspection, offering a space for viewers to confront their own inner landscapes amidst external anxieties.

Willem de Kooning's "Woman" series, while figurative, also displayed a powerful abstraction and a raw, often unsettling, emotional intensity. These works, born from a period of intense personal and societal upheaval, reflected the complexities and contradictions of the human experience during the Cold War. Together, these artists and their peers created a body of work that was both deeply personal and universally resonant, capturing the zeitgeist of an era defined by profound uncertainty and profound artistic innovation.

The Politicization of Abstract Expressionism

Beyond its aesthetic merits, Abstract Expressionism became a significant cultural battleground during the Cold War. The U.S. government, through organizations like the Congress for Cultural Freedom, actively promoted these artists and their work internationally. Abstract Expressionism was presented as an emblem of American freedom and creativity, a stark contrast to the state-controlled art of the Soviet Union. The State Department funded exhibitions and facilitated tours of American abstract art, effectively using it as a tool of cultural diplomacy and propaganda.

This strategic promotion helped to elevate Abstract Expressionism to a position of international prominence, solidifying its status as a major art movement. However, it also led to debates about the extent to which artists were being co-opted for political purposes. Regardless of these debates, the movement undeniably served as a powerful cultural statement during the Cold War, embodying a spirit of individual freedom and artistic innovation that resonated with audiences both at home and abroad.

Science Fiction and the Future's Fear

Science fiction literature and film experienced a significant surge in popularity during the Cold War, offering a unique platform to explore anxieties surrounding technological advancement, nuclear war, and the potential for dystopian futures. The rapid pace of scientific discovery, coupled with the ever-present threat of global conflict, fueled imaginations to envision both the wonders and the horrors that humanity might face. This genre became a crucial outlet for processing societal fears and speculating on the consequences of the era's defining preoccupations.

From alien invasions that mirrored geopolitical paranoia to narratives of technological hubris and existential dread, science fiction provided a metaphorical space to confront the unknown. Authors and filmmakers used these speculative scenarios to comment on contemporary issues, raising questions about human nature, morality, and the direction of civilization in a world increasingly shaped by science and the potential for destruction. The genre's ability to project anxieties into future possibilities made it a potent force in understanding the cold war impact on art and literature.

Dystopian Visions and Alien Invasions

The specter of nuclear war and totalitarian control loomed large in many science fiction narratives. Dystopian novels like Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" explored themes of censorship and the suppression of knowledge, reflecting concerns about conformity and intellectual freedom during the Cold War. Similarly, films like "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" played on fears of infiltration and the loss of individual identity, with its alien pod people mirroring anxieties about communist subversion and societal conformity.

Alien invasion narratives often served as allegories for the Cold War conflict itself, with extraterrestrial forces representing an external, existential threat to human civilization. These stories tapped into a deep-seated fear of the unknown and the potential for humanity's subjugation. The paranoia and suspicion inherent in these plots directly mirrored the geopolitical climate of the time, making science fiction a powerful cultural barometer of the era's anxieties.

Technological Advancement and Existential Questions

The rapid advancements in science and technology during the Cold War, particularly in the fields of nuclear physics and space exploration, provided fertile ground for science fiction narratives. Authors pondered the ethical implications of these developments, exploring the potential for technology to both liberate and destroy humanity. The space race, a direct consequence of Cold War competition, fueled dreams of interplanetary travel and encounters with extraterrestrial life, but also raised questions about the militarization of space.

Many science fiction works delved into profound existential questions about humanity's place in the universe, the nature of consciousness, and the future of our species. These explorations, set against the backdrop of potential global catastrophe, encouraged readers and viewers to contemplate the consequences of their actions and the choices they made as a society. The genre's ability to blend scientific speculation with philosophical inquiry made it an indispensable part of the cold war impact on art and literature.

The Impact on Popular Culture

The pervasive influence of the Cold War extended far beyond the realms of fine art and literature, deeply embedding itself into the fabric of popular culture. From the music people listened to, to the movies they watched and the television shows they consumed, the anxieties and themes of the era permeated everyday entertainment. This widespread cultural penetration served to reinforce societal attitudes, disseminate propaganda, and provide a shared experience of living under a constant, if often abstract, threat.

The clear delineation between good and evil, often projected onto the East-West conflict, found its way into simplified narratives that resonated with a

broad audience. This cultural conditioning helped to shape perceptions, foster patriotism, and, in some cases, amplify the fear of the opposing ideology. The enduring impact of the Cold War on popular culture is a testament to its profound and multifaceted influence on the American psyche.

Music as a Reflection of the Times

The music of the Cold War era reflected both the anxieties and the hopes of the time. While some songs directly addressed political themes, others conveyed a sense of unease or a longing for peace. Protest songs emerged, urging for an end to the arms race and advocating for nuclear disarmament. Conversely, patriotic anthems and songs celebrating American exceptionalism also gained prominence, reinforcing national identity in the face of perceived external threats.

The emergence of genres like rock and roll, while not overtly political, also captured a sense of youthful rebellion and a desire for change, which could be seen as a reaction against the perceived conformity and anxieties of the era. The lyrical content and musical styles of the period offer a rich tapestry of societal moods and concerns, demonstrating how music served as both a mirror and a shaper of public opinion during the Cold War.

Television and Film's Role in Shaping Perceptions

Television and film became powerful conduits for Cold War messaging and entertainment. News broadcasts provided constant updates on the geopolitical situation, often framing events through a lens of American superiority and Soviet aggression. Fictional programming, including dramas and comedies, frequently incorporated Cold War themes, from spy adventures to narratives about the dangers of communism.

Films, in particular, played a significant role in shaping public perception of the Soviet Union and its allies. Movies often depicted the Soviets as villains, while American characters embodied heroism and resilience. This often simplified portrayal helped to create a clear us-versus-them mentality, reinforcing the ideological divide. The proliferation of these narratives across various media platforms ensured that the Cold War's influence was felt in virtually every household, making it a defining element of popular culture.

Cold War Themes in Post-War Cinema

Post-war cinema in the United States became a significant cultural arena for exploring and processing the complex realities and anxieties of the Cold War. Filmmakers utilized the visual medium to address themes ranging from nuclear fear and espionage to the subtle psychological impacts of living in a world divided. The silver screen offered both escapism and a space for critical reflection, allowing audiences to engage with the era's defining challenges

through compelling narratives and powerful imagery.

The cinematic landscape was populated with stories that mirrored the geopolitical tensions, often portraying clear-cut villains and heroic protagonists. However, a more nuanced and introspective cinematic tradition also emerged, delving into the moral ambiguities and psychological toll of the conflict. The enduring legacy of Cold War cinema lies in its ability to capture the zeitgeist of the period and to offer enduring commentary on the human condition under duress.

Nuclear Melodramas and Existential Dread

The looming threat of nuclear annihilation found potent expression in films that directly or indirectly addressed the destructive capabilities of atomic weapons. Melodramas often depicted families struggling with the possibility of war, highlighting the emotional toll and the fragility of everyday life. Films like "Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb" used dark satire to expose the absurdity and inherent dangers of nuclear brinkmanship, while other films focused on the potential aftermath of a nuclear holocaust.

These cinematic explorations served to both entertain and inform audiences about the grave dangers of the nuclear age. By visualizing the worst-case scenarios, filmmakers encouraged a societal awareness of the stakes involved in the Cold War. The existential dread that permeated these narratives resonated deeply with a public living with the constant awareness of their own potential annihilation.

The Red Scare and McCarthyism on Screen

The domestic climate of fear and suspicion, often fueled by McCarthyism and the Red Scare, also found its way into post-war cinema. Films explored themes of infiltration, betrayal, and the persecution of individuals accused of communist sympathies. While some films directly addressed the political climate, others used allegorical narratives to comment on the pervasive atmosphere of paranoia and the erosion of civil liberties.

These cinematic portrayals often highlighted the dangers of unchecked fear and the importance of individual freedom and due process. By depicting the devastating consequences of widespread suspicion and accusation, filmmakers encouraged audiences to question the methods employed during the Red Scare and to reaffirm their commitment to democratic principles. The impact of the Red Scare on American cinema demonstrates how the Cold War's internal tensions were as influential as its international dimensions.

The Enduring Legacy of Cold War Influence

The impact of the Cold War on American art and literature continues to resonate today, shaping contemporary creative endeavors and informing our

understanding of the 20th century. The themes and anxieties that defined this era—nuclear threat, ideological struggle, espionage, and the questioning of societal norms—have left an indelible mark on the cultural landscape. Artists and writers who came of age during this period, or who continue to grapple with its legacy, draw upon its rich and complex history.

The artistic and literary movements born out of the Cold War, such as Abstract Expressionism and the spy thriller genre, have evolved but remain influential. The critical introspection of the American Dream, the exploration of technological anxieties, and the examination of political propaganda continue to be relevant themes in contemporary creative works. The enduring legacy of the Cold War serves as a powerful reminder of how geopolitical conflict can profoundly shape the human imagination and inspire a generation of artists and writers to confront the most pressing issues of their time.

Continuity and Evolution of Cold War Themes

While the immediate threat of nuclear war has receded, the themes that emerged from the Cold War continue to be explored and reinterpreted in contemporary art and literature. The anxieties surrounding global power dynamics, technological surveillance, and the potential for societal collapse remain relevant. Modern artists and writers often draw parallels between the Cold War and current geopolitical landscapes, utilizing the historical context to comment on present-day challenges.

The legacy of espionage, for instance, continues to fuel popular narratives, albeit with updated technologies and new geopolitical players. The exploration of the American Dream's complexities, the critique of consumerism, and the questioning of authority are ongoing dialogues in creative works. The art and literature produced during the Cold War serve as a foundational text for understanding these persistent human concerns and their manifestations in artistic expression.

The Cold War's Lasting Cultural Footprint

The cultural footprint of the Cold War is undeniable. It redefined the landscape of global politics and, in doing so, profoundly influenced the creative output of the United States. The fears, ideologies, and technological advancements of the era provided a unique and fertile ground for artistic innovation and literary exploration. The works produced during this time offer invaluable insights into the collective consciousness of a society grappling with unprecedented challenges.

The artistic and literary movements that arose from the Cold War not only reflected the times but also shaped subsequent generations of creators. The continued study and appreciation of Cold War-era art and literature are essential for understanding the trajectory of American culture and for recognizing the profound and lasting impact that geopolitical conflict can have on the human spirit and its creative expression.

FAQ

Q: How did the fear of nuclear war influence American literature?

A: The fear of nuclear war deeply influenced American literature by leading to the proliferation of dystopian novels, post-apocalyptic stories, and narratives that explored existential dread and the fragility of human existence. Writers used these themes to process societal anxieties about annihilation and the potential end of civilization.

Q: What role did Abstract Expressionism play during the Cold War?

A: Abstract Expressionism was promoted by the U.S. government as a symbol of American freedom, individuality, and democratic ideals, contrasting with the state-controlled art of the Soviet Union. It served as a form of cultural diplomacy and propaganda, showcasing American creativity and cultural superiority.

Q: How did the Cold War impact the spy thriller genre in literature and film?

A: The Cold War's climate of espionage, suspicion, and ideological conflict fueled the rise of the spy thriller. This genre explored themes of betrayal, infiltration, and clandestine operations, reflecting and amplifying public fascination with secret agents and geopolitical intrigue.

Q: Were there specific literary movements that emerged as a direct result of the Cold War?

A: While not always a singular movement, the Cold War profoundly influenced various literary trends. The Beat Generation, for example, reacted against the conformity and consumerism that they associated with the era's dominant culture, while existentialist themes were amplified by the overarching sense of global precariousness.

Q: How did science fiction literature address Cold War anxieties?

A: Science fiction literature addressed Cold War anxieties by exploring themes of technological advancement, nuclear war, alien invasions as allegories for foreign threats, and dystopian futures. It provided a speculative space to confront fears about the unknown and the potential consequences of scientific and political developments.

Q: Did government funding play a significant role in the art and literature of the Cold War?

A: Yes, government funding played a significant role. Organizations like the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the U.S. Information Agency supported artists and writers whose work promoted American ideals, contributing to the international perception of American cultural achievements.

Q: How did literature critique the "American Dream" during the Cold War?

A: Literature critiqued the "American Dream" by exposing the underlying anxieties, conformity pressures, and social inequalities that existed beneath the surface of post-war prosperity. Writers explored themes of suburban alienation, consumerism's emptiness, and the struggle for individual identity within a seemingly idealized society.

Q: What is the enduring legacy of the Cold War on contemporary art and literature?

A: The enduring legacy includes the continued exploration of themes like global power dynamics, technological surveillance, the questioning of authority, and the potential for societal collapse. These themes, rooted in the Cold War experience, continue to inform and inspire contemporary creative works.

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