

Title: Reading and Rereading 'Shrek'

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of a small-scale research project which aimed to enable young people to reflect on their childhood responses to the popular films, 'Shrek' and 'Shrek 2.' During the project the participants develop new readings of the films in the light of their own recent experiences both of life and of other texts. The research draws on reader response theories to describe the complex readings of the films made by two young women from Rotherham. These readings include an engagement with an element of the films' narrative structure, the relationship dilemma between the main characters. There was also clearly recollection of enjoyment of the animation style, the humour and the fairytale intertextuality of the film. However, the strongest response was based on more recent experiences and involved considerable empathy with the characters. This has important implications for both educational research and classroom practice. This paper argues for an increased recognition of the significance of children and young people's engagements with popular children's films as integral to their development as readers and creators of narrative texts.

Key Words / Phrases re Indexing

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Film and literacy

Film and reader response theory

Children, young people and film

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Reading and Rereading Shrek

Introduction

Children and young people regularly watch, enjoy and make meaning from moving image texts and their participation in these texts is an asset to their developing literate lives (Robinson and Mackey, 2003). Moving image texts influence children's developing pleasure, understanding and engagement with the narrative form (Robinson 1997) and contribute to their 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al., 1992) about stories and the way they are told and retold. An increase in television channels for children, DVD distribution and downloading mean that children can and do access a wide range of films both contemporary and those from other eras and cultures. Furthermore, with the growth of production companies such as Pixar, Dream Works, Walden and Aardman and the continued success of Disney there is considerable confidence within the film industry that films for children are economically viable. As a result there are many new films made for children and family audiences. In my professional practice, in the field of film education, I have encountered many children who displayed sophisticated knowledge of popular texts and report extensive emotional engagements with them that were clearly influencing their responses to other texts and it was this relationship that became the focus of further study.

My interest in the role of children's films also emerges from a concern that the films we draw on, in education, are not necessarily the ones which form part of children's popular culture. In the context of this paper, I broadly define children's films as those produced and marketed specifically for young audiences with a U, PG and occasionally a 12 certificate, and particularly focus here on those made for families. A distinction can be made between children's films which are made from the child's point of view and have the child audience firmly in mind and those that are made for wider family audiences with content that is for children but also content that addresses adults. Within UK education these films such as 'Toy Story', (Lasseter, 1995) 'Lion King,' (Allers, 1994) 'E.T.' (Spielberg, 1982) or 'Star Wars' (Lucas, 1977) are often shown as an end of term treat but are still rarely used to link linked to children's developing capacities to comprehend story. Films of literary classics are also shown as adaptations of texts studied in English, (Goodwyn, 2004). Only rarely are either adaptations or popular films shown as an aesthetic experience in their own right. Materials about film are provided by Film Education and the British Film

Institute which aim to enable educators to use a wide range of film to teach aspects of the curriculum or film form. Film is also recognised in the literacy curriculum in the UK, under reading, but the emphasis is on teaching about film form rather than on engagement or personal response. In his studies of young people reading print fiction Warlow (1977) suggests that involved or engaged reading, an immersion in the text, rather than critical appraisal of the text is key to developing as a reader. The relationship between personal engagement and critical response is equally important to developing an understanding of children and young people's reading of film.

During my experience as a teacher of English and Media Studies, I observed that children's emotional responses to texts, valued within the personal growth model of English teaching, were less valued than their ability to reproduce a more teacherly responses accurately. By this I mean that, rather than inferring meaning in texts by drawing on previous experiences, students were assessed by their ability to reproduce the inferences pointed out to them by their teachers or textbooks. Martin Barker (2000) identifies a similar issue in relation to film analysis. Barker is concerned by the way traditional approaches to the study of film have 'interpellated' the audience (Althusser, 1984), creating readings which affirm favoured theories and rely on a conception of the audience as fundamentally passive recipients. Barker further critiques psychoanalytical study of film for its close proximity to the effects paradigm, which assumes that the audience is subject to oppressive meanings, hidden in the text and only revealed through a psychoanalytical approach. This leads Barker to his particular interest in the role of the audience or the 'involved, motivated spectator'. In her work on children's reading of print and television, Muriel Robinson (1997) identifies a need to devise a 'theory of narrative as a social act' drawing on a range of diverse disciplines to explore the strategies children adopt in their encounters with narrative texts (Robinson, 1997 p. 51).

The work of Barker and Robinson demonstrates the continued relevance of reader response theory which looks back to the work of Louise Rosenblatt (1970 – first published in 1938) which scrutinises the way in which a reader emotionally engages with a literary text. She attempts to establish how best to teach literature to ensure that individuals are not simply expected to offer reactions which imitate 'given' critical or teacherly opinion about a piece of art but are expressions of a personal response:

Yet ultimately, any literary work gains its significance from the way in which the

minds and emotions of particular readers respond to the verbal stimuli offered by the text.

(Rosenblatt, 1970 p. 28)

Rosenblatt argued that readers bring 'common' experiences to a text based on their social and cultural lives but that the nature of these 'experiences', 'images', 'memories' and 'associations' will be particular to each individual and will influence their response to a text. She divides the reading process into two distinct experiences shaped by the planned outcome for the reading. Rosenblatt distinguishes between 'efferent' reading, to 'take away' meaning from reports or instructions and 'aesthetic' reading, to 'sense, perceive' or to 'experience' a text. Rosenblatt criticises efferent teaching of literature, that is to say, teaching a poem because it illustrates a particular feature of language use or a poetic device. She argues for an environment where aesthetic reading can be nurtured. In doing so she makes important claims for literature as having a central role in the emotional development of young people:

We participate in imaginary situations, we look on characters living through crises, we explore ourselves and the world about us, through the medium of literature.

(Rosenblatt, 1970 p.37)

This claim has particular pertinence in today's educational context because the medium of film and other cultural forms also offer opportunities for participation and exploration. Experiencing film enables us to enter the lives of others, to identify with their situation and to follow their story with interest and anticipation. How we teach film is an important question which requires further reflection. Films, like other narrative forms, might be studied in a way that recognises and values the process of experiencing the text as well as focusing on analysis or an 'efferent' reading. Rosenblatt suggests that readers develop a repertoire of experiences which enrich their future engagements with texts. Hodge and Tripp (1986), in their work on children and television, argue that moving image texts for children are complex and polysemic and that this is in response to children's need to be active meaning makers. It is important then, to question children's responses to texts, created for them by Hollywood producers that are made to address universal themes or global audiences. The 'Shrek' films offer an interesting example of a highly popular, family film with complexity and many possible readings.

In the case of the 'Shrek' films, the process of bringing to the text our own cultural and textual experiences is not just essential to the process of 'getting it' but is also made explicit and is clearly intended to be part of a conscious process of enjoyment. This is also true of popular television series such as 'The Simpsons' (Groening, 1989) and of earlier children's films such 'Toy Story 2' (Lasseter, 1999). However, the Shrek films are of particular interest because they draw on many common ideas, memories and associations drawn from children's popular culture. From fairy stories to advertisements and popular music, the Shrek films reference verbal, visual and audio material and through narrative and editing conventions many other texts that children and young people recognise. Hugely popular, they can be seen as having become part of children's 'collective memory' of films, (Bromley, 1996). Their inventive and complex uses of irony, ambiguity and intertextuality explicitly invites children to draw on their repertoires of other texts in order to participate in the subversion of convention and expectation. Given their overwhelming popularity it is important to consider how children responded to them and whether their responses have implications for educators.

The Shrek films are based on a William Steig picture book (Steig, 1993) which depicts an ugly, green ogre who eventually marries an equally ugly, green ogress. The creators of 'Shrek' added to the original idea drawing on fairy tales and popular culture to create a contemporary fairy tale kingdom that resembles the sort of gathering together of characters and scenes you might find in a contemporary theme park. Both 'Shrek' (Adamson and Jenson, 2001) and 'Shrek 2' (Adamson and Asbury, 2004) irreverently reference scenes from Disney films, for example, Shrek and Fiona, blow up the bluebirds from the 1937 'Snow White' Disney film. However, the film also draws on the conventional Disney structure (Zipes, 1997). So, alongside the traditional fairy tale love story, in which a Princess (Fiona) needs rescuing (by Shrek, the protagonist) from both a dragon and an ambitious, rival suitor, the film contains features such as the comedy side-kick (Donkey). As well as use of a contemporary sound track, where the songs chosen reflect the internal dialogue of the main characters, the film also demonstrates technological innovation in the form of ever more effectively produced CGI animation. However, 'Shrek' is distinctively modern with a belching Fiona who uses martial arts to defeat Robin Hood and is, we later find, also secretly a green and ugly ogre. The narrative is resolved when Shrek and Fiona take the decision to unite not as transformed and attractive Prince and

Princess but as ugly ogres. The narrative arc is similar in 'Shrek 2' where Shrek and Fiona are nearly separated by the self-obsessed Prince Charming and his conniving mother, the fairy godmother. They are united with the help of their friends and by reconciling Fiona's parents to their relationship. Taking as my starting point 'Shrek' as a cultural phenomenon, a highly popular series of films produced alongside many and varied artefacts such as games, books, toys and costumes, I invited young people who were interested in the films to take part in a small scale research project.

The Research Project

This research was part of a pilot study I made in preparation for my research fieldwork. I anticipated that young people aged 14 – 16 would have important recollections of films that had previously been significant to them. The pilot study aimed to explore both whether young people would have distinct memories of films from childhood and which research methods would be most appropriate for enquiring into their past engagements with children's films. However, the data which resulted from interactions between two young women and myself raised some issues, specifically in relation to young people's accounts of their childhood experiences of film, which are pertinent to recent debate about the relationship between film and literacy (Marsh and Millard, 2000). The activity took place in holiday time and the young women, Helena and Faizah, aged 15, were participants in another media project I had been involved in, at a City Learning Centre. Prior to the project, both Helena and Faizah had expressed their love of the 'Shrek' films and this love appeared to combine both nostalgia for the pleasure of their own childhood encounters with the films and pleasure in re-watching and to some extent rereading the films in the light of their own more recent experiences. Both girls are able and articulate and have a particular enthusiasm for English. It is important to note that, although working with young women aged 15 I was asking them to reflect on their early childhood experiences up to the age of 11. Research activities included; a written questionnaire about their memories of children's films, a discussion of children's film as a genre, screenings of Shrek clips followed by audio-recorded group discussion and then finally filmed interviews. I also briefly filmed them enjoying the films after they had begged me to let them carry on watching one particular scene. In analysing my research data, I attempted to further understand their responses to the films and scrutinise what experiences they were bringing to them.

Screening Shrek

B: Shall we start with the references then?

H: I've got loads.

B: What did you get? Go on you've got loads more than me.

H: Erm. I've got the whole Disney film read from a book thing like in Sleeping Beauty.

B: Yep.

H: And when he sees the wolf, he's reading erm he's reading Pork Illustrated – it's kind of like a whole kind of porno thing [laughter from all three] I'm not sure anyone else noticed that!

B: I didn't twig that one [laughter] but yeah.

H: And it had the memory style film reel, and it had the doves, and kind of Lord of the Rings where they forged a ring in Lord of Rings and the mermaids you know where in those sort of tales where the mermaids seduce men and the romance genre you know with the big moon in the back and also Prince Charming is like one of those showy actors with the hair net and things [does movement – laughter.]

This is the first exchange between Faizah and Helena, and myself as we begin to watch and respond to scenes from 'Shrek' and 'Shrek 2'. I had asked them to look out for and make notes about any references to other stories, films, adverts or music they spotted in the opening sequence of the films. What is missing in the transcription of this discussion are the giggles that accompany spotting the references and the rapid pace at which they rattled out the things they had recognised. Their responses incorporated both recollections of things they had found funny at the time and references they now saw as funny in the light of more recent experiences. This was an engaging process and what emerged was evidence of deep immersion in the process of seeking out references to other texts to make sense of the film - to 'get it.' I compare this to the sometimes laborious task I undertook as an English teacher, of explaining references within poetry and I am reminded why I have become so convinced that children's films and children's culture should be the object of study. It is also possible to imagine demonstrating to young people how references in films and television programmes work in a similar way to those in poetry so that they are able to engage with the pleasures these references and the relationship between texts and social contexts. Observations about references led us to explore the way in which some identifiable characters are subjected to satire for comic effect:

H: Oh and Robin Hood is a complete jerk [laughter].

B: Are all the like traditional, romantic male characters complete jerks? Can you think of any exceptions?

H: Prince Charming is a complete moron.

F: Lord Farquard. The King, Fiona's Dad, is kind of weak although he does make up for it in the end.

Both girls quickly latched on to this discussion thread about the male characters. They recognised the humour in the way in which traditional male story-book characters, who should display bravery and heroism, were here presented as too concerned about their appearance to be effective. The Shrek films regularly offer female audiences opportunities to question gender stereotyping to comic effect. During this discussion of the film references Helena and Faizah decided they had other stronger experiences they wanted to talk about.

Shrek and Realism

When Faizah began to use the word realistic in relation to 'Shrek' I was surprised. However, in discussion, both girls began to formulate their ideas further:

F. The fact that it's about love is realism. And it's about choosing someone not because of what they look like but because of their personality - which is real.

H. They don't just fall in love and then that's the end – they have an argument and they have problems - relationship stuff which is quite real.

F. It's not the living happily ever after.

Here I think Faizah is identifying an important response to the 'Shrek' characters by homing in on the difficulties of their relationship. This was something Faizah in particular could clearly compare to her own life and text experiences and, despite the animated style, took very seriously.

F: Shrek 2 sort of links into real life, because like Fiona she's trying to get her parents to agree with her marrying the ogre and that's sort of realistic because that doesn't usually happen in fairy tales. She's trying to get her parents to agree with her marriage.

Faizah recognises here that the Shrek films are contemporary not just because of the

use of language and style but also because they move beyond the accepted narrative dilemmas presented in fairy story films, that is to say after marriage. Her discussions led her on to talk about other films, she has seen more recently, with a similar theme of forbidden love like 'Titanic' (Cameron, 1997) and 'Moulin Rouge' (Luhmann, 2001). Faizah emphasised that it is not just the humorous things the fairy story characters do which defy our expectations – it is also the more 'real' things they do like opting to be ogres rather than royalty. For Faizah this was an important aspect and indeed the scene in 'Shrek 2' where Shrek and Fiona first argue because of Fiona's parents' reactions to their marriage was the one both girls begged me to let them watch fully. They watched it animatedly looking really upset at the facial expressions as the argument progressed. Their empathy was for both Shrek and Fiona and this strong emotional reaction is one which might be forgotten in the furore about the cleverness of the animation or the intertextuality.

Faizah and Helena talked animatedly about the way in which the humour in the films worked because of the elements of fairytale being uprooted from traditional storybooks and placed in a 'real' world full of coffee shops and theme parks, answer machines and limousines. But real for them was the way the film explored a relationship in difficulty. That readers can be differently affected by the perceived reality of a particular text, 'is ample evidence of the degree to which literary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written' (Iser, 1980 p.54). I would argue that these responses demonstrate that popular children's films have the potential to affect audiences far beyond a simple comprehension of the sequence of events or indeed spotting the references. These responses, elicited from pleasurable regression to an earlier experience and then built on from a new perspective, might not be appropriately addressed by the teaching of film form in a written critical response.

Reading Fiona

During the research process I admitted that when I had watched 'Shrek' I had a deep down niggling, guilty feeling that really - wouldn't it be great if Shrek and Fiona did opt for beautiful. I explained that for me a satisfying story, one that I was more used to, might have included this as the 'happy ending' but that I was also glad when it did not take this turn. They were both definite about their childhood reactions that they were delighted when Fiona decided to stay an ogre and thought it was funny. However, this led on to a discussion about Fiona, of wanting to be like her, her role

as Princess and both girls declared they would not have wanted to be Fiona in a game or when dressing up when they were younger. Clearly, they could sympathise with Fiona about her relationship difficulties now but, when younger, were less enthusiastic about her unconventional Princess character – as well as all the more heroic things she does such as rescuing Shrek from Robin Hood. This version of femininity therefore, is not one they responded to straightforwardly. Helena mentioned hating Fiona at first because she seemed like a ‘snob’ or a ‘diva’ and because she expected a fairy tale prince to turn up to rescue her. On liking Fiona, she commented – ‘it took me a while.’ There was some evidence here that both girls were viewing the development of Fiona iteratively, gathering information and moving backwards and forwards from one scene to another to build on their reading of her character, clearly also contrasting her with other versions of princesses they had encountered. This negotiation of identities in fictional characters is discussed in greater detail by Bronwyn Davies who describes young women engaging with ideas which attempt to ‘disrupt old cultural patterns’ (Davies, 1993 p.198). The process of anticipation and retrospection, which Iser (1980) claims comprises an important aspect of reading pleasure, is clearly available in film as well as literature. Both girls appeared to map their reading of Fiona against previous fictional heroines and life and did so throughout the film and after watching, not just on the first introduction.

Suspending Disbelief

The discussion of realism led Helena and Faizah to share their thoughts about suspending disbelief in relation to children’s texts. They describe a time when you are younger when you might really believe in such things as fairies. However, they also described a more conscious process of entering that third space and taking a leap into the imaginative and emotional world of the film. Robinson (1997) refers to the act of ‘suspending disbelief’ as a crucial aspect of a reader’s engagement with a text. She argues that we learn to immerse ourselves in text or surrender to a third space (Winncott, 1971: Meek, 1977) in a similar way to the way we might also play, knowing at once that something is ‘make believe’ but maintaining our involvement all the same. This is especially important for children’s texts which often expect large imaginative leaps away from the real life of the reader into magical kingdoms or encounters with toys which come to life. This notion of space is an idea echoed by Barker:

Films are imaginative universes with organising rules and principles; they

generate a role into which the audience (may or may not) enter, which I call the implied audience; and through the intersection of these, they generate proposals for how films might intersect with the rest of their audiences' lives, which I call modalities of their use. And in exploring these, I aim to show that motives and emotions are natural and inevitable parts of the invited processes of engagement.

(Barker, 2000 p.37)

F. You usually think there's a world, somewhere else – that there could be a world a magical world. When you're younger you think..

H. You think that it might be real. When you're an adult you're more like scathing and you don't believe that it could possibly happen – when you are younger you think it might do. That some of the stuff is real. Like I used to think fairies are real.

F. At the time when you are watching the film you don't think oh that can't be true – it's just made up. You always have a thought 'oh it could be true – it's happening – it might be like a magical world' so that's why you enjoy the film. If you think 'it's not real it's all made up' then you wouldn't actually enjoy the film. You'd just think 'it's not real' so what's the point of even watching the film.

Discussion of earlier enjoyments of the Shrek films led spontaneously to this theme. The films juxtapose a distinct visually imaginative style of the fairy tale world with a critical representation of a brash and commercial modern world. The films also bring into contrast what happens in traditional fairy story film texts, that is to say marriage with a more contemporary ending which as Faizah said, 'isn't the happily ever after ending'. Both girls were able to engage with these contrasting elements in the text and recognised a particular need to suspend disbelief in order to become involved in the fairytale world and care about the characters. Although they enjoyed the irreverent humour, intertextuality and parody the Shrek films had offered them alternative meanings connected to the main narrative lived by the characters. These readings had not been arrived at immediately but involved a process of reflection on previous viewings- previous younger responses followed by discussion in relation to other experiences of fairy story texts and popular culture. This has implications for teachers and researchers

Conclusions

The idea that texts teach readers about other texts and develop them as readers permeates much of the literature on children's reading and in particular can be found in the work of Margaret Meek (1974, 1988). I would argue similarly that children's experiences of films influence their future engagements with films and that experiences of story in all forms contribute to children's overall repertoire of experiences of narrative texts. Meek draws on examples of children's picture books and descriptions of children's encounters with these books to demonstrate the need for imaginative texts which are created specifically for children. Meek acknowledges children's need for texts which draw on their emerging repertoires of experience but that are also innovative and playful. She also identifies a reading milestone which takes the reader into risk-taking, unknown territory.

For me, the move from 'more of the same' to 'I might try something different' is a clear step. So is the growing tolerance of ambiguity. The notion that things are not quite what they seem...'

(Meek, 1988 p. 30)

Arguably, the Hollywood film industry has recently increasingly begun to re-examine and explore what constitutes an imaginative, playful and innovative film for children, breaking the Disney mould. It is therefore timely to attempt to understand how children participate in these playful films. In my research I was attempting to create opportunities to observe Helena and Faizah being active and creative readers of the films drawing upon their own repertoires and experiences to infer meaning. It was clear that they were also involved and engaged readers of the text and as Warlow (1977) describes in relation to print fiction this increases their ability to infer meaning. What emerged was that the most dominant response to the films was an empathy with the difficulty of gaining parental approval to relationships. This might well be as a result of the age of both young women and their current interests and life experiences. Clearly, here is a suggestion that we bring to film our experiences, associations and memories just as we do to literature. However, both young women also drew extensively on their knowledge of conventional fairy stories, in film and book form, to help them develop their response. They entered into the imaginative world the filmmakers had created by contrasting Cinderella and Prince Charming with Fiona and Shrek and they enjoyed the 'more real' extended narratives. They also

enjoyed the subversive humour of the irreverence to other traditional texts which is a feature of a number of other important texts for children and young people. The Shrek films clearly prompt audiences to critically analyse the fairy tale form through parody. Indeed the films are one of many contemporary texts which encourage the retelling of fairy tales and these function as a stimulus to invite young people to re-read and re-tell other traditional stories. They are complex texts which offer opportunities for engagement, creativity and emotional response, and as such they might usefully be afforded pedagogical space alongside more traditionally valued books and films.

Within Media Studies there are useful models available for the further study of film (Burn and Durran, 2007) However, film is clearly an aspect of literacy and should be integral to the English curriculum. Enabling children and young people to draw on their 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al., 1992) about story from films, and other popular culture texts, in English and Literacy classrooms enhances motivation and engagement (Haas Dyson, 1997; Marsh, 2000) and enables them to develop as readers of all manner of texts. As teachers and researchers, it is critical that we offer opportunities for children and young people to share their repertoire of experiences of narrative text including film and it is worthwhile considering some of the ways we might do this.

- When selecting films for classroom focus the same attention should be given to what is appropriate to a particular group of students as we would a print text and this may have implications for building teacher knowledge and experience of children's film culture.
- These selections should include popular culture texts which are likely to be shared cultural experiences, but classroom activity should acknowledge that children and young people have different readings, memories and associations connected with these films.
- It is important to enable learners to draw on their own experiences of film and moving image texts in classroom discussions of narrative texts by explicitly inviting them to do so and valuing the comparisons they might be able to draw.

- Teachers might offer opportunities for ‘experiencing’ texts, acknowledging the wide range of emotional responses that might result, as opposed to teaching compartmentalised aspects of film form which potentially subjugate the learner’s particular reading of the text.
- Teaching film form, through creative production, to enhance emotional responses or individual readings, might allow learners to be able to engage further with a particular text.
- Introducing new texts which enable learners to make comparisons based on their own knowledge whilst encountering new ideas in terms of form, style or content would potentially continue to build learners’ repertoire of texts.

Whilst these ideas are not new in relation to teaching literature they are worth consideration in relation to teaching about film. At the time of writing a new strategy for film education in the UK has been launched entitled ‘Film: 21st Century Literacy’, (UKFC, 2009). It is timely then to scrutinise existing pedagogy in relation to film and to contribute to debate about how to approach film education described in this strategy as,

‘a systematic process in which confidence and articulacy grow by having the opportunity to see a wide range of films, to gain a critical understanding of film and to enjoy the creative activity of filmmaking’.

(UKFC, 2009)

Writing in 1946 and debating the use of audiovisual material in the classroom, Edgar Dale describes the need to enable students to read literal meaning, read between the lines and ‘read beyond the lines’. In responding to this aspiration in existing frameworks for literacy teaching there remain some challenging questions and issues for teachers and researchers about how this can be achieved. Children and young people can usefully be encouraged to reflect on their own encounters with films that become significant to them and their participation in children’s film culture. These reflections clearly enable them to explore their literate identities in relation to ideas such as suspending disbelief, or the perceived reality of a text or the meanings intended by uses of intertextuality. Offering opportunities to reflect on previously enjoyed films in the Literacy or English classroom potentially provides a bridge

between experiences of popular culture texts and school based texts (Millard, 2005) enabling children and young people to draw on their own knowledge to access the curriculum. Research into reading of print based texts also offers useful pathways to a further understanding of how children and young people read and respond to film, an important consideration in a time of development for film education.

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