



# A Ghost Image—Giorgio de Chirico's Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire

—About a Problem with Identity in the Genre “Portrait” in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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## Abstract

Many of Giorgio de Chirico's motifs have an ambiguous identity. Academic discussions have frequently sought to establish the identity of the figures through perceived resemblances. This essay adopts a semiotic approach, as it enables a more precise differentiation between various forms of identity. With this essay, I discuss how the ambiguity of motif and picture behaves with a specific subject like Guillaume Apollinaire. I aim to emphasize the duality of the depiction and to propose an additional interpretation of the two figures in the image. In my view, the shadow represents uniqueness, while the classical bust alludes to reproducibility. The comparison to a *Vera Icon* sheds new light on the glorification of Apollinaire as the new prophet.

## Subject Areas

Art

## Keywords

Giorgio de Chirico, Guillaume Apollinaire, Metaphysical Art, Surrealism, Portrait, Genre Portrait, Semiotics, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art

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## 1. Introduction

The faces of Giorgio de Chirico's manichini show abstract features or no recognizable human features. This becomes very clear with the second *Metafisica* as shown in **Figure 1**. The surface of the heads is formulated as flat skin. There are no eyes, mouth or nose on the faces. It seems to be an instrument of stylisation to obscure or hide faces and the traits of faces in figurative art of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. A broad span of interpretations for such means of creating art is possible.

Already at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the manichino was a projection screen for various identities. In outlines created facial features make it harder to recognize and identify manlike figures. Many of de Chirico's motifs have an ambiguous identity. Surrealists had fun guessing the identity of de Chirico's figures. For one of de Chirico's figures Surrealists discussed seven different identities in the journal "*Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*" [1]. A "nonsensediscussion" —it has already been clear that the picture and motifs on the picture were singularities or "non-identical". Max Ernst intended to resolve this problem with identity [2]. Artists aimed for freedom in art and de Chirico was one of the leading figures when it came to alienation. However, de Chirico painted a lot of portraits. Usually, the portrait shows an outer similarity with the represented, above all with the head and face. One can state a problem with identification and identity for modern and contemporary art. Since the genre portrait has a special status regarding the issue of identity, I will discuss this problem mainly based on the portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire.



**Figure 1.** Giorgio de Chirico, *Il consolatore*, 190 × 130 cm, oil on canvas, 1929, private collection.

Surrealists tempered with the section of signifiers as well as with the section of the signified. Hence, Surrealists made the difference between these two sections and both sections have been considered for alienations. The alienation of both sections is recognized in the scientific discourse, but there is almost no research about it. There is no semiotic analysis about de Chirico's art so far. This method allows for to analysis of alienations of form and content appropriately. Therefore, I will clearly distinguish between the signifier and the signified in this essay. Ultimately, geometric identity based on Max Imdahl's writing will play an essential

role. The actions of de Chirico and Surrealists had far-reaching consequences, which aren't fully clear yet. They tested and created new criteria for art.

According to Gombrich, the subject of a picture with ambiguous motifs should not be nameable [3]. For example, in order to be able to identify a history painting as such, the identity of the characters must be nameable. To assign a picture to a specific category seems obsolete. As a result, an image of metaphysical art can no longer be clearly assigned to any genre. The genre portrait sticks out as a particularity. Usually the signified has to be explicit.

“Das Repräsentierte ist [...] selber da und so, wie es überhaupt da sein kann. In der Anwendung auf Kunst wird etwas von diesem Dasein in Repräsentation festgehalten. Wir meinen, daß das Bild selbst repräsentativ ist. Natürlich bedeutet das nicht eine Bilder- und Götzenverehrung, wohl aber, daß es nicht ein bloßes Erinnerungszeichen, Verweis auf und Ersatz für ein Dasein ist, wenn es sich um ein Werk der Kunst handelt [4]”. The connection between representative and represented appears to be outstanding strong. Hence a first question is: Has de Chirico made an exception from his usual aesthetics of signs for the genre portrait? With the portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire as shown in **Figure 2**, which Giorgio de Chirico has made 1914 for Apollinaire, I want to elucidate the solutions which de Chirico has found for this category.



**Figure 2.** Giorgio de Chirico, Portrait Guillaume Apollinaire | Bildnis des Guillaume Apollinaire, 86 × 69 cm, oil on canvas, 1914, Paris Centre Pompidou.

## 2. Case Presentation

The picture is known in scientific literature as *Portrait de Guillaume Apollinaire*. It is obviously assigned to the category portrait and to the represented person. But

even though there are discussions about the identity of the two figures on the picture. Last mentioned Willard Bohn that this picture had been named retroactively with the title *Portrait de Guillaume Apollinaire* and it hence might not even be a portrait. In addition to that Willard Bohn points out, that all other portraits by de Chirico had been painted in a mimetic realism [5]. This appears to be an important fact for the portrait genre. It was not until years later that de Chirico retrospectively depicted Guillaume Apollinaire in a baroque-like realism as is clearly visible in **Figure 3**. (Thankfully, Gerd Roos drew my attention to this picture.)



**Figure 3.** Giorgio de Chirico, *Apollinaire Citaredo*, 28 × 21 cm, oil on canvas, 1942/43, Collezione Carrieri Mailand.

Paolo Baldacci interpreted the bust in the foreground of **Figure 2** as Orpheus [6]. Baldacci did this by means of writings of the artists. He tried to decipher a symbolism corresponding to Greek mythology and Sigmund Freud [7]. However, there is no known outer similarity between an *Orpheus* and de Chirico's bust of Apollinaire. Hence de Chirico seems to have identified the outer appearance of an antique bust with *Orpheus* or to have found a similar correlation. Later, scientists tried to find an example for the outer appearance of the bust. Gerda Schwarz identified the figure in the foreground with a bust of *Marcus Tullius Cicero* [8]. Klaus Parlasca rejected this hypothesis in an essay and identified the bust with the *So Called Apollon* [9]. Parlasca claimed that this head showed more significant outer similarities with Guillaume Apollinaire. In my opinion, the bust shows no outer similarities to the *So Called Apollon*. Hence an antique model for the bust is still unknown.

The similarity to the name of the god Apoll is well known in the scientific discourse. Hence comparisons to the god Apoll were obvious. Willard Bohn pointed

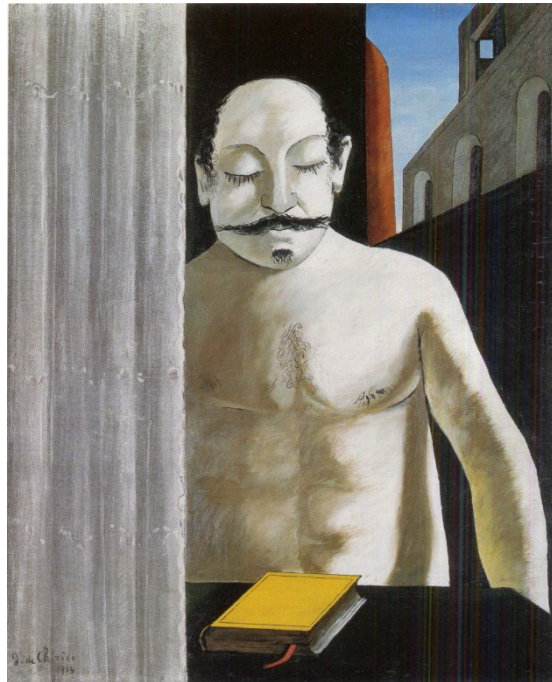
out that the figures imply a duality and states that the figure in the background corresponds to the Dionysian.

In the circle of friends among de Chirico, they developed an individual mythology for this language of symbols. (In this context, the term “symbols” is common, but in my opinion, they cannot be clearly “translated” like a language.) This becomes visibly evident in the fish and the shell. The friends used names of mythological figures as nicknames, e.g. in letters and on pictures. I suppose that de Chirico actually wanted to portray Guillaume Apollinaire in **Figure 2**. Therefore he used signs, which have apparently just a vague similarity with the outer appearance of Apollinaire for portraying him instead of a similar appearance.

In the following, I will pursue the question of the external similarity between the image and the portrayed. It has been a common opinion among artists that a mimetic copy of reality confines. De Chirico has distanced himself from such restrictions. The pictures had been all too human [10]. Also André Breton wanted painters to go beyond the pure imitation of outer appearances and wanted them to attend to the inner nature [11]. In order to approximate a portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire, de Chirico dedicated several paintings to him. In addition to that, he showed Apollinaire in different manners on these portraits. He used signs, which allude to the mythological self of Apollinaire and he created signs, which refer to his private and everyday person as well as to his public person. Therewith de Chirico showed on a portrait with signs at least three different identities of Guillaume Apollinaire. The signs may refer to the inner self of Apollinaire, the bust and the figure of a shooting gallery may refer to the inner self as well as to the outer appearance of Apollinaire.

It is problematic to assign an identity to de Chirico’s motifs by concentrating only upon the outer appearance. One can prove that with other pictures which might show also Guillaume Apollinaire. The two pictures *Il Cervello del Bambino* (**Figure 4**) and *Il Ritornante* (**Figure 5**) both show a problem with the identity of the picture itself as well as with the identity of the figures shown on them. In this case, too, the problem with identification is connected to a change of the title of the pictures as well as to the ambiguity of the motifs. It is supposed that Gala Éluard once has retitled *Il Revenant* in *Il Cervello del Bambino*. The titles of the pictures are important for de Chirico’s art. Breton might have noticed, that de Chirico had given the task to name his pictures to Guillaume Apollinaire before 1917 and Apollinaire shall have done that extremely well [12]. Titles of surrealist pictures often have no visible connection to the motifs of the pictures. Jerrold Levinson calls the effect a “conceptual dislocation” [13].

Scientists connect the posture of the sitting man as can be seen in **Figure 5** with the *Belvedere Torso* [14]. The other figure on the picture is commonly associated with the *Oracle of Delphi*. The figure seems to concentrate on its inner life, like having prophetic powers. Giving this figure an identity is due to the fact that it has a certain posture, a flutelike surface and concentration on its inner life. There is vague indication of possible ideals. But the figures miss important details to be



**Figure 4.** Giorgio de Chirico, *Le cerveau de l'enfant* | *Das Gehirn des Kindes*, 81.5 × 65 cm, oil on canvas, 1914, Moderna Museet Stockholm.

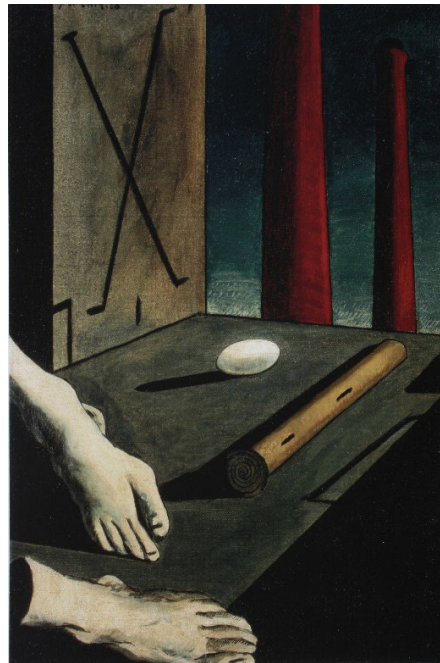


**Figure 5.** Giorgio de Chirico, *Il sogno del Poeta* | *The Nostalgia of the Poet* | *La nostalgie du poète*, 89.7 × 40.7 cm, oil and carcoal on canvas, 1914, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

identified distinctly. This is also true for a real, vivid person and for an ideal based on art history. The sitting manichino is missing its arms, hands and above all its head and hence its hair and its mimic. The other figure shows a whole body but

an identification of this figure is also difficult. The eyes of this figure are closed and it wears no common clothes which could help identify it. The figure appears like a column because of the costume it wears. The moustache as is evident in **Figure 4** and **Figure 5** is symptomatic. With the moustache one can create a correlation to Napoleon III. But a moustache was in fashion at that time. Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Paul Guillaume and Guillaume Apollinaire had moustaches. Not only Nietzsche but also Guillaume Apollinaire is the *Ritornante* for de Chirico. One can read this in the epitaph for the poet: "È Apollinaire, Apollinaire il ritornante; è l'amico poeta che mi difese in terra straniera e che io non rivedrò più mai" [15].

Shearer West also states that in modern art there are portraits with a high similarity between model and image [16]. Artists painted after the vivid model and alienated the image later. It has also been supposed that de Chirico shows himself on the picture *Metaphysical Composition* 1913 completely encrypted with signs as evident in **Figure 6**. De Chirico represented himself with an egg, two plaster feet and one chimney of a factory. This *Metaphysical Composition* consists of metaphysical signs. Each of these signs can refer to the person Giorgio de Chirico in various ways. But usually de Chirico names portraits *Ritratto* and designated self-portraits as such. This is the main reason for me not to think of this picture as a self-portrait.



**Figure 6.** Giorgio de Chirico, *Composizione metafisica | Misterio dell'Ortopedico | Metaphysische Komposition*, 81.3 × 54.6 cm, oil on canvas, 1914, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

### 3. Discussion

The problem Max Imdahl stated is about geometric identity between signified and

signifier and this is the relevant problem for this essay [17]. De Chirico seems to have recognized the same problem without using the terms signified and signifier. He has written about portraits.

Il ritratto si trova in una situazione molto delicata nella pittura contemporanea, e ciò per la seguente ragione. Il ritratto è un soggetto molto difficile a dipingere e nell'esecuzione di un ritratto quello che va bene e ciò che va male è, anche per il profano, più evidente, più controllabile che non in un altro soggetto [18].

De Chirico writes in this section of his novel *Signor Dudron* on the genre portrait without becoming explicit. The context supposes, that de Chirico treats the outer similarity of portraits and their verifiability. This was good as well as bad for the genre portrait. De Chirico implies, that this problem existed for sacred as well as for profane portraits like in no other genre. One can compare signified and signifier with reality in the genre portrait. It becomes evident, that a signified is not the signifier and hence there can be no identity. Such a relation between signified and signifier seems to have met the disapproval of de Chirico. De Chirico states in his writing about portraits that a dissimilar relation between signified and signifier wouldn't have been approved by art collectors.

As a first result I state that signified and signifier shall be identical or the relation shall be ambiguous. In case of a traditional relation between signified and signifier is the similarity relevant. Such a traditional relation confines and is tied to deception. The "bequeme Verhältnis" between signified and signifier described by Lessing thus underwent a revaluation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century [19]. The uncomfortable relationship seems to have been preferred by artists. This also includes deception about identity or falsification of identity. Alienations include for example variations of titles, variations of images and fakes or forgeries. With such transformations, Surrealists brought to light that metaphysical artworks are "open works". [20] This would imply that a single signifier can have an infinite number of signifieds.

An anecdote that circulated among the Surrealist group provides further information about de Chirico's view of image and effigy. De Chirico is said to have sat in a café in Paris together with other surrealists, including Breton. De Chirico was asked to identify a boy who was selling flowers. De Chirico looked in his pocket mirror and identified the boy as a ghost. According to Roger Cardinal, this encouraged the Surrealist system of reference and thus its understanding of identity [21]. De Chirico sees in this circulated fable only the reflection of the boy, not the boy himself. Consequently, de Chirico distinguished between signifier and signified. Such a mirror image is comparable to a shadow. A shadow is part of an object, arises and decays with it.

De Chirico describes the environment in which he portrayed Apollinaire in his Memoirs. Apollinaire in his penthouse, which has been filled with his bookcases, sitting at his desk, is said to have seen the outline of his friend on the discoloured sky "as if under the beam of light of a magic lantern" [22]. Another time, he writes about the portrait of the "camera obscura of his consciousness",

which is said to have opened up the view of the shadow with a “nocturnal lightning strike”.

“Quando mi s’affaccia alla memoria il suo profilo numismatico che stampai sul cielo veronese d’una mia pittura metafisica, penso alla malinconia grave del centurione romano, intento a valicare i ponti di barche gittati lungo le terre conquistate, lontano dal tepore consolante del suo focus e dai fugera del suo terreno arato”.

The portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire was initially referred to by the de Chirico brothers as *l’homme cible* or l’uomo *bersaglio*. The *l’homme cible*, the shooting gallery figure in the portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire as illustrated in **Figure 2**, looks like a shadow. A reflection and a shadow bring up decisive new aspects concerning the question of identity. A geometric identity is possible through such a trick. Such a constellation gives rise to a new identity problem, which Imdahl described as an identity crisis.

“Bezeichnetes und Bezeichnendes fallen in eins. Die Identitätskrise ist bedingt durch die Zweidimensionalität sowohl des Bezeichneten als auch des Bezeichnenden. Berechtigt also erstens die je gegebene Zweidimensionalität der Schießscheibe und des Bildes zu der Frage, ob es sich um die Wirklichkeit der Schießscheibe oder nur um die Wirklichkeit ihrer Darstellung handelt, so stellt sich überdies auch zweitens die viel wichtigere Frage, ob es sich um eine Schießscheibe handelt oder um Malerei, um Malerei schlechterdings, um konkrete Malerei. Oder was dasselbe besagt: Is it a flag or is it a painting” [23]? (Translation citation: “The signified and the signifier fall into one. The identity crisis is conditioned by the two-dimensionality of both the signified and the signifier. If, therefore, firstly, the given two-dimensionality of the target and the picture justifies the question of whether it is a question of the reality of the target or only of the reality of its representation, then secondly the much more important question arises as to whether it is a question of a target or of painting, of painting in general, of concrete painting. Or which says the same thing: Is it a flag, or is it a painting?”)

This statement by Imdahl draws new attention to the shadow in the background of de Chirico’s picture. By means of a shadow, de Chirico was able to approach the identity problem in the portrait genre. The shadow in the picture could have been identical with a shadow of Apollinaire. De Chirico has solved various problems in this way. A shadow is always two-dimensional. Thus, at this point in the picture, de Chirico avoided the problem of feigning plasticity. The shadow does not show any individual, momentary facial features. The shadow suggests a presence, which gives the portrait a mysterious aura. Depicting a shadow strengthens the bond between the represented Apollinaire, the motif and the picture itself. De Chirico himself does not seem to have found a more appropriate term for such an image, which could be inherent in a human presence, than to call it *ghost*. As a further indication of the shadow’s resemblance to humans, the dating and signature on the picture can be mentioned. De Chirico attached these to the pillar in the foreground and thus identifies

this area as man-made.

De Chirico worked with the point in time that a portrait shows. Especially with regard to the question of identity, time is an essential factor in portraiture. The portrait has its own temporal cycle apart from the portrayed. De Chirico has dealt with time in various ways. Backdating is an example of de Chirico's work with time. The trepanation seam and the bullet point in the portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire are further examples of working with time. In 1914, de Chirico succeeded in showing more of Guillaume Apollinaire than he could have known at the time. This war injury has become an unmistakable identifying feature of the portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire and this has been the main reason for the mystery surrounding this portrait.

Other versions of the portrait do not have this peculiarity as depicted in **Figure 7** and **Figure 8**. (There are numerous versions of the portrait, which will not be examined in detail in this essay.) Therefore it is also possible that the version with the trepanation scar is a backdated fake or that the scar was added later to the picture. (Such a review is aggravated by the fact that this painting was not published as intended as a frontispiece of the *Mamelles de Tiresias* and was not exhibited to the public for the first time until about 20 years later. However, the woodcut by Pierre Roy, made almost at the same time, proves that it is the original.) In **Figure 7**, further differences can be observed. Instead of the *l'homme cible*, a mannequin is shown from behind. Both double portraits by Guillaume Apollinaire symbolise a Janus-faced attitude. The sculpture in the foreground wears a pair of pliers. De Chirico emphasises the sense of sight with the pliers, he



**Figure 7.** Giorgio de Chirico, Portrait du Poète, 61.5 × 50 cm, oil on canvas, 1914, private collection, Paris.



**Figure 8.** Giorgio de Chirico, *Portrait du Poète*, 61.5 × 50 cm, oil on canvas, 1914, private collection, Paris.

indicates both external and inner vision. This draws attention to both the visible and the invisible. Reference is made to the ability to look in two directions - into the past and into the future. This is another hint of de Chirico's concern about time.

André Breton has described this portrait as “pure achievement of apotheosis” [24] He stressed that the portrait had been made two years before Guillaume Apollinaire had been actually wounded. Since the head wound Apollinaire during World War I, a mystery or a myth entwines around this picture. Beyond this enigma, the painting reveals additional aspects that show Apollinaire as the new prophet. There are several parallels that bring the picture close to a *Vera Icon*. [25] (Translation: The tradition of the *Vera Icon* is characterised by a visualisation of the face.) De Chirico shows only Apollinaire's face. The doctrine of the two natures of Christ brought with it various problems for the image of Christ. Similar to the doctrine of the two natures of Christ, de Chirico shows at least two different natures of Guillaume Apollinaire. Images of Christ were referred to as masks. The figures of de Chirico do not have any individual facial features. This seems to be another parallel to a *Vera Icon*. Individual facial features depend on the situation and are subject to change over time. Figures of de Chirico can also be compared to decalcomanias. Such a designation is reminiscent in the imprint of Jesus on the sheet as well. For images of Christ, too, there were problems with the timing and the claim to portray Christ realistically.

In this essay, I seek to emphasize the significance of the duality inherent in the depiction. The seemingly antique bust in the foreground evokes notions of

immutability and timelessness. In contrast, the shadow appears ephemeral, vulnerable, and fleeting—potentially even referencing Apollinaire’s own shadow cast upon a wall. This contrast allows for a rearticulation of duality on the level of signifiers: the shadow points to singularity and uniqueness, whereas the classical bust alludes to reproducibility and repetition.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the research debate on the portrait of Apollinaire, recognizing a quotation was often accompanied by a comparison between his motifs and models. (This has happened without using the terms “signifier” and “signified”.) Rare attention was paid to the fact that de Chirico had detached the signifier from its former, original signified. At least this is what, in my opinion, Guillaume Apollinaire intended for Surrealism in his work *Les Mamelles de Tiresias*. It is therefore questionable whether the original context of the signifier can provide information about the signified in de Chirico’s work. Shearer West has determined that the aesthetic goal for such portraits is to increase the “ambiguity and urgency” of the works [16]. Ruth Noack cites the “art-immanent genesis of process-oriented art”, the “need to adapt an outdated art concept to the course of time” and the “genuine interest of artists in creating themselves as a work of art” as goals of artistic identity alienation [26].

There seem to be more reasons for such a design. The trigger for de Chirico appears to have been the identity problem with the genre portrait, as can be seen from the passage quoted above. For Apollinaire he did not intend to create a portrait in a photorealistic style. Instead, he used several signifiers for one portrait. The similarity of the signifiers to the portrayed person has minor importance. At the same time other components of the picture gain more importance. In this case, the signature and date as well as the title.

The solution of showing a shadow is in line with the mysterious aura that surrounds *Arte Metafisica*. A shadow could even refer to the first portrait after Pliny. The decalcomania in the background shows two aspects of the *Arte Metafisica*, which have earned the reputation of being inimitable. Apollinaire’s head injury, which attested to the visionary trait of the *Arte Metafisica*, adds another, unrepeatable aspect to de Chirico’s work on and over time. For such a visionary work, the date of origin is of particular importance. In fact other versions of the portrait do not show a shadow. Hence the shadow appears to be the closest link to Apollinaire on the picture and lends it a unique status of being inimitable.

It could be demonstrated that de Chirico employed a range of pictorial strategies to engage with the problem of identity within the genre of portraiture. These include the selection of motifs, the manipulation of temporality, the use of reproduction, and the deployment of the picture title. Such an approach ultimately allowed the image to acquire a kind of autonomy. In this essay, the painting is therefore conceptualized as a ‘ghost image’.

The identity of the artwork becomes mutable through the use of ambiguous

motifs and tends toward indeterminacy itself. It is not only the uncertainty surrounding authorship that has contributed to the questioning of the identity and authenticity of many of de Chirico's works. Recurrent motifs and identical or varying titles—sometimes rendered in different languages—continue to generate confusion regarding the identity of his paintings, particularly in the context of technical reproductions.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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