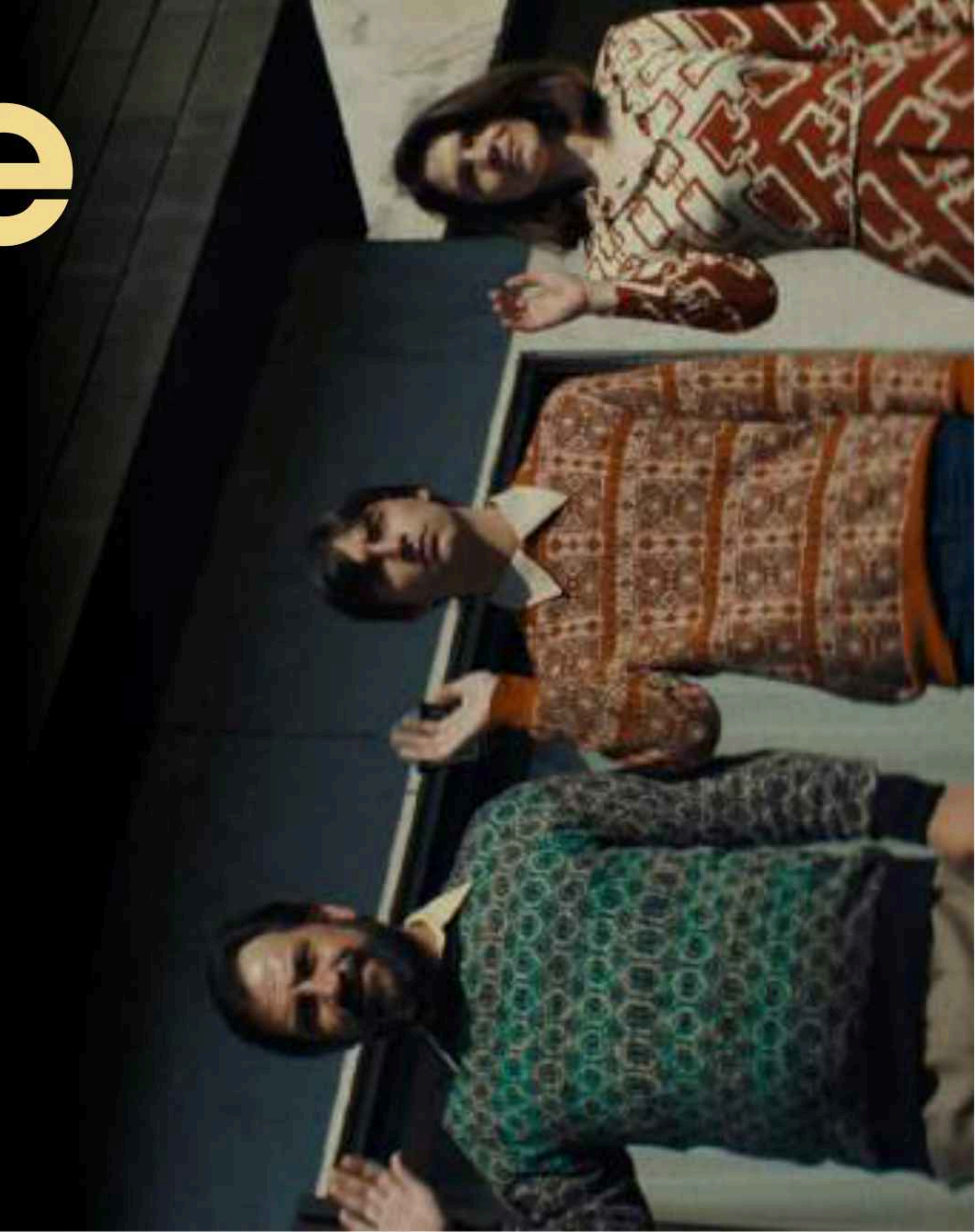


the uncle

this will be the best christmas ever!



Karlovy Vary
International Film Festival
Proxima Competition
Special Jury Mention



synopsis

yugoslavia, late 1980s. a family welcomes their beloved uncle who has returned home from germany for the holidays. the reunited family enjoys the christmas lunch until a smartphone starts ringing. it's a sign that it is not the 1980s, it's not quite christmas time either, and it is not just the served turkey that can be cut with a knife – the tension can, too.



director's note

“the uncle” is a deconstruction of a typical family situation during the holidays. since childhood, we’ve been trained that the holidays are a time when the family has to be happy and together. perhaps for that very reason, most of our festive gatherings look like superficially staged, well-rehearsed plays that collapse instantly and turn into chaos if one doesn’t comply with even the smallest change in habit. christmas can be ‘merry’ only if all the conditions of this play are fulfilled, without any negative emotions and unpleasant situations hanging in the air. the uncle forces the family to be happy, day after day, just so he can be emotionally fulfilled. in its infinite repetition of pursuing perfection, all these elements of tradition and family routines actually become devices of torture and abuse. laughter and absurdity, which come from “lighthearted” everyday situations, are transformed into unpleasantness and horror not only for the characters, but also for the audience.

q&a with the directors

you said that the idea for the film came out of your jealousy towards all the kids who had a rich uncle from germany. how come you decided to transform this envy and jealousy into such a dark story? is this your revenge for all the gifts you haven't received?

the revenge started out as a joke, but we fear it may have gone too far. our revenge was simple and cruel. as children, we never had a rich uncle or aunt from abroad to shower us with gifts come christmas time. we wanted to forever ruin the sweet and innocent childhood memories of those who did :) but in all seriousness, we feel there is something inherently tense, even violent, in family gatherings. nobody really enjoys all the customs, traditions, and machinations, but we all take part in them because that's how it's always been done. it didn't take a big leap from reality to use something universally recognizable, such as a family celebrating the holidays, and then to tell a very dark (and sometimes funny) story within those confines. we focused on all the absurd, grotesque and bizarre elements of our own family gatherings, and it wasn't hard to imagine how things could go very badly very fast. hopefully it isn't just us.

the movie is set in the late 80-s, at least it appears like that. was it challenging to create a film set in that period of time?

the most challenging part of recreating a truly believable 1980s household was finding the exact same things we remembered from our childhoods. finding the exact same toy rifle, the same vcr, or the same itchy sweater. this all made the story feel more real and grounded, but also more personal and intimate for us. we hoped that people would have the same emotional reaction to seeing all those things again as we once did. nostalgia is a powerful tool, and grounding the film's look in reality allowed us to tell a much weirder story.

the house is also an important character in the film. looking like a museum of socialism, it gives a strong context to the story.

it took us such a long time to find the right house that we started to fear it would never happen. our production designer always kept us calm by saying: "don't worry, we've seen many houses that were wrong, but we need to see just one that is right". the interior of the house was always imagined as a sort of "museum of socialism", a more modern and timeless aspect of socialism architecture and design. we wanted the design to provide a very strong background for our characters, with insights into the political and civil life of the 1980s, but also without pin-pointing the exact year in which the story takes place. also, it was important for the story for the design of the house to have an artificial and staged quality to it, but also to reflect the rigid and meticulous aspects of the uncle's character.

the uncle is actually a terrible sociopath that you sometimes feel sorry for. have you found any understanding for his actions?

we know very little about the uncle, almost nothing. all we know is that he really wants to have just one perfect christmas. and he'll have it by any means necessary. however, in his eyes, we see that he is a lonely and sad man, who seeks attention in a very disturbing and extreme way. and we've all had moments of great loneliness where we sought out attention, so we wanted viewers to recognize the uncle's honest emotion, regardless of the truly dark context. he doesn't think he's doing anything wrong, he sees the family as slackers who are not trying hard enough to do something that's supposed to be in his, as well as their best interests. and nobody has understanding or tolerance for slackers and sloths.

you also play with and criticize the idea that a family that has to pretend to be perfect during the holidays. what is so important in holidays like christmas that makes us pretend that we live perfect lives?

through the act of celebrating christmas, the preference of form over content becomes the most obvious. as long as tradition and the church insist on procedures like various ceremonies, mass, blessing food, forcing the togetherness of a family (regardless of whether the family in question is functional or not), we can expect to continue seeing the acts of dining together, decorating the tree and house, all that. this is why christmas, in effect, represents the biggest subliminal "molesting" of the subconscious with the idea of form over content. that is also why the uncle tries to solve his traumas in a violent way, by forcing everyone to take part in the "christmas spirit", which includes rituals and consumerism, instead of facing his trauma directly and head-on. additional tension is created by the fact that, in their conformity, people perceive negative events more intensely if they occur during the holidays, when the imperative is for everything to be warm and carefree.

although the film is all about repeating the christmas holiday, it was shot during autumn and spring, which is obvious in the scenes. why?

while filmmakers make plans, movie gods laugh at them. the film was originally planned to shoot in late autumn, to give the film a moody, undefined, bleak, mild winter look. when the cameras finally started rolling on the uncle, it was late spring, going into summer. we had no choice but to embrace what we had, and it turned out even better than we ever could've imagined. images of a family celebrating christmas in a warm and colorful surrounding just add to the film's more bizarre and weird elements. it also works great for the story, as well, but that might be a spoiler.

q&a with the directors

how did you choose your cast? did you know from the beginning who will play the uncle?

the cast for the film took years to assemble, through all the things the two of us shot and did during our time at the academy and after it. all the members of our family are our friends and colleagues we've worked with since the earliest days - so it kind of made sense to write and create these roles for them. as for the role of the uncle specifically, early on, he was supposed to be a much younger guy. but through the process of casting actors that we liked and found amazing, we decided that the character should be a lot older. when the producers asked us who we would imagine as the uncle in an ideal world, we told them without any hesitation - miki manojlović! at that moment, that seemed like an impossible fantasy. however, the producers had his email address, so they sent him the script, hoping against hope. miki replied soon after, saying he's completely impressed with this script written by two young, novice writers whose other work he'd never seen before. and the rest is history!

the atmosphere is dark, the visual style evokes anxiety throughout the film, the characters are shot with hyperrealistic intensity, the narrative is full of absurd and dark humor. could you explain your aesthetic choices?

the uncle's perseverance in having a perfect christmas is reflected in the so-called "ruthlessness" of the shot framing, which doesn't allow the characters to ever find themselves in the comfort of the typically-framed situation. this is why we used many such unusual compositions, where the heads of the characters are "pushed" to the edges of the shot, or it looks like the frame of the shot is suffocating them, ruthlessly keeping the characters only half inside or outside the shot. this leads to a feeling of uneasiness in the viewer's perception, as the shot always contains what is at the moment relevant, without compromise, much like the uncle's plan to make the family give in to all his demands - without compromise. the situation our characters find themselves in is absurd in its own right, which is why there are also some unexpected bursts of humor, usually dark, uncomfortable, and grotesque, considering the severity of the situation. we (the directors) both look at the world through an ironic prism. often, even in the most dramatic, difficult, and serious situations in life, we try to find at least a bit of humor, so it's obvious that these bursts of humor in the film come from our views of the world.

the film shifts between "reality" and scenes where characters stage the perfect christmas, or at least try to. this duality is one of the foundations the film is built on.

the goal was for our character to be burdened by the strict scenario with which the uncle wants to achieve the ultimate christmas, which doesn't leave them with any space to express themselves as persons, so they are reduced to mere functions - mother, father and son. another burden for our family is that, aside from the fact that they're a common, stereotypical family, they also have to constantly be happy. and considering the terrible background and motive behind why they're there, it's hard to make them be happy in this situation, even if they were the best actors. if we take into account that our characters are no meryl streep and marlon brando, but just normal people, this is nigh on impossible. that is why the idea of acting out happiness is devastating while knowing that in the background of the situation is someone's deranged concept of forcing a christmas celebration. but our family consciously plays along and, since they're already so used to the process, with time it becomes harder to separate the mother, for example, from her actual self in the outside world. much like pirandello's characters, the line between the role they play and who they really are keeps getting blurred. it's like giving yourself a mohawk - you have to go all the way. using hairspray, flour and water every day, and walking around like that, all that becomes part of your identity.

cast



predrag 'miki' manojlović is one of the greatest serbian actors. he is famous for his starring roles in some of the most important films of former yugoslavian cinema. since the early 1990s, he has successfully branched out into movies made outside the balkans and has become active in productions all over europe, having appeared in more than a hundred films and tv series since 1971. he is best known for the role of the father in emir kusturica's 1985 film *when father was away on business*, and as a tragic opportunist in 1995's *underground* (also by kusturica). both of the films were awarded with the palme d'or (golden palm) award at the cannes film festival.

ivana roščić is a croatian actress, well known for a number of roles, both in theater and film. she graduated in acting from the zagreb academy of dramatic arts and participated in more than twenty films, including *tereza 37*, for which she received the award for best supporting actress at the pula film festival in 2020. ivana is an accomplished theatre actress, starring in both classical and contemporary repertoire productions in croatia in the last 15 years.

roko sikavica is a croatian actor of the younger generation. he graduated from the zagreb academy of dramatic arts and starred in several short and feature films, such as *quit staring at my plate* (federa award for best european film at venice film festival 2016). he is well known for his appearance in television series (*mrkomir i., dar mar, ko te šiša*), all of which are achieving prime tv ratings in croatia. *the uncle* will be his first appearance as main cast in a feature film.

goran bogdan is a croatian actor that has appeared in various american and british films and tv series such, as *goltzius* and *the pelican company*, *the last panthers* and *fargo*. his role in the 2020 movie *father* earned him universal acclaim, and he made history by becoming the first croatian actor nominated at the european film awards for best actor.





david kapac is a croatian screenwriter, director, and creative producer. he started his career with student short films, all regularly screened at festivals in croatia and abroad, including his graduation film, medium-length horror film *zagorje specialty*, co-produced with the national broadcaster hrt and premiered at the pula film festival in 2011.

after graduating, david focused on working in television, achieving seven-figures viewership in croatia and the region for the shows he ran either as director or creative producer.

in 2017, he returned to film, co-writing the screenplay for the short film *party*, which represented croatia in 2018 as part of the project 'drama for children' of the european broadcasting union (ebu). *the uncle* is his debut feature. david is developing several projects, including the next feature film with andrija mardešić.

selected filmography:

as director:

- *zagorje specialty* (pula film festival, 2011; hrt, 2012; regular cinema distribution, grič art cinema 2012)
- permanent loan, co-director with andrija mardešić, "kockice" program, zagreb film festival 2010, official competition "days of croatian film" 2010)
- *frka 12*, with andrija mardešić (official competition "days of croatian film", 2017)

as co-writer with andrija mardešić:

- *iris* (pula film festival, croatian film days 2012)
- *tenant*, part of the omnibus short circuits (tv movie for hrt, 2013)
- *party*, ebu drama for hrt (director kras gančev)



andrija mardešić is a croatian film and tv author. he has successfully directed projects in various genres: experimental and music videos, documentaries and promos. still, andrija's focus is cinema, where he has proven himself with a series of short films. *iris* (2009), *two all alone* (2015) and *steppe fox* (2019) stood out at festivals in croatia and abroad. with hana jušić and dario juričan, he directed the omnibus *short circuits* for croatian national broadcaster hrt in 2013. as a screenwriter, andrija co-wrote the medium-length horror film *zagorje specialty* (directed by david kapac) and the short children's drama *party*, which he co-wrote with david kapac for hrt and the european broadcasting union (ebu). andrija also works as a storyliner on the biggest tv projects in croatia, and he directed the tv drama *don't tell anyone* for hrt. *the uncle* is his debut feature. andrija is developing several projects, including the next feature film with david kapac.

selected filmography:

as director:

- night ride (zagreb film festival)
- iris (festivals in croatia: pula, dhf, raf, fmfs, opuzen, festivals abroad: tuzla, moscow, izmir, casablanca, dhaka, vilnius)
- tenant, part of the omnibus short circuits (hrt, pula film festival, 2013)
- two all alone (special jury awards - zff, fmfs; grand prix, tabor film festival; grand prix, best director, best feature film - short at a glance (2015/2016)
- scream in the dark (2006) western (2009), promotional films, included in the anthology of croatian dedicated film 1993-2012. croatian film association

as co-writer with david kapac:

- zagorje specialty (pula film festival, 2011; hrt, cinema distribution grič cinema, 2012)
- party, ebu drama for hrt (director kras gančev)
- iris (pula film festival, croatian film days 2012)
- tenant, part of the omnibus short circuits (tv movie for hrt, 2013)

cast&credits

directors: david kapac, andrija mardešić
writers: andrija mardešić, david kapac
producers: ivan kelava, tomlav vujić
co-producer: milan stojanović
cast: predrag miki manojlović, ivana rošćić,
goran bogdan, roko sikavica, kaja šišmanović
director of photography: miloš jaćimović
editor: tomlav stojanović
music composer: miro manojlović
sound designer: frano homen
sound mix: frano homen
production designer: ivana škrabalo
costume designer: ana savić gecan
hair and make-up designer: silvija bradica
sound recordist: marko grgić

production company:
eclectica
www.eclectica.com
info@eclectica.com

co-production company:
sense production
belgrade, serbia
www.senseproduction.rs

supported by:
croatian audiovisual centre (havic),
film centre serbia (fcs),
croatian national television (hrt)

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