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DEATH AND ADVERTISING

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Abstract: The new context of culture built on communication opens us to a horizon in which advertising instrumentalizes existential concepts for specific purposes of commercial communication. Contemporary human beings build an alternative to traditional religious experiences, which they put under the sign of what we can identify as an everyday spirituality. In this context, reflective attitudes related to the way of being in the world lead to reflections related to death. It is a context of social construction and personal becoming in which the instrumentalization in the advertising languages of the representations of death integrates very well in the waiting horizon of the consumers. We have revealed in this text how the representation of death in advertising discourse takes place along the lines of the relationship of death with violence and along the lines of integrating death in search of meaning and the desire to be together. Advertising integrates the existential concerns of human being and uses death for marketing and commercial persuasion purposes in order to capture the consumers' attention and guide their behavior.

Key words: symbolic communication, death, violence, advertising, instrumentalization of death, everyday spirituality, religiosity, existential languages, advertising languages.

1. Introduction

Advertising appears to us today as a repository of languages of great diversity: from symbolic languages with a strong spiritual weight, to existential, philosophical languages with wide addressability to informative languages, built on the level of supply and demand in a market that is of products rather than a market of ideas. Thus, beyond the natural orientation of advertising towards commercial communication, we can notice that sometimes advertising uses an imaginary that is located near the associations between the imaginary and the sacred. We can accept that this is not the main trend in advertising communication, but it is a vein that cannot be ignored due to the increasing inclination of the consumer both to material products and to the accumulation of symbolic goods. The way in which the religious, mythical, symbolic imaginary are instrumented reminds us of the perspectives on the sacred in which the crisis of the imaginary and the crisis of the sacred are treated in the existential terms of the dialectic of life and death, of the union and distance of love and death (Căluț 2000, 11).

Even if we do not go so far in this text as to give advertising the status of a demiurge creator of symbolic worlds, we cannot ignore the fact that there are a large number of advertising creations aimed at building reality from existential, mythical, religious reasons, or from ritual behaviors and archetypal patterns (Frunză 2014). The metamorphoses that the sacred undergoes through its assumption in the human life of the contemporary society reveals its inclination for an instrumentalization of the essential themes related to the sacred. This happens even in advertising languages (apparently stripped of any spiritual concern) when they aim to bring deep meanings within the surface communication specific to everyday messages. In such a field of spirituality as a daily fact, we want to discuss some aspects of a series of representations of death, as they appear to us as part of this new attitude, integrated into advertising languages. But first let us place ourselves inside this world.

2. Religiosity in the world of communication

The generalized access to the construction of reality in communication also opens the democratic access to an ever-increasing production of experiences and images that we associate with the satisfaction of spiritual needs (López 2020; Codoban 2009; Gavriliuță 2006; Dâncu 2001; Wunenburger 2000). In this way, we can see that, to an increasing extent, divinity is revealed to human being in today's society in ways that access to the spiritual life becomes part of the daily concerns of each individual who assumes significant experiences of his own life. Such

an observation is formulated and argued in a very convincing way by Susannah Healy when she notices the current trend of structuring personal life as a project that develops from the development of a collective consciousness of humanity. This consciousness is built not around experiences as modeled by the traditions proposed by religious institutions, but by a direct, immediate participation in the experience of the sacred (Healy 2021, 16).

This exit from institutionalized religion, but with the preservation by the individual of the collective consciousness of participation in a common experience, is possible through a shift of religious interest from the experiences proposed by religions in their institutionalized forms to experiences of the sacred in everyday life. Since the last century, Mircea Eliade has highlighted three types of experience open to contemporary human being.

1) Eliade considered a deconstruction of the divine as it is opened by the new experiences offered by the theologies of God's death. God's death in no way affects the state of the divinity or its way of acting in the world, but leaves room for a new center of construction of religious life, a center represented by the human experience of the sacred. Such a perspective can lead, on the one hand, to an awareness of the profane nature of the world, and on the other hand, it can be the starting point for a new type of experience. This experience, even when it cannot be described in the traditional terms of religious experience, can be assimilated by contemporary human being with an experience of rediscovering sacredness in everyday life (Eliade 2005, 7). Such an experience, viewed from the outside, may reveal that the death of God speaks rather of the death of human being or of his reduction to a precarious existence. At the same time, this experience, seen from the inside, can reveal the fact that the human being in search of authenticity leaves the territory of vulnerability by building what we could call a spirituality of daily life. In this way, spirituality can become a way of searching and reconstructing the meaning that can help you to leave the hustle and bustle of everyday life by finding yourself as a spiritual being right in the middle of it (Healy 2021, 15). Or, you can live your significant experiences in self-help personal modeling actions that market spirituality and can make you find yourself as a valuable individual in a market of personal brands. And here the literature is more and more abundant because it brings the promise of a fulfillment of personal authenticity in everyday life (Maxwell 2003; Covey 2015).

2) Eliade had in mind that it is possible to live the experience of the sacred starting from the idea that it is not the religious who gives the ultimate meanings of human experience, but religiosity understood as a deep structure of human consciousness. Therefore, what we call secularization, with the diminishing presence of the sacred in the way institutionalized religions relate to this presence (Sandu, Huidu, Frunză

2020), is only what we can describe as a dialectic of the sacred and the profane developed in the general framework of universal transformation of values (Eliade 2005, 8). Accepting that we can see here a way of meeting between the collective consciousness of the sacred and the consciousness of the individual - with all its existential data in the sphere of sacred creativity, we believe that we can see that a construction of reality in communication can find here a solid foundation. The instrumentalization of symbolic themes and meanings in advertising languages can be considered as an authentic way of communication aimed at a horizon of expectation related to the human condition and its manifestation in situations of symbolic communication.

3) We are told that we have the opportunity to reevaluate the need for spirituality of contemporary human being starting from the premise that the experience of the Christian is one of a special kind. It is an experience that no longer proposes the situation at the interference between sacred and profane of religious experiences that placed man in the cosmos, but provides new experiences related to the manifestation of God in history and history as becoming from the perspective of a theology of salvation (Eliade 2005, 8). We can easily accept that in Christianity the dialectic of the sacred and the profane does not work as we see it unfolding in archaic religions. However, we can discuss other conceptual pairs that can be integrated into the principles of universal value transformation. Such a conceptual pair is brought by Susannah Healy when she puts us in front of a possible choice between "spiritual" or "religious". Probably in the traditional spirit of Christian thought the choice would be "both spiritual" and "religious" as well. The possibility of such an option, which does not oppose the spiritual and the religious, can be felt even in theological analyzes such as those in which Rudolf Otto describes the experience of the numinous (Otto 1996) or in how the limit experience obtained at the end of an ascetic effort is described. It combines the knowledge of God from the concrete conditions of life with the emptying of the mind and the experience of seeing the divine light as a mystical experience (Stăniloae 1993). In a world where the Christian religion has become institutionalized, bureaucratized, and offers experiences mediated by professionals in the administration of the sacred, the idea arises that it might be beneficial to return to the experiences triggered by a presence felt as supreme power. However, this power is no longer lived through traditional mediations, but in the form of a diffuse religiosity in which "for most believers "religion" is about people, while "spirituality" is about God" (Healy 2021, 39). In this way, the spiritual-religious dialectic, as it is described by Healy, does not introduce us to a horizon of evasion from the power of divinity, but to that of a living of God as a spiritual experience in daily life. It is about a new way of man to communicate himself and to communicate about the spiritual realities present as daily experience.

Such an experience is very visible in the forms of instrumentalization of the spiritual or religious imaginary for marketing purposes, as well as in the marketing of philosophy for the purposes of personal development, organizational development or development of consumer relations with a particular product. Whether it is about highlighting an institutional brand, a product brand or a personal brand, we can notice that the religious imaginary, cultural projections or the invitation to reflect on the fundamental truths of life accompany the promise we bring in communication in connection with the symbolic dimension attached to brand communication (Frunză 2019). We mention here the example of the brand due to its expressiveness given by the fact that it implies in addition to a tangible dimension and an intangible dimension. The latter is largely related to the experiences it provides to the consumer and at the same time to the values that the consumer invests in the relationship with the brand. Often, these values are part of a deeper structure, in which the foundation is given by living this new form of spirituality that we can experience as part of everyday life.

3. Advertising and existential languages: representations of death

3.1. Death and her violence

We believe that for a good understanding of what happens with the production of images and advertising languages we can stay in the same context of the discussion and remember that – starting from Martin Heidegger's statements on the relationship between language and Being – Susannah Healy states that language is the one that “creates our reality and sets the limits within which we perceive reality and can talk about it” (Healy 2021, 29). Identifying the things of the world by word sends us to a symbolic construction in which reality is codified to facilitate communication of our ideas to others and to establish points of contact of common experiences in relation to the realities concerned (Healy 2021, 30). Languages with a very strong existential weight, such as those of death or love, can refer to the communication of experiences that bring us together. We believe that this quality of language to make us participants in a common way of living the reality of our life is significant. Obviously, advertising has no metaphysical function, and none of it increases our theological sensitivity in relation to our own way of positioning ourselves in the world. But it can help create a horizon in which advertising languages help us to better situate ourselves in the reality built in communication.

We believe that it is difficult to decipher what goes on in the mind of a manager who accepts that his products be promoted using the symbolism of death. If it is not about products related to funeral situations, the Advertising Agency must probably have a very special magical power to convince the person who wants to promote a product to associate it with the image we put in relation to death. Even when it is tamed by mechanisms specific to advertising persuasion, death is accompanied in the collective imagination by a certain presence of violence, even if it is perceived only in terms of symbolic violence. All the more so as, this type of imaginary associated with death may appear problematic when it is actually accompanied by violence.

It is understandable why, noting that the presence of death in the advertising imaginary is often associated with violence, Scott A. Lukas believes that we should be concerned that "advertisers and corporations are saying that death can be used to sell products" (Lukas 2015). And to illustrate this, he offers us a series of images of prints, which we could consider to have a very strong negative emotional impact. Given the contexts in which women in particular are associated with the production of images in which violence and death are associated, he believes that we should stop being consumers of products that use the imaginary of death for promotional purposes. At the same time, Scott A. Lukas believes that in our capacity as human beings, but also as consumers, we should ask ourselves a series of questions such as: "What are some of the political, social, sexual or psychological reasons why death seems so common in ads? Why are more women represented in situations of death than men? How can everyday citizens convince advertisers not to use themes such as death in their ads?" (Lukas 2015).

The answers to these kind of questions could not be formulated in the limited space we have in this text. However, we believe that it is good for such questions to arise, even when they are formulated only as rhetorical questions. It is true that we can accept that "Sometimes, the messages are aggressive, precisely to shock the viewer and promote their understanding" (Moraru 2009, 173). It would be good to consider the intensity and extent with which we can accept that what shocks us can have a desirable persuasive value. I believe that beyond our beliefs in marketing philosophy or ideological beliefs, we should not treat with indifference the fact that Scott A. Lukas reveals that advertising languages in which women are illustrated are put into circulation in situations such as: depicting shark attacks, burning, being hit by a train, hanging, being ground up, being a drunk driver, being shot, falling out of a window, and being brutalized (Lukas 2005). Imaginative constructions, such as those listed by Lukas, can invite us to a reflective attitude on questions related to the ideological foundation of communication, consumer attitude and behavior, the relationship between consumer, product and brand owner,

but also the consumer's relationship with the world communication, in particular with that of commercial communication.

We are accustomed in religious discourse to speak of the imaginary that brings together the sacred and violence. It is obvious that in the advertising prints brought into discussion by Lukas we cannot speak of possible associations of images with the founding violence, the ritualization of violence or forms of violence expressed as ritual acts. Rather, it seems to be meaningless violence, emptied of any meaning, violence for the sake of violence situated beyond any spirituality and beyond any play of symbolic consciousness.

From an ideological point of view, we can reveal that the gender criterion has an important place in the selection proposed here. Violence is aimed at representing the situations in which the woman is imagined. But, even if in a more limited number, we can notice the same tendency to put death in a context of violence and when the character around which the advertising story is built is a male one. The *Greene King IPA beer ad* is a clip in which a man experiences overcoming the violence with which death is approaching because Death has chosen to stop at a bar to drink a beer. From the presentation of the video we learn that „IPA stands for India Pale Ale, a particular type of beer that was brewed for export to expatriates during the days of the Indian Raj. Because hops have a preservative effect on beer, an unusually large quantity of hops were used in the brewing process to ensure beer remained in good condition preparing it for the long sea voyage to India. Ironically, our beer never made it to India, perhaps it was just too good to let go?” (Video: *Greene King IPA beer ad*). This beer, which we learn embodies everything that can best be said about beer in the UK, uses in one of its videos, on the one hand, one of the traditional images of the representation of death, and on the other hand, the repeated experience of death-producing violence from which the individual emerges victorious because his death prolongs his stay at the bar where he sits to enjoy the irresistible beer. Throughout the advertising story, the most unexpected violence is tamed by the presence in the advertising language of the humor with which every scene of violence to which the man is subjected by the hazard of life and nature and the ironic way in which Death is delayed. The reason is that she must satisfy her joy of serving a *Greene King IPA beer*.

Another example that we can associate with a negative impact of death-related violence in advertising languages is presented in an excellent article published by Maria Cernat in which she analyzes *The Batman TV commercial* (Video: *Reclama Altex cu Batman*). The discussion proposed by the author is a more elaborate one, but what we want to remember here is that „in the *Batman TV commercial* there are two kinds of mythologies colliding: the profane one produced by the popular culture and the religious one. But they are both subsumed to a more important logic: the logic of consumption. At the first semiological level the story is

quite simple: not being able to buy a TV set one of the two main characters is asking his friend to tell him what happened in the movie. He is later convincing his friend to through a priest from a tower mistaking him for Batman. The hilarious conclusion is quite simple: if you are tired of others telling you what happened in the movie buy a Teletech TV set. That is, only the direct experience of seeing the movie for yourself could prevent you for mistaking a priest for a TV character. What is even more appealing to this ad is the much deeper meaning: people are so caught up in the media myths they tend to interpret reality only through this type of patterns" (Cernat 2014, 144). In the Romanian cultural context, the ad was perceived as representative of healthy humor. But, no matter how full of irony and humor, the scene in which two men dressed in white robes confuse a priest dressed in black with the character Batman, the violent finality is no longer tamed by the intention of the humorous story built by the advertising creative. The fact that it could only be broadcast for one day, after which it was banned, and then went viral in communication in the virtual space reveals not only the positive perception of the quality of humor, but rather two other aspects. On the one hand, it reveals the interest directed towards scenes of violence of some possible categories of consumers (probably the same increases the audiences of the programs with violent content broadcast as "5 o'clock news"). And on the other hand, it shows us the penetrating capacity and persuasive force of some messages in which violence and death appear as structures of the construction of languages for communication, including commercial communication.

We must not draw conclusions here about the place that such advertising themes could occupy in shaping the media culture and the behavior of loyal consumers of this culture. But, we must not ignore the observation of an expert in the mythology of advertising such as Mădălina Moraru, who points out that "In addition, we all know that advertising is the world that makes everything possible, by activating collective mental structures, brings back attention cultural profiles and uses the resources of any field" (Moraru 2009, 177). While waiting to see how digital culture is born and to follow its first steps in Western civilization, we may be lost sight of the fact that it has already reached the stage that we could symbolically associate with her adolescence. This is not a reflection of psychoanalysis of culture, but only the use of a cultural metaphor. Thus, we could invoke in understanding the need of contemporary human being to associate violence and death by analogy with what Irvin Yalom noticed that with the onset of adolescence it happens: „during adolescence, death anxiety erupts in force: teenagers often become preoccupied with death; a few consider suicide. Many adolescents today may respond to death anxiety by becoming masters and dispensers of death in their second life in violent video games" (Yalom 2011, 11).

In addition to the representations in which violence accompanies

death, we believe that more discreet presences are relevant, with a special mental and emotional impact that make the culture of communication a horizon of human becoming in the permanent game of life and death. Freeing ourselves from the pressure of violence, we can expect the discovery of a new form of spirituality, built in communication, starting from reflective attitudes, from a certain metaphysical sensitivity generated by putting in advertising languages the fundamental themes related to the human condition, the approach to the sacredness of life and the position of man in a plan that combines the commercial dimension with the symbolic one.

3.2. Representations of death as an existential dimension

If we are in the field of social responsibility, we will be able to find another face of the presence of death as representation in the languages of communication. Death is part of the way we view human becoming. We believe that the cultural history of the West was marked by the dispute over the choice of the vision of Heraclitus or the vision of Parmenides. Today we are much closer to the tendency to put them together. Human existence is both a sign of being and becoming.

From this perspective, life and death are part of becoming in search of being. Here we could adapt Heidegger's reflection on death and notice that death is not a simple event that marks or suspends our existence, but something that man assumes as part of the way of living his own life (Heidegger 2002). The nearness of death becomes less distressing if we understand, together with Irvin Yalom, that there is an interdependence between life and death, that death vibrates in the experience of life and the meeting of the two exerts a profound influence on all our experiences (Yalom 2018).

We are accustomed to the fact that, in the marketing processes, the cars are joined by a rich erotic content. Along with Eros, the advertisers bring Thanatos in various forms. It seems that love and death cannot be better combined in the image construction of any other product. An advertising creation very popular for those who watch commercials is the Mercedes-Benz advertisement, with the exhortation "Fool the devil with - brake assistant BAS + Mercedes-Benz E-Class W212". We are used to instantly associating the idea of being "safe" with the Volvo brand when we talk about car brands. Other brands have also exploited the idea of safety offered to the driver. Mercedes-Benz gives us the image of a young man crossing a snowy landscape, and at one point he appears on the right seat Death in his traditional form, with his scythe missing. At the last moment, even before the possible accident, the driver brakes and emerges victorious from the ironic, tense, but also playful confrontation with Death, avoiding the accident due to the excellent braking system of the car. Even if we do not have a model similar to the register of the victory

over death in Western religious culture, we notice how comforting this victory over death is felt in advertising language. There is a beneficial psychological effect that we can find in theories of death if we resonate with Irvin D. Yalom when he confesses: feel strongly—as a man who will himself die one day in the not-too-distant future and as a psychiatrist who has spent decades dealing with death anxiety— that confronting death allows us, not to open some noisome Pandora’s box, but to reenter life in a richer, more compassionate manner” feel strongly—as a man who will himself die one day in the not-too-distant future and as a psychiatrist who has spent decades dealing with death anxiety— that confronting death allows us, not to open some noisome Pandora’s box, but to reenter life in a richer, more compassionate manner” (Yalom 2011, 14).

There is no more beneficial period for such intrusions of highlighting the richness of meanings of a good life than the winter holidays. Here is the example of the video Edeka, a way of instrumentalizing death - empathic, meant to soften us, to make us fall in love, to orient us towards rediscovering the importance of spirituality for everyday life.

We are at Christmas time. Edeka, one of the most important store chains in Germany, challenges us with a story that brings to the fore the instrumentalization of the idea of death. Here the strangeness is given not by the presence of representations of death, but by the idea of its occurrence. We are told a story that makes you shudder and that could even arouse your indignation if the crazy idea of the old man, the central character of the story, to announce to his children that he died, would not be tamed by the nostalgia of childhood, the atmosphere of loneliness, the music and lyrics that accompany the visual construction with the message of Neele Ternes: „If life is a song, somehow it's sad, / I don't know the words without you Dad, / you've been on my mind, / all the time and im missing you... / Home used to be just some walls that i know, / but the truth is that home means nothing without you...” (Video: Neele Ternes).

Returning from the Supermarket, the old man receives a message on the robot on the phone and finds out that he will be alone for Christmas. He comes up with the idea of writing a message to his children announcing his death. The children come to the funeral, and he greets them with the holiday table, on which he was going to sell the products bought from Edeka, and with the message that would break the heart of any child and any person: “How else could I have brought you all together? Mmh?” The highest tension is brought about by the idea of death and its role in bringing us together. It is the one that triggers the empathy and joyful reactions of the children, who end up transforming a possible funeral moment into one of recovery under the force of the joy of being together (Video: Edeka 2015). The funeral rite of passage is replaced by the rites of passage and initiations specific to the experience of the holidays spent together.

When we talk about advertising and existential languages, we find that in addition to the imaginary of death, advertising often builds representations of love. What only partially manage to do the advertising languages that instrumentalize the experience of death, the languages of love successfully manage to do, due to the serenity and lack of drama. Such languages fit very well with the logic of consumer culture. It itself is a promise of fulfillment, love and even rediscovery that we can associate with heavenly states. The logic of the consumer society shows us that „By transforming objects into images, advertising creates ubiquitous symbols as a constant reminder that the culture of consumer capitalism is the institution that most deserves our love and adoration” (Sheffield 2006, 139).

In this culture, the experience of death is transferred from the spiritual, religious register to the biological, psychological and commercial register. An additional understanding of this situation is given by Irvin Yalom's belief that death and life must be seen together as a journey to self in which death turns out to be a fact of life, not a final moment, even if we have always the longing for a transcendence to the ultimate reality. At the same time, death cannot be a last moment of life, although we can establish quite precisely the biological boundary between life and death, as if we were to utter the words of Zarathustra: “Was that life? Well then once again!” (Yalom 2018).

4. Instead of conclusions

If once upon a time death was tamed by games of transcendence in which our religions trained us, the man of everyday spirituality is rather reduced to forms of self-transcendence within a philosophy of life built on the assumption of a symbolic consciousness. Transcendence is rather a cultural and existential game. In the world built in communication, this game is one adapted to media communication, with its resources regarding the creation of meaning and existential meanings. We can notice that one of the mechanisms through which we integrate the theme of death in public communication is that of taming its presence. The persuasion of advertising often has the role of making us more familiar with the realities it brings to our attention, of bringing them closer to the consumer, even when it comes to the desire to bring us into the area of transgressing taboos, such as it would be that of the discussion of death in public communication. The discussion of death in this context could be related to the characteristic recognized by advertising – that of being a factory of desires.

If we take into account the fact that the human being develops at the interference of two main types of desires – those that Freud describes as related to the instinct of life (Eros) and the instinct of death (Thanatos) –

we can accept that the principle of pleasure can diminish tension and discomfort (Freud 1992). Vasile Dem. Zamfirescu showed that "Natural death and all repetitive phenomena in which an unpleasant event is relived ... are subsumed by Freud to the principle of repetition, which corresponds to Thanatos, just as the principle of pleasure corresponds to Eros" (Zamfirescu 1992, 6). Advertising as a factory of desires brings the promise bringing into existence of the principle of pleasure. At the same time, „advertising has reflected the desires of a society that needed more than just facts; it needed hope, love, and security. Many social critics, employing religious language, have described advertising as a kind of “salvific experience,” a “system of magical inducements,” that replaced the declining traditional institutions at the beginning of the twentieth century” (Sheffield 2006, 53). Advertising magic is often associated with authenticity.

In such a field, a reflection on religiosity, occasioned by a meeting between communication and existential themes that also have a deep religious connotation, involves a challenge brought by religious pluralism, which puts us in front of some re-significations of the sacred orientation of contemporary man. He abandoned the confrontation between religious absolutism and his relativism. Whether it is the search for authenticity, the remodeling of the sacred or the marketing of the experience of the sacred, the human being integrates itself into a process that involves a series of metamorphoses of the sacred from the perspective of a spirituality of everyday life. As Tricia Sheffield remarks, „though advertising is not a religion, it has religious dimensions that make it a culturally potent force” (Sheffield 2006, 101). Advertising is not a new religion, but it can benefit from all the experience gained by contemporary man in different contexts, which can be related to both the professionalization of sacred administration and the feeling of freedom brought by living spirituality as a daily fact. The adoption of high-impact themes for the human way of being in the world makes it possible for advertising to be naturally integrated in the construction of new forms of spirituality through which the human condition and the way of positioning man in the world are highlighted.

In the world built on communication, and advertising has a major role in this effort, we find that contemporary human being, lives with intensity, but also with serenity on a double level. On the one hand, it is under the pressure of theologies that have left us the experience of God's death. And, on the other hand, it is under the pressure of the development of communication technologies that led to the establishment of ideologies and philosophies that speak about the experience of man's death as he was thought within the boundaries of traditional representations. The new culture of media communication takes care that to this human being, love and death are returned to it in forms that no longer aim to mobilize it

existentially, but try to persuade it in order to orient itself towards a certain type of consumption.

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Video: Neele Ternes - Dad (Lyrics),
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Video: *Reclama Altex cu Batman*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4z1GKZldpjQ>

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