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ANALYZING MUSIC IN TV SHOWS:¹ SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Abstract. The growing popularity of TV serials (broadly defined as multi-episode TV productions of various character) goes along with the rapidly expanding reputation of music accompanying such shows. We can talk about the international success of several soundtracks. Recognizing this situation, the article prompts undertaking profound studies on music featured in TV shows suggesting analytical procedures embracing three, interdependent perspectives: referring to one episode, to a musical scene/sequence and to the whole serial understood as a cohesive entity. The first approach is of normative character and involves gauging the length of musical fragments versus the length of the episode, measuring how often and determining where musical fragments appear, checking the patterns of their distribution with the episode, etc. We also need to identify characteristic musical (leit) motifs (most specifically the central motif, usually the one opening all episodes) and divide musical fragments into those of diegetic and non-diegetic character. While discussing scenes or sequences with musical components, we focus on musical solutions assessing to what extent they are (a)typical for the whole serial. The third stage involves an attempt to look at music in all episodes as a structural element of the whole serial, as well as is aimed at answering the question concerning the functions which music plays in a particular serial.

¹ In the paper the terms 'show', 'serial' and 'series' are used referring to TV filmic formats with plot spread over several episodes.

The article is deeply rooted in the tradition of Film Musicology making use of its terminology, concepts, definitions as well as analytical tools. The theoretical framework provided in the article is designed as a modest proposal for musicologists and film specialists alike, as well as all those interested in musical and sonic aspects of TV shows, who can also develop their own, methodological approaches to music in TV shows.

Key words: Film music, serials, TV music, analysis.

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АНАЛИЗ МУЗЫКИ В ТЕЛЕВИЗИОННЫХ СЕРИАЛАХ: НЕКОТОРЫЕ МЕТОДОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ СООБРАЖЕНИЯ

Аннотация. Рост популярности телевизионных сериалов сочетается с быстрым распространением известности сопровождающей их музыки. Можно говорить о международном успехе нескольких подобных саундтреков. Исходя из этой ситуации, в статье ставится цель провести академическое исследование музыки телевизионных сериалов, осуществляя анализ с трех взаимообусловленных позиций: по отношению к отдельной серии, к отдельной музыкальной сцене/последовательности сцен, и, наконец, по отношению ко всему сериалу, понимаемому как единое целое. В первом случае анализ носит статистический характер и включает в себя определение времени звучания музыкальных фрагментов относительно длительности серии, фиксацию того, где и когда появляется музыка, как она распределяется внутри серии и т. д. На этом этапе также необходимо обнаружить лейтмотивы (в частности, главный лейтмотив, который обычно звучит в начале каждой серии) и разделить музы-

кальные фрагменты на диегетические и недиегетические. Анализируя отдельные музыкальные сцены, мы фокусируемся на их музыкальных решениях, оценивая, насколько они характерны для всего сериала. Третий этап включает попытку взглянуть на музыку каждой из серий как на структурный элемент сериала в целом, а также ответить на вопрос о функциях, которые выполняет музыка в том или ином сериале.

Автор статьи опирается на устоявшиеся традиции исследования киномузыки, используя сложившуюся терминологию, концепции, определения, а также аналитические приемы. При этом теоретические принципы, представленные в статье, разработаны автором и предлагаются к использованию музыковедам и киноведам, а также всем тем, кто интересуется музыкальными и звуковыми аспектами телевизионных сериалов и способен создать свои собственные методологические подходы к исследованию музыки телеэкрана.

Ключевые слова: Киномузыка, сериалы, телевизионная музыка, анализ.

The growing popularity of TV formats, and especially serials (broadly defined as multi-episode TV productions of different nature/ of different genres) goes along with the rapidly expanding reputation of music that accompanies them. We can talk about the international success of several soundtracks, to mention internationally acclaimed, flag-ship American series of the 1990s—*Twin Peaks* (music by Angelo Badalamenti) or *X-Files* (music by Mark Snow). Despite that recognition, TV serials soundtrack have been less willingly studied than film music composed for the needs of big-budget blockbusters, intended primarily for the distribution in the cinemas. Hence, this article is designed as a methodological proposition how to approach musical layer of TV serials and presents—step by step—what actions need to be taken by the researchers who wish to discuss music in TV serials. This proposition is deeply rooted in the tradition of film musicology—making use of its terminology, concepts, definitions as well as analytical tools.² Nevertheless, it is addressed not only to music

² Although supporting literature on TV shows used for the purpose of this paper is predominantly in Polish, it reflects the current tendencies as observed in the research on serials globally.

undergraduates, or musicologists, but also to film lovers and film researchers interested in musical (and sonic) aspects of TV shows.

I. THE POPULARITY OF TV SHOWS

From the second half of the 20th century we can talk about the expansion of television and its domination over our social and private lives: in that sense, as Zygmunt Bauman rightly pointed out in *Society Under Siege* (2002), the television industry has made one of the most successful conquests in the history of humanity. [1] Despite the growing popularity of computer games or online social media, TV is still eagerly watched. It offers a range of programs including films, also those broadcast regularly and popularly referred to as 'serials'. While TV serials are still comparatively rarely analyzed in the scientific perspective, they continue to be loved by viewers, who sometimes only complain about too many advertisement breaks appearing during their favorite shows. The viewers are impatiently waiting for new episodes of their beloved serials, remaining open to new proposals. Watching shows is considered to be a 'social fact' being a part of everyday practices of millions of people all around the globe. [2, p. 188] Therefore, new formats are still introduced and verified by TV channels, new themes exploited. The diversity of formats and topics seems to accommodate many tastes and is meant to fulfill various expectations. It seems that serials enjoy such a great popularity because they inject an element of regularity into our hectic lives and «in the place of chaos and uncertainty they propose a ready-made and consistent interpretation of the world». [3, p. 78] Undoubtedly another factor that can contribute to the attractiveness of serials is music. Often it features characteristic tunes appearing immediately during the opening credits. These tunes are often remembered long after the first emission of the serial, outliving the popularity of some shows. Hence, it is worth paying attention to the role and importance of film music in such television productions. In the times of the growing popularity of 'cult' serials (e.g. those attracting lots of fans sharing their fascination

over mass-media, etc.) the musical aspect of TV shows should be duly recognized as an important academic research area.

The reception of music in TV productions is a highly complex, distractive process. [4, p. 71] Some theoreticians go as far as to claim that music is not an important part of TV reality: David Bordwell suggests that television viewers do not want to 'feel' but rather 'understand' the narrative they are watching, and emotions caused by music do not belong to that cognitive level. [5, pp. 30–33] Although enriching the production, they are not necessary to understand the plot. However, it seems that well designed music accompaniment can work on such a cognitive level: for example a set of recognizable tunes may carry decipherable meaning which allows viewers to understand the plot better.

The mechanisms employed to decipher the meanings attributed to music follow the same pattern as this described by Bordwell: [musical] hypotheses (i.e. cultural connotations of certain tunes, rhythms, instrumental sounds, etc.) are tested/checked during the show, either confirmed or repudiated. Music can serve as a means of facilitating the reception of the TV show even in different cultural zones, and the worldwide success of some musical tunes known from TV serials proves this thesis. Music in TV shows not only helps popularize the brand commercially, but in fact quite often becomes the hallmark of the entire production, becoming one of the most essential features of TV industry.

II. A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE SPECIFICITY OF MUSIC IN TELEVISION

One of the best known contemporary directors—Steven Spielberg, talking about the phenomenon of *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008) strongly emphasized that its success would be impossible without music by John Williams. Spielberg clearly underlined the intrinsic relationship between music and film saying that “Indiana Jones cannot exist without [his musical] theme. And, of course, that theme would be nothing without Indiana Jones”. [6] This declaration was then commented by the British musicologist

specializing in film music research—Ben Winters, who rightly observed that “it is a statement that few would disagree with, and yet it highlights a potentially troubling issue for film musicology”. [7, p. 224] By the “potentially troubling issue” Winters meant the above mentioned relationship between music and the image—certain reciprocity occurring between them.

The reasons why the links between music and the image especially in TV serials are still insufficiently studied can be connected with the very origins and—consequently—quality of the early TV shows. These were produced by TV companies and appeared as a part of the TV broadcast. [8, p. 139] Their reach was limited because rarely, if ever, were they distributed at cinema-theatres, due to their specific character: initially designed as ‘fillers’ of around 90 up to 120 minutes of broadcasting time, TV films even today are traditionally shorter than films originally intended for cinemas. Additionally, their budget is smaller in comparison with cinematic films and, consequently, in television shows, specific solutions are preferred: for example, close-ups dominate over panoramic views which might reveal the poverty of the set, scarcity of props, etc. Hence, many techniques masking these deficiencies are used, including replays, flashbacks, etc. The low budget affects also the process of production: shows tend to be shot in a certain hurry, sometimes under pressure, which reduces attention to the details. Furthermore, television films often exploit recently popular themes: reacting to the current modes they can become a voice in the discussion about urgent, and socially sensitive, problems. Yet, the action of TV shows tends to be rather slow, full of specific reminders or even repetitions. These films take advantage of the fact that their reception—especially the reception of TV serials—usually takes place at home. The episodes return systematically, as if immediately available (indeed, with the development of the new technology they are even obtainable on request), thus giving the viewers the spurious feeling of control and imposing an element of systematization, even stabilization into their lives.

Historically speaking, so-called television films (television movies, made-for-television films, etc.) appeared first in the United States in the 1950s and already one decade later they competed with cinematic films. The first film considered as a 'proper' TV movie was (lasting 100 minutes) *See How They Run* (1964), directed by David Lowell Rich. Music for this film was composed by Lalo Schifrin—it was one of the first assignments for the composer who was about to begin his long and successful career in film music industry. The same year, the film *The Killers* was made for NBC television, but ultimately—due to its drastic content—it found its way to cinema halls. The music for *The Killers* was composed by John Williams, who—as commonly known— later provided soundtracks to many smashing cinematographic hits. What seems striking though, is the fact that this originally meant for TV film was actually broadcast at the cinemas. It also cannot escape our notice that in both above mentioned cases of TV films the composers employed to provide music actually became successful cinematic composers—these details prove minor differences between so-called TV and cinematic films.

With the development of television not only more and more serials were produced but several sub-genres appeared, so today we even talk about hybridization of television formats. [9, p. 10] As a consequence, TV shows gained many variabilities—we distinguish serials, series, soap operas, telenovelas, sitcoms, etc.³ All of them are accompanied by music, usually original (but also pre-existing

³ The term serial is often treated synonymously with the concept of 'serial film', especially in colloquial language. Serials are usually multi-part productions (the number of episodes is predetermined), presenting consistent story—often screenings of novels are shot as serials. Series, though, should not be identified with a serial as it distinguishes from it in the way it treats each episode as a closed entity, the one that resolves a problem. Similar to series is soap opera: it is also made up of lots of episodes that do not tend to the ultimate resolution of the presented problems. Consequently, soap operas may be broadcast for many years, particular episodes are usually quite short (about half an hour). Just as soap opera (weekly soap), also telenovela (daily soap) is intended to be broadcast for a long time, but it usually focuses on love problems, and is especially widespread in the countries of Latin America. We also distinguish so-called sitcoms (also: sit-coms, i.e. situation comedies), oscillating between the serial and the series, whose most important feature is use of situational humor.

music can be used). The method of composing music for TV shows is not very different from composing for the cinema movies, but if while writing music for the wide screen composers usually watch the completed films and after provide music, in case of TV serials they oftentimes create music following only the cues given by producers commissioning particular musical themes. Composers are often forced to make compromises, giving up some elements of their musical language, exposing other aspects. This approach may—although not necessarily—lead to the multiplication of some musical clichés. Hence, many researchers say that music for TV shows tends to be of mediocre level. At the same time this kind of assessment actually allows us to talk about the music of some TV productions in terms of artistic achievement. [10, p. 179] What seems problematic though, is the very attempt to value music composed for TV shows in terms of its autonomous character since this particular music fulfills certain functions (e.g. co-creating the narrative), not always matching expectations imposed on so-called absolute music. Some authors, like Janet K. Halfyard strongly underline that even the process of writing music for television films differs from writing music for cinema movies. [11, p. 10] Despite obvious discrepancies, this view seems too radical, although Halfyard is right when she notes the lack of archival materials to be studied when analyzing music for TV shows (while there already exist libraries, etc.—especially in Hollywood—with cinema films' scores). And Halfyard aptly emphasizes one more difference between music for cinema and TV films: in the latter, because of the limited budget, the (over)-use of electronics (with the privileged role of the synthesizer since the 1980s) seems significant. Halfyard also underlines technological constrains of listening to music coming from a TV set: small (in comparison with cinematic) built-in speakers cannot guarantee the highest possible quality of sound; instead they rather assure sort of intimacy. This specific privacy of reception Halfyard holds responsible for relatively less (than in cinema films) fragments filled with music in TV shows. [11, p. 12]

III. ANALYSIS OF MUSIC IN THE TV SERIES: METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL

When we think of analyzing music in television films we must remember that the main source of information remains the film itself: we treat it as a so-called *phonographic document*. In film musicology it is widely accepted that musical scores are only auxiliary. Also listening to the soundtracks alone, without images, can be helpful, but neither the scores nor the recordings should be regarded as primary materials. [12, p. 27]

For the needs of analyzing audiovisual works we often resort to the descriptive method. As Maciej Gołąb declares, it is not only “the historical backbone of the analysis in general”, but it also allows to examine both simple and compound structures in a normative way. [13, p. 241] While discussing music in TV shows, we predominantly refer to well established musicological terms such as: theme, leitmotif, musical symbol (and *sinthom*), but also make use of the notions stemming from film studies, including the division of musical layer into diegetic and non-diegetic (so-called background music), or differentiating structural units of a film into episodes, scenes, sequences.

Preliminaries, associated with basic information about the show, include the establishing of the genesis of the script, describing the plot and understanding the general context of the production (for example, whether similar serials were produced at that time, etc.) It is also worthwhile to sketch profiles of the show’s creators—the director(s), the scriptwriter(s), and the composer(s). We also need to specify who was responsible for performing the music, whether it was released in the recorded form, e.g. as an album or perhaps even published as a score.

Further research can be carried out within a larger framework that differentiates between several analytical perspectives determined by their temporality. Therefore, we can distinguish:

- the perspective of an episode,
- the perspective of a scene/sequence,
- the perspective of the whole serial.

The perspective determines research questions and goals, whereby each of these levels of the analysis is characterized by different approaches and analytical tools. In the perspective of an episode we usually undertake normative measurements; in the perspective of a scene, descriptive analysis is preferred; while in the discussion and interpretation of the whole show, we usually venture most speculative and hypothetical statements.

3.1. The perspective of an episode—the starting point for further research—focuses on verifiable data. Here we proceed to the number of seemingly prosaic, yet necessary actions (gauging) in order to:

- determine the length of every episode (counted from the initial credits treated as a starting point, including end credits. The *time code* [e.g. 0:00] is always given in minutes and seconds);
- extract musical fragments, and identify the exact moment of their appearances in every episode;
- measure the duration of each musical fragment;
- calculate the percentage of musical fragments in every episode.

It must be remembered that the same procedure (measuring and describing all musical fragments) needs to be repeated for every single episode. In case of soap operas or sitcoms, etc. with an enormous number of episodes we may, however, decide to analyze a cluster of representative episodes, i.e. the ones that to the best extent illustrate typical strategies used in the musical layer and hence serve as good examples of the musical stylistics applied throughout the serial. For the better clarity all obtained data can be presented in the form of diagrams, tables, graphs, charts, etc. [14, pp. 123–133]

At this stage of the analysis we also need to consider the division into diegetic (being part of the narrative) and non-diegetic (background) music, in both cases identifying the prevailing style, be it romantic, popular, jazzy, etc. and establishing preferred instrumentation.

It is the next step though, that seems of crucial importance for the whole analysis: it involves determining the most distinctive, frequently repeated musical structures which can be tagged as

leitmotifs. While carefully watching and listening we will be able to determine the relation of these musical themes with the images (heroes, objects, or places). What usually characterizes leitmotifs is the specific use of instruments (e.g. in an atypical register), catchy tunes, interesting rhythms (e.g. syncopated, triplets), characteristic harmony (e.g. modal) or other elements. The leitmotif is often defined as «a cohesive and compound distinct gesture that unfolds within the limits of a psychological present». [15, p. 448] As Ruth Hachon and Naphtali Wagner write “each leitmotif contains an inherent semantic content upon which its referential and contextual functions are constructed”. [15, p. 447] Justin London compares the function of leitmotifs with that of people’s names, but—contrary to Hachon and Wagner—he claims that leitmotifs (just like names) are semantically empty (they do not carry specific information), and underlines their referential role. [16, p. 87] Although usually quite short, leitmotifs carry enormous musical potential, hence they are usually easily and quickly remembered by the viewers. Thus the sonic identification of the show is tightly connected with the recognizability of the leitmotifs it introduces. Of seminal importance becomes the musical motif accompanying the opening credits:⁴

it receives the status of the *musical logo* of the show. It may be used as a tool to gain the viewers’ attention, [17, p. 128] and is compared with a specific musical greeting (hailing). [11, p. 45] Also closing motifs—often repeating the opening motifs—cannot be overlooked: together with opening motifs they sonically define the time of the particular episode as if taking it into cognitive brackets. [18, p. 45] For some authors opening and ending motifs are the liminal moments of each episode: Halfyard, for example, stresses that they—in an almost magical way—mark the time of the episode separating the ordinary world and everyday time from the period spent watching the episode. [11, p. 47]

⁴ Instead of the opening motif, there may appear the song, fulfilling the function of the opening motif. Alternatively we may deal with a hybridization of instrumental motif and a song, e.g. in the form of whistling theme or so called vocalise.

When it comes to diegetic music, we need to pay attention to all—usually rather short—fragments which make use of the pre-existing material. While searching for their sources it is advisable to consult the ending credits which usually provide such information. Diegetic music can represent various stylistics (different from non-diegetic), depending on the needs of the plot. We also need to consider whether diegetic music takes over the role of the leitmotif. Moreover, in some cases a distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music is so blurred (even on purpose) that it is almost impossible to determine if we are dealing with diegetic or non-diegetic music, but these rare situations should be carefully examined. [19, pp. 1–25]

Having established the set of most important (or even all) leitmotifs, we turn to identifying *musical symbols* and *sinthoms*. According to Philip Tagg “music is particularly suited to the direct symbolisation and communication of affective states and processes” [20, p. 25] and it can be assumed that some sound effects heard in TV shows actually resume the function of musical symbols. These symbols can be compared with musical gestures or figures that become indispensable elements of the narrative. Such musical symbols denote certain meanings only in specific context, [21, p. 129] and their interpretation is always dependent on that context. Sonic symbols can take on various forms, e.g. identified even with some acoustic effects, not only musical one, because their presence constitutes a part of cinematographic narrative defined as super-reality which “turns towards the direction of anti-art, a withdrawal of the aesthetic away from the beautiful and towards the grain of brute actuality”. [22, p. 32] These ‘brutal’ sound effects exceed the framework of reality as we know it from everyday life. As Michael Filimowicz writes, this super-reality “represents an assault on our senses. At the same time, it can be understood as an increase in the resistance of the Real, a move in the opposite direction of Ideality and will-amplification, pleasure and sensorial access”. [22, p. 32] As a consequence, these musical symbols ‘vectorize’ the direction of our reception, suggesting and prompting, perhaps even determining the

way the viewers watch the episode. However, despite some obvious advantages of introducing musical symbols there are also many doubts concerning their (1) reception and (2) interpretation. Firstly, musical symbols can go unnoticed by viewers as most sonic effects seem so perfectly embedded into the acoustic layer of the shows. Alternatively, they can be interpreted simply as 'environmental sounds'—to use Michel Chion's terminology. [23, pp. 18–19] Secondly, musical symbols are assigned to a variety of functions and their meaning can be either imprecise or exaggerated, because symbols carry the element of mystery, unlike leitmotifs whose identification is unambiguous (via connection with visual elements). But what is even more confusing is the fact that every single viewer can suggest their own interpretation of a given symbol. While recognizing this situation, Slavoj Žižek noted that some effects without carrying such pre-determined meanings may be, nevertheless, endowed with them by the viewer. In other words, these effects can be interpreted as symbols but this symbolic function is not permanently assigned to them. In that case, instead of symbols, Žižek talks about *sinthoms* (after Jacques Lacan). *Sinthoms* remain totally dependent on the interpretation: recognizing them is not necessarily connected with the context of their appearance, but rather with the will of the observer/commentator. Žižek writes that *sinthom* is a kind of 'tick', a repetitive feature that is able to "merely cipher a certain mode of *jouissance* and insist from one to another totality of meaning». [24, p. 98] Thus sonic *sinthoms* not only enrich the musical layer, but also the narrative, adding to the attractiveness of the show by allowing the viewers—introducing their own *sinthoms*—to personalize these productions.

3.2. The role of music in TV shows can be also studied on the example of selected scenes or sequences. The scene can be understood as a basic film unit, consisting of at least one shot; it is characterized by the unity of time, place and action. [25, pp. 12–13; 26, pp. 172–173; 27, p. 21] The sequence includes several consecutive scenes combined by the narrative, sometimes common location or

time. In some cases music plays a constitutive role actively shaping dramaturgy, underlining the sense of continuation (both temporal and geographical) between scenes, as well as emphasizing logical and organic link between the shots. And yet, determining which scene should be examined (as a case study) is not an easy task. Some authors are of an opinion that finding the most representative scenes is most often determined by the researchers' intuition. [28, p. 156] Other criteria include the literature overview, references to the press reviews, following the choices of other viewers as expressed in polls, or in online fora.

It is never futile to ask whether music heard in the selected scene could be different: in other words, we may deliberate upon the cause (why?), and the aim (what for?) of using particular musical solutions in a given scene. At that stage of the analysis the researchers must be especially aware of their methodological limitations (positionality) as they often tend to pay attention to musical–visual associations as determined by their own upbringing, cultural context, and/or idiosyncratic preferences.

3.3. The perspective of the whole show is an attempt to think of all episodes as one—complex as it is—entity. In this holistic approach we assume that the essence of the discussed show can be grasped only by looking at it as a coherent, organic unity. The sum of all principles governing musical fragments appearing in all episodes may prompt final conclusions. The set of these rules creates what Janet Halfyard calls *musical strategy* of a given show. [11, pp. 24–25] While considering all episodes in a simultaneous rather than successive manner their syncretism hidden behind the idea of a cycle can be revealed. [29, p. 7] The term 'cycle' may even become the key term to understand the organization of musical fragments appearing on a given TV show as its very idea refers to the integration on the structural level. [30, pp. 6–9]

Crucial at this stage is also to observe such musical gestures—tunes, rhythms, etc.—which are not only repeated in all episodes, but in fact constitute their sonic aura. Most often they appear already in

the opening theme or song: associated with a given production they act as so-called *sonic saddles*, whose meaning is revealed in their constant discovery. [31, p. 160] However, it is also possible to identify a number of musical themes which appear only once, never re-used again: these are so-called *forgotten motifs or lost motifs*. On top of that, there may exist a number of such musical themes in the diegetic and/or non-diegetic layer that actually re-occur several times, on different occasions, but are not associated with any particular image (hero, place or even situation, feelings). Denied the status of the leitmotif, neither symbols nor sinthoms, they nevertheless prove their tremendous capacity fulfilling the sonic space of numerous fragments. Their exploitation serves as an excellent example of *musical recycling*. [11, p. 19]

At the end of this stage of the analysis it is worth to evaluate the musical layer of the show. For example, we may look at other soundtracks provided by the same composer, or compare given soundtrack with music from other shows directed by the same director. We may be interested in comparing soundtracks in serials from the same time, e.g. dealing with the same topics, etc.

To sum up, this sketch inscribes into the widely observed tendency to appreciate the role of music in films, but advocates studies on music featured in TV films and especially TV shows (serials, series, etc.) These productions not only attract more and more viewers (fans), but also seem to transgress political and cultural borders: soundtracks from so-called 'cult' serials should be treated as co-responsible for their huge commercial success since they are used to advertise these shows all around the globe. This paper presents methodological procedures how to analyze music in TV shows, embracing three, interdependent, discursive perspectives: referring to an episode, to a musical scene/sequence and to the whole serial being a cohesive entity. The theoretical framework provided in the article is designed as a modest proposal for musicologists and film specialists alike, as well as all those

interested in musical and sonic aspects of TV shows, who can also develop their own, individual approaches to music in TV shows.

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