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**PUBLIC LECTURE**

**NORTH OF ENGLAND INSTITUTE OF MINING AND  
MECHANICAL ENGINEERS**

Nov 2009

***'Reality and Mythology: The Ashington  
Group and the Image of the Miner 1935-  
1950'***

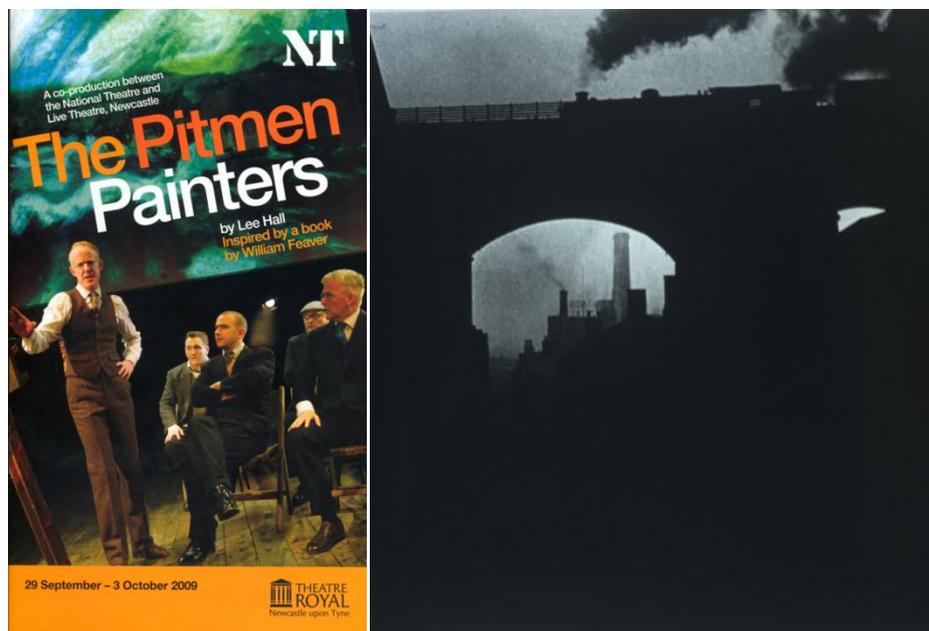
***The primary focus of this lecture is to explore and evaluate the work of the 'Ashington Group' of painters in context and against a backdrop on intellectual intervention, and political and social upheaval in Britain 1930-50.***

The lecture is significant in that it takes place by invitation in an important institution that is regionally, nationally and internationally recognised for its scholarship and major contribution to mining and engineering technology, science and geology, and the care of the regions mining archive. The extension of the lecture programme to include more culturally orientated topics is therefore an important development in the Institute's wider ambitions.

The lecture was structured around the concept that artworks function within systems of knowledge that are historically, socio-economically, politically and culturally located. In other words it is argued that, the paintings by the Ashington miners were not autonomous observations created in isolation, but were expressions that were heavily dependent on and determined by external sources and forces.

## The lecture is structured around the following key elements

- 1/ An introduction to the 'Miner' in a wider context
- 2/ An analysis and evaluation of contextual socio-economic and political background that underpins and frames the emergence of the Ashington Group.
- 3/ The critical role of Documentary Cinema and the film 'Coal Face'
- 4/ The miner as artist and subject – an edited selection of images by the group are highlighted in the text
- 5/ The Ashington Group and their relevance in contemporary culture



## Introduction

The central theme of the lecture is to interrogate and question the present-day significance of the '**Pitmen Painters**' against a backdrop of the popularity and critical acclaim that has been accorded to Lee Hall's play of the same name, which began with a limited regional appeal in Newcastle, but which subsequently went on to huge national and international success with extended runs at the National Theatre, London, and in America on Broadway.

It is easy to take a more romantic view and to think of the '**Ashington Group**' as some far flung aberration in British Naive painting, untainted by the 'art world', painting away merrily after dinner and a bath in between shifts. A group of amateur artists producing closed, inward looking images of their community – images that were private and insular with no meaning other than that depicted, and of relevance

only to themselves or to their kind. However, the 1930s were conditioned from the outset to acknowledge the *'image'* – if not the significance of the worker or working class, and the growing sense of disengagement with the metropolis and the centre. The **'Shell Guide to Northumberland and Durham'** (1937) actually described the town of Ashington as having a population of 40,000 people and who lived in dreary rows a mile long, with ashpits and mines down the middle of still unmade streets.

Art is a very complex subject and paintings can have a multiplicity of meanings – working on many levels both overt and subliminal. Therefore any informed understanding of art must take account of not only the process and production of the images in this study of the works by the **'Ashington Group'**, but also the context that informs the images, the control and consumption of those images then and now, and the audience or audiences' (plural) reception, because *'meaning is not static'*. In other words 'Art' is not an autonomous subject/concept but one that is heavily dependent on and often determined by external sources and forces. In many ways art is governed by expectations – **'Society'** – by conditioning and constraining, and it is these themes that will be explored in the lecture. It might be argued that the image of the miner in the Northern Coalfields actually provides a starting point from which to begin to define a sense or model of Regional authenticity.

## **Context**

Given that mining is no longer a physical reality, and that the coal fields of the North East of England have been flattened and the communities broken up and dispersed, the lecture questioned the relevance of the romanticised portrayal of the **'Ashington Group'** and attempts to provide a more theoretical, analytical and evaluative explanation of the groups significance. It is further argued that the significance of the group was not just through the production of a body of images with insight and integrity but, it is their actual fundamental relevance to context that is vital. The populist image or impression of the group and their work might suggest a cosy, comfortable, unchallenging and unproblematic view of the miner and his community – a closed and insular world far away from the metropolis. However, the lecture contended that the group were highly significant in the late 1930s and 1940s when evaluated within the complex context of the Depression and its aftermath – particularly in the North.

## **The lecture therefore focused on the following themes:-**

The Image of the Colliery

The Formation of the Group

The Miner and Community Above Ground

The Miner At Work

## Domestic and Social Life

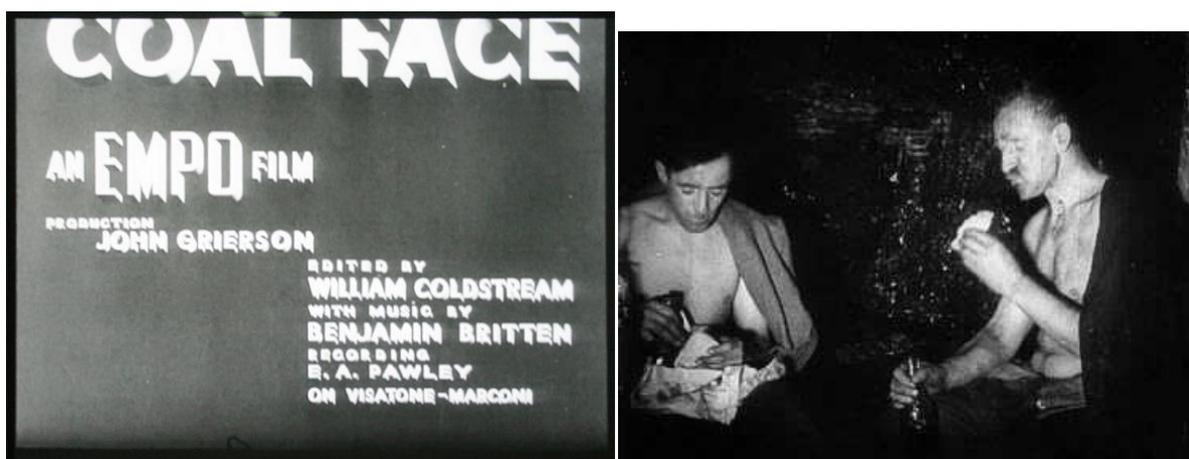
**'Literature and the Great Social Divide'**. Throughout the 1930s literature also supported the concept of an ever increasing social divide between North and South, and the sense of decline and disillusionment, misery and poverty were highlighted in the texts of many authors that were making personal pilgrimages around Britain during the Depression years. J.B. Priestly, in his **'English Journey'** (1934) noted how on crossing the Pennines to explore the North East of England he fully expected the conditions to be bad but was not prepared for what he experienced and found that the conditions far exceeded his grim expectations. George Orwell in his **'Road to Wigan Pier'** similarly recounts a visit to the region and observed that the low standards of health and physique, and the undernourishment were all the visible results of mass unemployment. More intimate accounts of the period such as Walter Greenwood's **'Love on the Dole'** (1933) described in more intensely intimate terms the life of the working class, the effects of unemployment and poverty through a very strong narrative. Whilst Walter Brierley's **'Means Test Man'** highlighted the cruel and inhuman way in which the 'means test' was brought into being as a way of determining if an unemployed man was eligible for dole or, if he should rely on what support the family could provide. It was a situation that resulted in many males being turned out of the family home to find refuge where possible in the growing number of 'doss houses'. Literary examples such as these – notwithstanding their melodramatic tone and sentimentality, nevertheless provided a clarion call and made the de-humanising suffering of the mass unemployed all the more visible.

**'The Role Documentary Cinema in the portrayal of National unity'**. Set up in 1928 as one of a large number of Government initiatives under the auspices of the **Empire Marketing Board**, documentary cinema was initially regarded as a poor relative in the move to be pro-active in promoting **'national'** issues. The primary function of the film unit was to collate and promote information from around the world that made reference to the production, preservation and transport of the Empire's food supplies. Whatever creative ideals the unit may have had they were subservient to the primary concept of explaining the prevailing Government ideology. Possibly of more interest was the fact that it took some of its inspiration from Russian Socialist Revolution cinema which had already developed a method of delivering long range propaganda in an imaginative and creative way. In 1932 the E.M.B. became embroiled in a major controversy that highlighted the issues that inevitably result from being part of a Government institution and therefore, in theory, committed to the ends of the sponsor, and which was to bring the idea of a Commonwealth of Nations alive.

The formation of the **G.P.O. Film Unit** in 1933 brought about a major shift in emphasis and where the focus was now on promoting the merits and benefits of the GPO through an emphasis on connections and links that ultimately were intended to create an image of unity and nation. For the GPO unit therefore, social issues and the need to communicate became fundamental factors in the development of a

vision and aesthetic. Thus we find that the *'human'* factor becomes the favoured conduit through which to present key issues and objectives, and where themes such as *'tough labour'*, *'work and industry'*, *'the skill of craftsmen'*, and the *'toil of the agricultural labourer'* were all to figure prominently. *'Coal Face'*, therefore sits comfortably in this agenda with its emphasis on routine and toil, family, community and comradeship, played out through a series of dramas that evoke the emotional values that underpin existence in the coalfields of Britain. Crucial to the relevance of Documentary Cinema was the fact that if it was to succeed as a method of social propaganda then it was essential that the films were available to the largest audience as possible and so throughout the 1930s they were shown as part of normal commercial cinema programmes. The titles of the films provide evidence of the intellectual and ideological shift that had been taking place and where sociological observation was becoming an increasingly dominant force with subjects such as *'Workers and Jobs'*, *'Enough to Eat'*, and *'Housing Problems'* (all 1935) – which actually used direct interviews with people from the slums of London and heralded a new sensitivity and human dimension to the genre. In *'Night Mail'* 1936, a poetical record of night mail trains travelling for London via Glasgow to Aberdeen presented an intimate observation of the vital role of postal workers and their tasks both on and off the mail train. The film brilliantly juxtaposes the Englishness of the rural with the new reality of modernity as the train makes its way north creating a conceptual bridge across Britain. The complex integration of sound and image with the music of Benjamin Britten and the poetry of W.H.Auden, together with visual sequences that reflect Russian Constructivist ideas, all of which go to make the film a highlight of documentary cinema.

### The impact and Significance of Coal Face 1936



The lecture commenced with a screening of the EMPO Documentary *'Coal Face'*, 1936, produced by John Grierson, directed by Alberto Calvacanti, edited by William Coldstream, with music by Benjamin Britten, and is of 11 minute duration. A range of

important issues and debates emerge from this comparatively short film that all go to foster a stereotypical image of life in the coalfields of Britain. **'Coal Face'** with its clearly articulated propagandist message and image of proletarian struggle was significant not only in socio-political terms, but also for the way in which it presented its image of the **'Miner'** within a **'creative context'**. The overall vision appeared to present the miner –not as individual but as a social grouping that was vital to modern life. Toil therefore is not only essential to the nation's progress but is presented as heroic with images of work underground dominating. Curiously set against a creative backdrop of poetry and music the ongoing discussion is about work and the life of the **'community'** being dominated by the **'Pit'** that ultimately creates a sense of interaction beyond the normal and where there is a **'total'** inter-relationship between all activities. It is a film that also appears to clearly define the roles of men – work, and women – home.

More fundamentally it can be argued that **'Coal Face'** had a dual agenda in that it presented an image of the 'Miner' as being vital to Britain – supplying coal for industry, homes, electricity and export, and played a crucial role in an ever developing nation where **Regional Identity** was to be championed. However, it is the contention of this lecture that such an iconography must be seen and tested against a socio-economic and political context that takes cognisance of the major events and situation that had come to characterize the period 1930-36 and which brought the plight of the working class and sense of disconnection between the North and the South more clearly into focus. The Depression years 1929-33, the staggering unemployment figure in 1932 of 3 ¾ million, and the iconic Jarrow March of 1936, all proved to be significant historic landmarks. Thus we find that the Region was firmly on the national 'political map' through images of workers, class struggle, poverty, unemployment, means test man, and **'Miners'**.



Jarrow March 1936

It is therefore important to be aware of the cultural and political importance of cinema as a major vehicle for propaganda, providing an ideal space and opportunity to **'educate the public'** through films such as **'Housing Problems'**, (the now iconic) **'Night Mail'**, and **'North Sea Drifters'**, all in different ways presenting an image in which the worker and the idea of community are central.

### **The Professional Artists View of the Working – Industrial Class in the 1930s:-**

**The Euston Road School** was founded in 1937 in Euston Road, London. Included in the group were William Coldstream, Victor Pasmore, Graham Bell, Lawrence Gowing, Claude Rogers and Rodrigo Monyhan. Despite its brief existence, the 'School' had a significant influence on many British painters with its emphasis on carefully **'subdued naturalism'**. The painting philosophy was to paint what was there in front of the artist and not to become preoccupied with theory and the dominant influence of the 'School of Paris'. To this end their work reflected a conscious reaction against and rejection of avant-garde styles such as the **'reductivist language of abstraction'** with its inherent limitations, and asserted the importance of painting traditional subjects and the commonplace in a **'realist manner'**. More importantly, this attitude was based on a political agenda that set out to create a widely understandable and **'socially relevant'** art – though the works were not specifically propagandist in the manner of Socialist Realism. Although the group was short lived, it came to stand for a kind of realism with its essence being the belief that everyday life is still an interesting a valid subject for art. This emphasis on working class and the link between art and community – the observation of the everyday and commonplace was undoubtedly important and significant in British art practice at the time, but for the purist it was professional, metropolitan and therefore inauthentic, **'the outsider looking in'**.

**'Mass Observation'** The Ashington Group came to the attention of Mass Observation through a review in **The Listener** of the group's first exhibition at the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle in 1938 . Founded in 1937, Mass Observation promoted a kind of intellectual anthropology where the key objective was to observe and record the lives of 'ordinary' people, and where every facet and aspect was important and relevant. The group were to prove an ideal subject and provided a timely case study that had at its centre the concept of **'authenticity'**.

### **The Image of Coal**



There were a number of cultural developments taking place in the visual arts during the 1930s, and it is arguably in these events that we can find a logic to the success of the Ashington Group, and an explanation that locates them within a specific mode of cultural practice. They were known variously as '**Amateur Painters**' or '**Unprofessional Painters**' in the regional and national press and other forms of media including journals, radio and television – the key point here being they were known and discussed throughout the period under review.

Art is inevitably shaped by the culture and events of the time in which it is produced, and the socio-economic and political events of the late 1920s and 1930s did not escape intellectual evaluation and analysis. The emergence of Marxism was to have a major impact as can be discerned in the comments of the art historian Anth who recalled the 1930s as being at the beginning of a new epoch, declaring that –

“.....quite suddenly, in the autumn term of 1933, Marxism hit Cambridge.....I found that almost all my younger friends had become Marxists and joined the Communist Party: and Cambridge was literally transformed overnight. The new ideas involved a complete reversal of everything we had held before. Art for Art's Sake, Pure Form, went by the board totally. We believed on the contrary, that art was a human activity, that works were created by men, that men were human beings, that human beings lived in society, and that society was influenced by social conditions. And this meant a reformulation not only of our theories but also our judgements on individual artists”.

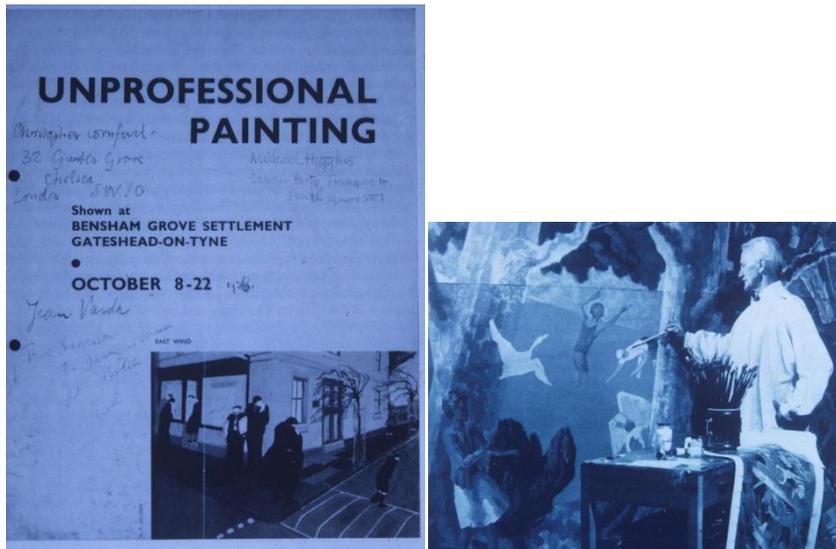
Thus we can recognize that there was a specific awakening by artists and intellectuals in England to a new Marxist tradition and the fundamental importance of society as a concept. Other discernable symptoms of this emerging social awareness in the arts can be seen in the formation of the **Artists International Association** in 1933, the publication of the **Left Review** in 1934, and the impact of the pitched battles at Olympia between members of the British Union of Fascists and their political opponents which provoked outrage and much debate in cultured circles.



### **The Group in London 1936**

The backdrop to the emergence of the '**Ashington Group**' or 'Pitmen Painters' in the mid 1930s is fascinating for the way in which it feeds off and into a wide range of

socio-economic, political and cultural debates that dominated the decade. Crucially, the group were formed at a time when the way information was presented was dramatically changing through the development of mass public democracy where education and information were becoming prominent issues. The rise in mass circulation information via the press, radio and cinema also went to generate greater levels of participation in public awareness, discussion and debate, and was further supported by an acceptance of a new emphasis on 'public relations' and advertising as fully legitimate vehicles for the discussion of ideas and ideologies that dominated the agenda.



### Robert Lyons

The groups origins can be traced back to 1934 and a series of evening classes in **Art Appreciation** that were being delivered under the auspices of the W.E.A. by Robert Lyons – a lecturer in Fine Art at Armstrong College, Newcastle, and where in a sense they can be seen as the real disciples of Ruskin and Morris – both of whom during the latter part of the nineteenth century had argued for the education of the artisan through art and culture. In 1935, Lyons described and evaluated the way in which the sessions provided an opportunity to engage with art theory through practical engagement in an article for *The Listener* titled – '**An Experiment in Art Appreciation**'. Of vital significance here is the fact that this was a middle-class magazine with an audience that included many of the cultured intelligentsia, and presented the group for critical debate within a national forum.



**The Listener – ‘An Experiment in Art Appreciation’**

The early works from the evening class tended to suggest subjects that were typical of the art school syllabus, and would most certainly have engaged the group in the history of art and the different stylistic movements. However, perusal of the early exhibition list seems to argue that such an approach had been short lived and had been replaced by a systematic portrayal of Ashington life, and a reflection on their own, individual experiences. In that sense it could be argued that they were true exponents of a **‘proletarian art’**.

Within a few years the Ashington Group had produced a body of work that was to provide a complete visual account of what life was about and looked like in their specific community. Themes highlighting and exploring the many facets of the miner’s daily routine such as clocking in, looking after the ponies underground, pithead baths, and most importantly – working at the actual coal face. Life in the streets that were part of the colliery infrastructure also featured prominently, whilst images of everyday leisure that included nights at the club, dominoes, allotments, pigeons and football all provided a unique insight into the mining community for the interested viewer and academic. The role of women also figures prominently in the group’s output and where the emphasis resides emphatically in and around the home with topics such as spring cleaning, shopping, making proggy mats, kitchen work, all being represented.

The actual lack of an academic training and skills in composition was an undoubted advantage and actually engaged viewers and critics in a positive way, reinforcing the view that they actually not only understood their environment – both above and below ground but intuitively responded to their situation without fear of aesthetic ideals and concerns. In effect their knowledge and physical experience of work down the mine provided them with a familiarity and a real connection that was totally unique and outwith the existence of the vast majority. The intuitive sense of cramped space in which massive forms toil at the coalface are intelligent, informed and

challenging, and are the result of years of association with subterranean labour and the shared values and intense loyalty of men who make a living from such a dangerous occupation – working to their own rules and agenda, and where objective accuracy was not a fundamental concern.

The first exhibition of works by the Ashington Group was held in November 1936 – not in their home town and mining environment but, in the Hatton Gallery in Armstrong College, now part of the University of Newcastle. A phenomenal 97 paintings were on show, and the venue appeared to confer a special and dignified status on the group through their images of comradeship and community support.

### The Miner at the Pit and in the Community



### The Coal Face





**The Domestic View and Leisure**



In 1936, the group visited the Tate Gallery in London and were given a guided tour by the then Director Jim Ede. Harry Wilson, an important founder member of the group, in an early television interview from 1938 outlined the underlying sense of community spirit, commenting that-

“One thing about Ashington, there is very little class snobbishness or distinction. You can make an error or a mess of things and still be accepted as a reasonable person”.

Such statements that captured the essence of community presented through the mass media all went toward creating an image that fascinated cultured society, and where mining was almost dignified through art.

**To return to the question of were they an isolated phenomenon or part of a wider movement or cultural agenda?**

*The lecture concluded* by arguing that the work of the ‘**Pitmen Painters**’ from Ashington is very important and was deemed to be so in the late 1930s by the middle class intellectuals of Mass Observation who found that the work of the group actually supported their belief in the validity of the quest for regional authenticity. The pitmen were the ‘**subject matter**’ and the ‘**means of production**’, and thus they were the total experience of the sociological situation.

What is the ‘**substance**’ or ‘**mythology**’ – what really was and is their significance. What will this iconography suggest to a ‘new’ audience and what will that audience expect. That they were not an isolated regional phenomenon untouched by art and culture is obvious. Articles in *The Listener*, press reviews, television interviews, exhibitions, and catalogues all suggest a significant body of peer review, suggesting that education, culture and community were all doing well in the region during the turbulence of the 1930s and 1940s.

The legacy – what is the significance? Lee Hall’s play obviously strikes a chord with national as well as regional audiences, together with the celebration of miner turned artist Norman Cornish at 90, and the multi million pound development of the Woodhorn Colliery Museum. But what is this replacing? Mining is no longer a visible and physical reality, it has vanished as a vital element in the lives and experiences of the people who once made the coalfields, and where the concept of ‘**society**’ was central to their existence and provided a model of comradeship that the rest of the nation could learn from. Vast areas where pit heaps dominated the landscape have been flattened since the political turmoil of the 1984/85 miner’s strike and where communities have been broken up, destroyed, moved or entirely cleared, ultimately leaving a strong sense of betrayal in some quarters. The challenge set by the then Prime Minister, **Magaret Thatcher** that “There was no such thing as society”, first outlined in ‘*Woman’s Own Magazine*’ in 1987 was a chilling reminder of the bitter legacy of the political struggle of the previous years.

Thatcher's comments were revisited when John Major replaced her as Prime Minister in 1990 and he made the following telling observation that appeared to mark a significant shift in political thinking, observing that -

“Some people tend to see individualism and social responsibility as mutually exclusive. We make no such mistake. Individual excellence and achievement are the key to the vitality of any community.....But the individual achieves his or her full identity in families, clubs, in schools, in churches, in enterprises, in public services”

However the political past is analysed and evaluated what is clear is that the Ashington Group paintings now act as iconic references of an authentic, regional golden age of community and society – of a shared experience and give legitimacy to a society searching for roots and traditional values in a world that is individualistic, high-tec and global.



**Woodhorn Colliery Museum**      **Union Banner**

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