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The Muppets in Search of an Audience: A Theory of Learning How to be Human

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**The Muppets in Search of an Audience:
A Theory of Learning How to be Human**

A Thesis
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of English

by
Stuart Harding
May, 1993

Michael Opitz, advisor

**The Muppets in Search of an Audience:
A Theory of Learning How to be Human**

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Introduction

This paper is an exploration—a journey which, at every divergence, seeks out intellectual roads less travelled. At points it sings “Movin’ right along,” just when it seems it should stay and tarry to let the wandering mind search through the underbrush for yet another, even less travelled path. It is a trip through a place near the lunatic fringe, where time, history, logic and consciousness are all jumbled up, and it’s amazing that any communication occurs there at all. In such a place, we need certain stabilities to cling onto, and certain guides to lead us along the perilous trail. For my stabilities I have chosen the muppets, Jim Henson’s puppet creations which have by now spanned a generation of children’s television education and entertainment. For my guide I have chosen Gregory Bateson, a scientifically inclined humanitarian who carefully examines the processes of the mind in an effort to leave us with a healthier outlook on the world (healthier, at least, than the type of thinking which has led to war and pollution).

It is a journey for lovers and dreamers, for people who want to get a closer look at themselves and their historical identity—who somewhere deep inside believe in a “rainbow connection.” Oriental mysticism and New Age bookstores carry the most colorful descriptions of this state of being and how to get there, but Bateson calls it simply “ecology of mind.” And as far as getting us there, Bateson is a good guide to have for this project: he may not always tell where the path is, but he teaches how to recognize where the path is not, and he quickly corrals digressions which lead down the crowded, well-worn trails. It’s good to have the muppets to cling to, as well, because no matter how wrapped up we become in the details, they are around to simplify

and satirize the goings on, and they provide hope with their eternal sing-song, "Someday we'll find it..."

Since I am reading Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* so extensively for this project, I thought I would model the introduction to my paper after the Introduction to his book, an essay called "The Science of Mind and Order." Bateson says immediately that the title of his book is meant to be a definition of its contents. He goes through each of the principle words in the title, in reverse, expounding upon what each is, and what they mean together in his understanding. "Mind" is a term used to collectively define ideas and "aggregates of ideas" (Bateson xv), which are more holistically thought about in terms of "ecology." An "ecology of mind" is a way to think about the world as we perceive it—it is what might be called an "epistemology." The "Steps" portion refers to Bateson's perception of certain delineating moments in his own study which serve as "points of reference from which new scientific territory can be defined" (Bateson xvi). All together, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* is a chronological ordering of Bateson's essays, lectures and thoughts which contribute to an understanding of not only all of his other works, but also provide a model to think about everything else. Everything else, in Bateson's words, is

the bilateral symmetry of an animal, the patterned arrangement of leaves on a plant, the escalation of an armaments race, the processes of courtship, the nature of play, the grammar of a sentence, the mystery of biological evolution and the contemporary crises in man's relationship to his environment...
(Bateson xv).

These "everything elses" are just to name a few.

I thought this notion of title-defining-contents true with my paper as well. What we learn when we learn to be human is how to code and decode

language and ideas more effectively and efficiently. In our school days, we begin to learn to communicate and think clearly this way, to manipulate the signs and tools with which we express ourselves. These pages hold my impressions about how we learn to do this. From the outset, we should accept that most communication and thinking goes on sub- or unconsciously, and that—perhaps to a higher degree—learning to think and communicate does too. That is, we are not at any time completely aware of what we are learning, especially when we are learning to learn. And because of the nature of the unconscious mind, it is not easy to get at the root of these processes. Put simply, the process of the unconscious mind is coded quite differently than the process of consciousness, and translation between the two is at least difficult, if not impossible under ordinary circumstances. Ostensibly the muppets, especially from the *Sesame Street* set, teach us to do these things—to think and speak and write and listen carefully and accurately. And then perhaps there is another level of teaching and learning which we would hope happens, a level which deals with the notion of attitudes, morals and ethics and “proper” behavior.

To take it a step further, I will try to take an ecological approach, as I understand it—that is, look at how the whole system works, of a person (or audience) watching the muppets on television and receiving didactic messages while also being entertained. There is a whole dynamic, a whole system, to account for when we talk of learning like this. The mind operates mysteriously, and it takes careful discussion of things such as consciousness and levels of consciousness, and the dynamism between these levels, before we can have a good idea of what really happens when we engage in a learning adventure which mandates screen-watching and suspension of disbelief. To facilitate this careful discussion, I am employing a cybernetic model, as does

Bateson—that is, metaphorically think of the mind as a self-corrective, autocatalytic system.

Bateson is one of the foremost thinkers in this genre of ecological cybernetics. It is a science that Bateson himself proclaims “does not yet exist as an organized body of theory or knowledge” (Bateson xv). It seems, in my study of this unorganized body of knowledge and theory, that if it were defined, codified, doctrinized or otherwise “organized,” it would fall into its own deconstructive trap. It would become, as Bateson’s student Mark Engel says in the Preface to *Steps*, one of those “ready-made systems of belief” and all who followed it would “lose the chance to do some truly creative thinking” (Bateson viii). So in an effort to add to “all this muddle,” as Bateson might say, that is, illuminate his ideas without trying to codify them, I am embarking on a paper which I hope will introduce the reader to this type of theorizing. Specifically, I would like to explore the effects of the violation of logical typing—that is, the creation of paradox—on audiences; explain and demonstrate symptoms of our epistemological deficiencies which, once recognized as deficiencies, we can overcome through “ecology of mind;” pursue intellectual discussion of what it means to have a profound spiritual experience, and the closely related issue of the visionary state.

The most evident question about this exercise is, how can Bateson help us read literature, or think about a play, or view a film? Bateson is concerned with the health of the human mind—not just individuals thinking creatively and productively, and not just a society or a culture doing so, but the whole of humankind evolving intellectually, biologically, ecologically. He offers us a way to ask about the overall experience of being human (or of human being). To do this, he elaborates on the nature of relationship, and articulates ways we can think about the contexts of our relationships. Any

student of communication will tell you that in order for communication to take place, there must be a given set of elements: a sender, a receiver, a message, a medium and a context of relationship among all of the previous four. This relationship can be called "epistemology" or world-view. What Bateson does is to probe the nature of that context, and articulate for us relationships that normally remain implicit. It is by examining those parts of our lives which remain implicit that we can more appreciatively engage in life and in art, whether it be performance, literary or visual (or any other form of expression which I may be leaving out).

This is not the same sort of attempt that Freud made to "articulate for us relationships that normally remain implicit." Bateson's problem with Freud's theories is that the psychoanalyst assumes, as does mainstream Western thought, that "it would be somehow better if what is unconscious were made conscious" (Bateson 136). In "Style, Grace and Information in Primitive Art," Bateson argues that this process is backwards, or somehow upside down. He spends the first half of this essay trying to prove that most premises of human communication ("mammalian interaction," in his words) are not easily accessible to the conscious mind. He does so by using examples from everyday instances of communication:

Consider the case in which I say to you "It's raining," and you guess that if you look out the window you will see raindrops.... Only if you know the language and have some trust in my veracity will you be able to make a guess about the raindrops. In fact, few people in this situation restrain themselves from seemingly duplicating their information by looking out of the window. We like to prove that our guesses are right, and that our friends are honest. Still more important,

*we like to test or verify the correctness of our view of
our relationship to others*
(Bateson 132).¹

His point is that we don't normally think about testing "our view of our relationship to others," it is something that happens at a different level of consciousness—approximately the same level that Freud would have brought to the forefront of consciousness. Freud's desire to somehow obtain more conscious control of the unconscious mind was seemingly instrumental; that is, he thought that this unconscious-brought-to-consciousness would shine much light on human behavior and psychology. However, Bateson insists that the mind works toward "an economy of both thought and consciousness," and that Freud's notion of bringing so-called repressed thoughts to the surface is born out of "an almost totally distorted epistemology and a totally distorted view of what sort of thing a man, or any other organism, is" (Bateson 136).

These are rather strong accusations, but I don't think that Bateson considers the works of Freud and his followers as useless, or stupid, or without merit. In fact, I think Bateson has a deep appreciation for the evolution of ideas and knowledge. But the problem with traditional psychoanalysis and sciences of the mind in general is deep-rooted. It began when they (Freud, Jung, et. al.) first decided to use language of the physical sciences, dealing with energy and matter, and (metaphorically) apply said language and laws to the mental processes of communication, thought, ideas and so on. If we think about the make-up of things versus the order of the same things, we come to Bateson's accusations of his psychoanalyst colleagues—that "they have tried to build the bridge [of understanding the human

¹ This paragraph is extrapolated from Bateson's discussion of "slash marks" across sets of information in which one piece of information gives clues and facilitates accurate guessing of a companion piece of information. Italics are Bateson's.

mind] to the wrong half of the ancient dichotomy between form and substance. The conservative laws for energy and matter concern substance rather than form. But mental process, ideas, communication, organization, differentiation, pattern and so on, are matters of form rather than substance" (Bateson xxv).

We can begin to apply these theories to performance art such as theater and movies by recognizing parallels in them. The sender, for instance, is comparable to the actors, although we must consider many parts of the "sender" which are outside of the actors, such as incidental music and signs (in the conventional sense of billboards or road signs). The receiver would correlate to the audience in theater or movies. The message is the overall meaning or idea of the piece. In terms of literary criticism, it might be called the theme or moral of the story. This idea/theme/moral is conveyed within the medium—it is dependent upon the form of performance art in question. The difference between a play and a movie which uses the same play as the basis for its screenplay, for instance, would be a good example. The fact that one medium requires the actor and the audience—the sender and the receiver—to be present at a common time and place and the other medium doesn't changes the message which is involved. The relationship evident among those elements is the shared epistemology; that is, the performers and the audience are consciously aware of a common world-view, which is usually being either challenged or reified by the piece in question. By examining that relationship, we are given opportunity to articulate aspects of that epistemology. In Bateson's case, these "aspects" are usually called "deficiencies," and his subject matter is Western thought.

"If I am right," Bateson writes in "Form, Substance and Difference" about these articulations of epistemological deficiencies, "the whole of our thinking

about what we are and about what other people are has got to be restructured” (Bateson 462). For Bateson, human behaviors like torture, coercion, exploitation—violence in general—are symptoms of our misled, deficient understanding of our experience of ourselves and of other people in the world.

If you put God outside and set him vis-a-vis his creation and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you. And as you arrogate all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical consideration. The environment will seem to be yours to exploit. Your survival unit will be you and your folks or conspecifics against the environment or other social units, other races and the brutes and vegetables (Bateson 462).²

Regardless of one’s particular religious stance, we cannot deny that we live in a culture and carry a world-view that puts oil and rivers, and by default sea-otters and spotted owls, outside of ourselves and not subject to “moral and ethical considerations.” Bateson never claims, nor do I, that we can easily make a change and think in a way which is, in Bateson’s understanding, more sane. In order to say it, though, we must believe that it is possible, even though we know that we do not know how to think this way.

Bateson speaks with urgency about how we must soon make these changes, or else we will commit geno-suicide. Because we have advanced abilities to affect our environment, and because of our current understanding of our relation to that environment, we end up destroying that part of our survival-circuit from whence we came—the Earth. Our chances of survival,

² Bateson contends that Darwin’s “unit of survival” in his “survival of the fittest” concept was mistaken. We cannot separate the organism from its environment when we speak of the survival unit, according to Bateson. This organism-plus-environment is what is termed “mind.”

in Bateson's words, are that of a snowball's in hell: "[We] will die either of the toxic by-products of [our] own hate, or, simply, of overpopulation and overgrazing. The raw materials of the world are finite" (Bateson 462).

My assertion is that this necessary change is a process of becoming "more human." We must reach toward this goal of extending our "humanness" or "humanity" outward to the rocks and plants and puppets so that they can be worthy of our "moral and ethical consideration." As it is, we are not even able to extend our humanity to all humans. And as Bateson points out, when we identify individuals who demonstrate that they cannot give humane consideration to any other person in the world, we call them "psychotic." It is from this language of psychiatry and psychology that Bateson chooses his adjectives to describe the condition of Western epistemology—"insane" is his word of preference. So Bateson tries to show us the dilemma of our epistemological insanity in an effort to help us become more sane. But as I pointed out earlier, Bateson is concerned with much more than individual psychoanalysis or psychiatry—rather, he is concerned with human discourse and the world-view it engenders; what he calls mind.

I assert also that Jim Henson and his muppets lead us on a journey of becoming "more human," and many of the same sentiments and attitudes about society, human communication, and the environment are shared between he and Bateson. But Henson is aiming toward an audience which may actually be capable of making the changes that Bateson talks about. Children are our only real hope in this matter, and I believe that Bateson would agree. Henson has created a world of muppets which not only shows us the problems and insanities within our epistemology, but also comes close to describing and portraying an ideal one. With this paper I hope to show how we can get into Bateson's thought through certain windows of

opportunity provided by *The Muppet Movie*, and how we can better understand the film using the works of Bateson. This is a complicated issue, and I hope that the impression I leave is more powerful than the exposition I give.

•••

The Bread and Butter of Bateson

The use of children's literature to help explain Bateson is not without precedent. In fact, Bateson himself alludes to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* to help him explain what amounts to nearly a decade worth of psychiatric work about the nature of schizophrenia. Bateson's well-known theory is called the double bind. Chapters of *Steps* are devoted to this notion, but I will attempt to explain it in a few paragraphs.³ It should be made clear that what Bateson termed "schizophrenia" may not be the same condition which is called "schizophrenia" today. Bateson was using the term to label certain empirically gathered behavioral data, specifically the nature of communication in people who demonstrated symptoms of "schizophrenia."

The double bind theory begins with the recognition that the mental condition which we call schizophrenia is actually a problem that the individual has in his or her ability to discriminate between differing levels of communication. And this is a condition that can be created by the environment—specifically the family and even more specifically by the parents. There are three necessary elements of a double bind: an initial

³ These chapters are: "Epidemiology of a Schizophrenia," 1955; "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia," 1956; "The Group Dynamics of Schizophrenia," 1960; "Minimal Requirements for a Theory of Schizophrenia," 1959; and culminates in "Double Bind, 1969," 1969.

command, or order, or idea expressed; a second command or idea expressed which blurs the communicational context of the initial injunction, thereby contradicting it; and a third, which prevents the victim from leaving or discussing (thereby rectifying) the situation. The double bind theory states that the victim, stuck in a lose/lose situation, learns to respond to the injunctions in such a way as to further blur the logical meaning of his or her messages. As this practice continues, through childhood for instance, it becomes ingrained and becomes, in the end, the personality and normal response of the victim to any situation, threatening or not (Reiber 4-5). Hence, we get schizophrenia.

To clarify, Bateson invokes Carroll's "bread-and-butter fly," an imaginary creature which has wings made of bread and butter and a body made of sugar. Its only source of sustenance is warm tea—it can't eat or drink anything else. If it does not drink the tea, it will starve, and it will die. If it drinks the tea, its body of sugar will dissolve, and it will die. It is trapped in a double bind—either way it loses. However, since the bread-and-butter fly is not schizophrenic, we cannot continue the example further to explain its response. R.W. Reiber says it well in the beginning of his essay called "In Search of the Impertinent Question:"

Bateson has taken concepts from ethnology (schismogenesis), logic (logical types), ethology (those ofters and the play of mammals generally), and used them to generate a psychiatric hypothesis about specific, etiologically important, modes of interpersonal communication that could be empirically verified. And the theory was finally exemplified, once the ensuing discussion became confused, with a fantasy creature from *Through the Looking Glass* (Reiber 9).

An important point is made here by Bateson's allusion to the children's story—that we must continually look for new ways to approach ideas, and

any new method of doing so, even if far-fetched, is worthy of some investigation. After all, in Reiber's words again, the only things which lead to productive, innovative thought are:

creativity, or exposure to novelty, or a combination of the two. But this is the exception, not the rule. The trick is to be constantly on the lookout, as Bateson was, for possible intellectual spurs to thinking in new ways—the difference that makes a difference—but neither creativity nor fresh experience can be planned, and they do not readily lend themselves to budget proposals and the like. Nor does a career based on trying out new things readily lend itself to academic tenure or research grants (Reiber 2).

Reiber appreciates the difficulties of “selling” this sort of thought, but seems to share Bateson's sentiment that the value of this type of thinking far outweighs the approval or disapproval of mainstream academia.

This is one of the principle attractions that I had to the works of Bateson—he was never reluctant to look at something from an unorthodox perspective. And his organization of thought seems to flow like an open discussion about life, in which perennial issues, although hard to define, resurface—after long digressions—in a different, sometimes clearer, light. One moment, it seems, he is talking about metacommunication and logic, the next he is talking of dolphins and play, the next he is talking about the artistic endeavors of Vincent van Gogh. And all of it is interesting.

The notion of levels of ideas and communication has been brought up in the discussion of the double bind, and perhaps I should clarify. Basically, much of what Bateson theorizes derives from Bertrand Russell's Theory of Logical Types, which is a fundamental rule in formal logic and mathematics. The theory asserts that *a class cannot be a member of itself*. That is, once we theoretically lump a number of things together, and label the collective, that

label of the collective cannot be a part of the collective, for it becomes part of an even larger collective—a collective of labels. A class is at a higher level of abstraction, of logical type, than the things classified. Charles Hampden-Turner, a genius at compiling thought about systems theory and “the mind,” is able to say it in two sentences: that “objects within a class—say, several different kinds of chair—and the class itself—‘all chairs’—are at different levels of logical type. A class cannot be a member of itself, so that ‘all chairs’ is at a level above ‘chairs 1, 2, 3 and 4’” (Hampden-Turner 142). Further, if the Theory of Logical Types is violated, a paradox ensues and the entire discourse which led to the paradox is nullified. In Bateson’s words:

The theory, then, deals with highly abstract matters and was first derived within the abstract world of logic. In that world, when a train of propositions can be shown to generate a paradox, the entire structure of axioms, theorems, etc., involved in generating that paradox is thereby negated and reduced to nothing. It is as if it had never been. But in the real world (or at least our descriptions of it) there is always time, and nothing which has been can ever be totally negated this way (Bateson 280-281).

We in the real world, then, must learn to accept and deal with a paradox when we come across one. When this happens, we look for malfunctions or fiction somewhere—either in the sender of the paradoxical message or in ourselves, our reception of it. In any case, we intellectually bracket paradox, and consciously refuse to get caught up in its never-ending loop.

Bateson uses this theory extensively in his ideas about communication and learning, especially in the chapters “A Theory of Play and Fantasy” and “The Logical Categories of Learning and Communication,” and it is central to his theory of the double bind. But what he demonstrates is that “it would be bad natural history to expect the mental processes and communicative habits

of mammals to conform to the logicians' ideal" (Bateson 180). The ideal, of course, is a discourse which never violates logical typing—the veritable "Universal Equation," reduced to a digital, quantifiable and qualifiable set of reproducible (in controlled environments) codes, with no hint of or room for ambiguity.

Ambiguity, though, is nearly synonymous with "double meaning," which in turn, by not too far of a stretch, seems to define "metaphor." And, as I hope to show later, metaphor is one of the purest expressions of mind. Bateson says that "human verbal communication can operate and always does operate at many contrasting levels of abstraction" (Bateson 177-178). That is, we have words and language about things, and we have words and language about words and language. In the former case, the subject matter is the real world. Alfred Korzybski is credited with articulating this theory the best: that the language/real world relationship is the same as the map/territory relationship, and it is important that one not be mistaken for the other. Just as certain differences in the territory get represented on the map, such as political boundaries, topographical changes or climate differences, certain differences in the real world object(s) get represented in language. In the latter case, our words and language about words and language, the subject matter ranges from the metalinguistic to the metacommunicative.⁴ If our talk is on the level of the metalinguistic, we are talking about the language, such as when we say "The word 'cat' has no fur and cannot scratch" (Bateson 178). When our talk is metacommunicative, we are talking about our relationship, such as when we tease or joke by throwing a false punch. The metacommunicative message is, "This is play," while the

⁴ Bateson's most complete and most clear comments about metalinguistic and metacommunicative communication appear in "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," 1954.

actual words may be "I'm going to tie you in a knot!" One can begin to imagine what happens in the real world when the metacommunicative message is lost—suddenly play becomes real battle and the nature of the situation has changed drastically.

My questions center around what happens inside the head of an audience member when a violation of logical type is created in the narrative or in the dialogue. Sometimes we ignore it; usually we laugh and dismiss it from our conscious mind as being absurd. This is interesting, because we have already agreed to suspend our disbelief, when for instance we watch a movie. I think we as adults don't truly suspend our disbelief—it is more like a conscious recognition of the fictional nature of whatever it is we are watching. Once we have recognized this, we then agree to participate to a degree, but we never really forget that the narrative is fiction. Thus, when we witness a paradox in the fiction, we retract our suspension of disbelief long enough to consciously remember we are watching a movie, a piece of fiction. But before I can develop my ideas about what the audience really experiences when watching something like *The Muppet Movie*, I need to explicate the film and the nature of the muppets themselves. We have many perceptions and assumptions about the muppets which we take for granted. It is necessary to bring these somewhat to light in order to better understand what it takes to suspend our disbelief while watching the muppets, and—with hope—to demonstrate that this "suspension" occurs at an unexpectedly deep layer of consciousness (or unconsciousness).

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The Nature of Muppet

The world of the muppets seems to have but one boundary—the screen. This is not to question the authenticity of the myriad publications which include the muppets as characters, but the muppets began on television and are forever secured behind the TV and movie screens. Children's books, magazines and other materials with and about the muppets are comparable, I think, to *Charlie's Angel's* or *Star Trek* short novels—they can be *about* the same characters, but they can never actually be the show or production. But the muppets have a whole universe on the screen ("Pigs in Space," for example), and although they have that one boundary they have no limits. They cross categories of classification at every turn and at many levels: puppet/marionette, animal/human, adult/children, satirical/profound, lighthearted/inspirational, Swedish/American, and so on. They are elusive and hard to pin down, and the only place that we can put them is in our hearts, and usually then only if we are children.

Most of the principal muppets are representations of recognizable animals. Besides Kermit being a frog, Piggy is a pig, Fozzie is a bear, Sam is an eagle, Camilla is a chicken, Ralph is a dog and so on. But there are complications: what is Gonzo, for instance? ("He's a little like a turkey...but not much," Kermit says of him at one point in the movie.) Other than his nose looking something like a water faucet, we have no idea what he is supposed to be. He is not an entirely human representation, nor can we associate him with any animals—he's just a muppet. And Animal, the drummer for the Electric Mayhem, is another complicated case, for as his name indicates he is entirely an animal, but again we can't discern exactly what animal he is, or is supposed to be, or even if he is supposed to be of any

specific species. Then there are all of the others, Doctor Teeth, Janice, Beaker, Zoot, even Statler and Waldorf—all not quite human, not quite animal. Just entirely muppet.

What does this mean for the viewer? What kind of relationship is built with the audience by these anthropomorphic representations? We don't expect the muppets to act entirely human, nor do we expect them to act entirely animal. In fact, by looking at the context of this movie, we know that these characters are not human, or animal, nor are they meant to be. They are muppets, and children and adults recognize that they are, indeed, a type of puppet, which is manipulated by human beings we can't see. But because of the invisibility of the muppeteers, we the audience create personalities for Kermit and Fozzie and the other individual muppets, forgetting their fictional nature to an extent. And the more invisible the muppeteering humans are, the more we think of the muppets as people. We observe their apparent agency and go along with it, attaching it to the characters we know and love. And we are somewhat confused by this agency—what is its purpose, its mission? If they were just animals we could easily think that their primary functions must be to eat and to reproduce. If they were human we would grant them that entirely undefinable human drive—we would think that they would want the same things out of life as we do, like a good ice cream cone or a steady income.

We are left with deciding what these anthropomorphic but rather elusive characters are by judging their behavior. Bateson would profess that anybody trying to get to the root of being human is in fact a behavioral scientist. And he further points out that "All species of behavioral scientists are concerned with learning in one sense or another of that word" (Bateson 279). Looking at the muppets' actions within *The Muppet Movie*, especially within the

embedded narrative, we find a complex set of behaviors. On the whole, the muppets act like adult humans with mediocre talent and aspirations of stardom. Kermit plays the banjo and sings. Fozzie does stand-up comedy in sleazy bars. Piggy competes in beauty contests and does commercials. Ralph plays piano, and The Electric Mayhem travel as a band. Gonzo, although not blessed with an evident form of artistic expression, has dreams of being a movie star. Together they go to Hollywood to make a movie and become rich and famous.

But they are almost always regarded as children, and their tastes and dreams often are quite reminiscent of childhood desires. Their height is a factor—rarely do we see a muppet standing taller than a human. This is particularly evident in their trip to the amusement park where they meet Piggy. Bob Hope sells Fozzie ice-cream cones as if the bear were just any other kid with an overactive imagination, and Richard Prior cons Gonzo into buying a whole bouquet of balloons for Camilla—as he might con a child. And to further complicate the question of judging what the muppets are by virtue of their behavior, we can examine their tastes. Fozzie orders a honey ice-cream cone, because he is a bear, and tries to get a “dragonfly ripple” one for Kermit, assuming that the frog would like such a flavor. Their tastes lie somewhat outside of “normal” human tastes, such as Gonzo’s sexual preference for chickens, Fozzie’s belief that his “natural environment” is a Studabaker and Janice’s love for organic refreshments.

Take a closer look at Kermit, for instance, who expresses both animal and human behaviors within the first few minutes of the embedded narrative of *The Muppet Movie*. We begin by watching him perform on the banjo. But while he is talking to Dom DeLuise as Bernie the agent, he interrupts to catch a pesty fly, misses, and comments that he must be getting elderly because,

“The tongue is the first thing to go in a frog.” This is the only time in the movie where Kermit does something that is so entirely animal. In fact, we see later in a dream sequence that he can’t even swim. Without missing a beat, the movie cuts to him riding a bicycle—another astonishingly human activity. There is definitely a deliberate breaking down of normal “human” and “animal” categories in the nature of muppet.

The narrative complications of *The Muppet Movie* also give us clues as to the nature of these entertainers. Our first run-in with narrative difficulty is when the embedded narrative begins. We get the sense that this movie within the movie could have existed without the frame—the impression in fact that it does exist without the frame. It’s as if those first five or so minutes are not filmed, are not repeatable. The helicopter shot of the sunlit clouds, the credits, the background music—all of these things lead us to believe that *The Muppet Movie* is starting now, when in fact we’ve been watching what we call *The Muppet Movie* for a few minutes. This is not unmanageable. We have all seen this sort of narrative structure before—even for children it is but a mere novelty. We can expect to return at some point, most likely the end of the movie, to the framing narrative.

The next few cases of narratological tangle are not drastic, either. Kermit has one short monologue in the swamp, a soliloquy that we are not forced to be audience to—in other words, he is just talking to himself and we need not listen, but since we hear it, we have the benefit of his thoughts. The first time we are directly addressed by Kermit is when he narrowly escapes being flattened by some heavy equipment and makes the really bad pun, “If frogs couldn’t hop, I’d be gone with the Schwinn.” A blithe joke, nothing more; as humans sitting the audience we are not brought directly into the dialogue. The second instance of direct address comes when Kermit begs the audience,

"I hope you appreciate the fact that I am doing my own stunts." Now Kermit has addressed the camera/audience, with the implication (a very clear implication), "This is movie." Stunts are done in the movies. Actors do not normally do their own stunts. In order for us to appreciate Kermit's endeavor of performing his own stunts, we must consciously (or close to consciously) accept that "This is movie." Suddenly, our context is changed, and we are no longer subject-watching-object. We now have a clue to the muppets' own subjectivity. But unless we have forgotten our frame, we are to think, "'This is movie' within a movie." After all, from our narrative stance Kermit is merely asking himself (and Piggy, and Fozzie, etc.) at this point to appreciate his endeavor of doing his own stunts. Further, another layer is evident by examining out relationship with this movie: Kermit does not do stunts—he is a thing made of cloth, wires, plastic and whatnot which is manipulated by Henson. The danger to Kermit is fictive on at least these two levels—one, that it is a movie and two, that Kermit himself is not "real." In fact, we can still be the subject-watching-object, but now have a perspective of several levels—we can witness another audience going through the contextual shift.

Perhaps we have not been directly addressed, but even so, what Wallace Martin calls the "'fictional narrative/reality' relation" has been called into question. What this does, according to Martin, is allow us to "look at prevailing...social conventions from another *position*, thereby questioning the validity or authenticity of the norm" (Martin 179). For instance, we are given a position encompassing enough to allow us to examine the fact that it is the social norm to accept stuntpeople in place of the actor during certain scenes. Just by analyzing Kermit's behavior of looking at the camera and making an off-hand remark, we can address these societal norms. Martin is

not speaking entirely about this technique of direct address, however. He is including in his explanation of recent narrative theory the literary functions of irony, parody, satire, pun and other conventions—conventions which are thick in *The Muppet Movie*. There are countless opportunities to take up this other position and analyze particular, societal norms, in the movie, but that shall not be the focus of the study.

Yet we still have not been bombarded with narrative that is overly “perverse,” as Martin might call it. The embedded narrative is relatively clean, free of these complications, except for these cases of Kermit’s direct address, until we get the introduction of the Electric Mayhem. Mayhem is right—narratological mayhem. After cordial introductions, Floyd the bass player makes the error of asking Kermit and Fozzie, “What brings you dudes here?” Fozzie begins from the beginning—at least the beginning of the embedded narrative, describing Kermit in the swamp playing his banjo. The frog interrupts him, explaining that the audience would be bored if they had to hear the whole story over again from the beginning. Kermit obviously perceives the importance of flowing narrative and clean storytelling. But, if the band must know, Kermit says, they can read the screenplay. Fozzie, recognizing the brilliance of this idea, but not the paradox, produces a copy of the screenplay from thin air.

When Dr. Teeth begins reading, at page one, we know that it is the screenplay of the embedded narrative. Dr. Teeth recounts the story for the band right up until the introductions take place and the existence of the screenplay in the screenplay. When we take a closer look at this, we find that the embedded narrative is the story of the events which led up to the muppets getting to Hollywood to make a movie. We know, from not only the framing narrative but also our experiences with *Sesame Street* and *The*

Muppet Show, that this has already happened. In fact the event of Kermit and Fozzie first meeting the Electric Mayhem pre-dates the existence of the screenplay, thus it cannot be that they would have a copy of the screenplay when they met. This event, along with another, when the band later claims to have read the screenplay almost all the way through (thus giving them a degree of omniscience), are blatant creations of paradox.

The complication and frustrations we run into are of this nature: Henson has created a world that is at once both consistent and inconsistent with our own. We can easily relate to the situations and dreams of the protagonists—we sympathize with Kermit's remark, "After all, a frog's gotta eat." On the other hand, the muppets do things which make no sense to us or are not possible for us—they behave/look like both humans and animals and they experience temporal paradox without question of their own sanity. We are torn, for we want to contain the muppets in their fantastical world, yet their world overlaps our own in so many ways that we can't easily do that. Of course, this blurring, this effacing of boundaries between the fictional world and the real world is much more effective on the target audience: children. As adults, we lose some of that imaginative thought which allows the muppets to be a part of our own world. Their behavior and their narrative existence denies our senses the ability to let our brain make the same, unquestioned assumptions that it makes every minute of every day. At this point we try to contain the world of the muppets in the category of fiction. We can only accept the paradox of Fozzie having a copy of the screenplay by consciously saying that the paradox exists only in the work of art, only in the words, on the videocassette or between the covers of the screenplay itself.

The fascinating thing is this: there are few people who don't identify with the muppets in some way or another. People work to contain the muppets

within the boundaries of fiction yet allow them to become, or allow their world to become a part of the real world. As children growing up, who didn't like watching Kermit and the others on "Sesame Street" and on "The Muppet Show?" Why do these unidentifiable creature-creations seem so much more *human* than most of the people we meet? Why are the muppets so easy to relate to?

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Our Algorithmic Souls

Bateson would disagree with the idea that it should be difficult to identify with the muppets because of their ridiculous nature. To him, feelings, emotions and impressions, however seemingly illogical and at times paradoxical, are the product of "precise algorithms" of the unconscious mind. He is fond of a quote by Pascal: "The heart has its reasons which the reason does not at all perceive."⁵ In Western thought, Bateson says, "it is rather usual to think of the 'reasons' of the heart or of the unconscious as inchoate forces or pushes or heavings..." (Bateson 138). In other words, these unidentifiable drives of emotion and feeling are often considered to be the beginning or the inceptive point of the thoughts which follow. For Bateson and Pascal (and Bateson includes Claude Levi-Strauss), however, the reasons of the heart or unconscious mind are as complex and as precise in nature as the reasons of consciousness. Bateson continues and describes the problem we adult humans have with these unconscious reasons:

These algorithms of the heart...are, however, coded and organized in a manner totally different from the

⁵ "Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point," *Steps*, p. 134.

algorithms of language. And since a great deal of conscious thought is structured in terms of the logics of language, the algorithms of the unconscious are doubly inaccessible. It is not only that the conscious mind has poor access to this material, but also the fact that when such access is achieved, e.g., in dreams, art, poetry, religion, intoxication, and the like, there is still a formidable problem of translation.

This is usually expressed in Freudian language by saying that the operations of the unconscious are structured in terms of primary process, while the thoughts of consciousness (especially verbalized thoughts) are expressed in secondary process (Bateson 139).

These definitions are useful because they give us a starting point to talk about how different forms of art appeal to these differing layers of consciousness.

For instance, Bateson talks about poetry and (presumably) visual art as being means of accessing the unconscious mind, however poorly access is achieved. "Art becomes, in a sense, an exercise in communicating about the species of unconsciousness," he writes (Bateson 137). This becomes problematic when we take note of poetry and art which appeals mostly to the consciousness, usually in the form of strong and obvious political statements. On the other hand, messages of this type, if properly masked in iconic codes, could perhaps be a very effective way to communicate specific messages, in hopes of gaining a correspondingly specific response. However, lest this line of thinking too far digress, I would like to explore where performance art fits in to this schema.

The case can be made that much performance art, especially productions like the muppets, is designed to entertain, not to express "inchoate forces or heavings." But in order for any entertainment to occur, there must be some form of communication. And often, behind the humor and wit of showbiz,

we find a deep-seated truth that we had not yet perceived, before we determined that it was funny or entertaining.

Bateson addresses one area of performance art—dancing.⁶ He uses a quote by Isadora Duncan to help demonstrate his point of art being an interface between the primary and secondary processes: “If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it.” Bateson takes this to mean that Duncan is aware that the message (i.e. “what it [the dance] meant”) is not the kind of message that is conveyable in the algorithms of language. Rather, it is a message, like all true artists’ messages, that says, “This is a particular sort of partly unconscious message. Let us engage in this particular sort of partly unconscious communication.” And the assumption is that there is something good to be gained by leaving the communication in the level of unconsciousness—or, rather, that something important is lost when, like Freud, we would try to make these reasons of the heart part of our consciousness.

Yet this is dancing, and like most visual art and classical music, there are no words in the actual piece of art, only words about that art. What of opera, and stage drama? And how does one differentiate between performances that are meant only to entertain and those which are meant to entertain *and* express something iconically coded? Here, as in poetry, the words become crucially important, but not always for what they denote, but rather for what they impress. There is a fine line here; the words leave an impression because we do attach to them precise meanings in and from our other conscious activities. An important element to note about these words is their context. Bateson spends much time discussing this issue, and demonstrates a

⁶ All references in this paragraph are found in *Steps*, pp. 137-138. Bateson credits Dr. Anthony Forge for the quote by Isadora Duncan.

hierarchy of contexts and the markers or indications of different contexts. We need to know, for instance, that a play is a play or a poem is a poem to be able to engage in the appropriate type of unconscious communication. A result of not being able to distinguish a play from reality, or a poem from a memo, for instance, would be the panic which resulted from the "War of the Worlds" broadcast. We have certain expectations of different forms of art and media, and those expectations are activated when we see a volume of collected poems, or a stage, or a musical instrument, or an art gallery, and so forth.

It will be necessary to further define primary and secondary processes in order to continue discussion of the validity of performance art as a means to communicate on a level which is not wholly conscious. Primary process can be thought of (consciously) best in terms of its manifestations, mode and subject matter. Primary process manifests iconically, as opposed to secondary process manifesting digitally. That is, primary process can be characterized "as lacking negatives, lacking tense, lacking in any identification of linguistic mood (i.e., no identification of indicative, subjunctive, optative, etc.) and [as being] metaphoric" (Bateson 139). Those missing elements, negatives, tense and mood, are common in secondary process and in fact are instrumental in our digital communication (language). Further, the subject matter of primary process is quite different than that of the conscious mind, for the unconsciousness is concerned not with subjects and objects, but rather with relationships and patterns. Most importantly, primary process is metaphoric; in other words, objects are not disregarded by the primary process, it is simply the relationship between or among the objects which is focused upon—just as in a metaphor.

Thus, on a scale of iconic-digital coding of artistic expression, we would likely put dance and abstract visual art far to the end of the iconic pole, song

and poetry in the middle, and written prose on the digital side. Further, the more consciously we experience these codes, the more digital they must become. If, for instance, we are sitting in a seminar and discussing a particular piece of abstract art, we are unlikely to experience that piece as it was meant to be experienced. We would be too conscious—yet necessarily so because of our discussion. The verbalized sentence is our most natural means of digital coding (nobody speaks in binary, for instance), yet it is also the main obstacle of iconic coding. In contrast, it is difficult to get much out of a novel as one dozes off to sleep, because it is necessary to concentrate and interpret the digital codes therein.

If we determine that performance art is a way, and perhaps a very good way, to engage in certain types of communication which are not wholly conscious, then we have a new perspective on what the muppets are. Each of them (as characters), as pointed out earlier, is or wishes to be a performer. And their most important criterion to be a performer is not necessarily talent, but rather an audience. In fact, they want to be *stars*; they want to be rich and famous. They believe they have something to say to millions of people which cannot be said entirely in secondary process—they want to convey their message in song, especially, but also in all sorts of other performance art. If we take a step back and look at the muppets as creations of Jim Henson and many other talented performers, we can see that there is another level of this attempt to communicate outside of wholly conscious thought. Henson and the writers of *The Muppet Movie* are actually engaging us in this process at a number of levels. Thus the muppets may defy the workings of the conscious mind, but they sit prettily in our unconsciousness, in our hearts.

Again, let us consider that the muppets are meant to be entertainment for children. It is reasonable to assume that the communication of children is

closer to primary process and iconic coding than is the communication of adults. This is true because children do not have the understanding that the world is worthy of their consideration. Up until a certain point, they do not realize that the world goes on without them. They are, in a sense, not fully conscious, nor do they have the benefit of a large vocabulary of digital codes. Paul Klee struck on to this idea around the turn of the century. He was quite well known (and was often regarded as insane) for his insistence that we look to the artistic expressions of children for the “best” art—he was convinced that there was something true, something untainted about these youthful endeavors. This is, perhaps, an overworn motif—that when we lose our childhood innocence we lose a very important thing. I venture that what we lose is the comfort children have with iconic coding, and we lose it because our deficient epistemology pushes us toward a more digital code, a more conscious mode. Bateson expresses this sentiment in his *Metalogue*⁷ “What is an Instinct?” asserting that “The poets and artists know...better than the scientists” what it means to cloud the unconsciousness with secondary process. He quotes at length from Blake:

Thought chang'd the infinite to a serpent, that which pitieth
To a devouring flame; and man fled from its face and hid
In forests of night: then all the eternal forests were divided
Into earths rolling in circles of space, that like an ocean rush'd
And overwhelmed all except this finite wall of flesh.
Then was the serpent temple form'd, image of infinite
Shut up in finite revolutions; and man became an Angel,
Heaven a mighty circle turning, God a tyrant crown'd
(Bateson 49).

⁷ Bateson's *Metalogues* are hypothetical conversations between a he and his daughter as a little girl. Bateson says, “A metalogue is a conversation about some problematic subject. This conversation should be such that not only do the participants discuss the problem but the structure of the conversation as a whole is also relevant to the same subject” (Bateson 2).

Perhaps we needn't be as dramatic and impassioned as Blake to sympathize with the same assertion—consciousness works against something inside of us which is closer to “truth.”

As a result (of growing up), when most adults watch *The Muppet Movie*, they can see little but ridiculous creatures in an even more ridiculous narrative. It seems to offer nothing in terms of helping adults grow more aware of digital coding and decoding—there is nothing to “learn” at this level. Bateson even demonstrates problems with an epistemology which pushes us into a more and more digitally coded world. It is interesting to note that digital coding, language, seems to have been born out of an effort to reduce ambiguity and eliminate confusion in sending and receiving messages. Language, however, is open to so many ambiguities that we respect people who can make us laugh at them. In fact, people who are very good at using language this way—that is, comics—often become rich and famous through movies. People like Richard Pryor, Steve Martin, Dom DeLuise, Edgar Bergen—the cast of guest stars in *The Muppet Movie* goes on. The point is that by recognizing and learning more about the deficiencies of our language and our digital tendencies, we can not only become more capable of using those codes efficiently and accurately, but also we begin to glimpse another realm of codes—we can begin to appreciate the virtues of iconic messages, the unconscious mind and primary process.

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Connections

Thus the beauty of *The Muppet Movie*. Taken as a whole, we see a narrative which defies many rules of logic and digital coding. The movie

puns, twists and wise-cracks at almost every opportunity. If we look at just the beginning few minutes, which unfolds as the framing narrative, we can see what kind of world the muppets live in. This sets our minds in a strange, oscillating mode of suspension-of-disbelief/ disbelief—we of course don't take what's happening as our reality yet we agree to enter into it anyway, up to point, at which time we laugh (or roll our eyes), and return to that stubborn conscious mind which will not let itself be drawn in. My assertion is that while this oscillation occurs at a more conscious level, the unconscious mind is in the meantime *more* receptive and impressionable than it is most of the time. I believe this to be true not by any empirical data at all, but rather by what I think the generation that grew close to the muppets gained. I will expound, but first let's examine some instances in *The Muppet Movie* which facilitate—if not force—the viewer into the oscillation aforementioned.

The following occurrences collectively happen in about 20 seconds shortly after the movie begins: 1) A large, human-sized muppet character approaches Miss Piggy in the screening room and asks, "Hey, lady! Is this seat taken?" Without waiting for a reply, this creature rips the seat from its place and walks away with it. He is "taking" it, without Piggy's approval. 2) Fozzie Bear is jittery and nervous before the (embedded) movie begins. "If I'm not funny," he says, "I won't be able to live with myself." His neighbor Dr. Bunson Honeydew, remarks, "Well, then, you'll have to get another apartment, won't you?" 3) Doctor Teeth is sitting next to Crazy Harry and comments, "You know, I hear this movie is dynamite!" Harry then ostensibly detonates enough dynamite to make a lot of noise and smoke, right in the theater. In each case, a word or words have been misrepresented at a different level of communicative understanding. Later, for instance, when Kermit comes in, Piggy says to him, "I tried to save you a seat, but somebody

took it." If we carry an object with us when we go somewhere, we have "taken" it. When we sit in a seat in a movie theater, we have "taken" it. When we have reserved a seat next to us for a friend, that seat is considered "taken." All three of these "takens" are somehow meant or represented in the first example. The creature, for instance, asks if the seat is "taken," and then he "takes" it, with no discrimination between the two meanings. Piggy also fails to make clear this distinction, if she makes it at all. In the other cases, Bunson understands Fozzie's figurative remark to mean something literal, while similarly Doctor Teeth and Harry are obviously on two different levels.

If we now recall that the primary process also does not make these distinctions, since the iconic coding that goes on there lacks mood and tense, we can perhaps postulate that the muppets are reaching out to us on this level. I would also defend such an argument on the basis that *this word- and mind-play occurs continuously* for about 90 minutes. By the end of the hour and a half, we are ready to accept just about anything that the muppets might pull off. This poking at the unconscious mind is unrelenting, even when (maybe especially when) the movie-film burns up in the movie-projector and the narrative returns to its frame. We are jarred into remembering that we have a movie within a movie. Our genuine surprise at this narrative play speaks to the idea that not only have we (to a certain extent) forgotten that we are watching a movie within a movie, but that we are watching a movie at all. What are we to think of such a movie? Waldorf asks Statler just that, and his reply is, "I've seen detergents that left a better film than this!" They both laugh at the pun, while we're still trying to compensate for the narrative complexities.

Let's add to this idea that the movie is aimed at children. As I mentioned earlier, the thought processes of a child are less digital and presumably more iconic in nature than our adult minds. It seems inevitable to me that much is happening within the different layers of consciousness while we watch *The Muppet Movie*. And the message of the movie, or the muppets as a didactic technique in general, slips to a deeper layer of consciousness and sticks. Think of the "fork-in-the-road" incident, in which Kermit and Fozzie, after having consulted and interpreted a road map, wait for a "fork" in the road to signal their next turn. As it turns out, Fozzie turns left when he sees a giant plastic eating-utensil fork stuck in the middle of the road. Intuitively, even at a young age, we know that the map is not the territory—that is, we know that the symbols on a road map *stand for* the actualities in the terrain, and that the word "fork" *stands for* at least two different ideas, one a divergence in the path, the other a dinner table tool. We seem to have a built-in capacity for handling this type of metaphorical representation. With much irony, as they drive by the fork, Kermit mumbles, "I don't believe that." Again, this play on the mind forces us to suspend our suspension of disbelief long enough to laugh and dismiss the visual pun—and meanwhile back at the unconscious ranch we are examining and reifying our understanding that the map is not the territory.

It is evident that the muppets are searching for something akin to "mind" with their constant playfulness—the introductory song in the movie is even an attempt to grasp something on a meta-level:

Why are there so many songs about rainbows
And what's on the other side?
Rainbows are visions, but only illusions,
And rainbows have nothing to hide...

Few people think consciously about this song as a meta-song. But it nonetheless *is* a meta-song, and is comparable in many ways to Bateson's metalogues—it is about a problematic subject (“What’s so amazin’ that keeps us star-gazin’? / And what do we think we might see?”) and the expression of these sentiments as a whole is relevant to the song itself. After all, the song “Why are there so many songs about rainbows,” is, ostensibly, a song about rainbows.

Now I must begin to make moral and ethical judgements, which I really would like to avoid, but it seems inevitable. Let us consider that the messages, or themes, of the muppets are “good”—that is, they teach children to respect others and to respect themselves; they teach people to appreciate differences in appearance, gender, race and religion, rather than to fear or hate such differences; they teach children an appreciation for the environment; and most importantly, they show children that they can pursue “the rainbow connection,” a universal human understanding of love and peace. The unprejudiced interaction between all of the characters—muppets and humans—in the movie and television shows speaks to these “good” teachings.

I assert that as these lessons are delivered to the audience, while its members are consciously in a maze and unconsciously in a daze, the messages sink to a deeper level of mind. Ideally, the messages become a part of the workings of those people, so that they don't have to deal with them consciously—they don't have to think about respecting the differences of another person, they just do.

This begins to sound much like Bateson's “ecology of mind.” It would be a world-view which would not, to the same degree, make the (sometimes violent) distinction that we make between the subject and object, between the

organism and its environment, between self and others. But this is clearly beyond the capabilities of our mind today. Bateson apologizes:

Let me say that I don't know how to think that way. Intellectually, I can stand here and I can give you a reasonable exposition of this matter; but if I am cutting down a tree, I still think "Gregory Bateson" is cutting down the tree. I am cutting down the tree. "Myself" is to me still an excessively concrete object, different from the rest of what I have been calling "mind" (Bateson 462).

So, as I have said, Bateson is more of a guide than anything else, pointing out scenic portions of the landscape. He claims nothing 'holier-than-thou,' but certainly feels somewhat burdened with his insights, and at times his urgency to communicate his ideas about ecology of mind become political: "And, quite seriously, I suggest to you that we should trust no policy decisions which emanate from persons who do not yet have that habit [of thinking ecologically]" (Bateson 463).⁸

It's here that the muppets may be of the most importance—they are searching for this way of thinking, and they reach a wide, popular audience with their inspiration. And it would be inappropriate to end this paper any other way than:

*Someday we'll find it—the rainbow connection,
The lovers, the dreamers, and me.*

⁸ From "Form, Substance and Difference," *Steps*, pp. 448-465. Bateson's note: "This was the Nineteenth Annual Korzybski Memorial Lecture, delivered January 9, 1970, under the auspices of the Institute of General Semantics."

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