The Politics of Humour in Kafkaesque Cinema: A World-Systems Approach

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Abstract:
Kafka's work has exercised immense influence on cinema and his reflections on diminished human agency in modernity and the dominance of oppressive institutions that perpetuate individual or social alienation and political repression have been the subject of debates by philosophers such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Alexander Kluge. Informed by a world-systems approach and taking a cue from Jorge Luis Borges' point that Kafka has modified our conception of the future, and André Bazin's suggestion that literary concepts, characters and styles can exceed "novels from which they emanate", I understand the Kafkaesque as an elastic term that can refer to diverse films that might share thematic preoccupations, but also aesthetic and formal differences. In this article, I explore the politics of humour in Kafkaesque cinema with reference to the following films: *The Overcoat* (*Шинель*, 1926, Gregor Koznitzev and Leo Trauberg), *The Shop on Main Street* (*Obchod na korze*, 1965, Ján Kadár), and *Death of a Bureaucrat* (*La muerte de un burócrata*, 1966, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea). I draw attention to the dialectics of humour and the connection between the Kafkaesque and slapstick so as to show how humour is deployed as a means of political critique.

Keywords: Kafkaesque; World cinema; World-systems theory; Humour; Politics; Representation.

It is not unusual to encounter the term "Kafkaesque cinema" in the critical literature concerning cinema, modernity, politics and representation. One senses, however, that the term is taken to be

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self-explanatory and self-evident as if the Kafkaesque is another synonym for an irrational aesthetic and narrative uncertainty. Frequently, the epithet Kafkaesque is used to describe filmmakers manipulating a dream aesthetics of audio-visual excess, e.g. David Lynch (see Nieland, 2012, p. 120). These approaches seem to conflate Kafkaesque cinema solely with representational strategies that foreground *Stimmung* (mood) rather than coherent narrative, leaving behind questions of politics and aesthetics. In a recent edited collection entitled, *Mediamorphosis: Kafka and the Moving Image*, scholars emphasise cinematic adaptations of Kafka's texts and their fidelity or non-fidelity to the source texts. While there is a section dedicated to filmmakers described as Kafkaesque, Kafkaesque cinema is used as a term that describes films that "incorporate and express the unique qualities of Kafka's world" (Biderman & Lewit, 2016, p. 18).

The problem with this interpretation is that "Kafka's world" remains something abstractly ahistorical whose self-evidence does not even merit definition. The Kafkaesque here becomes a synonym for the inexplicable or for a type of cinema that mainly adapts Kafka's texts or exhibits "Kafka's aura" (p. 18). These approaches have merit but are not grounded in history and do not enable us to understand the Kafkaesque cinematic aesthetic as a response to concrete historical contradictions that preoccupied Kafka's texts too. In its canonical use, Kafkaesque cinema turns into a term that simply refers to films that pay homage to Kafka and allude to his aesthetics of uncertainty. For other critics, the term is used in negative ways to describe filmmakers, whose adaptations of Kafkaesque texts remain faithful to the atmosphere of paranoia that characterises the author's works, but not to the texts themselves. Commenting on Orson Welles' adaptation of *The Trial* (1962), Martin Brady and Helen Hughes, complain that the film's style may be "seen as the triumph of what we understand as the 'Kafkaesque over Kafka himself'" (2016, p. 183). For these authors, the Kafkaesque is an unwelcome term precisely because it describes an aesthetic tradition rather than films which faithfully – as per the authors' predilections – adapt Kafka's complex novels and stories. One of the drawbacks of this defence of the fidelity to the text approach to adaptations is that it aspires to apply Romantic ideas of authorial exceptionality to an author belonging to a modernist tradition which was hostile to the view of the author as an especially gifted individual.

Far more nuanced is András Bálint Kovács' intervention. Kovács claims that the term Kafkaesque cinema refers to a tragic-comic aesthetic tradition rooted in the twentieth-century tumultuous history of the countries belonging to the Central and Eastern European region. His point corresponds with the Hungarian novelist, Szilárd Borbély's, idea

that people in Eastern Europe "are Kafka's sons [sic]" (2013, p.vii). According to this line of argument, the tumultuous history and the numerous regime changes in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, have led people to adapt morally and mentally to new regimes. The residents of this European region employ survival strategies that lead them to conform to authority without being able to confront the established social order and change it. Commenting on Kafka's "Before the Law" parable which is contained in *The Trial*, Kovács says,

> Kafka's highly mysterious parable has an important aspect that explains much of the specificity of Central European modern cinema. It is the paradoxical relationship between the law and order and the individual autonomy. The frequent and rapid changes of rules in Central Europe, which were the fundamental experience of peoples of this region during the last couple of hundred years, have developed an ability for quick mental and moral adaptation together with appreciation for a stable order regardless of its form or content. Individual autonomy standing up to the order is painfully missing from this experience. The lack of moral consistency is generally explained, in literature and political theory, by the survival of traditional hierarchical and authoritarian political structures in this region, which were the solutions chosen in frequent situations of political instability. The only meaning personal autonomy has in these conditions is the ability to accept any order that comes from the exterior, and then trying to survive it. (2007, p. 329)

There is much merit in Kovács's argument not least its connection of the Kafkaesque with the historical experience of countries, which were parts of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. For all its value, however, the Kafkaesque is discussed in passing in his monograph and he does not clearly connect questions of aesthetics and politics with reference to varied examples. An index of the limits of his argument is his proposition that Miklós Jancsó is the quintessential Kafkaesque filmmaker, although the latter is a director who has been associated with a Marxist-Lukácsian and Brechtian-aesthetic tradition rather than a Kafkaesque one.

Peter Hames has discussed the influence of Kafka on Czechoslovak New Wave filmmakers. According to Hames, the Kafkaesque stands for a generalized condition of alienation that is evident in Czechoslovak films of the 1960s–70s, which indirectly criticize the social circumstances of the Stalinist years and the Soviet suppression in the late 1960s. Hames explains that a conference on Kafka held in Liblice in 1963, allowed for the rehabilitation of the author, whose works had been marginalized by a regime that promoted Socialist realism as the true expression of Marxist art. This conference had a tremendous impact on numerous

Czechoslovak New Wave filmmakers who addressed social and political issues in former Czechoslovakia in oblique and indirect ways. At times, films reflecting on fascist oppression turned into critiques of the regime of the time. A key example is Zbyněk Brynych's *A pátý jezdec je strach* (*The Fifth Horseman Is Fear*, 1965) (see 2014, p. 19). Despite the significant historical information, as with Kovács, the Kafkaesque in Hames' work remains more of a generalized descriptor rather than a critical category that can enable us to consider questions of aesthetics in tandem with politics.

Thinking cinema through a Kafkaesque lens resonates with debates in the field of film and political philosophy including the question of limited human agency in modernity and late-modernity, advanced forms of state oppression in modern political systems, the loosened individual privacy in the new media environment, and the dialectics between individual autonomy and modern apparatuses of control. These are questions that have preoccupied many philosophers such as Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Friedrich Kittler, and respond to twentieth and twentieth-first century philosophical and political anxieties expressed in different socio-political conditions and moments in history. As mentioned above, the term Kafkaesque cinema has numerous contested meanings, but a non-linear historical approach can allow us to think of the Kafkaesque as a critical category that can reveal how filmmakers deploy formal complexity and interpretative impenetrability to respond to modern anxieties. Kafka was a child of his time, a period when belief in the values of liberal democracy and economic liberalism had crumbled after the economic recession of the late nineteenth-century and the first World War. The Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm explains that "survivors from the nineteenth century were perhaps most shocked by the collapse of the values and institutions of the liberal civilization whose progress their century had taken for granted, at any rate in 'advanced' and 'advancing' parts of the world (1994, p. 109). For Hobsbawm, it is this historical shock that allows us to comprehend the tumultuous history of the twentieth century that followed. In this context, the crisis of representation that is evident in Kafka's works is indicative of a growing disbelief in Western liberalism and the Enlightenment narrative of progress; at the same time, it anticipates the paranoia of counter-liberal political projects that appeared in the twentieth-century as well as neo-liberal economic and political models that retain belief in economic liberalism, but have, in the name of market efficiency, totally undermined liberal ideas of individual privacy, autonomy and the Enlightenment belief in finding alternatives to political and economic orthodoxies. Seen this way, we can appreciate

why Kafka's lessons transcend their historical situatedness and are pertinent in the study of films commenting on capitalist alienation, the horrors of fascism, the Stalinist terror, and contemporary social, political and ecological crises amid the challenges of late capitalism. Currently, in the era of the no-alternative neoliberal orthodoxies that have, according to Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, made liberalism abandon "pluralism for hegemony" (2020, p. 6), we can understand why Kafka's critique of modernity resonates with the past and the present.

My key proposition is that if we consider the Kafkaesque aesthetic as the product of the antinomies of modernity, then we cannot restrict it within the boundaries of a specific geographical region. We can instead rethink Kafkaesque cinema as a cinema that deploys an aesthetic of allusion, irony, and tragic-comedy to respond to historical contradictions experienced by the author himself, but also as having relevance to other themes and historical antinomies that go beyond Kafka's work and his historical experiences. In other words, the Kafkaesque cinematic aesthetic is a transnational one that is interrelated to the contradictions of, what Immanuel Wallerstein calls, the world-system. Wallerstein employs this term to describe a world economy divided into capitalist centres and peripheries. Wallerstein's approach shifts from the study of the historical experiences of isolated nations to an analysis of the global conditions of exploitation introduced by an unequal world-system whose study can offer a better understanding of the connected histories of nations. World-systems analysts, therefore, examine the historically defined systems, that is, "a spatial/temporal zone which cuts across many political and cultural units, one that represents an integrated zone of activity and institutions which obey certain systemic rules" (2004, p. 17). Scholars in the field of world literature have argued in favour of a world-systems approach in literary studies so as to reveal the common aesthetic and political preoccupations in literatures across the globe. In shifting the focus from the national study of literature, to the comparative study of literatures across the globe as objects that allegorize world-system conflicts, one gets a better understanding of the recurrence of certain aesthetic forms, e.g. realism, modernism, as responses to concrete contradictions of the global world-system. World literature responds to "a single but radically uneven world-system; a singular modernity, combined and uneven; and a literature that variously registers this combined unevenness in both its form and its content to reveal itself as, properly speaking, world-literature" (WReC, 2015, p. 49). The dominant world-system in modernity is capitalism even during the years of fascist dictatorships and existing socialism, since these states did not challenge

the conditions of "unequal exchange" and the division of the world in centres and peripheries, a practice rooted in colonialist practices dedicated to market expansion. Giovanni Arrighi has commented on how the dominance of capitalism as the global world-system is also evidenced by the fact that even formerly communist states were forced to keep "dollar balances for their trade with the West" (2010, p. 310).

As Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro explain, in emphasizing the interconnected global histories against the national study of global literature, world-systems literary theory brings together examples from texts coming from different geographical spaces and different periods of "capitalism's longue durée" (2019, p. 7). Film scholars have also deployed a world-systems approach to the study of World Cinema. David Martin-Jones, for instance, has discussed how world cinema's aesthetic innovations urge us to rethink, and re-encounter histories that have been obscured, such as Europe's colonialist past, and have contributed to the establishment of the world-system (see Martin-Jones, 2018). Martin-Jones connects these histories to films concerned with current contradictions, e.g. neoliberalism and climate change, to demonstrate how contemporary crises are linked to Europe's colonial history. As evidenced from these arguments, inherent in the world-systems analytical framework, is a non-linear view of history, according to which the past, the present and the future communicate with each other and much of our contemporary present includes traces of the past and vice versa.

Similarly, the analytic I am advocating takes as its starting point the idea that Kafkaesque cinema is an umbrella term that refers to films that appear in different geographical spaces and historical periods. The connecting thread, however, is the core contradiction of the singular modernity, as it manifests in early and late modernity. Kafka's literature cast doubt on the Enlightenment narrative of progress by clearly showing the dialectical affinity between rationality and unreason, Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment. In Kafka's universe, excessive rationality leads both to the nightmare of bureaucratic administration and to the (rational) justification of the most unreasonable indictments as long as they allow for the reproduction of modernist apparatuses of discipline and control that can result in the nightmare of the Nazi camps, the Stalinist gulags, and the neoliberal surveillance state. In these terms, the Kafkaesque is a category that cannot be strictly placed within fixed temporal and geographical parameters. It rather emerges or becomes revivified in different periods in history responding to systemic crises of development and underdevelopment. Consider for instance authors, of whose selected works can be understood under the

rubric of the Kafkaesque, such as Anna Seghers, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Roberto Bolaño, José Saramago, László Krasznahorkai, Imre Kertész, J. M. Coetzee, Szilárd Borbély and others. Texts by these authors have not appeared at the same point in chronological time but respond to unresolved crises of modernity and late modernity. In Eastern Europe, for example, the Kafkaesque is a valid literary category during Communism, but also after the shift to the free market economy that has led to the accumulation of wealth by a minority leading to the resurfacing of past, semi-feudalistic hierarchies and social relations. For South American authors, the Kafkaesque turns into a category that responds to enforced underdevelopment and past and present conditions of economic dependency to Western powers. The Kafkaesque was as relevant in the early years of the twentieth century, during the fascist and Stalinist years, the post-War experience – including the re-emergence of the concentrationary experience in different historical spaces such as Argentina, Chile, Cambodia – as well as in the present age of what Shoshana Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism" (2019) where global tech companies such as Apple, Facebook, Google, Twitter, and Instagram, act as contemporary apparatuses of control affecting peoples' worldviews but also the global political landscape.

With this in mind, we can start thinking about Kafkaesque cinema as a transnational aesthetic tradition that responds to social processes and relations operating on diverse spatial and temporal levels across the globe. After all, many of the prevalent themes in Kafka's literature, such as labour alienation, the bureaucratic nightmare of modernity, historical/social forms of exclusion (in his particular case this is intimately tied to the Jewish experience in Central Europe), the eroded human agency within modernity, and the anticipation of the modern experience of the camps, which were also rooted in colonialist practices, are themes that have preoccupied filmmakers in different parts of the globe. Films that can be understood through the Kafkaesque lens have been made in the beginning, mid, and end of the twentieth century as well in the first decades of the current one. For instance, films concerned with issues of alienated labour and centralized or bureaucratic control either in the Western Fordist system (consider Charlie Chaplin for instance of whom more will be said below) or in the Soviet centralized one (*The Overcoat* discussed in the following section is a good example) appear in the USA and the USSR in the 1920s–30s; in the former colonies or in developing economies these issues are registered cinematically at different points in history that have to do with the unequal stages of development experienced by these countries. Ousmane Sembène directed *Mandabi* in 1968 and Diao Yi'nan *Uniform* in 2003. Both films

can be understood under the Kafkaesque category in terms of style but also subject-matter – bureaucracy and labour alienation.

Consequently, the Kafkaesque does not subscribe to a fixed periodization. André Bazin famously suggested that literary concepts and styles can exceed authors and "novels from which they emanate" (2014, p. 46). As he says, "Don Quixote and Gargantua dwell in the consciousness of millions of people who have never had any direct or complete contact with the works of Cervantes and Rabelais" (p. 46). The same applies to Kafka, an author whose impact is traceable in artists concerned with the ambiguities of capitalist modernity. Jorge Luis Borges intimated that Kafka "will modify our conception of the past as it will modify the future" (2000, p. 236). Such an approach permits an understanding of Kafkaesque cinema as something that exceeds the adaptation of Kafkaesque texts on screen.

Kafkaesque Humour

Aesthetic and formal ambiguity are not irreconcilable with humour. This is also evidenced in Kafka's own texts, which contain moments of slapstick humour and tragic-comic incidents. Commentators, for instance, have acknowledged the slapstick quality of passages in *The Man who Disappeared* (posthumously published as *Amerika*), in *The Castle*, and *The Trial* (see Ruprecht, 2017, p. 97; Osborne, 2017, p. 314; Fuchs, 2002, p. 38; Beicken, 2016, p. 86; Zischler, 2003, p. 131). His texts are suffused with a comic grotesque aesthetic that undertakes a critique of the nightmare of modernity. In this respect, Kafka is part of a modernist tradition which merges the sombre with the comic. The works of Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Luigi Pirandello are exemplary in this respect. In this modernist tradition, the critique of the Enlightenment ideas of progress and the Kantian understanding of the individual as a rational actor who consciously escapes from its immaturity is achieved through a style that brings together dark subject matter with parodic and comic elements. This combination produces a polemical laughter that bitterly mocks the optimistic view of history according to which modernity would resolve past historical contradictions.

Irony is the key feature of Kafkaesque humour. Jean-Michel Rabaté suggests that the laughter produced in Kafka's works is a Promethean one, namely one that stems from an anxiety that the machineries of modernity have the capacity to overpower humans. For Rabaté, as for other scholars, Kafkaesque humour is the product of social angst that cannot be alleviated (see Rabaté, 2018, p. 58). The moments of humour in his texts are not therapeutic but operate as ironic reflections on historical

conditions whose gravity simultaneously produces fear and nervous laughter. This is the reason why scholarship has brought to our attention the parallels between Kafka and film comedians such as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. According to Omri Ben Yehuda, Kafka's characters act without reflecting much on the meanings of their actions and this is something that is also applicable to many of the personas embodied by Buster Keaton. Not unlike Kafka's characters such as K., Gregory Samsa and Joseph K., who are ready to adjust themselves to the most illogical situations, comedians like Keaton and Chaplin portray individuals caught in absurd situations; their somewhat mechanical response is not to use their rational faculties to deliberate on them, but to keep on adapting to them (see Yehuda, 2016, p. 282). Robert Benayoun has drawn parallels between Kafka's and Keaton's characters. He suggests that Keaton's expressionless face is an indicator of an enigmatic alienation. As he says, "Buster's and Franz's heroes have the same simplicity, a good will that can turn to stubbornness, but they also have the same fear of power and authority" (1982, p. 54).

There is something aggressive in the mechanical movements of comedians like Keaton and Chaplin which has been acknowledged by Kafka himself while commenting on the latter:

> Like every genuine comedian, he has the bite of a beast of prey, and he uses it to attack the world. He does it in his own unique way. Despite the white face and the black eyebrows, he's not a sentimental Pierrot, nor is he some snarling critic. Chaplin is a technician. He's the man of a machine world, in which most of his fellow men no longer command the requisite emotional and mental equipment to make the life allotted to them really their own. (Qtd in Janouch, 2012, npg)

Michael North has compellingly observed how many twentieth century film comedies respond to the dailiness and routine of everyday life to discover humour in the most mundane aspects of modernity. This is also applicable to Chaplin (see 2018, p. 17–18). Comedy emerges in his films directly from the unfulfilled promises of modernity that are made visible in the contemplation of the dialectic between progress and regression, liberation and oppression. Their humour operates simultaneously as a means of entertainment and as symptom of anxiety and agony. Walter Benjamin noted this in his much-cited comparison between Kafka and Chaplin:

> Chaplin holds in his hands a genuine key to the interpretation of Kafka. Just as occurs in Chaplin's situations, in which in a quite unparalleled way rejected and disinherited existence, eternal human agony combines with

> the particular circumstances of contemporary being, the monetary system, the city, the police etc, so too in Kafka every event is Janus-faced, completely immemorial, without history and yet, at the same time, possessing the latest, journalistic topicality. (qtd in Leslie, 2007, p. 119)

Benjamin's account places both Kafka and Chaplin within the tradition of the comic grotesque in which humour does not have a liberating effect but heightens the absurdity of modern times without producing catharsis. In this respect, humour turns into a form of anxious negation of the represented reality. This in turn implies that humour and comedy operate as defamiliarizing effects. Emma Woelk has reached a similar conclusion. Comparing Kafka's deployment of humour to Alexander Kluge's, she intimates that "humour, even within the doomed world of Josef K., exists not as a mechanism to escape a doomed reality, but to expose the very pluripotentiality of this reality" (2007, p.307). Certainly, the negation of the familiar can have an affirmative energy, but Woelk's argument that the author offers hope in the moments of terror is more pertinent in the work of Kluge to whom she compares Kafka. Humour instead can be seen as a defence mechanism that enables one to keep on living and consider the most shocking moments of modernity as if they are routine and the most routine aspects of everyday life as shocking.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's distinctive approach to Kafka is also important in thinking about the politics of Kafkaesque humour. Unlike scholars who read Kafka's plots and language symbolically and metaphorically, Deleuze and Guattari see in the Bohemian author's work a humoristic realism, which is an index of the eroded individual agency in modernity. Kafka's works are about desire, that is power, and the machines of desire in which all individuals are implicated in different degrees. Desire is what makes it difficult to distinguish oppressors from oppressed, since all individuals are implicated in relations of power and its reproduction. As they note, it is not accidental that K in The *Trial* experiences problems with the Law, for he is a lawyer, or that K in the *Castle* strives to be accepted at the Castle despite the humiliations he suffers. Deleuze and Guattari also point to the irony of Kafka being horrified by modern bureaucracy while simultaneously operating as a bureaucrat in his work for The Worker's Accident Insurance Institution. Kafka responds with humour to the paradoxes of modernity, so as to reveal the grotesque aspect of the evolution of its history, specifically, the oppressive apparatuses of fascism, Stalinism, and late capitalism. The paradox of the modern condition is that the more one attempts to contest power, the more s/he identifies new layers of it all connected with each other in ways that appear absurd. Despite his left and anarchist political

sympathies, Kafka cannot point to solutions, so he responds with humour and laughter to the contradictions of modernity.

> There is a Kafka laughter, a very joyous laughter, that people usually understand poorly.... He is an author who laughs with a profound joy, a *joie de vivre*, in spite of, or because of, his clownish declarations that he offers like a trap or a circus. And from one end to the other, he is a political author, prophet of the future world, because he has two poles that he will know how to unify in a completely new assemblage: far from being a writer withdrawn into his room, Kafka finds that his room offers him a double flux, that of a bureaucrat with a great future ahead of him, plugged into real assemblages that are in the process of coming into shape, and that of a nomad who is involved in fleeing things in the most contemporary way and who plugs into socialism, anarchism, social movements. Writing for Kafka, the primacy of writing, signifies only one thing: not a form of literature alone, the enunciation forms a unity with desire, beyond laws, states, regimes. Yet the enunciation is always historical, political, and social. A micropolitics, a politics of desire that questions all situations. Never has there been a more comic and joyous author from the point of view of desire; never has there been a more political and social author from the point of view of enunciation. (1986, p. 42)

Kafka can only laugh at power and at people's belief that they have the agency to deal with the complex machineries of power of which they are also part. K in *The Trial*, K in *The Castle*, and Karl Rossmann in *Amerika* are comic characters because they seem to believe that they have the agency to challenge modern apparatuses of power. Anca Parvulescu suggests that the comic effect in Kafka is also the product of the seriousness of the characters who remain earnest to the point of laughter. "Kafka's critics have failed to notice that K [in *The Castle*] is what in the early modern literature on laughter is called an agelast 'nonlaugher.' He is too earnest, and earnestness, we know from a long tradition of writing on laughter, is laughable" (2014, p. 1429).

Being too earnest is tantamount to taking an absurd situation too seriously. In this respect, Kafka's work connects with film comedians such as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Laurel and Hardy, who remain agelasts despite the comicality/absurdity of the situations they face. It is not coincidental then, that the three films that I am discussing here as exemplars of a Kafkaesque cinematic humour, make explicit references to the cinematic slapstick associated with these film comedians, despite the gravity of their subjects.

My examples are, *The Overcoat* (*Шинель*, Gregor Koznitzev and Leo Trauberg, 1926), *The Shop on Main Street* (*Obchod na* korze, Ján Kadár,

Elmar Klos, 1965), and *The Death of a Bureaucrat* (*La muerte de un burócrata*, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1966). *The Overcoat* is an adaptation of two short stories by Nikolai Gogol "The Overcoat" and "Nevsky Prospect", which are critical of the pre-revolutionary Tsarist bureaucracy. *The Shop on Main Street*, based on a novel by Ladislav Grosman, addresses the ethical dilemma faced by a poor carpenter in the Nazi occupied Slovak Republic in the course of the persecution of Slovak Jews. Finally, *The Death of a Bureaucrat* is a satire of bureaucracy in post-revolutionary Cuba. The film pays explicit homage to a tradition of American slapstick comedies. Aside from their common references to early cinematic comedies, the reason for the choice of these specific films is that they come from different geographical spaces addressing contradictions of the world-system in different historical periods. The first one deals with questions of underdevelopment in Tsarist Russia (which affected even the post-revolutionary USSR), the second one with the fascist experience following the capitalist crises of the late 1920s, and the last one with questions of the nightmare of bureaucracy in post-revolutionary Cuba.

The Overcoat tells the story of Akaky Akakievich (Andrei Kostrichkin), a clerk who experiences disappointment in love and spends his life doing tedious paperwork. As he ages, he decides to buy a new overcoat with which he becomes obsessed, hoping that it will provide him with the longed-for status of which he has been deprived. In his first appearance in his new overcoat his colleagues mock him and upon his return home he is robbed of his coat and beaten. The film concludes with the character's death. This tragic-comedy deals with typical Kafkaesque issues concerning labour alienation, the powerlessness and vulnerability of the individual in its encounters with the machineries of power, and the narrow-mindedness of the privileged classes. The aim of the filmmakers was to explore life in pre-revolutionary Russia and demonstrate the progress achieved through the October Revolution. Yet read retrospectively, the film's comic grotesque formalist style and its portrayal of the individual at the mercy of officials, bureaucrats, and machineries of power beyond its control prefigures the Stalinist terror of the 1930s and what Deleuze and Guattari call the "the diabolical powers of the future that for the moment are only brushing up against the door" (1986, p. 48).

Much of the film's exaggerated acting style is equally indebted to American comedies and the circus, as well as German Expressionism. It is not accidental that Charlie Chaplin was rumoured to have been offered to play the leading role. On the 23rd of January 1926, the British newspaper *The Nottingham Evening Post* published a small article titled "Russian offer

to Charlie." The anonymous author wrote: "Charlie Chaplin has been asked by a Russian film firm to go to Russia to play the leading role on a film to be called "The Overcoat." Government officials (according to a New York telegram) are discussing the point that if he did, and the picture contained Soviet propaganda, he might, as only an alien resident in the United States, be refused re-admission" (1926, p. 5). The influence of Chaplin becomes readily apparent in the gestural acting style and the sequences where the character's misfortune is comically portrayed. Consider for instance, a passage where Akakievich fantasizes that his new coat turns into a human companion. Initially, the camera registers the overcoat moving in an anthropomorphic manner, only to transform into a woman flirting with Akakievich and inviting him to have a cup of tea. Eventually the image of the woman dissolves and the overcoat walks back to its place in the room. This engagement with the overcoat as an anthropomorphic prop is evocative of Chaplin's comedies, where anthropomorphized props heighten the character's confusion in modernity and merge moments of reality with unreality. But here, the sequence with the overcoat turns into a commentary on Akakievich's disillusionment and his marginalized status within the nineteenth century St. Petersburg community. The humour does not provide release but leaves a bitter aftertaste in its employment as a commentary on the trials of the common man.

Elsewhere, the Chaplinesque effects and moments of buffoonery are registered in Akakievich's encounters with the authorities. After being robbed of his overcoat he enters a police building to seek help from the authorities. Left waiting there by an official and following a series of comic entrances and exits aiming to establish whether the police chief can receive him, Akakievich then enters the office only to discover that the former is being shaved by two clownish subordinates. When he tries to explain the nature of his visit, the comic-grotesque effect is heightened by a series of cross-cuttings that register the hierarchical relationships between the chief policeman, his minions and Akakievich. The chief policeman is framed with foam on his face in low-angle shots that exaggerate his physique followed by high-angle shots of Akakievich that diminish and present him as vulnerable in front of the authorities. A series of frenetic close-ups of Akakievich, the policeman and his inferiors succeed one another, while the latter attempt to assuage and continue shaving their superior. Astonished at the indifference and arrogance of the authorities, Akakievich ends up falling down. One of the junior police officers follows suit, but intentionally in order to gain the approval of his superior by feigning insult at Akakievich's audacity to enter the office unannounced. The sequence climaxes to a crescendo of

gestures on the part of all parties involved. This excess of gesturality fuses comic and grotesque elements. The slapstick quality of this passage produces a pervasive sense of absurdity. In effect, Kozintsev and Trauberg's penchant for an exaggerated style invoking American slapstick aspires to call attention to the absurd conditions of modern hierarchy and apparatuses of power. Following the tradition of the comic grotesque, the farcical elements call attention to the nightmare of bureaucratic and hierarchical structures so as to expose their unreasonableness. Frances K. Barasch has compellingly argued that "as a comic genre, the grotesque represents meanings in which the sinister is acknowledged, made ludicrous, and yet is never destroyed" (1985, p. 6).

The acknowledgment of the sinister aspects of the modern institutions of power is also made evident in the sequences where Akakievich is shown working at his office. Labour is registered as uncreative, tedious, and monotonous. The motif of alienation is further exaggerated when Akakievich is mocked by his colleagues after entering the office with his new overcoat. The filmmakers register his co-workers gesticulating wildly in vulgar slapstick-style, which add a group effect dimension to the scene and give a visual shape to motifs of individual powerlessness and weakness. It is this aspect of the film that strongly invites us to consider the perpetuation of past contradictions (namely, Tsarist authoritarian rule) in the diegetic present and read it as a social allegory for the Stalinist crushing of individual liberties, which was to be entrenched in the following years. This is also in accord with Kozintsev's point that the film's style was inspired by the historical contradictions of the time. As he says, "the composition in *The Overcoat* was inspired not by German films, but by reality itself" (qtd in Illán, 2010, p. 137). Reality in the film is presented as disturbing and ridiculous at the same time partly because of the constant references to American comedies and low Hollywood genres. Kozintsev and Trauberg were the founders of The Factory of the Eccentric Actor, which reacted against the naturalist and psychological tradition of acting. They were inspired by popular spectacles including the circus, music-halls and Charlie Chaplin and American slapstick comedies. These influences are clearly stated in their Eccentric Manifesto of 1922, where they articulate their preference for a style of acting rooted in American comedies:

> The actor – a mechanised movement, not ballet pumps but roller skates, not a mask but a red nose. Acting is not a movement but a wriggle, not mimicry, but a grimace, not speech but a scream. CHAPLIN'S BUM IS MORE PRECIOUS TO US THAN THE HANDS OF ELEONORA DUCE. (1992, p. 4)

In this vein, modelled on the performative excess of Chaplin's comedies, the film produces a cruel laughter as a response to the loss of individual agency within modernity. Akakievich is represented as a figure from a Chaplin film and a Kafka novel, who naively believes that he can find his right in his encounter with social institutions. As Hannah Arendt notes, what unites Chaplin's Tramp with Kafka's characters is their ceaseless desire to seek humanity in social structures and machineries of power that have undermined it (see 1994, p. 77). *The Overcoat* addresses this theme too and responds with cruel humour to the frustrations experienced by the individual in its struggle against depersonalized institutions. Consequently, the slapstick and farcical qualities of the film lend an aggressive dimension to the narrative without providing definitive closure and relief.

This type of bitter, ironic and non-cathartic humour pervades also Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos' *The Shop on Main Street*. The narrative takes place in the First Slovak Republic – a client state of Nazi Germany – in 1942. The historical context is that the puppet regime of the time collaborated with Nazi Germany and implemented the Nazi Nuremberg laws. The film tells the story of Tóno Brtko (Jozef Kroner), a poor apolitical carpenter living in a small town. Tempted by his fascist brother in law (Frantisek Zvarík) and pressed by his greedy wife (Hana Slivková), he accepts the former's offer to become the Aryan controller of a neglected button and textile shop on the town's main street. The shop is owned by Rozália Lautmannová (Ida Kaminska), a senile Jewish widow, who is completely oblivious to the fascist takeover of the country and the imminent threat for her and the Jewish people. When Tóno first visits her to announce that he is the new manager of the shop, she thinks that he is there as a customer rather than to claim the ownership of the business. Imro Kuchar (Martin Hollý), a man with contacts in the Jewish community, explains to him that he has been cheated by the fascists, because the shop is bankrupt and non-profitable. Imro arranges with the Jewish community to offer Tóno a salary to pretend that he is an employee of Mrs. Lautmannová so as to protect and prevent her from learning the truth. Tóno acquiesces and he eventually befriends her. When the town's Jews are about to be deported, he tries to save her. The film tackles this dark subject-matter with light humour and scenes riddled with farcical conversations and actions centred on a series of misunderstandings ensuing from Mrs. Lautmannová's deafness and her ignorance of the new political status quo. Humour, thus, turns into a distancing effect that develops from the absurdity of the situation.

At the heart of the narrative are questions of social responsibility. Tóno is an anti-hero whose character is depicted as morally ambiguous.

From the film's beginning we know that he despises the fascists. Only we realise soon enough that this is not because of political disagreements but due to a personal feud with his brother-in-law. When he is offered Mrs. Lautmannová's shop he is quick to forget his past antipathies and claim his rights to the property on the basis of the Aryanization law. His antipathy to the fascists resurfaces once he realises that he has been offered an unprofitable business and he is keen to help the old lady as long as he is paid by the Jewish community. When he witnesses the torture of Imro on the grounds of being a "White Jew" (someone who assists the Jews), he pretends not to know him well. At the same time, he seems puzzled by the persecutions of the Jews even though he has been one of the people benefitting from it in terms of status and income. Later, when the Jews are gathered in the centre of the town to be deported to the camps, he tries to save Mrs. Lautmannová, who does not seem to understand the urgency of the situation. At some point he panics that he will have the same fate as Imro and tries to force the old lady to present herself to the authorities and register for transportation. A quick change of heart makes him regret this action but when he attempts to hide her in a closet, he accidentally kills her.

Tóno's character can thus be understood as a performer, someone who tries to constantly adapt to new situations so as to save his skin. Ironically, he seems to acknowledge this after wearing a costume and a top hat that has been gifted to him by Mrs. Lautmannová. Looking at himself in the mirror he says "I look like Charlie Chaplin." This aspect of comic performativity is later captured in a sequence where he and his wife walk across the town promenade with their brother-in-law and his wife. The promenade is a social space where the well-off citizens show themselves off. As Tóno and his family walk, they are acknowledged by the town residents, yet Tóno visibly exhibits his discomfort in adapting nouveau riche mannerisms especially when it comes to tipping of his hat, a habit that he seems unable to get used to. Here he looks like a modern Pierrot, clumsy and uncomfortable with his new role as a respected citizen and an Aryan shop-owner.

The film explicitly conforms to the codes of farcical comedy in its registration of the misunderstandings between Tóno and Mrs. Lautmannová. The fact that the old lady is also deaf intensifies the absurdity of the situations. For example, when Tóno first visits her in the shop to announce that he is the Aryan manager, Mrs. Lautmannová mistakes him for a customer and persistently tries to show him more products available for purchase. Visibly confused he explains to her that the Jewish shops have been confiscated and only Aryans can be shop-owners. He then attempts to clarify the concept of Aryanization and

asks her if she understands it; perplexed, the woman responds that she does not. The scene is registered through a series of crosscuttings that capture the characters' confusion and the misunderstandings that provoke bitter laughter. But the ironic humour, partly deriving from Tóno's inarticulacy and Mrs. Lautmannová 's senility, operates as a means of exposing the hollowness of all these concepts. The irony is that although Mrs Lautmannová 's response is to be attributed to being hard of hearing and visually impaired she responds correctly to a nonsensical decree. Noticeably frustrated Tóno concludes: "I am your Aryan and you are my Jewess...Do you understand?" To his irritation, she then mistakes him for a tax collector and starts searching for her tax bills. Subsequently, following Tóno's hushed agreement with the Jewish community, she takes him for her shop assistant.

Miscommunication produces an ironic and grotesque humour that emanates from the character's inability to understand the gravity of her situation. Noël Carroll explains that the misperception of the circumstances on the part of the characters is a standard trope for producing laughter and humour in literature and cinema. For Carroll, this trope is exemplar of the incongruity theory of humour. The limited perspective of the character is in conflict with the audience's awareness of her disposition. According to Carroll, incongruity only produces comic amusement as long as it is not threatening (see 2005, p. 349). But Kafkaesque humour is at the antipodes of Carroll's approach, since it is the constant dialectics between misunderstandings and danger that is the motor of humoristic effects.

Kafkaesque humour produces a bitter type of amusement that can be seen as part of a gallows comic style. Miloš Forman, the Czechoslovak New Wave director, has captured this brilliantly:

> The tradition of Czech culture is always humor based on serious things, like The Good Soldier Svejk. Kafka is a humorous author, but a bitter humourist. It is in the Czech people. You know, to laugh at its own tragedy has been in this century the only way for such a little nation placed in such a dangerous spot in Europe to survive. So humor was always the source of a certain self-defense. If you don't know how to laugh, the only solution is to commit suicide. (qtd in Kovács, 2007, p. 326)

Humour in the Kafkaesque tradition is produced by threatening situations as a means of exposing the horrors of history in an ironic and mocking manner.

In another instance in the film, farcical misunderstandings are generated by the character's misperception of her dire situation. Tóno leaves the pub intoxicated and visits Mrs. Lautmannová so as to convince

her to hide herself ahead of the compulsory deportation. He first enters her bedroom while she is sleeping. The characters are framed in low key and chiaroscuro lighting that lends the scene a sense of dramatic solemnity; yet this is countered by the fact that further misunderstandings add a comic double-act quality to the sequence. Tóno intoxicated appears like a fool while trying to convince the half-asleep old lady of the imminent threat to her safety. The latter thinks that he is just talking nonsense due to his intoxicated condition. A series of farcical exits and entrances ensue, only to realize that Mrs. Lautmannová has misperceived the situation and thinks that Tóno has had an argument with his wife. She tries to comfort him by preparing a bed so that he can spend the night as her guest; meanwhile, outside her house the fascists are having a rally celebrating the launch of a newly built fascist monument. The double act aspect of the scene is intensified because despite Tóno's warnings, Mrs. Lautmannová responds dismissively thinking that all this is intoxicated gibberish. The clash between her misinterpretation and the visible threat of the fascist celebrations outside her house has tragic-comic effects. This is in keeping with Kadár's view of the film as "a comic grotesque, tragic scenario that grows wholly out of a misunderstanding" (qtd in Mistríková, 2004, p. 101).

Tóno chooses on the one hand to be neutral, while on the other hand he is happy to appropriate Mrs. Lautmannová's property. While he accepts that Jews are second-class citizens his pangs of conscience urge him to try to help the old lady. The key contradiction is that segregation against the Jews and the appropriation of their wealth cannot be separated from their subsequent deportation. Tóno does not understand this and fails to act while witnessing similar atrocities, including the beating of his friend Imro. It is not accidental that his attempt to rescue the woman brings her closer to danger. It is a quintessentially Kafkaesque move that in his last attempt to save her he ends up killing her. The character's moral ambiguity is socially determined, and this is brilliantly captured by the small-town setting of the film, where the individual feels constantly under the surveillance of the inquisitive gazes of the locals. The directors thereby acknowledge how fascism has reinforced the modern culture of surveillance that pervades Kafka's critique of modernity—a culture also entrenched in the post-war Czechoslovakian State.

Our last example focuses on another aspect intricately linked to modernity, that is, bureaucracy. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's fourth film, *The Death of a Bureaucrat* conjoins many motifs associated with Kafka, but also with early cinematic comedies of the 1920s–30s. In a typical

Kafkaesque style, the narrative centres on the battle of a common man with excessive and pointless bureaucracy. The narrative is loose and has an anarchic structure; following the tradition of slapstick comedies, the story acts as a pretext for the production of a series of gags, custard pie fights, chases and other funny happenings that often interrupt the diegetic flow and underscore the film's critique of bureaucratic irrationality. During the funeral of Francisco Pérez, his colleagues decide to bury him with his work card to honour his contribution to socialism. When his widow (Silvia Planas) goes to claim her bereavement pension with her nephew, Juanchín (Salvador Wood), they are told that her request cannot be processed without Pérez's labour card. They can provide a duplicate of the card, but this can only be submitted by the very owner of the original document. Juanchín decides to take matters into his own hands and requests the exhumation of his uncle's body. The cemetery workers explain, however, that permissions for exhumations can only be granted after two years from the burial date. Juanchín manages to convince some gravediggers to exhume the coffin illegally but when they put the body in a trolley they are noticed by a watchman, who calls the police. The gravediggers run away as Juanchín transfers the coffin with the dead body to his aunt's house. When he tries to get the body reburied, the director of the cemetery asks him for a certificate of exhumation. A series of absurdist episodes registering Juanchín's encounters with bureaucracy ensue that give rise to slapstick, chases and gimmicks. In the end, Juanchín ends up murdering a bureaucrat and is taken away in a straitjacket. The film ironically concludes with a pompous funeral ceremony of the dead bureaucrat.

The film's critique of bureaucracy from the point of view of the common man who struggles to find his right against illogical administrative mechanisms and processes manipulates a standard Kafkaesque motif. Commenting on the film's protagonist, B. Ruby Rich says that "the films (sic) hero is a bewildered, hapless Everyman, a Keaton-Lloyd-Chaplin rolled into one, tilting at spinning windmills of red tape" (1980). The comic effects and humour derive to a large extent from Juanchín's belief that he can find a solution in his encounters with the bureaucrats and it is this belief that results in the aggressive and anarchic happenings associated with slapstick comedy. As per the lessons of the slapstick genre, to which Alea pays homage, the moments of comic mayhem do not produce catharsis or emotional relief, but a feeling of anxiety. In this context, the film recalls Deleuze and Guattari's abovementioned point that Kafkaesque laughter/humour becomes even more bitter because it is directed at the very individuals burdened by modern machineries of power. The belief of these individuals that they

can challenge such mechanisms through their individual agency renders their situation even more absurd; their efforts meet with new layers of power and administrative control, much like the proliferating heads of the Lernaean Hydra.

The film's opening credits are suggestive of its cynical humour and desire to poke fun at bureaucratic processes. Typed by an invisible individual as a bureaucratic memo, they inform the viewer of the filmmaker's pledge to acknowledge all the individuals involved as per the rules and regulations imposed by the authorities. The dry, formal quality of the memo is derided in its concluding lines, which then go on to dedicate the film to "Luis Buñuel, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, Akira Kurosawa, Orson Welles, Juan Carlos Tabío, Elia Kazan, Buster Keaton, Jean Vigo, Marilyn Monroe and all those who, in one way or another have been involved in the film industry from Lumière up to the present." The postscript guarantees that carbon copies will be distributed to cinema managers.

Following the film's credits, the camera registers the funeral ceremony of Pérez, who is described as a committed proletarian. As the speaker references the deceased man's achievements, an animated sequence interjects that shows Pérez's major accomplishment, the manufacturing of a machine that could automatically produce sculptures of José Martí, a revolutionary Cuban poet. As the sequence proceeds, we see Pérez operating the machine and synchronizing his speed to its rhythm, only to end up being swallowed and killed by it. Linda Craig draws a cogent parallel between this sequence and Chaplin's *Modern Times*, where Fordist mechanization is condemned as a dehumanizing process of capitalism (see 2008, p. 529). Here, the filmmaker raises the alarm about a similar type of alienation, in a socialist society, which is equally vulnerable to the pressures of modernity. The film cautions that socialism runs the risk of degenerating into mechanized empty slogans – such as the ones uttered during the funeral eulogy – but also mechanized artistic products, such as statues with little artistic value and variation.

Michael North has aptly demonstrated the affinity between comedy and the culture of the machine in modernity. Comedy relies on machinic repetitions not because they are ipso facto funny, but because the machinic culture of modernity is simultaneously the source of excitement and anxiety. Comedy responds by showing how in modern times the shock can turn into routine, while routine itself can appear comic and strange (see 2008, p. 5). If we extend, North's comments to broader machineries of power in modernity, we might be able to read these sequences from the film as symptomatic of a fear that post-revolutionary Cuba might turn into a society that, not unlike its capitalist antagonists,

is committed to the reproduction of uniformity. The mass production of statues mocked in the animated sequence does not differ much from the Fordist motto of growth for growth's sake mocked by Chaplin in *Modern Times*.

Moreover, Alea cautions that absurdity and irrationality can become routine to the extent that they might not appear as shocking as such. This is succinctly signalled in a scene where Juanchín requests an exhumation order from a female civil servant. The camera frames both characters in a medium shot as the woman asks him for a court order. When she realizes that this is not available the camera closes-up on her face as she parrots the rules and regulations according to which without a health department authorization exhumation orders are not permitted until two years after the burial. We see the woman from Juanchín's point of view and suddenly the camera isolates her mouth and her lips. The sound and image are speeded up to the point that she sounds like a broken record. The motif of the merging of the individual with the machine that was a trademark of early cinematic comedies, is utilized here to reflect on how individuals turn into conduits for the stabilization of apparatuses of power and control. The representatives of state power appear as mechanical cogs in the machinery process of state power and control. Both the bureaucrats and the little man trying to find his rights within the bureaucratic labyrinth seem to be deprived of agency, that is, the capacity to reason and find solutions to not so complicated problems. The dialectics between the utopia of modernity and the domination produced by it, which were key motifs in silent American comedies, turn into a metacommentary that expresses fear for the degeneration of state socialism into a regime of centralized power interested in reproducing its own structures of administration and control.

Despite being a founder of the post-revolutionary Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry, Alea is quick to acknowledge the threat posed to the new society and the negative dialectics between utopia and reactionary regression. As Margot Kernan explains, "the main target of the satire is the residue of the neocolonial bureaucracy that still lingers in the revolutionary society" (1976, p. 49). Alea suggested after a festival screening that the *Death of a Bureaucrat* addresses the global problem of bureaucracy that affects countries irrespective of their political system. Here one is asked to consider the connection between bureaucracy and past social organisations. Kafka, for his part, reflected on the bureaucratic nightmare inherited by the former Austro-Hungarian empire. Similarly, Alea muses on the perpetuation of structures of control rooted in the former puppet-regime of Batista. With these in mind, one can see how Kafkaesque themes are interrelated to the world-system and structures of

global inequality as manifested in the unequal relations between core and peripheral countries.

In all the films considered here there are overt references to comedians from the twentieth century and particularly Chaplin, who made a career in the core country of the world-system, that is, the USA. Extending my proposal for the study of Kafkaesque cinema through a world-systems approach, it might be productive to consider the references to Chaplin – an artist renowned for his leftist political sympathies – not as a mere homage to a key film pioneer, but as an acknowledgement of the global challenges faced by modernity in different parts of the world system. In other words, Chaplin's comic response to the alienating structures of modernity turns into a reference point that is readapted and modified to respond to different modern political conditions and systems.

The culture of the comic grotesque manifest in the works of Kafka and Chaplin becomes pertinent as a cultural response to political and historical contradictions in the core and the peripheral economies of the world-system. But we might also want to think of cinema as the cultural medium par excellence that reflects the division of the world into centres and peripheries. Eric Hobsbawm has famously suggested that people from the early days of the twentieth century "learned to see reality through camera lenses" (1995, p. 193), something that can also make us consider how cinema in the capitalist core mediates our lived experience to cultivate cultural reference points and practices, which are then modified in other peripheral countries. Cinema became the emblem of the technological mediation of experience in modernity and cultivated not just means of adapting to it, but also responding to its alienating global structures. Kafka's literary texts were renownedly influenced by the new medium and this also applies to some of his early stories "drafted", as Roger F. Cook explains, before he "had actually watched a movie" (2020, p. 131). Cinema, thus, in modernity was a form of a cultural unconscious and this is also the case in our current mediated environment where the film medium is omnipresent in various media technologies and practices that perpetuate a modern ocularcentric culture and simultaneously blur the boundaries between the act of seeing and of being seen (see Stewart 2015, p. 22).

The study of these three films provides a relevant context for rethinking past and contemporary structures of control that have diminished human agency and empowered novel machineries of discipline and power that reside both in the global core and the global periphery. This article is a small part of a broader study of the Kafkaesque in World Cinema that aspires to demonstrate the structural analogies between films that appear in different geographical spaces and historical periods in order to reveal

the interconnection between the Kafkaesque cinematic aesthetic and global political tensions. A study of humour in films manipulating Kafkaesque motifs can enable us appreciate its political implications and consider its renewed currency in the present. Joseph Vogl famously suggested that "Kafka's comedy turns against a diagnosis that conceives of the modernization of political power as a 'rationalization process'" (qtd in Rabaté , 2018, p. 41). As I have argued in this article, this diagnosis is in line with much of the early cinematic tradition – deliberately invoked by the analysed examples – whose humour produces grotesque effects to reflect on structures of domination and control that permeate modernity and late modernity.

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