

**Between Semiotics and Puzzle Narrative Structure: An
Analytical Study of the Creation of Cognitive Dissonance
in Zeller's *The Father* (2020)**

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Abstract

This study examines the means of constructing an impossible puzzle narrative structure, using Zeller's *The Father* (2020) as its data by examining how the film immerses the viewers in a dementia patient's fragmented mind. The film's structure distinguishes it because it allows the film to be an experience rather than a story. The main aim of the study is to examine how the selected film employs psychological dissonance to create an impossible puzzle narrative, evoking a sense of disorientation in the viewers, and thus turns the film into a psychological experience. To highlight how the film manipulates classical narrative rules to create its puzzling structure, the study employs Kiss and Willemsen (2017) cognitive dissonance theory and conducts a semiotic analysis grounded in the analytical lenses of mise-en-scène and cinematography, drawing on the work of Bordwell et al. (2020). The findings reveal the means by which *The Father* (2020) creates its impossible puzzle narrative structure—spatial and temporal gaps, dual casting, semiotic alterations, among other elements. The study also reveals the techniques by which the viewers are turned into active participants in the meaning-making process of the film.

Keywords: *Cognitive dissonance theory (2017), Impossible puzzle narrative, Narratology, Psychological discomfort, Semiotics*

1. INTRODUCTION

While stories are a means of entertainment, they have also always been a powerful tool for education and spreading information. Over the centuries, storytelling methods have evolved from being oral to written to visually seen, creating a strong effect. As a result, one can argue that films have a stronger effect than the written word given that “films show people the story, while the novels tell people the story” (Bao 2008, 59). Therefore, films are

an effective medium for sending messages to a large mass of people since “the audience tends to believe that the image tells the truth” (Bao 2008, 59).

In their book *Film Art: An Introduction*, the American film theorists Bordwell et al. (2020, 2) support this argument by stating that “[f]ilms communicate information and ideas” as well as offer their viewers “ways of seeing and feeling.” In doing so, films “take [viewers] through experiences.” Therefore, films are an excellent medium for representing the experience of people who suffer from mind diseases. In doing so, films help audiences gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the disease, foster an empathetic reaction and, therefore, encourage a gentler treatment of these patients.

According to Bitenc (2020, 8), “Dementia is a progressive neurodegenerative syndrome” that causes “impairments to cognitive functions, among them memory and language.” While it has been represented in films before, the story of the people with dementia has rarely been told from their point of view. Representations of dementia patients usually focus on certain aspects, such as the heroic caregivers’ suffering (Capstick et al. 2015, 229). This representation encourages the viewers to empathize with the carers instead of the patients. This is what happens in popular films such as *The Notebook* (2004), where the audience relate to and sympathize with Noah, the patient’s husband and caregiver; rather than Allie, the one with dementia.

To create films that tell stories about dementia patients from their point of view, the films need to give the viewers a real sense of what it is like to live in the constant puzzlement state that dementia causes. Therefore, the narrative structure of such films is intentionally left incoherent to reflect the patient's confusion or puzzlement (Bitenc 2020, 4). This incoherence reflects how dementia patients experience time simultaneously while they are continuously losing their perception of it; consequently, their feeling of temporal coherence is usually “unclear and vague” (Deng 2023, 2).

This study examines the techniques by which filmmakers create a sense of psychological discomfort for the audience through the impossible puzzle narrative structure of Florian Zeller's *The Father* (2020) using Kiss and Willemsen's Cognitive Dissonance theory (2017) and semiotics. The film's disturbing feelings stem from the ability of its complex narrative structure to represent life from the protagonist's confusing internal perspective, representing what Zeller calls a "slice of dementia" (Ellwood 2021).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides an overview of narrative theory, puzzle film narrative theory, and semiotics, reviews previous studies on this research area, and concludes with the research question.

2.1 Narrative Theory

According to the American film theorists, Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith (2020, 73), a narrative is a story or is simply "a chain of events linked by cause and effect and occurring in time and space." These scholars then differentiate between the plot and the story by clarifying that "the story is the chain of events in a chronological order," while the plot is how the story is told (p.75). To examine the origin of narrative theory in better detail, one needs to go back to Aristotle because he is one of the earliest thinkers who laid the foundation for narrative studies through his work: *Poetics*. His ideas are still relevant because they explain how stories create emotional and intellectual engagement, forming the backbone of narrative theory. Buckland (2009, 2) explains that according to Aristotle's *Poetics*, arts stem from the need to mimic real life. Hence, Aristotle's definition of the plot is the arrangement of the imitated events in a way that successfully reflects real life (Buckland 2009, 2).

Aristotle distinguishes between simple and complex plots. According to him, a simple plot contains "a beginning (initiation of the action), middle (involving a complication of the action), and end (marked by the resolution of the complicating action)" (Buckland 2009, 2). His definition of a complex plot is exactly that

of a simple plot but with the addition of two elements; namely, reversal and recognition.

Buckland (2009, 2) illustrates that what Aristotle means by reversal is when the hero faces an unfortunate event that reverses his path. Recognition, however, takes place when the tragic hero discovers the reversal that has to happen to him. These two elements provide the plot with a causality that would not have existed if not for them. For example, normally in a simple plot, the characters' acts are the causes for the events to happen; however, in the complex plot, the audience have the normal causality driven by the characters alongside the causality that is out of the characters' hands.

Buckland (2009, 2) further elaborates by stating that even though a complex plot introduces events that are arguably a twist in the narrative, Aristotle still considers them classical mimesis because the reversal and recognition are usually necessary and even predictable. Aristotle even uses the term "*peplegmenos*" which translates to "interwoven" to refer to a complex narrative (Buckland 2009, 2). By this, Aristotle means that the events that happen to allow for recognition and reversal and which upset the hero's destiny are very much merged into the first line which is the plotline of the characters. As a result, recognition and reversal allow for a unified plot because in the end it looks like they are inevitable and somewhat even necessary and predictable (Buckland 2009, 2-3).

2.2 Puzzle Film Narrative Theory

Buckland (2009, 3) argues that there is a type of narrative that is even more complicated than what Aristotle names a complex plot, and that is the "puzzle plot". He believes that the events of a puzzle film are not just "interwoven" but "entangled" and, therefore, he argues that puzzle films are the category that comes after complex films in the category of complexity (Buckland 2009, 3).

The simple narrative structure of films denotes that a film must have a three-act structure —that is, it has a beginning,

middle, and end organized linearly in the narrative. To illustrate, it has an exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution—respectively (see Fig.1). People are used to the simple narrative structure through which films mimic the human experience and offer a clear representation of the emotions of the characters that mirror the emotions people experience daily (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 4).

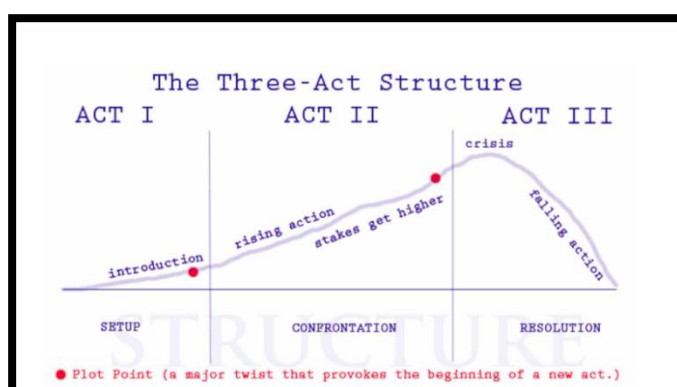


Fig. 1 – Three Act Structure Diagram (Maio)

To determine if the narrative style of any given film is a simple, complex, puzzle or impossible puzzle narrative, one needs to assess the degree of complication between the story and the way it is told; that is the mode of storytelling (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 23). To understand what a puzzle film is, one must understand the meaning of puzzle. As quoted in Kiss and Willemsen (2017, p.26): “Puzzles on the whole” according to Marcel Danesi, the puzzle historian, “are brain teasers that resonate with the deep-seated human ‘puzzle instinct’ – a universal ‘disposition’ that is best understood as part of a general and inherent need for sense-making.” A puzzle film narrative is not any different than a puzzle game, where the player has to put the pieces together in order to see, and therefore understand the whole picture of the puzzle. In playing a puzzle game, the player is highly interactive and not at all passive. Similarly, in watching a puzzle

film, the viewer is an active agent as viewers are actively engaged in making sense of the film with little to no help from the filmmakers.

According to Kiss and Willemsen (2017, p.4), since viewers are used to passivity while watching films, “confusing” narratives disrupt and deconstruct the “ordinary” function of films. Films with simple narratives allow the audience to be passive while watching them because a simple film is one that is readily organized by its makers without encoding any problems for the viewers to access or decipher its messages. Puzzle films, however, lean more towards giving the audience an “empowered” (Elsaesser 2011, 260) position. This way, the viewers take on the role of deciphering the message of the film by putting together the puzzle pieces in order to see the whole picture and make sense of the film.

Due to the nature of the puzzle film narrative, it is a perfect tool for posing "epistemological problems (how do we know what we know) and ontological doubts (about other worlds, other minds) that are in the mainstream of the kinds of philosophical inquiry focused on human consciousness, the mind and the brain, multiple realities or possible worlds" (Buckland 2009, 15). This quote illustrates how puzzle films are a good means of discussing philosophical questions that are related to the human consciousness. This type of narrative involves some elements that cause confusion and pose challenges to the viewers. Therefore, puzzle films are an effective tool for posing questions about the human mind and the nature of reality. Kiss and Willemsen (2017, p.6) agree with Buckland that impossible puzzle films “tend to elicit a state of ongoing cognitive confusion throughout the viewing experience” because the ambiguous storytelling technique of such films allows the presence of multiple paradoxes and incongruities.

Since films mainly depend on the schema and the shared knowledge of the logic and emotions of their viewers, narrative complexity takes place when these cornerstones are deconstructed. That is to say, “when a film obstructs or suspends its viewer’s

construction or comprehension of the story,” it causes “cognitive puzzlement” (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 26). This is exactly what puzzle films aim to elicit from their viewers (Kiss and Willemsen 2017,19). In this study’s case, the filmmakers try to elicit puzzlement from their viewers to align them with the protagonist’s disoriented perspective. This way, the viewers can get an idea of what it is like to be a patient of dementia, and in turn, understand this disease’s atrocious nature.

Kiss and Willemsen (2017, p.2) explain that the cognitive puzzlement which puzzle film narratives achieve by “blur[ring] the line between fiction and reality” deconstructs the passive voyeuristic viewing of films. It also highlights the power that the storytelling mode has and how it influences the audience’s understanding and overall viewing experience of the film. In other words, puzzle films immerse the audience into their story world and tempt them to figure out the laws of this fictional world and the logic on which it is constructed. By doing so, the whole film experience becomes highly interactive and immersive.

Kiss and Willemsen (2017) have decided to analyze narrative comprehension of films depending on the "cognitive core of cognitive dissonance theory" (p.67). The related concepts used by Kiss and Willemsen stem from the American social psychologist Leon Festinger’s argument that consistency leads to consonance; whereas, inconsistency leads to dissonance. His theory states that the human brain always wants clarity, and therefore its exposure to inconsistencies drives it to resolve dissonance. In other words, human brains do their best to resolve any cognitive dissonance to reach psychological comfort (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 67-68).

Building upon Festinger's observations, Kiss and Willemsen (2017, p.68) have observed that humans beings try to eliminate or at least reduce the dissonance when they experience cognitive dissonance by using one of the dissonance-reduction strategies: changing one or more of the contradictory cognitions, searching for new information, or reducing the importance of conflicting thoughts. They have also stated that impossible puzzle film makers

know that humans cannot stand cognitive dissonance and that humans do their best to reduce it. Therefore, film makers intentionally integrate a lot of contradictions, paradoxes, and ambiguities in order to grab the viewers' attention.

Kiss and Willemsen (2017, 71) have established that there are two major types of dissonant relations between cognitions when it comes to understanding narrative complexities. One is called "incongruities" and the other is called "impossibilities." Kiss and Willemsen (2017, 71) have clarified that incongruities happen when the film has conflicting elements within its diegetic world; whereas, impossibilities are when the film's world is in conflict with the viewers' real-life knowledge and sense-making. When these two elements are present, they create a sense of confusion that drives the audience to solve the puzzle. They also usually, but not always, exist hand in hand.

2.3 Semiotics

Danesi (2007, 10) states that Pierce, along with Saussure, is credited with establishing modern semiotics. Pierce's idea of semiotics is that people come up with signs in order to understand things in a "sensory-based way" (Danesi 2007, 10). Danesi (2007) then argues that semiotics is the "science of produced meaning" (p.3). He believes that one should study semiotics in order to understand the meaning of any form of art. He further narrows the study of semiotics by stating that it focuses on "the use, structure, and function of the signs (symbols, words, images, figures, etc.)" used in any form of art (Danesi 2007, 3). Semiotics involves many elements, including mise-en-scène and camera work.

2.3.1 *Mise-en-Scène*

According to Bordwell et al. (2020, 113), mise-en-scène is a French word which is literally translated into "putting into the scene," and signifies the director's control over the film as s/he decides what to be shown in each frame. This control is manifested through the choice of the setting, color, props, lighting, costumes, make up, performance, and blocking (the position that the actors take in relation to each other and to the items shown in the frame.)

2.3.2 Camera Work

Cinematography is the art of how every decision pertaining mise-en-scène is shot and viewed in front of the camera. This includes the camera movement and how shots are framed (Bordwell et al., 2020, 159). The framing of the shot is determined by the position of the camera since it “shapes the way we perceive the filmed event” (Bordwell et al., 2020, 178). The camera position is determined by observing its angle, height, level, and distance. The filmmaker can either set the camera at a high angle, low angle, or straight-on angle (Bordwell et al., 2020, 188). Each of these positions conveys a different meaning. A high angle shows that the subject is domineering, a low one conveys the subject’s weakness, and a straight-on angle gives the feeling of equality. However, the meaning of the camera position is never to be considered without its context. For example, a high angle shot of a person trapped in a ditch reflects a feeling of entrapment; whereas, a similar shot of someone on a mountaintop conveys triumph.

2.4 Previous Studies

The current academic analyses on *The Father* (2020) employ a different framework from the one adopted in this paper. For example, Li (2022) analyzes the narrative time of the film by dividing it into Bergson’s psychological time, which is the time that captures people’s subjective perception of time, and Genette’s space time, focusing on two types of time division: flashback and narration interspersed with flashback. Finally, she discusses the nonlinear film narrative that crystalizes the role of editing and Zeller’s mastery. The study concludes that the film immerses viewers into Anthony’s subjective experience, builds “a maze of memory,” and reflects Anthony’s loss by mixing between psychological time and space time (Li 2022, 920).

In Al-Basiony’s (2025) paper, the film is approached by focusing on the father-daughter relationship, Anne’s internal struggle and the used acting method. She analyzes the subtle differences in the set, applies Prague School’s theory of stage semiotization to understand the value of props, employs Lacan’s theory of the Mirror Stage to explore Anthony’s sense of identity,

and uses Stanislavski's method of physical actions to highlight the acting methods employed by the actors. Finally, she explores the emotional response elicited in the audience. The paper concludes by stating that Anne's silence throughout the film is nothing but a means of protecting herself from the torturous gradual loss of her father. It is also a reflection of her inner struggle between leaving her dad in a nursing house or putting her life on pause and staying with her father who treats her poorly.

While a number of papers use Zeller's *The Father* (2020) as their corpus, none of them has applied Kiss and Willemsen's cognitive dissonance theory (2017) together with semiotics to explore the techniques by which the disorienting effect of the film is created. This paper attempts to fill this gap by applying the above theory to reveal how cognitive dissonance functions as a narrative device that aligns the viewer's mental state with that of the protagonist. This study does so by answering the following research question:

1. How did the filmmakers create the impossible puzzle narrative of *The Father* (2020) and evoke a sense of psychological discomfort or dissonance for the audience according to Kiss and Willemsen's (2017) cognitive dissonance theory and the semiotic lenses of Bordwell et al. (2020)?

3. METHODOLOGY

This section includes the data description, the rationale for choosing Zeller's *The Father* (2020) as this study's data, the adopted theoretical framework and the procedures of the analysis.

3.1 Data

The data of this study is Florian Zeller's directorial debut *The Father* (2020) which is produced by the following companies: Canal+, Les films du cru, Orange Studio, Trademark Films, Film4 Productions, Ciné+ and F Comme Film. This film is written by the playwrights Florian Zeller and Christopher Hampton (Lemire 2021), and has an 8.2/10 rating on IMDb. It first premiered during

Sundance Film Festival on January 27th 2020. The film is an adaptation of Zeller's prize-winning French play of the same name that was performed in 2012. This one hour and thirty-seven-minute-long film is about an old man with dementia called Anthony (played by Anthony Hopkins) and his daughter Anne (played by Olivia Colman) who tries to take care of him while he struggles with time perception and identity loss.

The Father (2020) is chosen for this study because of its impossible puzzle narrative structure that mirrors the interior mental state of a dementia patient as it makes the audience delve into the patient's mind and experience life as if they were him. As its director Zeller says, "while many 'beautiful films' have been made about dementia, all of them have been told from the same outside perspective. 'So you know where you are and you know where you are going' — I was looking for something more challenging, which is why I had this desire to tell the story from the inside" (Ritman 2021). Zeller "never wanted *The Father* to be only a story, [i]t had to be an experience – of what it could mean to lose everything, including your own bearings" (Gilbey 2021).

3.2 Adopted Theoretical Framework

To conduct a qualitative study investigating how the impossible puzzle narrative structure is achieved using Kiss and Willemsen's cognitive dissonance theory (2017), the researcher needs to explain their theory in detail.

3.2.1 Cognitive dissonance theory

While Festinger's original cognitive dissonance theory takes a social psychological and behavioral approach, and aims at understanding or predicting human behavior, Kiss and Willemsen (2017) focus on the cognitive core of the theory. They connect this theory to the cognitive approaches to film in order to explain how film narratives achieve their puzzling effect (p.67). They also employ this theory in an attempt to understand the "cognitive processes of comprehension" (p.69), and the means by which viewers understand films. This theory is well-matched with this research as Kiss and Willemsen (2017) "argue that one of the key characteristics by which impossible puzzle films achieve their

distinct effects is their strategy of confronting viewers with cognitions that are dissonant” (p.67). In other words, both scholars state that the most effective way to confuse the viewers is by providing them with odd and nonsensical facts. Since this is one of the key characteristics of impossible puzzle films, it is clear that viewers will try to make sense of contradictory or paradoxical elements in the narrative. This, in turn, makes the film interactive (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 70).

Kiss and Willemsen (2017) have also observed two types of dissonance that impossible puzzle films rely on, which are narrative incongruities and narrative impossibilities. Incongruities happen when there are conflicting items within the film’s world: the diegetic world. On the other hand, impossibilities take place when there are items in the diegetic world in conflict with shared knowledge and schemata from the viewers’ real world (p.71). For example, seeing a flying man in the diegetic world is in conflict with schemata since it is impossible to find a flying man in the real world. The following paragraphs entail a thorough explanation for both types.

The first type of dissonance is narrative incongruity, achieved through denarration and narrative loop. According to Richardson, denarration is a “narrative strategy” in which the narrator “denies significant aspects of the narrative that had earlier been presented as given” (168). In films, this happens when the plot goes back and forth showing the viewers contradictive items and questionable facts, making the viewers realize that the paradoxes they see are not the subjective perception of a character in the film, but rather part of what the character believes to be an “actual diegetic reality” (Richardson 2001, 76). Kiss and Willemsen (2017, 78) explain that denarration dissolves the boundary between real and imaginary, resulting in “ontological incongruities,” which in turn cause “cognitive dissonance” because “ontological denarration is the core strategy of complexification. Ontological denarration happens when the filmmakers present some items to be part of the story world, and then present

contradictory ones. This leaves the viewers and the characters of the film unable to understand what is happening. Ontological denarration happens when the film lacks character unity and/or presents two story worlds in the same space and time without offering any explanation (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 79).

According to McHale (1987, 108), a narrative is considered self-erasing and violates its linear and chronological form when "two mutually-exclusive lines of narrative" experience a "development at the same time." To explain, when the representation of some narrative lines entails the negation of other ones, this causes the erasure of one of these narratives. For example, if the protagonist's daughter is X, then his daughter cannot be Y. Therefore, when the protagonist's daughter is presented as both X and Y at the same time, this causes dissonance. Moreover, impossible puzzle films do not offer any clue as to what the real story world is, and what the world that is just a projection of a character's perception of reality is. There is a blurred line between the objective and subjective narration in order to heighten the sense of uncertainty on part of the viewers (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 79). As a result, the viewers are made to experience the events from the perspective of the characters and go through the same experience as them.

Denarration is just one of the means of applying incongruities to films; the other one is narrative loop. According to McHale (1987, 108), the narrative loop takes place when the same event is presented twice in the narrative at two different times. According to him, this creates a sense of ambiguity that leaves the viewers unable to decide which one of the two presented sequences is the true one. Kiss and Willemsen (2017, 80) state that when films incorporate narrative loops, they violate the "spatio-temporal relations" and create "strong cognitive dissonances by creating paradoxical and incongruous relations among looping diegetic elements."

In simpler words, Kiss and Willemsen (2017) state that the viewers find it difficult to understand films created by filmmakers who opt for narrative loops and confront the viewers with two

different sequences. This difficulty arises from the viewers' struggle to determine the true chronological order of events. Therefore, this disruption challenges the viewers' perceptions of the timeline and spatial continuity within the narrative, making it harder for them to establish a clear understanding of the story's progression.

The second type of dissonance is narrative impossibilities, and these arise when the audience are presented with something in the story world that does not conform with the laws of the real world. These deviations may include events that are logically or physically impossible based on the real-world rules. Often, impossibilities and incongruities, which are contradictions within the narrative, are often overlapped, resulting in "impossible incongruities" (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 80). Kiss and Willemsen (2017) argue that impossible puzzle films rely on "impossible incongruities" to challenge the viewers' understanding of the narrative, causing a sense of confusion.

It is worth noting that both scholars state that sometimes these impossibilities seem normal within the diegetic world in which they are represented. For example, if the characters in the film can go back in time using a time machine, this time machine rationalizes the process of being able to go back in time. The presence of this prop allows for an "internally rationalized yet impossible scenario" (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 80-81). In other words, the process of traveling back in time is rationalized in the film's world due to the use of the time machine, but it is impossible in the real world.

It is normal for fiction to have imaginary worlds that are impossible compared to the real world. For this reason, Kiss and Willemsen (2017, 82) pinpoint the difference between physical and logical impossibilities. The former features talking animals or flying superheroes, while the latter features narrative structures—loops or dual actors portraying one character. These logical impossibilities make it hard for viewers to comprehend the narrative without exerting a lot of effort. Kiss and Willemsen

(2017, 82) state that story worlds can include elements that are physically impossible; for instance, the flying batman. This impossible physical feature can still be engaging as long as the film justifies it within its world.

Impossible puzzle films are characterized by an abundance of logically implausible occurrences, such as ontological inconsistencies, time loops, multiple character versions, and other perplexing aspects of fictional realms. These films intentionally include paradoxes to generate conflicting thoughts and feelings of dissonance in the audience. They do so by using intricate storytelling and complex story structures. Viewers may attribute the presented contradictions to these complex narrative techniques. For instance, viewers might think that there is a certain logic within the story of a given impossible puzzle film, but it is the intricacy of the storytelling that prevents them from grasping this logic fully. They believe that deciphering this logic is the key challenge (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 83-84). consequently, they become active participants in the meaning-making process.

3.3 Procedure of Analysis

For the analysis, the researcher has chosen the scenes that have a clear puzzling narrative and strong disorienting effect. These scenes are grouped into three tables, each representing a significant topic in the film. Each table contains sets of scenes selected from different parts across the narrative, highlighting how the film manipulates time. The duration of each scene is mentioned in section four.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

This section includes three groups where each group focuses on an individual topic from *The Father* (2020)—Men Hitting Anthony, Not Recognizing Anne, and The Dinner Scene. Each group includes a number of scenes that share a common theme but are non-linearly scattered across the film's timeline.

Group 1 scenes: Men Hitting Anthony



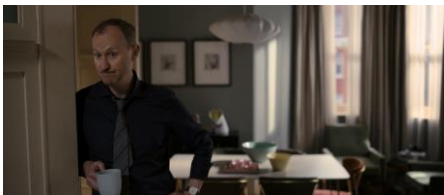
This group includes all the scenes related to the instance of hitting Anthony. According to the film, Anthony is hit only once;

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however, the scene is shown thrice where in each scene a different man is shown hitting Anthony. Scene one is from (0:45:35) to (0:45:53), scene 2 is from (1:07:39) to (1:08:27) and scene 3 is from (1:09:05) to (1:09:15).

Shot	Dialogue Summary
<p>Scene 1: (0:45:35) - (0:45:53)</p>  <p>Fig. 2 Paul (played by Rufus Sewell) asking Anthony "How much longer do you intend to hang around getting on everybody's tits?"</p>  <p>Fig 3. A medium long shot showing Anthony' clothes.</p>	<p>Paul approaches Anthony and says: "But I want an honest answer. Nothing fancy... Can you do that for me?" He asks Anthony: "How much longer do you intend to hang around getting on everybody's tits?"</p>
<p>Scene 2: (1:07:39) - (1:08:27)</p>  <p>Fig. 4 Paul (played by Mark Gatiss)</p>	<p>Paul and Laura (the nurse) are with Anthony at home because Anne is not home for the time being. Laura leaves Anthony to fetch his medicine. Upon leaving the room, Paul leans on the dining room's door and says: "But I want an honest answer. Nothing fancy... Can you do that for me?" He asks Anthony, "How much longer do you intend to hang around getting on</p>

asking Anthony “How much longer do you intend to hang around getting on everybody’s tits?”



Fig. 5 A close up on Paul’s (played by Mark Gatiss) face



Fig. 6 A close-up showing Anthony’s humiliation after being slapped by Paul (played by Mark Gatiss)

Scene 3 (1:09:05) - (1:09:15)



Fig. 7 Rufus Sewell is seen with Anthony

everybody’s tits?”

His question takes Anthony by surprise. He then asks Anthony if he is willing to stop ruining his daughter’s life soon. He slaps Anthony. Anthony tells Paul that he does not allow this behavior and Paul responds by slapping Anthony again. Anthony looks helpless and Paul slaps him for the third time.

Hearing her father crying, Anne hurries to the living room. Anthony is in the same defensive position, hunched over. In front of him is Paul (Rufus Sewell) rather than Mark Gatiss, looking at him uncomprehendingly.

Anne asks her father what is wrong but he does not respond. Paul says that he does not know what is wrong. Anne asks her father if he is sad because he cannot find his watch and tells him that she has found it.

The duality of actors involved in the instance of hitting Anthony along with the narrative loop play a huge role in creating cognitive dissonance. For starters, the audience are shown Rufus Sewell playing Anne's husband and asking Anthony "how much longer do you intend to hang around getting on everybody's tits?" Later on in the film, Mark Gatiss, who is now playing Anne's husband, asks Anthony the exact same question. In both scenes (Fig. 2 and Fig. 4), the actors playing the role of Anne's husband stand in the same spot and move in the exact manner until they reach Anthony and ask him the same question. The fact that both actors behave in the same manner and repeat the same question emphasizes the puzzling nature of the film's narrative and increases its ambiguity. Moreover, this repetition adds to Anthony's confusion, which, in turn, adds to the audience's confusion. The confusion arises because the viewers cannot differentiate between what occurs in reality and what is a projection from Anthony's imagination.

Moreover, when bearing in mind that the actor in scene one is Rufus Sewell and scene two is Mark Gatiss, one expects Anne (in scene three) to return to the living room to find Mark Gatiss with her father because scene three directly follows scene two. However, she returns to find Rufus Sewell with her father. Furthermore, when Anthony calls Anne crying, she is the one who hurries to him even though the audience were just told by Laura that Anne is not home and that Laura is home instead at the moment. These techniques create denarration, with each action negating the previous one. To demonstrate, when two actors play the same role, they make the character's identity unclear, casting doubt on the reality of what is shown on screen. It is logically impossible for one identity to be played by two different people, resulting in an impossible congruity and consequently causing cognitive dissonance.

The visual aspect also plays a role in creating the sense of confusion and disorientation. For example, the props (Anthony's clothes) make this action (asking Anthony when he will stop

getting on every body's tit and hitting him) look as if it did happen at two different points in time. In fig.3, when Anthony is in the scene with Rufus Sewell, he wears pants and a pullover. However, Anthony wears pajamas when he plays the same scene with Mark Gatiss (Fig. 6) and also when he is with Rufus Sewell again (Fig. 7). This change of clothing gives the impression that both scenes did not happen at the same time and are therefore two different actions.

Another disorienting factor occurs when Anthony asks Paul (played by Rufus Sewell) for the time, and Paul answers saying that it is eight in the evening, and that Anne is cooking chicken for dinner. In the last scene of this group, Anne repeats these same details. This consistency in time and action connects scenes one and three even though Anthony's changing clothes disconnect them. Furthermore, the sofa and chair are placed slightly different in Figs. 3 and 7. Moreover, in Fig. 3, there are sheets on the sofa and the chair; whereas, in Fig. 7, there are not any. All of these changes serve as a visual cue, highlighting Anthony's and the film's distorted temporality.

Another prop that adds to the confusion is Anthony's watch. In scene one of this group (featuring Rufus Sewell), Anthony is shown searching for his watch. Then, in scene three, when Anthony cries, Anne asks him if he is crying because he could not find his watch. This prop (the watch) connects scenes one and three; whereas Anthony's pajama connects scenes two and three, making the audience more confused. The watch in particular acts as a recurring motif throughout the film mainly to highlight Anthony's confusion about time among other purposes. In these scenes, it functions as a tool that creates a sense of continuity and links the scenes, further highlighting the circular, disordered nature of his experiences.

The editing of these scenes is a huge factor for creating confusion. The direct transition from scene two to scene three makes the audience assume that the slap by Mark Gatiss's character is also carried out by Rufus Sewell's character, even though it is never shown on screen. Thus, it is even harder to know

for fact the person who slaps Anthony. Moreover, the fact that Anne suddenly appears rushing towards Anthony from the kitchen is highly disorienting because the previous scene establishes that she is not home and that Laura is present instead.

Group 2: Not Recognizing Anne

This group combines four scenes that are all related to the instance of Anthony not recognizing his daughter. Scene one is from (0:02:20) to (0:02:36), scene two is from (0:14:07) to (0:23:18), scene three is from (0:38:20) to (0:39:00) and scene four is from (0:50:33) to (0:51:18).

Shot	Dialogue Summary
<p>Scene 1: (0:02:20 - 0:02:36)</p>  <p>Fig. 8 A medium shot of Anne</p>	<p>Anne (played by Olivia Colman) worriedly enters her father's house. She looks for him everywhere. She finally finds him. Surprised to see her, he takes off his headphones, and asks what she is doing here.</p>
<p>Scene 2: (0:14:07) - (0:23:18)</p>  <p>Fig. 9 A medium shot of Anne (played by Olivia Williams)</p>	<p>Anthony finds a stranger in his living room who claims to be Paul, Anne's husband for ten years. He also tells Anthony that he is the guest in this house as he is living with them until they find him another carer. Anthony tries to conceal his surprise but cannot help but ask if they have been separated. Paul tells him that they are still married. Anthony tells Paul that Anne is leaving for Paris because she has met a man.</p>



Fig. 10 Close up on Anthony's face

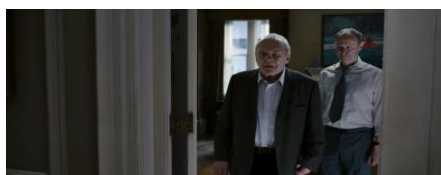


Fig. 11 A medium long shot of Anthony and Paul (played by Mark Gatiss)



Fig. 12 A medium shot of Anne (played by Olivia Williams) giving Paul (played by Mark Gatiss) the chicken to put in the kitchen



Fig. 13 Medium shot of Paul (played by Mark Gatiss) rushing Anne home



Fig. 14 Medium shot showing Anthony sitting in a corner

Paul dismisses this piece of information, as if he knows that this is nonsense.

Paul calls Anne and rushes her home. Anthony keeps calling Paul by the name "James."

Suddenly the door opens and Anne walks in. When Anthony sees Anne, he is taken aback because he cannot recognize her. He asks her where Anne is, to which she replies that she is Anne. Anthony tries to conceal his surprise and asks her what she has bought, she says chicken and gives it to Paul to take it to the kitchen.

Anthony seats himself in the living room, the woman approaches him and tells him that Paul says you are not okay. He tells her that he was in the kitchen and then found her husband in the house. She asks him what husband? He tells her your husband. She says that her and James have been divorced for five years. He asks her who is the man who took the chicken from you just now then. She tells him that there is no man and no chicken.

Anthony goes to the kitchen but finds it empty. He goes to his bedroom saying that this nonsense is driving him crazy.

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Fig. 15 High-angle shot of Anne (played by Olivia Williams)



Fig. 16 Low-angle shot of Anne (played by Olivia Williams)



Fig. 17 A medium close up showing Anthony's tense face



Fig. 18 Medium Long shot showing Anne and Anthony





 <p>Fig. 19 Medium long shot of Anthony walking down the corridor</p>	
<p>Scene 3: (0:38:20) - (0:39:00)</p>  <p>Fig. 20 Over-the-shoulder medium shot of Anne (played by Olivia Colman) and Paul (played by Rufus Sewell)</p>  <p>Fig. 21 Over-the-shoulder medium shot of Paul (played by Rufus Sewell)</p>	<p>Paul (played by Rufus Sewell) asks Anne (played by Olivia Colman) what is wrong. She tells him that when she came back with the chicken, her father did not recognize her.</p>
<p>Scene 4: (0:50:33) - (0:51:18)</p>  <p>Fig. 22 Medium long shot of Anne (played by Olivia Colman) in the supermarket</p>	<p>While she is buying chicken, Anne (played by Olivia Colman) answers her phone and says that she will be up in a minute. When she returns home, Paul (played by Rufus Sewell) takes the chicken and tells her that her father wants to see her.</p>



Fig. 23 Medium long shot of Anne (played by Olivia Colman) giving Paul (played by Rufus Sewell) the chicken to put in the kitchen

The first two scenes exhibit denarration given that at the beginning of the film, Olivia Colman is presented as Anthony's daughter without a doubt. However, the narrative erases itself when just a few minutes later, the viewers see Olivia Williams playing his daughter. The fact that there are two different actresses playing the same role is enough to cause dissonance as it is logically impossible for the same person to be two different people.

Scene two is particularly rich with cognitive dissonance. First, the viewers are introduced to Paul (played by Mark Gatiss) and see Anne (who is confusingly played by Olivia Williams) giving Paul a chicken, which he takes to the kitchen. Then, the viewers are surprised when Anne later says that she does not have a husband, that she and Anthony are alone at home, and that there was never any chicken. This contradiction creates narrative discontinuity and serves as a strong example of denarration.

When this is compared to the conversation in scene three, the confusion deepens. The dialogue between Anne and her husband in scene three complements the events of scene two, yet the actors and actresses in both scenes are different, even though they are playing the same roles. To illustrate, in scene two, Anne is played by Olivia Colman and Paul is played by Mark Gatiss; whereas, in scene three, Anne is played by Olivia Williams and Paul is played by Rufus Sewell. This inconsistency further adds to the cognitive dissonance experienced by the viewers.

Besides having dual actors, the film goes the extra mile to create cognitive dissonance by having the actress (Olivia Williams) whom Anthony mistakes for his true daughter (Olivia Colman) eventually be revealed as his nurse in the nursing home where he spends his last days. In this instance, cognitive dissonance stems from the fact that, in reality, one cannot confuse one individual with another unless one is aware of the existence of both individuals. Therefore, Anthony cannot mistake Anne for Katherine if he has not yet met Katherine. Similarly, he cannot mistake Paul for Bill at a point in time when he has not yet met Bill who is later revealed to be a nurse in the nursing home where Anthony spends his last days. When this happens, the audience is puzzled and cannot understand how this occurs, increasing the feeling of dissonance. This consistent inconsistency in casting disrupts the narrative's continuity and challenges the viewers' comprehension, causing cognitive dissonance. This is especially because there is zero justification as to why the viewers keep seeing the same role played by two different actors and actresses. It also creates a puzzling effect and compels the audience to engage more deeply and more actively with the narrative to make sense of these contradictions.

Semiotics plays a key role in constructing and deconstructing facts in the film world, and therefore, creating meaning. The dialogue, visual cues, and context of scene one establish the fact that Olivia Colman is Anthony's daughter as she is shown and addressed on screen as such since she addresses Anthony by "Dad" (*The Father* 2020, 00:02:18), to which he naturally responds. Anthony's confusion is brought forward using a close-up shot on his face as shown in Fig. 10. Moreover, the frame-within-a-frame shot shown in Fig. 11 serves to highlight Anthony's feelings of confinement and loneliness as he finds himself in a situation that he cannot navigate. The blocking of this scene reinforces his feeling of entrapment as there is Paul standing behind him and a woman he does not know, claiming to be his daughter, standing in front of him. There is no way he can escape. Anthony's loneliness is further reinforced by the wide camera shot

of Fig. 14, where he is seen sitting alone in a corner with a hint of the color blue in the background. The blue color reflects his sense of being cornered in his own mind, while also symbolizing the misery he feels.

The camera angle in Figs. 15 and 16 draws the audience's attention to the fact that this scene reflects Anthony's point of view. To illustrate, the low angle camera shot in Fig. 15 and the high angle one in Fig. 16 are both directly aligned with Anthony's eye line. This alignment subtly gives a hint to the audience that this scene – scene two of this group - is told through Anthony's point of view.

Both Figs. 18 and 19 evoke a sense of suffocation and anxiety. In Fig. 18, Anthony stands in the middle of a frame-within-a-frame shot, highlighting his anxiousness and imprisonment. This scene is followed by another one that further intensifies these emotions as Anthony walks down a corridor with closed doors as shown in Fig. 19. This hallway with closed doors is a visual representation of his mind. To clarify, just as he cannot unlock the doors of his own house, he cannot access certain functions of his brain. It is as if he is trapped in his own home; in his own mind.


When comparing Fig. 13 with Fig. 22, one gets highly confused. In Fig. 13, when Paul calls Anne to tell her to return home, Olivia Williams is the one who shows up right after as shown in Fig. 9. However, this very same phone call is answered by Olivia Colman as shown in Fig. 22 and not by Olivia Williams. Moreover, upon comparing Figs. 12 and 23, one becomes highly confused because the exact same action of Anne handing her husband a chicken to take to the kitchen is seen twice, and each time, it is performed by different actors. This change of actors and actresses disrupts continuity and disorients the audience.

Moreover, at one point in the film (*The Father* 2020, 00:22:36), Anne denies bringing a chicken as well as being married. This contradiction leaves the viewers questioning the reality of the events they witness. The repetition of the same action

performed by different actors, coupled with Anne's denial, highlights Anthony's unreliable memory and fragmented perception of reality. It becomes unclear whether these moments are actual events, distorted memories, or figments of Anthony's imagination. As a result, the audience experiences confusion similar to Anthony's, further immersing them in his deteriorating mental state.

Group 3: The Dinner Scene

Deciding if the following sequence is one or two separate scenes is challenging. On one hand, despite the looping nature of the dinner conversation, it might be considered one scene because it takes place in one place with the same characters. On the other hand, one can perceive the dinner conversation as two scenes because of the subtle differences in blocking, props and other elements that are discussed below in the analysis section. For this study's purposes, the researcher has decided to treat the dinner conversation sequence as one scene rather than two because this paper focuses on the means by which Anthony's distorted perspective of the world is put under the spotlight.

Shot	Dialogue Summary
<p>(0:53:10) - (0:58:32)</p>  <p>Fig. 24 A wide angle shot of Anne and Paul before dinner having a conversation about Anthony</p>	<p>Anthony moves towards the dining room and overhears Paul telling Anne that they need to put Anthony in a nursing home. Anne says that there is a new carer coming tomorrow. Paul insists on his opinion saying that Anthony's case will only get worse by time.</p> <p>Anthony then appears on the doorway and both are surprised and nervous when they see him. They try to act naturally and ask him to come have dinner. He sits down. Paul, trying to end the awkward silence, asks Anthony if it went well today. Anthony does not seem to understand what Paul</p>

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Fig. 25 A wide shot of Anne and Paul upon seeing Anthony standing on the dining room's door before dinner



Fig. 26 A medium close-up shot showing Anthony's perplexed expression



Fig. 27 A medium close-up shot of Anne and Paul after dinner having a conversation about Anthony

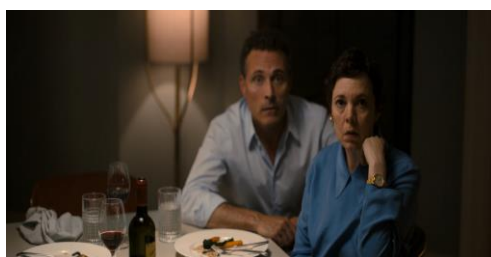


Fig. 28 A medium close-up shot of Anne and Paul upon seeing Anthony standing on the dining room's door after dinner

is talking about. Anne answers telling him that it was great. They start eating chicken.

Paul asks Anne if the new carer does night shifts. She tells him that the carer will do morning shifts only and that she will be with her father after she returns from her work. Paul looks at Anthony and tells him that he is lucky because he has a daughter that takes care of him. Anthony tells him that he is lucky too but Paul does not believe so. Anne is mad and takes the chicken to the kitchen.

Anthony asks what is wrong with her. Paul tells him that she is tired. Anthony advises Paul to take Anne on a trip. Paul tells Anthony that they were supposed to go to Italy but had to cancel because Anthony quarreled with his carer. He then asks Anthony if he is doing this on purpose. Anthony does not remember anything about this quarrel. Anne returns. Paul tells her that Anthony has forgotten. She asks Paul to stop being sarcastic. Anthony asks where the chicken is, Anne tells him it is in the kitchen and he goes to fetch it.

Anne is mad at Paul for saying these things in front of Anthony. He tells her that he understands her feelings but they need to put Anthony in a nursing home. Anne tells him that there is a new carer coming tomorrow. Paul insists on his opinion saying that Anthony's



Fig. 29 A medium close-up shot showing Anthony's perplexed expression

case will only get worse by time. Anthony then appears on the doorway and both are surprised and nervous when they see him. They try to act naturally and ask him to come have dinner. He does accept. Instead, he goes to his room.

This one long scene is a narrative loop because it starts and concludes with the same conversation, creating a circular narrative structure. The circular structure of this scene has a stronger confusing and disturbing impact on Anthony and the viewers than any other narrative loop in the film because, unlike the other looping instances, it folds back upon itself. In contrast, the other loops in the film take place at two points in the narrative that are far apart. To further explain, the other looping instances need the audience to be very actively watching the film to be able to connect them; however, this one is very easily noticeable, making this scene a visual representation of Anthony's worsening cognitive state, and highlighting an unprecedented level of cognitive deterioration.

The circular nature of this scene defies the spatio-temporal continuity of events and therefore causes dissonance for Anthony as well as the audience. For Anthony, his confusion intensifies because he cannot make sense of the situations he goes through. For the audience, this scene acts as a warning sign telling them not to believe everything they see because some things might be nothing but the mere reflection of Anthony's distorted mind. It also allows for an active engagement on part of the audience because they are tempted to put the puzzle pieces together in an attempt to see a clear picture and distinguish illusion from reality.

This fluidity of time is visually represented through props. At first glance, both Figs. 24 and 27 look identical. However, upon closer inspection, one realizes subtle differences. For example, in Fig. 24, the plates are empty but in Fig. 27, they contain some leftover food. Similarly, the glasses of water are empty in Fig. 24

and full in Fig. 27. This subtle, yet telling change in the details of the plates and water glasses signify that the -one and the same- conversation that occurs in Fig. 24 takes place before dinner while that of Fig. 27 takes place after dinner. Another change in props is represented through Anne's watch. In Fig. 27, Anne is wearing a watch; whereas, she is not wearing any in Fig. 24.

Blocking also plays a key role in highlighting the fluidity of time in Anthony's mind. The change in blocking is represented through Anne's hand position when Anthony enters the room. In Fig. 27, Anne's hand rests on her cheek, while in Fig. 24, her hand is on her head. This subtle change might go unnoticed at first, reinforcing a general sense of unease and confusion. The fact that the dialogue, costumes and the setting in both scenes are identical gives the feeling that both scenes are simultaneously identical, and yet different.

Similarly, Figs. 25 and 28 share the same similarities and differences as the afore-mentioned Figs. (24 and 27). However, a new difference emerges in Figs. 25 and 28 that is related to Anthony's reaction. When they ask him to join them for dinner in Fig. 25, he accepts, but he declines the invitation when they repeat it in Fig. 28. Furthermore, Anthony's costumes and facial expressions are identical in Figs. 26 and 29. However, his actions differ in both scenes as he once accepts the dinner invitation and another time declines it, confirming the fluidity of time and unreliability of narration.

5. Findings and Discussion

This paper's aim is to answer its research question that asks about the techniques the filmmakers of *The Father* (2020) employed to create an impossible puzzle narrative, reflecting the protagonist's subjective perspective and immersing the viewers in it. The findings of this study show that *The Father* (2020) constructs its impossible puzzle narrative by intentionally employing certain techniques that generate cognitive dissonance. Applying Kiss and Willemsen's (2017) cognitive dissonance

theory clarified how the film manages to induce psychological discomfort and confusion in the viewers. The filmmakers are well aware that the human mind cannot deal with nonsensical matters and when presented with them, it tries to resolve them to clearly understand what is happening. In *The Father* (2020), the filmmakers purposefully fill the narrative with confusing elements such as a fragmented timeline, different actors playing the same character, altered physical spaces, among other alterations. All of these are carefully placed in the narrative to create cognitive dissonance, making the viewers experience a dementia patient's confusion and frustration.

The film's manipulation of its formal elements such as mise-en-scène, editing and camera work reinforces the sense of disorientation and enhances the viewers need to put the puzzle pieces together. For instance, subtle changes in props create visual discontinuity and therefore reinforce the sense of confusion. The fact that these changes are not easily noticeable mirrors Anthony's awareness that something is wrong without being able to tell what exactly is, which is a frustrating feeling. Additionally, the editing enhances the feeling of disorientation because there are no clues to tell that there is a transition in time or space.

Even though the viewers try to resolve the contradictions, they constantly fail because the filmmakers withhold clues that would help the viewers make sense of the narrative. By doing so, an impossible puzzle narrative structure is created, making the film an experience rather than just another representation of dementia in cinema. This sustained ambiguity reflects Anthony's deteriorating mental state as he can no longer differentiate between the past and the present nor tell if what he experiences is real or a projection of his fragmented memories. As a result, the viewers cease to be passive observers and instead become active participants as they experience Anthony's agony and, like him, try to make sense of their surroundings to regain their grip on reality.

6. CONCLUSION

This study explores the means by which *The Father* (2020) creates an impossible puzzle narrative by using Kiss and Willemsen's cognitive dissonance theory (2017) and conducting a semiotic analysis on some selected scenes. The study shows that the film does not just aim to represent dementia, but rather ensures to make the film an experience that affects the viewers. By doing so, the film challenges the conventional means of dementia representations and paves the way for more accurate representations of mind diseases.

As for filmmakers, this study offers a foundation for knowing how to craft a film with an impossible puzzle narrative by understanding how dissonance is created and reflected from the screen to the viewers' brains. This way, filmmakers can deliberately create narratives that invoke dissonance and force the viewers to be active participants instead of passive viewers. This, in turn, helps the viewers relate to the protagonist of the film. This study proves that non-linearity and complexity are not just aesthetically pleasing but are also means for representing a story from a subjective point of view and creating an immersive experience rather than just representing a story.

Given that this is a qualitative study that has relied on theoretical analysis of Zeller's *The Father* (2020), it would be beneficial if future researchers build on this study by carrying out a quantitative one. In the quantitative study, researchers can engage the audience by conducting interviews and handing out surveys in order to quantify the degree by which *The Father* (2020) has a psychological impact on the viewers and how the viewers respond to such a fragmented narrative. This study would also highlight the varying levels of confusion that arise with different scenes and techniques that are inherently in the narrative in order to evoke confusion in the audience. As a result, the conclusion of the quantitative study would make people better understand how cognitive dissonance functions in practice. Such study would support and add to the findings of this current study by providing

empirical evidence of how impossible puzzle narratives affect the audience.

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