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Works Cited

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DRACULA (TOD BROWNING, 1931)

The Vampire's Secret

There are far worse things
awaiting man than death.

--Dracula

The images to which memory accrues!

In this timeless and utterly silent void, very like the pit of darkness at the bottom of the brain that opens, in sleep, to draw us through, there moves the sombre, elegant, impeccably groomed figure of Count Dracula--stark white face, gleaming black hair, demonically luminous eyes. And there is the large, hawk-like, dreamily fluttering bat, no ordinary bat but a concentration as of intelligence or will. And the graceful ballet of white-gowned female figures, Dracula's trio of beautiful mute wives who, like their master, arise from their coffins when the sun sets. The conspicuously setting sun too is a strong image, if more abstract--the surrender of day's (reason's?) power to control, or at least to keep at bay, the forces of evil--evil "nature"--that surrounds us. And of course there is the potent image of Christian sanctity, the Crucifix, from which Dracula and his vampire-disciples shrink as if it were, not merely metal, but a blinding beacon of light.

Dracula as film and Dracula as novel: the "triumph" of Christianity over, as we say, the forces of evil. (Are all horror stories thus constructed, to provide us with this "triumph"?--the classic stories at least, before even the genre became self-reflexive and postmodernist.)

In Tod Browning's *Dracula*, in which the celebrated European actor Bela Lugosi made cinematically immortal the mytho-poetic figure of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, all is enacted against a background of utter soundlessness: except for the sweetly seductive opening bars of "Swan Lake," as the credits come on, the film has no musical score, no distractions from its spare, poetic, highly charged dialogue. (The film was made shortly after sound came into moving pictures; the further concept of providing sourceless music as background, to disguise a too-silent theatrical atmosphere, has not yet occurred to film makers.) In this, *Dracula* more resembles a dream than most surreal or fantastic films, since--I assume I speak for all of us?--our dreams lack musical accompaniment. Dream-like too, and eerily suggestive of that stylized, unvarying ritual that is the Catholic mass, is *Dracula*'s every movement, premeditated as a dancer's, or, indeed, a Catholic priest's. The unfolding of fantastic events as if they were decreed by Fate is ideally suited to such silence, for rational comprehension is hardly the point here, only this emblematic experience, both primitive, as life feeding on life is primitive, and sophisticated, for, unmistakably, Bela Lugosi in evening dress and cape, the most studied and articulate of villains, is sophisticated. As Werner Herzog has said, what is film but an "agitation of mind." To subject it to intellectual analysis, let alone academic analysis, may be to misapprehend its true nature, and to endanger our openness to its magic.

Yet analysis is always a temptation, especially analysis many years after an initial experience. It may tell us, along with things we want to know, some things we don't.

Seeing this classic *Dracula* for only the second time in my life, a remarkable sixty years after it was made and released, and nearly forty years after I'd first seen it, in the long-raised Rialto Theatre in Lockport, New York, I am struck at once and during the days following by a storm of images-emotions-haphazard and teasing shreds of memory--it has stirred. Perhaps for many of us, for Americans of my generation most of all, it is film, thus the visual/aural, that has the power of Proust's madeleine to summon forth memory? Not the privacy of narcissism, the taste in the (child's) mouth, but the communal awe of the darkened, hushed, church-like movie theater, especially those movie theaters of old, that seemed to us places of legitimate wonder, and, indeed, were built to promote that fantasy; that swoon of expectation. *Dracula* plunges me into an obsessive consideration, not simply of the film, and the now-mythopoetic *Dracula*, and the novel of 1897 (which I first read in the early 1950s, no doubt immediately after having seen the re-issued film, and have subsequently "taught" in university courses, and written about, in an essay titled "Wonderlands"); not simply of the ingenuity of its bold conceit (which has to do, in short, as for instance Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books in their entirely different way, with the nightmare evoked by Darwinian theories of survival of the fittest and natural selection, morally repugnant to Victorian traditionalists), but of countless seemingly forgotten personal matters, anxieties of my own, and revelations too, small quirky bits of no possible interest to anyone but myself, or perhaps my parents; indeed, incomprehensible to anyone else. (For instance, it is fitting that I saw *Dracula* at the Rialto Theatre, not the Palace: the Palace, on Main Street, formerly a vaudeville house, had loges, velvet draperies, mock-Egyptian ornamentation, even a pastoral mural on its high, high

ceiling, and was, in a modest way, "palatial"--but the Rialto was small, unglamorous, in its later years frankly shabby, back off Main Street on the corner of Pine and Walnut, a place of second-rate Hollywood movies, re-issues, cowboy and Tarzan serials, children's Saturday matinees that transformed the place into a monkeyhouse. The Rialto was, in every sense of the word, backstreet.) Perhaps because I've seen the film during a period of personal stress, when, as it's said, "ego defenses" are lowered, I feel unusually vulnerable to such incursions from the unconscious, from that shadowy region of the brain where our oldest memories reside.

The most striking insight the film has left me with--though now that I've seen it again, how transparent, obvious--is that the figure of Count Dracula as played so coolly by Bela Lugosi is priestly; his formal evening wear, high starched collar, ankle-length black cape suggest the vestments of a Catholic priest, as do his carefully choreographed movements, the precision with which he pronounces words, enunciates syllables, as if English were a language foreign to him--as of course it is. And what resonance in this, for, in Catholic ritual, the priest celebrating the Mass drinks "the blood of Christ" (diluted red wine) out of a chalice, as the congregation prays, in the moments before the dramatic (to some, those who truly believe, intensely emotional, sometimes intimidating) sacrament of Holy Communion, during which the communicants come forward to the altar rail, kneel, clasp their hands, tilt their heads slightly backward, shut their eyes and open their mouths and, discreetly, extend their tongues an inch or two so that the priest can place the consecrated wafer on the tongue and murmur, in the past in Latin, Hic est corpus Christi: This is the body of Christ.

We were instructed to allow the wafer to dissolve--never to chew it.

We were instructed it was the body of Christ, Who had died on the cross for our sins.

We would be instructed, in time, if our curiosity had a theological bent, that, indeed, the communion wafer must not be confused with a mere "symbol" of the body of Christ, it is the body of Christ: that's how we Catholics distinguish ourselves from Protestants, forever.

As I've indicated, if you were a Catholic, especially a young Catholic, who unquestionably believed in this miracle--in technical theological terms, the "transubstantiation of the Eucharist"--going to communion was not a casual matter. Not only outward behavior during the hours between Saturday's confession and Sunday's communion must be strictly regulated (you must fast, for instance, from midnight onward, regardless of how late a Mass you attended on Sunday), but your every thought, and this means micro-, nano-, and wholly involuntary thoughts must be regulated. A single impure thought, profaning communion, could plunge you into mortal sin; if you died in a state of mortal sin you would go to hell, where your soul would be in torment forever.

Did I ever believe?--can anyone believe such things' I am tempted for romantic reasons to argue that, yes, I did believe, I was a true Catholic in those days, but in fact I remember myself too skeptical even as a child, a habit of mind I've inherited from my father; in church in particular I was

too restless in my thoughts to pay strict attention to the Mass-church was a place for cinematic day-dreams, an enforced calm. I could never make myself seriously believe that, in taking communion at the altar, beside the other communicants, I was being given the body and blood of Christ: this is a gulf, trivial to non-Catholic, immense to those who have grown up in Catholic surroundings, that separates me as a former Catholic from other former Catholics, including my husband, who did believe.

Not that Roman Catholicism is the only religion in which "ritual cannibalism"--vampirism'--is or has ever been practiced. It is simply the most elaborately reasoned of religions, the most politically powerful and traditional; the most "aesthetic." The very religion against which the Middle European "Nosferatu" (Romanian for "Un-dead") of legend defined themselves, in opposition, as damned souls, or souls that would be damned, if their Christian adversaries could catch them unprotected during the day, in their coffins, and drive stakes through their hearts.

My other insight into the probable reason that Dracula, the film, made such a strong impression on me as a child has to do with the fact that Bela Lugosi, in his ethnic-exoticism, somewhat reminded me of my maternal step-grandfather John Bush, who had emigrated from Budapest to the Buffalo-Tonawanda area around the turn of the century. I "Bush" is an Americanization of "Bus," which is Hungarian for "melancholy." No, no relation to the presidential Bushes.) Beyond this all resemblance ended, for my Grandfather Bush, a blacksmith and a steel foundry worker, a man particularly fond of hard cider, was hardly a figure of Austro-Hungarian nobility; his crude, candid, guileless manner was rather more that of the proverbial bull-in-the-chinashop than that of the demonic-priest Dracula.

My grandfather never saw Bela Lugosi on the screen, so far as I know-never went to the movies at all. Unlike my Grandmother Bush, he was able to read English, but his reading was restricted to the newspaper. At the time of the re-issuing of Dracula he was a worn-out, prematurely exhausted man though only in his sixties, soon to die of what would now be called an occupation-related condition (emphysema!). It was Grandpa's wedding portrait that suggested his ethnic kinship with Lugosi, the set of the eyes, the heavy arched brows, the thick stiff black hair, a portrait taken when he was in his early twenties, and dashing handsomeness, Magyar-exotic.

This old wedding portrait, long lost, of which I find myself thinking, so strangely and sentimentally haunted by, these days following my viewing of Dracula on our VCR.

Anyone opting to see a movie after forty years risks discovering that the movie will prove disappointing, if not embarrassing. I'd worried that Dracula as a film of 1931 would be too dated to justify discussing it in the speculative terms of an essay.

Not at all. The film is riveting throughout, intelligently and shrewdly constructed; it certainly deserves its classic status, and Bela Lugosi his fame. (As a yet more sinister, because wholly unsympathetic, brother-rival to Boris Karloff's immortal Frankenstein monster.) In terms of

contemporary cinema, of course Tod Browning's film is excessively melodramatic and stagey--the presentation of visual horror, in contrast to the more subtle psychological horror that prose fiction can render, is notoriously difficult. Yet, in a darkened movie theater, with an audience, if such an audience might exist, unfamiliar with the vampire legend, how much more effective than on the screen of one's household television where all images are domesticated, thus diluted. My initial response to the film is surprise that it moves so swiftly--too swiftly? Did early audiences catch the vampire exposition flung out at them, by frightened Transylvanian peasants on the eve of 'Walpurgis Night' In a mode very different from the mock-Gothic, systematically digressive Stoker novel, narrated from the viewpoint of numerous diarists and letter writers, the film reveals its secrets within the first five minutes, so that there is never any suspenseful doubt about the nature of Count Dracula: we soon see him and his three wives, dressed as for a formal evening, rising from their coffins amid a nervous scuttling of rats and spiders. (These creatures are shown fleeing the vampires!)What an eerie, yet elegant sight, and how disquieting it would have been, years ago, to a child unfamiliar with the conventions of vampire lore: for, if there is anything "forbidden" about adults in the night, in their beds, in privacy and secrecy, the vision of Dracula and his wives rising from their coffins would confirm it.

A technique Tod Browning uses throughout the film, no doubt for economy's sake, is nonetheless very dramatic: we see the initial movements of an action (Dracula rising from his coffin, for instance), then the camera cuts elsewhere, then back, and now Dracula is standing composed as if he'd been there all along. His later metamorphoses from bat to man--a bat hovering in the opened French windows of a young woman's bedroom--are even more striking.

The subliminal message is: Blink just once, and the vampire is already there.

The film *Dracula* differs substantially from the novel *Dracula*, having been adapted from a play, by Bram Stoker, now apparently forgotten; it is rather sharply truncated in terms of plot development, not rushed exactly but with an air, in the concluding minutes especially, of incompleteness. In place of Jonathan Harker visiting Castle Dracula for business reasons we have the less fortunate Renfield, who is quickly overcome by his sinister host, and, by way of a bloodsucking scene we are not allowed to see--the screen fades discreetly as Dracula stoops over his fallen prey--is transformed into a slave of Dracula's for the remainder of his life. Back in London, after the storm-tossed channel crossing, Renfield becomes the "zoophagous" patient of the asylum director Dr. Seward; the man is mad, exhibiting the grimaces, grins, and twitches that are the cinematic clichés of madness, yet he is mystically enlightened and even, at times, eloquent: his impassioned talk of life, life devouring life, life drawing sustenance from life, is a distillation of Darwinian theory, disturbingly contrary to Christianity's promise of spiritual redemption/ bodily resurrection. In the film, Renfield eats flies and spiders to provide him with "blood"; in the novel, he catches flies and feeds them to spiders, feeds his spiders to sparrows, and, one day, astonishes his keepers by eating the sparrows raw, and alive. Renfield's finest scene in the film is a speech of radiant madness, made to Dr. Seward and Van Helsing, a report of Dracula's Luciferian promise to him:

"Rats! Thousands of rats! All these will I give you, if you will obey me!"

Once Dracula has relocated to London and becomes acquainted with, and attracted to, the beautiful young women Lucy Westerna and Mina Seward, Dr. Seward's daughter, the story is an erotic fantasy in which the Stranger--the Non-Englishman--seduces one too-trusting woman, and then the other, beneath the noses of their male keepers. (The men are Dr. Seward, Mina's fiance Harker, and the scientist Van Helsing, an early prototype of the "wise scientist"--as distinguished from the "mad scientist"--without whom horror and science-fiction films could not exist.) The erotic triangle is a recognizable one: the "good" (i.e., gentlemanly, proper, Christian) man and the "evil" (i.e., sensuous, duplicitous, ethnically exotic, unChristian) man compete for Woman (i.e., virginal, Christian, and of the right social class). Woman per se is naturally passive, childlike, maybe a bit stupid; the contest is solely among men of varying degrees of enlightenment and courage. Van Helsing emerges the victor, saving Mina for his friend Jonathan Harker; in another mode of the fantasy, Van Helsing would marry beautiful Mina himself.

In the novel, Lucy Westerna's seduction/victimization/gradual death is the focus of much narrative concern; in the movie, the young woman is dispatched quickly, after a single visualized nocturnal appearance of Dracula in her room. Lucy's subsequent career as a vampire (who preys upon small children) is sketchily treated, and the extraordinary scene in the novel in which Van Helsing and his friends drive a stake into her heart, in a lurid, prurient mock-rape, is omitted entirely. (So violent, brutal, erotically charged, and, indeed, horrific a scene could scarcely have been filmed in 1931, though it would be a delight for our special-effects movie technicians to prepare today.) So abstract is this Dracula in its depictions of vampire-assault and ritual vampire-killing, so greatly does it depend upon dialogue summary, it might be possible for an uninformed or a very young viewer to miss the point altogether. What are those people in evening dress doing to one another?

It is the subtle, suggestive, disturbing appeal of the vampire that makes of the Dracula legend a very different fantasy from, for instance, that of the werewolf or the golem (Frankenstein's monster being a species of golem), whose grotesque physical appearance is sheerly repugnant and could never be construed as "seductive." The most insidious evil is that which makes of us, not victims, or not victims merely, but accomplices; enthusiastic converts to our own doom. The way of the vampire is the way of an absolute addiction--for the taste of blood one might substitute virtually any other substance, legal or otherwise. one of the special strengths of the vampire, Van Helsing warns in the film, is that people will not believe in him--"rational" people--but it is primarily women who resist believing in his evil; like Lucy Westerna (whose name is transparently obvious--she suggests "Westernization," rebellious female doubt of patriarchal tradition), who becomes a vampire, and Mina Seward, who, but for the zeal of her male protectors, would have succumbed to the same fate. The beautiful blond actress Helen Chandler plays the role of Mina in the film as convincingly as one might do in so circumscribed a context; her one animated scene, when she is infused with a bit of Dracula's rich, centuries-old, Transylvanian blood, shows her surprising and exciting her staid English fiance with an unexpected erotic intensity otherwise absent from the film.

The struggle is not really between the forces of good and evil, or even between Christianity and paganism, but between "propriety" and "the forbidden."

Dracula is, on the surface at least, a resolutely chaste film. If lovely female bodies are violated by Dracula, the actions are never visually depicted; no skin is punctuated; the "two small holes" said to be discovered on the throats of victims are never shown. In the novel, Dracula's wives speak lasciviously of their bloodsucking as "kisses"--the most voluptuous scene in the entire novel occurs in Castle Dracula, as a beautiful young female vampire stoops over to "kiss" the semi-conscious Harker ("I closed my eyes in languorous ecstasy and waited-waited with beating heart")--but in the film Dracula's power seems primarily that of the master hypnotist, eyes gleaming, fingers outstretched like talons, capable of bending others to his will. His stylized movement as he bends toward a victim's throat only symbolically suggests a kiss, and only a psychoanalytic theorist, committed to seeing sexual imagery in all things, could argue that the vampire's "kiss" is a metonymical displacement for rape, or any physical, genital act. Is the vampire's "kiss" simply a "kiss"?--not on the lips, which might signal both complicity and adulthood, but on the throat, as a child is kissed, blessed, with no expectation of a response? Certainly the vampire legend, like many such classic-horror legends, has about it the air of the nursery. At their cores, these are cautionary tales for the infant in us all.

I note in passing how truly oblique this 1931 Dracula is: in a film in which blood is so crucial, no blood at all is ever shown on screen, except when Renfield, in Castle Dracula, accidentally cuts his finger as Dracula stares hungrily.

The true horror of Dracula, as I've suggested, lies in the man's will. He has an uncanny ability, which Bela Lugosi makes credible, to mesmerize his victims, thus to make them want him--this, one of the vampire's secrets, that the virtuous victim, who is us, can so readily be transformed into the evil accomplice-disciple. [As moviegoers are "seduced" by screen actors and actresses--otherwise, why movies at all?] Not mere destruction of the sort other, ugly, "monstrous" villains threaten, but the awakening of desire in the victim; an unholy, loathsome, yet clearly enormously exciting complicity in being damned. Civilization is a structure of artfully coded taboos, and taboos entice us to violate them, if for no other reason than to rebel against our parents, teachers, spiritual leaders who have indoctrinated us, or tried to, into the accumulated wisdom of the tribe. There is a yet more pernicious, because so romantic, sense that Dracula's interest in a woman is a consequence of her beauty. The most beautiful woman is the most desired woman, the most desired woman is not killed, but made a bride: this is her, and (our?) reward.

It's a matter of social class, too. The hapless little flower-girl, a street vendor, is a victim of Dracula's, but, unlike Lucy and Mina, she is merely killed. No mystery why.

The wish that desire of a brutal, primitive, Darwinian sort be rooted in physical attractiveness, thus in our individuality--this is surely one of mankind's most tragic, because infantile and enduring, fantasies, the secret fuel of sado-masochistic relations, in life as in art. To be raped--to be

murdered--to be devoured--because we are irresistible: what solace! That we might simply be devoured, as Renfield devours his flies, for the "life" in us, and at once forgotten, is too terrible a truth to be articulated.

Art, by its selectivity, is always a matter of fabrication: thus its great value, its solace. Lie to us, we beg of our cruder fantasies, collective no less than private.

"There are far worse things awaiting man than death."

Dracula's enigmatic remark, made in Dr. Seward's drawing room, passes virtually unheard in that context, though it is perhaps the most disturbing idea in the Dracula-legend. In other versions of Dracula (Werner Herzog's 1978 remake *Nosferatu the Vampyre*)(n1) the isolated and tragic nature of the vampire is explored; the vampire is less villain than suffering victim of a curse; an oblique kinship is suggested between Dracula and the rest of humanity--for aren't we all blood-drinkers?--carnivores--don't we all, in a myriad of ways, prey upon one another? This, the vampire's most startling secret, allows us to feel a tug of sympathy for Dracula, seeing that he is not really immortal or supranatural, but trapped in flesh, condemned to forever feed upon the warm blood of living creatures. Tod Browning's film is of course a conventional one structurally, and does not explore this theme. As the film moves to its prescribed ending scenes are accelerated, condensed; there is a chase scene of a sort, Dracula with Mina in his arms, Van Helsing and Harker in pursuit; as Dracula lies helpless in his coffin, Van Helsing, unassisted, quickly dispatches him with a stake through his heart, and the story is over. Fear has been aroused, fear has been protracted, fear is now banished: THE END is truly the end.

Strange, and revealing of the habits of mind to which we are all heir, that images that may endure in the memory for decades can be discovered, upon a re-examination, to have been strung out like beads on an invisible yet always palpable "plot"--the tyranny, not just of genre, but perhaps of film generally. Its great, raw, even numinous power resides in images; its weakness is virtually always narrative, plot. There is a new theory of dreaming that argues that dream-images are primary, culled from the day's experiences or from memory and imagination; the dream itself, as a story, is a pragmatic invention to string together these images in some sort of coherent causal sequence. If this is true, it argues for an even closer relationship between film and dreaming than film theorists have speculated upon.

I should probably confess that, contrary to the spirit of this collection of essays on film, I can't really claim that any film made an impression on me commensurate with that of the books I'd read as a child and a young adolescent; it's likely that, had I somehow never seen a movie at all, in my entire life, my life would not be very different from what it has been and is. Had I never read a book, however--that's unimaginable.

Yet movies, comprised of images, among these images the enormously inflated faces of men and women of striking physical appearance, have the power of lingering in the memory long after all

intellectual interest in them has been exhausted. Nostalgia is a form of sentimentality; sentimentality is over-evaluation; the "over-evaluation of the loved object" is Freud's deadpan definition of romantic love. To be haunted by images out of one's own remote past is perhaps a form of self-love, which is after all infinitely better than self-loathing. We seem, once we pass the approximate age of thirty, to be involved in a ceaseless and bemused search for the self we used to be, as if this might be a way of knowing who and what we are now. For me this contemplation of a 1931 *Dracula* first seen sometime in the early 1950s, when I was twelve or thirteen years old, seen again now when I'm fifty-two, has become a kind of conduit into the past, which deflects me from analyzing it in purely intellectual terms; I'm tugged by memory, as by gravity, to the old Rialto Theatre there at the corner of Pine and Walnut Streets, Lockport, New York, as if these early memories are fated always to be stubbornly rooted in time, place. Especially place.

As it happened, my father Frederic Oates worked through high school in the display departments of both the Rialto and the Palace Theatres, helping prepare the marquee and lettering signs (in water-color, on a black-lacquered and easily washable surface--the era of mass-printed cardboard posters hadn't yet arrived), and he tells me a fact that seems astonishing: both theaters, in a city of about only twenty-five thousand inhabitants, changed their bills three times a week. And these bills were double-features, plus a newsreel and a cartoon or comic short. So we're speaking of quantity, sheer quantity, in those pre-television, pre-Depression years. He tells me too, as explanation rather than apology, that he'd soon grown to be bored by movies since he had to see each new bill three times a week, in order to prepare publicity; and, since the display department was in the theater, in fact in the Rialto building, he had to listen to film dialogue again, again, again, to the point at which the entire phenomenon must have seemed--and here I am speaking for him, supplying my own metaphor--horribly like the maya of Oriental religion, the ceaseless flood of diversionary dream-shadows and delusions that constitutes life at the surface of being, not spiritual life, at the core. So, as an adult, he stopped seeing movies entirely, rarely watches television, and spends as much of his time as he can reading. Only once did he overcome his revulsion for the medium and see a movie, in my memory--*On the Waterfront*, in 1954, at my urging, and because the movie had drawn so much praise. (Did he like *On the Waterfront*?--well, it was "all right.")

Perhaps it's simply the case that, where romance isn't operant, our susceptibility to dreams is lessened. We see through them. We can't detect our own images in them. Our human propensity for "over-evaluation" shifts elsewhere.

Note

(n1.) Herzog's brilliantly cinematic remake is of the 1922 classic of the German silent screen, F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*. After writing this essay, I arranged to see the Murnau film, which is, as its reputation would have it, a remarkable work--a German translation of the very English Stoker novel into Gothic-folkloric terms, set in Bremen's old quarter and with an opening sequence in *Dracula*'s castle that makes comparable scenes in Browning's film seem stagey and low-budget by contrast. The Murnau *Dracula* is a bat only partway transmogrified into a man, and is both comically

ludicrous and terrifying; where, in Herzog, he acquires a tragic grandeur of a kind, in Murnau he is simply a monster, sub-human. Set beside this bizarre work of 1922, Browning's Dracula would be a distinctly inferior accomplishment apart from Bela Lugosi's performance, which sets a standard beside which all other vampire performances are invariably measured. (Frank Langella's Dracula of the 19705 is a sensuous-sophisticated remake in which the vampire is distinctly human, accursed like the Flying Dutchman, and perversely romantic in his fate. The break with the earliest Draculas, that of Stoker and Murnau, is complete.)

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By JOYCE CAROL OATES

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