# Cameras, Mirrors, and the Bridge Space: A Winnicottian Lens on Cinema

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**Abstract:** Film studies inspired by the theories of British psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott are scanty. Although this may be partly explained by Winnicott's own somewhat unenthusiastic attitude toward cinema, it should be fruitful to approach film, in both its form and content, by taking into consideration the relevance of some of his ideas. These include in particular the concepts of mirroring and transitional space, especially in relation to the idea of a bridge space connecting external reality to its filmed representation, as well as the latter to reality as perceived by the viewer's gaze. Winnicott's developmental model of mental processes could prove useful for an understanding of the structural and functional characteristics of cinema, as well as for providing original interpretations of individual films.

**Keywords:** bridge, camera, mirror phase, psychoanalysis, transitional space, Winnicott

Within the growing body of interdisciplinary psychoanalytic film studies of the past half century, authors have been inspired by a variety of metapsychologies, including classical Freudian, Lacanian, Kleinian, Jungian, interpersonal, and, indeed, openly eclectic. The relevance of Donald W. Winnicott's theories to this vast academic field, however, is as yet little explored. By introducing such concepts as those of the *good-enough mother, mirroring, true and false self,* and *transitional objects,* Winnicott (1896–1971), a prominent exponent of the British Object Relations school of psychoanalysis, has contributed to our understanding of the importance for child development of what he calls a *holding environment*. Of special interest in our context are also his original formulations (collected in the posthumously published *Playing and Reality* [1971]) of an imaginary space where fantasy, play, and creativity can occur (Figure 1).

 Mostly because of Winnicott's lifelong curiosity for the psychological components of cultural phenomena, and on account of the relevance of his devel-
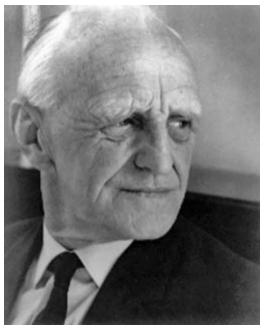
Figure 1. *The British psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott (1896–1971).*

opmental model of mental processes for an analysis of the structural and functional characteristics of cinema, I believe that an investigation of his contributions, however indirect, to psychoanalytic film studies is now overdue.

Especially significant in this respect is Winnicott's adaptation of the concept of the *mirror stage* (which Lacan had considered as a regressive aspect of the imaginary) to the intimate exchanges of gazes between mother and baby, facilitating in the latter the gradual establishment of a sense of personal identity—a process described by Winnicott as *mirroring*. This is consistent with his unique appreciation of the visual component of our experiences before the establishment of language (see Wright 1991). Furthermore, his conceptualization of a *transitional* (or *potential*) space, located somewhere between the self and the outside world, as the fertile ground of play and creativity, makes Winnicott's psychoanalytic theories well suited not only to provide an original understanding of the content of individual movies,[1] but also to study the more formal aspects of the filmic language, in particular through the exploration of that creatively ambiguous space that film opens up in the cracks between reality and fantasy, documentary and fictional narrative, history and subjective experiences.

I would suggest that one of the reasons why only a handful of psychoanalytic articles on film were written by authors making explicit reference to Winnicott's thought is that he had himself a rather unenthusiastic attitude toward cinema (though, it could be argued, Freud's disinterest in it never discouraged many of his followers to engage in psychoanalytic film studies). From the informal biographical research that I have recently conducted on Winnicott's views about cinema,[2] I would conclude that this particular art form was not one he felt specifically passionate or competent about, although he was probably curious about it much as we know he was, with almost child-like enthusiasm, about anything he happened to come across.[3] This would be indirectly confirmed by the scarcity of references to cinema in the numerous writings where he expresses an interest in the arts; for example, in some of his last letters to his friend and colleague Renata Gaddini he mentions a Vaughan Williams symphony, two Shakespeare tragedies, Rilke's poetry, and a novel by Virginia Woolf—but no films (Gaddini and Winnicott 2003). I could only find two passing references to cinema in Winnicott's writings: his suggestion that "the reappearance of the slavery theme in our books,

films and songs is largely our way of getting the feeling that we are ourselves free" ([1940] 1986: 215); and his linking one of his analysand's understanding of "children's love of the awful phenomena of gangster films" to that patient's realization of Oedipal issues ([1948] 1975: 172).[4]

In one of the few published articles relating Winnicott's theories to cinema, Ira Konigsberg comments on the centrality of Winnicott's idea of *potential space* for an understanding of film spectatorship: "The images on the screen and the emanating sounds put us into a state that makes us feel as if we were responding to transitional phenomena, a subjective-objective world, half real and half dream, half apart from us and half containing us" (1996: 874). With reference to the role that Gilbert Rose (1992) attributes to primary and secondary processes in transitional phenomena and creativity in general, Konigsberg adds that "early primary processes can sometimes remain strong enough to break through the controls of secondary processes and create fantasy in art or, in the case of film, a transitional world that transcends the normal limitations of time, space, and perception" (1996: 875). We can think of the screen, he goes on to say, "as the transitional place that gives the appearance of a reality following the laws of logic and physics of our own everyday world at the same time that such a reality is constantly manipulated" (ibid.).

Winnicott describes the transitional space as a sort of playground, "a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related" (Winnicott [1953] 1971: 230).[5] In line with his general views on the origins and functions of creativity, I consider cinema an eloquent instance of a playful activity (but, like a child's play, also an entirely serious one) which takes place in what, to use another spatial metaphor, I call a *bridge space*.[6] As an extension of the transitional space, the bridge space is an intangible yet at the same time real territory located on the boundaries between the internal and the external worlds. While Winnicott's concept relates to the potential space between two objects (to use his own colorful expression, "between the thumb and the teddy bear" [[1953] 1971: 2]) and implies a developmental movement from one toward the other (for example, from a mainly narcissistic investment on one's own body toward whole object relationships with other human beings), the bridge space metaphor also implies that—in the process of connecting two separate objects—it extends over and above the space between them.

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The fluidity of boundaries between objects, and more specifically between self and other, applies to aesthetic experiences in general, which can be considered sublimated versions of erotic ones. Referring to creative imagination, Rose describes it "as a bridge between ego 'core' and ego boundaries ... starting at any point and moving in either direction" (1964: 83). The bridge space image seems particularly appropriate as a description of

a cultural activity such as cinema. As well as linking the filmmaker's fantasies to those of the spectators, and the fantasies of both to objective reality, film imaginatively crosses over, so to speak, the everyday experience of the external world, while at the same time placing its very foundations in it—the piers that support the bridge. This crossing over implies a reference to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "suspension of disbelief," an aspect of illusion as necessary to film-watching audiences as it is to practicing psychoanalysts.

When viewing a movie or listening to an analysand, we are therefore placed in a position of potentially creative tension. On the one hand, we have learned not to let anything surprise us, aware as we are from our psychoanalytic experience that normality and pathology exist on a continuum. Bizarre as something appears to be, we must have seen it and heard it all before, and we assume it can only be the exaggerated or perverse variation on a familiar theme, nothing else than a more extreme or distorted instance of something already occurring within the vast range of normal experiences. On the other

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hand, while sitting in a movie theater or in our consulting room, we can only truly engage in our receptive activities of viewing and listening if our disposition is one of being open to the emergence of the unpredictable. After all, it is only what jolts us out of our expectations and makes us face and deal with what we had never before considered possible that our curiosity will be stimulated to pursue those activities, and make us richer human beings in the process. As long as we do not let it degenerate into morbid voyeurism (a risk, of course, always just behind the corner also for film lovers, and much exploited by producers for commercial purposes), our curiosity must be one of our main assets in so far as it allows us to expand our intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic knowledge of the world (external, internal, and whatever lies in between). At least in my own case, I consider my expectation of the unexpected, my momentarily child-like, irrational, and illusional belief in the magic of it, as a justification for my passionate involvement with both cinema and psychoanalysis—and for the bridge space that connects them.

We could now conceptualize as bridge space that which spreads out in front of the filmmaker's eyes and separates him from the scene he is in the process of shooting—but, at the same time, also keeps him in contact with it. A territory that will soon no longer be occupied by the images framed by the camera, but is not yet occupied by the final product to be eventually projected on the screen. Similarly, for the spectators collectively immersed into the regressive darkness of the movie theatre – a place that Bernardo Bertolucci has compared to the intrauterine and dream worlds[7]—this space of play and creativity is to be found, following the beam of light, which originates in the projection room, between their gaze and the screen. Our metaphorical bridge, in

other words, not only connects the respective worlds of external reality and its filmed representation, but also the latter with the reality perceived by the viewers' gaze. It is in Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* (2003) that one of its main characters (Matthew, played by Michael Pitt), as he describes himself in a voice-over monologue as a film-buff, states:

> *I was one of the insatiables, the ones you'd always find sitting closest to the screen. Why do we sit so close? Maybe it was because we wanted to receive the images first, when they were still new, still fresh, before they'd cleared the hurdles of the rows behind us, before they'd been relayed back from row to row, spectator to spectator, until worn out, second-hand, the size of a postage stamp, they returned to the projectionist's cab. (Figure 2)*

This no-man's-land between spectator and spectacle —as mysterious, fascinating, and perhaps also a little frightening as the setting of the Primal Scene—would have as one of its features that "nebulous" quality, which Renata Gaddini indicates as being one of the characteristics of Winnicott's prose. For her, his nebulosity "has to be considered . . . beside his idea of creativity. . . . It is an incentive to promote a response, an idea, a sign" (Gaddini 2003: 63). It can be related to his famous *squiggle game,* or to a meaningless word that nevertheless, as *spontaneous gesture,*[8] can evoke other ones in the patient, the reader, or the spectator. The flickering of lights and shadows, and the cinema bridge space in which it occurs, seem to have similar features, and consequently a similarly creative function; films can contain our anxieties,

*Figure 2. Matthew (Michael Pitt) sits close to the front at the Cinématèque Française (from Bernardo Bertolucci's* The Dreamers, *2003).*

nourish our minds, and even transform our lives. At the same time, in order to use an object and not just relate to it, this "must necessarily be real in the sense of being part of shared reality, not a bundle of projections" (Winnicott [1969] 1971: 88).

Winnicott's answer to the question: "What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face?" is that "what the baby sees is himself or herself" ([1967a] 1971: 112); and elsewhere: "The self finds itself . . . in the eyes and facial expression of the mother and in the mirror which can come to represent the mother's face" (1971: 271). Another aspect of mirroring, alongside the visual one described by Winnicott, concerns the reflection of the child's voice, sounds, and noises—a process I proposed to call *echoing:* "Such holding auditory reflection will eventually allow the child not just to produce sounds, but also to learn to listen to them, enjoy them and recognize them as his own. For 'echoing' to take place, the empathic and containing voice of his carers is an indispensable . . . resonance box to the child's voice: only by being talked and listened to by those who love him, the child will feel sufficiently supported to learn to listen to himself (literally and metaphorically) and thus gradually develop an individual identity" (Sabbadini 1997: 194; see also Anzieu 1985).

In parallel with the maternal function in this double process of mirroring and echoing, pictures and their soundtracks of spoken words, music and assorted noises could be considered, respectively, as mirrors and sounding-boards on which—by projecting aspects of ourselves—we search for a sense of our own identity.[9] Such a search is based on identificatory processes in relation both to the situations presented by the film's narrative and to its characters. But because the latter are often, for dramatic or comic purposes, either idealized or denigrated (the goodies and the baddies) in a collusion that inexorably links filmmakers and their audiences, it follows that the wish to find oneself is doomed to remain at least in part frustrated. Such a partial failure, though, does not seem to discourage spectators from repeating the experience with a new movie, hopefully better than the previous one. If they do not succeed, it is because the problem does not so much consist in the relative artistic quality of the film product, but in our own illusory and stubborn hope that we can transform the world that surrounds us through our own fantasies; that we might ourselves become the creators, with the stimulating help of the objects presented to us, of the universe we long for and, with it, of our own image, by projecting onto the screen/mirror in front of us a sort of private, and to a large extent unconscious, film.

Eberwein (1984) suggests a similarity between the *film screen* and the *dream screen* as places of both fusion and separation. The concept of dream screen, which Winnicott described as "a place into or onto which a dream might be dreamed" ([1968] 1989: 303), was originally developed by Bertram D. Lewin: "I conceived the idea that dreams contained a special structure which I

named the *dream screen*. . . . I thought of the dream as a picture or a projected set of images, and for the reception of these images I predicated a screen, much like the one we see in the artificial night of a dark motion-picture house before the drama has radiated forth from the window of the projection box" (1953: 174).

This "private movie," created for deep-seated unconscious reasons through the work of imagination, which each of us watches in the cinema, will be different from—though, of course, not entirely independent of—the one shot for us by the film director. It would also be different, to some extent at least, from the one watched by the other spectators in the movie theater. I have often heard friends describe to me in terms I could hardly recognize a scene from a film I had just been watching myself, or attribute to it a significance entirely different from mine. However, I can also see the validity of Emily Cooper's view who, in an unpublished paper titled "Film as a Good Mother," makes the alternative claim that "far from creating the film ourselves, the joy of film is to be presented with a meaningful world which has all been created for us" (2009: 26). This is how, she says, "film holds us . . . by inviting us to regress to an infantile state whilst firmly containing us" (ibid.: 1).

The assumption that spectators unconsciously contribute themselves to what they watch on the screen seems to me to be consistent not only with Winnicott's developmental model, but also with Christian Metz's seminal theories on the meaning of cinema. Metz observed that what runs in front of our gaze on the screen "is real (the cinema is not a phantasy), but the perceived is not really the object, it is its shade, its phantom, its double, its *replica* in a new kind of mirror" (Metz [1974] 1982: 45). Where would the spectator's point of view then be placed? Metz believes that a viewer could only identify with the camera that has preceded him in the act of looking. This, I think, may be true in an abstract, theoretical sense: of course, we do know that what we are watching is just a film, performed by actors, shot by a camera and projected on a screen, in the same way as we know, upon waking up in the morning, that what we have lived through in our sleep was just a dream. And we do understand that the perception of seamless frame-to-frame movement, of three-dimensional images on a two-dimensional surface, of regressing in time in the flashback sequences, to mention just a few of the artifices of the cinema medium, is but an illusion. In reality, however, our experience as spectators is mostly a different one.

I would like to draw a parallel here with what happens in the psychodynamics of the developing child. In the beginning, a baby's primary form of relationship is his fusional identification with the mother: this we can compare with the spectator's identification with the point of view of the camera that has given birth to the film in the first place. I assume here that babies narcissistically experience their mothers as aspects or extensions of themselves (for

instance, the mother's nipple as part of the infant's own mouth), insofar as they cannot yet properly differentiate themselves from others, the inner world from the external one, sensations from thoughts. In this connection, Cooper relates Winnicott's concept of *unintegration* (the baby's primitive state of complete merging with mother) to the experience of watching a movie, "which invites you to feel a one-ness or fusion with the emotional force of the film . . . to feel the feelings of the film as though they were your own" (Cooper 2009: 6). As to narrative film, Cooper states that its primary task "is to feed us information at the pace at which we can digest it, and at precisely the moment we desire it. . . . The magic of timing in film is crucial" (ibid.: 12). This she links to Winnicott's idea of the baby's legitimate experience of omnipotence, whereby "the breast is created by the infant over and over again . . . [and] the mother places the actual breast just there where the infant is ready to create and at the right moment" (Winnicott [1953] 1971: 11).

However, as the child grows older, and assuming his primary identification was with a *good enough* mother (that is one who "meets the omnipotence of the infant and to some extent makes sense of it" [Winnicott (1960) 1965: 145]), he then gradually, though never entirely, begins to separate from her. *Transitional objects* (a concept, which, according to Winnicott, "gives room for the process of becoming able to accept difference and similarity" [(1953) 1971: 234]), come into play to help establish the separation-individuation stage of development (Mahler, Pine, and Bergman 1973), thus facilitating a first self to appear, and to recognize the other as other, separate from the self. This will eventually allow the individual to learn to engage in the life-long process of starting, developing, and ending other object relationships.

Analogously, we could suggest that movie spectators, although potentially aware of the existence of a camera somewhere in the background of their viewing and listening experience, grow out of it once they feel settled in their armchairs (sometimes with the help of a drink and a tub of popcorn) and the light in the cinema goes down. They can then immerse themselves in the sights and sounds of the film's narrative, feel held and contained by them, and let themselves be drawn into a complex play of identifications with, and relationships to, the different characters on the screen. In order to do this, the viewers must momentarily forget that they are watching a movie being shot by a cinematographer, and disengage from their original identification with the camera's point of view. I see this as a necessary step forward for the understanding and enjoyment of film (and, indeed, of any artistic object); however, I am also aware of the contradictory nature of the intrinsic element of regression involved in this process.

Occasionally spectators may be made conscious of the existence of the camera. This happens when they get drawn, as it were, "behind" the film by a filmmaker's deliberate self-reflective gesture. A classical instance of this can

be found toward the end of *Persona* (1966), when the camera turns, as it were, on itself, to expose to us cinematographer Nykvist and director Bergman in the process of filming *Persona*! (Figure 3) In other words, the audience is placed here in the paradoxical (and voyeuristic) position of watching as an intrinsic part of the film a scene about the making of it. Viewers can also become aware of the presence of the camera in movies dealing with certain themes (for instance, scopophilia or filmmaking itself)[10] or by the introduction of explicitly subjective shots. An early and remarkable instance of this can be found in the opening sequences of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931): almost four minutes shot entirely from the subjective point of view of Dr. Jekyll. It is as if the camera lens was placed in his eyes, allowing (or, rather, forcing) us to observe the world entirely from his perspective (Figure 4).

Furthermore, the authorial voice sometimes makes itself more audible through a deliberately emphatic use of certain filming techniques—an insistent use of a fixed or hand-held camera, circular movements around an object, close-ups on the eyes of a troubled character—and the audience therefore becomes more aware that there are filmmakers and their creative minds (as well as their tools) behind the film. This is perhaps much as the growing baby renouncing his primary narcissism eventually realizes that there is a real person behind the breast, and later also realizes that his doll is not a real child. This oscillatory movement, or crossing of the bridge space, between two states of

*Figure 3. The camera self-reflectively turns on the filmmakers themselves (from Ingmar Bergman's* Persona, *1966).*

*Figure 4. The viewer watches through Dr. Jekyll's eyes the audience he is about to address (from Rouben Mamoulian's* Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, *1931).*

consciousness is something we are also familiar with from our psychoanalytic work, as patients free-associating on the couch sometimes find themselves (and implicitly put their listening analysts) in a discursive modality characterized by a tension between solipsistic monologue and interpersonal dialogue.

Regressive moves toward primary identifications are possible not just in young children but also in well-adjusted, independent adults. These, however, should be considered as exceptions. The norm for the grown-up is to use the original identification with the good enough parent as a step toward forming relationships with others, much as the function of the camera is to offer the spectator an opportunity to move away from awareness of the apparatus that had produced the film and relate instead to what is projected on the screen.

Of course, when sitting in a movie theater, we do not find ourselves in the presence of a camera but of another machine that represents it: the projector. Although it could be argued that a film's very existence depends on the intercourse between the parental couple of camera and projector, in our viewing experience we mostly relate to this offspring by ignoring its parents.[11] According to Metz, during the screening of a film the spectator is transformed into a sort of searchlight "duplicating the projector, which itself duplicates the camera, and he is also the sensitive surface duplicating the screen, which itself du-

plicates the film-strip. . . . When I say that 'I see the film,' I mean thereby a unique mixture of two contrary currents: the film is what I receive, and it is also what I release" ([1974] 1982: 51). We find here again echoes of Winnicott's views: the British psychoanalyst, himself a talented graphic artist (the Christmas cards he designed with his wife Clare and sent every year to their friends have become famous), had apparently stated: "What you find in a picture is what you put in it" (Nina Farhi, personal communication, 2003).

Winnicott once quoted a patient saying that the painter Francis Bacon liked "to have glass over his pictures because then when people look at the picture what they see is not just a picture; they might in fact see themselves" ([1967b] 1971: 117). This detail supports the suggestion that cinema can function as a kind of transitional object, partly found by the spectators in the bridge space, and partly invented, that is to say created, by them. It also confirms the meaning of the screen on which the film gets projected as a magical, distorting mirror surface reflecting (almost) anything that we unconsciously wish to see in it.

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## Notes

[1] Some movies have already been interpreted with reference to Winnicott's ideas. See, for instance, Lebeau's (2009) reference to the *mirror-role* of mother in relation to the films of Michael Haneke; the concept of the *false self* in Newman's (1996) article on *Ordinary People* (1980); and in Brearley and Sabbadini's essay on *The Truman Show* (1998), where the false self is described as "the defensive structure brought into existence to deal with a world that is damagingly uncongenial to the infant's self" (2008: 436). For a more extended definition and description of these and other Winnicottian concepts, see Abram (2007).

[2] I have referred to some of my findings on Winnicott's relation to cinema (based on consultations with my colleagues Jan Abram, Nina Farhi, Jennifer Johns, Brett Kahr, Arturo Varchevker, and Kenneth Wright) at a conference of the Istituto di Psicoterapia Analitica in Florence (February 2004) and in a brief article (Sabbadini 2005).

[3] My colleagues were all convinced that Winnicott probably liked films but none of them were able to confirm that he frequently went to see them. On the contrary, Winnicott's life was so absorbed by his clinical work, teaching, and writing that, according to Kahr (personal communication, 2003), he would rarely go out in the evenings at all. Abram confirmed to me that "the impression from the archives and his writings does strongly suggest that Winnicott made little time for leisure activities and would have chosen music, theatre, and poetry before going to the cinema" (personal communication, 2010).

However, Varchevker (personal communication, 2003) told me that in 1970, a few months before his death, Winnicott discussed at his invitation Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* ( *Ladri di biciclette;* [1948]) at the Adult Department of the Tavistock Institute in London—perhaps his last public appearance. Winnicott found the subject of that film particularly moving and gave the impression that he had watched it more than once. Unfortunately, though, we have no recording or publication of his presentation on that masterpiece of Italian neo-realism.

In a 1978 interview, Winnicott's wife Clare revealed that the night before her husband died (on 22 January 1971), they had watched a film on television, identified by Kahr (1996) as a fifteen-minute comedy on vintage cars, *A Good Old Summertime*. Before falling into the sleep from which he never woke, Winnicott's last words, according to Clare, had been: "What a happy-making film!" (Rodman 2003: 369).

[4] I am grateful to Abram (personal communication, 2010) for drawing my attention to these quotations.

[5] I am aware of the risk of abusing such a concept by applying it to cultural fields outside those for which it had originally been formulated. At a conference held in the 1970s at the Los Angeles Psychoanalytic Society, Robert Stoller had invited everyone "to declare a moratorium" on the use of this concept (see Rodman 2003: 165). But, forty years since that warning, I feel entitled to break that claim for a moratorium.

[6] "A bridge is a structure built to span a valley, road, body of water, or other physical obstacle, for the purpose of providing passage over the obstacle" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bridge).

[7] "The movie theatre, in this amniotic darkness, for me has always been like a womb, so we are all dreamers, but dreamers in a womb" (Bertolucci and Sabbadini 2007: 384).

[8] "The spontaneous gesture is the True Self in action. Only the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel real" (Winnicott [1960] 1965: 148).

[9] It is probably not a coincidence in this respect that cinema is popular among adolescents. In this context, however, the term projection is only appropriate on condition that we

consider it to be the result of a positive effort to get to know oneself better, and not simply as a defense mechanism.

[10] Classical examples of films on voyeurism are *Rear Window* (1954) and *Peeping Tom* (1960). Films on filmmaking include *Day for Night* (La nuit américaine; [1973]) and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981).

[11] The few times when we become aware of the presence of a projector in the cinema is when it breaks down. This reminds me of an acquaintance whose house was near a railway station, and who only became aware of the noise made by trains when there was a railway strike. We are all familiar with attributing more value to our health, wealth, or indeed to any object (including in the psychoanalytic meaning of that term) as soon as we happen to lose it.

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