

The Curious Female Character in István Szabó's *Sunshine*

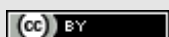
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Abstract: Hungarian director István Szabó's films usually feature the story of a young man on his way to becoming an adult during turbulent times in Hungarian history. Strangely enough, however, these stories are framed both visually and narratively in the presence of some female character – the plots, in fact, derive from the actions and decisions of these females. Zoltán Dragon's paper charts the underlying narrative and visual design in one of the best-known films made by Szabó, *Sunshine*, identifying the pattern of visual storytelling whose anchor point is one specific female figure, Vali, in the background. Vali's role as a focalizing agency is to frame the predominantly male story and reveal the hidden or silenced content that creates an alternative family story.

Keywords: *classical Hollywood narrative, Sunshine, István Szabó, female characters, performative subjectivity, photography in film*

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Usually considered one of the followers of classical Hollywood filmmaking in Eastern Europe, the Hungarian filmmaker, István Szabó, often incorporates elements of and direct references to the French New Wave (Bordwell and Thompson 1994: 548; 657-658). His films usually present the story of a young man facing turbulent times in history, trying to cope with adulthood and an unclear past—especially the lack of the father. His 1999 movie, *A napfény íze* ['Sunshine'], is a trilogy in one, as it follows the coming of age of three generations of the Sonnenschein brothers. Szabó continues the film style he developed during the 1980s in his films that brought international fame and recognition, including *Mephisto* (1981), which won the Academy Award for the Best Foreign Film in 1982, *Colonel Redl* (1984) and *Hanussen* (1989). These three films are not only significant for their awards and achievements. It is in this semi-trilogy that Szabó created a Hollywood style framework for his transgenerational sense of storytelling he had been experimenting with since producing his first feature film. With Klaus Maria Brandauer playing the lead roles in these movies, a continuous family history can be reconstructed



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along the lines of the historical settings and repressed psychic contexts whose marked absence helps reconstruct a secret story of the characters/bodies foregrounded (Dragon 2006: 3). While *Sunshine* seemingly continues tripling the focal male characters, it does so in one film, as well as in a very different diegetic structure which is based on the introduction of female agency in the construction of the narrative design.

My paper addresses the role and agency of the female character in the seemingly male story of the Sonnenschein family. Focusing on the female character is a rather overlooked aspect of Szabó's films in general and of *Sunshine* in particular. While in classical Hollywood narratives the female character has in some ways an objectified presence and acts as either a hindrance or an object of conquest for the male protagonist, for Szabó the appearance of a female character frames the male narrative on a visual level. In structural terms it means that Szabó's leading female characters are never passively waiting for the protagonists but use their narrative agency to move the plot forward, hence the term "framing" will be used both literally and structurally speaking.

The film starts with the death of Áron Sonnenschein, the owner of a village pub in the south of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the inventor of the herbal liqueur called "Sunshine," the name of which refers to the family's surname since it is a literal translation of the German *Sonnenschein*. His son, Manó, witnesses his death and, figuring that the only way to maintain the family is to leave home, he starts his journey to Budapest alone. The only resource he has is his heritage from his father, a black book containing the secret formula of Sunshine, and a watch that he found in the embers of the pub where his father died. Once in Budapest, he starts producing the liqueur and by the age of twenty-four he becomes a respected member of the middle class in the Monarchy. He gets married and has two sons, Ignác (played by Ralph Fiennes) and Gusztáv (played by James Frain). Following the brother's unexpected death, Manó adopts Vali, the daughter of his brother. The three young Sonnenscheins choose different careers: Ignác becomes a legal student, Gusztáv trains as a doctor, and Vali (played by Jennifer Ehle) discovers the power and beauty of photography. To make their professional lives easier and freer of hindrances, they decide to change their family name to get rid of its explicit Jewish connotation. As grown-ups, Vali and Ignác enter into an incestuous love affair and finally marry, while Gusztáv leaves the country in fear of persecution due to his participation in the Aster Revolution of 1918 and the subsequent political turmoil that occurred in 1919, resulting in the formation of the Republic of Councils in Hungary.

The further Ignác advances in his career, the worse his private life becomes, which results in Vali's estrangement from him and her eventual abandonment of him. As Ignác's health goes into serious decline, Vali returns with their two teenage sons, Ádám and István, to nurse Ignác. After Ignác's death, a new chapter begins in the film which focuses on Ádám's (also played by Ralph Fiennes) sports career. As was the case with his father, Ádám's athletic career is highly successful (he wins the 1936 Olympic Games in fencing), while his private life is also in ruins due to a secret affair with his sister-in-law. Again, history intrudes upon their family life: in 1944 the German forces invade Budapest, herd the Jews (the Sonnenscheins amongst them) into the ghetto and subsequently deport or kill them. Ádám's humiliating death is witnessed by his son, Iván (Ralph Fiennes's third role in the same film), who arrives home to Vali (now played by Rosemary Harris, Jennifer Ehle's mother), his grandmother, after World War II as the living dead. Surprisingly, Vali's foster brother, the émigré Gusztáv, also returns to participate in the new Communist government and acquires a job for Iván as an investigator of war crimes that were committed amongst members of the ÁVO ['State Protection Authority'], the secret police.

Iván's incentive in his job is to revenge the death of his father. He believes in communism and Stalin, but when he is ordered to find evidence against his benevolent boss, a father figure for him, that would furnish a reason for his execution on political grounds, Iván becomes utterly disillusioned with the Party. In 1956, he takes part in the Hungarian Revolution and is imprisoned. Upon his release, he returns to Vali, his great-grandmother, who dies shortly afterward. Vali's death prompts Iván to reclaim the original name of Sonnenschein and—while getting rid of all the worthless pieces of his heritage—start a new life.

In order to underscore the transgenerational aspect of the story of the family, all the three focal male characters in the successive generations of the Sonnenschein family are played by the same actor, Ralph Fiennes; curiously, this is not the case with the women. While it would be logical to follow the same casting pattern, there seems to be a clear demarcation between what belongs to the strictly narrative level and what is only apparent visually. Yet, interestingly, the narrative does introduce a female character similar to Vali in each segment to repeat the fate (the word is significant here, as in the second segment, to avoid being identified as Jewish, Vali, Ignác and Gusztáv change their family names to *Sors*, i.e. "fate") of the very first couple. Although the female characters who follow Vali (Greta and Carole, played by Rachel Weisz and Deborah Kara Unger, respectively) are just as transgressive as Vali was, it seems that Szabó wished to emphasize something more by consciously separating the logic of repetitions in terms of male and female characters. On the one hand, Vali has to be present as herself throughout the narrative since she is the only survivor of the first generation of characters. On the other hand, there is an additional element to her continuous presence that the other similar characters lack, and that concerns her performative engagement with the film on a diegetic level. As we shall see, Vali's presence thereby becomes the basis for the diegetic reality to unfold.

In this sense, focusing on the performative agency of the female character in a film whose every aspect is constructed like a classical Hollywood type narrative becomes a way of reading against the grain. However, it is only through this subversive approach that the structure and intricacy of the narrative of *Sunshine* becomes clear. The family genealogy functions as a filter by means of which the film's narrative emerges from the clash between the fates of the Sonnenscheins and the historical events that affect them. The voiceover narrator of the film is Iván, the son from the last generation, who ends his story by describing Vali's overall significance to the generations accounted for in the plot, then walking away, freed, with the original name of the family reiterated at the end. This closing gesture makes peace between the male picaresque narrative in search of the father, the element that sets the narrative in motion at the beginning of the movie, and the female visual framing agency that was responsible for focalizing the story.

The story of *Sunshine* focuses on the desire born with the first generation of siblings and repeated throughout the later two. While the plot introduces the origin of the Sonnenschein family prior to moving to Budapest, the narrative of the three male protagonists starts with Vali's arrival at the house as a small child. It is her appearance in the narrative, as she sits on the potty between the two boys, that sets the narrative of the first-generation protagonists of Sonnenscheins into motion. She brings difference into the family through her gender, sexuality, attitude and passion. Vali learns to play the piano and is the first intradiegetic character to play the main extradiegetic musical theme of the film, thereby introducing another structuring device into the design of the film's narrative. It is her desire that defines the first chapter and Ignác's story. Her presence secures the progression of the plot, which is markedly that of desire; unlike traditional patriarchal stories and narratological analyses, *Sunshine*'s story is not propelled by the male protagonist's desire.

In her reading of Roland Barthes's "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," Teresa de Lauretis explains that the principal logic of narratives is that of Oedipus, which she locates in the appearance of desire that becomes the core of any storytelling (de Lauretis 1984: 104). It is through their relationships to Oedipus that de Lauretis defines the narrative and structural roles that female characters can inhabit. In her analysis, the female characters, such as the Medusa or Sphinx can survive on the condition that they become inscribed as monsters in the hero's narrative (109). This inscription secures their position as signifiers of space (*topos*) by means of which the hero travels toward his aim. This also makes female characters hindrances, or objects for the male protagonist to overcome and conquer in order to fulfill his mission and complete his story. In *Sunshine*, the protagonist's story and his quest or mission is tripled in a way that echoes Jurij Lotman's idea of the diachronic character copies (117-118). For Lotman, morphologically and structurally speaking the successive roles of protagonists differ only in their distribution in time, context or modality, while retaining the very same or strikingly similar functions in a narrative design (118). While this is a general morphological approach to the study of narratives that has been enriched with de Lauretis's critical notes, it seems to be an accurate description of the matrix of characters in *Sunshine*.

While the approach de Lauretis introduces provides a solid framework to reinterpret the woman's role in classical narratives, Vali's character moves beyond that of being a simple bridge for genealogical transactions and storylines. In fact, she is the single character whose life encompasses the entire film, from the very beginning to the end, just as all the characters define themselves in relation to her. Ultimately, her life, story and actions frame the narrative of *Sunshine*, apart from the even more active role she plays in the visual organization of the narration. In other words, her role does not fit the classical narrative position for the female characters as argued above; instead, she is a truly performative subject upon whom the very narrative depends.

Vali's character is a unique female role that is pivotal both to the narrative as well as to the structure of that narrative. In other words, while her role is essential to the plot, it is her function within the overall structure of the narrative that renders her into an indispensable subject in *Sunshine*. Her agency as a visual meta-organizer in the realm of the filmic world calls for a radical reinterpretation of female subjectivity in the narrative structure of the classical Hollywood narrative of *Sunshine*. Not only is she an active character on her own, one who defies the objectification of the male look, but it is also her structural position that frames the three successive male stories, thereby allowing them to develop.

To define Vali's curious role in the diegetic structure of the film, it is not enough to rely on the narratological explanation for the role and position of the female characters in the classical narrative context. While de Lauretis attempts to free the female figure from her patriarchal constraints, *Sunshine* forges a position for her that goes beyond what traditional classical Hollywood narratives can offer. To account for such a new position, the subjectivity of the female character should be radically reconsidered within the context of Szabó's film. It is the newly found agency, the performative nature of the character that needs to be foregrounded. Based on speech-act theories of normative social order, this performativity should, however, point beyond the traditional critical assessment of the term. Enikő Bollobás's insistence on the ontological and radical nature of her version of performative subjectivity is pivotal in our case, since Vali's agency is the *origo par excellence* of the narrative realm of the *Sunshine*. As Bollobás explains,

My ontological or radical *performative* is quite different. Here new discursive entities come about against or in the absence of existing conventions.... When subjectivities are being performatively constructed, for example, figurations of new subjectivity will come about, typically involving the transgressions and extensions of categories. For example, the formerly disempowered will assume agency by resisting normativity and undermining the individualizing-normalizing-hierarchizing effect of power. In such cases, the subject does not come about via being interpellated by ideology, but instead by resisting this interpellation and resisting the normative codes of thought and behavior—by enacting a rupture from convention (Bollobás 2008).

On a narrative level, the female character in a typically classical Hollywood narration would be regarded as an objectified and disempowered figure, but in the case of Vali, her very appearance in the plot combined with her actions endow her with the creative agency that is signified by her embracing of photography, the creation of images and—ultimately—the framing of events, a career path that radically diverges from the family's interests. Vali's character is all about resistance, marking difference and transgressing ideologically safely guarded traditions. Bollobás's ontologically recalibrated definition of subjectivity is at the core of Vali's function as the focalizing agent for the birth of the filmic reality. This theoretical stance regarding the representation and the agency of the female character is very close to what Réka M. Cristian identifies in her study examining the development of women's image in Hollywood cinema. According to Cristian, the solution to changing the female roles in classical Hollywood narratives is not a simple gender switch in terms of the protagonist since this "would not solve any problems, because it would create a similar situation" (Cristian in Cristian and Dragon 2008: 88) to what the initial narrative construction would imply. Consequently, she calls for a "more intensified presence of women," a view that resonates with Vali's structural position in Szabó's film.

As an intense and crucial presence throughout the film, Vali also defies being objectified by the gaze, since she herself provides the visual structure in which the spectator is allowed to see the events unfold. When a family legend claiming that freshly blooming flowers fill the courtyard of their home when someone in the family falls in love becomes reality, Vali becomes the subject of the first visual anchor of the movie. While this legend may make complete sense in a rural setting, these flowers bloom in Budapest, in the courtyard of the Sonnenschein home which is located in the middle of the city. This almost magical event leads Vali to take her first picture; first, however, the chair standing in the middle of the scene must be removed. As Vali rushes to clear the scene, a thorn pierces her foot; while she is sitting on the chair attempting to pull out the thorn, Gusztáv leaps behind the large format camera and clicks the shutter. In this moment, the picture that represents the first still image that acts as a visual anchor throughout the narrative is born. As an image, a framed photograph Vali continues to be present (even when she is absent) throughout the rest of the film. This photograph thereby controls the scenes on a visual level by being either the focalizer (especially when equipped with her camera) or the subject within the frame (of the photograph and—metonymically—of the film). Her presence is materialized through the framed photograph of the flowers that bloomed out of her desire and love; interestingly, in the photograph itself she diverts her eyes off camera, hiding her gaze. The way in which photographer, the framer of the narrative, looks aside is a notable moment, one akin to the disappearance of the look and the birth of the gaze in the visual scenario described by French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan.

Lacan defines the gaze as "unapprehensible," as something there-but-not-there. The Lacanian gaze seems to be omnipresent while also being entirely absent. Lacan's text has more than just mere connotations to film and the visual arts in general because he uses the camera as a signifier for the gaze: "What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside...the gaze is the instrument through which...I am *photo-graphed*" (Lacan 1998: 106). The gaze "does not judge, create, or dominate," Kaja Silverman claims; it is only there to "put us in the picture" (Silverman 1996: 168). It thus turns out that it is through Vali's defiance of the objectifying male gaze that she herself becomes the structural point from which the photographic gaze emanates in *Sunshine*. This organizing principle is what frames the narrative diegesis in Szabó's film.

The story of the three Sonnenscheins is a retrospective narrative told by the last generation's protagonist, Iván. His storytelling provides the most conspicuous, dominating narrative voice that provides the linear and chronological structure for the film. This narration, however, fails to recover the hidden secrets that travel through generations within the very narrative it is supposed to explore. Following the voiceover narration, the viewer never learns about the fate of one of the most important objects that in fact sets the entire plot in motion at the beginning of the film. The notorious black notebook, containing the secret formula of the famous herbal liquid bearing the name of the family, disappears in the first third of the film. This disappearance becomes a void around which the story of the family navigates, as with this lack, the family name also changes. The narrative level does not take note of this shift and the narrator does not point out the curious simultaneity even when we finally, with the third generation of protagonists, spot the notebook. Although the moment the notebook reappears is a crucial event, the voice of the narrator does not even falter, thereby leaving this plot twist absolutely out of the story. The emphasis is instead placed on the visual level of the narrative; as the film halves its speed to slow motion to call attention to the event of losing the black notebook, Iván is seen searching through odds and ends that he is throwing out after Vali's death. Just as he accidentally grabs the notebook, Iván spots a letter falling out of it and instead reaches for the letter, leaving the notebook to fall and disappear. It seems that there are parallel stories running simultaneously: one on the narrative level, voiced by Iván, and one on the visual level, shown by Vali. Traditionally, classical Hollywood narratives are show-and-tell in their attempt to cover the story fully; in other words, verbal narration reinforces what one sees, and vice versa, the seen is also told. In *Sunshine*, however, the two levels introduce points of divergence that make it possible to tell different versions of the same story.

The technique deployed by the film is a separation of narration (Iván's role) and focalization (Vali's role) along gender lines. Two concepts of point of view are utilized to attain the effect of a double-sided story: focalization, which is "the optical perspective of a character whose gaze or look dominates a sequence," and narration, which can be defined as "the overall perspective of the narrator toward the characters and events of the fictional world" (Stam et al. 1992: 83). To put it bluntly, "the narrator is the one who 'speaks,' the focalizer can be described as the one who 'sees'" (Dragon in Cristian and Dragon 2008: 33). The narrator is an agent recounting the story, while the focalizer is an agent helping viewers perceive it.

The male narrative of *Sunshine* duly recounts the story of the family as a line of heritage passed down from father to son. The female narrative, on the other hand, seems to be more of a visual tableaux that, apart from providing photographic renditions of family events, also acts as an iconic anchor, a reminder and sometimes even as a counterpoint, to the story told by the voiceover narrator. In addition to the black notebook, another iconic image that recurs throughout the narrative without ever being mentioned by Iván: when Vali decides to take up photography as a hobby, she wants to capture every moment that seems to be either simply beautiful or in some ways valuable.

As we have seen above, the very first photograph taken in *Sunshine* ends up being that of the photographer herself.

The first photograph of Vali in the film comes to signify traumatic events concerning the relationships among the characters. Whenever there is a fight in the family in either of the three generations, some plate, bowl, or cup falls and breaks, and its pieces are meticulously and immediately collected by Vali, who places the shards right in front of the original framed photograph. The figure of Vali sitting on the chair as she tries to remove a thorn returns in a magical way for the second generation as a sculpture. Once again, it is not mentioned or explained in the voiceover narrative that it is Ádám who, having won an Olympic gold medal in fencing, meets his mother's embodiment when he visits a museum in Berlin. Ádám is to meet an American sports manager who would like him to move to the United States and pursue a fencing career there, when he suddenly spots a sculpture that uncannily replicates the moment eternalized by the framed photograph of Vali, his mother. This unlikely moment can be seen as yet another visual anchor that draws Ádám back home, where he starts a similar, quasi-incestuous relationship with his sister-in-law that also forms a repetition of the first generation's love affair between the foster siblings, Vali and Ignác.

Focalization in *Sunshine* is therefore not a simple narrative function: the visual composition of the sequences depends on the presence or absence of the photographic camera. It is by means of the device, or the presence of the photographer-focalizer character, that visual composition and framing are introduced. By creating a visual rhythm that sets anchor points and fills in the story's gaps, it is also the photographic frame that provides a viable structure for the voiceover narrative to proceed. Significantly, the intradiegetic device of the camera seems to be responsible for the color grading shifts in the overall visual design. Vali's cameras picture the diegetic reality in soft-contrast and grainy black and white images that intrude upon the moving image design and take over entire scenes toward the third and final segment of the film. The first occasion when this happens earlier in the film marks Ádám's return from Berlin, where he wins an Olympic medal only moments after facing the sculpture in the museum, which creates an intricate visual subplot that ties the original event to Ádám's life in a non-narratable manner. The second, longer sequence occurs when the photographic image frames the film's visual sequence a generation later, during the turbulent events of October 23, 1956, when the disillusioned Iván turns to his fellow revolutionaries and gives a fiery speech on the corruption inherent to the communist system. It is as if the visual level of the filmic narrative created a *mise-en-abyme* structure within the diegesis, as Pál Hegyi (2016: 50) explains this narrative technique in reference to Paul Auster's fiction, where Auster's narratives cannot be read without tackling the structural embeddedness of fictitious worlds within the actual textual realm, an element that is reminiscent of how Szabó's film organizes the diegetic structure by opening up a dialogue between the voiced and the seen.

The meta-sign quality of picture-making and framing in *Sunshine* cannot be mistaken. Vali sets out to become a photographer towards the end of the nineteenth century, when photography becomes ubiquitous and is established as a profession. Her large format camera is quite similar to the Lumière brothers' *cinématograph*, which she later switches to a foldable and portable medium format design that allows her to follow her sons and document their lives and achievements. It is right before the 1936 Olympic Games that a new, full frame device appears in her hands, thereby signaling the change of times and a recourse to the technology of the cinema. Leica was the first photographic camera to adopt the cinematic 35 mm film strip as recording material. It is significant that the designers of the camera decided to change the sequence of the frames from a vertical to a horizontal direction. In my analysis, this change signifies an alternative visual framing of the entire

plot that formally relies on the very same stock material, yet creates a different story. Vali's camera becomes a fabulation machine positing her in the role of the focalizing agency.

It is this crossing trajectory of the metaphorical film strip that best captures the alternative narrative that the focalizer of *Sunshine* is able to communicate. In Szabó's film, the curious figure of the female character gains agency in her own right by narrating against the grain of the voiceover that seems to pervade all corners of diegesis, yet covers the unnarratable fractures of the family history. It is very close to how, for example, Cristian (2015) assesses "the identity construction [that] operates in pluralistic modes on manifold levels" concerning Sandra Cisneros's intra- and extradiegetic, narrative and non-narrative positioning of the woman, translated as a structural position in Szabó's film. It is through the visual design and the performative potential of Vali's character, her identity constructed in a pluralistic way (as a character, the bearer of desire throughout the generations and a focalizer in the narrative), that fills in the blanks for the spectator and creates a female version of the male *Bildung* narrative. The visual framing deployed in *Sunshine* is able to bring forth the silenced female voice, the family's silenced, almost forgotten Jewish heritage and the desires that become unspeakable at some point in each of the three protagonists' stories.

Conclusion

Female characters in classical, Hollywood-type narratives are usually objectified, sidelined, and disempowered characters. Feminist studies have shown that in terms of structure and function, the narrative position of certain female characters can easily extend beyond being simple passive figures, even while still subjected to the male protagonist's quest that comprises the main narrative. In contrast to the usual Hollywood-type narrative, István Szabó's *Sunshine*, a film presenting the grand narrative of three generations of Sonnenschein men, posits a female character at the center of the diegesis instead of pushing her to the margins. The director therefore empowers her with an agency upon which the film's narrative rests from its beginning to end. The obvious narrative level is ruled by the voiceover narration of an intradiegetic character, whose omissions and silences are laid bare by the visual level of the film. Inexplicable, unvoiced or otherwise hidden content is put forth by the focalizing character's agency that is tied to one specific character in *Sunshine* whose life spans the three generations of the family: Vali, who—not coincidentally—also happens to be the only character whose profession is a visual one.

Vali is a photographer whose images anchor the triumphant or happy moments of the protagonists of each generation, complementing the male story in a scopic frame. These photographs, however, begin to assume their own function as they can be related to the specific moments and events that are not voiced by the narrator of the film. The analysis above has pointed out the significance of the camera as a framing device in the film and argued for the emphasis on the role and agency of the photographer whose visual narrative comes to frame the voiceover. Vali's character cannot be relegated to the traditional narrative role of the female in a male story and should therefore be reconsidered along the lines of a kind of performative subjectivity that forges an entirely new model for an active female role in a classical Hollywood narrative setting in Szabó's otherwise typically Hollywoodian film.

The penultimate sequence of the film is indicative of the significance of the visual level in contrast to the narrative voice. When Ivan is faced with getting rid of the family's useless possessions following Vali's death, he searches through a heap of tossed out objects while looking for two things. One is the watch that had been passed down through the male line of inheritance in the family, while the other is the infamous and mysteriously missing black notebook that contains

the recipe for *Sunshine*, the liqueur that created the Sonnenschein name and fortune. While searching through the debris, Iván actually touches the notebook, but becomes so occupied by the letter hidden within it—a missive apparently written by his grandfather and father in which they recorded their advice on how to be true to himself and lead a meaningful life—that he unthinkingly drops the notebook. While the narrative level voices the life lessons coming from beyond the grave throughout this last scene, the visual framing changes the pace of the succession of images and slows down the moving images to create a scopic anchor point for the viewer. Although the narrative voices the conviction that it is the lesson learned from the male heritage that frees Iván from the burden of the past, the visual level, framed by the agency of the female photographer's agency, shows a different explanation that is more in line with the overall narrative. *Sunshine* overwrites its own narrative with the introduction of a powerful focalizing agent, the woman, whose vision comes to structure the diegetic world of the film.

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