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NARRATIVE THEORIES AND NARRATIVE DISCOURSE

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Abstract: *In the period of the 1990s narrative is a central topic for literary, cultural, social and communication studies. Since television is considered by many authors to be one of the principle story tellers of the 20th century, media studies cannot ignore such narrative in post-modern discourse that typically blurs the boundaries between information and entertainment. Television is narrative in its substance and narratives are present in both fiction and non-fiction genres of film, the documentary, the news programme, commercials, reality shows and sport that television presents. This paper is primarily concerned with narrative theories applied in the research into media narratives.*

Key words: *narrative, media, discourse, method, approach.*

Narrative has existed from the time the first stone-age paintings were drawn in caves and the first stories were told at the tribal fires. In everyday life a person is surrounded by narratives from the time he/she is able to understand speech. Tales, jokes, novels, films, cartoons, newspapers, television news programmes and other people's obituaries, all of these and numerous others allow a person to learn about history, present day events or future. Whether narratives may be simple or complex, individuals need to be able to understand what their function is in order to understand the surrounding world.

Narratives, from the Latin word *narre* 'to make known, to convey information', provide individuals with a tool for learning and teaching others about the world. Narratives are also used by researchers as a metalanguage that enables them both to describe their research and to approach their object of study as a narrative discourse.

From its earliest days narratology carries multidisciplinary features. In the 1990s because the interest in a variety of aspects of narrative within the humanities rises significantly, resulting publications reveal a distinctly narrative turn in humanities. Narrative is no longer the exclusive domain of literary studies. The concept of narrative, in fact, can be found in almost all works produced by researchers in the humanities and social sciences, whether it is the primary focus of their work or just one element they deal with, whether they intentionally do so or are unaware of it. Consequently, narratology is more than ever before open to various methodologies of different fields: philosophy, aesthetics, history, sociology, psychology, religion, ethnography, linguistics, communication and media studies.

Since narrative is studied from a variety of perspectives, approaches to narrative vary significantly. It may be approached as a method to produce, as a theory to

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investigate, as a social practice, or as politics and strategy. In most cases, however, there are two main theories through which the relationships within which narratives are examined - the functionalist and constructionist theories, the former focusing on the role narrative plays and the latter on how it is produced (Threadgold, 2005, 262-267).

Paul Ricoeur and Peter Brooks represent an existential approach to narrative as a phenomenon giving meaning to people's lives. The cognitive approach represented by Mark Turner and Jerome Bruner deals with the narrative as an elementary instrument of human thought, of cognition. The aestheticians, such as Philip Sturgess, whose *Narrativity : Theory and Practice* published in 1992 can be used as a primary example, integrate narrativity, fictionality, and literariness as inseparable features. Sociologists focus on the contexts in which narrative is created. Technical approaches prefer language-based narrative analyses and include narratology proper, structuralism, linguistics and discourse analysis. Their intention is to find a place for narrative within discourse theory (e.g. in works by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, or Dan Ben-Amos). Narrative is even characterised as a concept, analytical category, discourse type, text type, and macro-genre (Ryan, 2004, pp. 2-8). With such a variety of contexts and approaches narratology enlarges into a very complex field.

The term 'narratology' is introduced in 1969 by Tzvetan Todorov (1977), originally in its French version 'narratologie'. Narratology is considered by some theorists to be a part of semiotics. For the first serious attempt to analyse narrative one has to go back to the philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle (1997) is still considered to be one of the most influential theorists of narrativity. In his *Poetics*, written about 330 B.C., he defines works of art as imitations of reality (in later introduced terminology known as 'mimesis') and specifies three areas related to imitation, those of medium (language, sound, music, etc.), object (people in action, later also calling it plot) and mode (narration or action – acting). For Aristotle art is a mirror reflecting reality (Aristotle, 1997). The analysis of television news narrative in this work uses Aristotle's imitation (mimesis) as one of the significant elements of narrative discourse.

Narrative theory (narratology) is originally developed by literary critics on the basis of the Russian formalist and French structuralist traditions. In general narrative theories are, after the WWII, divided into three main strands. The first one understands narrative as a sequence of events and the theorists focus on the narrative itself independent of the medium used. These are followers of the formalist Vladimir Propp (1968) and of the structuralists Claude Lévi-Strauss, Tzvetan Todorov (1977) and early Roland Barthes (1977). The second strand sees narrative as a discourse. The representatives of this strand are the successors of Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal (1985), and Seymour Chatman (1978), The final strand presents narrative as a complex artefact, the meaning of which is endowed by the receiver. Supporters of this post-structuralist approach are the later Roland Barthes (2004), Umberto Eco (1979), Jean Francois Lyotard (1991b).

Wallace Martin's (1986) diagram below portrays the variety of narrative theory in the second half of the 20th century. The French structuralists (axis 1, but sometimes including axis 5 as well) view narrative as a manifestation of social organization. They use linguistics in order to develop theories connecting literature, anthropology and sociology. Marxist

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critics and semiologists emphasize axis 5. Russian formalists contribute to the triangle 2. Point-of-view criticism deals with axis 3 in order to prove that readers are products of socio-cultural contexts that influence both their reading. Finally reader-response criticism emphasizes axis 4 to study how narrative is understood by readers.

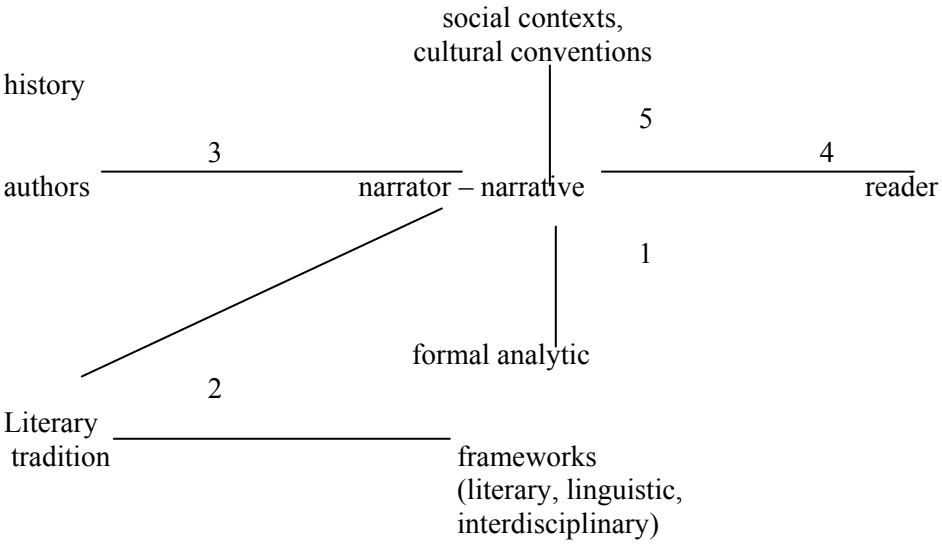


Fig. 1. *Narrative theories* (Martin, 1986, p. 29).

Axis 1 and axis 5 represent the theoretical framework of the presented research, the foundations of which lay in sociolinguistics, media and communication studies, and semiotics.

Vladimir Propp together with Viktor Shlovsky represent members of the formalist group, Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* written in 1928 (1968) becomes a classic for all theorists of narrative from the 1950s on and none of the works written on narrative neglects to mention it. It is constantly analysed and criticised by numerous theorists of media and many agree on the fact that the fairy tale is many people's first significant narrative and its elements motivate and/or are found in many popular genres (e.g. sci-fi films). By morphology Vladimir Propp (1968) means the structure, form and components of a system and his analysis reveals the structure of narrative present in Russian folktales. He provides a list of functions attributable to characters which are called 'narratemes' by present-day theorists and which appear, in modified forms, in various kinds of texts in different media even today. His work helps explain the structure of plots and roles of characters, i.e. the syntagmatic attributes of narrative (Berger, 1997, pp. 23-28). He also distinguishes between story (fabula), which is what happens in life in chronological order and plot (syuzhet) which is how the author presents the story to reader/audience, however it is read, heard or seen (Lacey, 2000, p.18). The work of Vladimir Propp (1968), moreover,

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is used by such scholars as Claude Bremont and Algirdas Julien Greimas, who, together with Victor Shklovsky, Mikhail Bakhtin, Roman Jakobson (1960), Boris Eichenbaum and Boris Tomashevsky all greatly influence the French structuralists who have an access to their works as late as the 1950s.

Structuralism is a method of analysis used in many social sciences in the 20th century. It examines the relations and functions of elements in various systems. In linguistics, structuralism it is represented by Ferdinand de Saussure; in anthropology, by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Structuralist narratology, building on the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Russian formalist studies, begins as part of the French intellectual tradition in the 1950s and culminates there in the 1970s. Only later, in the 1970s and 1980s, is it recognized in the English speaking world (Huisman, 2005b, p. 32).

Structuralists deal with the features common to all narratives, analysing the nature, form and function of various narratives. They focus on the level of story and use mainly literary narrative in order to study narrative grammar. For instance Tzvetan Todorov (1977), the Bulgarian structuralist, tries to uncover abstract narrative structures. Only William Labov (1972) and studies that follow him, such as those of Joshua Waletzky, deal with the level of discourse.

Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist, and one of the founders of semiotics (semiology), investigates the meaning of signs. His structuralist linguistic theory causes the so-called linguistic turn in the humanities in the 1950s. Ferdinand de Saussure's work influences the following period that focuses on deconstruction. Among his followers who deal with narrative representation and who also concern themselves with the study of media texts are Charles S. Peirce, Roland Barthes (2004), Jean Baudrillard (1994), Gilles Deluze, Jacques Derrida and Umberto Eco (1979).

Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French anthropologist and structuralist, contributes in the 1960s to the existing syntagmatic analysis by a paradigmatic analysis of text. If syntagmatic analysis deals with what happens in a text [structure of plots and roles of characters as in Vladimir Propp's work (see above)], then paradigmatic analysis uncovers the meaning of the text to people. Roman Jakobson's (1960) binary oppositions that are essential for the creation of the meaning of concepts, notions and ideas and Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics meet in Claude Lévi-Strauss's approach that identifies the existence of binary oppositions in the text as an element that helps readers to understand the meaning of the text (Berger, 1997, pp. 30-32). Claude Lévi-Strauss in his work *The Structural Study of Myth* (1963) shows how structural linguistics can be used in the systematic analysis of cultural contents.

Seymour Chatman's (1978) main contribution to the theory of narrative is *Story and Discourse.* He explains that story is the content of narrative (the *what* of the narrative) and the discourse is form of narrative (the *how*). According to the author the structuralist theory of narrative states that narrative (a narrative text, a narrative structure) has two parts. The first part, the story, consists of the content (the chain of events) and the existents (the characters and the items of setting). The second part, the discourse, is the means by which the content is expressed (Chatman, 1978, p. 478).

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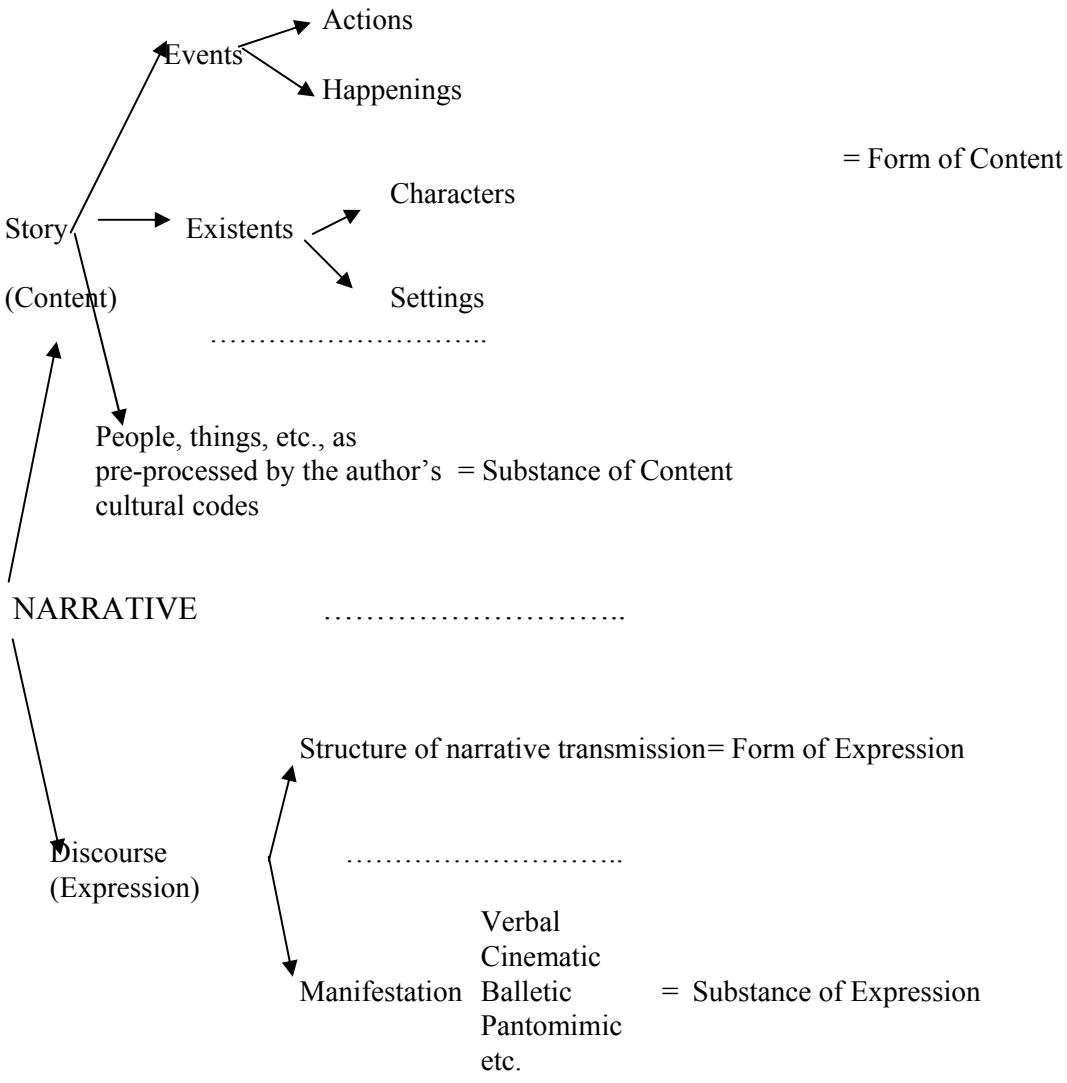


Fig.2. *Seymour Chatman's narrative discourse* (Chatman, 1978, p. 481)

As a semiotic phenomenon, narrative conveys meaning of its own and, as such, contains the form and substance of narrative expression as well as the form and substance of narrative content. Narrative expression is the narrative discourse and, while story is the substance of the narrative expression, discourse is its form with its various material manifestations (words, pictures, etc.). Narrative content also has its substance and a form. The substance is the set of possible events, actions that can be imitated by an author, and result in a particular form (Chatman, 1978, pp. 479-481).

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Narrative is understood by structuralists to be a form of communication. The real authors communicate a story (the formal content element of narrative) by discourse (the formal expression element) to real audiences through implied authors and implied audiences (Chatman, 1978, p. 483).

Gérard Genette, the French scholar of the structuralist narratology of the 1970s and 1980s identifies the elementary constituents and techniques of narrative working with three basic categories. These are tense (involving order, duration and frequency), mood (involving focalisation and distance, dealing with diegesis, mimesis) and voice (involving narrators and speech). Mieke Bal (1985) is listed amongst the most important theorists of narrative thanks to her work *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* published in 1985. She defines a text as "a finite, structured whole composed of language signs. A narrative text is a text in which an agent relates a narrative. A story is a fabula that is presented in a certain manner. A fabula is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors…" (Bal, 1985, p. 8). Mieke Bal is one of the first narratologists moving from structuralism to post-structuralism in the period of the 1980s.

Summarizing the above discussed issues one can claim that structuralists try to uncover a narrative's langue, i.e. a universal narrative structure and some elementary principles dealing with both syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions of narrative. The syntagmatic dimension links events rationally, on the basis of a cause/effect relationship or association. The paradigmatic dimension allows characters and settings to create another structure within narrative. Both of them result in sensible arrangements of characters, settings, events and time in the one complex whole (Fiske, 1987, pp. 128-129). When Vladimir Propp (1968) focuses on syntagmatic dimension of narrative in tales, he describes six parts of narrative structure (preparation, complication, transference, struggle, return and recognition) with 32 narrative functions within them. Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes focus more on the paradigmatic dimenstion. Lévi-Strauss analyses binary oppositions, showing that they represent an even deeper structure. Roland Barthes (1977) studies myth as a universal principle of narrative.

Not only Mieke Bal (1985) but also Roland Barthes (1977), the French critic and one of the most significant narrative theorists, broadens the realm of narrative theory by employing the methods of structural linguistics and anthropology and moves from a structuralist approach towards post-structuralist understanding of narrative. In his essay *Structural Analysis of Narratives* written in 1977, Barthes places narrative at the level of discourse arguing that "the language of narrative is one (and clearly only one) of the idioms apt for consideration by the linguistics of discourse…" (Barthes, 1977, p. 84). Narrative, then, represents a hierarchy of instances and, in order to understand it, one must recognize the construction of narrative at the level of individual functions [defined by Vladimir Propp (1968) and by Claude Bremond], the level of actions (by Algirdas Julien Greimas) and the level of narration [(the level of discourse by Tzvetan Todorov (1977)]. Barthes recognizes the existence of narrative communication, claiming that there is no narrative without a narrator and a listener or reader (Barthes, 1977, pp. 84-96). This recognition clearly involves elements of a post-structuralist, post-modern approach. The major step from a

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structuralist to a post-structuralist platform is made by Roland Barthes in his later works (e.g. *S/Z* published in 1975).

Post-structuralists analyse structuration (not a structure) of narrative. By structuration they understand the process through which the meaning is structured into narrative by both the writer and the reader. While structuralist examinations of narrative focus on the text as an object of study, post-structuralist, post-modern narrative theorists de-construct the narrative (the term de-construction is adopted from Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher) and emphasize the role of a subject (reader, listener, viewer) in the process of semiosis/ interpretation of meaning as well as in their understanding of narrative as communication. Taking into consideration perspective, subjectivity of interpretation and, consequently, the individual who creates and/or interprets the narrative, for the post-structuralists meaning or the process of signification are socially and culturally contextualised.

In the post-modern period narrative loses it marginal status and its analysis becomes a crucial element of fields dealing with the study of society, culture and the individual. Theorists and researchers recognize both the presence of narrative in the discourse of media and its role in structuring people's sense of reality. Recent analyses of media texts show that both fiction and non-fiction genres of mass media discourse are offered to the recipient in the form of narrative. Not only a horror film, but also a television news programme, provides audiences with either constructed fiction or created reality through telling them stories. It is more than natural because human beings from the beginning of their existence 'draw' and 'tell' stories about their inner lives and their experience in the form of narrative. At present narrative is viewed not only as a means to understand people's past experience, but also a possible explanation and mediator of present knowledge and practice. Clearly, media studies cannot ignore narrative that typically for blurring boundaries between information and entertainment.

Helen Fulton (2005) states that "feature films and documentaries tell us stories about ourselves and the world we live in. Television speaks back to us and offers us 'reality' in the form of hyperbole and parody. Print journalism turns daily life into a story. Advertisements narrativise our fantasies and desires" (Fulton, 2005, p.1). The author continues saying that in a post-modern society, narrative is perceived as a natural inner structure common for all humankind. At the same time it plays one of the most important roles in acquiring economic profit, it sells a product. From the point of view of marketing, narrative mediates the sale, presenting the products of media to their potential customers. Thus narrative strategies are applied in films, adverts, commercials, television news bulletins, comics, or newspapers. The primary function of mass media narrative is not only just to inform or entertain the recipient, but also, and even more importantly, to support the enormous media industry by enhancing sales of its products (Fulton, 2005, pp. 3-4).

Jean Francois Lyotard (1991a) perceives narrative as a mode of knowledge and at the same time as means of legitimisation of media 'message'. Within his narrative games, knowledge and information are distributed in society in the form of narrative. Hence the narrative defines conditions for the distribution of information and influences the performance of society. Narratives are the means through which society, state, institutions, producers, and individuals both legitimise their statements and create public consensus for their activities

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(Lyotard, 1991a, pp. 70-74). Media narratives support conformity and uniformity by offering dominant opinions, preferred ideologies, and agreed-upon models. Understanding, agreement and common attitude is only possible within these narrative games.

Post-modernism and its pluralism are also reflected in a variety of means of expression and of creative approaches and processes. Neither form nor genre predetermines suitability of the characteristics, selected approaches or elements used in the process of production. Television is a typical example of a post-modern collage in which individual products, genres, forms create the programme structure.

The theory of narrative used in research into media discourses builds its foundations on the above-discussed general narrative theories. Contemporary narrative theory encompasses structuralist and post-structuralist theories, methods of semiotics and approaches used in functional grammar. The focus is on both the creation of meaning in the process of signification (semiosis) and on issues of ideology. What Marie-Laure Ryan (2004) says about narrative in media summarizes the factors involved in contemporary approaches. She claims that narrative is not an artefact based on language but a mental, cognitive construct that is created by signs. It is constituted by pieces of reality, by setting and by agents/characters who perform their roles in actions/events and make changes in the world of narrative. For her "narrative is a mental representation of causally connected states and events which captures a segment in the history of a world and of its members" (Ryan, 2004, p. 47).

Study of narrative in media reveals its numerous functions, from being an entertainer in various genres (not only in anecdotes and jokes), through operating as an explanatory device in accounts and descriptions, to informing and instructing in news and tales, etc. Narrative is also viewed as an important identity marker (Thornborrow and Coates, 2005, pp. 7-9).

The critical tradition of narrative analysis within media and communication studies begins with Northrop Frye and his *Anatomy of Criticism* published in 1957 and Wayne Booth's text *The Rhetoric of Fiction* published in 1961. The integration of Russian and French theories of narrative with an account of English and American criticism is observed in works dealing with media written by Roland Barthes (1977), Jean Baudrillard (1994), and Umberto Eco (1966). From the 1960s onwards sociolinguistics involves oral narratives, their design, reception, function, content and organisation. Among those interested in aspects of media narrative relevant for sociolinguistic research one finds Joanna Thornborrow (2005a), Jennifer Coates, Ulrike H. Meinhof (1994), Nicolas Coupland (1999), Peter Garrett (1998), Martin Montgomery (2005), Terry Threadgold (2005) and others (Thornborrow and Coates, 2005, pp. 1-2).

American criticism of the 1970s with Jonathan Culler and Robert Scholes clearly shows the interdisciplinary and international basis of narrative theory that can be used in media discourse analysis (Martin, 1986, pp. 22-26). Especially strong is the more recent contribution of conversation analysis to the study of storytelling in media by Deborah Tannen, Deborah Schiffrin, Harvey Sacks, and Livia Polanyi. Contemporary theorist Monika Fludernik integrates the study of literary and oral narratives in her work *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* published in 1996 (Ryan, 2004, pp. 42-43). Arthur Asa Berger (1997) writes that reader-response or reception theorists

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claim that readers are required to approach narrative with their own experience and knowledge and thus individual readers may read a media text in a different way. He places narrative into a context of media communication taking into account elements of social context, author/creator, text, medium and audience.

The individual disciplines mentioned above use different narrative models and individual researchers focus their analysis on different aspects of narrative discourse.

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