



The importance of the cinema in Cuba can be seen from the fact that the Cuban film institute—the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematograficos, or ICAIC for short—was founded in March, 1959, just three months after the triumph of the Revolution. From an initially modest program and extremely meager resources, the Cuban film industry has today developed into one of the most politically and artistically vital cinemas in all of Latin America and one whose films have received international critical acclaim.

The United States' economic and cultural blockade of Cuba prevented Americans from seeing Cuban films until the Spring of 1973 when, through the combined efforts of the Center for Cuban Studies and the Tricontinental Film Center, Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT* became the first post-revolutionary Cuban feature film to receive theatrical release in this country. American viewers got a further glimpse when Humberto Solas' *LUCIA*, a three-part feature dramatizing the role of women in Cuban history, was released last year. (See also the article on "Recent Cuban Cinema" in this issue.)

While ICAIC has produced over 60 feature-length fiction films, it is for its documentary production that the Cuban cinema is most noted. As Todd Gitlin wrote in *The Guardian*: "The great strength of Cuban documentary films is in their method of conveying political lessons (in the literal sense, carrying them to you) by all available means and yet without preaching. They raise consciousness with a poke, a jab, a seduction, a caress, a tack on the seat, the rapid-fire juxtaposition of all such techniques."

Santiago Alvarez is generally regarded as the grand old master of Cuban documentarians. Born in Havana in 1919, Alvarez made two trips to the U.S., the first in 1939 and a second later to study for a short time at Columbia University in New York City. After returning to Cuba, he studied *Philosophy and Literature* at Havana University, was a founding member of the *Nuestro Tiempo* cine-club in the '50s, and actively participated in the underground struggle against the Batista dictatorship. After the Revolution, Alvarez was appointed head of ICAIC's Short Film Department. In 1960 he became director of its "Latin American Newsreel" and he and his co-workers have produced one *noticiero* per week ever since.

From the essentially straightforward, matter-of-fact reportage of *CICLON* (1963), a report on the devastating effects of hurricane 'Flora', Alvarez's later films demonstrate the development of a fast, free-wheeling editing style combined with a prominent use of music and the utilization of a wide range of materials and methods—live documentary footage, archival material, clips from features and TV programs, animation, graphics, historical footage, comic books, anything in fact—to make his point. As Gitlin describes it: "The incredible energy of Cuban life is echoed in the wild pace and hard variety of an Alvarez film . . . He thinks nothing of playing rock music over a shot of troop mobilization; George Harrison over parched Indian soil; Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto over the Havana skyline."

In *HANOI, TUESDAY THE 13TH* (1967), by showing us the daily texture of life in Hanoi under bombardment, Alvarez succeeds in showing us more about the resilience which allowed the Vietnamese to survive and fight their war than the voice-over rhetoric so often used in films on the Vietnam War. In *TAKE-OFF AT 18:00* (1970), he depicts Cuba at a turning point facing the American blockade, with the Revolution consolidated and the country mobilizing for the sugar harvest, preparing for economic take-off. His recent feature-length documentaries on Fidel's trip to Chile, *DE AMERICA SOY HIJO Y A ELLA ME DEBO* (1971), and to the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and Africa, *Y EL CIELO FUE TOMADO POR ASALTO* (1973), rather than merely recording the Cuban leader's travels, use these trips to

expound certain ideas. In the Chilean film it is the idea of Latin American solidarity in confronting the United States and, in *Y EL CIELO FUE TOMADO POR ASALTO*, the notion of Marxism as a humanism and the theme of proletarian internationalism.

Santiago Alvarez is presently in Vietnam where in February of this year he began production on *YEAR OF THE CAT*, a feature-length documentary history of Vietnam. In January of this year, Cinéaste had the rare opportunity to meet and talk with Alvarez when he was allowed into the U.S. as a member of a Cuban delegation to a United Nations conference. Those present at the interview were Rodi Broullon, of the Tricontinental Film Center, Gary Crowds, editor of *Cinéaste*, and independent film-maker Allan Francovich.

Q: We'd like to begin with a little personal history about yourself—what you did before the Revolution, how you came to work in the cinema, and so on.

A: Before the Revolution I was just a film buff, just a spectator like any other spectator from any other part of the world. I belonged to a cultural society *Nuestro Tiempo* [Our Times], which had a cine-club where we saw and theoretically discussed the film classics. Other comrades who today work at ICAIC—Alfredo Guevara, Julio Garcia Espinosa, Tomas Gutierrez Alea—also belonged to that cine-club. We also screened some of the classic revolutionary films from the Soviet Union. There was a distributor of Soviet films for Cuba and Mexico and we used to rent them and show them in a small movie house on Sunday mornings. We would get together to show the films and discuss them but it was also a pretext to recruit leftist people and talk about social problems.

Before that, in 1939, I lived in the United States, working as a dishwasher and working in the coal mines in Pennsylvania. It was here in the United States that I started to become politically conscious and when I went back to Cuba I became a communist. American imperialism is the greatest promoter of communism in the world. In fact, it was my experiences here that form the roots of NOW, my film against racial discrimination in the U.S. That film grew directly out of my experiences here. It all came back to me one day when I was listening to a song called "Now" sung by Lena Horne—it's a melody based on an old Hebrew song by an anonymous author. When I started to work on the film at ICAIC, that background, that experience, helped me—I used all the hate I had felt against discrimination and brutality.

I really started learning about the cinema in 1959. After the revolution when the film institute was created—it was the first law about cultural matters that Fidel signed—I started making a newsreel of the first trip that President Dorticos made throughout Latin America. That was the first issue of ICAIC's "Noticiero Latinoamericano." The day that the *Moviola* arrived at ICAIC so we could do the work it was a cause for celebration. It was a *Moviola* with only a viewing screen and no sound head, but I still have it and work with it. Every piece of equipment then, like the little pins where you hang the takes in the editing room, was something new for us. We had all talked about the cinema but we didn't know how to make it. Behind all our ignorance about equipment, though, there was a tremendous desire to move ahead, to fight the reactionary capitalist newsreels that were still being made and disseminating counter-revolutionary propaganda during that period in Cuba.

In 1959-60 there were still three newsreels in Cuba—*El Nacional*, *El Noticiero America*, and one more, I can't remember the name—which were transmitting news in a subversive, counter-revolutionary way about what was happening in Cuba. This was when Manuel Urrutia was President of Cuba. At that time, the Revolution hadn't

stabilized its power yet, there were still conflicts going on, there was much mass agitation, the people were restless, and the right was putting the Revolution in peril. It was then that we decided at ICAIC that we had to create a revolutionary newsreel that would promote the revolutionary policies and counteract the influence of the reactionary newsreels.

Q: *As time went on, was there any noticeable evolution in the style of the newsreels? It seems to me that there are a lot of similarities between your films and those of the Soviet film-maker, Dziga Vertov.*

A: Actually, the first newsreels that we made were influenced by traditional newsreels. They were not revolutionary in a formal sense but the content was revolutionary. After we had completed about 20 of them, we started to look for new, expressive cinematic forms for the newsreel.

As for Dziga Vertov, that is a question I'm asked in every interview but I must say that there is absolutely no influence of Vertov in my films. In fact, when I first started making films I hadn't seen any films by Vertov. It is true that the reality Vertov experienced is similar to the one we have experienced and it is this reality, perhaps, which is the common denominator of our films.

In this regard, I think it is important to point out the importance of the Revolution as a powerful motivating force for us—the revolutionary process in Cuba has been the main inspirational muse of all our work. Before the Revolution there was no cinematic expression in Cuba. Every four or five years a North American producer would come to the country and make a pseudo-folkloric or musical film, utilizing exotic elements of our culture in a superficial manner. Sometimes they would use a few Cuban technicians, maybe borrowed from the TV studios, but only a few. So in order for us to begin making films there had to be a revolutionary will, a revolutionary inspiration.

In other words, I became a film-maker, and other comrades in Cuba became professionally involved in things they never thought they would do, because the revolutionary will and the social needs forced us to become what we did. The people in the Sierra Maestra or on the Granma expedition had never been professional soldiers, had never studied in a military academy like West Point, and yet they won against an institutional army with North American advisors schooled in military theory. The guerilla isn't a professional soldier but someone compelled by a desire to smash an unjust structure, motivated by a revolutionary will which enables him to take up a gun and learn how to use it. No one is born a revolutionary, it is the needs of society which makes revolutionaries. Likewise, I didn't go to any school to learn cinema, I became a film-maker by making films. Before I had only fooled around with a 16mm camera like any amateur but I was possessed of this revolutionary will. I think anyone can make films—the only problem is to have the motivation, like any other activity.

I don't think one is born a creator, one becomes a creator. The creative element can be found in every human being and in any profession—engineer, pilot, lawyer, truck driver, whatever. In any human being there is this creative element and it is circumstances, the world one lives in, that stimulates or frustrates this element. How many young people before the Revolution in Cuba were frustrated because the society they lived in didn't give them the means or the chance to become what they wanted? And how many frustrated minds there must be here, how many creative minds that are working in radio and TV and who are not able to produce what they want? How many frustrations there must be accumulated!

Q: *How would you describe the role of the revolutionary film-maker in a revolutionary society?*

A: Our objectives as film-makers are the objectives of the Revolution, what the Revolution asks of us. If we are

responsible revolutionary artists, it is because we are part of the revolutionary process in our country—we are not on top of a mountain or in any ivory tower, we have a responsibility towards the revolutionary process because we are part of it. You must remember that from the very beginning our revolution was menaced and blockaded and because of that state of constant aggression, constant war, our cinema had to be consistent with that reality. We couldn't make films that didn't deal with that reality, that situation we lived in. And in the same way, we cannot avoid our responsibility as Cubans living today, either.

Q: *In what ways have Cuban film-makers attempted to assimilate Marxist theory into their work?*

A: The concrete experience of our revolutionary process, especially the imperialist aggression beginning with the blockade, has taught us, we have learned from it, but we have also developed ways of overcoming problems by using theories and methods that have been used before in similar historical situations, and this is Marxism-Leninism. We use it in all aspects of our lives—cultural, political, social, economic. In the same way, we Cuban film-makers have chosen to employ a Marxist-Leninist approach in the films that we make, to use it to confront and analyze the reality that we see and work with.

Many times, of course, this is not a conscious decision because in a sense Marxism existed before Marx existed. Marx was a man of enormous talent, possessed of great perspective and analytical capacity, who formulated something that already existed. He produced a series of theories analyzing society and ways of overcoming the problems of society. There were many other thinkers in the social and economic sciences but he had the virtue that his theories were taken up and practiced by other men. Lenin took up Marxist theory and put it into practice and so developed Marxism-Leninism which today has resulted in a large part of the world that is Marxist.

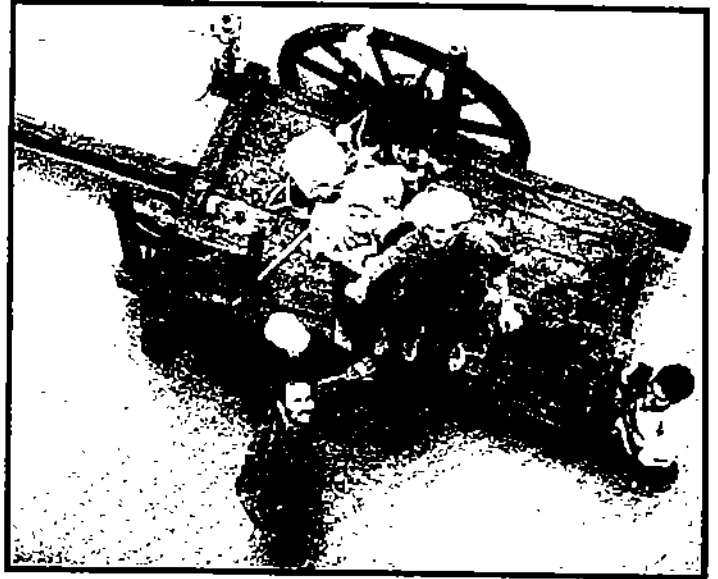
In our country Marxist-Leninist thought has a tradition in Jose Marti who wasn't a Marxist-Leninist but who was a revolutionary who wanted to liberate his country from the slavery of the Spanish Empire. Throughout history there have been similar situations where there were revolutionaries, according to the particular historical circumstances of the time, who weren't or couldn't have been Marxists. Here in the U.S., during the initial phases of the war of independence, there were great revolutionary leaders who weren't Marxists but if we analyze their role in history, according to Marxist-Leninist standards, they would be considered communists, revolutionaries.

Q: *Specifically, in terms of the application of Marxism in your films, I'm thinking of Y EL CIELO FUE TOMADO POR ASALTO where you develop a thesis . . .*

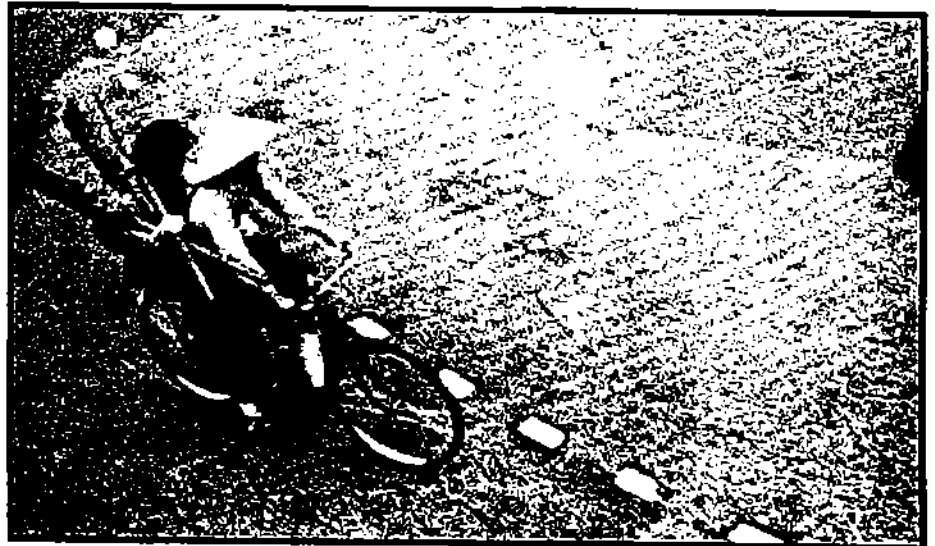
A: Yes, a materialist thesis. The beginning of the film, the introduction, deals with the birth of a child where we show scientific scenes of childbirth as contrasted with renaissance paintings of children with the Virgin. So we have a juxtaposition of the images of how a child is actually born, scientifically, with those beautiful paintings from the idealist renaissance world which suggest that the child was born from the Virgin, from all those religious ideas. It's a materialist world view opposed to an idealist world view.

Q: *Internationalism is another major theme of that film.*

A: Yes, and it's important to remember that the internationalism of our revolution doesn't begin with Marxism-Leninism, either. It is inherent in the tradition of our past independence struggle, a struggle which involved a San Martin, a Bolivar, a Sucre, a Marti, who fought for the independence of all the people of Latin America. The armies of these men were made up of people from all the different countries they were trying to liberate. They were internationalists long before Marxism-Leninism and we derive our internationalist tradition from them. In the Cuban war of independence, thousands of Venezuelans, Colombians, Domin-



Top: LBJ and CICLON (right)  
Middle: NOW and HASTA LA VICTORIA SIEMPRE (right)  
Bottom: HANOI, TUESDAY THE 13th



icans, Chileans, and others fought with us—we even had a Polish general fighting with us and he wasn't a Marxist. We also had Chinese fighting with us and they weren't Marxists or Maoists. Cuba was the last country in Latin America to obtain its independence and hundreds of people of different nationalities came to fight for Cuban independence. These are the roots of the internationalist tradition of the Cuban people.

*Q: When making a film, what are your relations to other members of the crew?*

*A:* In the newsreel department we have a group of cameramen and I have worked with all of them but there are a few I have worked with many times and, when circumstances permit, I prefer to work with one of the cameramen I know and get along best with. I think teamwork, collective work, is very important. Many times I have worked with two to five cameramen at one time.

The part of making a film I like best is the editing. My work in the editing room is completely different from that of the other comrades at ICAIC. Many times editors don't want to work with me because they're used to having an easy time with directors who just supervise and let them do the work. But I do all the work myself—I myself break up the material, I don't let the assistant editor do it, I myself hang up the takes in order to see what each sequence is all about. I look at it and look at it and look at it. And I am meticulous, I even choose the exact frame where I want to cut—five frames are five frames, not six, but five. Then, while I am looking at the footage and doing the editing, I start thinking about editing the sound. When I transfer to mag-track, I'm still doing the editing of the sequences because I'm searching for the music at the same time that I'm doing the montage. When I'm listening to the sound I'm thinking about the structure of the sequence and when I'm editing the image I'm always thinking of what sound will go with it. As I'm putting it together and it begins to take on a certain rhythm, I think about what effects, what sound, what music, will go with that image. 50% of the value of a film is in the soundtrack.

*Q: A controversial topic in political film circles these days is whether or not new, revolutionary forms are needed to express revolutionary content. That is, some people say it is absolutely impossible to make a revolutionary or radical film that employs traditional narrative techniques. What has been the experience of Cuban film-makers in this regard?*

*A:* A good example is a recent film, *EL HOMBRE DE MAISINICU*, which has been a big success. It is a film which tells the story of people from the Ministry of the Interior who infiltrate behind the lines of the counter-revolutionaries and it is a film which has, let us say, a conventional structure. But the success of this film tells us that we don't always have to use new forms to express revolutionary values, we can use traditional techniques to do it. Traditional cultural elements have a value at a certain point; we don't have to catalog or label and say that the conventional can never be used. Innovation results from making traditional forms valuable, by revitalizing them. Methods of construction in our country, for example, employ both traditional methods and new methods and by mixing the two we obtain revolutionary results. Likewise, the Beatles have innovated and revolutionized music by using traditional elements, they have been great innovators of the traditional.

*Q: How successful have Cuban film-makers been in improving public taste? Do Cuban audiences still prefer 'entertainment' films to 'political' films?*

*A:* We are the public, film-makers are the public. We start from the basis that we belong to the social reality of our country, we are not foreigners, we are part of the people and our films grow out of a shared reality. If we thought we were a privileged group above the people, then we would probably make films that communicated only with a minority or an elite group. But we are not a group of poets producing abstract

or bizarre poetry. One can only be a revolutionary artist by being with the people and by communicating with them.

It has been a challenge for us but we have been successful to some extent in breaking public movie-going habits. Due to the influence of capitalism, even in socialist countries, it has always been the custom to show documentaries only as supplementary material with a feature-length fiction film with actors as the main attraction. But we have been able to show documentaries as the main attraction in theatres. For example, *DE AMERICA SOY HIJO*, which lasts 3 hours and 15 minutes and which features as its main character Fidel on a trip, was released simultaneously in 7 theatres and there were still long lines of people and they had full houses for two months. Another documentary, *Y EL CIELO FUE TOMADO POR ASALTO*, which lasts 2 hours and 8 minutes, was similarly successful.

*Q: We've heard that THE GODFATHER was shown in Cuba. What was the reaction?*

*A:* The reaction was good but less than we expected. Due to all the publicity surrounding the film, we thought it was going to be much more successful than it was. *EL HOMBRE DE MAISINICU* was much more successful commercially. Before *THE GODFATHER* was released—and we showed it in 7 theatres so as to avoid long lines—we analyzed the film in articles and on different TV programs. And then during the film's release, film critics analyzed the film, situating it in its real context.

*Q: Did any of the critics interpret it as an anti-capitalist film?*

*A:* Anti-capitalist!? No, not at all, it is an idealization of the Mafia.

*Q: How does the decision to make a film get made at ICAIC? And what sort of censorship, if any, is involved?*

*A:* There are many ways. One way is for the film director to present a script written by himself or by others. Or the idea for a film may be given to him by ICAIC because there is some agency in the country which needs a certain kind of film—maybe a film on public health, for instance. Many of the didactic films we make are made in this way, by requests from other agencies.

But there's no one way of presenting an idea for a film. If there is a book or a story or an idea of one of the members of ICAIC, it is discussed by all of us and it is our political consciousness which dictates if the film can be done or if the idea is good—that's the only censorship we have. Of course, you can't make counter-revolutionary or fascist films. If there was a film-maker in Cuba who wanted to make a film in favor of racial discrimination, he wouldn't be permitted to do it. You can't make a racist film and we won't spend our resources in making porno films. That doesn't mean one can't make erotic films—eroticism and pornography are two different things, even though there are some people who hide themselves behind ideas of eroticism in order to make pornography. But pornography is not only sexual—aberration of any human activity can be pornographic. What's pornographic is the majority of the politicians in this country. The greatest pornographer of the U.S. was Richard Nixon—he was more dangerous as a moral example for North American youth than any scene in any film shown on 42nd Street.

*Q: How many directors are there at ICAIC?*

*A:* Unfortunately, we don't have many film directors in Cuba. We are limited by our lack of resources—we don't have many cameras or much sound equipment or big labs. Everything that's related to film in Cuba, from grease pencils to raw stock, is imported. So we have to set priorities in our film production. Our goals for 1974, for instance, consisted of 8 feature films, 41 documentaries, 52 newsreels and 10 animation films. By comparison, Japan produces 500 films per year. We do everything, the shooting, the sound, everything except the lab work. By May or June of 1975, however, we'll

have our own color lab installed in Cuba and it will be one of the best labs in Latin America.

ICAIC doesn't only produce films, though, we have many other activities as well. We have a TV program called "24 a Second", for example, which tries to inform the public about all the machinery behind the cinema, to demystify the cinema, to teach people how to watch a film and realize that there is a lot of gimmickry involved. It's a technical and political demystification, mainly political.

Q: *We could use a program like that in this country.*

A: Yes, for example, we know that here in the U.S. there are many films planned for the bicentennial that will offer a nostalgic look at the past, presenting an idealized version of U.S. history for people in this country and throughout the world. And we all know about that cinema that came out of Hollywood, that cinema about cowboys and Indians, which presents such a distorted picture of U.S. history. One of the classic films of the North American cinema, one that is listed in every film reference book and included in every cinematheque, is Griffith's BIRTH OF A NATION—a classic film, no doubt, but one that is also without doubt a reactionary film.

One of our greatest successes at ICAIC has been the *cine-moviles* [mobile projection crews] which transport themselves in cars, small trucks, small boats, even on mules, anything, to get films to the countryside, to the most remote parts of the country. We even show films in the sea, from a boat, so that people can watch it from the beach, from other boats, or from the rocks. We're also building hundreds of new movie houses around the country. We have a four year plan to build new theatres and fix up the old ones—in five years we will have 200 new movie houses.

Q: *Does ICAIC have any sort of program for training new film-makers?*

A: We don't have any film schools, again due to our lack of resources, but besides that we would just be graduating people who wouldn't be able to work. Up to now, all the people who are working in film, except for some technicians, like sound technicians, trained by studying rather than making films and, of course, the best way to learn about the cinema is

by actually making films. They studied in Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Germany, France, England, etc., according to the fellowships we had in socialist and capitalist countries. Afterwards, some of these people became instructors for our own courses and now we have a new group of sound and lab technicians who have been trained in Cuba.

Q: *Are there many women film-makers in Cuba?*

A: We don't have many women film-makers but there are some who work as film editors and in the labs. It's not that we've planned it this way, it's just that women film-makers haven't appeared. There are four or five young women students now at ICAIC and maybe they'll become directors.

Q: *In conclusion, any thoughts about the future?*

A: I think that in 20 years the cinema is going to disappear, there will be another technology to replace it. There will be new developments in electronic techniques which will completely change the traditional method of making films, not only in Cuba but everywhere. Technology is going to absolutely change everything and the means of communication—for the painter, the musician, the film-maker—will change radically.

I think the individualistic conception of art will change completely and we will no longer continue the practice of the museum or private exhibition of art works as we do now. The creators, the artists in society, will put their energies into making not just one painting but into creating mass art works, into beautifying shoes, homes, factories, everything, the total environment. It will be an anti-individualistic conception of artistic creation where everything will be for the benefit of all humanity. ■

Many short films by Santiago Alvarez—including NOW, CICLON, LBJ, 79 SPRINGTIMES, HASTA LA VICTORIA SIEMPRE and HANOI, TUESDAY THE 13th—are available from Newsreel branches throughout the country. In New York, write Third World Newsreel, 26 W. 20th St., NYC 10011.

Two feature-length documentaries by Alvarez—DE AMERICA SOY HIJO Y A ELLA ME DEBO and Y EL CIELO FUE TOMADO POR ASALTO—are available (in Spanish language only versions) from the Center for Cuban Studies, 220 E. 23rd St., NYC 10010.

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