

MONSTERS IN THE LIMELIGHT: THE REPRESENTATION OF MONSTROSITY IN
THE PUPPET THEATRE OF SOUTHERN ITALY

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RESUMEN:

Tanto el teatro de títeres, empleando *marionette* y *pupi*, maniobrado desde arriba, e incluso en la versión más mínima y delicada de este género, empleando *bagattelle* y *burattini*, animado desde abajo, son entornos donde la hiperbole es un lugar común. Por ello la presencia de aquello fantástico, monstruoso, de criaturas intrínsecamente exageradas, tal como veremos más adelante, es una característica absolutamente estándar en estas formas teatrales que hemos podido estudiar en detalle en el centro y en el sur de Italia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: títeres, teatro, Italia, monstruos, grotesco

ABSTRACT:

Puppet theatre, in the form featuring *marionette* and *pupi*, manoeuvred from above and the even more minimal and delicate version of this genre, featuring *bagattelle* and *burattini*, animated from below, is a setting where hyperbole is commonplace. The presence of fantastic, monstrous, intrinsically exaggerated creatures is therefore, as we will see later on, an absolutely standard feature of these theatrical forms that we have been able to study at length in central and southern Italy.

KEYWORDS: puppets, theatre, Italy, monsters, grotesque

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Puppet theatre, in the form featuring *marionette* and *pupi*, manoeuvred from above and the even more minimal and delicate version of this genre, featuring *bagattelle* and *burattini*, animated from below, is a setting where hyperbole is commonplace. The presence of fantastic, monstrous, intrinsically exaggerated creatures is therefore, as we will see later on, an absolutely standard feature of these theatrical forms that we have been able to study at length in central and southern Italy.

As these theatrical traditions consciously rely on a small setting and on actors of extremely reduced dimensions, they are almost programmatically destined to be loud. Everything appears to be based on flamboyant juxtapositions of opposites, which are of a basic form and therefore easy to understand, and are also expressed in a way that is intrinsically lively, well-trimmed of any superfluous elements, indeed almost whittled to the bone. Therefore we have a type of performance that rises continuously above the lines and brims full of acute and deep tones. It uses types of language that may be purposely simple and concise, or instead, rambling and redundant. It is grammatically incorrect and pronounced in a way that further and noticeably distorts its content. The themes represented are strong, full-blooded ones, evoking primary, ancestral and dichotomous frames of mind and sentiments such as goodness and evil, love and hate, courage and cowardice, craftiness and stupidity. Likewise, the scenes staged counterpose contexts of extreme poverty and wealth, which can either be domestic and reassuring or, on the other hand, unfamiliar and disturbing. The tiny stages are occupied by a plethora of characters with realistic and anthropomorphic or, on the contrary, fantastic, wild, monstrous features.

This kind of theatre is that of a life spent in the uncertainty of the present, the life of a typical member of the audience in the world of puppet theatre, an audience composed by the general public, by the man on the street who has to be reeled in and netted, trawled into a phantasmagorical world that is dark or bright, tragic and comical, concrete and unreal.

From the 17th century until today, in Naples, puppet theatre put down strong roots and was characterised by a series of distinctive elements, becoming the vehicle for the diffusion, both in southern and central Italy, of a theatrical tradition which, on one hand, saw the rise and consolidation of performances with *pupi* and, also, to a lesser extent, with *marionette*, and, on the other hand of the *guarattelle* or *bagattelle* and *burattini*¹. It is therefore logical that these two branches of theatre also require two entirely different types of stage equipment, given the different nature of the puppets used. The *pupo*, which, as we have said, is animated from above, is sustained by an iron rod which passes through the head and is attached to the chest. Its right arm is always armed with a sword, knife or pistol and this too is manoeuvred by an iron rod so that the body can be directed and the arm moved more easily to deliver the blow. The puppet is approximately one metre tall, sturdy and robust, and may weigh as much as 20 or 30 kilos. It is capable of moving slowly and seriously, with a dramatic gait, and appears “imposing” in its own small way. On the contrary, the *bagattella* and the *burattino*, free from the weight of the top half of their body, which is instead replaced, under their costume, by the puppeteer’s hand and arm, and also made lighter by their lack of legs, are much smaller and lighter than the string puppet, but this indeed gives them the grace of a tightrope walker, capable of extremely rapid movements and of evolving unexpectedly on the proscenium and also beyond it.

The *pupo* and the *bagattella* are, if we look closely, a reflection of two spirits of the city, one of which is excessive, Baroque, plethoric, Levantine and the other sharp, bare and basic.

1. We have devoted several years of research to this subject, conducted in various regions of southern Italy, and also in Sicily and several locations in Belgium and France, where the puppet theatre in consideration has had some interesting reverberations. This year the “Museum of Neapolitan and Southern Italian Puppet Theatre” will be opened in Naples, three monographs will be published, eight documentaries broadcast and three interactive multimedia programmes launched, all on the same subject, conceived and produced by the Interdepartmental Audiovisual Research Centre for the study on popular culture directed by us.

HYPERBOLIC, CATHARTIC MONSTROSITIES BETWEEN PALADINS AND KNIGHTS

The repertoire of the two theatrical forms is wide, but as we will see, they share several elements with a common denominator within their highly fantastic, often wild and monstrous dimension. This becomes a central, essential dramaturgical standard in the structure of the plot, in defining the personality and appearance of the characters and, specifically of the protagonists and antagonists, in defining the development of the narrative weave and the saving catharsis with which the performance necessarily ends.

As far as the *pupi* were concerned, from the end of the 18th century to the early decades of the 19th century, when the files in the archives we consulted make the picture clearer and more reliable, the scores of companies, mainly run by families, that worked in Naples and many provinces of the Kingdom under the House of Bourbon, stretching as far as Apulia, focused on plots involving knights, on the feats of Charlemagne, of Orlando and Rinaldo as they defended Christianity, as it came under threat from “non-believers”, from the “Turks”, a term generally used to define Muslims. However, the dichotomy between these two opposite sides is never clear. Alliances and betrayals, trespassing, kidnapping, theft, all constitute the prerequisites for duels, ambushes, murders, massacres, where the fine line that separates good from bad, and the fair from the unfair is often overstepped and cancelled by a complex plot, programmatically full of contradictions, of narrative knots that only a *coup de théâtre*, a *deus ex machina*, a prodigy can both generate and resolve, shifting the action from a realistic level to a fantastic, dream-like, magical, enchanted one, and so, as we said at the beginning, kindling the hyperbole. The hyperbole is the salt of this theatrical form, astutely dispensed *cum grano salis*, an instrument that livens up the performance, greatly enlarging the scale of the dimensions and the morphology of the characters. It turns the performance upside down and inside out, disorientating, amazing and kidnapping the spectator who is placed in front of an unexpected narrative moment that is fairytale-like,

paradisiacal or Luciferian, enchanting or terrifying. This is often where the concept of monstrosity, in its various forms, makes its entrance. The monstrous element can be a setting that alludes to the underworld, to the cave of a magician or a witch, but it can also and especially take the form of a character, the witch herself, an old hag, dragon, whale, snake, Cyclops or giant², and is most often a creature containing a mixture of different morphologies, suspended between the animal and human world³. It is also capable of further grotesquely transforming itself directly on the stage, for example, by changing its face using the trick of a two or three-faced head that turns round⁴ or even changing the size of its body and its height, multiplying itself into additional creatures, detaching its limbs. The ambush or trick lies in the fact that a *pupo* with the mute face of a beautiful young girl, can turn into the face of death, stigmatised by a skull, and then into that of a sprightly, Mephistophelian, horned devil. A creature whose monstrosity is clearly of a misogynous nature, she intervenes, attracting the knight, who is caught unawares and in love, showing him the beautiful girl's face, killing him once he has discovered her deathly identity and finally dragging his soul into the netherworld. Here, when the destination is hell, the final resting place not only for adversaries, but also for betrayers, those who have sold themselves to the enemy, an enormous creature with its

2. The gigantism of the stage equipment, and the statues carried in processions, including monsters and beings that were contemporaneously human and animal-like, is a widespread element throughout the theatre and popular celebrations of Europe (Vovelle M., 1989: 93-99). It exaggerates and imposes the character attributed to the subjects portrayed, and as a result of this, monstrosity can therefore be represented by emphasising these large dimensions.

3. Note that the theatre of the *pupi* has a kind of double front of stage, one on hand there is that of the shows and on the other, there is the one formed by the large signs hung outside the halls, on the street, in which all the most important phases of that day's episode were painted. Up to three metres high and two metres wide, the material displayed on these vivid multi-coloured sheets served to attract an audience, most of whom were unable to read and write. Violence, ferocity and monstrosity were even better stigmatised and brought to life here using a rapid, basic image and a jubilation of bright colours.

4. From *Janus Bifrons* to the many portrayals of devils with several heads and several faces, sacred and ecclesiastical painting offers us countless examples (Eco U., 2007: 90-104, 124)

jaws wide open awaits them and swallows them up. In duels, other sinister creatures, despite having been stabbed by a blade, cut into pieces by sword strokes or decapitated, maintain the coordination of their severed limbs as if performing a macabre dance. In the meantime, the limbs, like the tentacles of an octopus, each on its own steam, close in on the adversary, suffocating or strangling him⁵. Sometimes warriors of a gigantic build are present within the ranks of the Muslims: these have an animal-like appearance, fight with their bare hands, throw huge rocks and use clubs. They always succumb in the end, because their purpose is that of exalting the Christian knight who, despite the clear physical advantage enjoyed by his adversary, does not hesitate to throw himself courageously into the thick of a showdown between civilised and primitive life. It can clearly be noted that many of the skilfully sculpted wooden heads of the swordsmen in the ranks of the “Turks” have marked traits, pronounced arched, furrowed eyebrows, noses with large nostrils, very full lips, and grinning, snarling, wild expressions⁶.

5. In the theatre of the *pupi*, each daily episode featured dark, dramatic atmospheres, made even more frightening by the action of monstrous creatures. Back then, at the end of the main performance, the companies would stage an extra show characterised by the presence of *marionette* which they would use to create short comical circensian numbers that were designed to re-establish a more cheerful atmosphere. Here the puppet dismembering technique was used. A clown, known as “Bombolo – a man in pieces”, would take the stage and dance, while his neck, arms and legs became longer than they should have been, or, depending on which version was being staged, fell from his body; his head would fly about of its own accord on the stage and his eyes would flash on and off in a red light. As we were personally able to see, the effect this had on the audience was not only one of absolute amazement but also one of barely concealed disgust, given the macabre and monstrous nature of the act.

6. From the second half of the 19th century these beast-like facial traits would also appear on the faces of the characters in a new, powerful cycle of performances that accompanied the Carolingian performance, in some cases even replacing it entirely. Stories of the camorristi from Naples, the crooks of the Mezzogiorno area, would reach the stage and the puppets would imitate their real gestures, adding extra emphasis. Often real leading criminals would sit in the audience, and enjoy seeing themselves be represented by a theatre that sang their praises. Here too, we are talking about the presence of camorristi who were seen by the local people as the paladins of their downtrodden rights, especially Tore ‘e Crescenzo, who would rise to take on the same hero status as Orlando and Rinaldo. These characters would be threatened by a group of other criminals and by the police, first those of the House of Bourbon and then the Italian police force; these groups would then take on the unpopular role of antagonist and be

This emphasises their largely oriental, “African” and therefore primitive origin. They are both human and animal-like and the beastly aspect of the character is displayed by the ambiguously monstrous traits.

Here too the monster seems to serve two opposing functions: on one hand its unpredictable and uncontrollable revelation together with its excessive destructive power become the distressing metaphor of the unpredictable, precarious nature of the human existence, while, on the other hand it becomes a tool that paradoxically annihilates existence, to then re-establish and reconfirm it. Perishing at the hand of the hero, the monster indeed becomes the magic, saving expedient, the element that resolves the condition of extreme difficulty and danger in which his *alter ego*, the human protagonist of the event portrayed, had ended up. The monster helps to re-establish the order of things, offering the audience the reassuring familiar horizon in which all characters, protagonists and antagonists, “good” and “evil” return to the posts defined for them, at least until the next ambiguous ploy or the next traitorous conflict.

Its dramaturgical function is that of momentarily subverting a natural, social order caused by its intrinsic, alien, disturbing and magical exceptional nature. If this exceptional nature is good, it can, in turn, serve as a valuable support to the hero’s actions; on the contrary, if it takes the form of a severe, almost insurmountable obstacle to the protagonist’s intentions, it offers itself to the latter as a challenge in which he can prove his bravery and nerve. Whatever way, the monster is a valuable ingredient in the celebration of the essential catharsis of each episode required in order to close the episode in a logical, orthodox manner.

cursed by the audience. Angel-like faces, with light complexions and, ascetic or child-like faces characterise the camorrista figures loved by the audience, whereas the beast-like, coarse features that once featured on the faces of the Turks, are now used to depict the unpleasantness of the evil characters who oppose the former, and the guards.

DEATH AND ANIMAL-LIKE MONSTERS AT PULCINELLA'S SERVICE

We also appear to glimpse similar dynamics in the theatre of the *bagattelle*, which is still a vibrant part of the Neapolitan and southern Italian social fabric, together with the *burattino*.

Here, there is only one undisputed protagonist who has always historically filled the stages on which he performs displaying values that are positive and negative at the same time, exalted on each individual occasion by a certain number of deuteragonists and antagonists. This is true both when he is played by a real actor and when he appears in the form of a puppet. We are obviously referring to Pulcinella, who may, based on the circumstances, appear generous and greedy, courageous and faint-hearted, loyal and ambiguous, violent and gentle, trouble-making and trouble-solving, sly and silly, naughty and sincere. On impact, all his antithetical peculiarities unite to define a form of theatre that turns into comedy. The comical nature of Pulcinella, the smile he brings to the spectator's face is fruit of the Neapolitan character's never-ending debate between his opposing sides, where one ridicules and helps to fade out or neutralise the other, and vice versa. In the end, Pulcinella is everyman. He is the same man as the spectator who comes to watch his extremely human, contradictory comings and goings. He goes about his business among various rivals, who are all just as extremely human as he. These include the guard, the judge, the host, the bandit, the treacherous friend, his girlfriend's suitor, and all are easily taken care of with a few blows of his stick.

However, there are two adversaries that appear insurmountable, due to their intrinsic metaphysical, fleeting nature: death, which is improvident and unquestionable, and fate which is enigmatic, mysterious, and seems to have it in for Pulcinella, often treating him unfairly. The characters required to effectively portray such intense negativity that comes from the dominions of the afterworld, must originate from, or in any case be symbolically linked to, the same afterworld: and so here again the monster

returns to the playing field. Death, as was also true for the *pupi*, continues to hide behind the face of a young woman, and sometimes indeed in the face of Teresina, Pulcinella's historical girlfriend. Suddenly she reveals her horrible appearance, as a toothless monstrous, revolting skull, appearing from behind the veil which framed the beautiful face of the girl up until a moment earlier. She attacks the dumbfounded, terrified Pulcinella and with a wheezing, guttural cry, she hurls herself at the Neapolitan character, grabbing him, wrapping him up in her funereal tunic, and slowly and inexorably sucking him in, downwards, until he disappears from the front of the stage. Pulcinella takes leave, *obtorto collo*, of his audience, who are frozen to their seats, and of life, that has so suddenly been denied to him, letting out a prolonged, excruciating moan that gradually gets fainter and fainter until it disappears.

To return to the stage and to his usual existence that consists of useless expedients, Pulcinella needs to detach himself from this performance by making a clear break from the show that has just ended in the staging of his death, a death that would otherwise exclude the puppet's return to the scene. While some of the spectators begin to get up and walk away, and others, who are unable to tear themselves away continue to wait, Pulcinella pops up again from his tiny proscenium to reassure the audience that he intends to return the next day and perform, defeated by death, yet at the same time alive and well. He uses this ruse, the formula of the show within a show, calling to himself to come out of the theatrical representation that has seen him succumb to the hand of death. He comes back and by making this announcement to the audience he again confirms that he is the only protagonist of his stories, and so again raises the curtain on his status as the "sempiternal" *bagattella*, a status he has specifically earned as much in the centuries he has spent as a character in the theatres of southern Italy as in the time spent in the depths of the ages.

As mentioned before, another formidable antagonist of Pulcinella is his enemy Fate, which resembles an enormous dog covered in thick, usually

black fur, with a mouth that is just as disproportionate as its body. The forms and movements of this monstrous beast sometimes ambiguously recall those of a snake or a dragon. Here, we must emphasise that the encounter and clash between Pulcinella and the dog is sudden and therefore not the result of even the slightest plot unravelling, as is the case in all the other disputes that take place between Pulcinella and another of his “human” antagonists⁷. Suddenly, without warning, the dog appears on the scene and hurls itself at the *bagattella* for no apparent reason, clamping its jaws round the Neapolitan character’s arm or biting his waist. From here on the protagonist begins an endless lament, and an exhausting push and pull session with the beast ensues, as he attempts to set himself free from its jaws repeatedly calling out to the dog’s master to call it off in great distress, but this fails to happen. In the meantime, the gigantic beast never lets go of its hold.

The dog’s entrance on to the scene, which is improvident and unexpected, and equally, the animal itself, in as much as it is an inferior being, powered by instinct and therefore unpredictable and unforeseeable, are therefore excellent symbols of fate, which may be good or bad, but can in no way be prevented. It is also intriguing that the image used to allude to the inevitable nature of destiny is indeed a dog. The dog has always been considered the least “animal-like” beast, the animal that is closest to, and most in tune with man, and this is the very reason why the tradition of the theatre of *bagattelle* chooses it to play the part of an impassive, unreliable, uncontrollable element, as capable of staging an ambush as any other ferocious, wild beast. It is like saying that in life we must never even trust our most loyal allies, and that there are no certainties to which we can grasp,

as each moment of human existence is governed, or rather thrown into disarray, by a whimsical, persecuting, undecipherable destiny.

The exterior resemblances between dog, wolf, snake and dragon give “man’s best friend” an even wilder appearance, attributing monstrous, revolting traits to it and again quite clearly throwing it back to an extremely natural state. In the guise of this kind of composite creature, the dog also represents the survival of an animistic culture which, as Leander Petzoldt reminds us “saw nature as being animated by mysterious beings and powers” and so difficult to discipline (Petzoldt L., 1995:10).

“Nature” which, as we have seen, fails to dialogue with Pulcinella, and to form part of that cultural horizon in which the *bagattella* holds his human and dialogical relationships, even if these are minimal. This re-interpretation, which affirms the dog’s absolute animalistic nature and is further stigmatised by the monstrous component, is even more of an eloquent example of a perception and definition of the animal world which is antithetical and subordinate to the human one. Therefore, in the old theatre of the *bagattelle* the archaic τόπος of the animal survives as a handy breeding ground for the kind of negativity that man is not prepared to recognise in himself, τόπος but which more generally attributes to the animal functions that are merely structurally useful for satisfying primary needs, such as feeding, getting dressed and working. Luisella Battaglia affirms that, “Man’s relationship with the non-human world has always been mediated by stereotypes or unrealistic representations that are distorted and mainly imaginary, (...) and respond more to our own needs than to the reality of the animal world. (...) We want to preserve an image of ourselves that is entirely positive, distancing the unacceptable parts of our personality and offloading everything negative that belongs to us on to the other party (indeed, a *different element*). And what is more *different* than an animal? In this way, a component of aggressiveness comes into play and this causes the other element, the animal, not only to be charged with the negative aspect (the bestial side), but also with the ghost of a more disturbing and threatening

7. For example, when Pulcinella comes face-to-face with an evil character who prevents him from staying in a specific place, a host who refuses to serve him, a guard who claims he has committed a crime, protagonist and his antagonist speak to one another, each one staking their rights, then rage and shout at one other. Only at the end, in the *extrema ratio* of the argument, they come to blows, and begin to batter one another.

negativity. Indeed, the animal is attributed with that same aggressiveness directed as us that we deny within ourselves, in our relationship with him, and which serves, however, as an alibi for such a hostile behaviour towards him.” (Battaglia L. edited by Marchesini R., 1999: 16-17).

Puppet theatre, as has always been the case, continues to use references to the animal-like and monstrous element to exacerbate its form, considered a “macro-category that seems to include that myriad of traits and elements that man refuses to consider as his own and so projects entirely on the animal, as a defence and detachment strategy; the latter becomes the antithetical entity to man *par excellence* and the involuntary bearer of a series of ontological handicaps. The process of “purifying” man from his animalistic nature and the forced emancipation of the natural state have produced a quantity of cultural “waste products” that have been assigned to the inferior category, to animals, strongly characterising them in a negative manner” (Tonutti S., (edited by Marchesini R.), 1999: 82). The dog, snake and dragon are certainly, as Tonutti says, antithetical entities to man and, if possible, on the stages of puppet theatre, these are used to further emphasise the negative side of their character, as this must be exacerbated for the purposes of the show. They become spectacular, monstrous freaks, but this is an absolutely essential phenomenon in a type of theatre that appoints them as dynamic counterpoints, as lively rhythmic interludes that revitalise a story otherwise destined to be linear and monotonous.

Whether the hero, the main human character, is a paladin or a character of the Commedia dell’Arte, in order to fill this role effectively, he desperately needs an unequal opponent that only the monster can offer him. And only then can he capture and amaze his audience⁸.

8. “The chthonic, infernal nature of the snakes and the terrifying beauty of the dragons put us into a disturbed frame of mind which leads us to ask ourselves questions as if the images were trying to force our consciousness and push it towards the fathomless. (...) The kinds of myths that have their roots in the European fairy-tales on which our civilisation are based are hard to remove from our consciousness. Are we not still



IMAGEN 1. Snake or dragon head: the openable mouth better expresses the feral aggressiveness of this creature

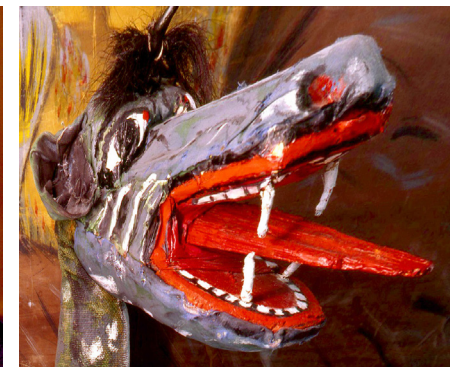


IMAGEN 2. Dog or wolf head with openable mouth



IMAGEN 3. Dog head for a character with hideous features to be inserted on a human body

amazed by the papier mache dragons that appeared in the children’s theatres when we were young (...)?” (Caprotti E., 2004: 32).



IMAGEN 4. Lion head for an anthropomorphous character

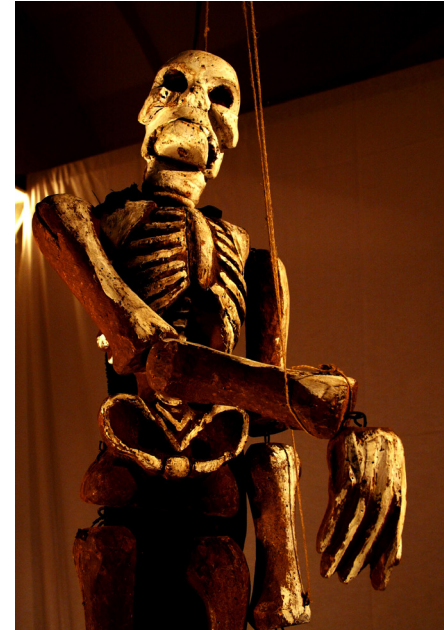


IMAGEN 8. Death showing off its shambling skeleton and articulated jaw which allows it to talk



IMAGEN 5.
The wrinkled face of a toothless witch with an aquiline nose



IMAGEN 6.
One-eyed giant head



IMAGEN 7. The misshapen and snarling face of a monstrous and one-eyed creature together with a moustached devil and a Pulcinella puppet with a corrugated, stern and disquieting expression

IMAGEN 9. A Muslim fighter whose features have been intentionally underlined to give him a ruthless and brutal expression. Traditionally the "Turchi" (Turkish people) were denied the possibility to fight wearing an embellished helmet and heraldic badges of knighthood as these were an exclusive privilege of Christian knights





IMAGEN 10-11. A group of paladins headed by Rinaldo is previously attacked by a Muslim giant and then succeeds in overwhelm him making him plunge into quicksand and stoning him to death (details of two theatre playbills)



IMAGEN 12. A Satyr, both this character's behaviour and looks are equivocal; here he is stabbed by a paladin (detail of a theatre playbill)



IMAGEN 13. Hell personified by a huge and horrible dragon: from its mouth two devils lean out to clutch a Muslim fighter killed by a Christian knight (detail of a theatre playbill)

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