The Truth of the Word, the Falsity of the Image: 
Transmetropolitan's Critique of the Society of the Spectacle

Steen Christiansen

In this essay, I investigate the binary opposition between words as true and images as false, in Warren Ellis and Darick Roberts's Transmetropolitan comic book series, which deals heavily with the notion of truth in a dystopian future and was published in the period between 1997–2002. The series’ protagonist Spider Jerusalem is a journalist trying to show a world that doesn’t care what the truth is. In a world saturated with images, resembling a Baudrillardian nightmare, Spider is peculiarly attached to writing, even working for a newspaper called The Word. Spider is positioned as a Messiah-like figure who, coming down from the mountain, will bring truth and revelation to the people.

Transmetropolitan is a science fiction comic book, published by DC Comics and presenting a satiric view of life in an unspecified future. The stories take place in an unnamed city, which becomes a mix of all the negative aspects of a metropolis. Although much of the comic book centers on politics in the City, there are plenty of encounters with strange technologies and strange ways of living, as one would expect from a science fiction story.

I read the text as a critique of current media saturation and as the struggle to reinstate the real in a world overrun by the hyperreal. I argue that the text tries to find the “smoking gun” of current media culture in order to transcend the images and get back to an original past. That Transmetropolitan is a comic book creates a peculiar double bind in that it is precisely both word and image and so itself enacts the very problematic the text investigates. I will conclude the essay by exploring how images and words, specifically text boxes, work in juxtaposition, focussing on how the words comment on the images.

A common thread in much recent science fiction has been the prominent position of media and images and the impact that these will have on our world. One horrible scenario is Steven Spielberg’s view in the 2002 film Minority Report, where we get personalized advertisements via retinal-scan recognition. Similar concerns are exhibited in Ellis and Roberts’s Transmetropolitan, where images are not only prevalent, but even aggressive. One of the more extreme
examples of this is the “buybombs” or “block consumer incentive bursting” (Ellis and Roberts, *Lust for Life* 45). These buybombs are brief flashes of images, shown so fast that they cannot be perceived immediately. What they do instead is: “load your brain with compressed ads that unreel into your dreams” (ibid. 47). Buyboms are, in other words, intense and overwhelming commercials which cannot be resisted, as they only function within your dreams, right in the unconscious.

As Steven Shaviro points out, such a strategy is extremely useful (Shaviro, *Connected* 25). It is, however, also terribly invasive since our dreams are the most private experiences we ever have. They are also a typical metaphor for our desires and invading this space represents the utmost violation of human privacy. That this invasion is mediated through television is clearly a powerful symbol of the text’s view of television and visual culture, especially because it comes at the end of a story where Spider has done nothing but watch television the entire day. Such an activity is regarded as clearly damaging and dangerous, and his assistant’s boyfriend even calls him crazy for subjecting himself to it.

While watching television, Spider needs to react against the lies that he sees, choosing to harass various call-in shows by revealing a number of unpleasant truths. As Spider says: “That’s what I hate most about this fucking city—lies are news and truth is obsolete!” (Ellis and Roberts, *Lust for Life* 40). However, while Spider may be able to criticize television and generally wreak havoc and get at least some truth out there, television exacts its own revenge. The fact that Spider, a famous journalist, makes harassing calls to various shows becomes a story in itself. Spider becomes television as he has antagonized all the channels and this is one of the worst things that could happen to him.

Unlike what happened at the Angels 8 Riot, where Spider stopped the police from brutalizing members of the Transient movement, an episode I will address later, in this case he personally becomes the news without any forms of truth attached to him. What the news clip mentions is only that Spider has “terrorized” call-in shows, indicating that here it is Spider’s persona which is of interest, not his journalistic work. Spider himself is horrified when he realizes that he has in fact become television, where his actions and his persona overshadow the criticism which he directed at the various shows and presenters. In other words, as Spider becomes news, his criticisms disappear because the media only focus on him, not on what he said.

We find here a serious indictment not just of television as medium, but also of what is usually shown on television; certainly Spider indicates that there is no truth to find there, only lies. Another way of stating this is to say that *Transmetropolitan* regards form and content as intimately bound together and that television as a medium is simply unable to reveal the truth about
anything. When we consider the buybombs, we see how television, and by extension all visual culture, functions as a negative part of Spider’s world and of the City in general.

Norman K. Denzin’s comments on the rise of the cinematic society can illuminate the process which takes place in Transmetropolitan: “The movies became a technology and apparatus of power that would organize and bring meaning to our everyday lives” (Denzin 15). Denzin continues: “Reality, as it was visually experienced, became a staged, social production. Real, everyday experiences, soon came to be judged against their staged, cinematic video-counterpart” (Denzin 32). This process has clearly continued not only in our own age but also further in the world of Transmetropolitan. It is, of course, also old news in academic discourse where the death of the real has been considered many times. The most prominent theorist is obviously Jean Baudrillard, who addressed the notion of a society of simulation. Jonathan Bignell summarizes Baudrillard’s points, stating that:

Baudrillard does not argue for a critical practice because for him pragmatic activity must be founded on notions of the real, the social or the community, which have been absorbed and nullified by capitalism and its law of value, and replaced by complicit simulations produced in the media. (Bignell 29)

Baudrillard is useful in this context because he contends that this implosion of the social is only catastrophic in regard to the idealism that dominates our whole vision of information. We all live by a fanatical idealism of meaning and communication, by an idealism of communication through meaning, and, in this perspective, it is very much a catastrophe of meaning which lies in wait for us. (Baudrillard 103)

Baudrillard’s concept of idealism of meaning holds that people believe that communication should be completely transparent to the content of meaning. Spider Jerusalem has a desire for such a state of affairs as well, but while Baudrillard argues that hyperconformity can bring down the system under its own weight, Spider Jerusalem believes that if the truth comes out, then people will learn and turn away from the hyperconfirmity and towards a fully developed subject-position, rather than occupy the empty object-position which Baudrillard argues is the state of television viewers. In other words, meaning will be judged by the truth-value it holds, as opposed to being reduced to spectacle. Spider’s reasoning is that when meaning is converted to spectacle, it becomes empty and useless.

As we can see, Spider has a very nostalgic view of the world, which is something that I will return to later, but for now we can note that in a world permeated by images, Spider’s preference for the word over the image is not only nostalgic but even rebellious. Spider is identified primarily with his
columns rather than his own persona; in other words with his words over his appearance. Spider is dressed in black, which in this case can be seen as a representation of what John Harvey refers to as an effacement, a desire not to attract attention to one's own person, while still speaking loudly (Harvey 14).

As we know, Spider has no interest in fame but is interested in his messages being heard, a peculiar double bind which Spider never reflects on. Visually, his black clothes make Spider stand out from the colorful world he moves through and he becomes easy to identify, easily recognizable in a comic book often overloaded with visual reference points. This is significant for a comic which portrays a future world we may have trouble navigating due to its difference from our own. Such a radical differentiation of this world is a typical strategy of science fiction, where estrangement from our world emphasizes the distance from the fictional world.

Spider's choice of clothes indicates that his style is one of personal, visual effacement, probably revealing the desire to generate as little noise as possible in communications. Obviously, his writing style is far more flamboyant and personal, but that is a slightly different matter. Style, as defined by Dick Hebdige for a subculture, is a movement which goes against nature and interrupts the process of normalization. It is a code which offends the silent majority, challenges the principles of unity and cohesion, and contradicts the myth of consensus (Hebdige 18).

Such offenses and challenges to the principles of unity and cohesion are exactly what Spider is trying to effect on the City and its culture, but at the same time it is also what the text Transmetropolitan tries to do to our culture. Ellis has stated that this is the comic where he can get a few things off his chest (Ellis, “Some Great Graphic Novels”), and while much of Spider's anger can appear rather infantile at times, it also seems evident that many of the statements are quite personal.

The text's way of representing a counterculture, even within a subculture such as comics, can be seen in a number of ways. First, Transmetropolitan was originally published under DC Comics’s Helix imprint, and when that imprint folded, Transmetropolitan continued under the Vertigo imprint, which is DC’s imprint for smaller comics. So, already during production, Transmetropolitan was marked as a subculture within a subculture. Furthermore, the stories themselves are filled with four-letter words and various profanities, and there are often depictions of nudity, just as pornography is a stable presence in the City’s environment. Some stories contain strippers, prostitutes, drug dealers, and drug users, among whom we may count Spider. In other words, the comic bears all the signs of being offensive to a large number of people.1

This is not to say that offensive behavior is always countercultural, but it is clear that there is a desire to generate attention and discussion about
the issues which are raised. Drugs, for instance, are portrayed as the only countermeasure to the buybombs and thus indicate, as already mentioned, the extent to which consumer society relies on a form of mind control.

As a countercultural text, Transmetropolitan defies what Hebdige terms the parent culture, and it does so by parodying what is regarded as the norm (Hebdige 79). The culture of the City seems similar to Bakhtin's carnivalesque (Bakhtin, “Folk Humor and Carnival Laughter” qtd. in Morris, 199), where everything is accepted, but unlike Bakhtin's desire to see the carnivalesque as socially subversive, it is shown here to be an empty carnival, one which seems decadent, especially from our culture's point of view. Much of what occurs in the City is portrayed as moral collapse. The favorite fast food is cloned human flesh, referred to as “long-pig.” Even though there are no social taboos left to be broken, the text still paints a very bleak picture of this society. It is most definitely not a utopian world, nor is the relative freedom regarded positively. Instead, the City is portrayed more like ancient Rome, a decadent empire in decline where the masses are kept happy and content with any kind of perversity they may desire.

It is here that we must recognize that what is parodied is not the parent culture in a generational sense (Ellis, born in 1968, must be said to belong to the parent culture), but rather the “parent culture” is contemporary culture, the postmodern age, the “society of the spectacle,” as Guy Debord termed it, or whatever we might prefer to call it. Through science fiction's typical hyperbolic strategy, our own Western culture is parodied and ridiculed. However, it definitely seems that there is a longing expressed for a re-instating of certain values which our contemporary culture has apparently destroyed.

As Zygmunt Bauman states, capitalist society modifies utopia into individual consumption, a culture where pleasure is not contingent on a specificity of time and place, but instead is preoccupied with the construction of systems of media spectatorship and consumption which will deliver the same mobile pleasures of looking to each citizen (qtd. in Bignell, 28). According to Denzin, we all become voyeurs in a cinematic society where reality is the social re-enactment of visual fictions (Denzin 32). Humans, then, become commodities rather than individuals. This is visually represented in Transmetropolitan in an instance where we see a stripper who instead of nipples has barcodes (Ellis and Roberts, Transmetropolitan: Back on the Street 55).

Both the comic and Spider are nostalgic for a time when this has not yet occurred and in many ways the blame is laid squarely on the rise of visual culture, which is seen as the cause of hyperreality and the death of the subject. There are many examples of Spider's nostalgic view of the word, but the most clear case is that of his newspaper's name, The Word, with its almost biblical connotations.
Another telling clue is Spider’s laptop, a marvellous wonder of technology which is not just a computer but also a telephone and many other devices rolled into one. Yet, its keyboard resembles that of an old-fashioned typewriter (Ellis and Roberts, *Lust for Life* 112). This is an example of what we might call an old-fashioned future or simply a general nostalgic thrust in the design of the future, what Fredric Jameson refers to in his discussion of nostalgia films (Jameson 19). It is clear that most of the Transmetropolitan world is not influenced by this appropriation of a missing past, but Spider’s writing evidently is. There is constantly an “old” feel to his columns, such as the fact that they are visually represented in the Courier font, also reminiscent of old typewriters.

We can apply to Spider’s activity what Hebdige refers to as “noise” (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media. We should therefore not underestimate the signifying power of the spectacular subculture not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy “out there” but as an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation. (Hebdige 90)

Spider thus represents “noise” in two ways: visually, for the reader, since the columns break with standard comic book representation, and culturally, for the City, because he attempts to break the visual culture by employing written text. Semiotically speaking, Transmetropolitan thus represents a desire to present subversive and blocked readings of contemporary culture, attempting to disrupt the visual logic by the introduction of an alternative frame of reference: the written word, which functions as a symbol of truth. This desire for subversive readings is further emphasized by a number of intertextual references, all of which point to anti-establishment people or events.

The basis of Spider can be traced primarily to Hunter S. Thompson, *Rolling Stone* journalist and author of several books on politics and some fiction, of which *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) is obviously the most famous. Not only is Spider Jerusalem visually inspired by Thompson’s appearance, but his journalistic style is clearly also that of Thompson’s gonzo style. Spider describes his view of journalism a number of times, as for instance:

Him [Wolf, journalist teacher] and his “plain old observation” had him covering goddamn flower shows. How he had the balls to found a journalism school. Anyway. You don’t learn journalism in a school. You learn it by writing fucking journalism. You teach yourself to wire up your own brain and gut and reproductive organs into one frightening machine that you aim at the planet like a meat gun. (Ellis and Roberts, *Lust for Life* 11)

*Point:* Journalism is not about plans and spreadsheets. It’s about human reaction and criminal enterprise (ibid. 15; original emphasis).
Add to this Spider's expansive drug use and his first person writing style, and we have an archetypal gonzo journalist, a type found when the journalist merges his or her own personality with that of the subject matter, and thus erases the line of objectivity which is usually the hallmark of journalism. The term is also used, and in this case suitably, for drug-influenced stream-of-consciousness writing. Although there are differences between Spider's and Thompson's points of view, they are both mainly interested in politics and social change.

In addition, the stories are permeated by the belief that one journalist with a scoop can change the face of politics; such a belief can certainly be regarded as a reference to Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, whose articles arguably caused the downfall of President Nixon. Spider is always taking pictures and recording what he hears in order to use it for his columns. There is even a direct reference to the Watergate affair, when Spider offers one of his contacts the nickname of “Deep Throat” to which he gets the response “I’m armed, you know” (Ellis and Roberts, Dirge 45). Although this is clearly a joke, it does indicate the nature of Spider's work and his mode of operation.

Other references are evident in the title of one of the trade paperback collections, which is called Lust for Life, and is most likely meant to refer to Iggy Pop's 1977 song and album of the same name, rather than to Vincente Minnelli's 1956 film about van Gogh. The reference to Iggy Pop can be seen as an extension of the general discourse of punk aesthetics, indicating a certain kinship with Pop's general career and even with the lyrics to the song, as it deals with drug use as an escape from the drudgery of reality.

If we turn to the visual style of Transmetropolitan, we can first conclude that it is most definitely a post-'80s comic book. Its visual style emphasizes unusual panel structures and designs, just as the type of transitions used is not traditional. Unlike the usual superhero style, this comic employs practically all types of transitions as Scott McCloud defines them (McCloud 70–72), the exception being the non-sequitur, a case where the connection between two aspects is unclear and often non-existent. We can particularly note the frequent use of moment-to-moment transitions and aspect-to-aspect, both of which are indications that this is not always an action-filled comic book. Aspect-to-aspect is defined by McCloud as a transition which “bypasses time for the most part and sets a wandering eye on different aspects of a place, idea or mood” (McCloud 72). So, an aspect-to-aspect transition may occur between two separate places, for instance, connected only by a common theme. Transmetropolitan alternates between slow-paced scenes and sudden jumps and ruptures, setting a narrative pace which is different from most superhero comics and does not emphasize violent conflict.
What is most significant in the present context, however, is the use of anchorage (i.e., text directs reader through use of images) and relay (i.e., text and image complement each other). As Matthew P. McAllister argues in his introduction to *Comics and Ideology*, there are two ways of looking at a comic book and how it presents ideology: “On the one hand, the communicative elements in comic art encourage the form to occasionally create a closed ideological text, imposing on the reader preferred meanings” (McAllister 3), but,

[on] the other hand, techniques—such as the ease of comics to visually change the point of view on a comic strip or book and the semantic space created by the sometimes ambiguous relationship between word and picture—make comics a potentially polysemic text, encouraging multiple interpretations, even ones completely oppositional to any specific artistic intent. (McAllister 4)

The possibility of such oppositional readings is not necessarily a bad thing; in many cases it is actually preferable for a commercial text to remain at least somewhat open. John Fiske terms such texts “producerly” (Fiske 104), to distinguish them from what Roland Barthes refers to as “readerly” or “writerly” texts (Barthes, *S/Z* 4–5), and such a position is useful in that it allows the reader a large degree of freedom, hence creating a personal sense of enjoyment which is unique but still requires the text to be read within certain limits dictated by the text itself. As such, superhero comics, for instance, can be enjoyed by a wide variety of readers despite constant objections that the genre is fascist in nature—for instance that some are born superior to others and as such have a right to use power (physical or otherwise) to enforce their moral views on those they believe to be offenders. This is an argument which has been re-stated a number of times, for example in Roger Sabin’s *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (162) and by Patrick Parsons in his article “Batman and his Audience: The Dialectic of Culture” (66). However, *Transmetropolitan* cannot be considered a comic book that is interested in freedom of interpretation regarding its ideological intentions. Instead, we find a strong emphasis on anchorage over the technique of relay more often used in comics.

Roland Barthes defines anchorage as when “the text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others; by means of an often subtle dispatching, it remote-controls him toward a meaning chosen in advance” (Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* 40), and relay as when “text (most often a snatch of dialogue) and image stand in a complementary relationship; the words, in the same way as the images, are fragments of a more general syntagm and the unity of the message is realized at a higher level …” (ibid. 41).

Anchorage, then, subordinates the image to the word, while relay grants them equal status. We find several examples of *Transmetropolitan* opting for
 anchored to ascertain specific readings of the events and images in the stories. To put it another way, words are often given a higher status than the images; the images must be kept in line in order not to be taken the wrong way. I will here leave out a more complex discussion of whether words are always interpreted in the way the sender desired. Transmetropolitan seems to argue that words are far more trustworthy than images. Spider’s words are constantly shown breaking the flow of images in society, and similarly in several cases break, or fix, the floating chain of signifieds on the page. We can take the Angels 8 Riot from the first collection as an example, which is where Spider is re-cataapulted back to his old fame before he left the City (Ellis and Roberts, Back on the Street 60–63). The plot revolves around a group of people called Transients who have genetically modified themselves to become an alien species. In order to get attention and respect, they demand to secede from the City, which results in the police attacking the Transient mob.

We as readers are presented with the riot from an omniscient perspective, as we see panels from all over the City, information to which Spider does not have access. However, all panels are commented on by Spider’s column. The sequence of images begins with Spider sitting on the rooftop, surrounded by the strippers, looking down at the riot, while typing on his computer. The sequence moves to Spider’s editor, back to Spider, to scenes with Transients being beaten, to Spider sweating because of the strain, his fingers on the keyboard. Then we get another abrupt transition, to ordinary citizens going about their business, suddenly seeing Spider’s words on public screens. We get a panel of people staring intently at these screens, before we return to Spider and a crying stripper. The next page shows Spider sweating and smoking, and then moves to his editor smoking, back to Spider’s hands typing, and to a final panel of the riot, seen from Spider’s perspective.

In these scenes, Spider’s remarks are interpretations of what is happening; that they hit close enough to home is simply meant as a function of Spider’s penetrating mind and excellent journalistic abilities. The juxtapositions in this case work as anchorage, where the words are the truth of the matter and the facts. Words constrain our interpretation of the images in a specific direction; in many comic books, particularly superhero ones, fights are not negative in the sense that they are here. Often fights are the justification for reading the story, not as a way to gorge on violence but rather to enjoy spectacular layouts and dynamic drawings. In other words, because DC Comics primarily publish superhero comics, many readers could conceivably read—and thus misunderstand—the fight scenes as morally unproblematic.

In Back on the Street, then, we find that Spider’s comments serve two functions; one is to control the images in the diegesis, to point out to people
in the City what is going on, and to show the truth of the events. The second is to control and constrain the reader’s interpretation, to make sure that there are no oppositional readings of the images where pleasure is derived from the fight scenes. The second function, then, is a metafunction which guides the reader’s protocol and “cancels out” certain readings that are otherwise often preferred by superhero comic books. Note that this function can still fail, of course, as readers may find pleasure in the images which runs contrary to the captions.

The images remain important for the text primarily in two ways. The first is to help guide the reader’s emotional response: showing one of the strippers crying is a clear cue for this scene to be read as tragic. In this case we have a word-image relationship which functions as a relay. An example of anchorage is the fist punching the Transient’s face (Ellis and Roberts, *Back on the Street* 61), an image which could be interpreted in many different ways. Here, however, Spider’s words direct and control the potential meanings into just one: tragedy.

The other important use of the images is slightly different: they generate emotional reactions. As Steven Shaviro argues, “[w]e respond viscerally to visual forms, before having the leisure to read or interpret them as symbols” (Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* 26). Here we come upon the one thing with which words have more problems than images; conveying emotions quickly and viscerally. All reading depends far more on interpretative moves before it can affect us, emotionally or otherwise. Because of this dependency on interpretation in reading, images are used in the Angels 8 Riot as a way of communicating the text’s preferred meaning to the reader (but not to the readers of Spider’s column), and it is in this connection that the relay function is used: to allow word and image to communicate the same message.

Still, what stops the Angels 8 Riot and what saves the Transients is of course Spider’s words. That his column is displayed where everyone can read it, is sufficient cause for the police to be called back. This is clearly a very idealistic way of portraying the power of words, but it is also evidence of how *Transmetropolitan* denounces the image-filled society for a hope of returning to a better past.

What is interesting about this, of course, is the medium in which Ellis’s critique takes place; it seems peculiar to choose a visual medium to criticize visual culture. It may be that there is no real explanation for such a choice, except for the fact that images may simply be needed to be noticed in today’s culture and that *Transmetropolitan* remains an example of contemporary visual culture. On the other hand, the comic book medium—unlike film, for instance—allows for the easy integration of words and images, and so provides Ellis and Roberts with a solution and a way to criticize the society of
the spectacle by employing words in a kind of disciplinary fashion, keeping control over the images and making sure that the reader understands that there is a certain and unfalsifiable truth.

Notes

1 An example of this is its removal from Denver’s libraries in August 2005, which Warren Ellis noted on 13 August of that year in his blog (“Denver Thinks I’m Dirty”).

Sources Cited


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KAREN E. BROWN
The “Inscapes” of Louis le Brocquy

This essay investigates le Brocquy’s head images of W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett. The author argues that these images must be understood in the light of recent inquiries in Irish studies, literary studies, and art history. Firstly, analysing the artist’s images and words exposes constructs of nationalism and Celticism in his response to Yeats. Secondly a comparative analysis of memory, identity, and modernism between his work and that of Joyce highlights his appropriation of the Joycean “epiphany.” And finally, a synthesis of Beckett’s themes of space, time, and human isolation are traced in le Brocquy’s paintings.

STEEN CHRISTIANSEN
The Truth of the Word, the Falsity of the Image: Transmetropolitan’s Critique of the Society of the Spectacle

In this essay, Warren Ellis and Darick Roberts’s science fiction comic book Transmetropolitan is shown to be a critique of the society of the spectacle, a warning against visual culture’s media saturation. Being at the same time both rebellious and nostalgic, the comic book reacts strongly against what it sees as the hyperreality of images, a condition which destroys meaning and empties the subject until humans are mere commodities. Using a cultural semiotics approach, the author shows how the comic book uses words to control the image, and to present strategies for opposition to dominant culture.

CRISTINA CUEVAS-WOLF
John Heartfield’s Insects and the “Idea” of Natural History

This essay argues that Heartfield’s montage Deutsche Naturgeschichte (German Natural History) published in 1934 in the Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung (The Worker-Illustrated Newspaper) is Walter Benjamin’s theory of natural history applied to the actuality of everyday life and the political and historical developments that shaped it in 1934. Heartfield transforms photography, the metaphor of history, into an allegory of death in order to signify metaphorically and literally the paradox of progress as tragicomedy and as farce in Nazi propaganda. Concomitantly, this essay examines the visual interrelationship between Heartfield’s critique of rationalization in the twenties and his critique of evolutionary progress in the thirties to delineate the historical and thematic continuity between these two decades of German history that witnessed the political disintegration of the Weimar Republic.

MARÍA DEGUZMÁN
The Photographic Thought of Latina/o Literature and Cultural Critique

This essay examines Latina/o fictional texts that involve a textually conjured photograph but that are not accompanied by any actual photographs. The author examines how this device of the photograph-in-the-text turns the absence of an actual photo...
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