Decay as Political Metaphor in Ely Dagher's *Waves' 98* and Mounia Akl's *Submarine*

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ABSTRACT: Lebanese cinema serves as a useful tool with which to assess postwar dynamics given the dominance of the civil war in artistic production since 1990. As the first postwar generation reached adulthood, we have been witnessing the inevitable rise of a 'second wave' of postwar Lebanese cinema, defined as the generation of filmmakers born towards the end of or after the civil war. This essay will analyse two post-war Lebanese films, Ely Dagher's 2015 Waves '98 and Mounia Akl's 2016 Submarine, as unique responses to a feeling of despair brought about by the city/nation, explored through the theme of decay as touched upon by both films by using Jessica Auchter's study of the politics of decay. This in turn would allow us to identify aspects of the second wave of postwar Lebanese cinema.

KEYWORDS: Lebanon – Lebanese Cinema – Decay – Lebanese Civil War – Politics – Trauma – Waste Crisis – You Stink Movement.

Introduction

In the summer of 2015, a waste management crisis led to piles of waste accumulating on the streets of Beirut and Mount Lebanon, sparking a wave of contentious politics. As people took to the streets to protest the waste crisis, their demands progressively widened to include the myriad of problems plaguing Lebanon, all of which were usually attributed to government corruption. The collective anger morphed into the 'You Stink' movement. While the waste crisis was the cause of the protests, it was not its sole goal. The protests, which even aimed (but failed) to occupy the heavily-protected parliament itself, attempted to extract "a non-sectarian definition of citizenship, by taking ownership of garbage management and disposal, and thus focusing on the depiction of an alternative body politic opposing citizens to an entrenched, corrupt, and venal elite"[1]. In this respect, the movement was successful and, during the 2016 municipal elections in Beirut, an independent group known as 'Beirut Madinati', supported by

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[1] KRAIDY Marwan M., "Trashing the Sectarian System? Lebanon's 'You Stink' Movement and the Making of Affective Publics." Communication and the Public, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, pp. 19–26., doi:10.1177/2057047315617943.

hundreds of volunteers, succeeded in getting 40% of the votes[2]. This was a key moment for anti-government activists given that the coalition opposing 'Beirut Madinati' comprised of, essentially, the government itself - in other words, it gathered "most of the ruling party figures from both the March 8 and March 14 camps"[3], the rival factions of the political elite dominating Lebanese politics. In a country where politics have been dominated by the two rival factions since 2005, the relative success of 'You Stink' in 2015 and 'Beirut Madinati' in 2016 led many to believe that a new era in Lebanon's postwar life was establishing itself.

To understand this, it is useful to mention how the 2015 waste crisis came to represent widespread corruption and the decreasing quality of life in Beirut and Lebanon as a whole. As Ziad Abu-Rish argued in an essay on the topic, the waste crisis was the result of a number of factors, including: "the nature of the existing waste management contract […] and the infrastructure of dumping"[4]. In 1994, the Lebanese government started subcontracting a company called Sukleen that would take care of waste management in Beirut and Mount Lebanon, which host roughly half of the Lebanese population. The founder of that company was a business partner of then-prime minister Rafik Hariri, one of the main figures of postwar Lebanon who would lead the neoliberal reforms and 'reconstruction' of the country. This particular business configuration proved to be very lucrative for Sukleen as the private company was charging the Lebanese government $45 per ton dumped waste, compared to a global average of $11[5]. This business deal exacerbated wealth inequality in an already-unequal country with public money, collected through taxes, being used to pay an expensive private company for services that the government was expected to do at lower costs.

As "one of Lebanon's most active and widely recognized youth-led groups"[6], the 'You Stink' movement also reflected some of the emerging trends present in the politics of the postwar generation, and the same could be said of Beirut Madinati. Whether or not 2015 was the beginning of a new era is still too soon to tell. That being said, as many commentators have noted, the 'You Stink' movement was itself the result of years of short-lived movements attempting to break a sectarian status quo in place for over a century and especially since the end of the country's civil war in 1990[7]. This was done by challenging one of the pillars of the

[2] Centre for Public Impact (CPI), Backing Beirut to Bounce Back, 14 Feb. 2018. www.centreforpublicimpact.org/backing-beirut-bounce-back/

[3] ELASADY Wael, "The You Stink Challenge in Lebanon." SocialistWorker.org, 20 June 2016, socialistworker.org/2016/06/20/the-you-stink-challenge-in-lebanon

[4] ABU-RISH Ziad, "Garbage Politics." *Can Military Intervention Be "Humanitarian"? | Middle East Research and Information Project*, Middle East Research and Information Project, 2016. Link: www.merip.org/mer/mer277/garbage-politics.

[5] *Ibid*.

[6] KHALIL Joe F., "Lebanon's Waste Crisis: An Exercise of Participation Rights." New Media & Society, 16 Jan. 2016, pp. 701–712.

[7] KHOURI Rami G., "Talking Trash in Lebanon." Al Jazeera America, 24 Aug. 2015, america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/8/talking-trash-in-lebanon.html

sectarian status quo following the civil war, namely the latter's status as a taboo within the context of state-facilitated amnesia. Cinema serves as a useful tool to assess postwar dynamics given the dominance of the civil war in Lebanese cinema. Postwar Lebanese cinema served as a commentator on: the development of sectarian conflict in Lebanon; the normalization of war; the reconstruction of Lebanon in the postwar period; and the way the war still lurks in every corner in today's Lebanon[8].

As the first truly postwar generation reached adulthood, we have been witnessing the inevitable rise of a 'second wave' of Lebanese cinema, defined as the generation of filmmakers born towards the end of or after the civil war. They are the first generation of filmmakers who have not known the war and who have only in recent years started to make films. This 'second wave' of Lebanese cinema, while undoubtedly sharing common characteristics with the 'first wave' generation which lived through the war and spent much of the postwar years reflecting on the war's significance, can offer some clues into what we can describe, for lack of a better term, as the 'collective psyche' of a generation that inherited a country devastated by a war they have never known. If we accept that cinema is "responsive to certain collective demands or desires"[9], it follows that just as cinema can help us understand the society in which it was born, identifying these collective demands or desires allows us to locate films within specific tendencies either established or emerging in that same society. For the purpose of this paper, emerging tendencies will be looked at due to the fact that not enough time has passed for us to discern well-established characteristics of this second wave of postwar generation of filmmakers.

Thus, we will be looking at two acclaimed short films that can give us clues as to some of the trends emerging from the first generation of Lebanese who were born in the final years of the war or right after or, in other words, who have not experienced the civil war, the as-of-yet dominant theme in Lebanese cinema since it began in the 1970s. The films were both produced by directors from the postwar generation and featured a waste crisis in one way or another. *Waves '98* is a 2015 animated meditation on the central character's, Omar, sense of alienation from and within Beirut. Directed by Ely Dagher, this short visual essay has the particular characteristic of being the first clearly postwar Lebanese film to have received a prestigious prize, Cannes' Palm D'Or (the previous winner, Maroun Baghdadi's Out of Life, released in 1991, was set during the war and released shortly after). *Submarine*, directed by Mounia Akl and released in 2016, is set in a dystopian near-future in which half of the population have died from diseases brought about by trash piling up throughout Lebanon. In *Submarine* we see news footage of an activist in a hygiene mask symbolising the resignation at the heart of the film, which is then contrasted with the central character, Hala, refusing, against the wishes of everyone around her, to leave the country. Whereas *Waves '98* ends with Beirut as a prison

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[8] KHATIB Lina, Lebanese Cinema Imagining the Civil War and Beyond. Tauris, 2008.
[9] *Ibid*.

from which one can escape through imagination, *Submarine* leaves us to wonder whether the very attempts at escape are worth it. In both films, crucially, escaping Lebanon is understood to be a natural reaction to the country's reality - a country increasingly defined by widespread corruption, restlessness and a sense that there is no future, or at least no positive vision of the future.

This essay will thus analyse these two post-war Lebanese films as unique responses to a feeling of despair brought about by the city/nation, explored through the theme of decay as studied by Jessica Auchter. The city/nation will be treated as a continuum in which representations of the 'local' (Beirut) are also representative of the national (Lebanon). This in turn would allow us to identify aspects of the second wave of postwar Lebanese cinema.

Decay as Political Metaphor in cinema (fiction) film

Waves '98 opens up with a ghostly figure of an old man rotting from within. This is soon interrupted by a newsreel jingle. The news anchor quickly informs the viewer that Beirut's Qarantina landfill is full and that, consequently, a waste crisis "is ongoing and continues spreading". The quick transition between the two connects inner decay with outer decay, the 'ghost'/old man with the country itself. This initial scene of inner rotting introduces us to the main character's world.

The connection between bodily rotting and a waste crisis taking over the city/nation opens up a framework of analysis that takes us to the politics of decay as explored by Jessica Auchter - she was writing in the context of international relations although, as we will see, her insights can be applied to our study of decay in both short films. She argued that "decay is the physical and material manifestation of the existential anxiety of mortality" which "itself is a form of anxiety over our very ontologies, over who we are and how we are materially constituted as bodies"[10]. We see decay as the symbol of the central character Omar's anxiety through two situations. The first is the scene of Omar sitting in his room and clearly depressed coming immediately after the previous two (the insides of the ghost and the newsreel). Within the first minute of *Waves '98*, we are introduced to the ghost haunting the character, followed by the city in decay, and then the depressed character himself. The second situation, in turn, comes right after, when a phone rings, followed by the voice of someone speaking through it, although no one picked it up. The voice, seemingly Omar's own, declares the following, introducing us to Omar's world: "I'm tired of hearing the same story over and over again. It feels like everything is stuck in a loop. I'm tired of my house, my bed, tired of all these depressing stories. Everyone is fed up. They wake up every morning to the same news, same chaos and mess. Nothing ever changes. I don't want to end up like them."

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[10] AUCHTER Jessica, "The Politics of Decay: Death, Mortality and Security." Critical Studies on Security, vol. 5, no. 2, Apr. 2017, pp. 222–225., doi:10.1080/21624887.2017.1334354.

The idea of ending up 'like them' terrifies Omar to such an extent that the ghost returning towards the end of *Waves '98* comprises the climax of the film. A crucial aspect of the terror haunting Omar is the idea of rotting in perpetuity, in a state of endless liminality. In other words, rather than decay representing Omar's fear of mortality, as Auchter argues, it seems to be representing his fear of perpetual liminality. This feeling of being stuck 'in between' has been a staple of postwar Lebanese life and can be found in cinema[11] just as it can be found in literature and other art forms.[12] This was perhaps best exemplified by a Lebanese teacher called Dima, whose words were documented in Sami Hermez's 2017 book *War Is Coming: between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon*[13], his exploration of how the Lebanese often live in multiple temporal registers at the same time due to, among other things, their anticipation of violence. Dima described the Lebanese condition as being 'in the meanwhile'[14], neither backward-looking nor forward-looking, but simply stuck. As decay represents the state of declining from a desirable to an undesirable form, from life to death, the 'in the meanwhile' represents the state in between life and death. This metaphor, as we will see, takes on a literal meaning in *Submarine*.

Even the title of *Waves '98* gives us good reasons to accept this 'in the meanwhile' framework. The closure of the Qarantina landfill in 1998 and subsequent waste crisis was echoed in the year 2015 when the Naameh landfill, which had replaced the Qarantina one, was closed as it reached its full capacity. The weeks of trash piling up ended up breaking the proverbial camel's back and the country's largest anti-government protest movement since the end of the war, dubbed 'You Stink', was formed. As if prophetically, *Waves '98*'s release came just months before the 'You Stink' protest was launched. In other words, the Naameh landfill replaced the Qarantina landfill, and a 'Waves 2015' could have been filmed with the same plot.

This reality sets the tone of *Waves '98*. The feeling of repetition and the belief that Lebanon is, for lack of a better word, plagued with a curse condemning its inhabitants to repeat their daily tasks as though they are being punished for something they did. We do not know what this 'punishment' is for as, contrary to a majority postwar Lebanese films, no reference to the civil war is made. And yet, this is a phenomenon present throughout the civil war where the average person's life was heavily impacted by the actions of sectarian or nationalist militias as well as involved foreign states. Hermez noted that, for him, 'in the meanwhile' "became a lens through which to think about social life amid political violence and the protracted nature of conflict that has existed in Lebanon".[15] The same lens could also be applied to a world like the one in *Waves*

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[11] MILLET Raphael, *Cinema in Lebanon / Le cinéma Au Liban,* Rawiya, 2017.

[12] HOUT Syrine Chafic, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora*, Edinburgh University Press, 2012

[13] HERMEZ Sami, *War Is Coming: between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017

[14] *Ibid.*, p.2

[15] *Ibid.*, p.2

'98 defined by a lack of hope and of a sense of purpose. Dima had noted how the Lebanese seek to maintain a sense of 'normality' even as war and destruction prevail. This serves as a coping mechanism, an escape from the feeling of being stuck 'in the meanwhile'. In *Waves '98* however, the characters are all depressed, and their daily routines in Beirut only serve to prolong their angst. There is nothing in Beirut itself that can provide any escape.

The need for 'normality' as described by Dima is also featured in *Submarine*, where the people go to a pub (named 'Submarine'), and where Hala can pretend everything is going well. The image of Lebanese people partying in times of war has become a cliché propagated by media outlets[16] and politicians alike. In *Submarine* however, its symbolism is used to portray a society that does not wish to abandon hope in the face of adversity, but is nonetheless forced to. Whether or not that is a 'good' thing is unclear, and perhaps besides the point. In *Submarine*, we see one possible conclusion to the liminal phase of 'in the meanwhile', namely the end of Lebanon as we know it. Akl does this by placing Hala in a Lebanon shortly after the 2015 waste crisis. Most of the population is killed by diseases and left with no choice but to leave Lebanon for ever. Decay is more than a metaphor for the fear of liminality as in Waves' 98. It is simply the penultimate stage before death itself. In Akl's words: "People have lost hope. Lebanon has become an unlivable apocalypse and the people are left with no other option but to leave. Nature has died, air has been replaced by poison and there's an acid rain coming".[17]

Furthermore, another dimension relevant to our case is the postwar governments' de-facto 'pro-amnesia' policies. The postwar government passed an amnesty law which exhonerated most crimes committed during the war. Many of the leading figures of the war were then integrated into Lebanese politics, with some gaining high-ranking positions, either in the 1990s or after the events of 2005. Furthermore, the amnesty law meant that discussions of the civil war were discouraged or even censored. As such, I argued elsewhere that "the conflicting powers in Lebanon attempting to monopolize truth have created an environment in which 'truth' cannot be determined by any recognizable social tool"[18]. This could help explain Omar's seemingly permanent depression. The postwar individual was left with no meaningful way of making sense of the world around him or her. We even see this affecting Omar's surroundings. His parents are portrayed as emotionless and fixated on whatever is on the television. Near them, empty frames with 'your memories' written on them. Both the students and the teacher in his class participate in the ritual of education with no emotions or even words involved. The teacher is seen clicking through her slides while the students in their stain-infested classroom just stare at her with a mixture of boredom, sadness and indifference. Putting it differently, not

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[16] see for example Tim Hume's "Beirut: The Middle East's party capital" for CNN, August 10, 2012

[17] AKL Mounia, "In Conversation with Mounia Akl, Director of 'Submarine'." *Hummus For Thought*, 18 July 2018. Link:https://hummusforthought.com/2018/07/18/conversation-with-mounia-akl-director-of-submarine/

[18] AYOUB Joey, "The Civil War's Ghosts: Events of Memory Seen Through Lebanese Cinema." *The Social Life of Memory: Violence, Trauma, and Testimony in Lebanon and Morocco*, edited by Norman Saadi Nikro and Sonja Hegasy, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

only does Beirut not provide any form of escape, but the individual living in Beirut doesn't have the tools needed to escape it in the first place.

But Dagher argued that the liminality need not be permanent, and he provided an escape from it in *Waves '98* in the form of a giant, golden and metallic-looking elephant. The magical creature redefines Beirut from the location of permanent liminality to one which harbors a certain amount of hope. To Dagher, seeing the waste crisis in 2015 initially "felt like an ironic incident" but this irony was soon broken by the 'You Stink' protest, "a glimmer of hope for a bit of time which we didn't see so much prior to 2015"[19]. Reflecting on what this means for Omar, and whether Omar did 'end up like them', he said: "I wouldn't say Omar 'end up like them', at least not for ever, because I think even if he thinks there's no way around it and there's no possibility for change, he would still try"[20]. In both *Waves '98* and in Dagher's reflections, the hope for change, no matter how 'unrealistic', is never fully extinguished, despite the grim and hope-resistant city/nation Omar lives in. We see this in Omar's amazement at the extraordinary world unfolding itself within the world of the magical creature halfway through the film, in contrast to his quasi-total silence up until then. Indeed, the first time we see Omar speak - as opposed to us hearing his voice in the beginning but not seeing him actually speak - he simply says 'wow'. Beirut has not managed to completely extinguish Omar's sense of wonder, and therein lies endless possibilities.

Whereas we see Lebanon as a whole portrayed in *Submarine*, in *Waves '98* it's the city which takes precedence. However, the city here represents the country as a whole as well, echoing the continuum between a country and its capital in several Middle Eastern countries such as with Damascus/Syria, Cairo/Egypt and Beirut/Lebanon. In this context, the city/country-as-decay is on the one hand a warning, a threat that, as with the ghost, terrifies Omar in *Waves '98* to his very core. On the other hand, the city/country-as-decay, as with Hala in *Submarine*, is a dystopic reality. Both metaphors denote the city/country as not just containing a spatial dimension, but a temporal one as well. The city/country is not just a specific location but one which exists at a particular time, and is therefore in existential uncertainty. In *Waves '98*, the city/country is stuck in a seemingly endless loop of repeating itself. As Omar is at the same time a symbol for the city/country[21], him saying 'I don't want to end up like them' could be viewed as the city/country speaking to itself. In *Submarine*, the city/country is threatened with extinction and, despite Hala's resistance, is de-facto no more. To put it differently, *Submarine*'s Beirut/Lebanon is what Omar fears, because it did 'end up like them'. In both cases, decay becomes a symbol for a political reality.

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[19] DAGHER Ely, "In Conversation with Ely Dagher, Director of 'Waves '98'." *Hummus For Thought*, 14 July 2018, hummusforthought.com/2018/05/14/conversation-with-ely-dagher-director-of-waves-98/

[20] *Ibid*.

[21] *Ibid.*

For that reason, during the 2015 Waste Crisis "the presence of decay (even of garbage) in the public sphere was the relevant issue that invoked the metaphor of political decay" and that "garbage and its stench became productive of a social and political protest against the government"[22]. We saw this with protesters putting the faces of prominent politicians on trash bags with signs such as 'some trash don't need recycling' attached to them. It also explains why parallel movements, which often mixed with 'You Stink', appeared such as 'Badna Nhassib' ('we want to hold them accountable') as well as various LGBTQ, environmental, student and/or feminist groups. In other words, the demands for a solution to the waste crisis were understood to intersect with wider issues due to the pervasive nature of corruption in Lebanon. The brief moments when the protests were viewed as potentially revolutionary therefore drew many more sections of Lebanese society than many expected, despite, or rather due to, the initial demands of the protests being primarily about the waste crisis.

As decay invoked the metaphor of political decay, so did its resolution depend on political action. The 'You Stink' protests demanded that the government find a sustainable solution to the crisis. "This decay", Auchter writes about 'You Stink', "was sought to be effaced by the sovereign via the mechanism of management".[23] The sense of something bigger at play - here, the sovereign state and ruling class - is present in *Submarine* in the form of those in power leaving Lebanon drowning in waste. Notably, in *Submarine* we are not asked why 'the people' couldn't organise amongst themselves to solve the waste crisis. The activist in the beginning of the film tells us that the ruling class fled the country, and that everyone else was trying to follow suit. But why was everyone else trying to follow suit? If the ruling class is the cause of the problem, shouldn't their departure signal new possibilities rather than doom? Previously, it was argued that liminality could be a realm of "pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise". But in *Submarine*, it is the end, or 'post-liminality', which is portrayed. Were it liminality, then the people in *Submarine* would have had an opportunity to start anew. The decay could have been a symbol of old failures, and its resolution part of a new era. Instead, the old defined the new, and the new abandoned ship (an apt expression for *Submarine*) before even reaching the 'new world' (a post-apocalyptic Lebanon).

Conclusion

This analysis of second wave Lebanese cinema opens up the door for a further exploration of the themes being developed by that new generation of filmmakers. If Ely Dagher's *Waves '98* finds itself at the center of future discussions on second wave cinema in Lebanon, it will likely be due to the international prizes it garnered. But both *Waves '98* and Mounia Akl's *Submarine*

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[22] Cf. Auchter, *op. cit.*

[23] Cf. Auchter, *op. cit.*

(itself widely-acclaimed) offer very useful insights into defining features of what I've been calling in this essay second wave Lebanese cinema.

One characteristic of second wave cinema is the representation of the city/nation as warning (as in *Waves '98*) or reality (as in *Submarine*). The city/nation is viewed as a time-sensitive entity, one which is in existential uncertainty. It represents two extreme possibilities: it has either become a hopeless land with no future (*Submarine*), or it carries within it its own salvation (*Waves '98*), making it also a representation of the postwar Lebanese experience. This is explored through the use of decay as political metaphor, as we saw with Auchter's analysis.

That a link is made between bodily rotting and the city/nation's waste crisis reveals a deep anxiety towards perpetual liminality. Omar's fear of ending up 'like them' further demonstrates the tense relationship between the postwar generation and previous ones who experienced the civil war. We see Hala refusing to follow in the footsteps of her neighbors and family, most of whom are from the war generation, choosing instead to stay behind despite the lack of any future in Lebanon. With both Omar and Hala deprived of any real agency to change the city/nation's future, they are left to wait 'in the meanwhile', with no end in sight.

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MILLET Raphael, *Cinema in Lebanon / Le cinéma au Liban*, Rawiya, 2017.

Abstract : Le cinéma libanais nous permet d'évaluer la dynamique d'après-guerre compte tenu de la domination de la guerre civile dans la production artistique depuis 1990. Depuis quelques années, la première génération d'après-guerre a atteint l'âge adulte, et donc nous assistons à la montée inévitable d'une «deuxième vague» de cinéma libanais d'après-guerre, définie comme la génération de cinéastes nés vers la fin ou après la guerre civile. Cet essai analysera deux films libanais d'après-guerre, "Waves '98" d'Ely Dagher sorti en 2015 et "Submarine" de Mounia Akl sorti en 2016, en tant que réponses uniques au sentiment de désespoir suscité par la ville/nation, explorés à travers le thème de la décomposition cher à Jessica Auchter. Cela nous permettrait également d'identifier des aspects de la deuxième vague du cinéma libanais d'après-guerre.

ملخص

السينما اللبنانية تمنح أداة مفيدة لدراسة ديناميكيات ما بعد الحرب كون الحرب الأهلية مهيمنة في السينما اللبنانية منذ ال١٩٩٠ . مع وصول أول جيل بعد الحرب إلى سن الرشد، اننا نشهد انشاء" الموجة الثانية "للسينما ما بعد الحرب .تُعرّف هذه الموجة كجيل صناع السينما الذين ولدوا في نهاية الحرب أو بعدها .في هذا المقال سيُحلَّل فيلمان لبنانيان من ما بعد الحرب،" موج 98" لايلي داغر (2015) و"سبمارين "المنية عقل (2016) ، كردود فريدة على الشعور باليأس الناجم عن المدينة / الأمة، من خلال نظرية الانحلال المعتمدة من قبل جيسيكا أوشتر. وهذا بدوره يمكننا من تحديد بعض عناصر الموجة الثانية للسينما اللبنانية ما بعد الحرب.

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