



A Discussion with Malcolm Turvey on Specificity, Essence, and the “Cinematic”

On April 10th 2013, film scholar Malcolm Turvey joined PhD students Adam Rosadiuk and Zach Melzer in conversation to elaborate on his talk “Medium Specificity Defended” presented at ARTHEMIS—the full length of which can be heard on the ARTHEMIS website (<http://arthemis-cinema.ca/en/content/malcom-turveys-talk>). In this talk Turvey aimed to distinguish “medium specificity” from “medium essentialist” claims, and to explain why some version of the specificity argument remains relevant to film theory today.

The following conversation begins with a brief biography of Turvey’s academic life, and continues by positioning the differences Turvey’s talk posed in relation to the enigmatic concept of the “cinematic.” It then ends with an extended discussion on the practical issues concerning the humanities and knowledge production.

WHY STUDY FILM STUDIES?

Adam Rosadiuk: Could you say a little bit about your formation as an academic and as a scholar?

Malcolm Turvey: I studied film as an undergraduate at the University of Kent in Britain in the late 1980s, and at that time, there were only two universities in the UK that offered a Bachelor of Arts degree in Film Studies. I got a very good education in film. The one thing, however, was that it was steeped in, broadly speaking, post-Structuralist theory, and the people who ran the program I studied in—the head of the program was Ben Brewster, who had translated Althusser in the late 1960s—had been involved with Screen in the early to mid-70s during its highly Brechtian, French Structuralist/Post-

Structuralist phase. That was definitely the theoretical perspective within which I was immersed as an undergraduate.

I then went to NYU to do my PhD in Cinema Studies in the mid-1990s, and there I was very fortunate to study with two wonderful people. One was Annette Michelson, with whom I studied avant-garde and modernist film. Annette always saw film as related to the other arts, so for her, you had to view certain types of film with the context of advanced painting, literature and so on. Her courses always very much emphasised that, and it meant that she exposed us to many things beyond film. I am enormously grateful to her for that, and for the tremendous amount she taught me about modernist art. She also brought me to *October*, first as the managing editor and then as an editor. Again, through *October*, I have been exposed to many things I would not have encountered otherwise, and it's due to Annette and *October* that much of my work has drawn on art history. My love of classical film theory is also largely due to Annette, who first introduced me to the writings of Epstein, Vertov, and so on, and who opened my eyes to their tremendous value. My talk on medium-specificity yesterday was part of a larger project of defending classical film theory, or at least some of its arguments. Not all of them were wrong, I think, including the ones about medium-specificity.

The other person who was very important to me was Richard Allen, who was at the forefront of the analytic philosophy of film as it was emerging in the early '90s. It's due to Richard that I started reading philosophers like George Wilson, Noël Carroll, Paisley Livingston, and Berys Gaut. To me, their brand of theorizing is vastly superior to the stuff I had been taught as an undergrad. I vividly recall reading Noël's work for the first time, which I found totally liberating due to its clarity, precision, rigour, and willingness to challenge dogma. I had felt the same way, by the way, a few years earlier when I first encountered David Bordwell's work. It was *Narration in the Fiction Film*, which had just come out when I was an undergraduate, a book I still count as one of the two or three most important in the field. After that, I never went back! That said, mainstream analytic philosophy has its problems, too, and in some of my work I've tried to criticise its reductionism and essentialism, its tendency to build theories that reduce complex

phenomena to one or two explanatory principles. This is why the tradition of analytic philosophy that has influenced me the most is the so-called “ordinary language philosophy” of Wittgenstein, Ryle, Austin (but not Cavell), which is engaged in clarifying concepts rather than building theories. Mainstream analytic philosophers also tend to defend their theories tooth and nail even in the face of plausible criticisms, which I've experienced first-hand on a number of occasions. This means analytic philosophy, at its worse, can be highly dogmatic. At its best, though, there is no better game in town, at least in my book.

Zach Melzer: You mentioned you had a really excellent education as an undergrad even though you were reading all this theory that you didn't quite respond to. But did it give you a taste for theory?

MT: Yes, certainly. We also read the classics—Bazin, Eisenstein and so on—and it definitely gave me a taste for film theory. But it wasn't until I was exposed to this other kind of theorizing that theory seemed like a valuable thing to me. As a discipline, we tend to get carried away by the “latest thing in town,” whether theoretical or artistic. In my work, I have tried to contribute to what I see are long running theoretical questions that are pertinent to film studies. “Medium specificity” is one of those questions.

MEDIUM SPECIFICITY, MEDIUM ESSENTIALISM, AND THE “CINEMATIC”

AR: Let's turn to medium specificity, then. Your talk yesterday clarified many issues I've struggled with, but at the same time, didn't quite address the way I tend to think about the concept of medium—or, at least, the way the concept is being used today. The term “cinematic” tends to come up often in popular discussions about cinema. I have one quote from a podcast for Slate magazine that I'd like to share with you. It is by Julia Turner who is a journalist and cultural critic, not a film critic, and she's talking about the film *Drive* (Nicholas Winding Refn, 2011). This is a film, as I'm sure you'd agree, that really gets cinephiles excited. This was Turner's take:

I was pretty seduced. It was a delightful movie to see. It was gripping and arresting, and you fall into a pool of moody emotion while you watch. But I'm not sure that it offers much more than 'cinematicness.' It's just incredibly, beautifully cinematic. It makes you feel 'Wow, movies are a great medium because they can look and feel like this.'

She goes on and it's clear that she doesn't love the film, and she doesn't think it's a masterpiece, but she feels that the film is doing something "cinematic." And, for her, there is something valuable and wonderful in that cinematic-ness. I am not entirely sure what the "cinematic" means to her, but I bring it up because I find her use of the term to have some degree of relevance here. Isn't it strange that a term such as the "cinematic"—one that is widely used for analyzing film in popular culture—is not being theorized in film studies?

MT: Yes. Irrespective of what one thinks about *Drive* in particular, what Turner is saying is something that we're all inclined to say, which is that there are certain kinds of effects—or experiences, if you wish to call them that—that cinema can give rise to, that one can find in cinema that one is not going to find with other mediums. When I say medium here, I mean art forms or practices. This seems to me like a perfectly legitimate thing for this critic to say, and when you suggest that film theory does not really address this kind of claim, I couldn't agree more. I think this is, in part, because medium essentialism has been conflated with medium specificity, as I argued yesterday. Let me explain. The kind of claim that Turner makes is, I believe, a theoretically coherent claim. I call it the "art form differentiation" argument, which is when you take some effect that a medium or combination of media in a particular art form are capable of creating, and say "this is an effect that you're not going to find in any other art form." This kind of claim becomes problematic, I think, when critics begin saying "in order to create an art work in that art form, you have to use that effect." This is what I call "medium essentialism," and it's highly prescriptive. But if you dispense with it, then it seems that almost all the objections to the kind of claim Turner is making fall away, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with saying that there are certain things filmmakers can do

with the medium of cinema that we call "cinematic," because you're not going to find them elsewhere.

What are the consequences of this? Well, as Turner says very clearly in the quotation, it doesn't mean that the work that produces the "cinematic" is a great work of art. Isolating one aspect of a work as being specific to an art form does not give you a guide to its quality, but it does suggest why we value art forms. We value theatre because of the live performances of actors, and we admire the skill with which certain actors are able to perform live and interpret famous roles, and so on. With painting, we value the ways that certain painters can use certain kinds of paints to achieve certain effects of texture and light and so on. To me, there isn't anything wrong with that at all, and in fact, our field is doing a disservice to the way people respond to films, by ignoring the fact that medium-specificity is an important part of their response to films, or any other art form.

AR: In that sense, it seems as if the term "cinematic" has become detached from cinema. It's become loose in culture, and you can apply it to all kinds of things, including music. It seems like many reviews mention the "cinematic" qualities of an album, and I think I know what they're trying to communicate: something that is "cinematic" produces these kinds of effects; it has a kind of Hollywood-esque "bigness" to it. But I also feel like this use of the cinematic is coming out of a recognition of something more like an essence that is outside of interpretation, outside of historical context. So what is this object that people have in mind when they use the term? Maybe it's a slippery and untenable use of the term, but it circulates a lot....

MT: But often, of course, people use terms like "cinematic" metaphorically. You often read about certain kinds of novels that are "cinematic." They're cinematic in the sense that certain kinds of literary techniques approximate, or are reminiscent of, certain kinds of techniques you find in cinema. People talk about novels in which the narrator cuts back and forth between different scenes and they call it cinematic. Yes, that's probably true, but that seems to be a metaphorical extension of the term, not a literal use of it. I

think one does have to be careful to note if someone is using the claim in a metaphorical sense, or in a literal sense.

ZM: In your talk you showed an example of a film technique that was, for argument’s sake, meant to be seen on celluloid. You wanted to look at how the techniques of exposure impacted the impressions of colour and brightness. And yet you illustrated this example by showing a clip from a DVD copy on a computer that was projected digitally. So your argument is that we’re still able to detect those aesthetic qualities that were “intended.” In other words, there’s nothing really essentially film/celluloid or DVD/digital about the techniques. My question is more related to the theoretical—or anti-theoretical—side of you. If we don’t want to talk about materialist kinds of relationships, and we want to talk about cinema and art as belonging to the realm of ideas, how can we stop ourselves from making larger claims about how aesthetics, techniques, technologies relate to social and cultural relationships that are made around and through them?

MT: Well certainly nothing I said yesterday was intended to exclude those kinds of sociocultural issues. My feeling in terms of my work is that so many people talk about those kinds of issues that I don’t have to do that. I’m more interested in the more philosophical and theoretical issues. The way that different kinds of media are used in the context in which they’re used—or contexts—obviously has incredible social, cultural, and often political consequences, and of course that needs to be talked about. It seems to me that one of the big advances in the field has been the greater emphasis on users interfacing with media, and the various kinds of uses and appropriations that they can engage in, the various ways in which socioeconomic, physical and environmental contexts will shape that engagement—all of that seems very important to me, even though I don’t focus on it myself.

ZM: This kind of work sounds to me like it can begin to tread on essentialist models. It begins to parse out or dissect the specific characteristics of a particular medium as though these kinds of properties can be identified.

MT: Yes. But one can still make a medium-specific claim about a medium and acknowledge that other media can do plenty of things that medium does. The other example I used yesterday—*La roue* (Abel Gance, 1922), and the reason why it seems to me unimportant that it was shown in a purely digital context—is that the kinds of editing effects that Gance was aiming for are ones that can be achieved in digital media too. When he made that film, one could say that these effects were medium-specific, because at the time, there were no other media that you could achieve those effects in. But now, of course, one could not make that claim. This is why I think it's very important that any medium-specific claim be relative to whatever else is available. One of the mistakes of a lot of medium-specific theorizing is that it makes absolute claims such as: "this medium does something that no other medium can ever do." That may be true in 1922, or whatever year you make that claim, but nothing means that it will continue to be true in 1923, or 1993.

Thus I don't think one can make an absolute medium-specific claim, ever. But that doesn't seem to be a problem because there's a whole class of claims we make about things that are relative to their historical context. Sometimes critics of medium specificity claims tend to think that we're all idiots, and when we're making a medium-specific claim, we're making a trans-historical absolute claim. Whereas it seems to me that medium-specific claims are always going to be relative to a specific historical moment, and most people who make medium-specific claims realize that. Bazin says it clearly. Vertov says it clearly. These theorists recognize that there are technologies coming down the line that are going to be able to do the sort of things that celluloid film could do in their day better than celluloid film could do. I think you have to write into the theory of medium specificity this historical relativity.

AR: The concept of medium-specificity seems like a useful hermeneutic tool. Yet, as a critical practice, it also seems to be in the service of establishing essentialist claims. So, I wonder why is medium-specificity so useful, and why do we keep turning to it? Isn't this a slightly irresolvable, and hence problematic, tendency?

MT: Part of the problem is the suspicion of essentialism, which I think is legitimate in certain contexts, but like most things, becomes absurd once it is generalized. It's important to say that there's no essential definition of what a woman is, and anyone who tries to say "being a woman means you must be a mother and a good wife," or whatever is wrong. But that doesn't mean that there aren't other areas of human life where one needs essentialist definitions. In studying the natural world, it seems to me that we want to know what, say, a disease is, that one needs an essentialist definition of a disease so that we know when somebody has it and therefore how to treat them. The problem is what had begun as a perfectly legitimate critique of essentialism in a sort of socio-cultural context has morphed into this sort of absurd and logically contradictory position that no essentialism of any kind is permissible. That seems to me to be both impossible in practice and also philosophically incoherent.

So no, I don't think this has to be a problematic tendency at all. This is the confusion I tried to ameliorate in my talk, and why I think it's necessary to draw a clear distinction between "medium-essentialism" and "medium-specificity." It seems to me that once you uncouple the two, you can start to find the clarity you're after. Once you identify a use of a medium that is specific to an art form, it does not mean it becomes something that a filmmaker has to use. It seems to me that any of those kinds of discomforts can be alleviated. For example, one can quite easily hold that there are certain kinds of things that we identify as cinematic, yet also allow the notion that films that do none of these things are great films. For instance, some people think—I personally don't like it—but some people think that a film like *My Dinner With Andre* (Louis Malle, 1981), which is largely a recording of two men talking over dinner, is a great film. I can't see it myself; it's certainly an interesting film, but let's assume that it is great. Just because you've pointed to ways that cinematic media can be used, that are specific to it, doesn't mean that you then have to take the next step and say a film like *My Dinner With Andre* is automatically not art because it doesn't use these techniques.

ZM: Do you see your project, then, going beyond an affective understanding of the experiences of cinema as they play out in other media, or other conditions for reception—for example, articulating other particular kinds of relations, or expanding a network of affective relations?

MT: I think it just shows that the arts are not autonomous, and that even though one can identify certain art forms, this does not mean that art forms are not influenced by each other or draw from each other. Let's look, in cinema, at the use of "theatricality"—one can think of the deliberate allusions to theatre in Renoir's films of the 1950s, or the use of Brechtian theatrical techniques in political modernist films of the 1960s. One might say that Anna Karina and Jean-Claude Brialy curtsying and bowing to the camera in *Une femme est une femme* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1961) is a theatrical technique. So one might say that cross-cutting in a novel is a cinematic technique, but that doesn't mean that one thinks one is watching theatre when watching *Une femme est une femme*, or that one is watching a film when reading a cinematic novel. I think all it goes to show is how rooted medium-specificity is in our critical responses to things, because we recognize that certain kinds of techniques are identified with particular art forms, and when similar techniques are used in other art forms, we say "oh, well that's theatrical, or painterly!" If you talk about how an Alain Resnais film is literary, you're not saying that watching it is like reading a piece of literature. What you're saying is that clearly, what Resnais is trying to do in *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959) is find cinematic equivalents for certain kinds of literary techniques, such as involuntary memory in Proust. So therefore, it seems to me, in a way, not to disconfirm the fact that there is such a thing as medium specificity, but rather to actually confirm it, because in the very vocabulary, we reach for it when we say that music is cinematic, or a cinematic work is theatrical. It reveals our assumption that there are certain techniques and effects that are very much identified with certain art forms. If it wasn't the case—say, acknowledging the audience was not a theatrical technique—people wouldn't say "that's Godard using theatricality in his films."

ON THE PEDAGOGY OF ANALYTICAL PHILOSOPHY, AND THE ECONOMICS OF THE HUMANITIES

ZM: Let’s turn now to some of your other interests. Your work champions the use of analytical philosophy. How do you go about teaching—and I’m thinking here pedagogically speaking—analytical philosophy through film? How would you shape this approach in ways that further develop its goals and aims?

MT: I think for most things about film, analytical philosophy is useless. But for theoretical questions, if one is trying to build a theory of something, I would say that the kinds of values that the analytic approach aims for—clarity, logical consistency, drawing on the best natural and social-scientific theories out there—all of those things are the way to go if you want to build a theory that stands a chance of being “right.” So any student who is engaged in a theoretical project, I would encourage to be clear, to be logically consistent, to read up on what people in pertinent disciplines are actually arguing, and then do the best that they can with this information. I think one of the problems in our field, and this is partly why the humanities are looked down upon by everyone else, is that our standards of reasoning and evidence are so low, and what gets trumpeted as a successful and applicable theory—Deleuze’s for example—has usually been held to low or no standards of reasoning and evidence. I think that it’s right to try to be clear, to clarify one’s concepts, to be logically consistent, and to use the best evidence available. This way one is much more likely to say something that approximates the truth, as opposed to the vague, analogical or associative reasoning that often passes for theory in the humanities.

ZM: As you point out, during the 1970s some strands in film studies inadequately tried to formulate relationships with psychoanalysis, semiotics, and Marxist theory. Psychoanalysis itself is a particular kind of animal as well, in that it cannot be truly empirically described or found.

MT: One of the main criticisms of psychoanalysis is that it’s not falsifiable. And unless there is some possibility of falsifying a claim, then it doesn’t count as a scientific claim. Unless you can at least envision ways of testing a claim, then it’s not science.

ZM: Right. And since we're largely dealing with aesthetics in our work, even when we engage with social issues related to them, we're trying to find how social conflicts are being articulated through them. So we're trying to search for something that can only be discussed in a certain way that, as you say, cannot be falsified. Since aesthetics are experienced subjectively, we can't really say “There it is! There is the axis where aesthetics and cultural contexts meet” because this axis is multiple and moreover is constantly changing. But can we rethink this dialogue with psychoanalysis? Can we make it provable? Are there better ways to do it?

MT: The way psychoanalysis is used, for the most part, in the humanities is as a theory that generates interpretations. People will look at a Hitchcock film or a David Lynch film and say “you can interpret this film through psychoanalytic theory.” You can, for example, interpret the behavior of a character as being motivated by unconscious desires or impulses. I see no problem with this because there are certain films and works of art that lend themselves very easily to psychoanalytic interpretation. And that's no surprise, because the psychoanalytical view of human nature, broadly speaking, is one shared by many artists, and therefore they will design works in which characters have unconscious desires, and so on. Obviously there will be other films where a psychoanalytical interpretation will totally miss the mark. There are films that are not about characters' unconscious desires, they're about something else, so if you insist on interpreting the film or novel or painting in terms of unconscious desires, you're going to miss that “something else.” But with that caveat, it seems absolutely unproblematic to believe that there are certain works of art that can be fruitfully interpreted through psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis will point to certain things about the work that you will miss if you don't use it. But that seems to be very different from, say, psychoanalysis or some other version of it—which is another problem: is one a Kleinian, a Lacanian, a Freudian, and if so, which phase and period? And there are any number of psychoanalytic theories that film scholars never draw upon, because they don't read them. They only read the authors who are fashionable: Freud, Lacan, maybe Klein, maybe Reich, Žižek, and that's it—but setting that worry aside, it's more problematic to me to say that psychoanalysis is true as a theory of mind and mentality, and we can

therefore make truth claims about the way viewers respond to films, using psychoanalysis. That seems to be a much more problematic enterprise because, first of all, film scholars for the most part lack the expertise to discuss psychoanalysis. People spend their lives studying psychoanalysis before they are able to say with any degree of confidence that certain psychoanalytical claims are true. Film scholars seem to dive right in without any kind of training and claim that "as Lacan has shown, x." How do film scholars know that there is such a thing as a mirror stage? It's a laughable notion within psychoanalysis itself, and many in the field have dismissed it as nonsense with no empirical evidence. Yet a whole generation of film scholars have confidently asserted "as Lacan has shown, when you are six months old, you'll look at a mirror and say 'a-ha!'" That, to me, is so full of problems, I wonder why anyone would want to go back there again. Thank God that's not the reigning paradigm anymore!

ZM: Would you say that instead of truth with a capital T, we can still adopt certain parts of psychoanalysis and find them relevant? There are many truths that can be said about cinema. Lacan's psychoanalysis is one particular kind of truth that may be useful to think through and think about, whether for a film or a cultural context.

MT: Actually no, because I don't think that an interpretation of a film using psychoanalysis or any other theory is dependent upon whether or not the theory is true. Here's another example: if one looks at the work of Dziga Vertov, one has to have some grasp of Marxist theory in order to explain and interpret what he's doing in his works. That doesn't mean that one needs to be committed to Marxism as true. The reason is because, regardless of whether Marxism is true or not, Vertov thought it was true, and therefore tried to instantiate certain kinds of Marxist principles, goals and beliefs in his work. If you don't know what those principles, goals and beliefs are, then you're going to miss a great deal about Vertov's work. As another example, there was a generation of painters who believed that the kind of prescriptive medium-essentialism that was advanced by people like Clement Greenberg was true. The job of a painter was to discover the essence of painting. Now, you don't have to believe that this prescriptive medium-essentialism that Greenberg advanced was true in order to say "these painters

are trying to discover the essence of painting." You said earlier, very correctly, that much of what we do in the humanities is not amenable to the kinds of scientific protocols that one may use in the natural or human sciences. I couldn't agree more, and interpretation seems to be one of those kinds of things. An interpretation of a film is not falsifiable in the way that a scientific theory is; interpretations are often not logically consistent because films themselves are not logically consistent, and so on. Now, there are still some broad protocols of reasoning and evidence when you interpret a film. If you say such and such a thing happens in a film and it does not, then that's an empirical error. Somebody who sees that film can then say, "Turvey claims that this is a Marxist film because a character shouts out how great Marx was, but there's no such character in the film." That's clearly a problem! But that's the sort of practical reasoning that we use in our daily lives all the time, and it's not scientific in nature. Interpreting a film has very little to do with what is true about the world. It has a lot to do with what is true in the film, but it has very little to do with what is true about the human psyche, psychology, or the nature of the economy. Whether or not psychoanalysis is true, there are going to be a great number of films that can be, and indeed have been, interpreted psychoanalytically in a fruitful way. I think one needs to keep the issue of the truth of the doctrine out of the equation when one is talking about interpretation. One certainly needs to have a sense of what is true in and of the film, but that's different from the truth of the doctrine one is using to interpret the film.

ZM: But we also need to think about the economy of the academic world which largely works towards understanding, or at least making sense of these "larger" questions, on the one hand, and finding ways to redistribute these findings on the other. This is especially pertinent when we're applying for grants which specifically ask us to make a case for how our research will benefit the broader community. And this ultimately demands, I think, that we address those more complex, perhaps irresolvable, sets of questions. Can we step outside of this position completely? Because I fear that if we do, we risk minimizing the kinds of questions we're able to ask and the kinds of questions we're able to think through together.

MT: I think what you're talking about is the fact that in any field, there are going to be certain paradigms that are dominant, and if one wants to get ahead in that field, one has to, in a sense, reconcile oneself with one or more of these paradigms, at least to a certain degree. I think that's true, and especially in the humanities, but it's true in the natural sciences as well, and you're absolutely right. There are paradigms that are dominant, and people will get grants and jobs because they fit those paradigms and other people won't. Each scholar has to find his or her own way of navigating those waters, because when you start out as a young scholar, you're very vulnerable—you have no power, no institutional weight and so on. In a sense, you have to do your best within the environment that you're forced to be in. Whatever one thinks about their environment, they cannot reject it totally, and if one does reject it totally, it is unlikely that one will be able to advance in any meaningful way. But I do think that changes when you get older and you have a job, and that job is secure. Then it's more beholden upon you that if there are fundamental problems with the paradigm you're working within, you need to say that there are problems. That may not be the best thing to do right at the beginning, but we only make progress because people come along and criticize what was there before, and try and propose something better. That's the only way progress is made, and despite one's best efforts at saying something important and significant and true about something, it's highly likely that somebody at some point in the future is going to come along and say "well you've missed this, confused that, and overlooked this." That's a good thing!

I think what you're saying is a legitimate concern for younger scholars, and one must find a way to criticize without alienating. But criticism is still the lifeblood of the humanities. Anyone who rejects what you do or say because it challenges their paradigm, they themselves at some point in the past have criticized somebody and rejected their paradigm. I think it's right that when you start off, caution is wise. But at the end of the day, the criticism has to come to the surface. Otherwise, anyone can say anything, and people who are in power can simply dictate what the truth is. Take my criticism of the modernity thesis. My criticisms may be entirely wrong, and that's fine. But the point is that it's not wrong to criticize. Ideas can be wrong, and there may be

better ways of answering the questions of the modernity thesis than have been proposed. And maybe I got it wrong too. But the actual act of criticizing...well, I don't even know what we'd be doing if we're not, on some level looking for truth. Even if we may not like to use words like “truth,” we're all trying to produce an answer that is more truthful or is somehow better than what came before. It's like an archive that somebody opens up, and all of these things that scholars either ignored or had to guess about before, they can actually go through the archive and see. They can see why Bresson did x, y and z. And that's a good thing! Why should it be that someone in power has their view of Bresson become the one and only doctrine? So that's a very long-winded answer, but the basic point is that criticism has to be the lifeblood of what we do.

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