



## Discussions of Genre Interpretations in Johanna Sinisalo's *Auringon ydin* and Finnish Weird

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*What would our life be like in the Eusistocratic Republic of Finland, the speculative society where the citizens have been domesticated by means of selective breeding? What would it be like to be a woman who does not meet the requirements and norms of the accepted female behaviour in this society? Finnish writer Johanna Sinisalo's (b. 1958) latest novel *Auringon ydin* (2013, "The Core of the Sun") invites its reader to ponder these questions. Among the questions that the reader is presumably asking is the question of the novel's genre. In this essay, we discuss the possible genre interpretations of the novel in relation to speculative and science fictional background.*

*Key words: speculative fiction, Finnish weird, genre, interpretation, Johanna Sinisalo*

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### ***Auringon ydin*, a Generic Battleground?**

In the introduction of *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, Farah Mendlesohn states that science fiction is less a genre than an ongoing discussion. She continues: "The reader's expectations of sf are governed less by what happens than how that happening is described, and by the critical tools with which the reader is expected to approach the text" (1). Mendlesohn aspires to describe a feature peculiar to science fiction, the fact that texts are often written by those active in criticism and can be generated from the same fan base which supports the market. Indeed, the field of science fictional or speculative writing can be "a battleground" also from the viewpoint of readerly interpretation.

*Auringon ydin* is an interesting example of such battleground. In the marketing materials, Sinisalo and her novel are situated as "part of the rule-breaking 'Finnish Weird' genre".<sup>1</sup> The radical mix of real and fictional is intrinsic to Finnish Weird (*suomikumma*), and this feature is designed to challenge the tradition of realist writing which has dominated Finnish literary scene for a long time.<sup>2</sup> For example, various text passages making up Sinisalo's novel include genuine historical documents, such as an article on eugenics which was published in a Finnish magazine in 1935. Meanwhile, the back cover text presents the novel as "chillingly fiery dystopia".

<sup>1</sup> This is how *Auringon ydin* is presented in the "Top10+" section aimed primarily at foreign publishers on the pages of FILI – Finnish Literature Exchange. See <http://www.finlit.fi/fili/en/books/the-core-of-the-sun>.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to Sinisalo, contemporary Finnish writers such as Pasi Ilmari Jääskeläinen, Leena Krohn, Maarit Verronen and Tiina Raevaara have been mentioned in connection to writing of Finnish Weird.

The question of a novel's genre is not relevant only from the viewpoint of marketing. Mendlesohn (1) argues for the view of science fiction as a discussion. In our view, genre in general can be understood as an ongoing discussion, but of a different kind. The theory of Alastair Fowler (45) stresses the instability of genres and their ability to combine with other genres. He (20) states that a single work modulates the genre it takes part in. This makes genre less a means of classification than of communication between the author and the reader. All in all, the attempt to define the genres of a single work is to try to find different meanings to the work (22, 38, 256). The understanding of the nature of genre as communication is rather similar to Mendelsohn's view of science fiction as a discussion. Science fiction, as well as other genres, invite the reader to take part in a communication process with the work of art, the author, and the works and the tradition that a single work refers to.

Interestingly, Finnish Weird – as well as the literary (New) Weird movement worldwide – has been quite topical during the last decade or so. As among the defining features of such contemporary “weird fiction” are the crossings of generic boundaries and casual combinations of various types of texts, our essay also explores the nature or building blocks of such fiction. What kind of elements does Sinisalo's technique make use of and what do they bring to the readerly interpretation?

### The Building Blocks of *Auringon ydin*

*Auringon ydin* takes place in the Eusistocratic Republic of Finland where the citizens have been categorised according to their sex into the groups of Eloi and Morlock women and Masko and Minus men. The novel focuses on describing the results of the selective breeding of women, and the life of men in the Eusistocratic Finland remains rather unexplained for the reader. Eloi women embody stereotypically feminine traits with their round heads, curvy bodies and tender characters. In short, they are presented as beautifully shaped but simple-minded, and their education encourages these features by limiting their possibilities to gain knowledge about the surrounding world. Meanwhile, Morlock women are depicted intelligent and independent, and this is why they are denounced as unfit to reproduce.

The Eusistocratic society portrayed in the novel shares some common features with the contemporary Finnish reality and the milieu of the novel, the city of Tampere located in western Finland, is partly realistic. The documentary material of the novel – for example, the article from the women's magazine *Kotiliesi* – is put together from both fictional elements and excerpts from genuine documents. The pseudo documents parody the language and style of the Statute Book of Finland, for example, and the scientific language is parodied as well.

**The Short History of the Domestication of Women.** State Publishing (1997). The juvenilization and pedomorphism related to the domestication of women is a process with scientific salience. Juvenilization is a natural way to back out of the evolutionary impasse which resulted from the inordinate independence and autonomy of women. (AY, 268.)<sup>3</sup>

Parodic texts that feign authentic documents along with the critical and exaggerating depiction of the faults of society and the play with stereotypes gives the novel its satiric mode. Satire is one of the ingredients in the genre mixture of *Auringon ydin* and the undertone of the novel is, on the whole, satirical. What are the other genres in this medley?

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<sup>3</sup> *Auringon ydin* has not yet been translated in English, and we have translated these excerpts from the novel ourselves. World English rights to the novel have been acquired by Grove Atlantic for publication in 2015 in the Black Cat imprint.

## Speculative Fiction as the Basis of Eusistocratic Finland

[**Hanna-Riikka Roine**] Speculative fiction is, of course, one of the most obvious generic backgrounds to *Auringon ydin*. The genre of “Finnish Weird”, as well as the (New) Weird movement, has often been dubbed simply “speculative fiction” which has also been offered as an alternate name for science fiction in general. However, not all science fiction is speculative in this sense. The defining feature of speculative fiction, the thought experiment, the “what if”, which Darko Suvin (63) has famously called the novum, is crucial to Sinisalo’s novel as well. Mendlesohn notes: “It is here that sf most departs from contemporary literature, because in sf ‘the idea’ is the hero” (4).

[**Hanna Samola**] Sinisalo’s novel is indeed built around the thought experiment. One of the main ideas discussed is the possibility of the domestication of human beings in the same way humans have domesticated other animals. What would happen if only people with certain features were allowed to reproduce? Sinisalo combines the depiction of fictional and fantastic human domestication with documents addressing sterilization and the domestication of foxes.

[**HRR**] It is interesting that such thought experiment can speak to us despite the fact that it is highly fabulous. Robert Scholes has defined “fabulation” as any “fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way” (2). The point of discontinuity or dissonance with the known world is the Suvinian novum, but Scholes wants to emphasise the fact that despite discontinuity of this kind, sf can “confront” the world of our everyday experience. *Auringon ydin* confronts the known world by locating the events in the city of Tampere and its surroundings, for instance.

[**HS**] In addition to confronting the reader, there is also the sense of wonder which Mendlesohn (3) names as a crucial feature of the mode of science fiction. However, fabulation and the sense of wonder are the basic ingredients also in the genre of fairy tale. Jack Zipes states that fairy tales depict “magical instruments, extraordinary technologies, or powerful people who will enable protagonists to transform themselves along with their environment” (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, 2). He (*ibid.* 136) also argues that in fairy tale revisions, the naive morality collides with the complexities of contemporary social realities and that contemporary art often has a critical approach to the fairy tale topics. The way Sinisalo combines speculative fiction with the tradition of satire creates similar kind of collision.

[**HRR**] All in all, it can be suggested that one of the most important threads of Sinisalo’s novel is the attempt to confront our everyday reality and highlight some of its problems by means of such confrontation. The broad genre or mode of speculative writing alongside with the tradition of satire forms a basis for this, but *Auringon ydin* reaches out towards various other genres. You already mentioned fairy tales, shall we continue with them?

## All the Better to See with! The Genre of Fairy Tale

[**HS**] The genre of fairy tale is used in several different ways in Sinisalo’s novel. The character types in the novel remind those typical in fairy tales, and the sense of wonder and miracle is one of the features of both *Auringon ydin* and the genre of fairy tale. One of the texts embedded in the novel is a fairy tale of a little girl named Punanna. This short tale is a version of the famous fairy tale called “Little Red Riding Hood” (in Finnish “Punahilkka”). According to Zipes (*Why Fairy Tales Stick*, 28, 39), “Little Red Riding Hood” is a story about sexual violence or the initiation of a young woman. He argues that the brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault altered the story about an initiation into a tale about sexual violence and the responsibility of a woman to prevent the violence. Versions written by Perrault and the Grimms have been dominant in western culture, and

they have had an influence on the way in which gender roles and sexual behaviour is depicted in literature. (Ibid.) What is the relevance of the fairy tale named “Pikku Punanna” in Sinisalo’s novel? [HRR] To begin with, the reference to this fairy tale is linked to other depictions of violence and abuse in Sinisalo’s novel. The protagonist Vanna/Vera’s sister, Manna/Mira is supposedly killed by her husband Harri, and Vanna/Vera believes that Harri murdered also their grandmother Aulikki. The story of Punanna is said to be part of the collection “The Most Beautiful Fairy Tales for the Eloi Girls” published by the Eusistocratic State. This can be understood as a parody of the way that fairy tales have been retold to meet the ideals of the time of their publication.

[HS] Interpretation of this kind presents the story of Punanna as a *mise en abyme*, which is analogous with the themes and character positions of the whole novel, and as such it provides us pointers for the genre interpretation of the novel. Punanna shares common features with the Eloi sister Manna/Mira. Among those features are the nasal sounds of their names, naivety, beauty, kindness, and willingness to marry a man. Unfortunately, Punanna can never successfully marry because she does not obey the wolf who turns out to be a handsome prince: “‘Because you disobeyed me and did not accept my proposal, but took medicine to your granny instead, I will abandon you right away!’ And so Prince Charming went away, and Punanna could never, never, ever marry.” (AY, 54.) This ending is interesting if we compare it with the previous tales. How would you interpret it?

[HRR] The ending of Punanna differs from the ending in the versions written by Perrault or the Grimms, but all these stories share an attitude towards women: the woman is to blame for what happens. “Little Red Riding Hood” has been understood as a warning to girls not to be disobedient (Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations*, 1). In the classical versions, a young woman risks herself and her grandmother because of her naivety or disobedience. She ignores rule: “Do not talk with strangers”. What about the wolf? If Manna/Mira resembles Punanna, is her husband Harri the wolf of the story?

[HS] The all-seeing wolf/prince does not characterize only the behaviour of the murderous husband Harri. The wolf is also a symbol of the dystopian society, which controls and stalks its citizens. At the end of the Punanna tale, the heroine asks the wolf about the size of his eyes and ears.

“Grandmother, what big eyes you have!” Punanna said.

“All the better to see with”, the wolf replied.

“Grandmother, what big ears you have!” Punanna said.

“All the better to hear your thoughts with”, the wolf replied. (AY, 54.)

[HS] The wolf who hears the thoughts and sees everything around him behaves the same way as the paranoid State with its controlling Health Office. The wolf’s answer to the question about the size of his mouth combines control and the greed to own: “All the better to eat you up, melt you inside of me and keep you all to myself the rest of my life” (AY, 54). This answer could be read as a representation of a jealous husband, but it also depicts the way in which the Eusistocratic State holds people, especially women, in its grip and tries to forestall the possibilities of escape from the country.

[HRR] The Eusistocratic State really sounds like a classical dystopian society, wouldn’t you say?

## Eusistocratia as a Dystopian Society

[HS] The genre of dystopia comes under the heading of speculative writing with its depiction of the possible future. Dystopia is often understood as a warning which can reveal the dangers that might follow from the contemporary policies (Gottlieb 27). This kind of social criticism brings dystopian literature close to satirical writing, and some critics approach dystopia as a subgenre of satire (Ryan-Hayes 202). Erika Gottlieb (10–15) discusses features common to dystopian literature. The

features of the western dystopian tradition include, among others, the vision of the society as a collective nightmare where individual cannot control her destiny, the depiction of the destruction of privacy, the importance of the knowledge of history that the nightmare system tries to hide or manipulate, the speculation with the hypothetical future, and the combination of features of tragedy and satire. These features, among many others, form the generic repertoire of the western dystopia. How does *Auringon ydin* relate to this tradition?

**[HRR]** The Eusistocratic State propagates that all democratic countries outside its borders are places of decadence and immorality. The borders of the state are closed, so people do not know what goes on in the world outside. The closed city with strictly guarded borders or walls is a common motif in dystopian literature. The way the Sinisalo's novel depicts an isolated state is not only a reference to the tradition of dystopian writing but also a satirical criticism towards the closed and propagandist societies and the rise of nationalistic thinking in the 21st century.

**[HS]** In Sinisalo's novel, people's behaviour is controlled by the state-led Health Office, which has banned the use of all stimulants and drugs. Among these drugs is chilli, but the reason for this prohibition remains unclear to the protagonist Vera/Vanna until the end of the novel. After using an extremely strong chilli, she understands that the plant is banned because its potential to widen the user's consciousness and give an access to other people's minds. Therefore, someone who uses a chilli of this kind can escape the dystopian reality to other dimensions. The name of the novel refers to the strong chilli cultivar which gives the powers of shaman to its user Vera/Vanna. Here, the references to the Finno-Ugric mythology and poetry give a certain Northern twist to the novel.

**[HRR]** Perhaps the user of chilli has an access to information that the State is willing to hide? In the dystopian tradition, the concealment of the information is often made possible by the restrictions of the used language. In the famous dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell, the whole nation has to suffer from the results of the state-led attempt to make people more stupid by controlling the means of expression of the language. Does the Eusistocratic society limit the usage of language and literature?

**[HS]** *Auringon ydin* describes mainly limitations such as the way the women are permitted to read only literature dealing with family life, heterosexual love, or housekeeping. Misspellings are encouraged in the writing of girls, because mistakes are a sign of feminine tendencies. The ignorance of women who are indoctrinated into their weakness and the role of servant reminds me of one previous dystopian novel, *Swastika Night* (1937) by Katherine Burdekin. This novel depicts Europe where Nazis have had dominance more than seven hundred years. Strict gender hierarchies prevail in the extremely masculine Hitlerdom where all women must submit to men. Both *Swastika Night* and *Auringon ydin* speculate with political and cultural history and the notions of gender hierarchy at different times. The premises of this speculation are such that they bring Sinisalo's novel close to alternate history stories as well.

## Exploring an Alternate Society

**[HRR]** Alternate history is typically defined as a genre of fiction consisting of stories that are set in worlds in which one or more historical events unfold differently from how it did in the known world. One of the most famous examples of an alternate history story is Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), which explores the world after Nazi Germany's and Imperial Japan's victory over the Allies in World War II. Sinisalo's novel invites readers to take part in a thought experiment of similar kind, as a few details in the course of Finnish history have set things onto a different track.

**[HS]** *Swastika Night*, which I mentioned earlier, is a combination of dystopia and alternate history as well, and I interpret it as one of the intertexts of Sinisalo's novel. In Hitlerdom of Burdekin's novel, women have no human rights and they are the property of men: "They acquiesced in the

Reduction of Women, which was a deliberate thing deliberately planned by German men. Women will always be exactly what men want them to be. They have no will, no character, and no souls; they are only a reflection of men.” (70.) Women of Hitlerdom have been forced to behave the way men want them to, but their appearance differs radically from that depicted in Sinisalo’s novel. They are portrayed as disgusting and extremely ugly in the eyes of men. What is similar in the depictions of women in Burdekin’s and Sinisalo’s novels is the importance of women as child-bearers and their inferior role in the society. In Sinisalo’s novel, all women are patronized by men and by the “extreme welfare state”.

**[HRR]** It is an interesting comparison. As Sinisalo’s text consists of short, rhythmic segments, the portrayal of the “extreme welfare state” is created by relatively quick and scattered fragments. At its best, the technique is quite effective. For instance, the formula of dog temperament tests is placed in parallel with the education of Eloi women, and the breeding of femiwomen is illustrated with reference to Dmitri Belyaev, real-life Russian geneticist who strove to breed domesticated foxes:

There are some Luddites who have questioned the application of Belyaev's theories on the mankind. They have presented arguments that the breeding of femiwomen would be a procedure “in violation of human rights”. But has not the mankind done the same thing throughout its history? When women in the old days regulated their sexuality and used it as a kind of blackmail by making it into a limited commodity, they chose males who were aesthetically most pleasing, most muscular, behaved in a most “romantic” manner or were most well off and thus allowed only them to procreate. Belyaevism has been used to exactly same purpose, but instead of the selfishness of an individual its motivator is the greatest possible good – social peace. (AY, 138.)

**[HRR]** This illustrates the basis of effectiveness of speculative worldbuilding in alternate history novels, the method of logical working through of a particular premise. However, Sinisalo’s novel is not able to tap the full potential of such method, as *Auringon ydin* does not really describe the world “in action” through the viewpoint of the main characters. The fate of Vanna/Vera remains an individual case and does not open the Eusistocratian society up as a whole.

**[HS]** I agree. This also eats away the frightfulness of Eusistocratian Finland as a dystopian society. It is described as oppressive and horrible, but nothing truly chilling happens. On the contrary, the satirical elements often turn the general impression of many fragments humorous or comical. In many dystopian novels, the suffering of the main character evokes empathy in the reader, but for some reason the destinies of the protagonists of Sinisalo’s novel do nothing of the sort.

**[HRR]** The strategy of confronting the world of our everyday experience by the means of working through of speculative premises can also backfire or evoke interpretations that are possibly antithetic to the author’s message. Sinisalo’s novel details both physical and mental characteristics of Eloi and Morlock women, and in doing so it begs the question of their relevance to our known world.

**[HS]** I would say that the target of Sinisalo’s satire is not always made clear. This has partly to do with the fact that she has chosen to combine speculative worldbuilding and other genres with it. This kind of ambiguousness of satire is not necessarily lack in the novel. It makes us ask what is criticised in the text.

**[HRR]** Yes, you are right. For example, why are the traits that are traditionally perceived feminine (such as maternal urges, helplessness, impressionability, flexibility) presented in unfavourable light? Is the fact that the protagonist’s sister Manna/Mira is described as a stereotype of an “empty-headed blonde” based on the tradition of fairy tales, or is it an attempt to suggest that her traits are something despicable in general? As a result, the attempt to deconstruct the traditional role of a woman turns into a mockery of desire to have a child, for example.

[HS] The question of the main character's sister is quite interesting also due to the fact that Manna/Mira does not have a voice of her own in the text. Her thoughts and behaviour are narrated by Vanna/Vera who repeatedly emphasizes the differences between the sisters. It is Vanna/Vera who is the clever sister of the fairy tale, and Manna/Mira has to carry the role of the simpleton. Large parts of the novel consist of the speculation of Vanna/Vera. The other character narrator Jare does not have an importance as big as Vanna/Vera has. What we know about the world depicted in the novel has been filtered through the mind of Vanna/Vera, although part of the information is given by the scattered pseudo-documentary material on the pages of the novel.

[HRR] True. The novel even gives an appearance that Manna is more of a fabrication by Vanna/Vera than a real human being. It is as if Vanna/Vera were using a fairy tale formula you mentioned earlier, the opposition of stupid and clever sibling, in order to make sense of her sister.

[HS] And Jare can hardly be considered a character, his personality is virtually non-existent. Against him and Manna/Mira, the radical subjectivity of Vanna/Vera who feels herself as a different and an outsider in the society is remarkable. The reader is perhaps supposed to feel sympathy towards her and to accept her point of view. The question is, what happens to interpretation if the reader does not believe in the truth told by Vanna/Vera?

[HRR] If anything, it eats away the reader's belief to the alternate society of Eusistocratian Finland. If we can't trust her depiction of her sister, we can hardly relate to the horrors of the domestication of women. Maybe we should look at the novel and its depiction of the alternate society from a more intertextual point of view.

## Science Fiction and Intertextuality

[HS] We mentioned earlier Mendlesohn's statement that science fiction is less a genre in the sense of a "body of writing from which one can expect certain plot elements and specific tropes" (1). Still, there are various clearly science fictional elements, tropes and themes used in *Auringon ydin* - direct references, even.

[HRR] Science fictional texts have been treated as mutually referential – participating in certain thematic discussions, for example. Alan Roberts takes notice of sf intertextuality and illustrates this with the film *Star Wars*. He suggests that one of the factors of sf fandom in particular is the knowledge of the history of the evolution of the form itself, and this gives the initiate a double reading or viewing experience: "[T]he text, such as *Star Wars*, can be enjoyed on its own terms and simultaneously be enjoyed as a matrix of quotation, allusion, pastiche and reference" (89). In this sense, the sf text is both about its professed subject and also, always, *about sf*. What kind of references there are in Sinisalo's novel, and why them?

[HS] Well, one of the most direct references in the novel is to *The Time Machine* (1895) by H. G. Wells, which is among the early sf classics. The terms Eloi and Morlock are borrowed from this novel, and the theme of human-led evolution and the selective breeding of human beings is crucial in both novels. In Wells's novel, Eloi are beautiful and light-minded creatures who live in the seemingly paradise-like world of the future. At the beginning of his time-travel, the protagonist admires the world of Eloi, but soon he finds out that all the dirty work in the future world is done by Morlocks, who live underground. Morlocks are described as ugly and violent and are discriminated against by Eloi people.

[HRR] The same topic is, by the way, explored also by another internationally renowned Finnish writer, Hannu Rajaniemi in his *Quantum Thief* (2010). An obvious intertext in the field of (dystopian) feminist science fiction is Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* (1985), in which a totalitarian Christian theocracy has overthrown the United States government and taken away all of women's rights. For example, almost all women are forbidden to read.

[HS] The theme of biological manipulation of human beings connects the novel not only with *The Time Machine* but with the novel *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley as well. This work has been categorized as one of the prototypical classics of dystopian literature. In the future London of *The Brave New World*, the reproduction and breeding does not happen in families but at the large factories. Gametes are fertilized on the conveyor belt. In the different parts of the belt, embryos are manipulated with the result of people belonging to different castes in the society. What is different in these novels is that in the World State of *Brave New World* traditional families have no value, but in Eusistocratia families and parenthood are valued and supported by the state.

[HRR] Besides the references of this kind, there are several other features that link Sinisalo's novel to the tradition of science fiction. For example, the phenomena of plant and animal kingdoms are given detailed explanations. However, some of the phenomena depicted are left without an explanation. How is it possible that Eusistocratia has succeeded in breeding the human population in a few decades with the result of the disappearance of unwanted features and the decrease of desired features of sexes?

[HS] You earlier mentioned that because science fictional texts can be mutually referential, they can participate in certain thematic discussions. On the whole, Sinisalo's novel obviously aims at connecting to the long tradition of discussing themes such as human-led evolution and selective breeding and update it with the questions linked to sexual discrimination and the idea of women's sexual power which has been fairly topical in Finland recently. Should we compile the pros and cons of her technique, in conclusion?

## Conclusion

In this overview, we discussed Johanna Sinisalo's *Auringon ydin* from the viewpoint of generic interpretations which the novel evokes. We analysed various elements contributing to this medley in relation to the supposed targets of Sinisalo's satire, as the voice of the satirist is quite distinguishable throughout the reading experience. Another goal in our discussion was to explore the "anatomy" of the genre of Finnish Weird, which has been quite topical in the field of Finnish speculative writing.

One of the targets of the satirical criticism of *Auringon ydin* is the society which tries to control the welfare of its people with extreme means. Another target is neoconservatism with its traditional and normative conceptions of sexual behaviour and gender roles. The rise of nationalistic thinking and patriotism is also ridiculed in the novel. The intertexts written in the 1930s bring the political attitude of Europe of that period to the side that of Finland of the 2010s. Today's right-wing politics and the rise of extreme political parties are made implicitly comparable with the political situation of the 1930s Europe.

As we mentioned above, Sinisalo's choice to combine speculative thought experiment with the means of satire does not always work out, as the humoristic side to satire eats away the credibility of the described dystopian society. *Auringon ydin* is at its funniest (and hits its target) when it turns to confront the contemporary view of romantic relationships functioning like market, where certain kinds of men and women can be of better value than others.

All in all, the reading of *Auringon ydin* through various generic viewpoints brought out the diversity of the elements and possible reading strategies of the novel.



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