

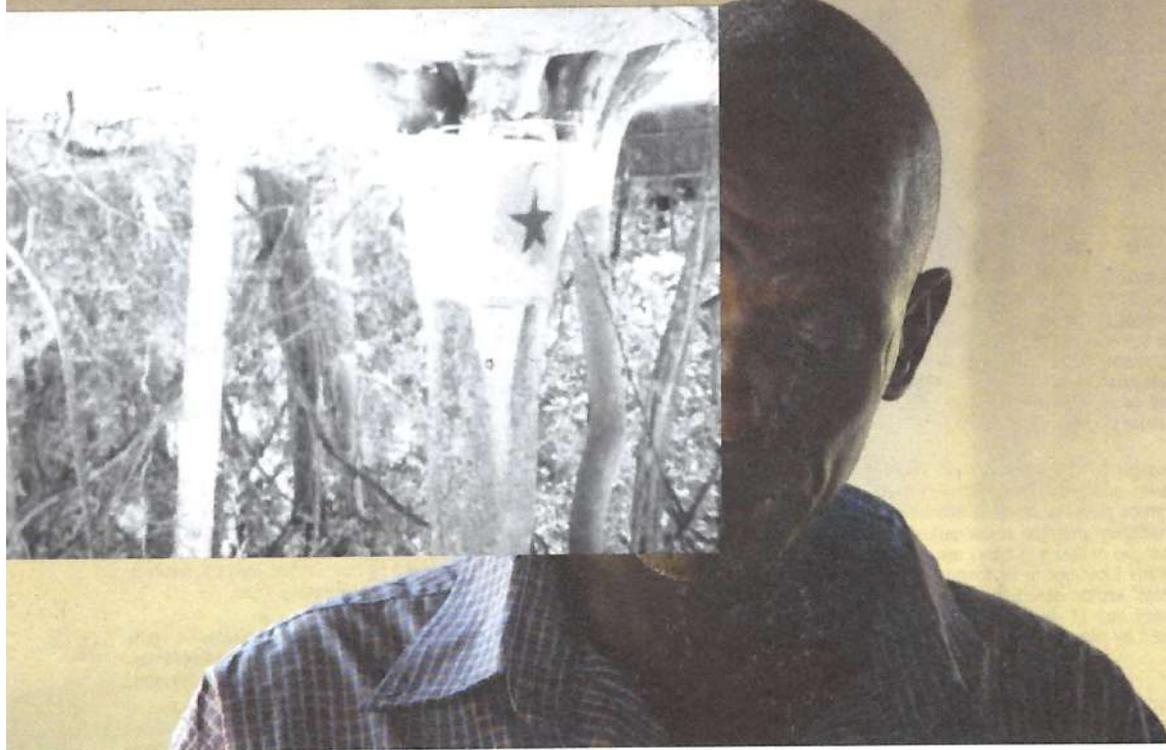
FOUND FOOTAGE

— Magazine —

SPECIAL ISSUE #5 MARCH 2019



Dirty Movies & Second Hand Poetics



Speel Reel
Filipa César (2017)

AESTHETIC VIOLENCE IN THE ANARCHIVAL TURN:

ON THE INFINITE
VISIONS OF HISTORY

by KAMILA KUC

Let's begin with aesthetic violence. By aesthetic I mean the various ways that filmmakers imagine, create and perform films. From the early stages of conceptualisation to execution, *aesthetic* points to the filmmakers' artistic strategies that guide and characterise the work. As one of these artistic strategies, the filmmaker's gesture of a cut—an edit—can be considered an act of violence; and if violence is by nature destructive, then perhaps at times it is possible to view violence as a force that is subversive and therefore, regenerative. I draw upon Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska, via Emmanuel Levinas, to claim that the act of cutting allows a filmmaker to negotiate our ethical and creative response to the world we inhabit. I consider aesthetic violence to be a *politically necessary* artistic action that aims to expose the workings of what cultural theorist Rob Nixon calls *slow violence*: violence that “occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon, 2013:2). In this article, I examine three films: two features—*Rey* (Niles Atallah) and *Spell Reel* (Filipa César)—and my own short film, *I Think You Should Come to America*.¹ Each combines archival footage with new material to portray instances of long-term violence. *Rey's* historical context is the oppression of the Mapuche tribes by the 19th century Chilean government. *Spell Reel* explores the Portuguese colonisation of West Africa's Guinea-Bissau. *I Think You Should Come to America* interprets Hollywood representations of American Indians as part of the oppression of Native American populations. Through these three films I see aesthetic violence as a plea for productive (as opposed to reproductive) ways of analysing and critiquing contemporary uses of media.

Exploring aspects of colonisation and oppression, the archive in all three films provides a space to re-imagine painful histories that require new interpretations. Each film exemplifies what I refer to as *anarchival turn*—a response to the economic and political impact of neoliberalism with its destructive effects on alternative forms of culture production.² In their radical ways of working with historical footage, these three films can be seen as alternative anarchival practices. The prefix *an* stands for *anarchic*—a rebellion against artistic and social conventions, a protest against fixed dominant narratives that fail to incorporate multiple voices and that, in effect, marginalise communities. The anarchival practices in these three films foreground a tension between a record and a representation that comes into play when events are narrativised. The anarchival spirit thus manifests itself in the filmmakers' recognition of the infinite possibilities and visions of an archive, and therefore, of history and culture.

Aesthetic violence as *politically necessary violence*

Now considered a cult film, *Sweet Movie* (Dušan Makavejev, 1974, France) is a fitting illustration of my concept of aesthetic violence. Its main subject is the limits of personal and political freedom. In one scene, a seductive murderess, Anna Planeta (Anna Prucnal), gives a sensual bath to her soon-to-be-dead lover, the young sailor Potemkin (Pierre Clémenti). As she twists a knife into his body, the camera cuts to images of unidentified, disintegrating cadavers. Manos Hadjidakis' melancholic soundtrack accompanies the camera pausing on these desiccated corpses. The documentary footage is that of the Katyń massacre of 20,000 Polish officers, committed by the Soviets in 1940. Kept silent until 1943, this crime was discovered and investigated by the Third Reich government, who then used it in their anti-Soviet propaganda. *Sweet Movie* was made in 1974 but it was not until 1990 that the NKVD's (The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) responsibility for this mass execution was officially acknowledged by the Soviet Union. Described by Stanley Cavell as "the conscience" of *Sweet Movie*, this gripping footage appears throughout the film as the decomposing bodies continue to disturb the viewer (Cavell in Rothman, 2005:20). Not only was Makavejev the first filmmaker to have used this archival excerpt in a feature film, but in doing so he refuted the conspiracy of silence surrounding this atrocious crime. The putrefaction of the archival Katyń scenes, these unbearable images when contrasted with the erotic depictions of Anna Planeta, express Makavejev's belief in cinema as a:

guerrilla operation (...) Guerrilla against something that is fixed, defined, established, dogmatic, eternal (...) The guerrilla filmmaker can use (...) everything that comes to hand, fiction, documents, actualities, titles. Style is not important. You must use surprise as a psychological weapon... We can even use material from the enemy (Makavejev quoted in Robinson, 1971:177).

Sweet Movie
Dušan Makavejev (1974)

What is aesthetic violence and why is it necessary? In this article I wish to focus on the kind of aesthetic violence that features a carefully orchestrated, deliberate staging of a collision between historical, archival and/or found footage with intentionally-shot new material—as opposed to the sort of aesthetic violence, found in Sergei Eisenstein's films for example, that unmask injustice through the means of intellectual montage. The violence in aesthetic violence is also not the depiction of violence per se. Rather, what I term aesthetic violence is the exposure of the workings of what Nixon terms *slow violence*. Nixon's study, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), is a call to arms for new forms of creative languages that represent the many unseen effects of slow violence; violence that slowly unfolds over time and that is often "not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2013:2; Kuc and Jury, 2018). Nixon's concept of slow violence corresponds with Slavoj Žižek's objective, systemic violence, which has catastrophic consequences enabling "the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems"; it is "violence that is invisible" and "it is ultimately more disturbing" (Žižek, 2009:1). Slow and systemic violence refers to "more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence" (Žižek, 2009:8). The child of neoliberalism, slow violence is not spectacular, nor is it sensational—it is the violence of inequality. Put simply, it is social injustice, as captured in Johan Galtung's term *structural violence*, i.e. racism, sexism, nationalism in all its institutionalised forms (Galtung, 1969:171).

In *Rey*, *Spell Reel* and *I Think You Should Come to America*, aesthetic violence relies on strategically placed incisions into historical material that already contains patterns of cultural transmission. Such material demands to be handled with consideration so the act of cutting can free historical footage from its original meaning and make room for new readings to emerge. But how does a filmmaker know where to cut?





Rey
Niles Atallah (2017)

Following Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska, I see the cut as both “a technique (an ontological entity encapsulating something that *is*, or something that *is taking place*) and an ethical imperative (as expressed by the command: “Cut!”)” (Kember and Zylinska, 2012:71). Kember and Zylinska are also concerned with how to cut *well*. They argue that a good cut is an ethical cut,

whereby an in-cision is also a de-cision. Cutting well therefore means cutting (film, tape, reality) in a way that does not lose sight of the horizon of duration or foreclose on the creative possibility of life enabled by this horizon (Kember and Zylinska, 2012:83).

Cutting is inherently violent; to claim the cut as an example of *good violence* (though I prefer the expression “politically necessary violence”), Kember and Zylinska turn to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. In his *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1969), Levinas argues that violence is a building block of subjectivity and that the subjects emerge in response to an intrusion, i.e., a difference, a confrontation with the other. It is through this confrontation that a reaction is awakened (Levinas, 1969:194). The violence of confrontation with another brings out something *good*: the subject’s response to an occurrence, a response that constitutes a form of ethical engagement that did not exist prior to this confrontation. For Levinas the otherness is embodied in the face of the other: “the face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if

to do so were to become an accomplice in his death” (Levinas, quoted in Cohen, 1986:24). It is this responsibility towards the other that is called into action through the employment of aesthetic violence, this responsibility that wishes to elicit a response, to open a conversation. To that end, the engagement with the past through the means of aesthetic violence is “an attempt to craft an ethics of the present” (Cocker, 2009:91).

‘Anarchival turn’

In the 1940s, the French film critic André Bazin wrote about the mummy complex: our obsessive need as humans to have images of ourselves preserved in media to avoid “the second spiritual death”, our fear of being forgotten by no longer being seen (Bazin, 2005:9-10). Today, arguably, we suffer from what Jacques Derrida described as *mal d’archive*, “a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness (...)” (Derrida, 1996:91). The need to archive is connected to our fear of loss—loss of the physical material that the archive is made of, and loss of representation of what the archive contains. Although for Derrida archival images are like ghosts of past lives that return to haunt us, the question of the archive is not only about the past, but about “the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow” (Derrida, 1996:36). Nonetheless, I do think of *Rey*, *Spell Reel*



Rey
Niles Atallah (2017)

and *I Think You Should Come to America* as ghost evocations—respectful and determined resuscitations of ghosts of history—necessary to grant these ghosts a just place from which they can speak (Derrida, 1994:132). All three films rely on appropriation where the acts of manipulation—the aesthetic violence—are necessary political gestures that expose “the injustices present in the original object itself” (Verwoert, 2007:3).

This non-coincidental reliance on *the archival* in these three films is linked to the progression of digital technologies (Eichhorn, 2013:5). Since the 1990s, this “archival turn,” as Kate Eichhorn calls it, has constituted a powerful response to the economic and political impact of neoliberalism, understood here as:

an ideology marked by the selling off of public goods to private interests; the attack on social provisions; the rise of the corporate state organized around privatization, free trade, and deregulation; the celebration of self interests over social needs; the celebration of profit-making as the essence of democracy coupled with the utterly reductionist notion that consumption is the only applicable form of citizenship (Giroux, quoted in Nevradakis, 2014).

Following Eichhorn, I believe that neoliberal influence also destroys the individual's political agency along with economically less viable cultural ventures (libraries, small publishing houses). To that end, the turn towards an archive, particularly in all its anarchival, anti-establishment iterations, is a way to “legitimize forms of knowledge and cultural production in the present” (Eichhorn, 2013:6; Kuc, 2015). The aesthetic violence in *Rey*, *Spell Reel* and *I Think You Should Come to America* thus allows me to consider these films in the wider context of an established film tradition that uses archive a site for interrogation of settled political narratives, as seen in the films of Santiago Álvarez, Bruce Conner, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, to name but a few.

Niles Atallah's *Rey*: Anarchive. Remixed. Manufactured

Rey's main subject is an episode from the life of Orélie-Antoine de Tounens (Rodrigo Lisboa), a French lawyer who in 1860 undertook a journey to Wallmapu in Chile and became a king of the Mapuches. In another version of the story, which runs parallel in *Rey*, de Tounens was considered a French spy by the Chilean authorities and was captured and banished in 1862. He escaped execution due to his alleged insanity. In *Rey*, de Tounens dies and then returns to the land, as if he were resurrected.³ The film's backdrop is the dispute over the Mapuche territory between the Chilean state and the Mapuche people. Atallah's film is timely. As I write this piece, the Kingdom of Araucanía and Patagonia's exiled governments are choosing a new king, who will ensure that the

international awareness of the Mapuche people's continuing conflict with the Chilean state is elevated.

The eclectic footage in *Rey* deliberately confuses fact with fiction. As Atallah's says:

Rey came into being as I sifted through the many pieces of this king's story. I imagined a film that evoked an analogous experience in the spectator: a journey through a realm of forgotten dreams, the decaying memories and fantasies of a ghost. And like a fading memory, they remain a chimera to this day, a king and a kingdom that exist only in dreams (Atallah, Portfolio Website).

The director's decision to merge archival footage with intentionally decayed 35mm, 16mm and Super 8mm film stock reflects the dreamy, confused state of de Tounens' mind: "Time and neglect have eroded the memory of this man." This fading memory, the kingdom that "exists only in dreams," is also reinforced in Atallah's manufacturing of his own archival material:

I decided I would create my own archives and to consciously fill in some of these holes, knowing that my own archives would be fictional and imprecise. They would be imaginary manifestations onto celluloid (...) I would create my own film archives where film *did not* exist (Atallah, 2018, my italics).

Atallah's creation of his own archive betrays his distrust of official archives, and by extension, of dominant historical narratives. The director's desire to stray away from official versions of events is in line with the beliefs shared by the current supporters of King Antoine's past politics who say that "the existence of the Kingdom of Araucanía and Patagonia undermines Chile's official narrative" (Youkee, 2018).

The feeling of the distrust of official scenarios manifests itself throughout the film as Atallah employs eclectic footage.

The 35mm, 16mm and Super 8mm film stock was buried in Atallah's garden for seven years.⁴ This burial has created a certain *archival appeal* that manifests itself in the severely damaged look of the film. On Atallah's online journal, the filmmaker meticulously documents his process of burying, digging out and digitising the film stock:

Today I unearthed the 4 reels of 16mm film I buried in the earth 3 months ago (on the 1st of April). The film was quite moist and caked in mud when I took it out of the earth. These past winter months have been very wet, lots of rain. There's still emulsion left (...) (Atallah, Portfolio Website).

By burying and unearthing the film, Atallah becomes a quasi-archaeologist for whom "memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a *medium*"; in order to discover the past, Atallah needs to "conduct himself like a man digging..." (Benjamin, 2005:576, my italics). In *Rey* the excavation, alongside the aesthetic violence embodied in the cutting through both the deliberately decayed and real archival footage, exposes the slow violence of the colonization of the Mapuche. In its construction, *Rey* foregrounds the long-term mechanisms of slow violence: "My grandparents remembered the times before their land was illegally usurped through massacres and colonization 130 years ago," stated Reynaldo Mariqueo, the current Kingdom's chargé d'affaires, in a recent interview in *The Guardian* (Mariqueo, quoted in Youkee, 2018). At the end of *Rey* the onscreen text reads: "The Mapuche, the Tehuelche...and other indigenous people of Latin America have suffered genocide, exile and persistent discrimination. Their struggles continue today."

If *Rey* is a statement about the construction of an archive and of official history, then what exactly is the intentionally decayed stock's relationship to the archival? Though possessing a certain archival appeal, this aesthetically distressed footage does not have an inherent relationship to archives. I thus see



Rey
Niles Atallah (2017)

the archive here as imagined, performed and manufactured as any version of history. This is how Atallah avoids falling into the trap of this ever-so-fashionable nostalgic fetishization of film. His is an anarchival that is remixed and carefully post-produced as Atallah wrote the script *after* having studied these decaying images.

The director's eclectic footage and methods are in line with Nicolas Bourriaud's understanding of the art of postproduction. In the 1990s the practice of remix took off at full speed. For Bourriaud, this art of remix and postproduction is a response to global chaos and to the overwhelming nature of the information age (see Eichhorn's idea of archival turn, previously discussed). For Bourriaud postproduction is a "set of processes applied to recorded material: montage, the inclusion of other visual or audio-sources, subtitling, voice-overs, and special effects" (Bourriaud, 2005:13). *Rey* is a mixture of footage specially designed and decayed, as well as real archival material. To that end, it is "already informed by other objects" (Bourriaud, 2005:13). *Rey* is therefore anarchival, because it suggests an archive as a performance-in-construction, an archive that comes to life through the processes of remix and postproduction.

This multilayered film's rationale corresponds with Jacques Rancière's view on testimony and fiction. As the French critic points out, the "empirical" tends to be associated with the true on the basis of "traces and imprints" and thus "'what happened' comes directly under the regime of truth, a regime that demonstrates the necessity behind what happened" (Rancière, 2004:34). "'What could happen'", on the other hand "no longer has the autonomous and linear form of the arrangement of actions" (Rancière, 2004:34). For the French critic "the poetic 'story' or 'history' henceforth links the realism that shows us the poetic traces inscribed directly in reality with the artificialism that assembles complex machines of understanding" (Rancière, 2004:34). Seen in this light, *Rey's* exploration of "what could happen" brings to mind works such as Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012), a quasi-documentary in which Polley created a version of her autobiography by directing a re-enactment of her home movies which seemingly feature her deceased mother, whom Polley does not remember because she died when the director was a child. With some excerpts shot on Super 8mm, the film caused controversy because many viewers felt cheated upon the revelation (in the final credits) that this footage was not "original" but instead it was "fabricated" (Anderst, 2013; Sperling, 2013). I am also here reminded of reverse practices of erasing people from images, as used by Stalin's government during the Great Terror of the 1930s. Apart from typical retouches of complexion blemishes, a new form of falsification emerged "as the physical eradication of Stalin's political opponents at the hands of the secret police was swiftly followed by their obliteration from all forms of pictorial existence," a practice that continued into the Khrushchev era (King, 2014:10). In his revealing study *Soviet Space Mythologies. Public Images, Private Memories and the Making of Cultural Identity* (2015), Slava Gerovitch gives a curious example of a photograph of sixteen cosmonauts

taken after Yuri Gagarin's pioneering spaceflight in 1961. The photograph became an iconic representation of the Soviet Space Age, yet the version published years later in the Soviet media featured only eleven cosmonauts instead of sixteen. Present were only those cosmonauts who were invited to fly; those five who did not fly were erased from visual record and therefore from official history (Gerovitch, 2015:1).

Likewise in *Rey*, I find the existence of both fabrication and erasure as methods of composing narrative. In one of the film's most significant scenes, in which de Tounens is interrogated by the Chilean authorities, the perspectives shift as we suddenly hear the testimony of de Tounens' fixer, Juan Bautista Rosales (Claudio Riveros), who betrayed the king to the Chilean authorities. In this multifaceted flashback there is a rapid acceleration of cuts as well as the use of heavily deteriorated and scratched film, as de Tounens reminisces: "I had been to Araucanía before...I was alone (...) I never should have followed Rosales." The scratching of the footage to me implies an attempt at erasing these moments from history. This scene is also important because its narrative and aesthetic chaos reveal that although de Tounens' recognition of the rights of the Mapuche people was a correct gesture, his desire to become a king was ultimately driven by his egotistical, colonial instincts. The intercutting of these heavily manipulated images with the *real* archival footage (provided by the EYE Museum in Amsterdam) draws further attention to the creation of historical reconstructions, period dramas and biographies:

There is an assumption (...) that by building a coherent narrative from found archives of a person's life we can get a good sense of who they were and what they did. I think this is rather naive. The experiences of one person's life, the inner emotional and spiritual world that exists within a human being, is infinitely more complex and varied than any narrative reconstruction (...) (Atallah, 2018).

These archival images are from the period of early cinema: some are pink and bluish depictions of various landscapes and animals that imply the extent of de Tounens' journey not only through continents, but also, through time. This footage questions the notion of truth that was associated with early actualities, as also challenged by Rancière's discussion of the relationship between testimony and fiction. Here Atallah's method is even more intriguing, particularly if we consider that at the time of de Tounens' life, there was no film. As Atallah himself stated: "I would create my own film archive where film *did not exist*" (Atallah, 2018, my italics). In fact, it was not that long after de Tounens' visit to Araucanía that cinema was born and alongside it, early theories about its objectivity. *Rey* thus foregrounds tensions between a record and a representation. In these seemingly early objective versions of events, people become *representations of ideas*:

They cease to be human, they become puppets or statues in a wax museum. And the process of historical reconstruction then invites us to believe these fictional objects, these substitutes for the dead, as if they were real flesh and bone, and an appropriate surrogate to living things (Atallah, 2018).

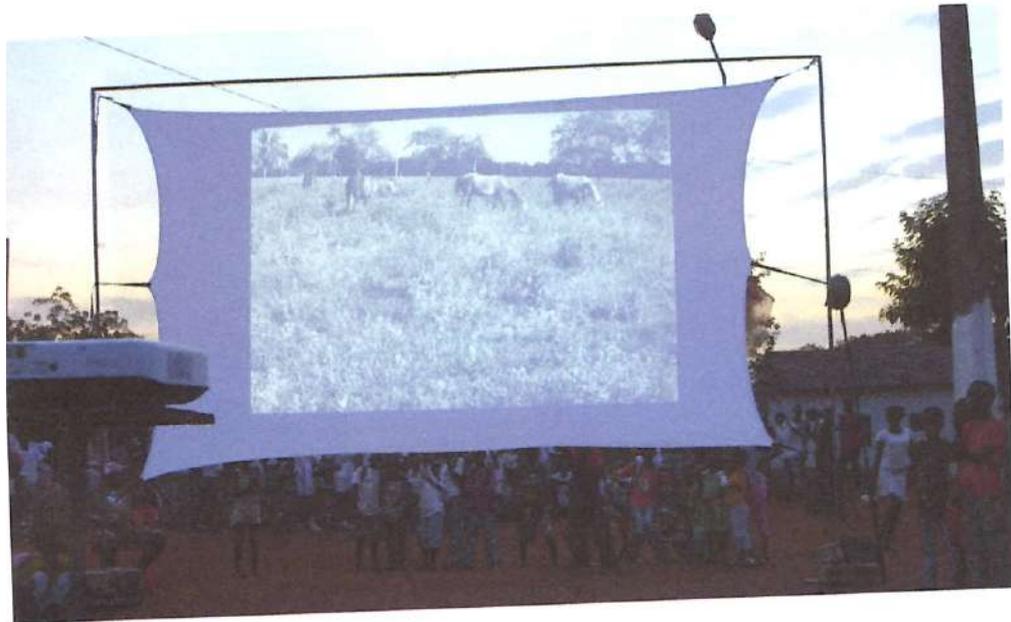


Rey
Niles Atallah (2017)

*In Rey an archive
is not so much a
site of preservation
but a space in
which knowledge
is produced
and contested
simultaneously*

Challenging any possibility of seeing the cinematic apparatus as an objective and passive device, seems to be more in line with Karen Barad's notion of *agential realism*, in which apparatuses are seen as active—and thus not objective—agents in creating *versions* of life. In *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007), Barad argues that apparatuses are “not passively observing instruments” but are capable of producing differences that matter; hence they are “formative of matter and meaning” (Barad, 2007:142, 146). Rey's use of eclectic footage, coupled with his complex storyline, demonstrate that apparatuses “have no intrinsic boundaries, thus they constitute open-ended practices” (Barad, 2007:142). To that end, they can produce endless versions and *visions* of history. Rey's use of diverse types of footage, as well as scenes in which the characters wear papier mâché masks—“the puppets and statues in a wax museum”—further draw our attention to the constructed nature of the image and, as Derrida pointed out, to the fact that archives themselves *produce* as much as *record* events (Derrida, 1996:17).

In *Rey* an archive is not so much a site of preservation but a space in which knowledge is produced and contested simultaneously. Grand narratives are challenged, as methods of recording and writing history are interrogated. Embracing



Spell Reel
Filipa César (2017)

interruption and fragmentation, *Rey* foregrounds the fact that history is non-linear and its creative reinterpretations can lead to captivating discoveries.

***Spell Reel*: Anarchive. Assembled. Collectively**

Berlin-based, Portuguese-born Filipa César's *Spell Reel*—like her previous work, *Transmission from the Liberated Zones* (2015)—is based on re-framing, re-shooting and restoring archival images, as well as staging testimonies. *Spell Reel* is a film about another film: in it, the restored archival footage of Guinea-Bissau's war of independence from Portugal (1963-74) is commented upon by Sana na N'Hada and Flora Gomes, who authored the original documentary reel. As na N'Hada and Gomes analyse the projections, they reminisce about the time they met Chris Marker, when the French Left Bank filmmaker came to Guinea-Bissau in 1979 to deliver a filmmaking workshop. Part of the footage he shot while there was used in his celebrated *Sans Soleil* (1983). The mention of the encounter with Marker is important to the film's overall philosophy as it signifies *Spell Reel's* nod towards politically engaged cinema.

Spell Reel celebrates the legacy of the brutally murdered Amílcar Cabral—the agricultural engineer and revolutionary who steered Guinea-Bissau's freedom struggle. The film also depicts local people commenting on the restored footage: "The Guinea-Bissau people wish for the Portuguese government to pay reparations—because they were dishonest about their intentions when they came here. Torturing the Guinean people is not what they promised us." In another scene a young guide takes a group of people on a city tour of Berlin. He points to a map of the Congo Conference (also

known as the Berlin Conference, 1884-1885), during which Otto von Bismarck marked Germany as a newly emerging imperial power. The conference's alleged aim was to regulate the European colonization and trade in Africa. The event took place without the presence of a single African country. Saliently, as in *Rey* and *I Think You Should Come to America*, the history of colonisation underpins *Spell Reel*.

In *Spell Reel*, restoration and digitisation of archive are necessary to resurrect what is left of the original film so future generations can learn of the complex history of Guinea-Bissau in order to progress to their present times. Describing a long-term collective project *Luta ca caba inda* (*The struggle is not over yet*) which led to the making of *Spell Reel* (both depict the process of assembling the declining cinematic archive of Guinea-Bissau), César insists that the completed work was not that of preservation: "These are no representations of the past, only matters of the present. We stopped calling it an archive and instead a collective milieu, an assemblage of shrapnel" (César, 2018:68). After Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, she proposes a certain "decolonisation of thinking" (de Castro, 2012) since "to deal with the shrapnel of colonialism means to deal with all the violence that comes through it" (César, 2018:68). Such decolonisation of thinking is a task that is never accomplished. Methodologies, like History, need to be reinvented as we remain haunted by imperial pasts: "but can, and how, the Derridean ghosts be laid to rest, when the events that unleashed them are not entirely concluded, only repressed in the present?" (Demos, 2013:21). One of the scenes in *Spell Reel* shows the original footage of the bombardment of the Portuguese military base in Jemberem. This part is narrated by Gomes who, as shown in the original footage, did not hold a gun, but a camera.⁵ It is insightful to hear and see Gomes reminiscing about his journey as a

filmmaker as he comments on the newly restored images. It is fair to say that *Spell Reel* is illustrative of Benjamin's words that "history decays into images, not into words" (Benjamin, 1999a:476). N'Hada and Gomes say to the local viewers: "We wanted to show it like this [in fragments] so you can revive the past and be aware that it exists." Present does not exist without a past.

César's inter-cutting of the original footage with contemporary life in Guinea-Bissau demonstrates that reconstruction is an act of collective political resistance that is also regenerative in nature because it engages with the present. Such resistance is community-building. As we witness the rise of neo-authoritarian regimes (Russia, Turkey, Hungary, Myanmar), *Spell Reel's* anarchival turn stands for regaining agency through group imagination. Collectively assembled, as the film's credits state, *Spell Reel* uses archive to form and perform communities of activism. It is powerful proof of aesthetic violence as violence that is politically necessary: the incisions performed on the original footage, intercut with the current interpretations, create a rare platform for engagement with the people of Guinea-Bissau, who voice their thoughts not only on the historical footage, but on the past and future of Guinea-Bissau. The performative incisions into the original film directly confront the historical trauma of colonisation in order to bring it to a comfortable rest with the Derridean ghosts of the past.

In *Spell Reel* these sites that were previously "unseen and unnoticed", those places where "death happens by indirection", where slow violence, as Nixon states, "occurs gradually and out of sight," are brought to attention through the means of cinema (Nixon, 2011:2). Cabral's as well as N'Hada and Gomes' belief that the camera was more powerful a tool than a gun informed César's attempt to establish a certain ciné-kinship with the local audiences. In *Spell Reel* aesthetic violence creates responses from the community whose history has been returned to them. It has been returned in fragments, and on celluloid only. Nonetheless, César's instinct to involve the locals in the various stages of this production is an ethical one. It taps into the wish of the people of Guinea-Bissau to reconcile with their own histories as opposed to the official histories designed by institutions whose cultural missions are dictated by corrupt governments. Like *Rey*, *Spell Reel* shows an archive in construction, an archive in which history:

does not remain something that you read and memorize, but it becomes about knowing that the past existed and paved [the] way for the present that we live [in]. Within this idea of history, the concepts of freedom and independence don't remain the mythical invoking of a transient feeling, but instead become very graphic reminders of the violence that was suffered to win this freedom and independence (Choudhury, 2017).

While watching *Spell Reel* I was reminded of Augusto Boal's work with underrepresented communities as embodied in his concept of *spect-actors* and explored in his seminal work, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974).⁶ Boal's notion of theatre required the direct participation of the spectator in a performance. In this process, the spectator is also a collaborator, as history is being made in front of their eyes. The poetics of the oppressed is "the poetics of liberation: the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself!" (Boal, 2008:135). *Spell Reel* creates *spect-authors*—spectators who are transformed from passive consumers to active critical thinkers. Through the making of *Spell Reel*, na N'Hada and Gomes, César and her team, as well as the people of Guinea-Bissau, invoke the ideal of freedom that Cabral envisaged—a freedom gained through knowledge.

Spell Reel, like *The struggle is not over yet*, activate César's revisit of her own ghosts. In 'A Grin without Marker' (2016), the director states:

My involvement in...*The struggle is not over yet* was less dependent on my curiosity for these cinematic genres, but rather unintentionally, the result of a suction force, pulling me into the magnetic field of a web of conditions, urgencies and magical encounters. The Portuguese colonial war, despite ending just before my birth in 1975, was a latent presence in my childhood, casting shadows of fear, subversion and cryptic intensities. My father was the channel, after his failed desertion to Paris, he had served in the military Portuguese Guinea between 1967 and 1969... Guinea was the place where my father had fought on the wrong side—mistaken by the communist ideals that militants should infiltrate the colonial military and subversively undermine its power—with dignified intentions that didn't prevent him from getting implanted therein a sunless gloom (César, 2018:61-62).

Although less overt, César's work can be considered a performance of self-inscription that finds its expression through acts of resuscitating fragments of the decaying archive. *Spell Reel* proposes the creation of a new type of archive—an *anarchive of responses* that gives agency to the people who are at last empowered to tell their own stories. Like in *Rey*, I see the archive as a creative tool and method to re-establish relationships between the original footage and its makers, the public and César herself as filmmaker turned anarchist.

I Think You Should Come to America: Anarchive. Absent. Ventriloquised

My auto-ethnographical film *I Think You Should Come to America* utilises 16mm American educational films made between 1950 and 1970 adopted by the Basement Film Archive in Albuquerque (New Mexico, USA). Merging the footage with my correspondence with Daniel Blackburn (the name was changed to protect the subject's privacy), an incarcerated Native American, my film explores a paradoxical fascination of Poles like myself living under Communism with the ideal of America as a *land of freedom*. In one respect, *I Think You Should Come to America* is a form of creative diary in which I revisit aspects of my own history. Throughout the film I read letters sent to me by Daniel, with whom I corresponded as a member of the activist Movement for the Supporters of Native American Indian Rights in Poland in the 1990s. To some degree, therefore, my story is also that of Daniel's—at least for a period of time as the film investigates the gap between history as a *social construct* and history as a *personal experience*.

I am not trained in anthropology, yet I see some correspondences in my approach with what Ruth Behar calls "anthropology that breaks your heart"—pointing to the fact that anthropology has often been "vexed about the question of vulnerability" (Behar, 1996:5). Such vulnerability often refers to the use of first person narration as dictated by the



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author's/maker's desire to investigate their own reasons for exploring a particular subject.⁷ Like Behar I think that our personal interests and desires motivate our work, thus, I question an objective, detached voice of a writer/maker. In offering a first person narration in my film and this essay, I do not require that the reader sympathises with my point of view anymore than with ideas expressed in a more severed voice of academy, yet I do trust that through the personal some form of the universal can be attained. Through my engagement with another (culture, person), *I Think You Should Come to America* was my coming to terms with my own experience of loss and sense of perpetual displacement that transcends the boundaries of personal. Having grown up in Communist Poland, I moved to the UK at the age of nineteen and somewhere in between I spent extensive periods of time in New York and Paris, and London. Today I remain an outsider in my own country, which over the years has been distancing itself from me through its reactionary politics, among other things. While making my film, I wanted to stretch the limits of my use of *I* yet attempting, desperately, to resist the privileged eye of the *I*, what Behar refers to as "a voyeuristic eye" (Behar, 1996:21). The avoidance of such a voyeuristic eye became my guiding principle when arranging the archival sequences of Communist Poland with the heavily stereotypical 'educational' images of Native Americans.

My film's overall shape and content is built on absence as *de-cision*—to follow Kember and Zylinska's phraseology—which to some degree was already made for me. All the

representations of Native Americans in the educational films I worked with were tinted with white privilege; plus, I no longer had access to my letters that I had mailed to Daniel. It is Daniel's letters addressed to me that provide the formal structure for the film yet they are only fragments of the reality that Daniel and I shared through our desire to escape; he from the confines of prison, me from the limitations of Poland. As I ventriloquise Daniel's words through my reading of his letters, my own words remain in the space of the imaginary to emerge at times only as on-screen writing ("I fantasize about seeing Daniel", "Daniel and I had plans"). The absence of my letters to him on the one hand provided me with a device for crafting the narrative of the film; on the other, this absence posed the difficult and unanswered question of one's right to represent. As Francesca Rusalen and Francesco Cassin point out in their review of *I Think You Should Come to America*, "private correspondence accentuates the discrepancies in representation and defines the formation of the film's imaginary structure" (Rusalen and Cassin, 2017, my translation). In this film I embody both, the subject and object positions as the *I* shifts continuously from mine to that of Daniel, which has been mediated by my own experience and narrativised, and therefore, problematized, in the course of writing the script.

In another respect, *I Think You Should Come to America* is concerned with exposing instances of slow violence that are inscribed in cultural misrepresentations of Native American people. These misrepresentations began with the 19th-century



I Think You Should Come to America
Kamila Kuc (2017)



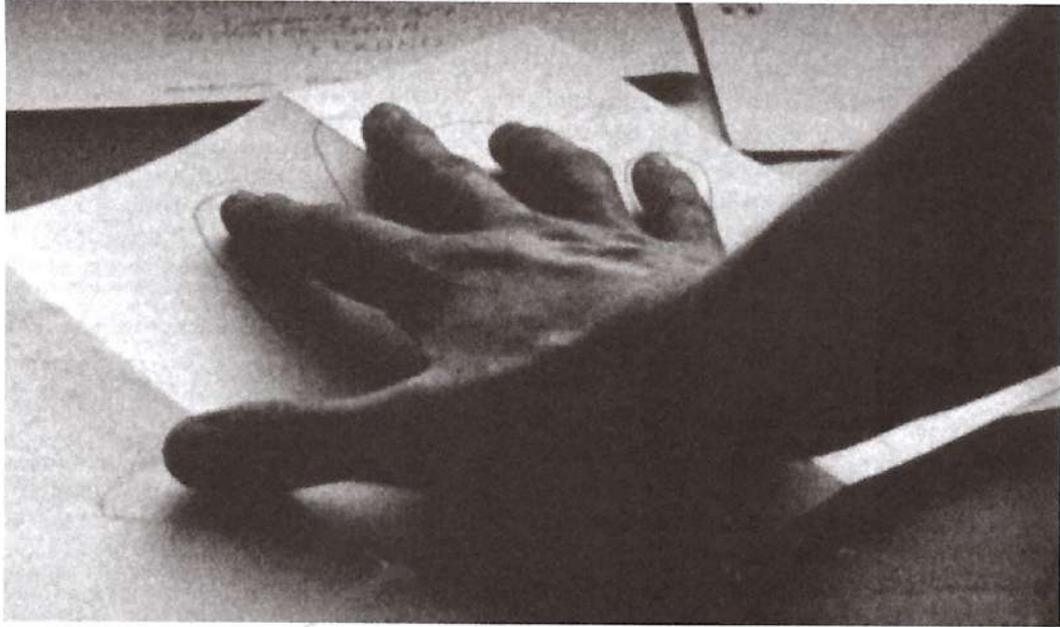
I Think You Should Come to America
Kamila Kuc (2017)

colonial fiction adventure novels, depicted in the film by references to Karl May's novel *Winnetou* (1875). These misrepresentations expanded with the rise of cinema, as seen in these archival educational films that painfully reproduced the Hollywood images of Native Americans.⁸ As described in the film, Karl May was Hitler's favourite writer (Mann, 1940:393). The "driving idea behind Hitler's conception of Social Darwinism was the extermination of American Indians in the Wild West. And the vehicle for this was Karl May's fantasy novels" (Gilbert, 2016).

In making *I Think You Should Come to America*, I used over twenty archival films to create a tapestry of my experience as a young girl growing up in the Polish People's Republic, fascinated with America and its Indians. The films ranged from fictional stories (*Sioux Legends*; Nauman Films, 1973, written and edited by H. Jane Nauman) to quasi-ethnographical (*Hopi Nation*; Coronet, nd) to almost nationalistic documents about America as a colonial power (*America Becomes a World Power*, no details; *Poland: A New Nightmare*, Hearst Metrotone News, 1982). The questions of representation thus became the film's main subject. In *Reservations*, one of the three-part archival films that formed the fabric of *I Think You Should Come to America*, red-hued images of slowly decaying 16mm film are narrated by Marlon Brando (in my film I use a silent version of this film). A section titled 'Lament of the Reservation,' depicts the hardships of everyday life on the reservation built on polluted lands. This constitutes a significant contrast to the products of colonial imagination embodied in the exotic Wild West that Communist Poland's young adults like myself consumed with curiosity. These fictitious visions of the Wild

West were created hand in hand with the slow violence enacted on the Native American people. Leonard Peltier, whose story forms part of *I Think You Should Come to America*, remains demonstrative of the ongoing abuse the American government inflicts on the indigenous nations. Since 1975, the Dakota/Lakota painter and activist, now age 73, remains incarcerated, confronted with a lack of due process.⁹

While re-arranging this archival material into various constellations in an attempt to produce a universally accessible *version* of one's own experience, this suspended footage that awaited reinterpretation imbued in me feelings of absence, loss and trauma. I realised that in these easily accessible educational films the camera itself was an instrument of violence and that these images of the Native American people function as a painful reminder of genocide. "Is it possible that there is no other memory than the memory of wounds?" asked Czesław Miłosz in his Nobel prize acceptance speech (Miłosz, 1980). Gerald Vizenor points out that stories of Native Americans are stories of absence (Vizenor, 2000:23). Traversing the basement of the humid Basement Films archive, these absences quickly turned into wounds for me. I found these educational films to be in themselves meta-archives of colonisation, *mise-en-abyme* of traumatic histories. I thought of Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1956) and the impossibility of representing trauma that one has not experienced. I considered abandoning the archive. I then realised that by leaving these archival images behind, history has imposed an ethical duty on filmmakers to respond to it. My own working with aesthetic violence thus became a complex but necessary emotional process of cutting



I Think You Should Come to America
Kamila Kuc (2017)

through not only the materiality of film, but also of and through history, and memory—both collective and personal. This act of cutting is an attempt at dealing with what César calls the “assemblage of shrapnel” that requires decolonisation of thinking (and making).

By utilising flawed, Hollywood-style representations of Native Americans, *I Think You Should Come to America* renders visible the fact that the notion of universal American freedom, this American dream that the former Soviet Bloc nations were so enamoured with, was a mere fabrication that was built on the trauma of those whose lives have been abused to make room for power. “You must always remember,” Ta-Nehisi Coates writes to his son, “that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body” (Coates, 2015:10). I am painfully reminded here of medical practices such as systematic abortions and sterilizations of Native American men and women that form part of the government’s long-term extermination policy. My act of *cutting* through the cinematic representations of Native American bodies felt to me like twisting a knife in a wound caused by centuries of biopolitics and misrepresentation (also exemplified in the scenes in which Native Americans were played by White actors). Through the employment of aesthetic violence as an artistic strategy, I wished to “brush history against the grain” (Benjamin, 1999b:248). I imagined the possibility of creating a space where the voices of the powerless in records created by the powerful—these ghosts that need to be resurrected in order to speak—come out to challenge the official representations of history. As Michelle Caswell points

out in her writing about the photographic depictions of the victims of the Khmer Rouge’s Tuol Sleng prison in Cambodia, the point of looking against the grain is to “look for ways of *interpreting* records that were not intended by their creators, searching for evidence of resistance, contention, and voice in the face of oppressive power” (Caswell, 2014:59, my italics).

Cutting through the layers of misrepresentation while revisiting Daniel’s letters eventually created the space for me to deconstruct the classical Hollywood myth of the Noble Savage and the myth of idealised America.¹⁰ In *I Think You Should Come to America* it is “the cinema that looks for faults, that creates the necessary space so that we can graft the question that interrogates the image itself, thus creating a dispute” (Rusalen and Cassin, 2017). It was this looking for faults by cutting through the ideologically loaded archival footage that made it possible for me to question these constructed and constantly reimagined images of Native Americans that needed to be slashed *through*. Once again, aesthetic violence was politically necessary. *I Think You Should Come to America* lures the viewer with images and Tim Nelson’s soundtrack. But it is only at the end of the film that the viewer realizes that what they have been watching is a construct, too. The archival film is central here as it is film itself—both as material object and concept—that is a product of centuries of cultural oppression and mis-representation, which in turn is imprinted on celluloid.

I Think You Should Come to America ends with the following words: “Images always represent something false. They reveal the culture that produces them, rather than the culture they

strive to portray." Made during my residency with Basement Films Artist Collective, the film reflects the organisation's mission to explore "diverse and underrepresented media histories and practices" (Basement Films, 2014). In *I Think You Should Come to America* the reworking of an archive strives to create "a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record that begins on a personal level" (Halberstam, 2005:170). An example of mediated auto-ethnography, similar to *Rey* and *Spell Reel*, *I Think You Should Come to America* is anarchival because it uses personal, unofficial narrative to deconstruct grand narratives created by those in power. In doing so, it also aims to question my own privileged position as one who represents what is not always myself only.¹¹

When first watching *Rey* and *Spell Reel* some months after I completed *I Think You Should Come to America*, I was startled by how these three films, independently of each other, reveal a set of complex mechanisms that are at play every time we attempt to impose narrative on history and people's experiences. I then came to understand that the filmmakers discussed here, including myself, look at history as experience. While analysing these three films' encounters with archival material, it struck me that each use archive as a method, or at the very least, as a space "of contestation and reinvention" (Cocker, 2009:99). *Rey*, *Spell Reel* and *I Think You Should Come to America* aim to expose the slow violence of colonization of the Mapuche tribes, of the people of Guinea-Bissau and of Native Americans, respectively. In an attempt to challenge official records and ways of telling stories, *Rey* employs intentionally decayed footage to show that the boundary between a record and a representation is an artificial one; *Spell Reel* successfully invites local communities to collaborate in creating their own archive; and in *I Think You Should Come to America*, archival footage is woven into a personal epistolary narrative that acts as a springboard to critique Hollywood's misrepresentations of Native Americans.

All three films challenge ways in which stories of national significance are told, questioning the archive's status as an authoritative and definitive keeper of knowledge. I therefore see them as anarchives—archives that destroy the illusory belief that recording is objective. Instead, through their employment of aesthetic violence these films interpret, create and reimagine. In doing so they uncover occurrences of slow violence and provide platform for Derridean ghosts to speak in their own voice. These films illustrate that aesthetic violence is politically necessary and ethical, because it opens history up for interpretation and encourages a sense of inclusion, belonging and agency that is required in the process of creating anarchives. I see these three films as invitations to engage in localised, smaller accounts of events, which unlike grand narratives do not aim to divide people, but instead, strive to build communities of resistance. In line with Makavejev's belief in cinema as a guerrilla operation, *Rey*, *Spell Reel* and *I Think You Should Come to America* experiment with ways of analysing and critiquing not only archival, but also media practices.

ENDNOTES

1. I would like to thank Filipa César and Niles Atallah for their permissions to use stills from *Spell Reel* and *Rey*. Thank you also to Reed O'Beirne and Dominic Leppla for their comments on the various drafts of this essay, as well as to the editors and anonymous peer reviewers who helped shaping its final version.

2. Although the term *anarchival* is now inseparable from Hal Foster's 'An Archival Impulse' (2004), my understanding of it refers to more recent debates on Open Access and online archives, as explored in my 'Photomediations: An Open Book: A Curated Object and a Disruptive e-Anarchive,' in *Photomediations Machine*. Kate Eichhorn feminist study, *The Archival Turn in Feminism. Outrage in Order* also provided a guiding principle for my use of the term.

3. For various accounts of de Tounens' life and adventures, see Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia* (1977), partly a travelogue, partly a work of auto-fiction.

4. A similar approach informed Alia Sayed's *Priya* (2011), which was made out of a 16mm film that was buried in the filmmaker's garden.

5. The Jamberem excerpt informed Gomes' historical film *Mortu Nega (Those Whom Death Refused)*, 1988). An example of ethnofiction, it merged contemporary events of the War of Independence with African mythology. *Mortu Nega* was the first film produced in the independent Guinea-Bissau and it premiered at the Venice Film Festival that same year.

6. I am grateful to Dr. Michelle Orr from the School of Theatre, Television and Film at San Diego State University for bringing Boal's work to my attention.

7. It is curious to note that this well-developed tradition of first person filmmaking is expanding to feature-length films. In most recent years, numerous filmmakers have merged first-person narration with personal and national archives: Marcia Tambutti's *Beyond my Grandfather Allende* (Mexico, 2015) utilises the Allende family photographs to tell a compelling story of Chile's rise of dictatorship and destruction of its democracy, while *In the Intense Now* (João Moreira Salles, Brazil, 2017) uses Super8 footage of China during the Cultural Revolution shot by the director's mother to reflect upon the 1968 uprisings.

8. Karl May (1842–1912) was a German writer who wrote fiction novels about the American Old West. Many of his books were adapted into stage plays and films. May wrote about America never having been there, thus much of his writing is based on his flair for fiction.

9. Peltier received two consecutive life sentences for first-degree murder for the alleged shooting of two FBI agents during a 1975 uprising in the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. For a detailed account of Peltier's trials, see Peter Mattiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse; the Story of Leonard Peltier and the FBI's War on the American Indian Movement* (London and New York: Penguin, 1992).

10. For a masterfully made film on the history of the depiction of Native Americans in Classical Hollywood, see Neil Diamond's *Reel Injun* (2009).

11. Travis Wilkerson's latest film, *Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?* (USA, 2018), his own investigation of his Alabama-based racist great-grandfather killing a black man is, to some degree, an attempt to grapple with the notion of the right to represent.

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