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CAST

Barton Faulks Gerald Martin
Christina Marie Lane Lillian Nebbs
Page Moseley Richard Simmons
Fred Holliday Frank McIntosh
Patty Shepard Laura Simmons
Alicia Moro Rita Miller
Jack Taylor Christopher Caplin
Joy Blackburn Susan Nebbs
May Heatherly Anna Bixby
Elmer Modlin Father Clinton

CREW

Directed by **José Ramón Larraz** (as Joseph Braunstein)
Written by **Joaquín Amichatis**, **Javier Elorrieta** and **José Frade**
Produced by **José Frade**
Editor **Barry B. Leirer**
Director of Photography **Tote Trenas**
Music by **Javier Elorrieta**
Special Effects and Make-up Artist **Colin Arthur**

AMERICAN HORRORS BY WAY OF SPAIN: INTERNATIONAL CO-PRODUCTIONS AND THE SPANISH SLASHER

by Amanda Reyes



While any country with its own regional cinema is often heavily informed by its political and cultural landscape, if it isn't the United States of America, one can often still catch some notable traces of Hollywood's influence. Those non-U.S. countries might even nod towards (or heavily steal from) the outliers of American film, looking to ape popular genre productions. But there's something particularly spellbinding about foreign countries that create B films for an American marketplace. The transcontinental flair mixed with friendly American faces, and commonplace but sometimes warped images of Americana can leave a gauzy haze in the minds of the audience. *Edge of the Axe* (1988) is one such movie. Ultimately, it is a late entry slasher that looks a lot like any other slasher coming out of North America, but it still manages to go against the subgenre's own rules, and features violence that feels much more at home in the incomparable world of Eurosleaze. Yet, *Edge of the Axe*, along with other Spanish slashers, isn't really doing anything different than what the country had seen in the decades preceding it. Spain has long since enjoyed a fascinating history with international co-production ventures, and this odd mix of culture led to unique hybrid visuals and storytelling techniques.

According to Nicholas G. Schlegel's captivating account of Spain's history of cinematic horror in *Sex, Sadism, Spain and Cinema: The Spanish Horror Film* (2015), the genre film didn't even come into play in the country's production output until well after the birth of Spanish cinema and its early days of production. The reason for this lies in the country's political landscape of the era. Spain was ruled by a dictator named Francisco Franco from 1938 until his



death in 1975. Intent on disseminating his political ideologies into the hearts, minds and collective consciousness of the people, the autocrat turned to Spain's cinema, and Spanish filmmakers spun out mostly historical epics and war films. These movies were about celebrating (and emulating) the country's glory days, hopefully instilling patriotism throughout the land. But little else came into play. In fact, no horror films were produced in Spain until the early sixties, although the genre didn't pick up steam until later in the decade, closer to the end of Franco's rule. In an era where America's Universal Monsters ruled the roost, and exploitation flicks were flooding the drive-ins, Spain's cinema mostly avoided the deep dark recesses of the fantastic. They were living in their own personal hell.

Franco's allegiance with Italy and Germany during World War II led the country towards heady economic struggles, as Spain devolved from a developed country to a developing one. Subsequently, in the 1950s, Franco, desperate to change Spain's image, came to a realization that if his country were to survive, it needed the aid of others. Soon after, Franco opened Spain's metaphorical iron gates and invited in foreign filmmakers. The dictator hedged his bets that these releases, which would be screened internationally, would aptly capture the beauty of Spain and influence moviegoers from around the world to visit. It worked.

In actuality, Spain co-produced more films with Italy, but the country's partnership with the United States brought more attention, and this era came to be known as "Hollywood in Madrid." Epic productions such as *Decameron Nights* (1953) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) had all of the bells and whistles of a bright and shiny Tinseltown production, complete with recognizable and popular American actors, such as Charlton Heston. The American feel intertwined beautifully with the lush and vibrant Spanish locales, bringing great notice to the struggling country.

In this new era of co-production ventures, studios were built, and film savvy acquired. Then, eventually the horror movies came. In 1962 Jess Franco's *The Awful Dr. Orloff* was unleashed onto Spain and the world at large. While Franco

deserves much credit for getting the genre ball rolling in his home country, it was the prolific Jacinto Molina Alvarez, better known to most fans as Paul Naschy that kick-started the horror boom of that era. Naschy began his adventure in entertainment as an actor, moving furiously into film production, first as a writer, and then directing dozens of films, many of which were genre releases (he produced a handful of films as well). Early in his career, Naschy even appeared in uncredited roles in a couple of those "Hollywood in Madrid" productions (*El Cid* and *The King of Kings*, both 1961), but it was his love of the classic Universal Monsters, and his take on those characters that got him the nickname The Lon Chaney of Spain, and a wonderful reputation as a distinguished man of horror. Naschy's genre debut was as the writer and star of *Frankenstein's Bloody Terror* (*La Marca del Hombre Lobo*, 1968). He managed to light a fire in the hearts and minds of audiences and filmmakers alike because between the release of *Frankenstein's Bloody Terror* and 1975, Spain produced well over 100 horror films. What makes these releases so interesting is that because the country had no genre history of their own to pull from, inspiration came from everywhere, including the Spanish art world (particularly Francisco Goya), and of course, the country's own dark history of bloodshed and fascism. All of that is simply to say that the stories told – and images disseminated – were wide and varied and vast.

However, along with Spain's history of co-producing films with Americans, that cherry-pie, baseball aesthetic and red, white and blue influence can still be readily surveyed in a number of Spanish slashers. As seen in the "Hollywood in Madrid" era, co-productions would prove to be vital to Spain's genre output. *The Awful Dr. Orloff* was a co-production, as was *Frankenstein's Bloody Terror*. Co-productions were key to instilling a flavor to the film that would allow it to have international marketability. Many worked under the guise of imitating the wondrous far-flung images of Americana, which ultimately allowed these films to boast their own unique cinematically blended universes.

Edge of the Axe shares in the history of co-production ventures. The film was directed by Spanish born José Ramón Larraz, and produced by the Florida



based Calepas International, Inc., who partnered with several Spanish genre filmmakers, co-producing *The Sea Serpent* (*Serpiente de mar*) and *Pulsebeat* (*Pulsaciones*, both 1985) to name but two. According to *Variety*, with an American based production company in place but no distributor, *Edge of the Axe* earnestly began filming in Southern California in late June of 1987 (although the bulk was shot around the outskirts of Madrid). Other indie horror films that began shooting around the same time include *Lady Avenger* (David Decoteau, 1988), *Opera* (Dario Argento, 1987) and *Vampire at Midnight* (Gregory McClatchy's directorial debut, 1988). This motley list of examples showcases that slashers may not have been in as much of a demand by 1987, but ingenuity and slick productions never go out of style.

With no famous American names attached to the cast, the slick slasher kill sequences still give the film a very North American aesthetic, and distribution quickly followed. To show that *Edge of the Axe* was ready for video store shelves, a stunning one-page ad was placed in an October 1988 issue of *Variety*, featuring the words "Overseas Filmgroup" in the header. In February of 1988, the same trade publication had reported that Overseas picked up the film along with several other European-American productions, including *The Brother from Space* (*Fratello dello spazio*, 1988), which was directed by Italian filmmaker Mario Gariazzo, and starring American actor Martin Balsam, as well as *Fine Gold* (*Oro fino*, 1989), directed by Spanish filmmaker Jose Antonio de la Loma and featuring such friendly American faces as Ted Wass, Andrew Stevens and Ray Walson.

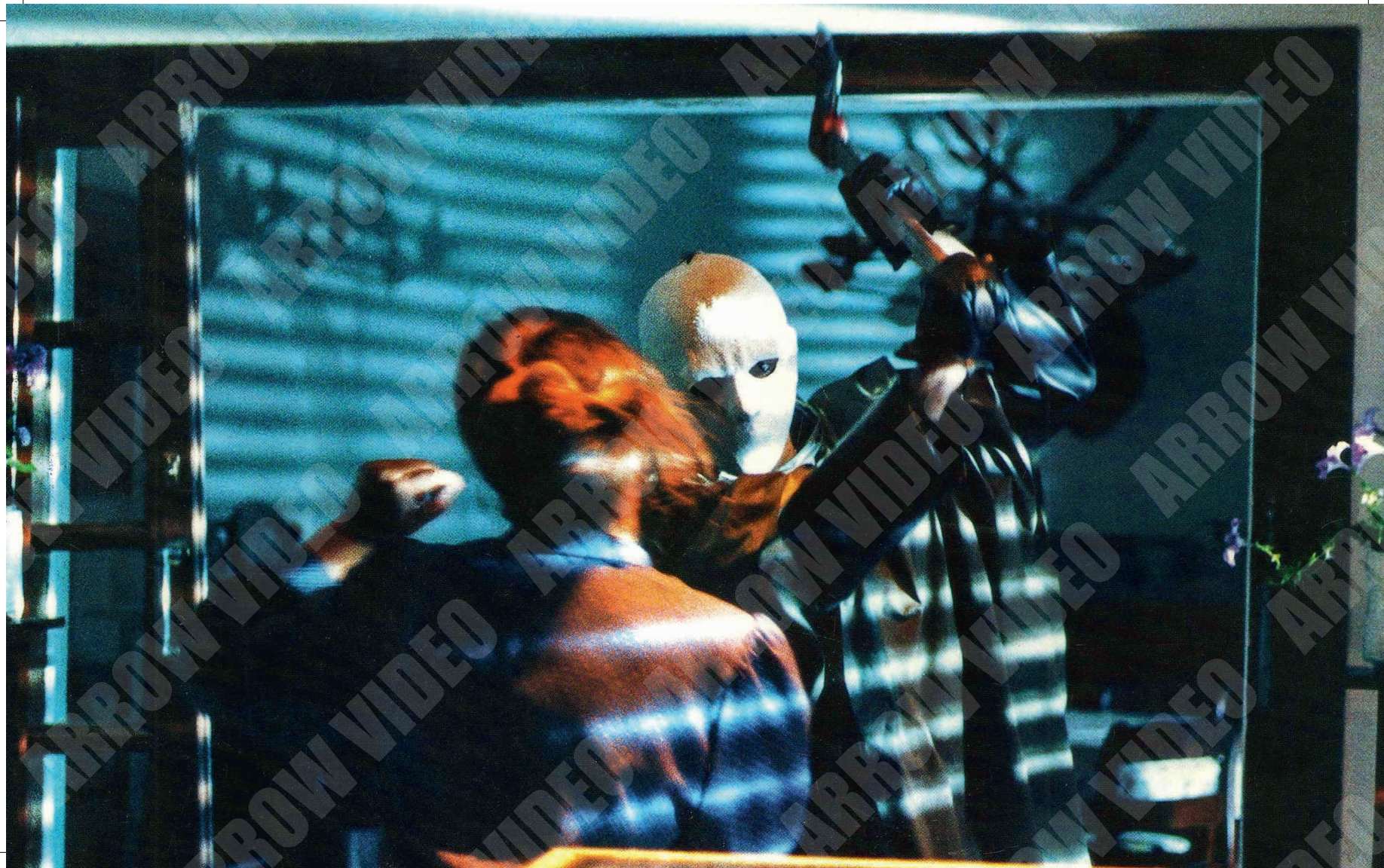
Robert Little, the founder of Overseas Filmgroup once said in an interview with *Variety* that he was "not in the production game," but he was certainly ensconced in the heady and profitable world of Euro-American co-productions, having found some success with distributing titles belonging to the Spaghetti Western craze of the 1970s. Originally from Liverpool, England, Little married an American woman named Ellen and the two relocated to Los Angeles, where the couple formed The Overseas Filmgroup. The company, already hosting two people from two different parts of the world, specialized in distributing these fascinating hybrid productions

that managed to show off their American influences like peacock feathers while also carrying a singular European feel.

What makes *Edge of the Axe* a unique viewing experience is that while it is certainly aping the North American slashers from its golden age of the early eighties, it's also not a conventional entry. It's almost *too* American – This film takes place in farm country, and no man, woman or pig is safe from the killer's wrath. The locations feel distinctly familiar – the use of the rural landscape and the fishing house and lake as central spots recalls the woodsy adventures of Jason Voorhees. But Larraz and screenwriters Joaquín Amichatis, Javier Elorrieta and José Frade (who also served as a producer), don't use the location in any kind of similar way for its stalking and slashing scenes. There's plenty of animal violence too, which is a far rarer occurrence in American slashers (although no snake was safe in *Friday the 13th* [1980], nor any dog in *Halloween* [1978]). And, while the younger characters are given the bulk of the screen time, there's a distinct maturity about them: a drifting computer geek, a guy who regretfully marries an older woman for her money, etc. In short, there's a real European vibe in the melodrama, and it aids the film in its mood.

The lack of a real final girl isn't altogether unheard of (*Sleepaway Camp* [1983] instantly comes to mind), but the neurosis that leads to the killer's rampage and the film's ending shot are stark and untidy. Even if we're being set up for a sequel when the supposedly dead killer opens their eyes at the end of a U.S. slasher, there's more often than not a feeling of resolution. Here, the wrap up is so dark, it probably couldn't even see its hands in front of its face.

However, that's par for the course for Spanish slashers. It may be worth noting that the 1969 proto-slasher *The House that Screamed* (*La residencia*) compellingly pulls from all sorts of places, and subsequently served as inspiration for several other genre films from around the globe. It's as international as any film can get. Shot in Spain, the story revolves around a French boarding house where beautiful young girls have gone missing. The cast is led by German born Lilli Palmer, and



not only is it rumored to have influenced Italian director Dario Argento's *Suspiria*, but there are images in *La residencia* that are reminiscent of both the Canadian proto-slasher *Black Christmas* (1974) and another Spanish production that would come in the 1980s, *Pieces* (*Mil gritos tiene la noche*, 1982). Both of these offer open endings (albeit it's a rather strange resolution in the case of *Pieces*).

Speaking of *Pieces*, that film is a perfect example of combining Euroslaze and all-American slash. Again, beautiful young things are being dispatched at a college, but the police are on the case, along with the residential co-ed stud student. *Pieces* lifts from all kinds of places, possibly because the notorious American-born Dick Randall served as producer. But most tellingly, the tagline for the film, which aptly states, "You don't have to go to Texas for a chainsaw massacre," is definitely meant to conjure up one of the great American horror classics. Yet, this WTF film unquestionably maintains its Euro roots in the mood and lunacy.

One of the more thought-provoking entries in the pantheon of Spanish slashers is *Anguish* (*Angustia*, 1987), which is a prime example of how effective the hybrid concoction can be when looking towards Spanish surrealism and all American gore. *Anguish* was directed by painter-turned-director Bigas Luna. Preoccupied with Dalí, Luna creates a film that seems to be both a wink and nod to the moviegoer while applying forward thinking social commentary that may be a bit disconcerting for modern American audiences. *Anguish* is, ostensibly, a film within a film where horrors of all kinds are happening in both worlds, but things take a rather sinister (and disturbing) turn when the "real" story becomes that of a shooter locking people into a movie house, firing at random people at will. It's difficult not to call to mind the 2012 murder spree in Aurora, Colorado where someone did something very similar. It is difficult to know whether Luna was playfully injecting images of over the top violence into his film, or commenting on how the consumption of such images may affect a less stable moviegoer. The slice and dice of eyeballs, and post-dubbed American accents, along with performances from the U.S. actors Zelda Rubenstein and Michael Lerner mixed with a Spanish sense of cinema makes for an intriguing and discomfoting viewing.

And then there's Larráz's trilogy of horror films, released between 1987-1990. Using the very American sounding pseudonym of Joseph Braunstein, Larráz directed *Rest in Pieces* (*Descanse en piezas*, 1987), a supernatural slasher about a woman who inherits a strange piece of property; *Edge of the Axe*; and finally, *Deadly Manor* (1990), which involves teens hanging out in an old dark mansion where they are not alone. While these films are not really very similar, they all boast an international flavor, and glorious slasher beats. Mystery mixes with the bloodshed, the Euro gothic feel beats down on each entry like a baseball bat, and sometimes a badly dubbed actor shows up just to keep us on our toes. Each of Larráz's slashers are accomplished in their own ways, but *Edge of the Axe* is a rather special film because of how lovingly it recalls the glory days of the slasher subgenre's heyday. And like those earlier entries, it has a cast brimming with likeable characters, ultra-moody and sometimes freaky set-pieces and in the bloodied core of its heart, *Edge of the Axe* only seeks to entertain, which I imagine it would do in any language.

Amanda Reyes is an academic and a film historian. She edited and co-wrote Are You in the House Alone? A TV Movie Compendium: 1964-1999 (Headpress, 2017).





ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Edge of the Axe / Al Filo del Hacha is presented in both English and Spanish versions in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono audio.

The original 35mm camera negative element was scanned in 2K resolution on a 4K Scanity, graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master and restored at R3Store Studios in London. The original mono mixes were remastered from the optical negatives by Deluxe Madrid.

All materials for this restoration were made available by Paul Rich and José Frade P.C.

Restoration supervised by **James White, Arrow Films**

R3Store Studios: **Jo Griffin, Gerry Gedge, Andrew O'Hagan, Rich Watson, Jenny Collins**

Deluxe Spain, Madrid: **Inma Fernandez Montes, Miguel Ángel Gómez, Pedro Summers, Yolanda Hurtado, Victor Illan, Ana Belén Martín, Vanessa Ruiz-Larrea, Juanjo Carretero**

José Frade P.C.: **Constantino Frade, Alfredo Valdemiro Fernández**



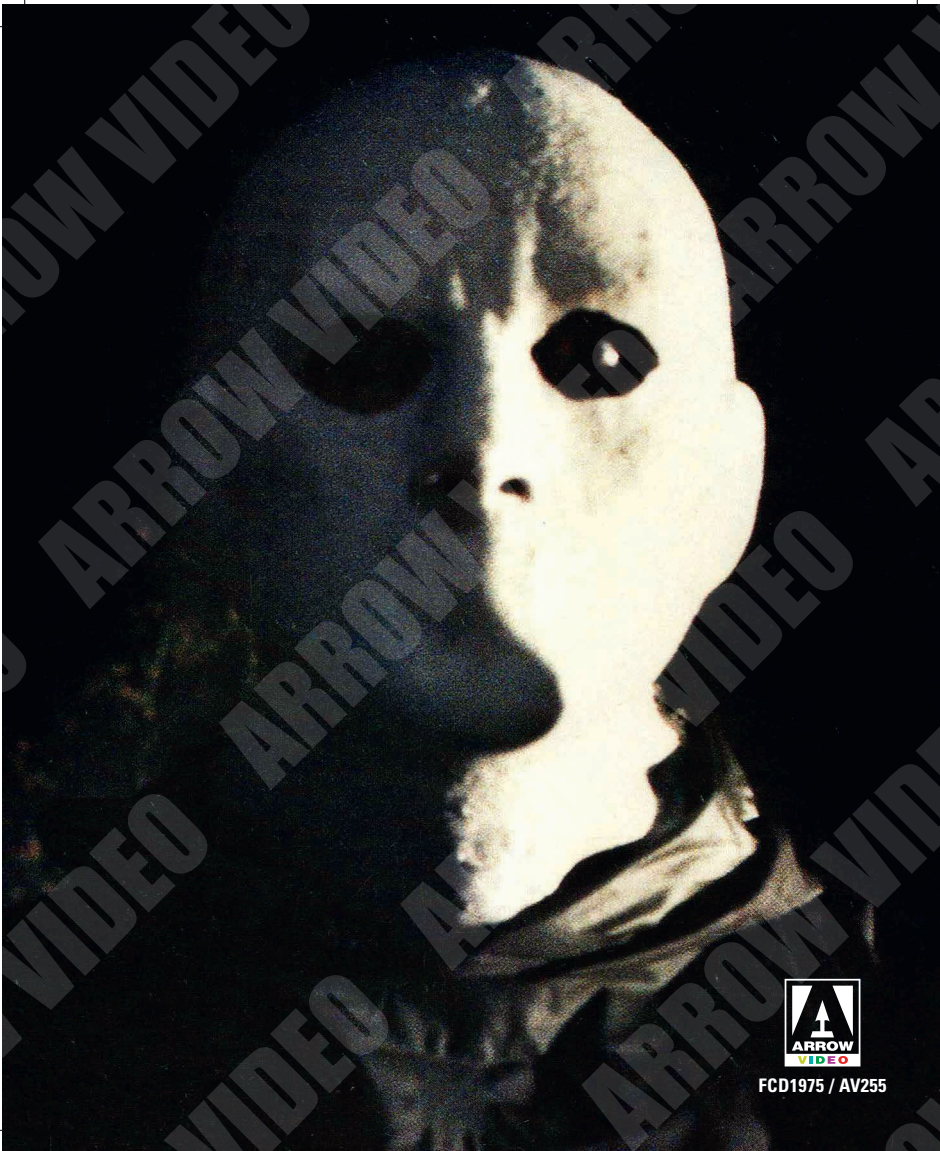
PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**
Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Artist **Justin Osbourn**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Colin Arthur, Barton Faulks, Naxo Fiol, Joseph Henson, Nathan Johnson, Justin Kerswell, Jim Kunz, Victor Matellano, Page Moseley, Amanda Reyes, Paul Rich, Jon Robertson, Matt Rosenblatt and Erik Threlfall.

Stills courtesy of <http://aquiwaletodo.blogspot.com>



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