

Semiotic Analysis of Chanel N°5, The Film

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In 2004, Baz Luhrman, the director of *Moulin Rouge* and *Romeo & Juliet*, was hired by Chanel to create a television commercial for their best-selling N°5 Perfume. The commercial, often referred to as “Chanel N°5, The Film,” is essentially a 180-second-long short film that feels more like a sophisticated movie trailer for a fantastical love story than a typical TV ad. In this paper, I conduct a semiotic analysis of this theatrical Chanel advertisement, breaking down the symbolic structures, including various codes, metaphors, myths, and narratives.

Some Basic Semiotics

The discipline of semiotics analyzes how signs are specifically used in various forms of media, or everyday discourse, to richly communicate meaning (Danesi, 2007). In fact, a sign is any cultural element that produces meaning. Signs are paradigmatically and syntagmatically organized into various structures. This means that these structures are based on associations and ordered patterns, which are typically recognized through socialization and cultural reproduction (Thwaites, Davis, & Mules, 2002). Some of the structures that I will highlight in my semiotic analysis of *Chanel N°5, The Film*, include codes, metaphors, myths, and narratives.

Codes

A code is a system that is made up of signs. Codes in a video, such as this Chanel commercial, are used to construct and communicate particular messages to the audience (Danesi, 2007). This, of course, includes associating the advertised product with carefully selected meanings that may cause consumers to more intensely desire the product. As I will illustrate, many codes exist throughout this piece of media, including deliberate use of particular colors and various costume changes.

Metaphors

Metaphors involve comparison. In a metaphor, one sign is used to substitute for another (Thwaites, et al., 2002). In advertising, metaphors are used to get the audience to “transfer certain qualities from one sign to another” (Thwaites, et al., 2002, p. 51). For example, at the end of *Chanel N°5, The Film*, Nicole Kidman’s character wears a sparkling pendant down her back with the “N°5” logo encrusted in diamonds. In this case, the glamorous, expensive pendant is a metaphor for the Chanel N°5 perfume. Thus, qualities such as luxury and elegance are transferred from the jewelry to the perfume product.

Myths

According to Thwaites, et al. (2002), a myth is a particular type of code that is based on metonymic relationships. This means that one subset is used to dominantly define the entire group of which that subset belongs. Myths are used to greatly reduce complex relationships and variance of group members into simplified denotations, or prevailing cultural meanings. The entire group is then conceptualized through the lens of this subset’s denotation. Myths are often repeated and reproduced as stories within a culture, thus strengthening their symbolic power and making them seem natural, normal, and unquestionably true (Chandler, 1994). In *Chanel N°5, The Film*, Luhrman relies on a number of common American myths surrounding the pressures of fame, romantic affairs, and the nature of self-discovery, and uses them to create a new myth: Wearing Chanel N° 5 perfume can offer any woman this transformative, fantastical experience that is depicted in the commercial.

Narratives

In semiotic terms, a narrative is another major type of code, in which events are presented in a sequential manner to represent a passage of time (Danesi, 2007). In this Chanel commercial, the narrative is a story of a famous woman who experiences a sequence of existential events that

allow her to discover her true identity and take back her own life. First, she goes through a nervous breakdown, and in the midst of this crisis, she suddenly meets a mysterious writer. She follows him back to his rooftop garret and they engage in a secret, romantic love affair. Finally, she goes back to her real life to attend an event that she committed to. The narrative is simply this ordered set of episodes that the characters in the story experience over a given period of time.

Advertainment

This Chanel piece was one of the first of a new breed of advertising called “blended content” or “advertainment” (Weaver, 2010). In this genre, the focus is more on entertainment and long form, rather than short, direct sales pitches. In advertainment, the brand is often displayed in some sort of prominent manner, but the characters or narrator never specifically mention it. This blending of entertainment and advertising swings both ways. For decades, sponsors have leveraged brand placement by inserting their products and brands into the context of sitcoms and movies. The difference today, is that the placement is more subtle and sophisticated than it used to be. For example, in the 2003 remake of *The Italian Job*, Mini Cooper cars played a central, but seamlessly integrated, role within the action chase scenes. Apple Macs are constantly showcased in many movies, as characters use their computers.

While *Chanel N°5, The Film* is primarily a commercial, references to Lührman’s theatrical movies are strategically embedded inside it. Lührman gratuitously borrows character, plot, and stylistic elements from his iconic, popular screenplays, including *Moulin Rouge*, *Romeo & Juliet*, and *Strictly Ballroom*. In essence, Chanel has deliberately created a compelling, entertaining container in which the Coco Chanel and No.5 brands can naturally live and breathe within the narrative. Using celebrities, such as Nicole Kidman, to attract consumers is nothing

new in advertising. The difference here is that Chanel draws audiences in by positioning the commercial as an artistic film that fans of Luhrman will instantly find familiar, as well as visually and emotionally sweeping. Luhrman's first three films are marketed and packaged as the Red Curtain Trilogy. While there is no common plot or story that runs through these stories, they are thematically similar in that they all have stage theater elements throughout them. *Chanel N°5, The Film* intrigues fans because it feels like a fourth installment in this movie series, or at least the trailer for one.

The Target Audience

This commercial appears to be targeting women who are at least in their thirties. At a more primitive level, Luhrman is using the sweeping romantic affair myth to draw viewers in, but at a higher level, he is appealing to the more modern identity of a woman who craves freedom, independence, and control over her own destiny. This is why Nicole Kidman was perfectly cast in this role as a heroine who feels a loss of control and actively chooses to reclaim her life and personal identity. She is sexy and alluring, but also sophisticated. She comes off as a free spirit, but she also seems like a competent, savvy businesswoman who is in charge of her career.

The City Setting

The city in this film sets the stage for the elaborate Chanel fantasy to unfold. At first glance, the city seems to be New York, much in the same way that Gotham City in the Batman series feels like New York. However, this Chanel city is really more of a mythical, fantastical place; a quintessential urban setting that has both elements of New York City and Paris. It is designed to be universally recognizable, while at the same time also feel magical or dreamlike.

Using the City to Communicate Interpersonal Proximity

The city setting plays an integral role in the story and, in particular, the love affair between the two main characters. It is the container where the plot unfolds and an element that provides a significant amount of context to the story. Moreover, the city represents varying levels of proximity throughout the story. Like in Gestalt Theory, close proximity represents a closer association (Chandler, 1994). At the beginning, there is a clear physical distance between the heroine in “Time Square” and her lover far above the city, in his rooftop garret. The production designer, Catherine Martin, states that the mythological setting is “a big city, big enough to get lost in.” This cinematographic focus on the city’s expansive size is a paradigmatic cue, communicating to the audience the great difference between the two characters lives. He is a bohemian writer that does not seem to have much knowledge of pop culture and she is a famous actress. The lack of physical proximity at the beginning acts as a metaphor, which represents the substantial gap between their everyday lives.

Externally Representing Internal, Private Experiences

Despite the distance portrayed early on in the sequence, the city quickly begins to act as a connecting force between the two lovers. In fact, the city becomes an integral part of their love affair, as it unfolds. The environment seems to respond and react to the emotions between the two lovers, and the heroine’s activities in particular. One example of this is the fireworks. They explode into the air as the couple embraces and presumably begin to make love outside the rooftop garret that the writer lives in. This plausibly signifies both a sexual climax, as well as a celebration of the heroine's personal transformation and discovery of her true self.

The spotlights also serve a special, dynamic significance in the story. As the writer begins narrating the story, perched on top of his roof, he sees spotlights waving back and forth in the distance. The spotlights both physically and psychically catch his attention, almost as if he feels

a connection to his future lover before he even meets her. They also represent another world, a mysterious celebrity world of fame that the writer is far removed from. Later on, in the midst of their love affair, the spotlights act as a reminder to the protagonist that she is living inside a temporary fantasy or dream. As her manager comes to retrieve her, the heroine and her lover both come to terms with the fact that she must eventually return from this peaceful, existential retreat. She is a famous public figure with important career-related responsibilities and obligations. The spotlights once again highlight the fact that the two lovers normally live in very different worlds. They refocus our heroine's attention back on the reality that exists down below, within the depths of the city.

The Empire State Building

There are other physical symbols embedded within the city setting that signify various elements of the heroine's fantastical dream, her torrid, romantic affair, her personal transformation, and the Chanel brand itself. One of these is the mythical version of the Empire State Building, which the director repeatedly focuses upon. This is clearly a viral, phallic symbol. It represents the objectified male object that Nicole's character fantasizes about. Of course, the Coco Chanel logo can be seen glowing at the top of the Empire State Building implying that the Chanel perfume will heighten desire within young, handsome men and enable this empowering, romantic, sensual experience for any woman who wears it. By pairing the Empire State Building and the Chanel logo together, the director is signifying that the Chanel N°5 perfume, itself, is full of virility. It not only makes a woman more sexually desirable, it also engenders confidence, independence, and freedom, enabling her to maintain control of how the sexual encounter unfolds. The association of the phallic building and the Chanel perfume

suggests the possibility of sex, but it also suggests empowerment, offering her the liberty to determine whether to actually pursue this sexual affair or not.

The Rooftop Garret

The rooftop garret, in which the heroine's lover lives, is also a significant physical construction within the city environment. This apartment inherently communicates a number of characteristics about the man who occupies it. First of all, rooftop garrets, such as these, have historical connotations. In 19th century Paris, they were commonly places that artists, writers, and poets were able to cheaply live and maintain their creativity on the fringes of urban society (Luhrman, 2006). Thus, there is an immediate suggestion that the male lover in this commercial is some sort of bohemian artist who is not a part of the mainstream culture; a culture which the heroine is obligated to represent through her fame and public career. Additionally, the fact that the apartment is situated so high above the city signifies that it is a dreamlike place far removed from the realities of the city below. Luhrman (2006) calls it "a creative spot on the rooftop of the world where love could flourish away from society." It thus becomes the perfect setting for the heroine to escape to and engage in a secret love affair, away from the prying eyes of paparazzi and fans within the city.

The Lover

Appealing to Female Desires in Advertising

Advertisers frequently used scantily clad women to entice men and catch their attention. For example, Axe Body Spray has a series of commercials that directly suggest Axe will cause gorgeous women to be uncontrollably attracted to any man wearing it. This association works well with males because their attraction to the opposite sex is more simply based on anatomy,

with the woman appearing healthy, young, receptive, and fertile (Taflinger, 1996). Additionally, getting the opportunity to have sex with multiple women is a typical fantasy of young males.

Women, on the other hand, have evolved very differently. Female criteria, when seeking a sexual partner, is often more complex and selective. A woman may have just as strong sexual desires, but that is often superseded by specific societal criteria, including various measures of social success and how a male makes her feel about yourself (Taflinger, 1996). This complexity could explain why the Chanel ad emphasizes romance, courting, and an intimate, spiritually transformative affair over immediate, raw sexuality. Luhrman, of course, still incorporates some suggestive sexual undertones such as unbuttoned clothing and fireworks as they become physically intimate, but these are subtle and non-threatening. The focus is on sensuality rather than sexuality.

Defining The Lover as a Fantasy Object

The lead male character in this cinematic commercial is presented as both a fantasy object and a vehicle for the heroine's journey of self-discovery. On a physical level, he looks a lot like a character out of a stereotypical romance novel that one might find in the checkout line of a supermarket. He is young, handsome, and constantly attentive, with almost a prince charming sort of look.

There are many clues that the lead male is an artist, and in particular, a writer. In the first scene, he is enjoying a book with reading glasses on. He also is the narrator of the commercial. He tells the story of the heroine, and his love affair with her, using eloquent prose, in the form of a compelling, dramatic narrative. Additionally, the heroine finds a tuxedo in his apartment and wears pieces of it in lieu of her feathery, pink dress. This tuxedo may be a hint that he works in

the service industry, perhaps as a restaurant waiter or hotel clerk (Luhrman, 2006). Such jobs are typical among artists, in order for them to pay the bills while they produce their art on the side.

Clothing, style, and appearance do indeed play a big part in defining the male character. He often appears to be casual and carefree with long, disheveled hair, a 5-o'clock shadow, and a shirt that is halfway unbuttoned. At the same time, he exhibits sophistication, intellect, and creativity with his glasses, brown leather jacket, and foreign accent.

The casual side of this character highlights that he is meant to be a symbol of escape for the heroine. Living far above the city, as an introspective writer and artist, he presumably doesn't face the sort of pressures and scrutiny that she encounters constantly within the bright lights of show business and the mainstream media. He is from another world, even though he lives in the same city.

The more sophisticated side of this male character is demonstrated through other characteristics. Indeed, there are subtle cues throughout the film that insinuate he is an intellectual and a creative spirit who does not necessarily care about fame, fortune, and pop-culture. For example, at the very beginning, he narrates, "I must have been the only person in the world who didn't know who she was." Therefore, he appears to be interested in the heroine because of her personal traits and not simply because of her public persona, which he admits to knowing nothing about.

Mystery, Intrigue, and Security

Because the male lover is a writer, and he lives above the city on a building rooftop, he maintains a certain aura of mystery and intrigue, while also acting as a symbol of security and safety. In this sense, he almost feels like a heroic Batman character. As he sits, perched within the "C" of the Chanel logo, he remains a constant observer. From this position, he seems to own

the entire city, but only from afar. When the heroine is up in his rooftop garret, she clearly feels secure and at peace, like he can protect her from the crazy outside world of fame and stardom. In this setting, she can finally let her guard down and behave as her true self. At the end, after the heroine returns to the red carpet, she seems to sense his omnipresent gaze, believing that he continues to watch over her even while they are apart. All of this viscerally invokes the romantic myth of a mysterious suitor suddenly sweeping a woman off of her feet.

Establishing Control

Luhrman is always careful to demonstrate that the heroine is in complete control of the situation. In his very first line, her lover asks himself, "When did I wake into this dream?" This sets up the premise that he is an object inside *her* dream; a fantasy that she controls. While she wears the Chanel N°5 perfume and it presumably attracts the writer to her, she also determines when and where they go from there. The upper hand role that the heroine plays in their relationship couldn't be more explicitly demonstrated than when she hops into the cab that the writer already occupied, and commands the cabbie to "drive." This is the very first time the two of them meet, and she establishes autonomy from the very beginning with this exclamation. This encounter signifies that she is in the driver's seat and the writer is just along for the ride.

The heroine continues to demonstrate control over the situation even when she follows the writer up to his rooftop apartment. She initiates the suggested sexual encounter by changing into his partially undone tuxedo outfit and flirtatiously exclaiming that she is a "dancer." She also maintains power in the relationship through the mystique of her public fame. Furthermore, she ultimately makes her own decision to return to the city and fulfill her obligations. The lover remains passively mesmerized and entranced by the heroine, as he waits patiently and dwells on her memory: "Her kiss, her smile, her perfume."

The Heroine's Transformation

The Nervous Breakdown

At the center of *Chanel N°5, The Film* is the heroine's personal journey of self-discovery through a fantastical romantic affair that Luhrman closely connects to the Chanel brand and the N°5 perfume. At the beginning, the heroine is experiencing a distressing internal crisis. She seems to be panicking and overwhelmed by the media's obsession over her and all of the public exposure. It appears that the pressures of fame have gotten to her. The paparazzi surrounding her with continuously flashing cameras "represent the harsh glare of public scrutiny" (Luhrman, 2006). She looks frightened and trapped. There is a deliberate freeze frame on the heroine's face that makes her look like a wide-eyed little girl; a deer caught in the headlights. She seems to want nothing more than to escape this chaotic life that she has lost control over. Therefore, she decides to run away and disappear from the public for a while. This theme of a female learning to be strong and regaining control of her own destiny extends throughout the entire story.

The Escape

The heroine's disappearance, of course, is linked to her random encounter with the attractive male writer as she suddenly hops into the occupied cab, while in the midst of running away. This is where it seems like the prototypical fairy tale romance myth is about to begin. She is a scared girl in distress and the male swoops in, out of nowhere, to heroically rescue her. Except, here is where the twist occurs. In this story, the female is not just naive, passive, and waiting to be saved. Rather, she becomes self-empowered and rescues herself. The male just happens to be at the right place and the right time when she jumps into the cab, so he becomes the objectified vehicle for her passionate, dramatic escape. The writer's role as a passive player in her fantasy is signified by a camera shot in which Luhrman zooms in on his face to reveal the

same kind of wide-eyed look of surprise that the heroine had seconds earlier when she was ambushed by the flash of the paparazzi's camera. As discussed earlier, the most telling moment, here, is when she commands the driver of the cab to "Drive!" Even though she is still distressed, this moment establishes a major shift in the heroine's nature. She is taking control back from the media, the public, and her handlers, and independently selecting a new path of her own choosing.

The Transformative Romantic Affair

In the next scene, the heroine is suddenly sitting inside the "C" of the Chanel logo, similar to the way the writer was positioned at the beginning. She is experiencing a new world: his world. Up at the writer's rooftop garret, the heroine's demeanor and mental state has changed considerably from when she was frantically running through what looked like Time Square. She appears calm now that she has escaped all of the madness that surrounded her down in the trenches of the metropolis below. The connection between this exciting escape, the heroine's unexpected romantic opportunity, and the Chanel brand are continually reinforced throughout these scenes.

Once in the comfort and safety of this other world, high above the dense urban streets, the heroine experiments with a new identity. When the writer asks who she is, she creates a fantasy identity, exclaiming, "I'm a dancer. I love to dance!" She seems to like that he knows nothing about her real life and she wants to maintain this separation so that this other world can continue to feel like a true escape. However, this is also a transformative moment. For the first time, she is actively discovering her true identity, rather than simply going along with the public image that all of her handlers and fans expected her to maintain.

By playing the role of a free-spirited dancer, the heroine is able to let her inhibitions fall to the wayside, becoming more open and empowered in her sexuality. This has symbolic

meaning on a few different levels. First, this love scene presents the myth that there is a primitive, sexual animal hidden deep inside every woman. Lührman suggestively implies that Chanel N°5 perfume gives a woman the confidence to release this sexual being and embrace the primitive desires that she normally suppresses or keeps secretly inside. All of a sudden, she no longer must passively follow conventions, restrictions, and expectations that others in society have placed upon her. She has temporarily escaped the role of a traditionally glamorous and innocent female icon.

The bursting fireworks in the sky may superficially suggest a sexual orgasm, but they also represent a celebration of the heroine's newfound freedom and self-awareness. She is prying herself from the shackles of her career, as well as the traditional expectations of a lady in bourgeois society, and simply living in the moment. In this love scene, sexuality is metaphorically treated as an expression of personal freedom.

Taking Back Control of Her Life

When the outside world intervenes in her fantasy romance, and her manager demands that she go back, she defiantly protests, "I don't care about tomorrow." At the beginning, she is the one being pursued by the paparazzi and the mainstream media. However, by reversing conventional gender roles and pursuing the man, she demonstrates that she is no longer worried what others want her to be, but rather she is going for what she wants. She realizes that she has obligations and responsibilities but now she will only attend to them on her terms. The fantasy provided by the N°5 perfume becomes something personal that she and she alone owns. As the lovers embrace and part ways, she whispers in his ear, "No one can take our dream away from us, no one."

The Significance of Color, Clothing, and Hairstyle

There are numerous codes throughout the commercial that emphasize the transition and personal changes that the heroine experiences. At the beginning, when we see the heroine running through Times Square, overwhelmed and upset, the colors briefly turn from color to black and white, and then back to color again. Black and white is also used to present the news media reports of her disappearance and supposed emotional breakdown. These color transformations signify a dichotomy between reality and fantasy, as well as the transition between them. The black and white world is the frantic environment she is trying to escape, because she is tired of the loss of control over her personal image, privacy, and destiny. The color world is the fantastical, personal transformation experienced through an idealized love affair that is all catalyzed by the Chanel N°5 perfume she wears.

The clothing and style that the characters wear are heavily coded as well, and the costume changes cue the different transition stages that the heroine goes through, while also driving the narrative that unfolds. At the beginning, the heroine has her hair down and she is wearing a feathery pink dress that is long and flowing. Her appearance is elegant and modest. Pink is often coded as a color of innocence and naivety. In American culture, baby girls are traditionally dressed in pink, and their rooms are often adorned in that color as well. It is a passive and nurturing color that is non-threatening and childlike. It signifies femininity, but it can also represent dependency and a lack of autonomy. Pink is sometimes even associated with being overly emotional and cautious (Grumbine, 1921). Additionally, the dress is cumbersome and restricting. It takes up a lot of space and makes it harder for her to quickly escape. The heroine is also wearing her hair down and curly, which reinforces the image of innocence.

During the heroine's transformation, while she is engaged in her love affair with the writer up in his rooftop garret, she literally sheds her symbol of innocence as she pulls the pink,

feathery dress aside to reveal her new seductive outfit: a mostly unbuttoned and undone tuxedo shirt and jacket that looks a lot like a cabaret costume on her. At the same time, the writer is now wearing only an undershirt. Clearly, this insinuates that they are about to engage in a sexual experience. Furthermore, there is significance in the way that she trades in her pink, girly dress for men's attire. This accentuates the fact that she is challenging traditional gender roles, as she becomes the sexual aggressor and, more generally, takes control of her own life.

In the last scene, the heroine's clothing and hair are heavily contrasted from her innocent look at the beginning. As she stands in front of the cameras, she is wearing a very sexy, yet cosmopolitan black dress that is tight with an open back extending almost down to her butt. Her hair is also straightened and tied up in a bun. Black outfits are often associated with urban business people and models, especially in Western Europe and East Coast cities such as New York. The heroine's dress and hairstyle represent a newly discovered sophistication and savvy confidence within her. She now owns the red carpet, rather than the red carpet owning her. As she senses her secret lover watching from afar, she flirtatiously smiles with satisfaction. She now appears cool, calm, and collected, a far cry from her frantic state at the beginning.

Ultimately, the escape and romantic affair fundamentally change the heroine. She experiences an epiphany, as she essentially transitions from an innocent girl to an empowered woman. Thus, by the end, when she is standing on the red carpet with a brand new sophisticated look, she is not the same person as she was at the start. The progression and maturation of the Nicole Kidman's character is vividly represented in this final scene. Yet, it is significant only because of the intertextuality, or references to commonly recognized myths, that ties the scenes together, exemplifying her journey or rite of passage to modern, independent womanhood (Chandler, 1994).

The Brand and Logo

The Coco Chanel logo is omnipresent throughout the entire film. The brand is all encompassing, surrounding the Times Square scene. On each video display monitor, elements of Chanel can be seen. On one side there is the iconic logo with the two interlocked C's, while on the other side, the word "Coco" is visible. Directly in the center, a picture of the perfume is displayed with its name, "N°5," right below it.

Connecting the Chanel Logo to the Fantasy

The writer, the primary object of the heroine's fantasy, is first introduced as he sits within a massive Chanel logo at the top of a tall building. In a sense, he and this logo are one and the same. With the exception of the cab scenes where they first meet and later say goodbye, the writer only exists within the physical context of the Coco Chanel logo. Thus, the commercial communicates a myth that this romantic and transformative fantasy can be experienced if one wears the Chanel N°5 perfume. The association between the logo, the romantic narrative, and the heroine's self-empowerment is carefully maintained all the way through. In fact, during the suggested love scene, in which they are dancing and kissing, the camera pans away, placing the entire, glittering gold Chanel Logo in the forefront. The main characters become small and minuscule compared to the brand. From this visual perspective, Chanel both contains and presents the fantasy myth to the viewers.

The N°5 Diamond Pendant

In the last scene, the heroine is wearing a sparkling diamond N°5 pendant across the small of her back. It appears to be extremely expensive and valuable. The camera zooms to solely focus on this pendant, which communicates the association that the N°5 perfume is a valuable, high-class product that is worn by only the finest women. Meanwhile, the writer

emphasizes the heroine's perfume as one of three defining qualities about her that he will forever remember: "Her kiss, her smile, her perfume." N°5 is always the "touchstone" throughout this cinematic commercial (Luhman, 2006).

Conclusion

Chanel N°5, the Film is a compelling example of advertainment. Baz Luhrman blends familiar elements of his popular films with pervasive myths of romance, escapism, fame, and revelatory self-discovery. Through the use of colors, music, costumes, character traits and an immersive urban setting, he manages to fill this 2-minute commercial with rich codes, symbols, and metaphors that effectively connect Chanel N°5 perfume to these emotionally-powerful myths. Luhrman (2006) states, "The big idea is just to tell a simple story in which people's emotional relationship with Chanel N°5 is reignited." Later, he says, "You can't explain a perfume, why it's your favorite...It's what you have in your mind." The objective of this type of advertainment is to sell consumers on an idea, a lifestyle, or a feeling, and suggest that the product will deliver this personal experience if one uses it. While the story not directly about Chanel N°5, the brand and product are heavily immersed and intertwined, both within the physical setting and the emotional sentiment.

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