

## Indonesian Cinema: The Battle Over Censorship

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### Abstract

The practice of film censorship has been in Indonesia since the Dutch East Indies era. Since then, film stakeholders have always been the battleground, as the different values and norms generate different views and beliefs. The critical constructionism paradigm is used to examine the contestation of film censorship in Indonesia. Four films released after the enactment of the 2009 Film Law are used as the case study: *The Act of Killing*, *The Look of Silence*, *Naura & Genk Juara*, and *Memories of My Body*. Data collection was done through a collection of news reports and social media posts that discussed the four films used as the case study. In addition, interviews with four stakeholders were done, which were an alternative cinema manager, a representative of the Indonesian Censorship Board (LSF), a representative of the Indonesian Film Body (BPI), and a film actor/director. The research results indicated that different stakeholders have different views and interests regarding film censorship, which explains why the polemic of contestation over the film censorship policy happens. Some people believe that film censorship should exist, as it would give control over society. At the same time, some people believe that film censorship should be replaced by film classification as a form of freedom of expression. There are also arguments over the standards of film censorship. Academically, the research's significance is to develop studies regarding film censorship polemic and its stakeholders' contestation. In contrast, practically, the research may be used to formulate film censorship regulation and policy by evaluating factors that may cause conflict among film stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Film censorship; film stakeholders; contestation; policy; values

### Introduction

This research tries to explore the contestation that happened over Indonesian film censorship. By using the concept of film as an art medium with aesthetic, ideological, and pedagogical values, the researches observe how the mechanism of Indonesian film censorship is contested. As film is seen as something impactful (Nurik; Bordwell and Thompson), film censorship

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regulation becomes the discourse that film stakeholders are contesting. Different values, beliefs and norms among film stakeholders in observing film aesthetically, ideologically, and pedagogically become the base of the discourse contestation (Zimmer; Irawanto; Mishra). This research brings up film censorship cases as well as the views and beliefs of different film stakeholders regarding the existence of film censorship.

The practice of film censorship has existed in Indonesia since the Dutch East Indies era. Historically, there are several censorship periods: the Dutch East Indies period, the Japanese period, the Old Order era, the New Order era, and the Reformation era. In each era, film stakeholders always have contestation, as they value and see film censorship differently based on their values and norms, resulting in different views and beliefs. Censorship is one of the orders regulated in the film industry regulation. It is important to note that besides entertainment tax, censorship is a form of state apparatus that has never been absent from the Indonesian film scheme (Pasaribu). Currently, Indonesian film censorship is done by the Film Censorship Board (LSF).

Problems that occur in Indonesia and the world in regard to film censorship mechanism show that film censorship is not a single discourse. The polemic of censorship strategy and target brings up various questions that need to be studied, such as who has the right to censor and who will be the most disadvantaged due to censorship and why (Corduneanu-Huci and Hamilton). Contesting the discourse of censorship means that there is a contestation of values and norms between film stakeholders that make them want to push over their values and norms in the discourse of censorship, becoming the base when implementing and applying film censorship. In Indonesia, many different film stakeholders are contesting their ideas and beliefs to decide and create film policy, such as the LSF itself, filmmakers, clerics and religious leaders, and other groups within the society (Kusuma and Haryanto). The researchers assume this contestation was between film stakeholders with different values and norms. These values and norms become the foundation for each stakeholder to decide how the film censorship mechanism should be run (or not be run) in Indonesia.

The researchers refer to one prior research which stated that there are two different views on censorship: pro and against (Eriyanto). The former is under the belief that censorship is necessary to become the guard of the state's values and culture, while the latter believes that censorship is a form of limiting creativity. This happens both in the regulation of censorship by the state, where censorship is a cultural policy that is promotively strict and by *laissez-faire* is considered weak (Sasono et al.) as well as in its implementation by groups in the society, which for some filmmakers is seen as something even more frightening than state censorship (Diani). The polemic that arises between the two opposing opinions about censorship, which occurs among the government, society, moral institutions, and the film industry, is something that often cannot be discussed (Kusuma and Haryanto). The researchers assume that film censorship is a battleground between stakeholders with values of control who believe that censorship should be implemented and stakeholders with values of freedom who do not believe that censorship should be implemented. While censorship discourse should create a balance for the film industry, these differences in values create disharmony among film stakeholders and make censorship dysfunctional.

Film is a form of mass media. Media itself is a contested realm. Stakeholders that have power could influence the process of creating its policy and even decide the content of the desired policy (Nugroho et al.). The researchers would also like to analyze Indonesian film regulation in this research. Media regulation that practically could be observed is almost always a manifestation of the government's policy, and the policy is based on the political or moral

philosophy regarding the roles of media in society (Long and Wall). Regulation decides the control and limits, whether by law or self-made, towards media organizations regarding ownership, production process, and outcomes, as a way to achieve the policy's purpose (Long and Wall). Albeit it is generally believed that film censorship after the establishment Law No. 33/2009 film has been more democratic than its predecessor, the researchers assume that the current censorship regulation has yet to be completed with a firm and clear standardization, which creates gaps that could bring up controversies.

The purpose of this research is to explore two things. The first is to examine the different values, norms, and views that become the base of the censorship discourse's contestation between film stakeholders. The second is to look upon the forms of the contestation by observing several films that were caught in cases of either state or public censorship. Regarding the significance of this research, academically, this research's main target is to expand the studies regarding film censorship polemics and the contestation between film stakeholders. Practically, this research could create a film censorship policy by evaluating factors that could create conflict between the film stakeholders.

## Literature Review

The researchers have done a literature review on research regarding the film, especially censorship, in Indonesia and globally. Within the Indonesian context, there are six studies from Kurnia (2006), Eriyanto (n.d.), Kusuma & Haryanto (2007), Barker (2011), Sasono et al. (2011), and Anshari (2016).

The first research observed that the state had intervened in the film industry by creating regulation, development, censorship, and a high tax on raw film material. In addition to the state, this research also observed the power of the market and its influence on the film industry (Kurnia).

The second research observed Indonesian films that have undergone censorship during the New Order and the early Reformation regimes (1970-2005). This research examined how censorship limited the freedom of expression in film and the views on pro and against censorship. This research offered a rating model or age classification related to the characteristics and necessities of different audiences (Eriyanto).

The third research discussed how censorship works in the film industry using Paul Du Gay's circuit of culture approach. This research observed film censorship from the Dutch East Indies era until 2007. This research showed that the birth of regulation is not always because of status quo reproduction but a dynamic process that contains contestations, which are influenced by economic pressures and power structures, as well as experiences and specific causes of the individuals or groups involved (Kusuma and Haryanto).

The fourth research discussed the revitalization of filmmaking and the film industry in Indonesia post-1998 using the cultural economy approach. One of the things observed in this research is the struggle of the Indonesian Film Society (MFI) when proposing the judicial review of Law No. 8/1992 on film. This research concluded that filmmakers were still given limitations and found it hard to oppose the state's discourse (Barker).

The fifth research studied the political economy map of the Indonesian film industry through three sub-sectors: production, distribution, and exhibition. Censorship is a form of limitation on freedom of expression and culture. During the New Order, film censorship was stringent. After the fall of the New Order regime, LSF still adhered to the provisions of politics

and public order. However, the problem of censorship arises not only from LSF but also from community institutions (Sasono et al.).

The sixth research discussed the background, implementation, public reception, and evaluation of the application of the age classification system in an alternative cinema in Yogyakarta called Kinoki, which operated from 2005-2011. This research was based on the MFI's struggle toward LSF and their offer of an age classification system as a replacement for the censorship system. The researcher argued that the film classification system is more constitutional than censorship as it does not limit the freedom of speech and expression but classifies the audience based on age (Anshari).

Meanwhile, on the global context, the researchers observed three studies related to film censorship. The first study looked upon the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) and its relationship with a broader state apparatus (Petley). The second study summarized several research types that questioned the rating system's accountability and accuracy of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) (Gentile). The third study observed how gender bias is developed in the film censorship and classification system of the USA as there is a tendency to police women's sexual agency on screen is due to political, economic, and ideological factors. The researcher then concluded her research by offering a view on how the film regulatory system could be restructured to allow for an equal gender representation (Nurik).

## Methods

Using the critical constructionism paradigm (Hidayat, 2009), this research uses the qualitative approach and the case study method (Neuman, 2014; Yin, 2018). Data collection was done by conducting in-depth interviews (Alshenqeeti, 2014) to collect primary data and archival and documentation studies (Neuman, 2014) for secondary data.

Face-to-face interviews were done in October 2019-March 2020 with four informants who at the time of interview were and now are still active in the Indonesian film scheme. The informants are (1) a manager of an alternative cinema in Jakarta and program manager of an Indonesian website that focuses on film studies and criticism, (2) a representative from LSF, (3) a member of the Indonesian Film Board (BPI) who was also a member of MFI, and (4) a film director and actor.

Documents that were studied as secondary data are divided into two parts. First is regulation documents, which are:

1. Law No. 33/2009 on Film;
2. Government Regulation (PP) No. 18/2014 on Film Censorship Board; and
3. The Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture (Permendikbud) No. 14/2019 on the Guideline and Criteria of Censorship, Audience Age Classification and Withdrawal of Film and Film Advertisement from Circulation.

Second is news, social media posts (Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook) and online petitions circulated on the website change.org.

In this research, the researchers also observed four films. Some films are directly mentioned by the informants, while others are not mentioned by are related to the context. The films are (1) *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012), (2) *The Look of Silence* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2014), (3) *Naura & Genk Juara* (Eugene Panji, 2017), and (4) *Memories of My Body* (Garin Nugroho, 2018).

This research has three main limitations. The first is that the research only focused on feature film censorship, even though LSF's censorship mechanism works for other audiovisual materials besides feature films. Second, there is a limitation on the period that is being analyzed, as the research only observed film censorship problems after the release of Law No. 33/2009 on Film, so only films after 2009 are being considered. Third, the films observed are Indonesian films or films about Indonesia with Indonesian crew members, even though censorship problems also occur in non-Indonesian films screened in Indonesia.

## Results and Discussion

All contentions related to censorship discourse show an imbalance in the structure due to differences in values and norms among film stakeholders that underlie their understanding of what is considered appropriate and inappropriate. There are four forms of contentions on film censorship: LSF censorship, non-LSF censorship, self-censorship movement, and the debate between censorship and age classification.

Regarding the contention of the LSF censorship discourse, there are different views between filmmakers and regulators. Back then, LSF was considered authoritative. Nowadays, the LSF representative stated that in doing censorship, LSF put forward the dialogue function. This mechanism is more democratic than directly cutting out scenes or even banning the film from screening. Informant 2 said regarding LSF's dialogue function:

"Please do not think, "LSF has made its decision, alright, let's not deal with it. LSF is a dictator." No, it is not like that. There were many occasions when revisions changed a film's rating decision from 17+ to 13+. From 13+ with revisions to 17+. There was even a more dramatic occasion where a film should have had a 17+ with revisions rating but then changed to 17+ without revisions. Some others changed from 17+ or 13+ with revisions to 13+ without revisions. This means that the revisions are annulled due to the dialogue. Those preassumptions towards LSF are normal, but please, they also must know that LSF widely opens itself for dialogues. Come and let us have a dialogue. We are here to discuss, debate and argue, and there will be a decision. It is not like everyone would keep being stubborn and insistent. If you have a film with a 13+ with revisions rating and want it to be 13+ without revisions, LSF believes that the scenarios that should be revised are because they are adult content. However, what if if you do not want to change it, and then LSF insists, but then you also insist, therefore reaching no decision? It is not going to happen. At some point, LSF would consider all dialogues".

However, in Informant 4, the filmmaker stated that the dialogue function does not have much impact on the decision on the film's censorship. Based on his experience undergoing the dialogue function, Informant 4 said:

"Well, that is good, but I have been in this situation before. I was not the director but I was involved in the filmmaking process. We did have a dialogue, but eventually, we still had to sacrifice something from the film. In the end, the content believed to be inappropriate would still have to be removed. In the end, it is censorship. So what dialogues are you trying to have when you would still have to censor it? Maybe I can ask LSF not to remove that much content. However, eventually, you still zip my mouth".

Regarding LSF's censorship pass, the two films being observed, *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*, could not be widely screened in Indonesia. Both films discussed the G30S/PKI

issue and never received the Censorship Pass Certificate (STLS) from LSF. The screenings were not supported by the Indonesian National Army (TNI) and, on several occasions, were interrupted by local police. However, several institutions issued a counterargument to the rejection of the film *The Look of Silence*, namely Komnas HAM, civil society organization KontraS, and the Jakarta Arts Council. Komnas HAM believes that rejecting the film without implementing the dialogue function makes LSF look like a New Order institution (“Larang Film Senyap, Komnas HAM Sebut LSF Seperti Orba”). LSF itself believes that the film promotes communism, while Komnas HAM believes the film could be a way to open up discussions regarding the dark history of Indonesia in 1965. Both the support as well as the rejection of the film are issued by circulating official institutional letters.

On the second discourse, namely the non-LSF censorship, the four films mentioned above stumbled on this problem as several individuals, groups of society, and even municipal governments value them as films that do not match the values and norms in society. *Naura & Genk Juara* is believed to be a blasphemy towards Islam, and *Memories of My Body* is believed to promote LGBTQ. In contrast, *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* are seen as promoting communism and opening up the dark history of 1965.

These four films are all seen as problematic by conservative groups of people. However, they are also defended by people who believe these films are not problematic. The latter believe that these four films do not contain anything sacrilegious, therefore these films should retain their screening rights and not be publicly censored. This counterargument is voiced through social media by filmmakers and people who support the films. It is important to note that both *Naura & Genk Juara* and *Memories of My Body* have also passed LSF’s censorship. For the cases of *Naura & Genk Juara* and *Memories of My Body*, Informant 2 said that LSF also voiced their support, standing up for these films and informing that these films have every right to be screened.

Informant 3 believes that public censorship is something that imprisons the freedom of discussion. He believes that people who practice public censorship are people who do not believe that society needs to discuss essential things or who think that films are so influential that people would just immediately follow what they see. He also describes that public censorship nowadays is practiced in ways different from when MFI contested LSF in Constitutional Court. Informant 3 said:

“Back then, groups of people who love to exercise public censorship do not watch films. Films belong to middle-class people who like to argue. Back then, those morally correct groups of people would object to a film over its title and poster. Since those two are directly visible, they do not have to watch the film. Back then, people would counter, “have you seen the film? No.” Just like what happened to the film *Buruan Cium Gue*. You can find the jokes and the news about it.

“However, things are different now. Middle-class people have become some sort of a political installation so that they would identify themselves as either pro-freedom or pro-control. Many people decide to become pro-control, then watch a film, and make a fuss about it on social media. Like what happened to *Memories of My Body*, they said, “*Memories of My Body* is a pro-LGBT film, LGBT have become protagonists, and they always win.” They wrote it down on social media and also made online petitions, signed by 200.000 or 300.000 people, even though the film only had around 10.000 viewers in the cinema. You see, most of the people who signed the petition did not watch the film. Maybe a few did watch the film. However, now this is how it works. Those few who

actually watched the film used social media to voice out their objection and then gained support from others who do not necessarily watch the films, but share the same view.”

In the debate about this discourse, there is an important note that no official legal regulation obliges LSF to protect films that have obtained STLS to retain their screening rights if the public disputes the film. The regulation on withdrawing films that have gained their STLS is available in PP No. 18/2014 on Film Censorship Board and in Permendikbud No. 14/2019 on the Guideline and Criteria of Censorship, Audience Age Classification and Withdrawal of Film and Film Advertisement from Circulation. In PP No. 18/2014 Article 38, it is stated that films and film advertisements that have passed censorship can be withdrawn from circulation by the Minister based on LSF's considerations if the films cause disturbances to security, order, peace, or harmony in community life.

The provision regarding “disruption to security, order, peace or harmony in community life” is subjective, so it has a great potential to be problematic. The regulation does not explain the definition or indicators determining what constitutes a disturbance to security, order, peace, or harmony in community life. The ambiguity of this indicator is a matter of debate because it affects many aspects of film censorship. This can create gaps that allow for a unilateral ban on a film, as happened to *Memories of My Body* by several municipal governments and *Naura & Genk Juara* by some individuals.

Informant 2 said that LSF itself is trying to protect films that are judged by the masses by directly mediating opposing groups and spreading information that the films do not violate the rules that have been set by LSF so that they can be widely circulated. Unfortunately, the debate between *Naura & Genk Juara* and *Memories of My Body* had already affected the film's image in the eyes of some public members. The two films started to spark debate as they went viral on social media and were petitioned online by individuals who objected to the film's existence.

In the case of *Naura & Genk Juara*, LSF stated the film was not religiously blasphemous and had obtained STLS. There is also the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), represented by Seto Mulyadi, who stated that the film is an educational film for children. The film director, Eugene Panji, also issued a statement.

*Memories of My Body* faces a different kind of battle from *Naura & Genk Juara*. In this case, there are differences in viewing this film between institutions. Thirteen municipal governments, supported by conservative community groups, refused to show the film because it was considered to show sexual deviations that could be disturbing, even though the film had obtained STLS. The discourse battle, in this case, is extensive because prior to the refusal, the film had won the Citra Award for Best Film at the 2019 Indonesian Film Festival (FFI) and was even chosen by the Indonesian Film Selection Committee (KSFI) as the official Indonesian representative that was eligible to enter the 2020 Academy Awards selection. FFI is a film festival supported by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Creative Economy Agency (BEKRAF), and the Indonesian Film Board (BPI). The three institutions represent the state or were born from regulatory provisions. However, even after winning at FFI, thirteen municipal governments still refused the film when it was about to be re-screened in theaters to celebrate its victory. The state institutions have different views, so they do not share the same voice.

Informant 3, a BPI representative, and Informant 4, a filmmaker, have different views regarding the ban. Informant 3 sees the ban as a form of belief from some people that society does not need to discuss important things, which means that Informant 3 sees this from a societal perspective. Informant 3's statement is equal to the belief that censorship does not regard and appreciate the rights of the audience to gain information or entertainment. That

ensorship means viewing the audience as uneducated people (Eriyanto, n.d.), even though what Informant 3 means is censorship done by the public or state institutions that do not have the right to censor. On the other hand, Informant 4 believes that the ban is a practice that overlooks LSF's decision that comes from a central institution and also as a form of LSF's failure in protecting the films that they have given the censorship pass, which means that Informant 4 sees this from a state level of perspective.

Meanwhile, regarding the cases of *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*, Informant 1, who is a film programmer, has a similar view to Informant 3. LSF and conservative groups ban both films. However, Informant 1 believes that both public and state censorship ruin the culture of discussion and prevent people from looking for other sources and points of view regarding something, in this case, the dark history of 1965. He said:

“Well, like it or not, I think we should leave both films alone. Now we know that the closed channels have been opened. It's different from my elementary school days when there was only one single source of information, and that was how history was written. But now, if you want to screen *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*, go screen it. But it is also important to note that the audience should be given a chance to seek alternative history.

“This also applies to cases of other films. Well, it depends on the programme, but for example, if I were a TV programmer, I would screen a film with a particular narrative alongside another film that counters the former film's narrative. Now that there are two different films, let's discuss them. What is the truth? Who made the film? And stuff like that. So the discussion would be more alive.”

Arguably there is a massive problem with this ban. Komnas HAM stated that the ban is done towards independent films, not commercial films, and without dialogue function, which means that LSF itself did not follow the rules written in Law No. 33/2009 about the film. In Article 6, it is stated that films should not contain content that (1) inspire people to do violence, gamble, and drugs, (2) explicitly show pornography, (3) provoke arguments between groups, class, and race, (4) insult religious values, (5) inspire people to commit crime or actions against the law, and (6) degrade human dignity. Both films discussed the dark history of 1965, when the state assassinated those who were believed to be communist followers. There are no detailed definitions of the six points mentioned. However, both films arguably do not necessarily contain such content. This provoked the argument between those who believe both films should be screened as a form of historical alternative against those who believe that both films should not be screened as they are seen as promoting communism.

In the third discourse, which is the debate on the self-censorship movement issued by LSF, informants disagree on the definition and practice of this movement. This disagreement occurs as the self-censorship movement targets all film stakeholders, not just society. LSF tries to encourage society to choose films based on their age classification, which the other film stakeholders accept. This is a form of control that LSF exercises after a film receives its STLS and then is released to the public. However, when this movement is targeted toward filmmakers, this becomes a polemic as filmmakers, and people working in the film industry feel that this limits freedom of expression and creativity. Informant 1, who is an alternative cinema manager, believes that self-censorship should not be a mindset; rather, people should just be responsible for the films they make. He said:



“I’m doubtful about LSF’s self-censorship definition. I don’t understand... let’s say we use Law No. 33 as the reference, stating that there are forbidden things. Let’s take drugs as an example. The thing is, my understanding about drugs might be different from yours. Which ones are allowed and which ones are forbidden would be different. It’s a bit strange because in my opinion self-censorship sounds too negative. Maybe we should just be more responsible towards our own content. So just make your content, submit it for the classification process, and accept your classification.”

Informant 3, who was also part of MFI, also feels that LSF’s self-censorship is strange and disagrees with it. He said:

“It sounds like they (LSF) know that filmmakers are creative people, so they ask them to just “work it out” so that their films would make the cut. Well, *that* you don’t have to tell the filmmakers. That is the essence of filmmaking, you don’t have to tell them to do so. LSF’s task is to bridge films so that they can send their messages to their ideal, designated audience. So don’t tell filmmakers to self-censor. That is a ludicrous request.”

This is continued towards the fourth debate that has been teased above. Namely, if LSF has done the dialogue function and age classification, they would still have to ask filmmakers to cut or censor their films or not. The film workers believe that LSF should work as a board that audits films and decides the proper age classification for each film without the filmmakers having to cut or censor the content. This system is believed to be more ideal, mainly when supported with clear indicators that can be held accountable to the public and clear and firm sanctions for exhibitors who violate the rules.

The polemic of age classification gets sharper with the advancement of technology that allows the audience to purchase cinema tickets online through the web or an app. Even though the cinema app or website requires the audience to register by providing their ID card photo before they can purchase tickets online, it is important to note that people can purchase more than one ticket. On one hand, this system makes ticket purchasing so much easier as they can purchase tickets wherever and whenever they want without having to go to the cinema and queue physically. However, on the other hand, problems could arise as the cinema could not control for whom the additional tickets are purchased. An adult can purchase tickets for an adult-rated film using their account and invite underage kids to watch it. The cinema may or may not check when admitting the audience; even so, when stopped, the adult viewer can say that they have purchased the tickets beforehand. On this, Informant 2 states that it is essential that the audience understand that they have the responsibility to obey the age classification rule. It is generally advised that cinemas follow the age classification rule, but the audience should not dismiss it either.

Meanwhile, Informant 4 believes LSF must enforce strict sanctions on cinemas that violate this rule. Informant 4 says that the sanction could be a costly fine that would be a harsh impact for cinemas that allow underaged kids to be admitted for films meant for adults. This means that there would be no films meant for adults be seen by underaged kids, and films can still be screened without having to be censored as they reach their intended audience.

## Conclusion

This research looks at the difference in the value at stake in the view between freedom versus control. This difference in values gives rise to an understanding how to organize and maintain

structures differently. This gives rise to the contestation for censorship discourse among film stakeholders, both through debates between parties and overlapping functions. Among individuals, community groups, and even state institutions, there are differences in values and norms between freedom and control that are not agreed upon by all parties and can lead to disharmony. The contestation for censorship discourse will continue to occur.

Based on the conclusion, this research offers academic and practical recommendations. Academically, first, it is necessary to conduct further research that observes film censorship problems by using films released after 2009 as examples, especially from the perspective of communication studies. Films from this era still stumbled on this problem and are not discussed in this research. In addition, the development of technology also gives way to new platforms that will influence how the audience watches films and how censorship works, as films become more accessible and can be circulated easier and more freely. Further research could see the polemic of film censorship in these new platforms.

Practically, this research recommends the importance of discussion between film stakeholders to observe factors that could initiate conflict within the mechanism of film censorship, such as the blurry and unclear censorship indicators or the age classification mechanism that is yet to be maximized. Reviewing film censorship regulations would be necessary, especially on Permendikbud No. 14/2009.

## Annotation

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