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Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

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Are Art and Life Experiences “Mostly Perceptual” or “Largely Extra-perceptual”?

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ABSTRACT. These days, there's a lot of discussion regarding the role of perception in aesthetic experience. Philosophers of mind like Bence Nanay claim that aesthetics can be reduced to the philosophy of perception, while many more are actively debating the Cognitive Penetrability Hypothesis (CPH), whereby what “we think literally influences what we see.” Those who uphold CPH consider perception susceptible to internal factors (visual memories, color memories, "wishful seeing," concept possession, attentional bias, pre-cueing, or practical knowledge), as well as external ones (perceptual learning). If CPH is true, then our experiences of art and life share two basic features: 1) routine perceptions are coloured by factors that often lie largely beyond both our control (concept possession, prior experiences, memories, prejudices/biases, etc) and our awareness, and 2) the magnitudes of such factors are not only indeterminable, but they cannot be turned off/on at will during perception. One question remains, however, are art's contents mostly perceptual or extra-perceptual? Extra-perceptual contents refer here to after-thoughts, prompted more by the imagination, new information, curiosity, playful activities, emotions, and social engagements than *in situ* (real-time) perceptions. This paper claims that the contents of life experiences are primarily perceptual, while those of art experiences, which require interpretations, are largely extra-perceptual since such assessments typically occur post-perceptually.

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1. Introduction: An “Aesthesis Turn” (or Return)

One of today’s hot topics in Aesthetics and Psychology concerns perception’s influence on aesthetic experience. After decades of aestheticians’ having developed strategies for articulating artworks’ mostly *immaterial* features, heretofore described as “work” (Martin Heidegger), aesthetic concepts (Frank Sibley), aesthetic terms (Peter Kivy), standard/contra-standard categories (Kendall Walton), “embedded” contents (Arthur Danto), and even non-perceptual perceptual properties (James Shelley); Aesthetics is currently undergoing what might be described as an “Aesthesis Turn” (or rather “return”) as circumscribed by New Materialism, Posthumanism, and Object-Oriented Ontology.

Closer to home, Bence Nanay’s 2016 book *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* claims that aesthetics and philosophy of perception share so many common features that it might be helpful to treat the former as exemplary of the latter. Elsewhere, I have argued that aesthetics is the “philosophy of our wordless world,” meaning that its subject concerns ineffable artworks that are hastily treated as effable, owing to aestheticians’ intentionalist inclinations (Spaid 2015, p. 181). On this level, both philosophical fields address how we phenomenologically experience material environments, rather than language. Problem is, the philosophy of perception primarily focuses on conceptualised contents, thus neglecting objects’ immaterial features and ignoring crucial aspects that fail to be conceptualised until much later. By contrast, aesthetic experiences remain largely unconceptualised, making inference, what Kant called the “free-play

of imagination and understanding,” aesthetics’ bailiwick. Were artworks so easily perceivable as familiar objects, participants wouldn’t have to infer interpretations, allowing aestheticians to focus more on artworks’ material features than their immaterial features. Unlike conceptualisation, which is rather immediate, interpretations are post-perceptual, since they occur after perception, and rarely in the object’s presence, though direct experiences prove more evidential than virtual ones. We direct our perceptual tools at whatever is under scrutiny. For these reasons, post-perceptual content is extra-perceptual, while extra-perceptual content such as hearsay could occur pre-perceptually, perceptually, or post-perceptually. The main point is that extra-perceptual contents, like cognition, not only influence perception, but facilitate it.

1.1. “What we Think Literally Influences What we See”

Since the millennium, philosophers of mind have actively been debating the Cognitive Penetrability Hypothesis (CPH), whereby what “we think literally influences what we see,” a view that frankly challenges perception’s accuracy (Raftopoulos and Zeimbekus 2015, p. 1). Those who uphold CPH consider perception susceptible to cognition, whether internal factors (visual memories, color memories, "wishful seeing," concept possession, attentional bias, pre-cueing, or practical knowledge) or external ones (perceptual learning). And if perception is susceptible to cognition, then of course the conceptual content arising from aesthetic experiences is no less immune. Nanay thinks aestheticians ought to consider CPH’s impact on aesthetic

experiences, but of course, they do all the time, since cognition not only influences, but directs interpretive mechanisms. This is why philosophers since the 18th Century have emphasised the *aesthetic attitude*, known either as “disinterestedness” or “distanciation,” which offers a conscious corrective of human beings’ obvious biases.

If CPH is true, then our experiences of art and life share two basic features: 1) routine perceptions are coloured by factors that often largely lie beyond both our control (concept possession, prior experiences, memories, prejudices/biases, etc) plus our awareness, and 2) the magnitudes of such factors are not only indeterminable, but they cannot be turned off/on at will during perception. One question remains, however, are these contents entirely perceptual or could some be *extra-perceptual*?

In light of the fact that artworks are typically interpreted long after *in situ* (real-time) perceptions, extra-perceptual contents are usually after-thoughts, spurred by the imagination, additional information/hearsay, curiosity, playful activities, emotional reactions, social engagements, and especially some urgency to identify plausible referents (Susanna Siegel 2015, p. 423). As an example, I offer Marcel Duchamp’s 1912 painting *Nu Descendant un Escalier* (Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2), whose titillating title, not its depicted imagery, caused quite a stir, eventually inspiring Duchamp not to exhibit it in Paris. When it was finally exhibited the next year in “The Armory Show,” *American Art News* offered a \$10 reward to anyone who could identify this inscrutable painting’s nude figure, demonstrating that its original offense was not due to perceptual contents, but to extra-perceptual ones (fears of a scandal). Perhaps a more vivid

example is Emmanuel Frémiet's plaster sculpture *Female Gorilla Carrying off a Nègresse* (1859), which members of the public physically destroyed in 1861. Even though Frémiet clearly carved the words "Gorille Femelle" (female gorilla) on the sculpture's base for all to read, members of the public, including Baudelaire, routinely interpreted it as an aggressive male gorilla about to rape a woman. This sculpture's demise has been attributed to the fears it elicited, as well as the sense of moral outrage aroused by Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* (1859), published the same year. Given that the public's reaction was not derived from perception (the figure of a female gorilla carrying off an indigenous woman, depicted imagery, and words), one recognises the greater power of extra-perceptual contents (hearsay, emotions, evolution's implausibility).

1.2. Interpretation's Reliance on Extra-Perceptual Contents

What interests me is the tendency for audiences to rely on extra-perceptual contents when interpreting, and even evaluating aesthetic experiences (theater, film, opera, visual art, symphony, meals), a vector that Nanay not only overlooks, but remains underdeveloped in literature generated by the International Network for Sensory Research (a consortium of 25 philosophy departments). Extra-perceptual contents play a crucial role for several reasons: 1) Interpreting artworks can take years, so audience members often rely on public discourse, hearsay, and institutionally-available information such as theater/opera programs or museum labels to speed up access. 2) Spectators are typically overwhelmed by multi-sensorial aesthetic

experiences, making it difficult to zero-in on particular aspects, leaving parts a blur. 3) It's far more difficult to process art's unfamiliar references than those underlying familiar life experiences. 4) Art experiences require interpretations, which is not the case for everyday life experiences, which are taken at face value. As we shall soon see, perception plays a primary role in the recent wave of neuroaesthetic research cited by philosophers to explain why certain artworks, as well as nonart objects, hold our fascination. Research conducted in art exhibitions rather than labs rather indicates that extra-perceptual contents override perceptual ones.

To remain consistent with the philosophy of mind literature, I refer to recipients attempting to interpret artworks as subjects (undergoing cognition), who engage part-whole relationships, as they toggle back and forth from an artwork's ineffable aspects to the world, just as recipients move from an environment's myriad elements to its overall composition. Like eaters in the dark using a process of elimination to discern what they most likely just ate, one's experience with a novel artwork typically engenders post-perceptual *inferential* processes. Unlike interpretation, the process of conceptualising familiar artworks during its exhibition is comparatively direct (immediately processed via each visitor's cognitive stock, didactic panels, and selected artwork positions). Since curated exhibitions are typically designed to defend curatorial hypotheses concerning the displayed objects, there is less need for the kind of guesswork that often accompanies unfamiliar artworks that are presented void of any context (Spaid 2016, p. 88). As detailed in the next section,

recent exhibition experiments indicate that exhibition visitors routinely employ extra-perceptual content.

This paper thus juxtaposes everyday life experiences, which include *familiar* art experiences that don't require inferential processes, with novel art experiences that defy understanding and thus require ongoing assessments, sometimes occurring years later, and far from some original *in situ* perception, which is why I characterise them as *extra-perceptual*. Neither everyday life experiences nor novel art experiences are immune from cognitive penetration, which is why the aesthetic attitude still matters. Recall Ludwig Wittgenstein's view that interpretations are not properties of things. That we act like interpretations are matters of fact is yet another example of cognitive penetration run amok. Although most aestheticians consider artworks' contents "embedded," interpretations are often comparatively immaterial and imperceptible, though to succeed as plausible interpretations they must eventually be backed by material evidence that is perceptible. But they remain interpretations all the same.

1.3. The Folly of "Neutral Views" Conducted in Labs

Since the 1990s, several philosophers have defended so-called "neutral views," ranging from Affect Theory and Neuroaesthetics to Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), all of which arose to safeguard mind-independence. As a result, scientists have conducted scores of laboratory experiments that measure people's responses to images or actual artworks in terms of pupil dilation, eye movements (reaction times, gaze duration, saccade length, scan

paths), heart rate, skin conductance, and neural responses as measured by EEG and fMRI. Such tests typically occur in laboratories, totally detached from actual art experiences, where perceiving subjects are not only wired to sensors, but they cannot wander at will, as they would in an actual exhibition. With the subject's agency effectively annulled and objects "flashed" on a screen, void of any context; it's no wonder researchers *erroneously* credit underlying objects with whatever "agency" is said to direct people's attention, prompt perception, trigger reception, and eventually inspire judgments. Most significantly, interpreting, and responding to art is time-intensive, yet "flash-by" art is comparatively quick.

2. Experiments in Actual Exhibitions

Because lab environments are particularly well-suited to "neutral" views, vision scientists have started conducting experiments in actual art exhibitions. As we shall soon see, these experiments not only defy earlier lab results, but they capture extra-perceptual contents in action. As it turns out, visitors actively engage some combination of fore-knowledge, name-recognition, relaxation techniques, social interactions, label reading, and deep reflection. Although said researchers never mention "cognitive penetration," their experiments in actual exhibition affirm that there is more than meets the eye, which parallels the view of those upholding CPH, as described above. That scientists have recorded cognitive penetration influencing perception effectively denies objects their reputed "agency" and

negates any possibility for “neutral” views. Even if objects themselves *spur* visitor attention, experiments that occur in actual exhibitions demonstrate that individual objects, as opposed to a carefully selected and positioned set of objects, are insufficiently programmed to inspire reflection, let alone goad aesthetic judgment. In 2000, Falk and Dierking found a “close causal relationships between [1]) the physical context (alluding to the assessment of the exhibition itself: the choice of artworks; installation labeling; and didactics) and the scope of a contemplative experience, and between [2]) the socio-cultural context (alluding to group dynamics: talking while visiting, visiting for social reasons; seating opportunities) and the social experience” (Kirchberg and Tröndle 2015, p. 180). Hardly “causal,” such relationships exemplify Peirce’s semiotic triad, which ties the set of objects to some curator’s presentation (the sign) and audience reception (the interpretant), thus granting the visitor the last word.

2.1. Three Types of Exhibition Experiences

Attempting to repeat Falk and Dierking’s findings, Kirchberg and Tröndle followed up with a psychological test that actually mapped people’s physical behaviour throughout an exhibition. Statistical data led them to identify three kinds of exhibition experiences: *enthusing* (primarily students), *contemplative* (typically teachers), and *social* (mostly women); whose time frame stretched from pre-conception to exhibition experience to post-visit reception (174). After testing six potentially relevant factors: from 1) pre-visit expectations to 2) socio-demographic statistics, 3) personal

relatedness to art, 4) the visitor's mood upon arrival, 5) the post-visit assessment, and 6) potential social group dynamics, they concluded that "art knowledge positively impacts the enthusing experience of the exhibition." Knowledgeable visitors take pleasure in conceptualising artworks *in situ*, which means that a little art knowledge goes a long way toward ensuring enjoyable experiences. Fortunately, negative moods show little effect (176-177). Those characterising their experiences as contemplative credited "excellent" artworks, "good" information/didactic panels, and "fair to satisfactory" seating arrangements, factors that are primarily extra-perceptual, though evaluating artworks as "excellent" could be perceptual (personal assessment) or extra-perceptual (deference to experts). By contrast, those reporting social experiences rate exhibited artworks on par with seating arrangements, somewhere between "Satisfactory" and "Good" (179). Not surprisingly, "talking while visiting," yet another extra-perceptual activity, lessens contemplative experiences, yet it enhances social experiences (179).

Using a Likert Scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high), Kirchberg and Tröndle calculated 9 emotional and 8 cognitive index variables for each visitor. "Driven by an 'aha-effect'" (185), enthusing visitors have the greatest emotional connection (physiological reactions), yet they tend to exhibit just one cognitive assessment, that of beauty. Although contemplative visitors are design sensitive and tend to focus on particular artworks, they have less intense physiological reactions than other types, while social visitors casually stroll about, seeking objects of interest.

Comments like “This artwork made me think,” “This artwork moved me,” or “This work connects with that work” are indicative of contemplative experiences. “Deeply thinking about the art, being moved by it, assessing the interaction with the other exhibited works, and considering the specificities of presenting the selected artworks are also part of a contemplative experience of this exhibition” (181). Social visitors, who especially appreciate works by notable artists, primarily respond emotionally to works that make them laugh (181). “The determination of the social-experience type by cognitive reactions to the selected artwork reveals a counter-image to [that of] the contemplative-experience type” (181). “In other words, the less the visitor takes into consideration the content of the artworks, the higher is his or her level of social experience” (181).

2.2. Immediate Encounters and Assessments of Exhibition Aspects

Kirchberg and Tröndle contend that their findings corroborate Antoine Hennion and Bruno Latour’s classically neutral approach, which frames “artworks and exhibitions as inherent aspects unto themselves” (181). Kirchberg and Tröndle proudly conclude:

[W]e found almost no impact of socio-demographic traits or expectations on the exhibition experience. Instead, causes for the tripartite exhibition experience could be found significantly through immediate encounters and assessments of exhibition aspects (artworks

and arrangements, information, and seating); imminent social context of the visit (company, talking); differing spatial behavior patterns; different physiological reactions to the artworks; and the individual rating of selected artworks by the correlation to one of the experience types (186).

I consider Hennion and Latour's "proposition that the sensual encounter with art objects has great significance for the recipient" more a *truism* than actual proof of object agency. The takeaway here is that people are most inclined to enjoy familiar works that don't necessitate extra-perceptual interpretations and are displayed in a compelling manner that affords physiological reactions and social situations. But of course, not every viewer is seeking immediate gratification. Moreover, I imagine viewers who have peers with whom they can continue discussing prior art experiences finding enjoyment long after the exhibition closes.

Either way, Kirchberg and Tröndle's experiment countermands the plausibility of neutral views that credit objects, rather than environments, with directing visitors' attentions. Kirchberg and Tröndle's experiment proves that "the museum experience has a much larger effect on the visitor than one might have thought" and that "the curator can indeed influence the visitor experience by paying more attention to the aspects of exhibition composition" (188). Their research incidentally demonstrates how visitors' varying cognitive states penetrate perception, since what they think or know totally influences their experience. Differing exhibition experiences not only indicate perceptual asymmetries, but they reflect the varying interpretative

tools visitors select, whether additional information, seating access, and/or shared conversations. Moreover, those visitors who exit the exhibition, yet continue to engage it via discussion or further reading, activate extra-perceptual contents.

2.3. Exhibitions Inevitably Favor Experts over Novices

In contrast to standard experimental psychology models that treat individual artworks like visual stimuli, experiments conducted at UCLeuven's Laboratory of Experimental Psychology, where researchers routinely collaborate with artists, have shown that artwork reception involves the interplay of perception, cognition, and emotion. Moreover, their research characterises the "interrelationships between attention, perception, memory, understanding, and appreciation," which inevitably favor experts over novices (Wagemans 2011, 668). Seeking to balance obvious inequities among exhibition visitors, "We often found an effect of providing participants with additional information, a difference between novice and expert participants, and a shift with increasing experience with an artwork, in the direction of tolerating more complexity and acquiring more order from it" (Wagemans, 648).

To my lights, the scientifically proven need to provide more information, in order to inspire creative thinking/imaginative reflection, and thus influence visitors' cognitive states, indicates the significance of *extra-perceptual* contents, whose magnitude, thrust, and impact have thus far remained entangled in cognition, as "sub-personal factors." As discussed,

scientific research routinely captures art lovers employing extra-perceptual contents to spur interpretations. Absent any discussion of extra-perceptual contents, philosophers of perception presume that all contents are perceived. It is thus imperative that philosophers of perception distinguish extra-perceptual contents from perceptual ones. Furthermore, scientific experiments that demonstrate how extra-perceptual contents influence cognition should persuade philosophers of the impossibility of affording exhibited objects “neutral views.”

3. Distinguishing Extra-perceptual Contents from Cognitive Penetration

Given that actual exhibition experiments highlight both the presence and necessity of extra-perceptual contents, one may wonder why I don't just consider them cognitive states, which influence perception. It seems, however, that viewers typically employ extra-perceptual contents to *precipitate* perception, that is, to experience something thinly that was initially invisible. Alternatively, cognitive penetration, which reflects some combination of available information (concept possession) and cognitive states (again, “what we think”) rather *saturates* perception, enabling us to have thicker (richer) experiences. If information improves perception, as the above exhibition experiments suggest, then more information grants visitors faster access to more contents, which augments enjoyment, as well as disappointment, since one now has good reasons to reject it. Either way, the

more one “knows about” something, the more one tends to like or dislike it, availing more material upon which to later reflect.

3.1. Delineating Perception from Cognition

One problem that routinely dogs philosophers of mind is that it is nearly impossible to delineate perception and cognition, other than to consider the former early vision and the latter late vision, so one ought not to get too worked up about where the former ends and the latter takes over. Those who know how to distinguish crows from ravens, and readily apply this knowledge correctly, easily identify this as perception, since the subject correctly “perceives x as a crow” (and not a raven). Were one to use the app Merlin Bird Photo ID, ask a fellow bird watcher, or look up the image in a birding handbook, one would describe these contents as extra-perceptual, since identification requires interpretative tools beyond mere perception. By contrast, the next time one applies said knowledge without appeal to an outside source, such as a book or a colleague, it would ring as perceptual. As already noted, philosophers typically consider art experiences to be entirely perceptual, yet I contend that contents derived from experiences with unfamiliar artworks are rather extra-perceptual, since the process of ascribing contents often occurs at a remove from the actual artwork. Those contents derived from experiences with familiar artworks, which appeal to understanding in a manner that feels comparatively non-inferential, rather combine perception, cognition and emotion, as the above experiments indicate.

For these reasons, I find it easier to split extra-perceptual content from perceptual content than it is to sever perception from cognition, which is why extra-perceptual contents ought to carry more weight. As already mentioned extra-perceptual contents include available concepts or thoughts that are consciously aroused, exclusively for the purpose of interpreting novel art experiences. By contrast, consider a classic example of cognitive penetration, such that white wine tinted red tastes like red wine. When taste and sight combine, cognitive penetration (memories of how red wine tastes) overrides one's actual perception (Spence 2010). However, those knowledgeable of this illusion could employ extra-perceptual content (knowledge of this trick) to test whether white wine is actually masquerading as red.

3.2. Dining in the Dark

Consider the case of “Dining in the Dark” eaters, who typically experience difficulties distinguishing flavours when they cannot see their food, lending credence to the adage “eye appeal is half the meal.” Although “Dining in the Dark” promoters claim that such experiences heighten eaters’ awareness of taste and aroma, psychologists rather doubt this, according eaters’ appreciation to “the constant feeling of surprise, based on the delivery of unusual sensory experiences that may really make such dark dining experiences so unusual and intriguing for customers” (Spence and Piqueras-Fizman 2012). Moreover,

We humans have only a limited attentional capacity, and vision tends to capitalise on the available neural resources. As a result, we often don't pay as much attention to the other senses as perhaps we should. Indeed, more often than not, what we see ultimately determines what we perceive, even when the other senses may be sending our brains a different message (Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman).

Apparently, dining in the dark surveys have determined that there is no appreciable difference in enjoyment between eating under lights or in the dark, though people claim to pay more attention in the dark and eat larger portions, since they cannot see their plates (Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman). Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman have also noticed that “a lack of sensory expectations can even lead to confusion and to the illusory identification of flavours that are actually not present” (Piqueras-Fiszman and Spence 2011). Apparently, “Whenever we consume a food that we can't recognise, we nevertheless still tend to create post-consumption beliefs about what the food actually was.” To my lights, post-consumption beliefs are actually extra-perceptual contents, since they are generated using inference, not perception.

The presence of extra-perceptual contents eventually persuades Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman to dismiss claims that dining in the dark bears any resemblance to dining while “blind.” They note that:

Normally sighted individuals typically have a great deal of stored knowledge concerning the appearance of properties of foods and

beverages. This means that once they have recognised it via their other senses, they can't help but create in their minds a potentially vivid mental image of what the food or beverage actually looks like. They may even retrieve information concerning how it has been cooked, and how much they like it (Simmons et al., 2005). This multisensory mental image might well then serve as an input and in some sense feed the cognitive eating process. (Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman 2012).

Not surprisingly, sight, or at least sighted persons' familiarity with relevant food concepts, finds a way to dominate even when dining in the dark.

Regarding a different kind of novel experience that also takes place in the dark, I ask: What truly compels our admiration for a particular presentation of "La Boheme"? Is it the opera director's particular staging, the imaginative costumes, Puccini's score, the precise set design, the singers' voices, or Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa's libretto based on Henri Murger's story? Could it also be the excitement of getting dressed up for an evening on the town, a rousing discussion afterwards with friends over wine in an "underground" bar, or the romanticisation of creatives surviving poverty and compelling characters falling victim to yesteryears' disease? If friendly "art debates" enhance our art experiences as much as the opera, art exhibition, or film itself, why are neuroaestheticians, like vision scientist Semir Zeki (University College London), focused more on spectators' physical responses to particular scenes or imagery than total art experiences that *flourish* long after the actual perceptual experience?

4. Concluding Remarks

In addition to having epistemological and ontological dimensions, this debate is of particular importance to neuroscientists, as well as aestheticians, who typically treat perceptual processing with great confidence. In light of what I've presented, I would argue that extra-perceptual contents play distinct roles in aesthetic evaluation. Because they are rarely available until after actual exhibition experiences, they often play greater roles in meaning-making than perception itself, and thus threaten the "shared" nature of "embodied meaning," as well as the grounds for conceiving it thusly. The experiments discussed above outright challenge reams of aesthetic research currently collected in brain labs from immobile participants, void of actual art experiences. Although I challenge perception's total domination in terms of art experiences, I hardly deny the importance of human beings' perceptual apparatus or the relevance of neuroscience research. I rather recommend that the philosophy of perception and their neuroaesthetic collaborators find a way to factor in the existence and far-ranging influence of extra-perceptual contents, which has thus far been ignored by their research, primarily because they fail to distinguish extra-perceptual contents from cognitive penetration. In fact, most consider extra-perceptual contents exemplary of cognitive penetration, and therefore reducible to cognitive penetration, which means that these researchers will continue to overlook its impact. Even if the time-frame for cognitive penetration is extended indefinitely, their research will fail to grasp, let alone distinguish each type of visitor's exhibition experience. Cognitive penetration's focus on the

influence of knowledge, memories, beliefs, and moods suitably accounts for perceptual inaccuracy, but it fails to explain how people eventually generate contents, despite grave perceptual difficulties. As sections 2 and 3 indicate, all three types of visitors, especially those experiencing art in the dark, rely on extra-perceptual contents to infer contents otherwise unavailable perception. This is no doubt the imagination at work. But I leave this thought for a future paper.

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