Cut-ups

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Brief orientation

Cut-up is a technique developed by artist Brion Gysin and writer William S. Burroughs from the late 1950s through to the 1960s. Its origin was in Paris, more precisely at the Beat Hotel, a beat writers' colony where Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and Jack Kerouac spent time on their way to and from Tangier. Although the discovery of the cut-up technique happened by accident, it is noteworthy that it occurred in Paris, as it is a variation of collage, an artistic practice that dates back to the early 20th century and was also invented in France. Cut-up, like collage, aims to put several distinct documents in contact, so as to "show and to see things differently [and] to make art in a whole new way" (Cran 2014: 6). Thus, the fact that cut-up was developed jointly by a painter and a writer highlights its inherent hybridity and foretells some of its subsequent developments. Indeed, the cut-up technique was first used by Burroughs and his collaborators to produce new poetic texts from already existing poems. Then it was applied by Burroughs to the writing and rewriting of four novels: *The Soft Machine* (1961)*, The Ticket that Exploded* (1962)*, Nova Express* (1964)*, Dead Fingers Talk* (1963). Burroughs went on to create some articles and some fake newspapers that were distributed by the British and American underground press. Finally, the cut-up technique was fostered by Burroughs as a counter-cultural weapon in the late sixties and early seventies, albeit without much success. Alongside its developments and usage within literature, the cut-up technique was employed to create numerous photo-collages, scrapbooks, audio-collages and three short films. All these different uses help to define cut-up as a technique encompassing different methods, or as a toolbox, rather than as a single practice. First considered as an avant-garde practice celebrated in the American alternative press, it was progressively adopted by the counterculture, and eventually became part of the 1970s and 1980s aesthetics which heavily relied on sampling and montage.

Historical aspects

In 1959, William S. Burroughs was living in Paris after spending four years in Tangier, where he wrote what became *Naked Lunch.* Fleeing from the Moroccan city in late 1957 to escape his heroin addiction and overcome the death of one of his lovers, he reached Paris. He checked in at the infamous Beat Hotel, a family *pension* located on Rue Gît-le-Coeur. There, he caught up with poets Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, who were staying at the hotel, and finished editing *The Naked Lunch*. While in Paris, he literally bumped into Brion Gysin who was also staying there. The two had met some years before in Tangier but had not gotten along well, mostly because of Burroughs's heroin addiction. Their unexpected meeting in Paris – another happy accident – proved pivotal to Burroughs's career. Even before he discovered cut-up, Gysin had a deep impact on his friend's writings as he introduced him to Muslim mystic Hassan-I Sabbah.

This legendary character founded the Order of Assassins, which he led from his Alamut fortress, and threatened the Caliph's authority in the 11th century. He is said to have relied on drugs – mostly hashish – to charm his adepts into following him. One of Burroughs's most recurring catchphrases in the sixties, "Nothing is true, everything is permitted", is attributed to Sabbah. It highlights the writer's desire to reveal to his readers the falsity of their emotions and perceptions, and his objective to "wise up the marks", to make them aware of their manipulation by words and images, thanks to the cut-up technique. Brion Gysin joined the Beat Hotel in the fall of 1959 and Burroughs immediately started watching him paint. At the time, Gysin was working on calligraphic paintings called *écritures*, and Burroughs was fascinated by these works, which blended writing and painting together (Miles 2000: 155). They also conducted a number of psychic experiments together, experimenting with scrying as well as with various drugs.

In late October, Brion Gysin accidentally discovered what became known as the cut-up technique. He was cutting some shapes in cardboard with a Stanley knife and had placed some old newspapers under it to protect his table. As the blade went through the cardboard, it cut at random into the newspapers, creating fragments of sentences, which he then reassembled to hilarious effect. He quickly showed these to William S. Burroughs, who had an epiphany and immediately realized their literary and artistic potential. In the wake of this discovery, he and Gysin started to experiment extensively with this new method, quickly joined by Gregory Corso and Sinclair Beiles, a South-African writer who was working for Maurice Girodias, a publisher and founder of Olympia Press. They developed the first cut-up method, which consisted of splitting a text into four parts and reassembling them so as to create a new text from already existing material. They put this method to use with newspaper articles at first, and then used classics of Western literature, from Solomon's *Song of Songs* (9th century B.C.) to Shakespeare's *The Sonnets* (1609) and Rimbaud's *Illuminations* (1886). Their objective with such sources was twofold: first, they aimed at creating new Shakespeare and Rimbaud poems, and second, they wanted to establish a postmortem communication with writers they admired. As for newspaper cut-ups, the aim was to deconstruct media discourses and to reveal their artificiality. The result of these early experiments was published in a small outlet called *Minutes to Go!*, published by French editor Jean Fanchette. Born in Mauritius in 1932, he was a trained doctor with a passion for literature, who founded Two Cities, a publishing house, which also edited *Two Cities*, a bilingual literary magazine. *Minutes to Go!* came out in April 1960 with a wrapping that read "Un règlement de compte avec la littérature" [Settling Scores with Literature]. This self-proclaimed attack on literature was the beginning of Burroughs's attempt at "rubbing out the words", or to put it differently, at reaching the writing of silence by erasing articulated language.

After these early experiments, William S. Burroughs embarked on the writing of the *Nova Trilogy*, starting with *The Soft Machine* (1961), a complex text based on synesthesia. This first edition featured four distinct numbered sections, each labeled after a color "Red", "Green", "Blue" and "White", a process which evokes Rimbaud's poem "Voyelles" (1871) in which the French poet relies on synesthesia. It is not surprising as Burroughs had been experimenting with this writer and other French poets in his early cut-up experiments. This book was his attempt at bridging the gap between fiction and poetry by dislocating narration and offering a cryptic and highly sensory text to his readers. This first edition was revised initially in 1963 for the American publishing house Grove Press, and eventually in 1968 for the British publishing house Calder and Boyars. The second and third editions were very different from the first, as Burroughs had discovered new cut-up methods, and had given up the idea of mingling poetry and prose altogether. Following *The Soft Machine*, he wrote *The Ticket that Exploded* (1962, revised in 1967) and *Nova Express* (1964), two cut-up novels that relied mostly on "fold-in". This new method consisted of folding two texts along their middle and sliding them back and forth against each other so as to create new sentences. A highly erotic writing process, it allowed Burroughs to save his manuscripts and books from the destructive action of scissors or blades. Most of the material used for this trilogy was actually cut-ups from a mass of unpublished texts called *The Word Hoard*, which was written in the second half of the fifties while Burroughs was living in Tangier. A fourth book, *Dead Fingers Talk* (1963) was published out of that same material, making the *Nova Trilogy* a tetralogy. However, it was neglected by critics at the time, who saw it as a "rehash" of already published material (Harris in Burroughs 2020: 4).

Burroughs's objective in the *Nova Trilogy* was to present his readers with a story of interplanetary conflict between the "Nova Mob" and a resistance group. The mob's objective is to make Earth explode by aggravating the conflicts between different factions, while the goal of the resistance is to expose the Nova criminals and arrest them. The rest of the books is also laden with stories of individuals fighting for global control, such as "The Mayan Caper" section, which displays a character challenging the power of Mayan priests and their calendars. This science-fiction plot was an excuse for Burroughs to criticize the media's role in spreading false information and to foster the cut-up technique as a revolutionary weapon. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the cut-up technique is used by both the criminals and the resistance. The former relies on it to broadcast defamatory statements and control messages, whereas the latter uses the cut-up technique to deconstruct these messages and track nova criminals. In the early seventies, Burroughs would give a definition of the issues at stake in these books, explaining that, "in *The Naked Lunch* and *The Soft* Machine [he had] diagnosed an illness, and in *The Ticket That Exploded* and *Nova Express* [suggested] a remedy" (Burroughs 1999: 11). Here the term illness refers to people's inability to look beyond the surface of things and to question what is presented to them as facts, while the remedy proposed is of course the cut-up technique. Thus, most of the trilogy was composed using the cut-up technique, which creates an interesting echo between form and content . However, while Burroughs hoped that his books would be considered as a manual for the cut-up technique, he did not propose sufficient explanatory texts, judging that the technique was "self-explanatory". Therefore, while the *Trilogy*'s narrative sections were appreciated at the time, the most experimental parts of the books were a turn-off for many readers when faced with a never-ending and seemingly nonsensical logorrhea. Indeed, as language stutters and goes wild, one gets the feeling that the typing machine has gone berserk and has escaped the writer's control, whereas there is not a sentence in the books that wasn't carefully picked by Burroughs.

Although he claimed that the cut-up technique was a way to reintroduce randomness to writing, he spent hours cutting-up his texts again and again until he found the right words, in what he called a "sifting and panning process" (Burroughs 2013: 45). Another illustration of this meticulous selection is that Burroughs rewrote large sections of the *Trilogy* several times, either to make it clearer, or to incorporate some of his new texts in it. Thus, the second edition of *The Ticket That Exploded* included a revolutionary text called "The Invisible Generation" written some five years after the original book. The inclusion of new material was also provoked by his new experiments, as he discovered new potential uses of his technique and wanted to share them with his readers. As Burroughs was moving away from cutting-up prose narratives, he increasingly embarked on multimedia venture, applying the cut-up technique to newspapers, sound and moving image. The turning point occurred between 1963 and 1964 while he was staying in Tangier. There, he started to experiment with column cut-ups and grid cut-ups, in an attempt to create parodies of newspapers and playful texts. Grid cut-ups were documents in which a text was broken into fragments and typed on a grid. Readers were then invited to recompose it any way they liked it and create new works from this generative text. Contrary to his novels which were published as books, these materials were displayed in the British and American underground press, and remained unstudied for a long time. Among the numerous outlets in which he published them are *My Own Mag*, a British underground magazine edited by poet-writer-musician-activist Jeff Nuttall, and *Bulletin From Nothing*, edited by French poet and writer Claude Pélieu. Playful and innovative, these documents highlight Burroughs's willingness to destroy his readers' conception of reading the news, as well as his desire to establish a *post-scriptum* communication with them. Many of these documents featured an invitation to the readers to send him their own cut-ups and to apply these techniques to their own writings.

However, the link he wanted to develop with his readers through the cut-up technique was undermined by the absence of a published method on which they could rely. One of Burroughs's main objectives in the 1960s was to find a publisher for what he called a "book of methods", that is a collection of his different types of cut-up writing. This book was a collaboration with Brion Gysin as it was to feature textual and visual cut-ups, as well as permutation poems, which had become one of the artist's favorites. This proves that although Burroughs liked to shroud himself in a cloak of secrecy when it came to his personal life, he was inclined to offer his readers a clear overview of his technique, as outlined in a letter from 1965: "Brion and I are working on a definitive book of methods to be called *Right Where You Are Sitting Now*. Cut-ups,

fold ins, tapes, intersection reading, newspaper format, the Dutchman etcetera" (Burroughs 1990: 190). The book's title refers to Burroughs's idea that the cut-up technique allowed its users to write several narratives at the same time, a feature particularly useful when it came to describing streets scenes, inner turmoil and thoughts simultaneously. The different techniques and applications mentioned in the quotation highlight the many developments that Burroughs had been working on, although his forays into cinema are not evoked there. A few years later, Burroughs and Gysin renamed this book *The Third Mind*, as a reference to the third consciousness which emerges when two individuals work together. However, due to printing-related issues and a growing weariness towards the *cut-up* technique, it was first published in France in 1976 by Flammarion, and it took another year for the book to be published in English. This publication came too late for the cut-up technique's initial audience, namely the counterculture and avant-garde of the 1960s, but it would become a valuable resource for researchers and critics. Moreover, it is noteworthy that *The Third Mind* was first published in France, as cut-up was actually born there, thus creating an interesting echo between the technique's genesis and its eventual theorization.

Theoretical & conceptual aspects

One of the reasons why the cut-up technique was not as successful as Burroughs expected it to be is its complexity and lack of precise method. The texts produced by the cut-up technique were already hard to read for inexperienced readers and Burroughs's repeated calls to use the technique were not met with success. While he insisted that the cut-up technique had to be practiced in order to be understood, the lack of details on the technique frightened many readers who refrained from using it. Indeed, in a short period, Burroughs developed several methods, which were used to write the *Nova Trilogy,* none of which were clearly theorized. Moreover, as the 1960s unfolded, Burroughs infused the cut-up technique with some supposedly mystical aspects. First, it is necessary to distinguish the initial cut-up technique from the fold-in method in terms of methodology.

The first was an aggressive technique involving scissors or blades, while the second was an almost erotic process based on the rubbing of two texts together. As a method, the cut-up technique was used mostly in *Minutes to Go!* and *The Soft Machine.* It was also seen by Burroughs as a way to create new sentences and texts from deceased authors, as he considered that "whoever wrote or spoke the word [was] still there in any rearrangement of his or her words", (Burroughs 2013: 22). In its original form the cut-up technique consisted in slicing a text in four parts and reassembling those parts together to create new associations and new meanings. Writing to Paul Carroll, then editor of *Big Table*, a famous small literary magazine, he insisted that the sections should be rearranged "looking away", thus highlighting the chance operation at work (Burroughs 2013: 22). However, even though the cut-up technique was presented as a way to reintroduce randomness into writing, it relied on an important selection process by Burroughs who carefully selected the sentences he wanted to use. Additionally, Burroughs would often modify them, putting his authority as author above that of the cut-up technique itself. Only a few cut-ups were published without any authorial control, mostly in *Minutes to Go!*, which was written at a time when Burroughs had not yet developed a proper method. This selection process is all the more visible when one tries to recreate the original text behind a cut-up text: as one moves backward in time thanks to drafts and attempts, the original text always escapes, as it was not destroyed by pure chance. Indeed, it is the combination of chance and selection that allowed Burroughs to create new documents. Unfortunately, while it was essential to the whole cut-up process, this selection step was never clearly explained by Burroughs, which puzzled readers who tried to use this technique to create their own texts. In a 1960 letter to Allen Ginsberg, he insisted on "trying" instead of "theorizing", an advice that did not seem to consider the absence of any precise method he could have followed. Besides, by the time he started promoting the use of cut-ups, Burroughs had already moved on to another method: fold-ins.

The fold-in method consisted in folding up two texts in the middle and sliding them against each other to create new sentences. It was widely used to create some flash-forward and flash-back effects in his books without relying on narrative devices. Burroughs heavily promoted this method at the 1962 Edinburgh Writer's Conference, during which he also spoke against censorship. He even proposed a clear explanation of this method, which was published in the 1962 winter issue of the *Transatlantic Review*:

> **In writing my last two novels,** *Nova Express* **and** *The Ticket That Exploded***, i have used an extension of the cut up method i call the "fold in method". […] The fold in method extends to writing the flash back used in films, enabling the writer to move backwards and forewards [sic] on his time track — For example i take page one and fold it into page one hundred — I insert the resulting composite as page ten — When the reader reads page ten he is flashing forwards in time to page one hundred and back in time to page one — The déjà vue [sic] phenomena can so be produced to order (Burroughs 1962: 6-7)**

The meticulous description of his new technique delivered in a thorough literary context allowed Burroughs to reinforce his image as one of the avant-garde writers of his time, while also demonstrating his ability to clearly define his technique. Another remarkable aspect of this definition is that Burroughs links fold-ins to cinema, almost in anticipation of his future film experiments with American filmmaker Anthony Balch. Moreover, these remarks highlight his desire to produce works that bridge the gap between genres, already outlined through his claim that the cut-up technique allowed writers to manipulate words the way a painter uses colors. The fold-in technique was very close to montage, whether it be sound or visual, and it allowed Burroughs to progressively detach himself from pure writing and move towards more formal experiments. To put it differently, after experimenting with cut-ups and fold-ins, he had reached the end of what he could achieve in terms of narration and fiction writing, and he focused on his newspaper format experiments.

Burroughs experimentations with newspapers were mostly attempts to challenge official discourses and mainstream press agencies, by mimicking their form and trying to establish a direct communication with readers. These documents were widely broadcast by the British and American underground press, as well as by a few German papers. Burroughs spent a lot of time and attention crafting these documents which featured illustrations and colors and represented a real challenge for printers who had to adapt them to the mimeograph. These texts were an attempt at challenging the Western conception of linear reading, and a criticism of the way news was produced by press agencies around the world. Indeed, column cut-ups usually featured three different stories or timelines, with the text sometimes running backwards, thus forcing the reader to jump from the top of one column to the bottom of another, only to discover that they had to go to the next page to find the next sentence. Of course, none of this was clearly explained, which made these documents more cryptic than funny for most readers. Even when Burroughs did provide the reader with an explanatory document in the fifth issue of *My Own Mag*, he displayed it in columns, which made it equally difficult to grasp for unheeding readers. Moreover, Burroughs pushed his experiments with time further thanks to column cut-ups: many of these documents were composed of three time-tracks running next to each other, in an attempt to erase the boundaries between present, past and future. Actually, many of these fake newspapers were either given names such as *The Moving Times* or bore slogans that alluded to this phenomena: "Tomorrow's News Today". This was an extension of his experiments with fold-ins, but this time, the analepses and prolepses were produced on the same page and not on a novel-length scale. Nevertheless, cut-up columns were very close to one of Burroughs's favorite activities, that is scrapbooking; he even sent pages from his scrapbooks to be printed and published in underground newspapers.

Column cut-ups were also Burroughs's favorite way of keeping track of what he called "intersection points", namely, the congruences formed by a text and the environment in which it is read; the unexpected similarity between a fictional character and a real one; or the correspondences between different elements

on the same page. More precisely, it is the unplanned meeting between words, images, sounds, people, and the many unexpected meanings which they produce. According to Burroughs, these "intersection points" were happening daily in people's lives, and the cut-up technique was a way to both highlight and transcribe them. Intersection points were a key aspect of the cut-up technique, and yet, they were never clearly explained by Burroughs, probably because he considered that they were an integral part of people's lives. Burroughs's most ardent desire was that his readers engaged with the text instead of consuming it, as part of the effectiveness of intersection points comes from their own sensitivity and perception of a text. This collaboration between the writer and the reader evokes what French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy describes as *"l'excriture"*, which could be translated as "exscribing" (Nancy 2001: 62). This complex notion encapsulates the idea that a writer's thought can never exist without a body – the page – and another consciousness – that of the reader – to bring it back to life; it also includes the idea that the written language is a body stretched between the words on the page and their potential meanings; finally, exscribing describes the necessary participation of the reader to bring a text to life and reactivate it (Nancy 2013: 318). This is particularly important in the cut-up technique as exscribing defines the opportunity given to the reader to confront his own sensitivity to the writer's, and to play with a given material so as to appropriate it. In this sense, not only does the text act a generator for further texts, but it also becomes a contact zone between a writer and his readers across time, space and words.

Cases

One of the cut-up technique's most important aspects is that it was developed across three continents and in five different countries. Born in Paris, it was then refined in London, where the second and third volumes of the *Nova Trilogy* were drafted. This internationalism was already present in *Minutes To Go!* which was published in France but included contributions from British, American and South African writers. In early 1963, Burroughs started collaborating with visual artists such as David Budd, with whom he held a joint exhibition at the Stadler gallery in Paris, alongside concrete music composer Earle Brown. Burroughs's contribution to the exhibition were cut-up texts which he sent to Budd from Tangier, after they met with Brown in London. At the same time, he started creating some manuscripts with red, white, and blue color stripes painted on them, influenced by Budd's painting, and highlighting his willingness to depart from writing and move into the visual realm. His interest in concrete music and sound collage would later manifest in his promotion of sound cut-ups as a revolutionary weapon. One of the most impressive manuscripts of that period is stored at the University of State of Arizona, and consists of seventy pages of cut-up experiments with symbols, permutations, colors and drawings. Labeled "Operation Soft Machine / Cut-up", it also includes calligraphy by Brion Gysin, and a few theoretical texts on fold-ins and cut-ups. These documents were initially created and assembled for an art exhibition that never happened. They are key to understanding the cut up technique as a multimedia practice, and reveal the steps that lead Burroughs from early cut-ups to fold-ins to column cut-ups and grids, an early example of which can be found in this collection. Finally, they also make clear Burroughs's conviction that "writers work with words and voices just as painters work with colors", and that "words, colors light, sounds, stone, wood, bronze belong to the living artist" (Burroughs 1986: 19-21).

Burroughs's 1964 stay in Tangier with Ian Sommerville allowed him to develop and refine new methods, including newspaper formats (column cut-ups) and grid formats, which were eventually published in the British underground press. Following this, Burroughs embarked on a year-long stay in the United States, where he pushed his column cut-ups further by producing fake newspapers, some of which were published by the finest alternative editing houses, such as C Press, founded by poet Ted Berrigan. Returning to London, Burroughs then worked extensively on film cut-ups and sound cut-ups, and began to work on the use of the cut-up technique as a revolutionary tool. Through his publications in *My Own Mag*, he became involved in the British counter-culture, meeting the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and later David Bowie, who all used their own by-product of the cut-up technique to write songs. Meanwhile, he collaborated

intensively with German writer and editor Carl Weissner, who edited *Klactoveedsesteen*, an underground magazine which also published members of the cut-up network such as Gysin, Ian Sommerville, Claude Pélieu, Allen Ginsberg or Ted Berrigan. Although it was published in Germany, Burroughs used his influence and contacts to turn this paper into a celebrated outlet, which also included sound cut-ups and readings on tape; audio documents were issued on an enclosed cassette tape. Such publications highlight the international dimension of the cut-up technique, and Burroughs's success at creating a nexus of practitioners. Nevertheless, this cut-up network was mostly composed of fellow writers and innovators, and never really attracted anyone outside of Borough's own artistic circle. In a letter to Brion Gysin written in 1970, he complained about the lack of reaction to his techniques and calls to revolt, declaring "what a job it is to get people to do anything", (Burroughs 2013: 341). These attempts at reaching a wider, non-literary, audience remained largely unsuccessful, both because of the technique's complexity and because of Burroughs's own image, which was progressively brought into disrepute by his involvement with the Church of Scientology.

While his idea of contaminating official discourses by turning them against themselves, and his calls to revolt using portable recorders were positively received by some readers, they were also targeted by some critics who saw it as a meaningless tool. In the late 1960s Lawrence Lipton, a writer once associated with the Beats and a columnist for the Los Angeles Free Press, published a series of articles criticizing both the technique and Burroughs's nexus of cut-uppers, calling the first a "fraud" and the second a "coterie". On top of this, he criticized Burroughs's interest in Scientology and his inability to produce a clear and definite definition of the cut-up technique and its potential uses. Burroughs's answers were far from answering this attack and actually reinforced the idea that the creator had been surpassed by its creature, which is paradoxical when one considers Burroughs's obsession with control. Although he later claimed that he was interested in breaking the cult's secrets, he was first attracted to it by the promise of erasing traumas and bad memories supposedly stored in engrams. Moreover, references to *Dianetics* and other L. Ron Hubbard works can be found in early cut-ups. Burroughs was also interested in Scientology's promotion of words as potential weapons, which was advocated by L. Ron Hubbard and echoed his own interests of the period. However, Burroughs grew progressively dissatisfied with the cult as he realized that he was losing his time and money, while getting progressively isolated from his friends, whom he disappointed by his enrollment. He was eventually expelled from Scientology in the early 1970s and published a series of articles criticizing it in the alternative press. However, the harm had been done for many of his readers and he had already lost his position within the counterculture. Moreover, having spent the previous decade destroying language, he had lost himself in a world of meaningless and unnecessary words. He came to realize that the end of words could not be reached using words themselves and he progressively came back to a more linear style of writing, using cut-ups parsimoniously to describe scenes of intoxication and sex scenes, particularly in *The Wild Boys* (1971) and his last trilogy: *Cities of the Red Nights* (1981), *The Place of Dead Roads* (1983) and *The Western Lands* (1985).

Avenues for future research

The cut-up technique has been studied internationally over the past fifty years mostly through the lens of the *Nova Trilogy*. Recent academic work in the United States and in France has started to focus on the technique as a whole, analyzing drafts, manuscripts and unpublished documents, such as those featured in the underground press of the 1960s and 1970s. These studies have been useful in redefining the cut-up technique as a multimedia technique with ramifications in the visual, musical, and digital realm. However, large amounts of Burroughs's intensive cut-up production throughout the 1960s remain unstudied, including most of his sound cut-ups. Further research should focus on these, so as to take the technique off the page, and perhaps reach Burroughs's ultimate goal, namely rubbing out the words to reach the writing of silence. Indeed, it seems paradoxical sometimes to write at length about a writing technique which called for practice and play rather than study. It is eventually up to readers and individuals to take

hold of this technique and start chopping down pages of texts and documents in order to continue Burroughs destructive and yet highly creative venture.

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