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Values and Assumptions in the Concept of Cultural Leadership

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Abstract

Cultural leadership is still a young concept in cultural policy and academic study. Emerging as a sectoral concern in the UK around 2002, its early development as both practice and discourse took place during a time of notable growth and optimism for the cultural sector, despite being rooted in a perceived crisis of institutional management. It has developed into a training and development agenda of international significance.

Changes in economic and political circumstances over the past three years have dramatically altered the context in which cultural leaders operate. This is to some extent reflected in the terminological shift towards “resilience” in recent initiatives. However, the largely economistic foundation of cultural leadership discourse remains unchallenged, with a continuing emphasis on achieving well-run cultural businesses and sustainable structures.

This paper reconsiders cultural leadership’s history as a live topic in the policy arena and questions the sufficiency of the values which continue to underpin it. It argues that the key site of crisis for cultural leaders has shifted from organisational governance to the social, ethical and aesthetic demands of an emerging political era, the nature of which cultural leaders must themselves play a role in shaping. These issues are explored through interviews with artists, producers and cultural activists, while the assumptions of cultural leadership discourse are considered with reference to key literature and research. A more complex and critical approach to cultural leadership is proposed, demanding dynamic responses from policy makers and practitioners alike.

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Cultural leadership in changing times

The global financial crisis from 2008 onwards was a watershed for all areas of social and economic life in the west, and the implications for artistic and cultural activity are as profound as for any other area.

[<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/series/european-arts-cuts>].

In the UK specifically, the advent of the coalition government in May 2010 and the austerity programme subsequently imposed on public funding have transformed the institutional and financial environment in which the arts operate [Knell & Taylor 2011]. The wider political and social outlook has also transformed as rising unemployment and personal debt levels have dramatically altered prospects for individuals and communities alike. Across Europe, voices of protest and dissent, notably on the far right, have risen in reaction to individual governments' struggles to combat national manifestations of multinational chaos [Hall et al 2013; Streeck & Schafer 2013]. For artists, the financial environment in which their work is made, the social environment in which it is received, and the political environment in which their ideas take shape have all changed fundamentally in the last five years. It is in this context that we consider the history and the future of "cultural leadership" as an established and continuing policy concern.

Cultural leadership has become a key term in cultural policy in the UK during the last decade. In fact, it has had a remarkable influence for a concept with so short a history, shaping training and development for the British arts management sector and now sparking a number of initiatives around the world.

In the UK it is most closely associated with the Clore Leadership Programme, the predominant national training initiative specifically created to meet the needs of the cultural sector. The programme was developed in the wake of a 2002 report for the Clore Duffield Foundation by Robert Hewison and John Holden, who had been commissioned to examine the state of leadership in top cultural organisations [Hewison & Holden 2002]. This commission was itself a response to series of high profile financial crises and perceived managerial blunders in flagship national institutions around the turn of the millennium which had alerted the Foundation to the probable need for some kind of structural intervention [Hewison 2004].

Operating across the arts as well as for libraries and the heritage sector, Clore offers a combination of long term Fellowships and short courses. Its mission was articulated in these terms:

Our purpose is to improve the quality of leadership for cultural organisations in the United Kingdom.

Leadership is practiced at all levels within an organisation; it is defined as the ability to conceive and articulate a direction and purpose, and to work with others to achieve that purpose in both benign and hostile circumstances.

We will develop leadership abilities by creating opportunities for specialist training in cultural management and leadership skills, stimulating policy research, assisting mentoring and secondments, and supporting the exchange and communication of ideas both nationally and internationally.

[Hewison & Holden 2002].

Two phrases here are telling: “the quality of leadership for cultural organisations”; and “specialist training in cultural management and leadership skills”. This is an initiative with organisational leadership as its central concern: it aims to achieve more effectively run institutions. This is not to criticise that emphasis, which identified and addressed a significant gap in the development of cultural sector skills nationally at that time. The site of crisis for culture was clearly identified as being within organisations, related to longstanding issues of succession and uncertain career structures, especially in the arts. Moreover, at a time when government support for culture was expanding under the banner of “Creative Britain”, sectoral credibility, in terms of its capacity to manage increasing investment, was also at issue [Smith 1998]. However, given that it was through this report that the term “cultural leadership” gained currency in the UK, it is important to recognise that the foundational focus on organisational and managerial issues sets specific parameters for the topic and establishes the character of subsequent debate. It puts a particular inflection on the word leadership, which after all is an abstract term in itself, denoting only the “ability to lead” or “the action or influence necessary” for the direction of group activity [OED]. The qualities of leadership, and the definition of what is necessary in terms of influence, action or ability, depend substantially on context and interpretation.

The term, and the number of initiatives responding to it, quickly proliferated. A partial roll-call of the national and international incarnations from the last decade would include:

- Clore Leadership Programme: Cultural Leadership Fellowships and short courses (2004-present) [<http://www.cloreleadership.org/>]
- Cultural Leadership Programme (initiated by Arts Council England, 2006-11) [<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/arts-council-initiatives/past-initiatives/the-cultural-leadership-programme/>]
- The Cultural Leadership Reader (research resource produced through the CLP, 2010) [<http://www.creative-choices.co.uk/tools-resources/article/a-cultural-leadership-reader>]
- The Artist as Leader research and report (Gray’s School of Art/On The Edge research 2006-9) [Douglas & Fremantle 2009]

- The Artist as Leader programme, Southbank Centre (event series, 2008)
[http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/sites/default/files/press_releases/Barenboim_Artist_As_Leader_PR.pdf]
- Cultural Leadership International, British Council (operating in 18 countries since 2009)
[<http://creativeconomy.britishcouncil.org/cultural-leadership/>]
- The Cultural Leadership Handbook [Hewison & Holden 2012]
- Hong Kong University's Advanced Cultural Leadership Programme and "Cultural Leadership: the Asian Way" event, Hong Kong (July 2013) [<http://asiasociety.org/hong-kong/events/cultural-leadership-asian-way>]

Such initiatives are not the first high-level thoughts ever given to cultural sector management training, either in Britain or internationally. The topic had been discussed by European ministers of culture at a meeting in Portugal back in 1987 and an initial meeting of institutions offering arts management courses took place in Hamburg that year, leading to establishment of the European Network of Cultural Administration Training Centres in 1992 [www.encatc.org; accessed 1st August 2013], an organisation which now has over 100 members in 40 countries.

In the UK, meanwhile, some sub-sectors identified and started to look after their own particular needs: for example, the Museum Leaders Programme was established at the University of East Anglia in 1994 and continues to operate successfully. However, from 2002 onwards there is a clear tendency for new arts, libraries and heritage management initiatives to coalesce under the emergent banner of "cultural leadership". In many cases, relationships between these initiatives can be identified and something of a family tree can be drawn in terms of personnel. The former Director of the Museum Leaders Programme, Nichola Johnson, is now on the Clore Leadership Programme Board of Directors. One of her colleagues there, John Tusa, appeared as a guest speaker in the "Asian Way" event schedule in July 2013. Cultural Leadership International was established in partnership with the Cultural Leadership Programme. The Cultural Leadership Handbook, published in 2012, was authored by John Holden and Robert Hewison, the co-writers of the original report for the Clore Duffield Foundation in 2002. A unifying assumption of these related initiatives seems to be that cultural leadership is something that takes place within professional practice and under the roofs of recognisable cultural institutions.

However, different understandings of "cultural leadership" open other perspectives. An earlier use of the term introduced a 1995 Boston symposium, "Cultural Leadership in America" [Corn 1998]. Subtitled "Art Matronage and Patronage", its papers emphasised the historical influence of philanthropists and collectors, as distinct from artists, arts institutions or academies. This focuses on a different site of cultural

leadership: the external influencers who create the circumstances in which artistic and cultural activity takes place. From outside of actual practice, these individuals and institutions (including governments) affect the aesthetic development of cultural forms, both by informing public taste and by setting the economic conditions of production for artists.

Dimensions of artistic leadership

Other alternatives to setting the definition of cultural leadership in principally institutional terms have been articulated in the UK through the Artist as Leader research (2006-2009). This included a process of interviews and analysis plus an intensive, residential “laboratory” event¹ which involved a range of significant individuals across the UK arts sector, including individual artists as well as institutional leaders. The final report differentiated three separate spheres in which leadership by artists takes place:

- Artistic (leading within the art form: inventing and inspiring)
 - Organisational (leading organisations and institutions: directing and developing)
 - Social (leading in society: challenging and changing)
- [adapted from Douglas & Fremantle 2009].

There is an obvious difference in terminology between “Artist as Leader” and “Cultural Leadership”, with its aggregation of arts, libraries and heritage leadership issues. In the latter discourse, obliged to address itself to common and overlapping needs, it is arguable that some of the specific potential of artistic leadership has been obscured, but it is in this area that a critical purpose for cultural leadership is offered. Chris Fremantle has described the Artist as Leader model as a “protractor” which can be held up to situations specifically within the arts [Fremantle 2013]. The three spheres are given equal weight, avoiding prioritisation of the organisational. Crucially, they allow the asking of wider questions about the way the sector is constructed: demanding to know for what reasons particular organisations exist. What are the social and artistic purposes of these structures? Institutional modes of thinking have an instinct to preserve what already exists, assuming that organisational sustainability is the same thing as sectoral health. However, as Fremantle also observed:

¹ The Lab element of Artist as Leader was led by Susan Benn (Performing Arts Labs, London) in collaboration with Anne Douglas (Gray’s School of Art, Aberdeen), Deborah Keogh (Cultural Enterprise Office, Glasgow) and Zoe van Zwanenberg (Scottish Leadership Foundation, Edinburgh).

Organisations have to change; they have to be allowed to die; they are only useful so long as they are actually useful. You know, they are constructed vehicles ... I think you can get very emotionally attached to organisations, and they get caught within larger political matrixes.

[Fremantle 2013]

This point was reinforced in another recent interview, with the freelance artistic producer Suzy Glass, who spent part of her early career in a development role with Arts Council England. Now working creatively alongside artists to develop large scale or multi-disciplinary projects, Glass has evolved an approach of putting together “ad hoc” in relation to each project she works on, convening partnerships for particular purposes and dissolving them when those purposes are fulfilled. Her prior experiences with larger, more stable organisations have fuelled that approach:

That was one of the main things I came away from the Arts Council with: that this is crazy, there are people killing themselves over keeping their organisations going, and their organisations actually are meaningless. Their organisations should have died a long, long time ago, but for some reason they’re still feeding them.

[Glass 2013]

This is not to deny the importance of organisations or the value of running them effectively. It is, however, to emphasise how crucial it is to be clear about the ongoing roles and purposes of those organisations, and to remember that the intent and content of their work is the essence of cultural life, not the structure or mechanism through which that work is achieved. A leadership model which judges effectiveness only according to the extent to which institutions are preserved and replicated will therefore be insufficient when it comes to supporting the evolution of dynamic cultural work.

One of the original interviewees for the Artist as Leader research in 2008 was James Marriott, co-Director of London based art organisation Platform. Platform, which was established in 1983 to bring artists and activists together on social and environmental projects, has focused its work since the mid-1990s on the human rights and environmental impacts of oil companies. The aesthetic and organisational aspects of Platform’s work develop in response to their political and ethical purposes. In his 2008 interview, Marriott described a metaphor for leadership of a wheel. This wheel needs to be kept turning, and this effort to keep it functioning, keep it revolving, is like organisational leadership. Someone must take charge of this engineering process, deal with the mechanical issues. But the wheel is also moving across a landscape: a terrain needs to be navigated. A direction needs to be found. Only in this wider context can the real purpose of the mechanical process be found [Marriott 2008]. Asked about this recently, Marriott discussed the fact that not only does a direction

have to be found, for organisations or individuals, across the cultural landscape, but that the landscape itself is shifting and uncertain:

It's really important to understand, constantly understand, the changing nature of the landscape, and perhaps one of the ups or downsides of doing this for quite a long time is you can see that the landscape has changed... the question to me is what kind of a vehicle do we need for the landscape we're in now.

[Marriott 2013]

As in Chris Fremantle's account, the organisation emerges as a vehicle, a vessel. So one of the challenges of cultural leadership is to navigate in a changing landscape, find direction, and only then to design, construct or remake vehicles - organisations and institutions - accordingly. Meanwhile, the landscape itself is made up of aesthetic, social, political and economic realities: but they are not realities that we must accept as fixed, they are changing too, and our own actions can be part of effecting that change. For an activist like James Marriott, this is in fact why working through art is essential to his purpose:

It gives us space to imagine... our world differently. There's a beautiful line which I think Stephen Spender said, which is "living differently is not living in another place but living in the same place and making in the mind a different map".

[Marriott 2013]

This is where a sense of ethical engagement comes into the concept of leadership, in the arts as in any other sphere. To keep the wheel turning, to operate a mechanical process, may be a complex operation that requires particular managerial skills: but it remains distinct from the role of the leader, who looks beyond the vehicle to find direction; who then responds to the demands of the landscape to achieve that direction; who shifts perspective on that landscape and then, perhaps, reshapes it. This is someone who takes responsibility; who engages with external forces; who resists, steers, or accelerates. This echoes the sense of direction finding included in Hewison and Holden's 2002 definition, but it moves beyond the implied limitation of this taking place within or on behalf of an organisation.

Relational leadership and changing times

Is this cultural leader, then, some kind of heroic figure, an appointed or self-appointed sectoral navigator with superior vision and an in-built moral compass? The problem with this question becomes apparent as soon as it is asked. Quite apart from the ethical undesirability of trusting our direction finding to any third party's moral compass, there is the practical problem of sole navigation within such a shifting terrain as artistic production - particularly in the present time of global upheaval, and

given its fast moving technological, social, economic, aesthetic and ethical challenges. The Artist as Leader research, in fact, drew this out, as Francois Matarasso has pointed out in his essay “The Art of Uncertainty”. Analysing the descriptive words used to characterise effective artistic leadership in the report, he finds that, firstly:

They are all far from the popular stereotypes of the Romantic genius: visionary, tortured, solitary, self-righteous etc. This approach to leadership is not self-justifying but collaborative and social.

Secondly, many of the words are relational, in the sense of positioning the artist leading through practice in a relationship with others: ‘animator’, ‘collaborative’, ‘connected’, ‘negotiator’ – even ‘lover’. This kind of leadership involves being with people, working together, responding and interacting.

[Matarasso 2012]

In interview, Matarasso, Glass, Fremantle and Marriott all tend to confirm this emphasis on interaction and connection, suggesting that for artists there is no contradiction between the concepts of leading and collaborating. Indeed, where direction finding cannot be reliably achieved from individual vantage points, leadership necessitates a process of co-ordinating perspectives.

This “relational” approach offers a distinct alternative to the “transactional” and “transformational” models of leadership prevalent in mainstream business management practice. Transactional, or managerial, leadership is best suited to conventional tasks and routine processes: hierarchical and commanding, it keeps the wheel turning by controlled systems of reward and punishment. Transformational leadership, a more progressive model, responds to change and attempts to motivate workers through charismatic figureheads or the promotion of inspirational values [Bass 1990; Marturano & Gosling 2008]. It is tempting to assume that this more visionary mode is particularly well suited to the arts, and the potential appeal of transformational figures to eager but beleaguered management boards can be understood. In practice, meanwhile, leadership styles overlap and mutate into one another, with part of the skill of any effective leader being the ability to employ relevant techniques according to changing circumstances. The relational approach, however, emerges as distinctively productive for creative processes and uncertain environments - such as artistic production - where a vision needs to be assembled or discovered, rather than imposed or sold. This is echoed by Suzy Glass’s experience:

I’m quite uncomfortable with... that singular vision. To me, one rarely has the best idea: groups of people working together have the best ideas. So I talk quite a lot about Distributive Leadership...

If I was doing it by myself [the programmes] would be much less impactful than they are when I'm working in groups because I only know what I know and I can't push the idea any further than my own mind.

[Glass 2013]

In a practice or an environment where no individual can claim a definitive overview, direction finding can only be achieved by relating different perspectives. With Platform, James Marriott describes how an organisation which discovers its leadership in collaboration also assumes a fluid, shape-shifting identity:

Coming from a long and passionate interest in the work of Beuys, I see Platform as a social sculpture... the people in it on a day to day basis are engaged in trying to make an organisation which represents... their own desires and visions, so that in a sense the organisation is a constant process of shaping and reshaping and renegotiating, sometimes difficult and sometimes easy, between a number of different people's visions and desires.

[Marriott 2013]

It is interesting that this negotiated and collective version of organisational development can be inspired by a noted individualist such as Beuys. This in itself serves to illustrate the overlapping and metamorphic nature of leadership in action. The description could also stand as a good account of how the process of democracy is supposed to work in an ideal sense. By decentering leadership and placing the work itself at the heart of the method, rather than either the individual vision or the organisational identity, these artists are able to generate flexible processes which lead their practices and organisations into new forms and relationships.

Suzy Glass offers this additional observation:

For me the work is not the artist: the work is separate from the artist, in the same way the person is separate from an organisation... But we've created an environment [where] the 20th century artist is more important than the work that the artist has created, and in the 21st century I don't think that should be true anymore. It's almost a reversal... if the art has a role in society, then it's not the artist that's important, it's their relationship with society and therefore the work that's important.

This may be one way in which culture needs to re-examine its priorities in changing times. A personality driven culture may be more effective in supporting the values of the market than in playing a dynamic role in society. If the work is to be reclaimed as more important than the artist, then this should remind us that the work is also more important than the organisation. This suggests, for contemporary cultural leadership, a need to re-prioritise the cultural or artistic work, and to re-examine the role of art in society.

It is the depth and nature of the political and economic changes taking place which particularly demand this re-examination. Matarasso is among the number of writers and thinkers who are beginning to articulate the significance of the shift taking place since the financial crisis, which he sees as heralding the end of the longstanding Thatcher revolution:

its energy is lost and its ideas are deflating under the pressure of their own inconsistency. So the economic system that has functioned and has been dominant in the last 30 years I think is finished.

[Matarasso 2013].

A similar diagnosis has been articulated by Stuart Hall and his colleagues at Soundings:

With the banking crisis and the credit crunch of 2007-8, and their economic repercussions around the globe, the system of neoliberalism, or global free-market capitalism, that has come to dominate the world in the three decades since 1980, has imploded.

[Hall et al 2013, p.8]

However, this is no simple transition: belief in the old system is dying hard:

The economic model that has underpinned the social and political settlement of the last three decades is unravelling, but the broader political and social consensus apparently remains in place.

[ibid., p.8]

For the time being, our inability to articulate other models and values means that we are still looking to the old system for solutions to its own systemic problems. To some, this political inability to obey the first law of holes is as frustrating as it is disastrous:

If you'd written a story ten years ago, or twenty years ago, and said: "in ten years' time there's going to be a massive crisis, where because we have massively cheap money and we encourage everyone to go and buy loads of stuff, we're going to have endless economic growth and we're all going to get super rich, and then the system is going to crash – and the solution to this problem is going to be even cheaper money and even more economic growth"; you know, people would have said, well, you'd have to be an artist to come up with something as stupid as that idea.

[Hope 2013]

The perception, then, is that we are moving into a third social and economic phase since 1945: that the financial crash of 2008 heralded the passing of the neo-liberal age, the end of a particular form of consensus around the free market, globalised model of capitalism; just as the economic crises of the 1970s saw the eclipse of the post-war consensus and the decline of the welfare state [Hewison 1995]. However, the economic upheaval has not been accompanied by a corresponding ideological shift: the new era as yet lacks guiding ideas or a unifying philosophical identity, a set

of values to supplant the old and inform critique. One thing that the rise of neoliberalism a generation ago demonstrated was

the notion that the fundamental level on which political struggle is waged is that of the struggle over the legitimacy of concepts and ideologies; that political legitimation comes from that; and that, for example, Thatcherism and its cultural counterrevolution were founded fully as much on the delegitimation of welfare-state or social-democratic (we used to call it liberal) ideology as on the inherent structural problems of the welfare state itself.

[Jameson 1991, p. 263]

It will therefore take more than the structural problems of the financial crash to delegitimize the old financial system, because the libertarian values underpinning it remain embedded on a cultural level. New thinking and new articulations of thought are called for, and for artists, intellectuals and cultural leaders this is an unavoidable challenge. Part of that challenge will be to find ways of thinking and imagining constructively as well as critically; perhaps, to extract from relational thinking positive alternatives to exhausted individualist ideals. This suggests engagement with the political sphere, not simply antagonism towards it. Relevant here are Shannon Jackson's observations that anti-authoritarian tendencies within the arts, particularly since the 60s, have tended to promote hostility to state apparatuses and add to the erosion of the collectivising spirit that produced the original welfare settlement. She has warned that:

If progressive artists and critics unthinkingly echo a routinized language of anti-institutionalism and anti-statism, we can find ourselves unexpectedly colluding with neoliberal impulses that want to dismantle public institutions of human welfare.

[Jackson 2011, p. 16]

Instead, she declares her interest in more constructive approaches, in "art forms that help us to imagine sustainable social institutions". Art therefore has a role, as Marriott also perceives, in asking and envisioning what kind of a world we want to create. At a time of palpable but as yet uncertain change, therefore - particularly after an era in which many people felt disempowered in terms of their capacity to affect the nature of the globalised system - the arts are the site in which we can imagine where we cannot foresee; and, by imagining, create possibilities.

It is not yet clear what might emerge as the dominant ideology of the unfolding era. But even if it is simply accepted that a time of structural change is occurring, then it is unavoidable for cultural leadership that the relationship between the arts and society must be reconsidered. The social and aesthetic spheres of the Artist as Leader model therefore acquire renewed importance in any relevant conception of cultural leadership at this time.

The turn to resilience

One important change in the landscape since the Artist as Leader research is the closure of the Cultural Leadership Programme in March 2011. This accompanied a raft of cuts to cultural projects and funding as part of the UK government's austerity programme, amidst a radical mood change in the national cultural sector [Knell & Taylor 2011]. Early in 2013, Arts Council England announced that the CLP would be replaced by the Developing Resilient Leadership initiative, a £1.8m scheme for which the Clore Leadership Programme was selected as national delivery partner. Its purpose

is to support the personal and professional development of cultural leaders. It aims to foster a strong national network of individuals who work collaboratively for more resilient cultural organisations and deeper local engagement.

[Arts Council England 2013]

A few things can be concluded from this: firstly, and most positively, that ACE still considers cultural leadership worthy of strategic investment, despite severe financial pressures. However, the word "resilient" speaks of more embattled times, and suggests a primary concern with survival rather than progression. Indeed, the word "resilience" seems to be viral in the vocabularies of cultural sector institutions at home and abroad. In June 2013, the UK's Association of Independent Museums subtitled its annual conference "Improving Resilience in Economically Challenging Times" [Association of Independent Museums 2013]; the previous summer, Riga's Art & Communication festival hosted an "Art of Resilience" conference in response to "unstable, uncertain times" [Cultura 21 2012]; and "community resilience" has been a cultural research priority since 2011 [Arts & Humanities Research Council 2011]. Meanwhile, the stated purpose of Creative Scotland's Cultural Economy programme is to

develop the cultural economy by building the long-term organisational resilience and financial sustainability of the cultural and creative sector in Scotland.

[Creative Scotland 2013]

There is nothing wrong, of course, with resilience per se: but this wording, with its emphasis on "organisational resilience" and "financial sustainability", suggests that the current instincts of cultural leaders are to protect or conserve structures and organisations, perhaps at the expense of making in the mind different maps, or imagining worlds to construct. If resilience is to be a watchword of the foreseeable future, it must be questioned whether its conception can include proactive and critical aspects, elements that suggest the capacity for reinvention, rather than just becoming a narrative of self-preservation.

The Clore Leadership Foundation's central role in Developing Resilient Leadership also serves to reinforce its status as the UK's pre-eminent cultural leadership training provider. This institutional continuity and consolidation of expertise should not mask

the need to revisit the terms of the discourse on which its programmes were founded over a decade ago. Looking at the history of cultural leadership through the lens of the Artist as Leader reveals the constriction of the discourse within the organisational sphere. That area remains packed with challenge, particularly as the financial ground continues to shift uncomfortably beneath cultural institutions. The present situation, however, sees corresponding instability in the social sphere, with unavoidable implications for the aesthetic. What does this imply for how cultural leadership must now be defined and conceived? What kind of leaders and leadership programmes do these uncertain times demand?

There remains significant work to be done in exploring how the artistic and social dimensions of artistic and cultural leadership can be developed and re-prioritised in the wider interests of a changing sector.

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