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SELF AND SPACE IN AFTER-POSTMODERNISM:
LATİFE TEKİN'S *MANVES CITY* AND JENNI FAGAN'S *THE PANOPTICON*

Abstract

As we are starting the third decade of the 21st century, there are some cultural shifts in our current condition. The forces that once drove postmodernism seem to be mutating and diminished. Whether it is a matter of mutation or a decisive break with postmodernism, ours is a new global era. The major common feature of the literary tendencies that writers have adopted today seems to be the questioning and shift of the paradigm of postmodernism's cultural logic. Approaching to postmodernism from one of those reactive and oppositional strands, some contemporary writers such as Latife Tekin (1957-) and Jenni Fagan (1977-) tend to have a renewed engagement with realism. Because some longstanding socioeconomic problems still linger in all around the world, recently the representations of these socioeconomic problems have started to re-appear in the world literature. These writers' return to realism can be explained as one of the tendencies that proclaims to be postmodernism's successor. Studying Tekin's *Manves City* (2018) and Fagan's *The Panopticon* (2012), this paper aims to show Tekin and Fagan's similar and/or different configurations of what can be called as after modernism or post postmodernism. The paper will explore how the novels have construed the self and space in contemporary working-class life and engaged with the real-world problems of individuals and communities who have experienced extensive degrees of destabilization, poverty, and unemployment.

Key words: Latife Tekin, Jenni Fagan, after-postmodernism, selfhood, space

Introduction: After Postmodernism

Postmodernism, the most dominant intellectual phenomenon in the 20th century, has been everywhere. Though controversial, it can be argued that postmodernism emerged as a reaction to modernism. To put simply, postmodernism (even as a word) brings modernism to mind. It seems that postmodernism wanted to overthrow modernism by emphasizing the rejection of grand narratives (religion, gender, Marxism), loss of historicity and lack of truth and depth over the idea of meaning-making. Postmodernism aimed at subverting the master narratives by rewriting them in order to show the constructedness of them.

Starting from the 1980s, literary postmodernism has been losing power in terms of being the most dominant discourse towards the end of the 20th century. Linda Hutcheon in the Epilogue of her book, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (2003), claims that "postmodernism may well be a twentieth-century phenomenon, that is, a thing of the past" (166). In today's cultural climate there appears to be a renewed engagement with history, a revival of reverence and appreciation for authenticity, genuineness, and meaning-making. Several current works of literature favour the fantasies related to metaphysics, the idea of narrative authority, and the reader's perception of identification with main characters. To quote novelist Ben Lerner's narrator in his *10.04* (2014), that "the world [is] rearranging

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itself” (2014: 26). A world rearranging itself today has caused postmodernism to lose power or go out of fashion, if not ending postmodernism entirely. “Postmodernism today had become institutionalised and routinized” (Hoberek, 2007: 235). For many scholars and writers today, it is quite difficult to declare the end of something as slippery and diffuse as postmodernism. Huber argues that “To move beyond postmodernism might be, strictly speaking, impossible, since the postmodernist project of questioning is endless and no longer allows for a succession of states that evolve out of one another” (2014: 4). Postmodernism might not be as emphatically dead as some critics like to claim, but it does seem to be in retreat, in a state of decline, aesthetically speaking. With postmodernism’s retreat, writers are better placed to construct a literature that engages earnestly with real-world problems. The contemporary works discuss the features of social life which they see as a formative for contemporary fiction and how they understand fiction as registering and displaying those determinate features. This new literature can, in good faith, examine complex and ever-shifting social conditions and crises – of racial inequality, capitalism, and environmental problems. With these thoughts in mind, this paper does not attempt to offer a new and sweeping explanation of theory of what comes after postmodernism.

The rise of the digital age in which we live today requires us to formulate new solutions for the new problems and questions. The Jamesonian taxonomy concerning postmodernism no longer has the same explanatory power for the new dominant cultural logic of after postmodernism. In other words, postmodernism seems to be inadequate to provide a satisfactory response to the problems that we experience in today’s digital world. It can no longer capture the spirit of the contemporary age. Having removed all criteria and meanings and blurring the lines between what is real and fictional, postmodernism seems to have prepared the ground for the digital or virtual age which is described as devoid of authenticity and genuineness and featuring a millennial anxiety. Thus, what defines the period after postmodernism is a nostalgia and appreciation for authenticity, care, and a desire for realism.

‘Neo-Realism’ (Rebein, *Dirty Realist*), ‘Speculative Realism’ (Saldívar), ‘New Sincerity’ (Kelly), ‘Aesthetics of Authenticity’ (Funk) or ‘Aesthetic of Trust’ (Hassan) make their appearance frequently. All these suggestions stress some sort of a return to the real not only in their labels. [...] After and because of deconstruction, it seeks to reconstruct. (Huber, 2014: 6)

Therefore, in place of postmodernism’s detachment, there is indeed a resurgence in authenticity and the voice of the author, and a new realism appears to be once again a popular mode in our after postmodern condition. To tackle with the challenges of this new century, new realism offers a more reasonable and useful framework. Unlike postmodernism, which has detached itself from the social life and ended up being an extreme relativism, the framework of new realism can offer an insight to our post-postmodern condition by reprioritizing the content over form and underlining the importance of the idea of place. Although it is quite difficult to argue the existence of a total break from postmodernism, the recent literary reconfigurations of realism prefer to present the invasions of a crude, imperfect world and history along with the vitality of love, genuineness, and values in contemporary society. The recent literary reconfigurations of realism underline an eagerness to reconnect with the self through communication and pinpoint the significance of reconstructing authenticity and values; a “need for some form of reference, meaning and ethics” (Krijnen, 2016: 168).

It is expected that literature should change if it wants to be relevant. There is a shift towards a new aesthetic and cultural movement. Latife Tekin (1957-) and Jenni Fagan (1977-) tend to have a renewed engagement with realism in order to highlight that there is still a social purpose in literary works that can connect people with social institutions. Because some longstanding socioeconomic problems still linger in all around the world, recently the representations of these socioeconomic problems have started to re-appear in the world literature. So, in new realist texts, the reader’s attention is turned into more down to earth issues, under-privileged classes (labourers and orphans) and places (prisons and correctional homes) that are conventionally either marginalized or excluded from the mainstream forms of literary expression. These writers’ choice of using a new realist trend can be explained as one of the tendencies that proclaims to be postmodernism’s successor. Both Tekin and Fagan narrate three ideas, of specificity, of values and of authenticity in a realist mode and this is at odds with postmodernism.

Having stated that, it is significant to argue that the new realism that the contemporary writers have turned to after postmodernism is a new sort of realism that is aware that it is controlled by narrative

and textual rules: a self-contradictory endeavour, perhaps. However, it “relies on precisely those genre conventions in order to signal its attempt at sincere representation” (Huber, 2014: 26). Cognizant to mimetic limitations, new realist texts do not yield to “the paradoxical idealism implied in the postmodern claim that a responsible narrative *must* overtly acknowledge the absolute contingency of all narrative acts” (Toth, 2010: 119; original emphasis). What makes us call the contemporary works new realist is exactly their “attempt at sincere representation,” that is, representing the world as we all more or less know, and emphasis on a genuine communication by knowing the value of genre conventions and differences. Through a heightened interest in realism and in intersubjective relationships, a wish to salvage a sense of authenticity, reconnection, and sincerity, contemporary new realist texts opt for exploring new perspectives in literature beyond postmodernism.

Latife Tekin’s *Manves City*

Like her first novels, Latife Tekin’s novel *Manves City*¹ explores the life of poor working-class people. It tackles the sociological and phenomenological dimensions of personal lives of a group of factory workers in order to enhance the realism of her text. The novel depicts the difficult life of the factory workers such as Nergis, the narrator, and her friends and family in a made-up Turkish town called Erice. These working-class characters in the novel are stripped off their rights to strike and protests because neoliberal hypercapitalism makes the life insufferable for them.

As mentioned before, Nergis is a factory worker but at the same time she writes a column in one of the local newspapers in Erice.

With the practice of ‘the worker for every job,’ which forced them to work till they collapse due to sleeplessness, the factory had turned into a hell for them, and they were tired of being trapped between workload and debt. This new practice was called HİKİ control system in the level of the supervisors. (Tekin, 2018: 14)²

As this quotation underlines the process of reification empties the meaning of everything in the workers’ life, including the workers themselves. Nergis’s first-hand experiences and ideas written in her column in the newspaper appear to be some sort of testimonial accounts of seemingly real events. This metafictional device, a typicality of postmodernist texts, provides for authentication of the authorial voice; a direct engagement with the reader. Furthermore, by means of Nergis’s subjective authorial interventions in the text as a witness from the inside (of the workers’ world), the reality constructed in the novel through language coexists with the empiric reality.

Tekin exposes reality through Nergis’s newspaper column entries, workers’ complaint notes to their supervisors, some other characters’ letters. *Manves City* as an after postmodernist text continues to use much of the same narrative devices that are associated with postmodernism such as the metafictional self-reflexivity. These postmodernist interventions in the realist discourse of the novel help the novel create the kind of realism that is a part of after postmodernism. That is, this is Tekin’s type of narrative strategy of saying that real life is too fragmented, too multifarious to be narrowed down to one single narrative, but that doesn’t mean it can’t be captured, in all its heart-breaking variety, in the pages of a novel. Timmer argues that “the expression of real feelings, the desire for connection with others, and the need to share experiences” is an indicator of a need to “turn to the human” (2010: 51). This tendency of turning to the human is reflected in the novel by emphasizing the characters and their familial interactions. This technique of writing which has hardly disappeared from contemporary fiction, does not emphasize ambiguity and complexity as expected from a postmodernist text, it attempts to explain the complex understanding of reality. The title of the novel *Manves City* refers to this complex reality: the embodiment of a process of oppression and trauma in which the problems of gender, justice system, economics, environment, rootlessness, and class intersect. Depicting the 21st century reality,

¹ *Manves City* has a sister text *Sürüklenme (Drift)* published at the same time as two separate novels which can be read together because their plots at some point coincide and complete each other. Yet, *Manves City* particularly focuses on the life of the working-class people so, it is better to prioritize *Manves City* in this comparative study.

² “Uykudan yıkılana kadar çalışmaya zorlandıkları, ‘Her işe koşan işçi’ uygulamasıyla fabrikalar onlar için cehenneme dönüşmüştü, iş yüküyle borç derdi arasında sıkışıp un ufak olmuşlar. Bu yeni uygulamaya amirler katında HİKİ kontrol sistemi deniyordu.” (Tekin, 2018: 14)

Tekin addresses the urgent social issues without forcibly shoving them in the readers' face and pointing fingers. It has the ability to open eyes at the fact that there is a sense of sameness among people that triggers the establishment of empathy between the characters and thus among the readers.

The other main character of the novel is Ersel, Nergis's childhood lover, a factory worker like Nergis. The reader meets Ersel when he is about to be released from the prison. He was sentenced because he protested an unjust exercise in the factory. The factory owners get rid of the unions and manage the workers however they like. According to the workers, the world is changing for the worse because they cannot have decent wages and their familial relationships deteriorate.

In the novel, the actual social problems (such as unemployment, poverty, domestic violence, and injustice) bring about family breakdowns in the sense that parents abandon their families because of money problems and children are raised either by relatives or step-parents. To illustrate, when Ersel is arrested, "in the first week of his imprisonment, Ersel's lover, Zeynur, had eloped with Ersel's step-uncle Serco who is Nergis's common-law husband. Zeynur's nine-year-old daughter Eda was left behind with her step father, Ersel" (Tekin, 2018: 15).³ *Manves City* can be described as a story centring on family and its deterioration, and the issue of family breakdown in fact signals the necessity of connection within the family. After five years in prison, Ersel comes back to Yenice to look for his sixteen-year old step daughter, Eda, and goes through a lot of misfortunes. That desired authenticity and connection is often looked for within the family circle. Several scholars have noticed that there is "an increased interest in family stories" (Huber, 2014: 232). The idea of ingenuine-ness and unauthenticity is criticized in the novel as Nergis states that "In Erice, everyone is a step-somebody of everyone - she had a place at their home until she started a life for herself - if you go to a neighbourhood there, they are all relatives, all step-somebody" (Tekin, 2018: 27).⁴ In Tekin's language, being step-somebody (*üveylik*) denotes to unauthenticity and the loss of innocence and intimate bonds. Feeling real or having organic bonds is an impossible dream in Erice. They all seem to be numb and adrift in the sea of unauthentic relationships. *Manves City* signals the breakdown and dysfunction of family as the nuclear model of the society. The destruction of organic feelings in family is also paralleled with the environmental crisis. The trees are cut and once fertile soil is destroyed in order to build more factories. The landscape in their town is destroyed. Women are suppressed and abused.

The representation of class in the novel is characteristically realistic. Referring to Facebook, blogs (Tekin, 2018: 28), selfies, the concepts of Kaizen and Six Sigma, *Manves City* is engaged with visual and digital culture. Tekin underlines the new technologies and applications introduced to people's life in the Digital age. Both Nergis and Ersel as the representatives of the working-class are depicted when they are crushed under the burden of financial problems and lack of meaning and value in their lives. To illustrate, the feeling of meaninglessness, loneliness, and despair that keep haunting Nergis is depicted as follows:

She was pushed under everyone's feet, as it were. While seeking goodness, her face was distorted and her heart got frozen for everything and everyone. She became lonely in the crowd of meaninglessness, her expression collapsed with a bitter surrender as she fed herself to despair. (Tekin, 2018: 20)⁵

The life Nergis is leading is depicted as her fate in the novel because she is only one of the representatives of people whose bodies and minds are crushed under the system which shapes the economic and technological changes. These changes bring about the marginalization along with feelings of isolation and a ceaseless void in people's lives. Therefore, characters like Nergis and Ersel yearn for authentic and genuine relationships to endure, stand together and life's challenges.

³ "Ersel'in sevgilisi Zeynur, o hapse düşünce haftasını bile beklemeden Ersel'in üvey amcası Serco'yla, Nergis'in nikahsız kocasıyla kaçıp sır oluvermişti. Zeynur'un dokuz yaşındaki kızı Eda, üvey babası Ersel'le geride kalmıştı" (Tekin, 2018: 15).

⁴ "Erice'de herkes herkesin üveyidir -kendine bir düzen kurana kadar başlarının üstünde yeri vardı- bir mahalleye girseniz silme akraba, hepsi üvey" (Tekin, 2018: 27).

⁵ "Ayakaltına itelenen, yüzü gözü çarpılıp da yüreği her şeye, herkese karşı soğuyana kadar iyilik aranarak orta yerde yalnızlaşıyor, acı bir boşanışla ifadesi çöküyordu sonunda, kendini yedirdikçe yedirmeye başlıyordu artık" (Tekin, 2018: 20).

So what does Ersel want? He is determined to find his step-daughter after all these years. “He promised himself that he would find his daughter, even if he was dead at the end of this quest” (Tekin, 2018: 136).⁶ He follows Eda’s traces from the beginning until the end of the narration, and finally he is accused of murder. The corrupt system which causes his imprisonment in the first place never leaves Ersel alone and it appears that he is stigmatised and all of his actions and even thoughts are in a constant surveillance. When the neoliberal present goes rampant, Manves City becomes the panopticon, an embodiment of surveillance.

He, in fact, looks for roots, truth, a home, and past memories that he can hold on and reconnect his identity in the age of virtual reality when everything feels like transitory, valueless and evanescent. He dedicates his time after prison until his arrest for murder to a quest, looking for his missing step-daughter. Over this period of time, he feels like an outcast a shadow or a walking corpse. “He had stepped on Erice, but he did not feel exactly like he had come, as if the feeling of what he saw would never awaken in him, whether his gaze would warm up and come alive, it floated like a shadow” (Tekin, 2018: 66-7).⁷ Like the liminality of a shadow, the state of being in-between, explains Ersel’s existence. His liminal existence makes the reader think of the world of *Manves City* as a liminal space in which characters are stuck between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, the centre and the marginal. As a liminal space, Manves City makes its inhabitants, particularly Ersel, feel lost, deprived, distressed, and nostalgic. He keeps asking to himself, “Where are my roots and where is my home” (Tekin, 2018: 72)⁸ throughout the novel and can never answer that. This question is in fact raised to the reader in order to make them think and interrogate their own state of existence.

Jenni Fagan’s *The Panopticon*

As an after-postmodernist novel, Fagan’s novel is an “autofictional writing” in French writer, Serge Doubrovsky’s term, which puts the writer in the spotlight and provides a sense of authenticity for the reader, despite in the form of fiction rather than fact. Autofiction can be seen as “a project of self-exploration and self-experimentation ... of the author” (Dix, 2018: 4). Accordingly, Fagan’s writes her novel after her traumatic experience in Scottish care system. Like *Manves City*, *The Panopticon* has a strong female protagonist who has artistic talents and a vivid imagination. Anais Hendricks is a fifteen-year-old young woman who is an outsider to the bourgeois family model; an orphan and living under the care of social services since the death of her adopted mother, the novel opens with Anais’ transfer to a children’s home called The Panopticon. She is accused of beating a police officer to death who is in coma now, but she does not remember anything.

Like a character from Tekin’s novel, Anais reminds the reader of Ersel’s step daughter, Eda who is adrift because of her class and poverty. Anais’ summary of her life until she turns fifteen displays her desperate life: “I got taken in when I was born, moved through twenty-four placements until I was seven, got adopted, left there when I was eleven, moved another twenty-seven times in the last four years” (Fagan, 2012: 58).

In the Panopticon, Anais meets other unfortunate teenagers like herself and out of the feeling of belonging and need of love, she starts genuine friendships for the first time in her life. These “inmates” of the care system, as they see themselves, expose the violence of the world's disregard, of being defined as “no-ones from nowhere” (Fagan, 2012: 6). Anais’ relation to her own history is characterised and complicated by loss, isolation and yearning.

The death of her birth mother at the time of her birth in a psychiatric hospital obscures her nativity in mystery and she reiterates throughout the text a fantasy about her origins; “In all actuality they grew me – from a bit of bacteria in a Petri dish. An experiment, created and raised just to see exactly how much, fuck you, a nobody from nowhere can take” (Fagan, 2012: 31). The experiment, as she terms her creators, form a shadowy cadre she purports to glimpse everywhere – men in wide-brimmed black hats without noses observe and stalk her in her peripheral vision. Paranoid delusion or

⁶ “Ucunda ölüm de olsa kızını bulacağına söz vermişti kendi kendine” (Tekin, 2018: 136).

⁷ “Erice’ye ayağını basmıştı basmasına ama kendini tam da gelmiş gibi hissetmiyordu, sanki gördüğü şeylerin duygusu hiç uyanmayacaktı içinde, bakışları ısınıp canlanacak mıydı bilinmez, gölge gibi süzülüyordu” (Tekin 66-7).

⁸ “Hani ev, hani yuva?” (Tekin 72)

not, the suggestion of a threatening parallel dimension forms part of the novel's liminality, and, in addition, this fantastic narrative structures Anais' psychic life around eluding and escaping the experiment. Like Ersel in Tekin's text, Anais feels to be watched and trapped. Yet, unlike Ersel, Anais is a young and inexperienced, so she is unable to express the weight and violence of the life she has to suffer, so she articulates her fears and anxieties by stating that

They watch me. Not just in school or social-work reviews, court or police cells – they watch everywhere. They watch me hang by my knees from the longest bough of the oak tree; [...] They watch me as I outstare the moon. I am not intimidated by its terrible baldness. [...] They are there when I stare too long or too clearly, without flinching. [...] They watch me lie like an angel, hiding my dirty feet. They watch me, I know it, and I can't find anywhere any more – where they can't see. (Fagan, 2012: 1)

When asked what a panopticon is Fagan's response is

A panopticon is a building in a semi-circle or full-circle with a watchtower in the middle. From the watchtower each cell in the semi-circle can be observed twenty-four seven. However the 'inmates' or 'patients' cannot tell if there is anyone in the watchtower or not so they feel they are perpetually observed. The buildings were originally going to be used as an experiment in mental health facilities, or prisons. There are some still operating today. When I read Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment* this idea of being observed in a panopticon and not knowing who is watching you, not having any ability to respond, it really reminded me of the care system. (Interview with Fagan, 2015)

The reader learns everything from Anais' point of view; a perspective from the inside of the juvenile correctional home. The character speaking for herself explicitly demonstrates a stubbornly authentic voice, "full of fire and brought to life in a broad Scottish vernacular littered with fucks and cunts" (Fagan, 2012: 1).

The text reconfigures realism through characters like Anais and her friend, Angus, who tells her "but you've got something! I'm telling you. I've met a thousand kids in homes, and you're different. You could make something of yourself, you really could. You dinnae need tags and time in secure, or any of that. You could be somebody" (Fagan, 2012: 179). The lack of intimacy and sincerity in Anais' life renders her isolated and lonely, but some characters can see her through and pinpoints the necessity of establishment communicative bonding in one's life. After spending some time in the Panopticon, Anais' feelings change and she confesses this to herself as follows:

I turn around and give him a wee kiss on the cheek. He's gonna grow up to be a really nice guy one day. He's flushed, and happy, and I look out the window – there's a world out there, you know. One that isnae here. We shouldnae be here; I shouldnae, I should be in Paris. It's still nice, though. Today. The sound of the engine, the motorway, just a wee band of outsiders, and I feel alright, quite liked. Sort of content. (Fagan, 2012: 216)

As a working-class fiction, *The Panopticon* addresses the intersections of class and gender which overly-determine individuals' lives and freedoms and interrogate the constructing of class as a cultural rather than an economic issue, an approach so effectively realised in neoliberal individualism. Inequality circumscribes the opportunities of these characters, underpinning their specific vulnerability to exploitation even in their moments of protest. Fagan's narrative is more interested in representing the world we all more or less know and share. It examines the working-class experience of class stigma.

The feeling of distress is intensified with the setting of the novel. The panopticon as a space in-between serves as a liminal space in which characters, in spite of being exposed to the surveillance/gaze of the care system, are able to construct intimate friendships and interactions. Thus, the spatial sense of the novels confuses the reader in terms of a dilemma between being exposed to the evil and being secluded from the evil. That is the confusion of the modern human being in the contemporary world. Hence, liminality of the panopticon manifests itself as a site for resistance and isolation, a place to both despair and hope.

Unlike Tekin's novel, Fagan's new realist text ends with an "embarrassed optimism/strategic naïveté" in Huber's terms: "a 'what if' mentality oozes from the post-postmodern novel, a 'willingness

to belief” (for example in the form of a strategic *naïveté*, a suspension of disbelief, and taking a leap of faith)” (2014: 33). As a new realist text, *The Panopticon* ends with a note of embarrassed optimism and a hint of calmness. At the end of the novel, Anais is promised to seize happiness, to recover authenticity, and to reconstruct bonds after having survived the violence of a brutalising life on the margins. After the riot in the Panopticon, she escapes and decides to go to Paris in order to realise her dreams: “This is it, I’m getting out. So, Vive freedom. Vive Paris. Vive le mad artists and drunken whores. ... Outcast Queens! Vive Le Revolution. Vive Le Dreamers. Vive Le Dream. I – begin today.” (Fagan, 2012: 324).

Conclusions

With their forsaken group of outsiders, both *Manves City* and *The Panopticon* make the social margins a suggestive context for exploring the impossibility of evading the damaging consequences of the neoliberal present. Tekin’s novel offers sites of resistance to the dominance of neoliberal discourse. It reflects some key facts of working-class experiences and of twenty-first-century life under neoliberalism. Fagan’s novel is a critique highlighting the constraint and oppression exerted on individuals, young and old, and foregrounding the dangers facilitated by class inequality. Both Tekin and Fagan seem to stand inside their texts as witnesses through Nergis and Anais, “the authorial subjects, not as an interpretative authority controlling the meaning of the text but as a guarantor for the sincerity of the act of communication” (Huber, 2014: 27). They embed themselves in the milieu they describe, be it in form of regionalism dealing with the life of underprivileged classes or prison/juvenile detention narratives. Unlike postmodern novel, contemporary fictions narrativize the self not as a game, but in order to enhance the realism of a text and tackle the sociological and phenomenological dimensions of personal life. The feeling of being adrift in both novels is unending which renders them to be a constant transformation, an unending journey or quest of authenticity, genuine bonds, justice, and care. Considering from this perspective, both Tekin and Fagan’s novels seem to propose new models to reconstruct, reconnect, and communicate in the times after postmodernism. This “empathic expression of feelings and sentiments, a drive towards inter-subjective connection and communication, and also a sense of *presence* and *sameness*” is typical of post- postmodernism (Timmer, 2010: 11).

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