

# 2HB *vol.20*

Pavel Büchler

*I am going to use this projector*



I am going to use this projector I don't really know why I've got to like this maybe I'll go off it but you see the yeah there is just like 10 minutes in 4 sections so that's like probably two and a half minutes each I think that the proposition is self evident that the visual is beyond description if taken to mean that language and appearances form two different domains two separate appearances are in another domain so by definition that means that the visual which would fall into the domain of appearances would not work at all they would have to have that kind of separation otherwise language would get mixed up with appearances and vice versa and wouldn't be of very much use so if we agree I think we would agree that that they are separate domains the problem is where does visual art come in the relationship between language and appearances is it really is it part of language or is it part of appearances or where does it come between the two and most of the points I want to make having simply asserted that the proposition seems to me self evidently the case so you have the two domains and you're then faced with historically and institutionally the differing powers of those two domains and the second of the thoughts relates really to what happens if the textual domain the domain of language becomes strengthened and I think it's again very obvious for anybody who looks at institutions and developments that there has been a development in the idea of the importance of text it comes out as a stress on theory and documentation the sense of having the domain of language strengthened the amount of language-based stuff the amount of documentation and theory around again seems to be fairly self evident but when this when the power of language is common form and perhaps increasingly the common form against the idea of intertextuality my second point that's a vague idea in some respects but what it dramatises is the independence of language the independence of language-based of the language-based domain to exist on its own and to have a kind of autonomy and for it to depend on itself in either a kind of linguistic model or for its texts to depend on other texts so you never find a text that's on its own there is always quite a lot of other text in it there are only about 4 texts that don't contain quotes and millions of others that more or less quote those texts so the domain of language has been strengthened to

become a kind of autonomous domain by the feature that language or text have of creating their own world creating this intertextual world given the power of the world of appearances the world of the visual as is again by its own exertions it's going to deny the features of the visual that are describable what can be described then becomes incorporated or appropriated into the textual domain and into the intertextual domain only those elements that can be incorporated in other words the descriptions of those elements so the way again that language and appearances form two separate domains but the language domain is becoming powerful through these particular habits of mind through these particular kinds of developments ok the next the third point is the phenomenon of the intervisuality that is a development of the idea of the intertextuality and that's when somebody says go and look at it's a phenomenon common I should think to most art students they do things that look a little bit like another painting and then somebody turns up and says go look at and they give you a book and in the book there will be pictures and you look at the pictures so you look at the kind of the look of art in the way that in the intertextual domain the intervisuality creates the kind of form of documentation but visual like the reproductions or photographs in a catalogue or in magazines so that not only may we talk about the idea of the text about the language domain but as the describable elements like what's photographable what gets into the printed elements of the visual then circulate again within the intertextual domain so again that idea of looking at photographs the photograph describes the describable part of the piece of work the appearance of the piece of work it isn't doesn't reproduce the appearance it describes aspects of it so intervisuality and intertextuality create this question if this is where art is of its position between language and appearance I think again in terms of talking about developments what that's created in terms of normal experience perhaps is the problem of irony and the retreat from appearances into the textual domain from the domain of appearance so that I think creates the problem of irony the problem of irony if you have to be ironic in order to manage the intertextual and to function and the retreat from appearances is part of this main thing the power of the d

main of language and intertextuality and through reproduction to more or less entirely capture to all general appearances but the description of that the appearance which is beyond description remains beyond the textual domain remains in the world of appearances in the domain of appearances so the contributing factors to that I think in again a normal experience these are fairly based on fairly normal experiences the two there may be other factors but the two factors that I think have kind of contributed to kind of strengthening and kind of encouragement of retreat from appearances and that is the substitution of representational practices for observational practices observational work that is again in a normal experience say in art schools the problem of looking and saying that the gradation of cool red to a warm red for instance which is not easily reproduced not easily represented in the intervisual field has been replaced by a representational practice so the representation device people prefer in capturing the world is the photograph so the idea of the photographic image which is the idea of representation has more or less taken over from the idea of looking at something that is looking at the appearance of something the appearance of the blue near the red and that's a kind of retreat from appearance that's like the idea of somehow there is an interposition of the camera and representational practices of the camera between you and the appearance of the world and the camera is located in the textual domain ok and the second one which shows that I am a kind of modernist if you ever wonder is to discuss the aesthetic experience and the thing about the aesthetic experience is that it all depends on appearances it's just what things look like that matters in the aesthetic and if you move away from what things look like if you don't value the aesthetic experience and again I think there are plenty of reasons why the aesthetic is now attacked or is criticised out of existence then the effect of appearance is minimised the domain of appearances becomes less of a factor within the art experience so more or less what I think the other thing about the aesthetic experience is that almost know that no amount of words would make you like something that is aesthetics are beyond the grip of discourse that is someone could tell you cabbage is good for you but you still and you can eat cabbage because you know that it's good for you but you don't

like it any more when someone has told you it's good for you than when you thought it's bad for you when you are 15 or 16 it tastes like a kind of poison so your aesthetic revulsion can never be minimised by somebody telling you how many vitamins and iron is in cabbage so the aesthetic experience is beyond the reach of discourse of rhetoric of the rhetorical aspects of the intertextual domain and again that's why it stays more than I think observational practices can be appropriated are two domains so I think that the proposition is self-evident I think there is a strengthening of the textual domain the incorporation of the intertextual into visual which I think is another move in terms of cultural development and the concomitant defeat of appearances of withdrawal from the forms of appearances mainly that the idea of looking is minimised and the idea of the aesthetic experience is minimised ok the first thing which I don't agree with really is that language is presented here under different names and in fact I am trying to think what it would mean if there are separate categories so I'll come back to it the other thing that I would suggest and I think I go through is that in fact ehm the visual is indeed one of those describing elements which can be incorporated in textual matter that the visual is indeed privileged to describe the world I think that the arguments that are put forward and intent to in fact make different categories for language and appearance that are so discreet and the framing of them the framing of the motion that the visual is beyond description goes beyond description comes from an argument which is not an argument about whether or not one can write or perhaps in some other way to mimetically represent the visual I mean we do that on a common sense level all the time but about the completeness of description and in the argument this argument the argument as it is contextualised in not in the necessarily every day but on the common sense level in terms of the art practice in this argument completeness as it goes on calls tends to all for identity or at least equality between the visual phenomenon and the port of description description doesn't hold unless somehow it can prove its identity with an equality between the visual but I think that this is ultimately without sense a description in the world where it's felt the description assumes that there's an anteriority of one thing and a

posteriority of another it would otherwise be simply a script not a description so identity is not a concept which could put the possibility of description into jeopardy and as for equality that term is pure concept you know whatever is on one side of a balance or on the other equality itself equality works essentially that is in the world of concepts or in one manner or another in the world of numbers equal intensity equal size equal measure so to have equality one must have measure and here again we enter into a tautological argument certainly self-justifying and maladapted because all the defining arguments concerning the description are given against measure any measure is a description if description of the visual descriptions of the visual are argued to be necessarily incomplete what would be their completeness in a way how would you find the situation in which the visual would go beyond what would in fact be a complete description to be adequate is not the issue raised that would ask for an equality to some end and equation the end to which description is unjustifiably being forced I think in the context in fine art debates by those who would undermine it that end is equality or identity and not the perfectly respectable ends which we all accept without dispute such as communication and knowledge perhaps the demand for completeness is you know not described as equality but symmetry isometry the exact fit of the description over the visual like one template on another but the visual isn't itself a fixed and universal figure which that isometry would emanate it is anterior to the category of objects which are its description but it in itself is a description a representation something which is invisible if written out of the world for the mind its anterior object is the impetus of the object in the world the real object in the world to see the visual as the real object in the world would demand a radical phenomenism of the world which denies all continuous existence to the world with all the counterarguments about separate worlds etc you know all that sort of stuff that went down in the early 60s you know the arguments against radical phenomenology the visual is a category of experience which is particularly apt to description compare it for example to pain which is not apt to description because it brings to mind a description of pain which is then apt to description the visual is always already engaged in a chain of description which

we call knowledge or understanding the sense even the weak sense of intention which is the quality of the visual rather than the visible is a mark of the visual investment in mind the concept of visualisation makes the ecumenological continuum between the internal imagined figure close to the mind the figure imaged from the raw visible the thing cut out from the visible described from the visible ehm since 1915 one of the things that since 1915 the greatest phenomenologists have been watching physical scientists trying to shring that continuum I've just mentioned between the internal and imagined figure and the figure imaged on of he raw visible the tiny silicon rods that are nudged atom nuc lei of energy still don't quite tell the scientists the location of a of a s ngle proton in the nucleus from the way oscillate but that's what these beautiful little machines are made for and why becausas as Hamel and Manning these scientists in California who put these beautiful images in New Scientist all the time ehm ehm Hamel and Manning ehm say you can tell someone what the molecule looks like by teling them where each proton is they admin however that they still have to make each proton or electon be when they want to it be long enough to detect i t that is not a dewcription as empirical observation of course in a classical scientific sense but comes far closer to the visual eh with which artists work all the time you might notice that the scientist is looking for that isometry as is acting as if the visual were a fixed part of being rather than a category of experience and still we are in the red Hamel and Manning however are desererate to visualise just in order to enter the continuum of description to enter a nntinum of description indifferent forms not at least text both narrative and mathematical they don't feel lumbered or misidentified by their posterior script a descrittion and if that makes me ask why the artist has incensed us why the resistance to entering into intertextuality into taking uo the visual place which the which the visual intent the intention the wak intention in the isual demands that it is yplaced in that str am of intent and description well the techne has a diiferent thing to do and different disciplines surround themselves with different sort os foolishmness in every discipline but I think that this marks out a real diiference between the artist and the scientist in dealing with the visual the question is not whether the

visual can be described the visual is already part of the description it would not be the visual without it but why artists seek to extract the visual from description why having been a category of objects which offers itself to vision a object intended invisial they wish it not bo be uniquely yresented to the mind and therefore to language but to hover as a kind of air stream in the world of unknown being in the world of identityznd equality in total totally abstract world of concepts in fact I thing that the arguments against the argument for ehm as it is set here the argujent against description is in fact he argument to radical conceptualism right you obviously don'tagree with it ehm ehm I would take this as a kind of epigraph to what I am dgoing to say the words of water Bejamin who probably wrote more interesting words than anyone else this century not the only person who wrote interesting words but he did write a lot of hem ehm I don't want to tell yo something I want to show you something ehm I was intrigued by Jane's strain to kind of to reduce the visiabe to something else ehm and not to rejoince in the visible for what it it it may seem somewhat incongruous that a write and critic should be speaking ror the motion that the visual is beyond description afta all it's my business is it not to use words in the description aftart it's odd for one who makes a living from the use of words to pro ose to an audience of artissts that the visual is beyond description indeed don't we find that in the earliest writings we have on aesthetics in European literature anyway the aesthetics of the visual or the aesthetics I should say of the visible a primacy of place given to the criical facility of description I refer to the Greek mimesis a skill a skill of descri i ng a work which was highly valued by Greek aestheticians seen as if you like a primary skill of a crici well it is as it happens I think that what the po nt is the function on which I place greatemphasis in my own practice and I amy say with a due immodesty it's a faciliy or skill that I have often has been remarked upon by those artis s who asked me to write about t er work so I'm good at it eham and yet I still want to dispute the primacy of he word well though a contracictitn it may seem precisely the fact that I do have precisely this commitment to to description and I might define description here as entailing the pain of the closest attention for the articulerion beteen different parts visible parts visible



elements in a work that if you talk about visual art painting may come to mind but I refer to in a way to all manners of art that are placed within the ambit of the visual I have no doubt that the principles underlying my practice apply to music and I know that they apply to literature and architecture upon both of which I had practiced physically and professionally why because the more precise and attentive and verbally effective the description the more in the lap of the modality of the visible as Stephen Douglas reported in the artist as a young man in the lap of the modality of the visible asserts itself that is the more potent the impact of the visible thing itself the visual emotion that is beyond description in words makes itself felt in the receiving imagination let's make a crucial distinction that will clarify the matter reading a poem we read writing this is something Arthur Collingwood a great British philosopher one of the greatest philosophers of the century at the moment sadly neglected he said this long before Roland Barthes reiterated it we have to do that out of the nature of our reception of the written word but can we say that contemplating painting we repaint it or recreate it I think not a poem is written in the natural language the language speaking form and that is something we share with the creator of the text he or she uses a symbolic material that we all possess and although we all make our own poem when we read someone else's there is much between all those recreations your reading of that poem my reading of that poem that person's reading of that poem there's a lot between all those recreations those rewritings those those writings I might say that we share and know that we share that is something contained in the words and their records of things ideas and experiences these are things that are common more or less to us all things such as pebbles and houses and cats and clouds ideas such as nature wildness tamedness strangeness these ideas inherent in love and joy sadness or dumbfoundness the kind of dumbfoundness I felt listening to Jane of course we personalise these aspects for the purpose of making art we turn them into her materials personalising may be emphasising that the poem is not simply imagining the experience he presents she presents but imagining him or her as having the experience in a philosophical sense but none of these hinge happens when we encounter the visual

work of art for it's not framed in a shared language but it's an object has no language in any real sense it's a thing itself not a symbol sign or a signifier for something else to speak of a visual language is imply to use a metaphor it contains an image or it presents an image which may be said to refer to or may be assigned to something else woman cat a sunset but we cannot recreate it as we might a poem we have to create it from somewhere other we have to invent its meaning we make meanings for it by resorting to language something we share and which enables communication using the words which of course is cognitive communion and community but it may be that we think and feel in a complex way that is strictly speaking beyond language those thinkers who say that thought is only what finds expression in a language surely oversimplify the complexity of our mental and emotional experience much of what we may feel in response to visual experience in front of a painting or in front of something else in the world that is visible is prelinguistic or postlinguistic or or as we may say beyond words I can't tell you what I experience even when we find words as it is as it is my business how so to do then that metaphor is accurate they are indeed found in the speaking and writing they are not thought and then given expression clothed so to speak in words what is found is by definition not something known before the finding so eh the making of a visual work is an activity profound profoundly different from the writing of a poem or any other kind of text it involves the manipulation of material substances in particular configurations usually conventional in the sense that there are customary places and materials places where these things are places materials of which they are made and used in an accepted in an accepted system of cultural exchange such systems of cultural exchange are themselves diverse reception is an act of the mind the mind has eh Theodor Steinberg put it is part of the mind appearances reach through the mind wrote Steinberg now mind manifests itself through the word but we know from experience I don't know if we'd ever know this from theory but we do know from experience it is not exclusive language makes thought possible but the mind that it creates is free thereby to reach for that which lies beyond language this is the supreme paradox of human creativity for we know that language for all



its splendour is limited and that the ambitions of positivism the second sin of the theorist still with us to assimilate knowledge to wisdom to arrogate to the rational mind all that need be known such ambitions were then glorified Wittgenstein the ostentatious logician of this age acknowledged this in the superb final proposition of Tractatus whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent the artist works in Wittgenstein's silence through and its object its things in their silent thinginess we may apprehend or glimpse something of that which language cannot encompass this is of course true also of music it begins and ends in silence fills space with physical vibrations acting upon the mind through the actions of certain organs of the inner ear and of the language of poetry with which I began well it too works beyond even though it uses words it works beyond the discursive through the somatic action within the body of rhythm and sound by its intensifications and fracturings of verbal sense to reach outwards to the objects of that poem its discovery of the hidden meaning of things its apprehension of the sign in the object I think that's enough really to make the case that the visual is beyond description however much description may help us to apprehend the visible there is something of a continuity between Mel and I although I dispute that for example Wittgenstein is the most eminent logician of the last century there are many other examples we could give I am not even sure I understand I am certainly not speaking for the title but I am not even sure I am speaking against it because I am not exactly sure what the title entails whilst a title such as The Visual Beyond Description that the visual is beyond description is perfectly conventional fodder in the milieu of the exchange in areas such as art theory and cultural studies I confess I am a little puzzled by men's titles and I have been for the 40 years I have been in art schools either as student or teacher consequently I think it is beholden upon me to frankly work out what this title might mean for the moment ignoring the question of the who of the what the term the visual may or may not refer does the title mean for example that the visual is somehow beyond the reach of language if it does then there seems or if it is then there seems little reason why you or I should be here for if the visual whatever it may or may not refer to is beyond discussion then whatever we may talk

about here today one thing we won't be talking about is the visual since if it is really beyond talking about then we cannot we can talk and talk until we are blue in the face but we logically and obviously won't be talking about anything which it is impossible to talk about simply if then it is the case that the title The Visual Is Beyond Description means something like the visual is beyond language as it's been canvassed 40 years in art schools in my knowledge then it seems that we have embarked on a faulty errand on talking about something which can't be talked about so we may as well retire into the nearest bar and talk about things which we can talk about so for the hope that his topic may sustain some discussion perhaps even some interesting discussion I am going to presume for the moment anyway that the title The Visual Is Beyond Description does not mean something such as the visual is beyond the reach of language or I suppose most specifically here went visual is beyond the reach of discussion so that other kinds of meanings might the title nevertheless for the start we might like to remind ourselves we do few other kinds of things with language apart from describing the description is certainly one of the most important functions we manifest in using language for instance to illustrate the important importance of the function of description in language use we can note that early in the last century in the company of Ludwig Wittgenstein Bertrand Russell constructed a logical framework which in an important part was a theorem called The Theory of Description I do not intend to detail out this theory here but it might also be worth reminding ourselves these resources of philosophical knowledge are not the kind of resources we customarily use when we discuss art practice such resources have not had the caché in art theory and art practice then perhaps exemplify the narratives of Foucault, Léotard, Derrida, Guattari and Deleuze have had since the 80s as some of the characteristically discursive materials of what shall we call them the cultural studies areas of the art schools while the theory of descriptions is perhaps widely known in the philosophical milieu of Anglo-American universities it is because it has a logical bend and it does not have a literary bend such resources of philosophical knowledge do not have the visibility in the art milieu that has what we might call French theory or as French theory as a grant into the

sources of the works of the likes of Nietzsche and Heidegger just to give a further detail into the difference between analytic philosophy and literary philosophers in his history of western philosophy a pot boiler if there ever was one Russell himself characterised Nietzsche as both a literary philosopher and an inventor and admirer of a character Nietzsche himself called the artist's tyrant Heidegger himself didn't warrant even a mention in Russell's thought on the whole then we might say that what has emerged for better or worse as art theory throughout the 1980s and 90s has the pronounced liking of literary philosophers and a pronounced aversion to philosophical logic thus I have given one very brief possible hint above of one possible fact of one possible set of resources of philosophical knowledge which might be used to inquire further into the function of description and into the other functions of language now now about the other part of the title the subject of the sentence visual what might the visual mean or perhaps more precisely to what does it refer perhaps it is worth a notice to start that the title The Visual is Beyond Description is distinct from some such title as the objects are beyond description is then for example the visual in the title a kind of condensed referent'sosome such as all the visual objects in the world so kind of memory fill of all the visual objects in the world are beyond description or some such as all the visual objects in the world including mirages and visual hallucinations so that the title can then become all the visual objects in the world including mirages visual hallucinations are beyond description none of that seems to me altogether plausible not least because it is clear that everything that describes the visual characteristics of visual objects take this for example take this table for example I didn't know it was here but I reckon take this table for example in noting that is it brown about such and such a length it is rectangular etc we are describing at least some of its visual characteristics and we can keep in the description we can describe what kind of shade of brown etc in the case that perhaps in the title the visual is beyond description means or refers to and I think there is a distinction between meaning and reference because they're not the same means or refers to something other than the visual characteristics of visual objects if so what perhaps the visual means or refers to some deer

mysterious or in fact not a mysterious universal that itself refers in some way to all things visual as I guess were this to be the case then the title The Visual is Beyond Description might be transcribed as the characteristics of visual objects are beyond description or perhaps the visual means some such as visualness the quality of visualness that you can read in much the same way as you might read the term redness in referring to the common quality of all the things which are red in this case the visual might seem as a general characteristic common to everything visual in the world if then under his strange interpretation the title means some such as simply the characteristics of the world are not linguistic descriptions then it is a truism clearly then the visual characteristics of any visual object are obviously not linguistic descriptions they are visual characteristics equally obviously although at risk of sounding patronising I beg to note this doesn't mean that written linguistic descriptions as distinct from spoken linguistic descriptions do not have visual characteristics whilst the title after all is not linguistic descriptions are beyond the visual I guess the title might be further detailed out as the visual is beyond a linguistic description although the fact as I noted above almost in passing that written linguistic descriptions do have visual characteristics may seem obvious and glib it may be worth dwelling upon a bit more obviously again in order to a psychic person to read a piece of wiring say description than the letters words sentences etc must be visible in a similar way that a hearing person in order to understand a spoken sentence must be able to hear the sound of it being spoken whilst in the two cases of writing a language or hearing the language the seeing and hearing are respectively necessary conditions of my understanding of language or even understanding it is a language I see or hear it is not a sufficient condition of my understanding for example if John Hyatt in the front row asked me if I spoke Albanian I would probably understand that it is a language that he speaks but I would not understand it as the language it is I wouldn't have a clue of what he was saying although I would hear perfectly clearly the sounds and the sense of the language unless I know the rules of the language of Albanian I have no means of understanding the language even if I can hear or write or even if I can hear or sort of see it bearing all this

problematics in mind then perhaps we can suggest that the title of this discussion *The Visual Is Beyond Description* is not specific enough let us try another title for the purposes of these brief remarks it will be the last one lest us substitute another couple of titles they are as follows the introductions of a visual language are beyond description in language language or the products of a visual language are beyond description in non-visual language first then of these two titles which of course there is such a thing as a visual language as I have remarked before in these remarks I've been in an art school manning the voice of the right to roam for 40 years and throughout that time I have heard the term *visual language* frequently the term is used as much today as it ever was I must confess since the early 60s when I first stopped to think about it I've been fuddled about what exactly it might mean and I am still puzzled my recent puzzling over this term was augmented by reading some of the essays in Bertrand Russell *Mysticism and Logic* when I was a student at the Slad in the early 60s and there was an option in wider interest in language also provoked by reading Bertrand Russell's book then there is the business of developing a language this at least in evolutionary terms is a historical process which in terms of the history of our species took place a long time ago although against the backdrop of cosmological or geological time the period our species has been in existence let alone possess language is an eye blink be as all this may it's perhaps worth us noting here what are the kind of characteristics of what of language in the case of a language language we all inherited a pre-existent symbolic system which we deploy according to the syntactic and semantic rules which may vary from language to language for example the definite article in English is ungendered whilst in German the definite article is gendered but there seems often to be at least a faint suggestion when the term *visual language* is used that each alleged act of use is each time the invention of a new language that in each act of use there is a positive and new set of syntactic and semantic rules in this scenario the logic is that there are as many languages as there are users of visual language and it is worth remembering that should we ask what are the rules of any of these myriad of visual languages then we ask the question in language language and not in visual language and that is

exactly what I am doing now asking the question in English the question raised according to the syntactic and semantic rules of English the idea that there are as many visual languages as there are users of it nestles us nicely some of the issues raised by Wittgenstein's observations on the notions of a private language we will return briefly to the topic of a private language but more immediately consider the following let us suppose that the visual whatever it may be is linguistic it's pretty clear that anyone claiming or being claimed by someone else as using a visual language cannot be in agreement with this statement for to be in a pre-linguistic state is to be in a state of not having language therefore this would make a visual language not a language for it makes the application of a visual language it is linguistic a language acquired before we had a language a plain contradiction on this line of argument then whatever the visual is if it is anything it cannot be a visual language for whatever a visual language may or may not be one thing it seems pretty certain to assume it will be if the term *visual language* means what it says it will be a language so let us switch back to the plain notion of the visual of the title if the visual is pre-linguistic is it some kind of a pre-linguistic medium is it possible to think in this medium of the visual let us suppose then that the visual is some kind of a pre-linguistic medium in which we can think but it is not language this raises the question of there being a necessary relation between language and thought if we can think in some medium which itself is pre-linguistic this means we are capable of thinking before we acquire language therefore there is no necessary relation between having a language and being able to think I've heard it asserted from time to time and unwittingly applied more frequently in art schools for example that terms like the visual do refer to some pre-linguistic medium through which we think there are various formulations of this kind of position all more or less incoherent insofar as they assert a claim usually unwittingly that there is no necessary relation between language and thought in asserting that we as a species do think before we acquire language language one of the great candidates of evidence for this kind of claim is some such that the species' propensity to make what shall we call them visual objects images paintings drawings



The original tape was found with an old cassette transcription machine in an art school office. It was transcribed by a professional typist on a manual typewriter in one non-stop session and the sound of the typing was recorded. The recording was then copied back onto the original tape and is played by the machine.

The text published here was scanned from the typescript – a scroll over two metres long – and converted into a digital text file using an online OCR service.

Pavel Büchler is an artist living in Manchester.  
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