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SPA 399

14 April 2021

Netflix and Critical Theory: *Las chicas del cable*

Las chicas del cable stands as the first Spanish original production of the streaming service Netflix, having been added to the platform in 2017. As a period drama, the narrative follows four women of the 1920s who work as switchboard operators for a telecommunications company in Madrid, Spain. The show has gained notoriety not only for being Netflix's first Spanish production, but for its parallel to modern feminism as well. Each woman uniquely struggles with the traditional, patriarchal expectations placed on them, and as they each work to achieve their own independence and freedom, they actively begin to challenge these imposed gender norms. Despite its positive reviews, the show works more to portray the relevance of its themes to the modern day than in ensuring it is historically accurate. Integral aspects of *Las chicas del cable* such as the modern music chosen, the wardrobes of the working-class women, the character development, and the title all not only undermine its authenticity of depicting a historical time period but weaken its feminist message as well.

One of the most glaring issues of this "period piece" is the soundtrack. Not only is the music backing the scenes modern in sound, but the songs with words are in English as well. As the series is set in Spain, a rich amount of music and music traditions could have been drawn upon and utilized for its scenes. For instance, one of the most prominent musical genres that still remains strong in popularity today is flamenco. As Matthew Machin-Autenrieth points out,

flamenco remains one of the “most prominent symbols of regional identity in Andalusia, Spain,” a southern region of Spain (4). Flamenco reflects an integral part of much of Spain’s history, even so far as to stand for part of some regions’ identity. It is important to note, as Machin-Autenrieth does in his own work, that flamenco developed mainly in the region of Andalusia, despite its correlation to much of the country of Spain as a whole. He notes how flamenco is “often correlated with Spanish stereotypes more generally (particularly outside Spain)” (Machin-Autenrieth 10). As such as key identifier of Andalusia in particular, its influence still spread across much of Spain, resulting in this stereotyping.

The music of flamenco reflects the history of interaction between different cultures that contributed to its own making. It serves as an *arte vivo*, a living art, that is thus reflective of the experiences of many of the cultures within Spain (Heredia-Carroza, Jesús, et al. 3). The beginning of the twentieth century saw a preservation of this musical tradition as its integrity began to become lost, as Machin-Autenrieth writes how Spanish composer Manuel de Falla and Spanish poet Federico García Lorca both tried to achieve this revival of ‘traditional’ flamenco (11). Falla and Lorca’s work in the early twentieth century coincides with the time when *Las chicas del cable* takes place, in 1928. However, not a trace of influence of flamenco can be recognized in the music chosen to back the series.

As traditional flamenco was not accompanied by singing, it would have served well as background music for scenes with dialogue, or at the very least as influence on what songs would be chosen. An abundance of music from flamenco artists is at the creator’s disposal—from the Spanish Romani flamenco singer Camarón de la Isla to Spanish virtuoso flamenco guitarist Paco de Lucía, or the Spanish gypsy guitar player Raimundo Amador—and yet, they decided to include none of it. As Machin-Autenrieth points out, “music has a close connection

with place and a powerful role in the construction of place-based identities” (6). While flamenco has a closer bond with Andalusia specifically than with Spain as a whole, *Las chicas del cable* should not have passed on the opportunity to use the background music to help construct the series’ identity as a show about Spain in the 1920s.

In passing on this opportunity, the series attempted to try and situate itself more in the present day and amongst a wider, more international audience. Considering an international scope within the time period, the 1920s, would have been a reasonable course of action as well. The Jazz Age was in full swing in the United States during the 20s, and its influence stretched far beyond the country. Along with the music itself, it was during the 1920s that “play entered a new territory,” and the Jazz movement emphasized both self-expression and self-indulgence (Appelrouth 1499). This idea is in tandem with the type of leisure and freedom the women of *Las chicas del cable* strive for, so including music of this age or songs that draw inspiration from the jazz music genre would have subtly reflected the dream of the main characters. Appelrouth goes on to argue that early jazz “represented a threat to the legitimacy of prevailing behavioral and cultural codes,” just as the main characters of the series are trying to push back against the established societal norms of the time that women were not meant to work but to serve the house and the husband and children who reside in it (1500). However, such a correlation is not present in *Las chicas del cable*, as the music included seems to have no jazz elements to it, let alone any jazz songs at all.

There is a scene, within the first season, where the main characters attend a party at the company, and the women dancing onstage have an uncanny resemblance to the flappers of Western society in the 20s (29:36). The dancers are wearing sparkling black dresses that are low cut, right above their knees, with short hair and feathers tucked within the strands. Instead of the

jazz music that flappers would have listened and danced to at the time, the song “Good Life” by Sweet California plays. While Sweet California is a Spanish band, the pop song is performed in English and was released in 2016, with no connection to jazz whatsoever. The scene feels more like an American middle school dance than a party in the 20s. While the band’s audience may stretch internationally, this series’ attempt to do the same only results in the validity of the scene being undermined. The dancers in the scene do not even appear to be dancing to the rhythm of the song playing, which only further highlights the disconnection between the music and the series.

In addition to an international audience, *Las chicas del cable* also attempts to situate itself within a modern day audience using the title track as a means of displaying this modernity. However, while the series means to appeal to today’s audience, it does so at the expense of the authenticity of the narrative to the ethnicity being portrayed. The theme song of the series is “Salt” by B.Miles, for the first two seasons, and the shortened main title for the remaining seasons is composed and produced by Mauricio Ribeiro. Even when watching the series in the original Spanish with English subtitles, the lyrics of both intros are sung in English. This in and of itself, even considered in tandem with the lack of influence from authentic music of the 20s (in Spain or elsewhere), is not inherently detrimental to the show. The theme is relatively catchy with a sultry nature that is reminiscent of some aspects of the show, and it speaks to the international scope of the audience in a way. However, it is worth considering how texted music in English operates as such an integral piece of the show, as the main title can arguably situate an important emotion or idea within the narrative as a whole when done well.

Emaeyak Peter Sylvanus studied the effects of texted music in performing ethnicity in Nollywood film music, but their findings can be applied to *Las chicas del cable* as well.

Sylvanus argues that “the persistent use of texted music (i.e. music with words) alongside certain musical forms and even instruments and/or instrumentation influences the values that shape ethnicity in Nollywood film” (94). The music of the series that has words, as defined by the title song, are all in English, thus eliciting a persistent portrayal of the American aspect of Netflix Spain, being that Netflix is an American production company. Two of the most fundamental aspects of ethnicity are identity and culture, and “both music and language are constituents of those building blocks” (Sylvanus 94). If this holds true, then the English language used in the theme song and elsewhere in the show, along with the modern music, misrepresents the true ethnicity being portrayed here. Although, for instance, Alba is living in New York at the start of the first part of Season 5, she is still a native Spaniard, having been born in Spain along with the other main women of the series. Had the texted music been in Spanish, the lyrics and tunes could have served the purpose of “singing the film,” as Sylvanus defines as implying the “use of texted music to either narrate or foreshadow the storylines” of film (96). As the songs are already strategically placed throughout the series either ahead of pivotal scenes or amidst them, such as the song accompanying the women taking the test to apply for positions at the company in the first season (which prefaces Alba’s more direct approach to be accepted for the position), they could have been more intrinsically linked to these scenes. Texted music in Spanish would not only have more effectively (and truthfully) performed the ethnicity of the women, but it would have better served the narrative as a whole, more actively participating in the storytelling process by narrating or foreshadowing.

Music is often overlooked in terms of its capacity to contribute to a narrative, when in reality it has the potential to even affect the audience’s perception. As Appelrouth points out, “music has the capacity to ‘move’ listeners both literally and figuratively by evoking physical,

emotional, and intellectual responses to its sounds,” and *Las chicas del cable* neglected this capacity and in turn, surrendered a strength that the narrative would have greatly benefitted from (1496). A German study was conducted to investigate the effects of slow-motion in film on the audience’s perception of time, as well as their emotional response, and a significant influence was found regarding the presence of music. It had previously been found that music has an impact on the perception of time, as it provides additional information which results in longer estimations of time (Wöllner, Clemens, et al. 2). Additionally, there is a consensus among researchers that “music can indeed *induce* emotions rather than only convey emotional states that people may recognize,” giving emotional music the ability to cause tangible psychophysiological responses in members of the audience (Wöllner, Clemens, et al. 3). This was the intention of the series, for example, in including background music in an early scene when Alba’s friend, Gimena, is killed.

Within the first few minutes of episode one of the first season, the main character Alba runs toward Gimena’s armed husband, who instinctively shoots and kills Gimena (03:15). As she dies in Alba’s arms, modern background music begins to play, reaching its crescendo when her head falls, signaling her death. Not only does this music feel unnatural given the setting of the 20s and Spain that was established just minutes before, but it feels disingenuous; it has a fairly quick tempo, and though this is accompanied by more solemn strings in the background, the rhythm of the tempo takes precedence in the foreground of the song. It clashes with Alba’s sobs as she cries over the loss of her friend and takes some of the sadness out of the scene. The music could have induced more of Alba’s sadness in the audience, causing viewers to actually feel the weight of her friend’s death and maybe even shed some tears themselves. The scene itself is short as well—not longer than two or so minutes in total—when it had the opportunity to reflect

the heartbreaking reality of women who disobeyed their husbands at the time, and just how tightly they held their grip on them.

Music has been proven to be an effective means of nonverbal communication, but not just songs with a high amount of familiarity; music unknown by the audience has been proven to be an emotionalizing carrier of meaning in film as well (Herget 3). Since the song used in this scene did not resonate with the information being presented in this scene, it likely conveyed a different message with its tone. Information is processed in the brain through different schemata, with a specific schema controlling attention and perception, and background music has been found to have the potential to “activate schemata that shape the processing of information” (Herget 2). This has been clear in background music that the audience is familiar with, but in the case of *Las chicas del cable*, the background music is not popular or well-known. But this is not where the show falls short, as unknown music can still activate the same schemata through a “specific kind of semantic memory” (Herget 3). Thus, it is not the “unknown” aspect of the background music that causes it to fall flat, but the music chosen in general.

Slower music, for example, may have more effectively communicated the sadness of the scene and made it feel more real by allowing for a more efficient processing of information and activation of schemata. It would have given more emotional weight to the scene, and this weight is what is missing from so many of the supplemental scenes of the series, as a genuine connection to the experiences of the women during that time is abandoned in favor of dramatic effect. The music feels thrown in as an afterthought, with little intention or connection to the narrative, the emotions being expressed in the scenes, or the time period of the whole series. Thus, musical authenticity to the time period, as well as any resonance to the culture and ideas

associated with that authenticity, are lost in this series, and as a result a key understanding of the series itself is lost on the audience.

A less jarring and clear issue than the music of *Las chicas del cable* is the wardrobes of the main characters. At first glance, the four women appear not unlike how a woman of the 1920s would look—bob hairstyles (though a bit longer as 1928 was towards the end of the decade), knee-length dresses, and often some form of a cloche hat on their head. Their outfits seem to be a reflection of the modern female wardrobe at the time; with the first World War having just ended, women's fashion around the world moved towards simplicity and convenience in the 20s. Jayne Shrimpton, a dress historian, highlights how this was achieved “through the progressive simplification of dress as the decade advanced—a rejection of formality and multiple layers, in favour of comfort and a lighter, more natural effect” (Shrimpton 13-14). The dresses of the women in *Las chicas del cable* follow with this trend, but to an extent. Simplicity in the wardrobes was accompanied by decoration such as beadwork when it came to evening wear, and the characters' outfits reflected this as well when they for instance attended the company party at the beginning of season 1. However, these dresses often leaned towards more shapeless silhouettes, which were believed to look best on thinner, less curvy bodies, and this is why women in turn tried to achieve this body type. This is the first area that *Las chicas del cable* begins to deviate in. For example, the dresses of the main characters are sometimes cinched tightly at the waist to accentuate the women's curves, and the v-necklines are often cut a bit lower to be more revealing, which both go against the “shapeless” design that was so prevalent during the time.

The larger aspect that the show deviates from as it progresses is the relationship between these wardrobes and class. The simple and convenient aspects of women's clothing in the 20s

was easy to replicate, so the style was not limited to just those who could afford designer designs. Anyone, from working-class to higher class, could access and take part in this trend, as “dress is now no sign of social status” (Forester 62). Each of the four main women, Alba, Marga, Carlota, and Ángeles, are established as being from working-class backgrounds, except perhaps for Carlota, whose parents are insinuated to be higher class financially. Thus, it is believable for the four of them to be wearing the dresses that they are. However, it is the frequency at which they change outfits that is a clear indication of an inauthentic depiction of their class. Besides their normal blue work uniform, the women are rarely shown wearing the same outfit twice. As working-class women, they likely would have been unable to afford so many outfits. Such a wide range of dresses, hats, and shoes is more reflective of a higher-class woman who is rich enough to finance such an extensive wardrobe. Not only is this inaccurate to the time period, but this wrongly portrays the characters as well. Seeing the characters in so many different and elaborate outfits throughout each season will perpetuate the idea that they are higher in class than they actually are, resulting in the audience’s perception shifting to accommodate for such and causing the narrative to suffer as well.

Additionally, though the young generation of women who were flappers wore knee-length dresses, which was short and rather rebellious for the 20s, a prominent ideology of the time was bodily modesty. This societal idea of bodily modesty “placed formidable limits on women’s daily movements in home, work or leisure” (Folguera 55). Young women were expected to dress modestly, in addition to acting as such as well, when out in public and even at home. Some of the outfits of the women in the show, such as Alba’s low-cut red dress that she wears when she secures a job at the company, are only meant to be alluring to the male characters. In 1928, her outfit may not have been received positively, as it challenges the

predominant ideology of women's bodily modesty. However, this actually speaks well to who Alba is as a character; she is a headstrong lead to the series who the other women join in pushing for what they believe in, as for example advocating for not integrating new technology in order to keep their jobs at the company secure.

It is not the characters themselves who are problematic to the feminist message, but rather, their portrayal. Alba could have easily been portrayed as having worn the red dress as a personal choice, but from the minute that the manager Carlos steps foot in the room, it is clear that Alba's intention is to seduce him, as he has both the keys to the vault and the final say as to who would be accepted for the job. As Alba's skills are centered on lying and manipulation, this could have been an opportunity to have a female sexual display serve as a rebellion against the societal ideal of modesty. So often the film industry becomes "a space for the sexual exploitation of women," and *Las chicas del cable* does not escape this (Gooptu 369). In this scene, Alba is figured as an object of the male gaze (coined by Laura Mulvey to mean the typical male heterosexual gaze often in tandem with the sexualization and objectification of women), more so than as a figure for autonomous femininity, which underscores the feminist message of the series (Gooptu 370). Rather than focusing on infiltrating the company, she moves to go through Carlos immediately through flirtation, which makes sense given her background and desperation to fulfill what is required of her.

However, the flirting only feels exaggerated. When Carlos first walks past her while addressing the group of women, Alba strategically drops her pencil behind him, to which he picks it up for her. The camera follows Carlos, the man, as he bends down to pick up the pencil, and pauses for a beat as he glances at her waist (Campos and Neira 11:32-38). There are not only these camera movements coordinated with the male characters' movements, but lingering shots

on the various parts of the female body, which both serve to illustrate how this series had all male directors. The male gaze, in feminist theory, “tends to be replicated through camera angles and editing, as the way the camera moves often simulates the way men might look a particularly attractive woman up and down and hover or pause on her particularly erogenous zones” (Meluso 25). In this example, the camera lingers on Alba’s exposed shin, and later when she sits in Carlos’ office, it focuses on her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her dress, both of which illustrate this simulation. These types of shots “further remove the female character from personhood and cement her solely as an object for consumption” (Meluso 26). Though Alba is trying to achieve her freedom for herself, it is clear in the series, and during the time period, that this freedom would have to come from a man by either marrying or seducing him. The male gaze “translates through action and role,” and throughout history, women usually were not able to play a role in a film’s plot, which seemed to be where *Las chicas del cable* was so groundbreaking (Meluso 26). However, the plot seems to be furthered in many instances by the men, as if Carlos had not been attracted to Alba, he would not have given her a job and her way into the company would have been lost since she failed the tests. This is reflected in the first establishing shot of Carlos in the aforementioned scene, which is an upward tilt, as the camera moving in this upward direction signifies him as being in a position of power and superiority over Alba, who sits opposite him. It is clear that the seduction of men and dramatic effect is valued more here than the portrayal of an independent woman and an accurate depiction of history.

As seen with Alba, the wardrobe is not the only aspect of the show that results in the narrative suffering, as the character development leaves much to be desired in terms of strengthening the feminist message underlying the series. In the very first episode of its first season, the series opens with the indication that women were seen as *adornos*, meaning

ornaments or decorations. Quite literally this is equating women to inanimate objects of little to no use outside of their appearance. As the main character Alba narrates for the audience, women were “accessories to be shown off” and “objects unable to express an opinion or make a decision” (0:08-0:22). Despite appearing to be setting up a narrative of women working against this dehumanization, of taking back their freedom and thus their humanity and right to think, speak, and act for themselves, *Las chicas del cable* still portrays some of its female characters in the context of the men surrounding them, rather than as their own individuals.

From the start of the show, Alba is established as being between two men: Francisco, her childhood love whom she got separated from in youth, and Carlos, the man who stands between her and the company vault. Alba, as the central female character whom the two men lust for, is established as “the object of desire for the male character(s)” (Smelik 491). This is not unlike the traditional model of a *telenovela*. There is often a main heterosexual couple navigating challenges in order to be together, with most of them “produced by the dramatic presence of triangles—two men in love with the same woman...” (Acosta-Alzuru 271). As is the prevalent issue of *Las chicas del cable*; who is Alba truly in love with? At times, this takes precedence over the driving force of the plot: achieving freedom, and it reflects Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, as applied by Carolina Acosta-Alzuru to *telenovelas*.

Gramsci defined hegemony as being the cultural, moral, and ideological dominance of one group over others, and Acosta-Alzuru notes how in terms of feminist media studies, the “conditions of representation have changed as the dominant media take up certain ideas about feminism, gender, women and men,” (270). There have come to be predominant ideologies regarding the role of women and the portrayal of relationships in film, such as the notion of the “love triangle” that is illustrated in *Las chicas del cable*. The woman is often placed between the

affections of two men, of whom she must choose one or the other, and sacrifice something in the process. Bonnie Dow's analysis of the *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* serves as an additional reflection of feminism as a threat to hegemony at work in film, and she writes how "Mary's independence is consistently compromised by her submission to others' needs...she is slotted into familiar roles and relationships that assure the audience that little has really changed" (Acosta-Alzuru 273). Alba unfortunately receives much the same treatment. While she actively works to achieve her own freedom from conviction, helping the other women as they work toward their own respective freedoms in the process, her freedom consistently becomes evaluated in terms of worth next to the presence of Carlos and Francisco in her life. When she secures the job at the company and realizes Francisco works there, she frantically calls Inspector Beltrán saying she cannot complete the heist, which would prevent her from securing her freedom.

This brief run-in with a man nearly derails her journey to freedom entirely, and it does not stop there—she constantly is torn between her freedom and the two men, not to mention being pulled between the two of the men themselves as well. Her plans are constantly being disrupted by her attraction to them, such as protecting Francisco's life from being destroyed when Inspector Beltrán blackmails her yet again, and the hegemonic tropes keep piling up; Carlos changes from a womanizer to being sweet and sensitive, the long-lost love Francisco begins revealing more toxic traits such as blackmailing Alba, and Francisco lies to Alba's face and then tells her he cannot stop thinking about her. As a result, both Alba and Francisco fall into roles of the classic film narrative. In order to satisfy the "woman's guilt" of the narrative, "two traditional endings [are] made available to women: she must either die or marry," with Alba doing the latter as she accepts Carlos' proposal (Smelik 492). Francisco, as he gets the

photographs back from Inspector Beltrán that were being used to blackmail Alba, essentially frees her, making him a “representation of ‘the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego’ of the male hero” (Smelik 491). The series aligns more closely with cliché than with a female-forward piece, as the attention necessary to ensure the characters are developed realistically and thoroughly was simply not taken. Alba’s development, and in turn the character development of the series as a whole, is where *Las chicas del cable* weakens its own feminist message by falling prey to the stereotypes so much of film is wrought with.

The series seems to lack a connection, in the context of the development of its characters, with modern feminism, and this is clear in its title. With movements such as the Women’s March and #MeToo, feminism today has a global reach, as women internationally have recognized the familiarity in each other’s struggles. “The International Women’s Strike on March 8, 2018, had a massive and unprecedented impact in Spain,” with almost 5.5 million women supporting it and another 3 million in attendance at the rallies (O. Abrisketa and M. Abrisketa 931). Public expressions of feminism have only grown in Spain since then, as the “solidarity among women has penetrated the movement and flourishes through social networks and public demonstrations, generating a great flow of both protest and solidarity messages” (O. Abrisketa and M. Abrisketa 931). Why, then, would the series slip up with the title?

“Girl” and “woman” are used interchangeably at the colloquial level to refer to someone of the female gender. A “woman” refers more often to an adult female, while “girl” denotes a young female. However, in modern discourse, “girl” has come to take on a negative connotation, likening the female to be, though youthful, immature or docile. “Woman,” in contrast, reflects the maturity and control that an adult female usually has, and it shows respect when a female is referred to as such. Consequently, calling a female who is clearly an adult a “girl” can be taken

offensively. “Girl” is often thrown around as an insult, from as early as elementary school on the playground all the way to the office when adults enter the workforce, even being deemed as a microaggression (Miller). There are countless online discussions regarding the topic, how some see being called a “woman” as a sign of respect, while others do not really mind how they are referred to. But in the context of trying to appeal to modern feminism, *Las chicas del cable* should have considered the implications of not calling its adult characters “women.” It comes across as a lack of respect akin to how they would have been treated by their male co-workers: as inferior, for being younger, less mature, and most notably, female, along with being docile enough for them to control.

A historical inaccuracy also lies within the title—“Cable”. Though it was likely included in order to, again, attempt to appeal to modernity and today’s audience, it is simply incorrect. The women of the show work as switchboard operators at the National Telephone Company. Telephone switchboards connects circuits between telephones in order to connect calls, establishing necessary connections between people. “Cable,” as most people understand it in the modern day, has to do with over-the-air television signals. Thus, not telephones, nor connecting calls, and it worth noting as well that this type of cable was not developed until the late 40s, much later than 1928.

Not all is lost, though: in terms of feminism in the 20s, there seems to be some resonance there. Erin Holliday-Karre points out how “with suffrage won, the specific aims of feminism became unclear,” as the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920 in the United States, granting women the right to vote (323). English writer Virginia Woolf wrote of how feminism was dead at that point, and the general consensus and discourse of the time conceived, specifically American, women as “superficial flappers more concerned with fashion, drinking, and jazz than

with issues of equality” (Holliday-Karre 323). As World War I had just drawn to a close, however, the war had changed the relationship between men and women, as many women had participated in the war and fought for their country. A resurgence of work debating the truth of the prevailing consensus had begun since 1998, but it still remains that “the influence of women sexual reformers was so short-lived,” that not much work relays their influence in detail (Holliday-Karre 324). However, there was more social justice reform prevalent, with women’s organizations of the middle and working class rising, and even the social justice feminism movement continuing from its start in the 19th century (McGuire 225). These organizations pushed for labor legislation, moving from the court to the state level, and “legislation to protect working women and to abolish child labor especially reflected the social feminist orientation” (Lemons 85). It would make sense, then, for the women of *Las chicas del cable* to be so adamant about keeping their jobs and protecting their right to work. Unfortunately, this historically believable aspect fails to compensate for the other “feminist” aspects of the show.

While *Las chicas del cable* is widely reviewed positively as a reflection of modern feminism and is enjoyed by many, it is worth considering its flaws in order to understand how period dramas can operate as a nod to history, or a means of commercial gain. The very aspects that draw in its audience, such as the modern music used or the elaborate wardrobes of the characters, are what reflect the show’s negligence of historical accuracy. Ultimately, as Anneke Smelik points out in “Feminist Film Theory,” there has been an “important theoretical shift... from an understanding of cinema as reflecting reality, to a view of cinema as constructing a particular, ideological, view of reality” (491). The experiences of the women in *Las chicas del cable* resonated with so many who watched it, which is why it has been so widely regarded as paralleling feminist ideas of today. But in attempting to connect with both the past and the

present, the series gets stuck somewhere in between, with trying to reflect the reality of these women while appealing to the modern ideology of feminism. What results is an entertaining but inauthentic construction of the fact that women face many restrictions in their lives, both in the 1920s and today, and a watered-down declaration that they are worthy and deserving of the same freedoms as men.

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