

RESEARCH PAPER

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COMEDIA RANCHERA: A REACTIONARY GENRE OF MEXICAN CINEMA

UDK 791.2.01(721/727):316.7

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The paper focuses on the *comedia ranchera* genre of Mexican cinema, and especially two important films: *On the Big Ranch* and *Two Types of Care*. The genre is analyzed in view of its cultural, political and aesthetic significance in the post-revolutionary Mexico of the 1930s and 1950s, and through its reactionary and subversive features regarding the prevailing *indigenismo* art and culture of Mexico. Analysis of shot by shot sequences and the iconography of frames reveals that *comedia ranchera* is a distinctive genre of Mexican cinema, which can be seen as a reactionary ideological apparatus that echoes *porfirismo* and the old pre-revolutionary regime. The subversive potential of *comedia ranchera* is hidden cleverly beneath its stereotypical plots and stock characters, and particularly beneath the omnipresent theme of the love triangle. Comparing *comedia ranchera* to the Western showcases the main difference between heroes of the Western frontier and the rural, reactionary protagonists of *comedia ranchera*. Although aesthetically different in their visual representation, both *On the Big Ranch* and *Two Types of Care* emanate the reactionary paradigm: a class-based society marked by paternalism and Catholic conservatism.

Keywords: *indigenismo*, *comedia ranchera*, *charro*, reactionary, class, ideology, *porfirismo*.

This paper determines the distinctive features of the *comedia ranchera* genre, which are not only unique in the context of Mexican cinema, but also in relation to its genre counterparts in the West. These features relate to the notion of reactionary class doctrine represented within the genre, and to the reactionary ideology overwhelmingly present as the subtext in most of the genre's titles. Through analysis of the historical and political, but mainly cinematic contents present in *comedia ranchera*, the paper underlines the ideological, aesthetic and cultural significance of the genre that dominated Mexican cinematic output from the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, and continued to be produced until the mid-1950s. The films analyzed

are *On the Big Ranch* (*Allá en el Rancho Grande*, 1936) directed by Fernando de Fuentes, and *Two Types of Care* (*Dos Tipos de Cuidado*, 1953) directed by Ismael Rodríguez. The former is generally accepted as being the first *comedia ranchera*, while the latter can be seen as the genre's last significant output. The very last *comedia ranchera* was Miguel Morayta's *The Silk Stockings* (*Medias de Seda*) in 1955, but since it was a deliberate destruction of the fundamentals of the genre, and since it has been analyzed exhaustively elsewhere (such as by Kerry T. Hegerty in 2009) it will not be addressed here.

Comedia ranchera is linked to the post-revolutionary period of Mexican history, which was marked by a shift from an oligarchy to an alleged social state. This period of monopolistic power held by the *PRI* (Institutional Revolutionary Party) movement, led by Presidents Álvaro Obregón (inaugurator of the *indigenismo*), Plutarco Elías Calles (the atheist who fought *La Cristiada*—a civil war against rural catholic guerillas) and Lázaro Cárdenas (a land law reformer who created the new agrarian crisis), was also the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. The period was characterized by a cultural and ideological system known as *indigenismo*, which was coined in 1915 by Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio in his book *Forging the Nation* (*Forjando Patria*). Gamio presented *indigenismo* as the ideology of the new Mexican identity, forged from a mixture of the indigenous culture and that of *mestizo* (a mixed race of white and indigenous Mexicans) culture, established through the revolution. (Brading 1988: 78–80)

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The term was later present in the philosophy of Mexican Secretary of Public Education José Vasconcelos, and elaborated upon in his 1925 book *The Cosmic Race* (*La Raza Cósmica*) (Vasconcelos 1997: xiv). Vasconcelos became a patron of the new Mexican art, which was infused with *indigenismo* and known as *muralismo* (or Mexican mural painting in the West)—a large scale, fresco-like technique made famous by artists like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Starting in 1921, *muralismo* became the first outright *indigenismo* art in Mexico to elaborate visually the *mestizaje* (a mixture of races, cultures and mixed inheritance) that forged the Mexican Nation after the Revolution. Although *mestizaje* formally propagated racial and social egalitarianism, it was more a racial counter discourse to level the national identity, enabling the post-revolutionary rehabilitation of the indigenous population (Moreno Figueroa 2010: 390).

The amplification of the *mestizaje* paradigm during and after the Revolution was double-edged. On one hand, it overshadowed the racial and social side effects of *blanqueamiento* (the cultural and economic whitening of the *mestizo* identity) by stressing the equilibrium of racial issues in the nation-forming

process. On the other, it became a scapegoat for social and class immobility inherited from the nineteenth century land law reform, which created millions of employed *campesinos* and landless wage laborers known as *peones*.

In these circumstances, the emergence of a film genre that propagated values contrary to those of the Revolution, *indigenismo*, and *mestizaje* was unusual. *Comedia ranchera* emerged at the height of the *PRI* and *indigenismo* power as a relic of the *Porfiriato*—the era of Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship (1876–1911), which was an oligarchy, and a paternalistic society with elite class rule. *Porfiriato* was a result of the breakdown of the colonial economic and social system *encomienda*, which was substituted in rural de-colonized Mexico by the authoritarian *caciquismo* system (the power of local intermediaries, landlords, and bosses). *Caciquismo* was the significant ideological apparatus during *porfirismo*—the ideology of the *Porfiriato*, based on Comte's positivism and propagated by his ideologist José Yves Limantour, and Limantour's group *Los Científicos*. *Porfirismo* was dependent on the allegiance of the rural *hacendados* and their patriarchal position within rural society.

The research reveals that the *patron* in the *comedia ranchera* represented the *hacienda*, the patriarch of the estate, an employer and ruler over *campesinos* and *peones*, but also over the fates of subordinate men and women. As Olga Nájera-Ramírez notes in her important article "Engendering Nationalism: Identity, Discourse, and the Mexican Charro":

Despite socioeconomic and ethnic differences, then, the patriarchal hacienda system united men in their domination over women and fostered a paternalistic attitude towards those in the lower levels. Furthermore, movement within these social ranks was extremely limited and certainly had little to do with an individual's ability. Instead, class, gender, and ethnicity largely determined a person's place in society. (Nájera-Ramírez 1994: 3)

During *Porfiriato* these patriarchs became the cornerstone of the regime, forming an agrarian oligarchy self-named *los correctos* ("the right ones," or the elite), a term reserved for men from the elite Creole class. It is easy to see that White masculinity prevailed over *mestizo* masculinity, as well as over all feminine aspects (Raat 1973: 34). Thus, the ideological essence of *comedia ranchera* inscribes the context according to recent retrograde real-life developments, rather than through a conventional inheritance from the arts. Unlike the other prevailing genre of Mexican cinema, the melodrama, *comedia ranchera* didn't have roots in the literary milieu of the elite Creole Mexican society of the nineteenth century, and was more or less absent from the theatre at the turn of the twentieth century.

The protagonist of *comedia ranchera*—the *charro*—was present in nineteenth-century literature in the character of the bandit, present in *costumbrismo* novels like Luis G. Inclán's *Astucia* from 1865, and José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's *The Mangu Parrot (El Periquillo Sarniento)* from 1916 (Hegerty 2009: 90). However, as the analysis confirms, the bandit *charro* of novels eventually became the macho seducer in *comedia ranchera*. There is no evidence in *comedia ranchera* of any social rebellion from the *charro*; he never becomes Hobsbawm's social bandit, or a vigilante. The reasons for this absence of social banditry and lack of rebellion in the lower class directly relate to the intertwined relationship between the state, the Church and the class system. The Catholic Church was omnipresent during the political turmoil of the secular *la Reforma* period, which was led by the first indigenous President Benito Juárez (inaugurator of secular laws, disentailment and the secular Constitution of 1857). During the opportunistic period of *Porfiriato*, the regime never actually abolished these secular laws, but nor did it bolster them, keeping the Church as an authoritarian intermediary between the state and the rural provinces. The rural inhabitants were traditionally devoted Catholics, echoed in *comedia ranchera* through the stock characters of *criada*, and *gobernante*, but also through the iconography of the *charro* (e.g. rosaries, and the invocation of the Gods grace in the *cantos*). The Catholic values inscribed as the part of identity of *comedia ranchera* characters are further amplified during the *Cristero* rebellion of the 1920s, in which "the Catholic faithful rose up in rebellion against the post-revolutionary government that had sought to implement the anti-clerical provisions of the 1917 Constitution" (Davis 1992: 278). Catholicism's strength thus relied mostly on the rural and working classes and their traditional anti-modernizing stance, which was widespread in *comedia ranchera* byplays (the symbolism of Jorge's automobile in *Two Types of Care* being the most significant).

The name of the genre—*comedia ranchera*—translates variously in the literature (Knight 1994: 413) as ranch comedy, cowboy comedy, cowboy ballad, and rural comedy, but it is most appropriate to call the genre by its original Spanish name. The genre designates the settings of the rural landscape, or ranch, or *pueblo* (village), and usually incorporates musical elements, such as *canción rural* (traditional rural songs), *canción de charro* (*charro* songs), and *canción ranchera*, performed by a mariachi band. While *canción rural* is also present in the subgenre of melodrama known as *drama rural* (melodrama in a rural setting, with themes of poverty and class differences in a social context), *canción de charro* and *canción ranchera* became

a hallmark of the *comedia ranchera* and a distinctive feature of the genre (Díaz López and Fernández 2000: 35).

On a dramaturgical level, the genre always incorporates the characters of the *charro* (a *mestizo* from the lower class who works for or against the *patrón*), the *patrón* (a landowner and employer from the Creole elite class), and a *novia* (girlfriend or bride) or *la criada* (maid). These characters form a love triangle, with many subplots and byplays as the narrative builds. Along with the characters of the *gobernanta* (governess), *peones* (day laborers) and *campesinos* (employed peasants) the love triangle of *charro/patrón/novia* not only establishes the stock characters of *comedia ranchera*, but also constructs the archetype of the genre for its 30 year duration. Kerry T. Hegerty also notes that the *mujer pura* (pure woman), the archetypal female character in *comedia ranchera*, highlights the rural innocence of the setting, and the moral perfection that echoes the colonial discourse of *la perfecta casada* (the perfect married woman) (Hegerty 2009: 98). The *charro* (being from a lesser social and racial class) was often hailed as the revolutionary unifier of the nation in earlier works on the subject (such as those by Carlos Monsiváis), but new analyses (by Kerry Hegerty and Carlos J. Mora) reveal this character to be a reactionary subject.

The uniqueness of *comedia ranchera* established a context in which Mexican cinema diverged completely from its Hollywood and European counterparts, and, more importantly, from other Mexican cinema. Beginning in 1936 with *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (*On the Big Ranch*), directed by Fernando de Fuentes, *comedia ranchera* established itself as real Mexican originality. This film is significant for its screenplay, co-written by Guz Águila (the stage name of *revista*¹ author Antonio Guzmán Aguilera), who was the real father of the *comedia ranchera* genre, writing hundreds of skits for his theatre company, which toured Mexico in the early 1920s. Guz Águila fell from grace in the *indigenismo* decade of Mexican history, when President Álvaro Obregón (the *patrón* of *indigenismo* art and *muralismo* painting) imprisoned him for his anti-revolutionary sentiments (Kanellos 1993: 253). This is important to the analysis of *comedia ranchera*'s distinctiveness, because traditional values, religion, economic positivism and the old regime became features of the genre, which were prohibited in the *indigenismo* era and in the times of President Plutarco Elías Calles' anti-clerical and pro-labor rights period (1924–1928).

¹ A revue in a journal or periodical, often with subversive and highly critical content.

Guz Águila returned in the 1930s, finally striking success with de Fuentes in creating the *comedia ranchera* genre. *On the Big Ranch* featured Gabriel Figueroa as its cinematographer, in his first feature after his apprenticeship with Gregg Toland in the United States. Figueroa, who later shot some of the milestones of Mexican cinema (*Maria Candelaria*, *Los Olvidados*, *Río Escondido*) established evocative visuals reminiscent of Eisenstein's *¡Que viva México!* and Eduard Tisse's facial close-ups, cut-ins to the legs, tracking shots of peasants, long shadows and *chiaroscuro* contrasts. De Fuentes showcased the *ranchero* (the Mexican equivalent of the Hollywood western's cowboy) as a singing/seducing *charro* (a flamboyantly dressed macho horseman with a guitar), moving from the conventional male of the melodrama (a sexual object for women) towards a witty and cunning class exponent in *comedia ranchera*. This shift of masculinity simultaneously downgrades femininity in the genre, since its female characters established a stereotypical, paternalistic view of women.

On the Big Ranch is a story about José and Felipe, the former a *patrón* and the owner of the *Rancho Grande* household, and the latter the ranch's *gerente* (manager/accountant). The plot begins when they are both enamored of Cruzita (the *gobernanta*'s daughter), who is represented as *la criada* and a sexual object for both men. Tito Guízar, who plays Felipe, became the prototype of the *charro*, and hundreds of *comedia ranchera* that followed emulated his portrayal of traditional, rural *charro* values in defiance of the leftist modernizing tendencies that emerged in the cities (Fehrenbach 2000: 57). The film ends in concordance with the ideological state apparatus: José recedes, and marries a woman from his own social class, while Felipe and Cruzita marry each other and order is preserved. This preserved order is a distinctive feature of *comedia ranchera*, since the film depicts the post-revolutionary Mexico of Obregón, and establishes the masculinity and machismo principles that echo the patriarchy of the *porfirismo*.

The genre itself was an anomaly, produced in the age of *indigenista* culture and eulogizing the regime abolished by the Mexican Revolution. The enormous success of *comedia ranchera* indicated that the audience yearned for an old regime lifestyle and the milieu of the *Porfiriato*. This reactionary notion is useful when comparing Hollywood Westerns and *comedia ranchera*. The link between the two genres is their protagonist: the Western's free-willed cowboy, and the *ranchera*'s singing *charro*. In their visual representation, both genres tend towards rural settings, stock characters and an overtly stereotypical image of women. The difference

is in their ideological and class issues. Carl. J. Mora, an authority on this subject, writes:

The American cowboy picture was a popularization of the Turner thesis of the expansion and conquest of the frontier: the rugged individualist confronting a hostile and primitive environment and overcoming it through sheer will power, thus ensuring the extension of democratic institutions. (Mora 2012: 45)

Thus the Western was an ideological apparatus rather than reactionary one, the latter being the case with *comedia ranchera*. While the *novia* or *criada* characters can be analogous with the main female characters in Westerns, with their moral and religious virtues (excluding the character of the *whore with the heart of gold*), the *charro* and *patrón* characters of *comedia ranchera* are not analogous with the cowboy and tyrant characters of the Western. The political and social class context is what sets them apart: the Western hailed US democracy and opposed the tyranny of the local bosses, while *comedia ranchera* hailed the *porfirismo* and colonial *encomienda*. Westerns displayed the liberal worldview of the free individual, and *comedia ranchera* highlighted the reactionary view of the class system and social immobility.

The cowboy in the Western works against systematic obstruction of local politics, and oppression of any kind. Conversely, the *charro* is a worker fighting battles of love, not politics, oppression or the tyranny or the system. Paradoxically, director de Fuentes who created Mexican political films *El prisionero trece* (*Prisoner 13*) in 1932, and *Compadre Mendoza* (*Godfather Mendoza*) in 1934, initiated the new *comedia ranchera* genre, which worked along reactionary lines.

The class system in *comedia ranchera* is the real essence of the genre—although it is concealed beneath the love triangle plot and melodramatic necessities—and makes it subversive of the established post-revolutionary order. Since the old regime was abolished with the Mexican Revolution, the old class system was obsolete in *indigenismo* ideology, and to re-evoke it through *comedia ranchera* was an attempt to restore the bygone colonial discourse. This is a distinctive feature of *comedia ranchera* in the context of Mexican cinema, as melodrama, historical epics and *rumberas* (dance melodramas) never achieved this reactionary subversive potential.

Curiously, Figueroa's cinematography accented these subversions, especially with his constant use of deep-focus shots, which develop a unity between the setting and its characters. This echoes a similar technique deployed in Eisenstein's *¡Que viva México!*, especially in the novella "Sandunga",

although their aims were different: Eisenstein and Tisse inaugurated *indigenismo* and Figueroa and de Fuentes resurrected colonial discourse and *porfirismo*. Deep-focus shots combined with tracking shots and edited with an action-reaction sequence construct opposing class representatives in a unique way: José and Felipe are the action-reaction triggers, emphasized in 2/3 of the film by parallel montage. José, a *criollo* white man is symbolic of the oligarchy of the *porfirismo*, while Felipe, a *mestizo* and a *peón* (landless peasant) represents the oppressed class in pre-revolutionary Mexico. Deep-focus shots, especially in full shot and medium shot sequences, visually narrate the *encomienda* paradigm (that of the class system), deliberately represented as being rooted in the mentality of the land and its inhabitants.

Particularly important is the sequence of shots using the cut-in technique. This begins with a deep-focus panoramic view of the countryside and the *campesinos*, before the camera cuts in on the legs, zooming to focus on the *zapatos pesados* (heavy working shoes). The camera then moves from its stationary position into a tracking shot, continues with a cut-in shot of José's slick and elegant boots, and opens up with a full shot of the *patrón*'s office. This elaborate visual merging of subjects reveals the fundamental order in *comedia ranchera*: the *patrón* is inconceivable without the *campesinos*, and vice versa. *Zapatos pesados* are the real icon of the film, not the love triangle; the heavy shoes of the *peones* and *campesinos* reflect the notion that the lower class will always be an immobile majority in the hands of the elite (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: *On the Big Ranch*. Cut-in of the *zapatos pesados* (left) worn by *campesinos* and Creole boots worn by the *patrón* (right) illustrate the class representation elaborated in the film.

If *On the Big Ranch* was the beginning of the *comedia ranchera* era, another film from the genre—Ismael Rodríguez's *Dos tipos de Cuidado* (*Two Types*

(*of Care*) from 1953—announces its end. The film itself has a bewildering plot, unprecedented in the *comedia ranchera* milieu: first, the story begins with a retrospective, which *comedia ranchera* almost never does; and second, the film introduces a second *charro* character and omits the *patron*, ending the convention of the class/love triangle.

Two Types of Care opens with a Prologue in the form of a trailer and in the manner of a 1940s Hollywood crime film, although the trailer is not a feature of *comedia ranchera*. This, together with long retrospectives and flashback insets, betrays the conventions of the genre, but also shows the circularity of the features from other genres that finally destroyed the dominance and resistance of *comedia ranchera*. The film's title is also bewildering, since *cuidado* means care, danger, and attention, and English translations are not unified in the literature. Hart's translation is *Two Types of Care*, Macías-González and Rubinstein translate the title as *Two Rowdy Guys*, and IMDB uses *Two Dangerous Fellows*. This is not a trivial matter, since the story reveals the ambiguity indicated by the title. The very existence of the two *charros* in a genre designated to have one is a deliberate subversion of its fundamentals.

The plot is complicated, and the audience follows three lines of narrative. First, the love battle between the two *charros*, Jorge and Pedro, for the girl Rosario. Jorge wins at first, but his reputation for being a womanizer drives Rosario into the arms of Pedro, and the two marry. The second narrative depicts Jorge as a wealthy *charro*, since he drives a car and has a successful business. The third narrative follows Pedro as a rural *charro*, incapable of success and a relic of the old regime. Jorge's success in business is in binary opposition to Pedro's failure, and the former's bad luck in love opposes the latter's success with the *femme fatale* Rosario.

However, a class issue is brought forward by positioning each *charro* within the social strata of post-revolutionary Mexico. Jorge, who is not a real *charro* in terms of his social position and the *comedia ranchera* convention (he owns a car, buys a ranch, and heads for Mexico City's business scene) is revealed not to be the true *haciendado/patron* of the classic *ranchera*, but a newly formed post-revolutionary monopolist (he owns the concession for the water supply). This notion links him directly to the *Porfiriato* oligarchy, which exploited the fallen *encomienda* by appropriating the agricultural industry and basic commodities like water and gas. The film's subversiveness lies in its hidden agenda, found in retrospectives and byplays; we take for granted that Jorge is a *charro* because of the plot designation of his character, and because he is a *canto* singer and dresses in the flamboyant *charro* manner.

The byplays, such as buying a ranch, owning a car and controlling the water supply, amplify the notion that Jorge is from the ruling class, and that his romantic adventures will eventually lead him to marry a woman from his own social strata.

Pedro, too, is a non-traditional *charro*: he is a drunkard, womanizer, and misogynist, frustrated by his economic difficulties and by Jorge's financial success. However, in the context of class representation, Pedro is a *charro* by virtue of his social position as a *peon*—a landless and moneyless peasant. The film lacks a classical script, and most sequences are built as situation comedy, improvised on set by Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete (1940s Mexican cinema stars), who play the two *charros* (see Figure 2). The *cantos* (songs) from the film have become folk standards in Mexico, and are filled with intrigue, competitiveness and bickering, echoing the unusual plot of this *comedia ranchera*. The final sequences subversively contain the "best friend" agenda, when the two *charros* realize that it is not the woman they cannot live without, but rather each other and their competitive intrigues. In his important 1973 study *La condición del cine mexicano*, Jorge Ayala Blanco offers a reading of the two *charros'* relationship as a latent homosexual subversion, hidden in a correlation with misogyny. This notion is, however, visually absent and iconographically inconclusive.

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Figure 2. *Two Types of Care*. Pedro Infante (left) and Jorge Negrete (right) playing the two *charros*.

The final sequence of shots reveals the film's true nature. After its exhausting three way narrative, the plot unites in an ensemble dance-music finale, announced through extreme close-ups of the two *charros* and of the

campesinos. The camera then shifts into a circular tracking shot, filmed from a low angle. This establishes the three opposing groups of subjects: *campesinos*, women, and the two *charros*, who are withheld until the very last shot, filmed from an ascending crane and ending with a wide shot. This deliberately choreographed sequence is a visual advocacy of the class representation in the film: women are stereotypically represented as objects within its macho agenda; *mariachi* and *campesinos* are retained within the immobility of their social class; and the two *charros* act as the only mediators between the two. This is obvious in the final sequence: the *charros* flirt with women, while singing the *cantos* with the *mariachi*. The camera makes magnificent use of reverse cuts and jump cuts, disorienting the audience with cut-ins on food, *sangria* and musical instruments that elaborate the role of the two *charros*—mediators between, but not unifiers of, the social strata.

If Figueroa's *On the Big Ranch* is a cinematographic masterpiece, *Two Types of Care* can be viewed as its opposite. While Figueroa used wide shots and mid shots, sequencing their rhythm to emphasize the collective and the pertinence of the setting, in *Two Types of Care* Nacho Torres overused the American shot, allowing the stationary camera dominance in dialogues within the ¾-frame rule. While de Fuentes and Figueroa distanced themselves from the aesthetics of the Western, Rodríguez and Torres deliberately amassed its traits to inaugurate masculinity as the conservative ideological agency. One of those traits is the overuse of low angle shots, emphasizing the *charros* and their dominance, especially during the *cantos*, where panning is utilized to subordinate the surroundings to male primacy.

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Finally, the link between *On the Big Ranch* and *Two Types of Care* is evident in the aforementioned final sequence of the latter, wherein the camera shifts from its stationary routine into circular tracking and reverse cutting to emphasize the class iconography. Another similarity between the two films, and between all films in the *comedia ranchera* genre, is in the reactionary doctrine that lies behind their plots. Evidence of this can be seen in the portrayal of Pedro. As Hart notes, when situated in the urban milieu of the bar, Pedro is seen as a drunkard and a bad guy with a violent temper; transposed to the milieu of the ranch, he becomes part of the bourgeois society of the Mexican old regime (Hart 2004: 38–39). As is the case with *On the Big Ranch*, the denouement of *Two Types of Care* echoes a *porfirismo* agenda and a reactionary class context. This means, as elaborated, that *comedia ranchera* is finally revealed as reactionary genre, juxtaposed in the post-revolutionary *indigenismo* milieu as a regressive, conservative, and

paternalistic tendency to re-establish the traditional oligarchic, Catholic and conservative order.

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