

## Graeme Doyle, The Cunningham Dax Collection and Surrealist Discourse

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In this paper I will discuss the interpretation of art by people with experience of mental illness. I begin by examining two approaches, one which emerges from within the discipline of psychiatry and the other from the work of French surrealists. I point out the benefits and limitations of both before moving to discuss the paintings and drawings of Graeme Doyle, an artist, poet and performer whose work forms part of the Cunningham Dax Collection of Art, Creativity and Education in Mental Health located in Melbourne, Australia. The question I will pose is as follows: could the work of an artist such as Graeme Doyle suggest a new set of interpretive strategies and insights that relativise the existing discourse about art and mental health?

The discipline of psychiatry has long taken an interest in art works produced by individuals with experience of mental illness.<sup>1</sup> However, it was only during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that significant advances were made in the understanding of such material. A common approach among early researchers was to analyse the works through a system of taxonomic classification, whereby they were categorised on the basis of the mental illness they referred to. This approach, which viewed the art as completely outside the realm of normal or common experience, had a lasting legacy into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hans Prinzhorn, for example, in his 1922 text *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, argued that

The schizophrenic... is detached from humanity, and by definition is neither willing nor able to re-establish contact with it... We sense in our pictures the complete autistic isolation and the gruesome solipsism that far exceeds the limits of psychopathic alienation...<sup>2</sup>

Prinzhorn was a pioneer in that he avoided reading the works as the direct expression of illness. Nevertheless, by asserting that there were essential, identifiable features of art by people with mental illness he presumed that the most relevant context for understanding the art was the distorted, inner world of the author's mind rather than other factors such as a work's social or historical context. This approach, which saw the art as evidence of a deficiency in the creator, also went against any interpretation that such works possessed artistic autonomy.<sup>3</sup>

Although some medical professionals put forward alternatives to this approach, such ideas continued to inform many psychiatric discussions of art after World War II. In his 1953 book *Experimental Studies in Psychiatric Art*, the then Chairman of the Victorian Mental Hygiene Authority, E. Cunningham Dax, maintained that 'the same syndromes are seen in the paintings as in the clinical examinations, as for instance... the characteristic disorder of thought in



schizophrenia.<sup>4</sup> Dax's attitude was manifest in the original display of his collection of works produced by patients in psychiatric hospitals in categories according to the mental illness of the author. As Dax has argued, he was interested 'merely in the painting as an expression of the particular sort of illness.'<sup>5</sup> Many years have passed since the inception of the Dax collection, which is now housed under the auspices of the Mental Health Research Institute of Victoria. The collection, which has responded to more recent thinking about the display of this art and has repudiated an exclusive focus on psychiatric interpretation, now exhibits the multiple dimensions of creative work. This is reflected in the exhibition space, where the display is divided into two groups:

The Cunningham Dax Collection considers the first group as 'therapeutic art' and views them with a primarily clinical emphasis. Artistic merit may be considered with other aspects of the work. The second group of works is viewed primarily as art with clinical considerations being considered with other aspects of the work.<sup>6</sup>

Several works by the Melbourne artist Graeme Doyle, whose work I discuss below, are currently exhibited in the latter section of the gallery, including a work of 2001 titled *Grockles Sitting on his Putt Putt Putty* [fig. 1].<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 1: Graeme Doyle, *Grockles Sitting On His Putt Putt Putty*, digital print of original drawing reworked with correction fluid and ink on paper, 39 x 26.5 cm, c. 2001, Cunningham Dax Collection, Parkville. Courtesy of the artist.



The staff at the Dax collection are to be commended for renovating their curatorial approach, in particular for their recent efforts to mount temporary exhibitions of individual artists.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, a potential difficulty with the current division of the permanent collection is in suggesting that while the artistic and the clinical do overlap, ideally they are best kept separate. A remaining difficulty is raised by the collection's supporting didactic material. The website argues that:

Viewers should regard the works as giving them a privileged insight into the world of people suffering from mental illnesses and should not diminish their creative efforts by treating the works as bizarre or simply as a source of fascination.<sup>9</sup>

I argue, on the contrary, that it is precisely because some of these works are bizarre and fascinating that they have status as creative works, and in turn, can give insight into the artist's experience of mental illness. How else, we might ask, can we look at Graeme Doyle's works, many of which represent faces undergoing what appears to be a diabolical process of transformation? As the artist himself is well aware, these images are 'very disturbing.'<sup>10</sup> For all of its important insights, the psychiatric model - insofar as it is manifest in the permanent display of the Cunningham Dax Collection at the time of writing - has its limitations as an approach to this art.

An alternative model is provided by the French surrealist movement, which saw creative works by people with mental illness as art to be praised and imitated. In 1924, Max Morise typically argued: 'Let us admire the lunatics... who manage to impart fixity to their most fleeting visions, in the same way the man dedicated to Surrealism tends to do...'<sup>11</sup> Certain artists within the surrealist group appropriated the work of those with mental illness. Max Ernst knew the Prinzhorn collection and brought a copy of Prinzhorn's book, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, to Paris as a present for Paul Eluard in 1922. His *Oedipus* of 1924 shows evidence of borrowings from August Natterer's *Miraculous Shepherd*, a work dated prior to 1919 and held in the Prinzhorn Collection.<sup>12</sup> Through such efforts, the surrealists were entering into a debate with the psychiatric establishment in France. As Adam Jolles argues in his 1998 article 'Paranoiac Pictures and Delusional Discourse,' the surrealists opposed the 'constitutionalist' paradigm in contemporary psychiatry, which saw irrational behaviour as irrefutable proof of illness, by positing madness as 'a nexus of symbols.'<sup>13</sup> By simulating observable symptoms of illness in their own work through the use of chemicals or sleep deprivation, the surrealists challenged the link between madness and psychological deficiency. Some surrealists even argued that art and literature by people with mental illness has an element of *deliberate* refusal within it. Antonin Artaud argued as follows: 'what is an authentic madman? It is a man who preferred to become mad, in the socially accepted sense of the word, rather than forfeit a certain superior idea of human honour.'<sup>14</sup>



The position of certain individuals among the surrealists was problematic. As Roger Cardinal argues, although André Breton encouraged artists to imitate the irrationality he saw in the work of people with mental illness, he also believed that ‘the surrealist creator was expected not to flounder about as an object of delirium but to retain the poise of the stable subject.’<sup>15</sup> In other words, Breton looked at the experience of madness from a safe distance. Furthermore, as psychiatric studies and personal accounts of people with mental illness demonstrate, an individual experiencing psychosis is rarely in a position to freely choose their delusions and hallucinations.

In spite of these problems, the value of the surrealist experiment has been in breaking down the absolute boundary between the mentally ill and the non-mentally ill. Within the surrealist group there was a talented individual, Artaud, who was later diagnosed with a mental illness, and the surrealists’ work has helped us to acknowledge that among the work of individuals suffering from various forms of mental illness most deploy skills familiar to those judged sane. A corollary of this, and a factor that is rarely considered in the literature on this subject, is the influence artistic movements such as surrealism have had on the work produced by individuals experiencing mental illness. It is to this influence that I will now turn in my discussion of Graeme Doyle.

Graeme Doyle was born in 1947 in Melbourne. He is a regularly exhibiting artist who is represented in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia and has two degrees in Fine Art from the Phillip Institute of Technology. As a young man he was admitted to the Larundel psychiatric hospital in Bundoora. Doyle’s experience of mental illness, which included a diagnosis of schizophrenia, has caused the artist a great deal of suffering. In several interviews and written texts he stresses the formidable personal difficulty of that experience.<sup>16</sup> Although he emphasises the down side of psychiatric drugs prescribed to cure him, Doyle also argues that these are what enable him to continue to produce art.<sup>17</sup>

A recurrent theme in Doyle’s work is the self-portrait. In these extraordinary and often chilling works, the artist’s head is distorted and takes on all kinds of monstrous shapes, seemingly oscillating between a face and a series of unrecognisable objects, so that the identity of the figure is fractured irreparably. Such work is certainly amenable to analysis from a psychiatric perspective. Doyle speaks about these works as a way of ‘exorcising demons,’ strongly suggesting that they speak to a therapeutic process related to the experience of mental illness.<sup>18</sup> We might take this as a cue to articulate what they reveal about the experience of mental illness, for example the bizarre delusions, prominent hallucinations, incoherent thinking and inappropriate emotional response clinically associated with schizophrenia.<sup>19</sup> In what follows I propose to go down a different path by connecting these works to surrealism. This is not because that movement had a privileged insight into the actual experience of mental illness. Rather, I argue that if Doyle’s work has anything at all to tell us about the experience of mental illness, it needs to



be understood within the artistic tradition of surrealism. In interviews Doyle quotes the work of Australian painters Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker as major influences, particularly for their use of colour. These artists had, in turn, been significantly affected by the European surrealist heritage.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in speaking of the French surrealist painters and poets, Doyle recently commented that he feels so close to their work that he 'could have been one of them.'<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 2: Graeme Doyle, *Hairy Harry the Happy Head*, digital print of original drawing reworked with correction fluid and ink on paper, 39 x 26.5 cm, c. 2001, Cunningham Dax Collection, Parkville. Courtesy of the artist.



*Hairy Harry the Happy Head* is an undated drawing in the Cunningham Dax Collection [fig 2]. To create this work the artist digitally reproduced and enlarged one of his own ink drawings, placed a reversed transparency of the work over the original, copied it again, and then added further black ink lines and white correction pen to highlight, transform or diminish certain areas. At a technical level the work is simultaneously a reproduced image and an original image, machine-made and man-made, both multiple and unique. The place where this is most immediately visible is in the original frame created during the process of scanning the drawing, a frame which Doyle has subsequently broken in his later additions of ink marks. At the level of visible subject matter, the work shows a seemingly endless proliferation of faces. We can identify at least eight beings, from the cat-like growling face at the bottom, to the chipmunk face between the same two eyes, the human face on the larger face's nose, and the more mysterious abstract faces in the upper regions.

Identity is suspect in this work at both the level of technique and of subject matter. The work has an ambiguous identity, prompting us to question whether it is more properly considered a drawing, print, or photograph, and the portrait in the image has an uncontainable quality of proliferation. The identity of this work, with its endless possible permutations, redounds upon the viewer. This troubling of identity in the image is not something invented by Doyle but can be observed in the work of surrealist artists. As David Lomas has pointed out in *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity*, through various techniques including automatism and simulation, and through exploring the uncanny and abjection, Joan Miró, Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí dispensed with the traditional language of self. As Lomas puts it, the surrealists 'succeeded in radically challenging and destabilising the dominant forms of Western subjectivity.'<sup>22</sup> One of several methods of producing this effect was the technique of 'tracing,' where the artist created a work by elaborating on the traces inadvertently left on a piece of paper by previously sketched images. By mechanically re-appropriating elements of his own drawing through this tracing method in preparing his famous 1925 picture *The Birth of the World*, Miró exhibited an understanding of authorial presence similar to that later put forward by Jacques Derrida – as absence.<sup>23</sup> Similarly in Doyle, the reversing, doubling, re-inscribing and cancelling of his own photographically reproduced work relativises the idea of the authorial subject's presence, scattering it across space and time – misaligning the trace by doubling in space, deranging the origin of the trace by doubling it in time.

The most striking affinity between Doyle and Miró is in the latter's *Self-Portrait* of 1937-60. In this work, Miró traced a large scale self-portrait, which had been produced by looking into a concave mirror which distorted and magnified the face's features, and then later drew over it with a thick graffitied line. As Lomas comments, this embodies Georges Bataille's notion of the 'familiar dissolving into the strange, and ourselves with it.'<sup>24</sup> Doyle's drawn and traced self-portraits exhibit a similarly alienated and defamiliarised conception of individual identity. Doyle's



concept of the self is also expressed in his poetry: 'A man is like an argument not backed up by any proof.'<sup>25</sup> Identity, the artist points out, is a product of language, of continual re-inscription, something that exists in and through time. There is no mathematical equation wherein subjectivity exists in a steady state, valid for eternity.

*Rembrandt and Rave*, another series by Doyle, was exhibited in the 2006 show *For Matthew and Others: Journeys With Schizophrenia* held in Sydney, where works by people with mental illness were displayed alongside the work of Australian artists such as Albert Tucker with no reported experience of such illness.<sup>26</sup> This curatorial decision, although controversial, was particularly fitting in Doyle's case, not only because he cites Tucker as an artistic influence but also because Doyle exhibited there his own surrealist-inspired, investigative study of the artistic tradition of the self-portrait. In *Rembrandt and Rave* Doyle digitally photographed, enlarged, and traced over by hand with ink and correction pen a series of self-portrait etchings by Rembrandt [fig. 3].



Fig. 3: Graeme Doyle, *Rembrandt and Rave*, correction pen and ink on digital laser copy (of artist's own drawing), 30 x 42.2 cm, 2006, collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

How are we to understand this re-inscription of the famous Dutch artist's work? Rembrandt's works seem to possess a striking naturalism. In the *Self-Portrait with Angry Expression* of 1630, we appear to see the identity of the artist laid bare, not only due to the simplicity of the garment, the unruliness of the hair, but also the apparently frank expression of



anger on the face indicated by glowering eyes and pressed lips. All this is achieved in a technique which looks hasty and unfinished, closer to an artist of the nineteenth or twentieth century than of the artist's own time. When we investigate further, however, it is clear that these works cannot be viewed through the lens of modern understandings of self-picturing. As Ernst van der Wetering argues, these works were certainly perceived by contemporary viewers as portraits of the famous artist, but also to some degree as anonymous 'tronies' or heads embodying allegorical meanings such as bellicosity, piety, youth, and so on.<sup>27</sup> The etchings were also intended to be used as studies of emotions that could be used in future paintings, as we see when we compare Rembrandt's etching *Self Portrait Open Mouthed* with the painting *Self Portrait as a Beggar* of 1630. When one of Rembrandt's pupils passed this technique onto his own students, he advised them to compose self portraits imitating the emotional state of one of their intended figures: 'thus must one reshape oneself entirely into an actor... in front of a mirror, being both exhibitor and beholder.'<sup>28</sup> In other words, we shouldn't see these works as private moments of unmediated expression but rather as an instance of mimicry intended to inhabit the space of an other in a later composition.

Through his re-working of these images the Melbourne artist reveals an intriguing dimension of Rembrandt's portraits. Doyle has expressed enormous respect for Rembrandt's work, and describes the artist as a genius with a colossal intellect and a profound sense of humanity. At the same time, he insists that his own reworkings of Rembrandt are neither a homage to, nor cannibalisation of, the earlier artist's work. Rather, he describes his *Rembrandt and Rave* series as informed by a spirit of playfulness, an instance of 'using' another artist's work.<sup>29</sup> Exploiting the tension that exists in Rembrandt's self-portraits, that between their direct presentation of the author's subjectivity and their mask-like quality of mimicry, Doyle has copied, resized and inscribed the etchings of Rembrandt, using the 'found' template of the Rembrandt original as the basis for his own elaboration. In the process, the image becomes a Rembrandt-Doyle. The seventeenth-century artist's image is doubled and transformed, becoming other to itself.<sup>30</sup> But Doyle has not changed or made over Rembrandt in his own image; rather he has revealed an otherwise hidden dimension of Rembrandt's work – the production of an image of self that is not-itself.

In another work from the series *Rembrandt and Rave*, the image of Rembrandt taken from the *Angry Expression* portrait has been reversed, copied, elaborated and drawn over once again with ink and correction pen [fig. 4]. This split subjectivity renders the figure of Rembrandt, like that of Doyle, as double. Both are artists in the here and now; both are alienated, murdered by finitude. The works they produce will be subject to the eyes of others, read by others, and open to alterity. This knowledge allows Doyle to suspend Rembrandt and himself in a movement between past and present, presence and absence. In so doing, he refutes the notion of subject as



origin. He reveals in this work that artists are bound to a play between presence and the alienation of belatedness, a situation that none are in a position to control.



Fig. 4: Graeme Doyle, *Rembrandt and Rave*, correction pen and ink on digital laser copy (of artist's own drawing) 30 x 42.2 cm, 2006, collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Thomas Szasz argues that the currently prevailing concepts of genius and madness closely resemble each other, except in one important respect: individuals in the former category are presumed to have full control over their minds and those in the latter are viewed as out of control.<sup>31</sup> One of my intentions in this essay has been to demonstrate that this opposition, which continues to structure the debate on art and mental illness today, is in urgent need of deconstruction. The insights of Doyle, in particular, demonstrate that this polarity in prevailing theories of the mind no longer holds. One of the principal ideas behind the surrealists' exploration of automatism, and their interest in the experience of mental illness, was to demonstrate that no individual is in full control of their thoughts, words and works. In so doing they shattered the distinction between sane and insane art. The power of Doyle's work is that it continues this work of de-definition, and the point of my argument has been that we must re-think such distinctions before we attempt to move any further in understanding the work of those who experience mental illness, and the relationship between 'madness' and creativity.

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<sup>1</sup> For a general history see John MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Hans Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1972), 266. Quoted in Hal Foster, 'Blinded Insights: On the Modernist Reception of the Art of the Mentally Ill,' *October* 97 (2001), 8.

<sup>3</sup> See Mark Gisbourne, 'French Clinical Psychiatry and the Art of the Untrained Mentally Ill,' in Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr., eds, *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1994), 236. See also Inge Jadi, 'Points of View – Perspectives – Horizons,' in *Beyond Reason - Art and Psychosis: Works from the Prinzhorn Collection* (London: The South Bank Centre, 1996), 31. An early exception to this tendency within psychiatric discourse was the work of Marcel Reja, whose *L'art chez les fous* of 1907 evaluated works according to aesthetic criteria. As David Lomas has argued, Reja's approach 'was not easily reconciled with the institutional power and authority wielded by psychiatrists,' and accordingly Reja's pioneering efforts are to some extent the exception that proves the rule about psychiatrists and art. David Lomas, *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 62.

<sup>4</sup> E. Cunningham Dax, *Experimental Studies in Psychiatric Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 1953) 92.

<sup>5</sup> E. Cunningham Dax, quoted in Belinda Robson, 'A History of the Cunningham Dax Collection of "Psychiatric Art": From Art Therapy to Public Education,' *Health and History* vol. 1, no. 4, 1999, 344.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.daxcollection.org.au/approach.html> viewed 3/16/2007 6:25pm.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.daxcollection.org.au/graemedoyle.html> viewed 3/17/2007 10:32 am. See also [http://www.union.unimelb.edu.au/gpq/2006/2006\\_02\\_outsidein/index.html](http://www.union.unimelb.edu.au/gpq/2006/2006_02_outsidein/index.html) viewed 8/30/2007 9:08 am.

<sup>8</sup> I refer in particular to the exhibition *Outside In: An Exhibition and Short Film Featuring Graeme Doyle and Renee Sutton* held at the University of Melbourne's George Paton Gallery in 2006. See



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the website at [http://www.union.unimelb.edu.au/gpg/2006/2006\\_02\\_outsidein/index.html](http://www.union.unimelb.edu.au/gpg/2006/2006_02_outsidein/index.html) viewed 8/30/2007 9:08 am.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.daxcollection.org.au/approach.html> viewed 3/16/2007 6:25 pm.

<sup>10</sup> Graeme Doyle, quoted in Carrie Kennedy, *Collected Thoughts: Graeme Doyle*, DVD (Parkville: Cunningham Dax Collection, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Max Morise, 'The Enchanted Gaze,' in *La Révolution Surréaliste*, no. 1 (1924), 27. Quoted in Roger Cardinal, 'Surrealism and the Paradigm of the Creative Subject,' in *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 96-7.

<sup>12</sup> Cardinal, 'Surrealism and the Paradigm of the Creative Subject,' 105.

<sup>13</sup> Adam Jolles, 'Paranoiac Pictures and Delusional Discourse: The Surrealist Challenge to French Psychiatric Authority,' *Chicago Art Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1998), 47.

<sup>14</sup> Antonin Artaud, 'Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society,' in *Selected Writings*, trans. Helen Weaver, ed. and intro. Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 485, quoted in MacGregor, *Art of the Insane*, 284. See Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 217. The most extreme formulation of this view has been the anti-psychiatry position of R. D. Laing, who argued that madness was a 'creative response to an untenable world,' quoted in Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, 217

<sup>15</sup> Cardinal, 'Surrealism and the Paradigm of the Creative Subject,' 97.

<sup>16</sup> 'Once you cross that line into the nether world of mental illness, it's extremely painful.' Quoted in 'Pictures of Mental Health,' *Melbourne Yarra Leader*, May 20 (2002), 6.

<sup>17</sup> 'He has been on and off medication.... sometimes enduring terrible side effects.' See Rachel Kleinman, 'In a Better Headspace,' *Melbourne Yarra Leader*, May 19 (2003), 12; Kennedy, *Collected Thoughts*, DVD.

<sup>18</sup> Kennedy, *Collected Thoughts*, DVD.

<sup>19</sup> See Sidney Bloch and Bruce S. Singh, *Understanding Troubled Minds: A Guide to Mental Illness and its Treatment* (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 1997), 163-64.

<sup>20</sup> Kennedy, *Collected Thoughts*, DVD.

<sup>21</sup> Personal communication, 18 September, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Lomas, *The Haunted Self*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Lomas, *The Haunted Self*, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Lomas, *The Haunted Self*, 201. We could also compare this to André Breton's idea of identity, in which the author is alienated from his or her own textual products. As Kendall Johnson argues 'Breton's subject becomes a shuttlecock, batted between the cause and effect of the author and the text.' See Johnson, 'Haunting Transcendence: The Strategy of Ghosts in Bataille and Breton,' *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 45, no. 3 (Autumn 1999), 347-370.



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<sup>25</sup> This line is taken from the poem 'Like a clown in a mirror his heart is for his own' by Graeme Doyle, which accompanies *Grockles Sitting on His Putt Putt Putty* (2001) at the Cunningham Dax Collection, Parkville.

<sup>26</sup> See *For Matthew and Others: Journeys with Schizophrenia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Ernst van de Wetering, 'The Multiple Functions of Rembrandt's Self Portraits,' in Christopher White and Quentin Buvelot, eds, *Rembrandt by Himself* (London: National Gallery Publications; The Hague: Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, 1999), 21.

<sup>28</sup> Wetering, 'The Multiple Functions of Rembrandt's Self Portraits,' 21.

<sup>29</sup> Personal communication, 18 September 2007.

<sup>30</sup> See the reproductions of works from this series in *For Matthew*, 52, 72, cat. no. 125.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Szasz, "My Madness Saved Me:" *The Madness and Marriage of Virginia Woolf* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 124-5.

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