

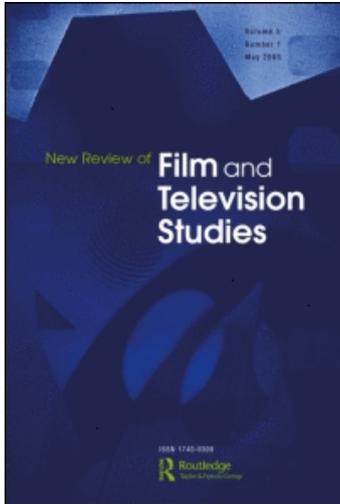
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Cinema Context and the genes of film history

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cinema Context and the genes of film history

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Cinema Context (www.cinemacontext.nl) is a website and tool for researching the history of film culture in the Netherlands. It provides basic information about the Who, What, Where and When of film exhibition and distribution, from its origins to the present. At the same time the site allows researchers to analyse the available data and to study patterns and networks, the DNA of film culture. This paper reports on the purpose and structure of this instrument, and demonstrates its analytical powers with a few examples. It will comment on the impact of digitization on film history and how this can contribute to the sharing of knowledge.

Keywords: historiography; digitization; archives; film exhibition; movie-going

The background of this paper is the meeting of two revolutions, one in historiography, the other in technology. On the one hand we have seen a shift in film history from text to context, moving from a preoccupation with film production to a new interest in film culture at large. Today we know that film as a text or an artefact is at best a semi-finished product. In the days of silent cinema, for instance, a movie consisted of pictures only: the sounds had to be added during the performance in a local cinema. The same programme could also include the live performances of a singer, an acrobat or a comedian. The film as text required completion and it received a fresh context each time it was screened.

While this shift in historiography was under way, we have also become witnesses to the digital revolution and its impact on the humanities. Just like the microscope and the telescope changed the sciences, so digital instruments are transforming humanities research today. Digitization is rebuilding our knowledge infrastructure, modifying the way we collect, store and communicate what we know. As digital tools open up innovative areas of enquiry for film history, they are reforming historical research as we know it, allowing for new questions to be asked.

Most historians don't seem to care much about technology. They would rather leave it to museums and archives to create a new knowledge infrastructure for historical learning. Historians behave as if heritage institutions are the caretakers

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of historical research. But as new technologies alter the symbiotic relationship between archives and their users, so historians will have to catch up with the digital revolution as their profession changes. Digitization is a success story in the heritage world. Millions of dollars, euros and pounds are being spent in this booming business. Archives and museums have reinvented themselves. They have found new audiences through focusing on entertainment, tourism or education, and they use the most recent technologies to capitalize on these opportunities. Historians are amongst the last customers served by museums today. Heritage institutions are developing a digital knowledge infrastructure for their own needs, which potentially will define the future research agenda to a large degree. If historians do not engage with these changes, the profession is in danger of becoming marginalized.

Museums and archives increasingly see each other as competitors, using new technologies to show off their unique collections and claim a monopoly for themselves. To ward off the threat of cooperation and assimilation, the heritage domain has become an empire of islands more than ever before. The trend toward more convergence and transparency of information seems to be stagnating. Sharing knowledge is a major issue in this respect. Competition and commerce are setting limits to the exchange and integration of data. An international encyclopaedia like the *Internet Movie Database (IMDb)* would not exist today if heritage institutions had been in charge of its development. Museums can no longer afford to collaborate and share freely without losing some part of their identity and autonomy. They have entered a vicious circle of self-interest, which runs counter to the core business of the humanities in creating and sharing knowledge. There is no reason to be optimistic about this development. The success story of digitization has a negative side, where divergence drives out convergence. The historian's world of shared knowledge is disintegrating.

In what way can historians respond to this challenge and contribute to a solution? I would like to explore here one particular road to answer this question: contextualization (van Vliet, Dibbets and Gras 2009). Archives and museums have been neglecting their professional concern for contextual information by focusing narrowly on digitizing their unique artefacts. A historical source without a context is meaningless and has little value for our understanding of the past. What is more, context information is not unique. A great diversity of objects and documents can share a common context. Context is like a medium, connecting one object to another, and linking one collection to another. Contextualization is a vital concept for discovering, connecting and integrating cultural artefacts buried in unrelated collections of heritage institutions. It fuels the drive towards access of information. While museums and archives are sitting on their insulated collections, historians can play a strategic role as mediators between heritage institutions. They can initiate new forms of cohesion for our knowledge infrastructure. They can build bridges by creating and sharing contextual information, by making digital links not only between dispersed documents and artefacts, but also between archives and museums. While these institutions are collecting and digitizing documents and images as isolated artefacts, the historian can contribute to greater integration by

CINEMA CONTEXT

films cinemas programmes people companies home

Film in the Netherlands from 1896
an encyclopedia of film culture

REMBRANDT THEATER

DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS
IN DE
DIEF VAN BAGDAD
source

Figures

- 106550 programmes
- 45910 films
- 1597 cinemas
- 29197 censorship files
- 4226 men and women
- 1602 companies
- 400 cities
- from 1896 to the present day

Search [search] in collection all search

Did you know:

which banned films were shown in 1929?
where the travelling cinema of Albert Frères had a show in 1907?
who was the owner of the Pompenburg Theatre in Rotterdam?

Quote from The Bioscope, reporting on the world of early and silent cinema:

"What is the finest film reference source on the Web, for all film let alone silent film? With all due respect to the Internet Movie Database, I

Figure 1. The homepage of *Cinema Context*.

focusing on the contexts of these artefacts and disclose, for instance, where they were used, by whom and when.

Cinema Context is a digital resource which aims to create exactly this form of contextual infrastructure for the history of film culture in the Netherlands (Figure 1). It provides basic information about the Who, What, Where and When of film exhibition and distribution in the country from its origins to the present. At the same time, it allows researchers to analyse the available data and to study patterns and networks, the DNA of film culture. Here I want to discuss the purpose and structure of this instrument, and demonstrate its analytical powers with a few examples.

A digital research instrument

Cinema Context has gone through several stages of development, but at all points research has been its main driving force. It all started with a study of economic

integration in the exhibition sector: the emergence, growth and expansion of movie theatre chains in the Netherlands. The project defined the film industry as a network. Each node in the network represented a cinema while a line between two nodes stood for the owner of both cinemas. Social network analysis can deal systematically with large and complex sets of relationships of this kind. The main question was how cinemas became interrelated by the practice of interlocking directorates, that is, the same people serving on the boards of multiple corporations. As the owner of one cinema chain meets the owner of a competing company on the board of a third chain, the latter will serve as a link between the other chains. A cluster like this is much larger than any individual chain, but its cohesion is also much weaker. Network analysis offers several measures to calculate the size and the cohesion of a cluster, to assess the relative weight and centrality of different groupings, and to compare networks. By dealing with the theatre business as a network, it is also possible to systematically analyse historical transformations in the sector.

To perform an analysis of this kind it is necessary to compile a clean data-set of cinemas, companies, people and their mutual relationships. Creating a solid data collection always requires a lot of time and meticulous research, an indispensable investment to achieve good results. However, the cinema industry of the Netherlands was small enough to be incorporated as a whole in the data-set. The nature of the project required to enter the historical information in a database from the outset. It happened in the latter days of computers using punch cards, long before the creation of the Internet. Membership listings of the Dutch cinema trade association were the main source for cinema addresses and owners from 1925 to the present. Accordingly, the analysis had to start with 1925. The preceding years have been added slowly but surely by searching local archives and newspapers all over the country, a process to which many colleagues and students have contributed.

The preliminary work of information gathering produced an important spin-off. It emerged that we had made a digital encyclopaedia of every single movie theatre that had ever opened its doors in the Netherlands, including its owners and corporations. Now one could not only analyse the data, but also utilize the data collection as an information bank for the history of cinema, independently from the initial research project. Soon after the introduction of the Internet in the 1990s, the first edition of this encyclopaedia was made accessible on the provisional website *Netherlands Cinema History*.

Gradually the initial research project began to expand and to tackle new questions about film culture and its changing infrastructure. To understand moviegoing and film exhibition, it is essential to study what happened at a local level. The data collection therefore had to be enlarged with new information about film exhibition in local cinemas, making it possible to specify which movies could be seen, where and when. A generous grant from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) allowed for investment in an advanced research instrument, and the Library of the University of Amsterdam was commissioned to develop the digital infrastructure. Picking the Library

for this job proved to be a masterstroke. Scientific libraries have become experts in information technology, specializing in sharing information, while operating independently from heritage institutions. The Library pushed for open standards, interoperability and data exchange. The Netherlands Filmmuseum also supported the project by making its resources available. Finally, the new website, *Cinema Context*, was launched in 2006, hosted by the Library. Since that date, the bilingual website has continued to expand with new data, tutorials and geographical maps.

Basic building blocks

What can *Cinema Context* do? It is designed to answer three strings of questions. The first set covers the encyclopaedia part of *Cinema Context*: users can find quick answers to simple questions about the Who, What, Where and When of film culture in the Netherlands. This level of information is very helpful for historians to identify and check specific evidence. For instance, what was the original title of a foreign movie when only the name of the Dutch release is known? It takes a split second to find that *Zijn eed gestand* is none other than *A Study in Scarlet* (George Pearson, 1914), a British screen adaptation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes story, which was shown in at least three major cities at the start of 1915. These minute details are the genes of history and *Cinema Context* is its provider.

Secondly, users are able to select, count and rank the results of a search in *Cinema Context*, either on the website or by downloading the data to a computer for closer analysis. The website offers several tutorials teaching how to collect, download and import findings to a database. If a user would like to know, for instance, how many feature films were exhibited in Amsterdam in 1929, and which movie had the longest run in town, then *Cinema Context* can provide the answer. That year Amsterdammers could choose from 550 feature films (down from 607 titles in 1928), including 367 new releases, and *The Circus* (1928) directed by and starring Charlie Chaplin, had the longest run in local theatres, continuing its success of the previous year.

Finally, the data can be used to answer more complicated questions about changing patterns in film distribution and exhibition, often with the help of sophisticated methods like statistics and network analysis. It is possible, for example, to study the geographical distribution of audience preferences by analysing the programming strategies of cinemas. The popularity of Rudolph Valentino and Tom Mix during the 1920s is a case in point. Both stars appealed to large audiences, but in different localities, as *Cinema Context* reveals. Valentino movies were always shown in one end of Amsterdam, while Western star Tom Mix could only be seen at the other end. They would hardly ever cross the line. Closer inspection of each district may reveal that Valentino catered to white-collar fans and that Tom Mix drew the attention of the traditional working class. A similar observation can be made when comparing Amsterdam to Rotterdam: the former

city is more sympathetic to Valentino, while Rotterdam favours Tom Mix. Charting differences in audience preferences is essential to the history of moviegoing.

Cinema Context organizes its information into four data collections: films, cinemas, people and companies. These collections represent the basic building blocks, the genes of film culture. The collections are interconnected in such a way that the individual pieces of information will complement and enrich each other. With these four elements, users can explore film culture in its complexity. Every film screening happens in time and place, and so a film programme, for example, is basically a link between the data-set's movie collection and the cinema collection on a specific date. By making such connections, a fifth collection of film programmes has been added in this way. Through collecting enough information, users see that the genes start to connect and grow together to form sequences, patterns and networks, unravelling the DNA of film culture.

A brief comparison with *IMDb* exposes some of the most striking features of *Cinema Context*. *IMDb* is an international online filmography with extensive credits detailing who contributed what to which movie. What *IMDb* has done for filmmaking, *Cinema Context* is doing for film exhibition and distribution in the Netherlands by documenting the use of films in the past, not their making. For instance, *Cinema Context* can reveal the French films shown in the theatres of a cinema owner in Groningen, and who was distributing those films. *Cinema Context* does not seek to replicate the production credits catalogued by *IMDb* but rather offers links to those credits, so that the two websites complement each other well. Both sites also share an important similarity: images and digital artefacts are utterly irrelevant to their design, since the sites depend on textual information like names, titles, metadata, etc. This essential feature sets them apart from museums and archives, whose websites usually serve to showcase the artefacts available in their vaults. Encyclopaedias like *IMDb* and *Cinema Context* are in a position to show what they know, not what they own.

It should be clear that *Cinema Context* is mainly focusing on the supply side of film culture. It does not collect information about audiences in terms of attendance figures, social composition or taste preferences, largely because historical data of this kind is hard to find or not available in the Netherlands. Supply and demand are relative concepts, however. Local suppliers of cinema entertainment, for example, are customers of national film distributors who in turn are clients of international distribution companies. A film importing country like the Netherlands is completely dependent on foreign suppliers of movies. Its importers are buyers in the international market. From this perspective, the supply of films to local audiences can be seen as closely related to the demand for films at a national and international level. Between producing, importing, exhibiting and watching a movie are filters in operation which affect cinema attendance and film reception. The analysis of selection patterns in the film supply chain can contribute to a better understanding of film consumption.

To give an impression of the size of the data collections available, in 2010, *Cinema Context* carried information about 1597 cinemas, 1599 companies,

4219 people, 17,932 screened films, 48,574 censorship files and 106,150 weekly film programmes. The programme records ran from 1895 through 1947, mostly coming from Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, Groningen and Leiden. Advertising in local newspapers provided the main source for this programme information, and the referencing of sources is a set procedure in *Cinema Context*. An additional source was the archive of the Netherlands Board of Film Censors (Centrale Commissie voor de Filmkeuring) which keeps records of every single movie passed for exhibition since 1928, both for feature films as well as short subjects. *Cinema Context* is the first resource to present an accessible inventory of this voluminous archive. It can also be used to verify statistics for film imports which were based on internal accounts by the censorship authorities. A preliminary analysis suggests that the old surveys have always overstated the real numbers by counting short subjects as feature films.

Finally, it is worthwhile to call attention to another remarkable source: the archives of Jean Desmet, a fairground entrepreneur who rented movies to small exhibitors and travelling cinemas outside major cities round 1910 (Blom, 2003). His bookkeeping records reveal his clients and his shipping orders in full detail. Desmet used to dispatch entire programmes of 6–10 short movies to all corners of the country. *Cinema Context* worked with these records, making it possible to reconstruct Desmet's trade and distribution practices. The following examples will demonstrate more types of historical reconstruction and analysis.

Alberts Frères

Willy and Bernard Mullens were the most influential film exhibitors and producers in the Netherlands during the first two decades of cinema. Through their company Alberts Frères, they liked to advertise themselves as the kings of travelling cinema in the Netherlands – 'Les Rois des Bioscopes'. With a mobile theatre that could accommodate 800 spectators, the brothers were on the road from 1899 till 1913, becoming the pride of every fairground. They also produced a fair number of short films chronicling local events or starring Willy Mullens in a comical role (Figure 2).

Cinema Context has collected a wealth of information about itinerant exhibitors and their programmes, and so the site makes it easy to find the whereabouts of the Alberts Frères from their first cinema show in 1899 until their farewell tour in 1912–13. It appears from the data that the showmen visited about 20 cities each year, often more than once, and sometimes they travelled to Belgium and France, though the frequency slowed down in later years. *Cinema Context* is very attentive to geographical information about venues and events, and by plotting coordinates with the help of Google Maps it is possible to reconstruct the roadshow and to visualize all the places and distances covered by the Mullens brothers while touring (Figure 3). Such analysis reveals the spatial logistics of their tours and their underlying business rationale. *Cinema Context* can also identify which movies were shown by the Alberts Frères while touring



Figure 2. The Alberts Frères and their mother, c.1900. Willy (left) and Bernard Mullens operated a travelling cinema in the Netherlands until 1913. Photo courtesy of the Netherlands Filmmuseum.

the country. Not long ago, such analysis was a time-consuming exercise, but using this digital instrument it is possible to quickly collect details on the inventory of films in use by the Mullens brothers during the early years of cinema, reconstructing their entire film repertoire in a matter of seconds. Similarly, the catalogues of various distribution companies in the Netherlands before 1945 can be retrieved with details of not only the film titles available for rent but also who was renting them, where they were shown and when.

Table 1 summarizes the 394 films in use by the Alberts Frères according to countries of production origin. Translating film titles can present a major hurdle for historical research when dealing with the transnational passage of films across borders. In the case of the Alberts Frères, since all titles were advertised in Dutch

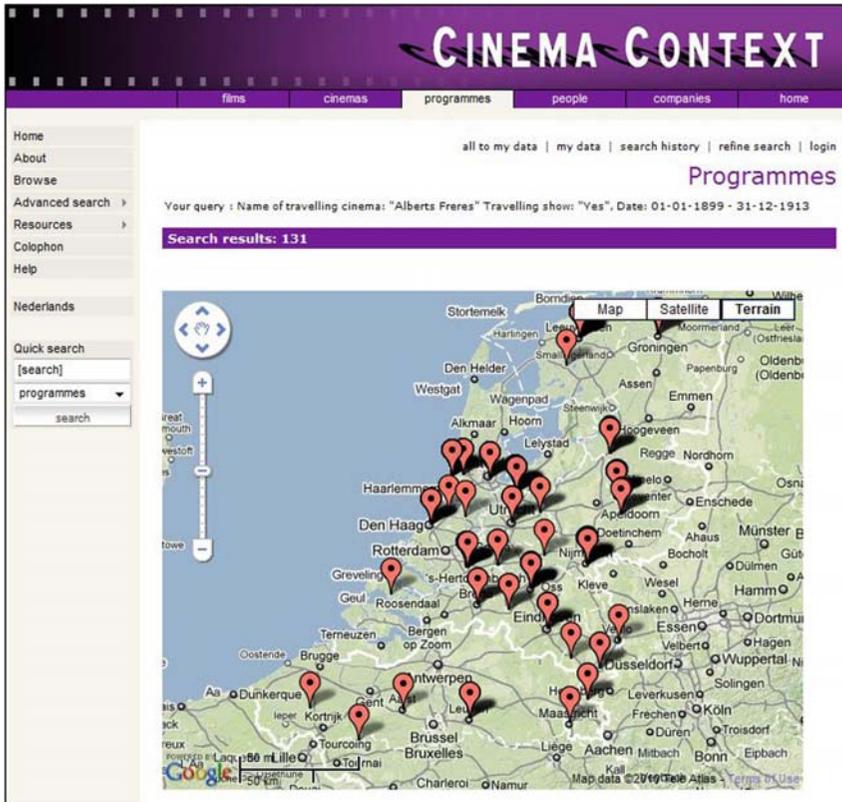


Figure 3. Locations visited by the Alberts Frères with their travelling cinema between 1899 and 1913.

language, it required a huge effort to identify at least 244 or over 60% of these films. Though almost 40% could not be attributed properly (indicated in the table by the question mark), it can be reasonably presumed that their number could be divided up proportionally between the countries represented.

Focusing on those films whose origin could be accurately identified, and adding details from the website, several insights can be arrived at about the inventory of films used by the Albert Frères. Generally the Mullens brothers did not rent their movies but would buy new films outright or produce their own brand. They were keen to show top quality pictures, in colour preferably, and they knew where to get them: in France, *chez* Pathé. Indeed, France was the main supplier, accounting for 144 films, followed by the Netherlands with at least 65 films. Many of these domestic productions were made by Alberts Frères themselves in their own studio or on the road. Finally, the table suggests that to replenish their show from 1904 onwards, the brothers stepped up their purchasing

Table 1. The film catalogue of the Alberts Frères by country of origin and year of production 1898–1913.

	De	Dk	Fr	It	Nl	UK	US	Unknown	Total
?	1		4					145	150
1898			2			2	2		6
1899			2		2	2	1		7
1900			2		1				3
1901			5						5
1902			2		3		1		6
1903			8						8
1904			21		10	1			32
1905			23		13			2	38
1906			4		1				5
1907			6	1	1				8
1908	2		16	1	1	2			22
1909	1	1	21		14				37
1910		1	11	4	11		3	2	32
1911	3	2	12	2	5	1		1	26
1912			5		1		1		7
1913					2				2
Total	7	4	144	8	65	8	8	150	394

Source: www.cinemacontext.nl

or production of new films, although this investment strategy may also have been at work during the early years, where so much information is missing and many titles remain unidentified.

Measuring popularity

In the Netherlands, box-office data before the 1970s is not available. For reasons of commercial confidentiality, the motion picture industry did not want to publish economic details that could be linked to individual companies or movies. Since details about specific cinemas, their revenues or their attendance figures are missing, researchers have looked for alternative ways to measure the popularity of movies and cinemas in the past. Screen time offers one option in this respect. *Cinema Context* has collected the weekly film programmes of every cinema operating in six major cities of the Netherlands from 1912 through 1947, together with the programmes of itinerant exhibitors before that date. It provides an almost complete record of the films that people could see, where, when and for how long.

The week provides a unit to measure how long a movie was available to cinema visitors, matching the frequency of weekly ads in the newspapers as well as the habit of most cinemas and theatres to change their programmes on Friday. It is not difficult to find the track record of every film, compute the number of weeks in exhibition and compare the results. Quantifying duration in this way is

a crude measure of popularity for sure, and its relationship to other indicators of popularity has yet to be assessed. Duration introduces time into the measurement of success and popularity, a dimension lost in the archives of box-office data. It takes into account, for instance, that some successful films appear to peak in a short period of time before disappearing into oblivion, unlike others which benefit from a long history of comebacks.

Based on this weekly data, it has been possible to construct a list of the 10 most popular movies in the Netherlands before the Second World War (Table 2). Although this analysis is based on duration, it may be speculated that these films also received the best box-office earnings and attendance figures, even if there is no information to confirm this. However tentative, this list sheds some light on pre-Second World War Dutch film history for the first time.

Considering the long historical narrative of Hollywood's dominance over European markets, it may come as a surprise to see that the Dutch productions *De Jantjes* (Jaap Speyer) and *Pygmalion* (Ludwig Berger), *Bleeke Bet* (Alex Benno and Richard Oswald) or *Op hoop van zegen* (Alex Benno) feature prominently in the rankings. Noting the popularity of domestic productions before the Second World War therefore challenges presumptions about Hollywood's power. The absence of German pictures, the main competitor of Hollywood in the Dutch market, is also striking. Another surprise of a different kind is the appearance of an obscure Austrian sex education film, *Hygiene der Ehe*, or 'Marital Hygiene', in the rankings. Contemporary translations of the title into Dutch presented problems when trying to identify the film and it is still possible the Dutch title covers two or three films. *Cinema Context* contains a lot of information about how this film was exhibited in the Netherlands from 1924 onwards, which can help towards understanding cinema's role in the regulation of sex education. In some cities, for instance, cinemas had special screenings on Sunday morning for men only, while on Sunday afternoon for women only screenings were held. In other locations, women had to sit on the left side of the cinema hall while the men sat on the right. A medical doctor was always at hand to explain the pictures.

Table 2. Most popular feature films in six major cities of the Netherlands before 1940.

	Film	Country of origin
1	<i>De Jantjes</i> (1934)	Netherlands
2	<i>Pygmalion</i> (1937)	Netherlands
3	<i>It's in the Air</i> (1938)	Great Britain
4	<i>Modern Times</i> (1936)	USA
5	<i>Hygiene der Ehe</i> (1922)	Austria
6	<i>Ben-Hur</i> (1925)	USA
7	<i>Bleeke Bet</i> (1934)	Netherlands
8	<i>One Hundred Men and a Girl</i> (1937)	USA
9	<i>La Maternelle</i> (1933)	France
10	<i>Op hoop van zegen</i> (1934)	Netherlands

Source: www.cinemacontext.nl

Conclusion

Sharing knowledge is vitally important to historical research. The new knowledge infrastructure that is emerging as a result of information technologies in the hands of heritage institutions is insufficiently adapted to this end. The preoccupation with the digitization of images, sounds and texts is understandable, but it has been at the expense of investments in contextual information. Contextualization is a driving force towards greater cohesion and integration of digital information. *Cinema Context* fulfils this need by creating a research instrument to study the history of film culture in the Netherlands. Its aim was to develop a digital encyclopaedia that can be used in quantitative and qualitative research. As the project evolved, it emerged that its focus on contextualization could turn it into a cornerstone of the digital knowledge infrastructure of history and heritage. It is a very modest but fundamental contribution to a huge enterprise. It also shows that historians with small projects and limited means can contribute to sharing knowledge in the digital world, for example, by developing a digital encyclopaedia.

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