

The Challenge of Sustaining Critique across Time and Texts:

“I never said that” about *The Hunger Games*

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Abstract: This article analyzes how a group of pre-adolescent girls responded to the novel and film, *The Hunger Games* (2008; 2012) as explored throughout a series of discussion group sessions. While providing more nuanced interpretations of gender as represented in the novel, the girls were more accepting of normalized heteronormative gender performances in the film adaptation. We argue that these texts simultaneously challenge and reproduce dominant gendered and heteronormative ideas and for the importance of providing all learners with spaces for critical discussion of popular culture texts.
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Résumé

Cet article analyse la façon dont un groupe de pré-ad-

olescentes ont réagi au roman et au film *The Hunger Games* (2008-2012) par une série de discussions en groupe. Bien qu’elles aient des interprétations plus nuancées du genre représenté dans le roman, les jeunes filles acceptaient plus facilement les performances hétéronormatives normalisées selon le genre dans l’adaptation cinématographique. Nous faisons valoir que ces textes remettent en question et reproduisent, simultanément, les idées dominantes hétéronormatives basées sur le genre, ainsi que l’importance d’offrir à tous les apprenants un endroit où ils peuvent discuter de façon critique les textes de la culture populaire.

Introduction

Popular culture and its artifacts can be powerful influences on individuals, including youth's, conceptions of self, others, and society (Giroux 1994; Giroux and Pollock 2010; Tisdell 2007, 2008), particularly with respect to gender (Brunner 2010; Feasey 2012; hooks 1994/2008, 1996/2009; Petersen 2012). Publishing houses often commodify young adult fiction (Zipes 2002), profiting from book sales, movie tie-ins, and associated merchandise. *The Hunger Games* has joined the ranks of media sensations *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* as a highly popular series of novels turned into blockbuster film adaptations (Taylor 2012). Both the novels and films document the experiences of Katniss Everdeen during the annual Hunger Games where she must fight to the death in order to survive. In both cases, Katniss can be read as a strong female protagonist, but upon critical examination, she also can be interpreted as constrained by heteronormative social expectations.

This article explores how a group of preadolescent girls responded to *The Hunger Games* novel (Collins 2008) and film (Jacobson, Kilik, and Ross 2012) in a series of group discussions. To frame this examination, we first discuss the literature that examines gender and popular culture, detail our case study methodology, and provide an analysis of *The Hunger Games* novel and film. In the latter case, we suggest that these texts simultaneously challenge and reproduce dominant gendered and heteronormative ideas and that both mediums provide rich forums for discussion of gendered representations. We then discuss the responses of a small group of preadolescent girls to the novel and film adaptation, framing the participants' responses in context of our own critique. We found that the participants experienced difficulty in critiquing some issues related to gender in the novel and film adaptation, with this being especially poignant with respect to the latter. In other words, the girls seemed to be more accepting (or less critical) of normalized heteronormative gender performances when viewing the film adaptation than when reading the text. We conclude by emphasizing the importance of providing all learners with spaces for critical discussion of popular culture texts and gendered representations.

Gender and Popular Culture

Popular culture artifacts are often produced in alignment with dominant ideologies and can be cri-

tiqued for reproducing cultural norms. That is, the popular media can serve as a site to sustain and reproduce norms that maintain cultural standardization (Adorno 1997). Feminist media scholars have argued that this process can result in the reproduction of highly normative gender ideologies (see Brunner 2010; Feasey 2012; Peterson 2012). The medium through which narratives are conveyed also impact their translations and presentations (Stam 2000). Novel-film adaptations often result in women being portrayed as "what they *should* be like" as opposed to as they are (Gillis and Hollows 2009, 1; emphasis in original). This is especially true for Hollywood blockbusters where positive reception from audiences is critical for offsetting high production costs (Bielby and Bielby 2013). Mainstream films that target broad audiences often rely "on classical narrative conventions (whether of plot, of characterization, or of cinematic techniques)" (Citron 2013, 171). As a consequence, patriarchal representations of gender in film and sexist valuing of audience demographics are perpetuated (Meehan 2013).

While cultural standardization can be reflected and transmitted through the media, it is also influenced by audience media engagement. As Adorno (1997) argues, processes of cultural reproduction in the media "impede the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves" (48). While Adorno emphasizes that the media influences audience understanding and interpretation of culture, other theorists, such as Fiske (2011), argue that audiences are agent consumers in capitalist societies. Dominant cultural representations that are reflected and reproduced in the mass media are often designed to satisfy a majority of audience members. In considering what representations are produced, the mass media often neglects female audiences, seeks to appeal to male audiences, and tends to reproduce patriarchal representations of gender (Strinati 2012).

Normative gender representations are not unique to film adaptations, but are also often found in novels (Zipes 2002). Women and girls are often portrayed in children's and young adult literature in ways that reinforce gendered stereotypes, with their roles often secondary to those of male characters. For instance, female characters are likely to express concern over their physical appearance (Taber and Woloshyn 2011a; Younger 2003) and desire male attention (Taber and

Woloshyn 2011a; McNally 2008). They are also less likely to engage in adventure relative to their male counterparts (Diekman and Murnen 2004; McCabe et al. 2011) and do so only in response to an urgent need to provide for their families and in absence of a more capable adult (usually the father) (Taber and Woloshyn 2011b). Finally, females' adventures are conditional on their return to domestic or traditional roles (Dominguez-Rue 2010). Female characters who act outside these normative scripts are at risk of being cast as unfeminine "outsiders" (Valverde 2009, 264). Male characters, in contrast, are typically presented as strong, determined, and fearless individuals who eagerly participate in calls for adventure without restriction or penalty (Diekman and Murnen 2004; Taber and Woloshyn 2011b). In these ways, then, representations of women in popular culture, including in text and film, "seek to re-establish gendered certainties," despite re-inscriptions to the contrary (Taylor 2012, 32). For example, post-feminist conceptions of female success conditionally allow young women to compete in masculine work contexts only if they comply with feminine beauty ideals and heteronormative relationships (McRobbie 2007).

Despite the prevalence of normative gendered representations, alternative gendered depictions do exist in popular culture. However, they are often framed in stereotypical ways. Therefore, it is important to deconstruct norms in the media that marginalize alternative gendered performances. For instance, Marsh (2009) explores how Madonna's video, "What It Feels Like For a Girl," "provok[ed] controversy and debate concerning hegemonic ideas about women's roles in society and in popular culture" (115). Similarly, Petersen (2012) views popular media artifacts, such as *Twilight*, as problematic, while simultaneously having potential for "teaching moment[s]" (65). (See also Click, Stevens, and Behm-Morawitz 2010 for a discussion of the complexity of the *Twilight* franchise and its reception by audiences). Such teachable moments may be especially important in novel-to-film adaptations where readers/viewers can be encouraged to question notions associated with gender and heteronormativity within and across mediums.

Methodology: A Sociological Case Study

This research, conducted in 2011-2012, used a sociological interpretive case study methodology

(Merriam 1998) to explore the experiences of four girls (grades 5-7) in a book club for students identified as struggling readers (decoding scores two-to-three years below grade level). The girls were Caucasian and from lower middle-class or middle-class families. Outside of school, the girls enjoyed participating in sports and dramatic activities as well as spending time with siblings, parents, and extended family. We believed that facilitating a book club for girls in the junior grades who experience reading difficulties was important, as these students are often overlooked (Graff 2009; Sprague and Keeling 2009). They also tend to have limited access to some learning supports (Osler 2006), in contrast to ongoing educational initiatives that focus on the needs of boys, based on the perception that they have been left behind (Baskwell, Church, and Swain 2009). Book club discussions can assist girls (as well as women) to improve their comprehension of texts, while simultaneously examining social issues through fiction (Taber, Woloshyn, and Lane 2012; Polleck 2010; Twomey 2007).

With respect to specifically examining *The Hunger Games*, the book club members participated in two phases: the first concentrated on the novel (Collins 2008) and the second on the movie (Jacobson, Kilik, and Ross 2012). *The Hunger Games* book club sessions consisted of four, two-hour small group discussions held over eight weeks. The girls were provided with the published audio recording of the text and were tasked with reading sections of it independently. The book club sessions were designed to promote critical discussion of sociocultural gender issues, with the girls being encouraged to consider how the representations of the primary characters corresponded to societal notions of femininity and masculinity. They were also prompted to consider how individuals gained and maintained power and control over others. The book club sessions were audio recorded and the girls also completed individual exit interviews.

Upon the release of the film a year after the completion of phase one, we contacted the girls to determine their interest in viewing the movie. Three of the four girls (Aryton: Grade 6, Madison: Grade 7, Bridget: Grade 8) agreed to participate. As one of these girls had since moved to a different province, she participated in the project via FaceTime. The researchers watched *The Hunger Games* film independently prior to viewing it with the girls in order to generate guiding questions for

the interviews and small group sessions. We then interviewed the girls individually prior to the screening to get a sense of their continued interpretation of the novel and their predictions in the regard to the film. After viewing the film together, we facilitated a small-group discussion and, one-to-two days later, conducted individual interviews to gather the girls' analysis of the primary characters, perspectives on gender, and overall responses to the film. We audio recorded and transcribed the individual interviews and small group sessions for subsequent analysis. The analysis in this article focuses mainly on the second phase of the research, which built on the girls' interpretive responses during the first (Taber, Woloshyn, and Lane 2013).

Gendered Representations in *The Hunger Games* Novel and Film Adaptation

The Hunger Games novel and film are set in a dystopian future where a wealthy Capitol governs thirteen districts. They chronicle Katniss Everdeen's survival in the annual televised Hunger Games, which serve to punish the districts for a lost rebellion, reinforce the power of the Capitol, entertain its citizens, and involve tributes in a fight to the death. The novel and film focus on Katniss' emerging relationship with her co-tribute, Peeta, and the resulting tensions that arise with her long-time friend, Gale. During the games, Peeta and Katniss must decide whether they will harm others either directly or indirectly (e.g., sabotaging resources, setting traps, or manipulating information). Katniss is a skilled hunter who can protect herself and others and who volunteers as tribute in order to save her sister from the games. In connection to Connell's (1987, 2005, 2012; see also Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) work on hegemonic masculinity, emphasized femininity, and marginalized masculinities, Katniss engages in actions that are often associated with hegemonic masculinity. However, she is also insecure and reticent to harm others directly, traits that are associated with emphasized femininity. Peeta refuses to harm others, unless it is necessary (a form of marginalized masculinity) or to save Katniss (consistent with hegemonic masculinity). While consistent in plot, the novel differs from the film in that it is narrated through a first-person viewpoint (Katniss) as opposed to a third-person omniscient perspective. Through the first-person narration in the novel, the reader is privy to Katniss' internal monologues

that often center on her resistance to the violence in the games, the use of her relationship with Peeta as a game strategy, and negotiating her feelings for Gale. Without Katniss' narration, the film features visible emotional responses, such as Katniss crying uncontrollably after Rue's death and her frantically searching for Peeta when the game makers announce that the game may have two victors. This difference in narration, in part, accounts for the central characters' different gendered portrayals in the novel and film. In addition, the withholding of certain events and details and the addition or alteration of others are also critical aspects of this novel-to-film adaptation. In the film adaptation, Katniss' rational logic is notably absent. Instead, her gender performance begins to border on "sex-role stereotyping [that] encourages [the] audience to engage in such stereotyping" (Tuchman 2013, 53). More importantly, we read the novel-to-film adaptation as a recasting of Katniss as more feminine and Peeta as more masculine, a process that simplifies their gender performances.

Katniss is presented in the novel and film as a strong and independent young woman who is capable of hunting and providing for her mother and sister. However, her role as caregiver and nurturer tends to be emphasized more in the film than in the novel. Katniss is also more prone to express emotion in the film adaptation than in the novel. These nurturing and emotional characteristics are consistent with feminine norms. As such, Connell's (2005) argument about the ways in which acts of "feminine nurturance are made normative by the dominant media story-lines" (252) is more applicable to the movie than the novel. Peeta is portrayed as an equally skilled and highly physical competitor in the film, while the opposite is the case in the novel. Peeta's display of strength and power in the film in comparison to the novel constitutes a reassertion of his masculinity particularly in relation to Katniss.

Participants' Book Club Responses to the Novel

In this section, we discuss the girls' responses to *The Hunger Games* novel in order to establish the foundation for our exploration of the novel-to-film adaptation. In their reading of the novel (see Taber, Woloshyn, and Lane 2013 for an extended analysis of the participants' experiences in the book club sessions, which focused solely on the novel), the girls were able to identify the primary characters that, in some ways, defied tra-

ditional masculine and feminine scripts (Butler 1999; Connell 2005, 2012). They particularly admired Katniss as a strong and independent young woman who was a competent hunter. As Taylor stated:

She's more like a guy because she hunts and does a lot of...stuff that guys do. I think it's really interesting. She like hunts and stuff she doesn't just like stay at home with her sister and...do more household stuff. She goes more outdoors and does physical stuff. (Individual Interview, April 4, 2011)

The girls were divided on the Capitol's imposed makeover of Katniss when she entered the games. They argued that, to some extent, it was typical and justifiable for girls to be concerned about their physical appearance. In the end, they tended to agree that girls should be able to exercise choice in regard to attending to their physical appearance. As Bridget maintained, "They can wear makeup if they want to. They shouldn't have to but if they want to" (Individual Interview, April 6, 2011). The girls were somewhat critical of Katniss' need to enter into a relationship with Peeta as his girlfriend in the context of the games, noting that this was not an expectation for males. For instance, Bridget asked: "have you seen a man that had to find a woman?" (Discussion Group, March 17, 2011)

The girls were critical of Peeta's character for not being sufficiently masculine. In their view, he could not fight, hunt, and protect Katniss physically. They also faulted him for his over attention to his appearance, his lack of proclivity to violence, and his public proclamations of affection for Katniss. At the same time, they positively recognized his more feminine qualities. As Madison suggested:

He's kind of like one of those cuddly teddy bears you can buy at a market...you know those really big ones? That's because he doesn't want to kill anyone...He doesn't want to be in the game, he wants to help people instead of hurting them. (Individual Interview, April 4, 2011)

Overall, the girls concluded that Peeta was more of a liability than an asset to Katniss and hindered her chances of survival, despite his scheme to present them as *star-crossed* lovers. They believed that Katniss would need to "save" Peeta and that he did little to facilitate

her survival in the games. As Aryton and Madison commented, Peeta "makes Katniss do everything... she always had to look out for him" (Individual Interview, April 6, 2011) and "She thinks that she can win it by herself. She doesn't need Peeta's help" (Discussion Group, March 17, 2011).

The girls, however, appeared to be most comfortable when the characters were aligned with heteronormative gendered expectations and most perplexed when the characters deviated from them. As Taylor stated, "I get Katniss and Peeta mixed up sometimes" (Discussion Group, March 8, 2011). Although they valued Katniss' strength and abilities, they thought it was inconsistent with her being a young woman; they were also critical of Peeta for his lack of survival skills.

Osgerby (2004) argues that the popular media supports gender as a series of performative actions. As such, popular media may also be a space for performing gender in ways that challenge social norms and support gender identity as unstable. Audiences are not merely passive consumers, but instead negotiate meaning through their acceptance or criticism of texts and the social norms represented in them (Storey 2009). While the book club sessions on *The Hunger Games* gave our participants an opportunity to engage in a critical discussion of gender representations in the novel, they found it difficult to accept some alternative gendered portrayals. The next question was how they would read the novel-to-film adaptation.

Participants' Responses to the Film Adaptation

While the girls demonstrated differing levels of awareness about how gender was performed in the novel and film, they appeared to be more accepting of Katniss and Peeta's portrayals in the film, as the characters conformed more closely to heteronormative gender expectations by embodying notions of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity respectively (Connell 1987, 2005, 2012; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In this section, we discuss the girls' responses to the film relative to the novel, highlighting a number of critical differences.

Prior to viewing the film and engaging in the discussion group, the girls had developed expectations related to the film, based on their independent viewing of the film trailer and discussion with their peers. When asked how many times she had watched the trailer,

Bridget responded by saying “about 20” times, both “on the phone with my friend” and multiple times on “youtube.” She further emphasized that, “all my friends like a love *The Hunger Games* so all we talk about at recess is *The Hunger Games*” (Individual Interview, March 19, 2012). Aryton developed expectations in relation to the subsequent books, in part through input from peers: “a friend told me” (Individual Interview, March 19, 2012). Madison also described her experiences watching the trailers and discussing the books with friends. She stated that,

we’ll just be—like oh my gosh—I just saw this brand new trailer and just be like talking on and on about it and I’m just like—oh no—I really, I really think they’re going to do this part of it, no I want to see this part and stuff like that. Girl talk. (Individual Interview, March 21, 2012)

When asked about how the characters were represented, Aryton indicated that her visualization of the characters when reading the novel differed from the film’s representations and her conception shifted significantly after viewing the film: “now I realize that it’s the opposite” (Individual Interview, March 19, 2012). Bridget suggested that she had a similar experience; she visualized Katniss with “curly hair,” but deferred to the film’s depiction of the characters (Individual Interview, March 19, 2012). Madison expressed excitement about seeing the film, given that, in her view, the trailers suggested that it would be an accurate representation of the book: “I think it’s going to be better because with the trailers, it shows it really looks like the book and the book was awesome” (Individual Interview, March 21, 2012).

After viewing the film, the girls identified Katniss’ character as one that defied traditional notions of femininity, describing her as “strong” (Bridget), “a hunter” (Aryton), and “confident” (Madison) (Discussion Group, March 24, 2012). As Bridget stated, “She’s a hunter and well mostly boys hunt so sometimes she acts like a boy, sometimes she acts like a girl” (Discussion Group, March 24, 2012). At the same time, unlike their reading of the novel, the girls also associated Katniss’ character with traits that were consistent with emphasized femininity. For instance, they cited her maternal and emotional responses to the much-younger tribute Rue:

And she had major feelings for Rue, she was just like really upset when she died. [She was then] more of a girl at that point...Like in the movie, it showed that she was crying because she was scared or freaked out. (Madison, Discussion Group, March 24, 2012)

[Katniss acted more like a girl in the movie when] she was more sensitive with the Rue thing. In the book, it doesn’t say that she was crying or anything...[And] when she was getting nervous about Peeta...She went over [to find him, in the book], but in the movie she was kind of screaming his name and stuff...I thought she wouldn’t be screaming out his name because that could kill her. (Aryton, Individual Interview, March 26, 2012)

The girls’ perceptions of Peeta were also altered. When reading the book, they saw him as “an artsy-craftsy kind of person” (Madison, Individual Interview, March 21, 2012), a trait associated more with marginalized masculinities (Connell 2005, 2012). After viewing the film, they read him as a much more masculine character: “Well he’s a boy, so he had to act like a boy” (Bridget, Individual Interview, March 26, 2012). They appeared to be more enamored with his character as depicted in the film and seemed less annoyed with his affection for Katniss. They described him as “sensitive” (Madison), “strong” (Aryton), and “in love” (Bridget) (Discussion Group, March 24, 2012). As Madison elaborated, Peeta’s character took on the role of a protector, rather than simply being a young man with a silly crush as portrayed in the novel:

[In the film], he’s got like the muscular side to him but he really is sensitive, like really sensitive like Katniss and stuff. Well, a muscle example, he was like fighting off Cato and he’s like doing all that type of stuff, like throwing the giant metal thing. [He acted more like a girl in the book] with the cakes and stuff and with Katniss, he’s always had a thing where in a way he’s doing like a little giggle and a smile and stuff. (Individual Interview, March 28, 2012)

In contrast to their reading of the novel, the girls now viewed Peeta as integral to Katniss’ survival in the games and less of a hindrance:

I think it was more [in the film] Peeta that saved Katniss because if they kept trying to kill her, they probably would have got her eventually. And if he didn’t say let’s wait, she

wouldn't have time to figure out a way to get out. And then she wouldn't be there. (Madison, Group Discussion, March 24, 2012)

[Peeta held Katniss back] more in the book. Yeah, because he doesn't threaten that he's going to go walking and yelling [through the woods] in the games [after injuring his leg] in the movie. (Aryton, Individual Interview, March 26, 2012)

As Bridget indicated, "They save each other" (Group Discussion, March 24, 2012).

The girls also rejected the idea that, when reading the novel, they had perceived Peeta's character as not sufficiently masculine. Instead, they insisted that their perceptions of Peeta in the text and the film were consistent and in line with notions of hegemonic masculinity, as the following exchange demonstrates:

Bridget: I thought he acted like a boy before we saw the movie.

Madison: I think he acted the same way that he did in the book.

Researcher: Do you remember, you [Aryton] said you thought he acted in different ways because he was kind of like a friend of yours who liked to dance, but you said most boys didn't like to dance?

Aryton: I never said that (Group Discussion, March 24, 2012).

From these responses, it would appear that the film version of *The Hunger Games* did indeed reassert gendered norms and altered the girls' initial and more nuanced interpretations of gender representations in the novel. Even though they seemed to be somewhat uncomfortable with their gender interpretations of the novel, the discussion provided them with opportunities for dialogue and critique. After viewing of the film, their perceptions seemed to narrow. As Bridget indicated, boys and girls were expected to perform narrowly defined gender traits and this especially applied to Peeta: "Yeah [they acted like boys and girls] what are they supposed to act like? Dogs and cats? Girls acted like girls, boys acted like boys" (Individual Interview, March 26, 2012). Thus, when Katniss and Peeta's characters were more aligned with gendered expectations, the girls appeared to be more accepting of them. Indeed, after viewing the movie, they abandoned their original eval-

uations of the ways in which gender was performed in the novel.

Implications

We began this study curious about how the gender representations in a novel, like *The Hunger Games*, would be translated into a film for mass consumption. We also wondered how young preadolescent girls who had initially engaged in a fairly nuanced discussion of gender as portrayed in the novel would respond to the film version. During our book club sessions, we were encouraged by the girls' emerging abilities to problematize elements of the novel that supported stereotypical gendered representations; in this context, they referred to the characters as "girly boys" and "boyey girls." We expected that this same level of analysis would extend to discussions of the film.

Upon viewing the film, however, the girls seemed to be drawn to the gendered simplicity and Hollywood spectacle of the film (Fiske 2011). As a result, they were more attracted to the film versions of Katniss and Peeta and the ways in which they conformed to the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1999) - where sex, gender, and desire map onto each other in heteronormative ways - than they were to the more complex gender performances found in the novel. They viewed Peeta as a "boy" and Katniss as an acceptable "girl" who sometimes "acted like a boy" (Bridget, Individual Interview, March 26, 2012) and, as such, they classified the characters according to the gender binary using analogies such as "dogs and cats." They tended to subscribe to the idea that men should singularly embrace hegemonic masculinity and that women could adopt and benefit from adopting masculine qualities and roles as a means of survival without seriously compromising their femininity. Furthermore, they no longer questioned whether Katniss and Peeta should be in a relationship. Instead they expected a more detailed account of this romance and more emphasis on heterosexual "desire." As Madison argued,

I thought it was a little rushed in certain parts. Like um when they were in the cave...the relationship [between] Katniss and Peeta...had a little bit more of time together in the games. The movie only showed them only for a short time. (Group Discussion, March 24, 2012)

Despite our attempt to stimulate a more nuanced gendered reading, the girls seemed to defer to the more normalized gendered representations found in the film, a response that relates to Adorno's notion of cultural reproduction. While the mass media in general often reproduce normative representations of gender, audiences also come to expect them.

Scholars who have examined Hollywood films have argued that they often rely on normative gender conventions that are well received by audiences (Meehan 2013; Tuchman 2013). The shift in the girls' interpretive perceptions of gender from *The Hunger Games* novel to Hollywood film highlights the importance of providing all learners with spaces for critical discussion of popular culture texts. In particular, students who struggle with the reading process often doubt their abilities to process texts and may be more inclined to accept the viewpoints of others (Taber, Woloshyn, and Lane 2013; Woloshyn, Lane, and Taber 2012; deFur and Runnells 2014; Klassen 2010). After the initial discussion of the novel in the book club, the girls in our study seemed to defer to the commentaries of their peers prior to viewing the film and to the visual representations contained in the film. The shift in their reading of gender from novel to film might also have been due to the time that lapsed between the facilitated book club sessions and the more independent film discussions. Given that the heterosexual matrix of sex, gender, and desire shapes representations in popular culture as well as social and audience understandings of them, it is essential, in our estimation, to engage youth in critical discussions of all forms of popular culture, so that they can become more aware of gender and heteronormative representations and develop into critical audience members.

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