IMAGES FOR THE END OF TIME

Photography began by holding up a mirror to the world, and in so doing established a relationship with representation which nothing, neither post-modernism nor the recent explosion of digital imaging techniques, has ever entirely undermined. It is a relationship which is constantly subverted, corrupted or dismissed, and yet like Melville's Bartleby it is always *there*, impossible to ignore. Even today, despite its apparent absorption by the wider discourse of the visual arts, photography stubbornly insists upon referencing the world; by which I mean that by and large, photography remains essentially concerned with returning a reflection of the world if not as it is, then as we believe it to be.

One side-effect of the medium's increasing critical and artistic popularity has been a new role of cultural litmus paper, and an investigation of photography's topical concerns and obsessions can provide surprisingly effective clues to the zeitgeist. During the course of precisely such an investigation, Ian Jeffrey recently recognised in contemporary art "a discontent, or scepticism, with regard to society and the cosmos", and went on to suggest, only partly tongue-in-cheek, "that art, including photography, appears to have involved itself in a fundamental myth which holds that the body of the world is corrupt".

That myth is none other than a modern variant of Gnosticism, the doctrine known to the Church Fathers as the heresy of heresies. An extreme form of radical dualism, juxtaposing absolute good with absolute evil, Gnosticism purported to explain the problem of the existence of evil in a more satisfactory way than orthodox theology. According to Stephen Runciman in *The Medieval Manichee*, "the solution of the Gnostics was to take from God the responsibility of having made the visible world. God the Father, the First Principle, was far removed from it, with many heavens lying in between." In other words, the Gnostic held that whereas an omnipotent deity may well exist at the far end of a chain of creation, responsibility for the material world and indeed for man himself must be laid at the foot of a relatively minor Demiurge – a creator at best flawed, but most probably entirely evil. It follows inevitably that as the creation of an evil demiurge, matter, the whole world and indeed man himself are irredeemably flawed. The doctrine's attraction lies in its superficial simplicity; questioned by the Holy Inquisition, a thirteenth-century Cathar explained that "God is very good and nothing in this visible world is good; therefore he cannot have made the visible world."

Contempt for the world was an essential article of Gnostic faith. Christian and Manichean Gnosticism are in agreement about the peculiarly awful nature of the physical body, holding humanity to be no more than a mockery of the divine prototype. In much the same spirit, the Bogomils of Bulgaria abstained from marriage and regarded children with abhorrence because they gave new life to that abomination, flesh; indeed, the 14th century monk Lazarus went so far as to preach that men must be castrated in order that no more material bodies should be introduced into the world. The other principle tenet of Gnosticism was faith in a secret body of knowledge, available only to the initiated, through which the tiny fragment of divinity trapped in every human might eventually achieve union with the godhead. The very word *gnosis* from which the doctrine takes its name is Greek for knowledge, a knowledge to be

kept jealously from even the majority of the Gnostic flock and preserved for a small elite capable of understanding the complex, often wilfully obscure allegorical discourse. Such an elite were the parfaits or 'perfect souls' of the Albigensians.

As we hasten towards the end of the twentieth Christian century, consideration of such relatively arcane matters may not be inappropriate. With official religion in Europe and the West in seemingly terminal decline, all the evidence points to the fact that, for the ruling classes at least, art is the new religion, with museums the great cathedrals to which we are called to worship. And what is academic post-structuralism, that intellectual opium of the nineteen-eighties and nineties, if not the hermetic Gnosticism of our days – a complex self-referential discourse intelligible only to a select band of *parfaits*, but regarded with baffled awe and devotion by a far larger band of devotees?

Certainly Gnostic world-weariness lies at the very heart of that defining text of structuralism, Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques*, with its conclusion that "the world began without the human race, and will end without it". Michel Foucault takes this idea even further in the penultimate paragraph of *Les mots et les choses*, reducing humanity to a mere invention, and an inefficient one at that: "As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date, and one perhaps nearing its end"; in his final, chilling sentence, he predicts that man will sooner or later be erased from the world, "like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea".

"Like a face drawn in the sand": the phrase is peculiarly apposite for a doctrine based on relativism taken to its logical, if bleakly impractical, extreme. Like the medieval Gnostic who has deconstructed the moral and religious universe to the point where all is one and sin becomes a non-concept, the post-structuralist, having used language to deconstruct language, finds himself in a universe not unlike that of Alice in Wonderland, where anything can mean anything else. For the Gnostic, of course, there was always the steady lodestone of the First Principle, whereas hard-core post-structuralist *parfaits* have little to sustain them other than faith in the chilly uncertainties of relativism. Except that as it happens, in his latest writings Jacques Derrida appears to be postulating an irreducible essence in its way as mystical and unknowable as that of any Gnostic. This essence he defines in *Spectres of Marx* as "an infinite idea of justice", a concept which at times seems not all that distant from the ineffable Godhead of the 2nd century heresiarch, Basilides the Alexandrian.

"What remains irreducible to any deconstruction", writes Derrida in Peggy Kamuf's translation, "what remains as undeconstructible as the possibility itself of deconstruction, is, perhaps, a certain experience of emancipatory promise: it is perhaps even the formality of a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism, an idea of justice…" – as tortuous and agonised an attempt at actualising the transcendent as that of Basilides: "Naught was, neither matter, nor substance, nor voidness of substance, nor simplicity, nor impossibility-of-composition, nor incompatibility, nor imperceptibility, neither man, nor angel, nor god; in fine, neither anything at all for which man has ever found a name, nor any operation which falls within range either of his perception or conception."

If even Derrida is reaching for the messianic, we must surely be standing at the very gates of millennium. Millenarianism is in the air, and has been for some time; for Jung, people are neuroticised by a loss of roots and lack of tradition, which create the conditions for collective hysteria, and we need only look back to the messianic killings at Jonesboro, Waco or Heaven's Gate to see what he means. In a millenarian context, messiahs are much in demand, nowhere more so than in the world of art; and for Ian Jeffrey, messianism is undoubtedly "a pervasive and unspoken condition in recent art", particularly when "major contemporaries emerge as from nothing, somehow names in their own right – suddenly there, baptised artists", to be observed "in a state of stunned credulity".

But let us turn to photographs.

Self-loathing, nihilism, pessimism, disgust – individually, none of these responses is new to photography. What is new is the extent to which they have come to dominate a major part of photographic discourse, and in particular what is perceived as the high ground of artistic production. Not perhaps unexpectedly, the idea that the body of the world is corrupt is most apparent in contemporary representations of the human body. To the Gnostic, the body is a vile, an intolerable imposition, and in this he is at one with the most censorious of puritans. Surprisingly perhaps, an age in which all is permitted, and which in some cultures has seen the transformation of pornography at its most extreme into a major industry, is also one of the least sensual and most anti-erotic. For after all, what unites both Calvin and the Marquis de Sade is a lucid, concentrated loathing of the body, a loathing dressed in the cold imperatives of moral order, but which is at heart nothing more than disgust – a quality informing much of the late 20th-century's apparently insatiable obsession with the somatic.

At its most basic, such disgust is expressed iconically through straightforward depictions of degradation – in almost every case, needless to say, that of women's bodies. Nobuyoshi Araki, for instance, whose endless flood of images tirelessly rehearse over and over again the same obsessive bondage fantasies located in some tacky corner of a cut-price consumerist hell, or else the more sophisticated but infinitely colder stagings of Helmut Newton as he manipulates his elegant models like so many sides of expensive beef. Nor is the male body spared, as witness Mapplethorpe, the remarkable thing about whose sexual imagery is not so much the clinical depiction of objects being inserted into places for which they were not obviously intended, but the almost inhuman technical polish which he brings to that depiction.

Newton and Mapplethorpe manipulate conventionally perfect bodies, however uncommon these may be in the real world, but others prefer to work upon a raw material already deeply flawed. Joel-Peter Witkin's posturing is that of a ghoulish dandy who carves bodies like meat, displaying corpses, freaks and sports upon a lush neo-gothic stage spiced with anticlerical necrophilia of a distinctly old-fashioned kind. Witkin's anguish is artificial – he tries much too hard, so that his stagings end up looking like a window-dresser's bad hair day – but his contempt for the body cannot be disguised, even if it seems the result of calculation rather than genuine rage.

There are many ways of distorting the body, some natural, some less so. Between 1979 and 1991, Nancy Burson created computer-generated

imaginary portraits: composites, artificially aged faces and the like, many reminiscent of the so-called aliens which millennial hysteria is everywhere conjuring out of the minds of the simple. Since 1991, however, she has been photographing what she calls 'special faces' – children and adults whose appearance has been affected by diseases such as cancer or catastrophic premature ageing. The purpose of the work, according to Michael Sands, is essentially redemptive: "These faces, thanks to Nancy Burson, are here with dignity to face a world that might ordinarily turn away from them in denial. Do you find them beautiful? Then you see the world through the same open, compassionate eyes that Burson does, for that is how she sees them". Burson, however, has chosen not to provide any of this information in her captions; consequently, an uninformed viewer looking at these representations of extreme facial deformation is more likely to be reminded of the special effects of horror films, responding with appalled fascination rather than compassion. To all appearance, these faces are the survivors of a nuclear holocaust, the mutant children of Armageddon.

Burson's later subjects, particularly those photographed in soft focus with the plastic-lensed Diana camera, have an air of melancholy resignation, as though waiting for the sands of time to finally run out. Inez van Lamsweerde, on the other hand, who also uses computer imaging to construct her sinisterly jaunty digital monsters, could be credited with pioneering mutant chic. She manipulates photographs of women and children in a number of disturbing ways, whether by erasing genitals and smoothing over the skin in order to provide them with what David Mellor has described as "non-secreting, seamless, sleek, static and closed bodies in a parody of screened consumer perfection… immaterial enigmas of techtronic fabrication", or else by replacing the eyes and mouths of children with those of adults. Part of the fascination of Lamsweerde's electronic golems seems to lie in the fact that at first sight we are unable to make out the site of her interventions; we know that something has gone horribly wrong with these bodies, but we don't immediately understand what, or how, and it is this uncertainty which makes them so horrifying.

Finally, in Orlan, who has elevated non-essential surgery into an ongoing art-form, we have perhaps the ideal millennial artist. In the middle ages, flagellants like the German Brethren of the Cross would flog themselves with whips and chains until the skin hung from their flesh in ribbons in order to appease the wrath of God; today, our sins are atoned for not by flagellants submitting to the whip, but by an artist submitting to the surgeon's knife.

The disintegration of hitherto solid social relationships is another traditional sign of millenarian fervour, and if the body has been the site of one kind of disorder, social relationships are the site of another. Despite the apparent collapse of traditional familial structures in most Western societies, at its most basic a family unit – as opposed to a congeries of adults – consists of one or more immature children and their carer or carers, a relationship which most people, irrespective of social or moral preconceptions, usually regard as entailing a very particular set of obligations. Sally Mann's photographs in *Immediate Family* have been the cause of considerable debate, generating as they do a strong suspicion that the making and subsequent publication of this work may represent a betrayal of these obligations.

Mann's intimate photographs of her three children growing up in the Virginia countryside are certainly striking; cumulatively, however, they produce in the viewer the same sense of unease as the Reverend Louis Dodgson's rather creepy photographs of small girls in a state of semi-undress. That the children are usually posed naked or half-naked is probably neither here nor there, but what brings one up with a start is the number of images in which they are made to look like the victims of violence, with marks like scars or blood upon their bodies, or the number of times they adopt aggressively or (more usually) passively sexualised poses.

Mann would respond – *has* responded – that her images are innocent, and that evil resides exclusively in the eye of the beholder; but that is to be wilfully dense, which this artist clearly is not. The precociously and inappropriately sexualised identities which Mann's children adopt over and over again, and particularly the strong element of sado-masochistic exhibitionism evident in these photos, are clearly the result of conscious or unconscious manipulation by the photographer. Children, as everybody who honestly remembers their own childhood will confirm, are undoubtedly and in their own way sexual beings; but the social contract we live by insists, for good and adequate reason, that their sexuality should not be manipulated by adults. The violation of this taboo, one of the strongest and most deeply rooted of all, in the name of artistic production, could be seen as significant evidence of disorder.

Social macro-relationships are dominated by class distinctions of every kind, and I would like to touch briefly upon a phenomenon to which might be given the name of *class voyeurism*. Voyeurism has always been an inseparable part of photographic mediation; the act of photography is by and large the privilege of the powerful, with the powerless of all kinds offering traditionally rich and exotic subject matter. So much is commonplace; what is more interesting is the fact that condescension is now frequently replaced by contempt. The targets of this contempt, in an age at least nominally attuned to political correctness, are one of the few species of 'other' not to benefit from any form of protection – in other words, they are what used to be called the urban working class and are now, after two or more decades of economic liberalism, turning into a vast and hopeless *lumpenproletariat* living on the margins of Western society.

The process can best be demonstrated by examining three stages in the development of the well-known contemporary British documentary tradition, a tradition whose originator and most distinguished representative is Martin Parr. The seminal work in this lineage is Parr's *The Last Resort*, a jaundiced, bleak and surprisingly bitter exploration of a working-class holiday resort in Northern Britain first published in 1986. The original critical response to this undoubtedly brilliant work mentioned humour and, rather more frequently, nostalgia; but what we see in it today is more often anger and a kind of corrosive disgust – disgust at the dirt, the vulgarity, the physically repulsive details of what are presented as stunted and ugly lives.

A further stage in the breaching of this class's intimacy was marked by the publication in 1991 of Nick Waplington's *Living Room*, which became an instant international success. It represented another stage because unlike Parr, Waplington was no longer photographing strangers, but close acquaintances. In a brief, impressionistic essay accompanying the Aperture

publication, John Berger waxed lyrical over this link: "What is remarkable about Nick Waplington's photographs is the special way in which they make the intimate something public, something that we, who do not know personally the two families photographed, can look at without any sense (or thrill) of intrusion… It is obvious that Nick (the photos make me want to call him by his first name), that Nick knows and loves the friends he has photographed… The opposite of instant pictures, these photos are as lasting for a lifetime as tattoos, yet all they show are split seconds. This is because, brought here in the concentration of Nick's love, life breathes through every one".

I don't buy this; I think Berger, who has studied the relationship between representation and power more profoundly than most, and ought to know better, has been hoodwinked. I find the images impressive but treacherous, not least because of the obviously yawning gulf in photographic sophistication between photographer and subject; to counter that the subjects did not object to their photographs is as naive as claiming that people really *want* to be exposed in the tabloid press or on victim TV – a unique form of exploitation whose victims are duped into collaborating in their own degradation.

The process reached its logical conclusion a couple of years ago in the shape of Richard Billingham's *Ray's A Laugh*, which moved in even closer and scored a still greater success by depicting a seemingly terminally dysfunctional family: the photographer's own. While Billingham lacks the skill of a Parr or a Waplington, his rather hit-or-miss photographs have an undeniable visceral punch, a clear demonstration of photography's fundamental inability to divorce itself from representation: the voyeuristic thrill of the work lies in the fact that this is not just any old wino stumbling about a nightmarishly filthy flat but the photographer's father, that the malevolent-looking harridan lashing out at him with her fists is the photographer's mother. If Billingham's images went almost instantly from the status of painful and incoherent documentary project to artworld mega-stardom, this is partly because they pander to bourgeois expectations of working-class grunge, and partly because they conform to the dominant mood of titillating disgust, of belief in a corrupt body politic.

So far I have considered two kinds of photo-based work which betray what one might call a Gnostic attitude to the world, that concerned with representations of the body and that depicting social relationships. There is however a third category which demonstrates a similar set of attitudes, perhaps the most interesting of all: that of landscape. At the end of the twentieth century, to consider landscape is to confront a whole series of questions about man's relationship to the natural world. Landscape, however, is also a potent factor in the psychology of peoples and cultures; in his magisterial study *Landscape and History*, Simon Schama propounded the thesis that the majority of peoples maintain a particular emotional and spiritual relationship with the landscape they occupy.

As far as British, and particularly English, culture is concerned, landscape is tamed, familiar, no longer as in Germany and North America a source of terror but rather of nostalgia, even though nowadays it may consist of acre upon acre of genetically modified corporate monoculture drenched in pesticides, or else devoted to the breeding of that peculiarly British

contribution to animal husbandry, the Mad Cow. Within this mythic English landscape of rolling woodland and meadows are located the cuddly anthropomorphic animals of countless novels and stories from *Winnie the Pooh* and *The Wind in the Willows* to *Watership Down*. The English, in other words, have – or like to believe they have – a warm, emotional relationship with the birds and animals of their countryside. In fact, the closest the average urban Englishman comes to wildlife is when he hits it with his car.

Hence the heavy irony in the title of Clive Landen's 1993 series *Familiar British Wildlife*. Far from being a helpful naturalist's reference book, this work consists of quasi-forensic images of road kills – some of the estimated 1.5 million animals killed every year on British roads. As Christopher Coppock pointed out in his catalogue essay, while we tend to imagine these animals as existing in a state of natural grace, in an untroubled habitat, "the hard shoulder and the gravel verge are instead the real site of their existence... as we have come to know it".

A rapidly disintegrating ecology, an environment loaded with known and suspected contaminants, the insidious creep of genetically modified crops, the constant threat of another and deadlier Chernobyl – all the delightful results of capitalism rampant in its latest neo-libertarian colours, to say nothing of the Malthusian horror of overpopulation lurking in the wings: is it any wonder that the most vivid of future landscapes in popular imagination today is the post-nuclear wasteland of Mad Max?

This is undoubtedly the landscape of a millenarian Gehenna, ultimate confirmation of the Gnostic's belief in a corrupt and irredeemable world – for what better proof could one adduce of humanity's inherent evil than the fact of our having single-handedly laid waste to the Garden of Eden? And indeed, it is characteristic of much contemporary landscape work that it proposes a world empty of humanity, one in which a radioactive wind has erased Foucault's drawing from the sand. For orthodox Christians, the whole point of the universe is man, without whom there is no purpose to creation; but for the Gnostic, as for some in the contemporary ecology movement, creation must be purged of humanity.

The American photographer Richard Misrach has worked around this subject for a number of years, producing a powerful body of work with the collective title *Violent Legacies*. The first part of his trilogy, entitled *Project W-47 (The Secret)*, consists of colour photographs of Wendover Air Base, a now abandoned military facility in a remote and barren region of western Utah where components for the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs were designed and tested. Misrach portrays simple pictorial elements isolated in the terrible clarity of the desert landscape: rusting shrapnel, a crater, an ammunition bunker with the clean, sunlit lines of a pueblo church, an ultra-minimalist bomb-loading pit. In "The View from the Ark", a short story which accompanied the sequence's first publication, Susan Sontag called these images "catastrophe-landscapes", and commented on how beautiful they were: "It looks beautiful to me. All those golds and pinks and browns. And the sky. And the light. I don't see the problem." And she continued, "Well, it isn't just about seeing. You have to know what's going on… You may notice that there aren't any people in the pictures. But this is what people have done… Sometimes when things are destroyed they look beautiful."

Between 1987 and 1989 Misrach worked on the second part of his trilogy, to which he gave the name *The Pit*. The images were published with the following brief, factual text: "On March 24, 1953, the Bulloch brothers were trailing 2,000 head of sheep across the Sand Springs Valley when they were exposed to extensive fallout from a dirty atomic test. Within a week the first ewes began dropping their lambs prematurely – stunted, woolless, legless, potbellied. Soon full-grown sheep started dying in large numbers with running sores, large pustules, and hardened hooves. Horse and cattle were found dead with beta burns. At final count, 4,390 animals were killed. Initial investigation by government experts indicated that radiation was the cause. However, the Atomic Energy Commission recognised the potential economic and political liability, and all reports and findings were immediately classified. The AEC did provide a public explanation: a dry year and malnutrition were blamed. Today, county-designated dead-animal pits can be found throughout the West. They function much like trash dumps in which locals are encouraged to deposit livestock that die suddenly. The causes of the animals' deaths are often unknown".

An American would, I think, find particular horror in the fact that it is the proverbially pure, symbolically and psychically significant Western frontier that has been raped in such an insidious way. With their lush golden colours, these images make up a hellish negative of the familiar Marlboro cigarettes poster with its galloping stallions: the frontier poisoned, the cowboy's noble companions bulldozed into a pit like so much stinking offal.

A less apocalyptic, more subtle reading of the same text is offered by John Pfahl's *Power Places*, a cool, ironic subversion of the sublime tradition in American landscape photography. In one almost paradigmatic instance, he presents the viewer with a classically lyrical colour image of the Susquehanna River flowing away into the distance – except that the rather beautiful modernist structure in the background, so poetically reflected in the river waters, is Three Mile Island nuclear power plant, which came close to covering much of America's East Coast with radioactive debris. Throughout this series, Pfahl's subversion of the American landscape tradition is carried out with a light hand, with the power plants usually positioned on or just beneath the horizon line in such a way as to hide them from the casual glance. There is a further significance to this distancing, since under normal circumstances it is impossible to approach nuclear plants closely enough to foreground them.

Millenarian nihilism tends to focus on ruins and fragments, the debris of technological civilisation. We know of course from the romantics that ruins can be the focus of a peculiar grandeur, but the ruins at the end of time are usually humble rather than impressive – none more so than the rubbish-strewn mud flats of Lewis Baltz's *San Quentin Point*. In this sequence of what Mark Haworth-Booth has called "forensically neutral" images, Baltz pictures the end products of technological civilisation in austere, low-contrast monochrome, a minimalist version of Apocalypse reduced to a scattering of unidentifiable cardboard, metal and plastic shards barely emerging from the mud.

John Divola seems to go to the opposite extreme in his *Zuma* series, but the difference is essentially one of style. Divola focuses on the remains of a wooden house gutted by fire on a Californian beach, from whose ruined

interior we gaze out at nuclear sunsets – skies of a Blakean intensity and ominousness, the scene glowing inside and out as though with radioactive fallout. In fact these images, which seem like illustrations to one of J.G. Ballard's stylish disaster fantasies, are an example of manufactured imagery on two levels: the house itself was used over and over again in training exercises by the local fire brigade, while the hallucinogenic graffiti are an addition by the artist.

If the natural world faces collapse, recent interpretations of the urban landscape are no less apocalyptic. Ryuji Miyamoto's monochrome images of the Walled City of Kowloon, in Hong Kong, make it look like a cross between Gormenghast and Kipling's City of Dreadful Night. Its high-rise slums built in a legal limbo outside both British and Chinese jurisdiction, Kowloon developed into a densely populated enclave unencumbered by taxes, government or public services; as such, it became a natural home for most of the colony's drugs, gambling and prostitution as well as scores of unregulated industrial enterprises. Miyamoto recorded the demolition which began in 1987, his images suggesting the destruction of some preternaturaly vast and sinister architectural fantasy, but his version of Kowloon is also a paradigm of what urban life might be reduced to following a terminal breakdown of civilisation.

Closer to the bone, Anthony Hernandez in *Landscapes for the Homeless* photographs the sites inhabited by the homeless in California, ranging from stacks of metal sewage piping to the concrete underside of L.A.'s elevated freeway system, of which the artist writes that it represents "a ribbon of life for the real city but a wasteland for the forgotten". Much of the time, Hernandez moves in close, cataloguing the debris which litters these unoccupied or temporarily vacant nesting sites: grimy blankets, empty fast-food containers, a broken toilet seat, endless cigarette butts, carefully hoarded but unidentifiable rubbish of all kinds. Commenting on this work, Lewis Baltz notes that "L.A.'s destiny is to become *Blade Runner*: each earthquake, each fire, each riot, each slackening of the social contract is of necessity good, as it hastens an inevitable fate. If you can convince yourself of that you can get by and experience the city as pure spectacle". In this despairing suggestion that the fire next time should be welcomed as the implacable agent of redemption, Baltz articulates a lucid and concise restatement of the Manichean world view which calls upon Armageddon because only at the end of time will the world be purified.

Images such as those of Misrach and van Lamsweerde provide undeniable evidence for the presence among photographic artists, and indeed all contemporary artists, of a world-weariness, of a contempt for the flesh, of a cynicism at times angry and at times resigned. This is in the nature of the human dilemma today; art cannot but reflect the general disillusion with the world, a traumatic rupture for which Gnostic beliefs provide a powerful metaphor. The age of faith and the age of enlightenment are both irretrievably beyond us, whether for better or worse; certainly the kind of art which those ages produced is no longer within our capabilities. Perhaps, however, once the artificial milestone of the millennium has passed and the hysterias have abated a little, art – and photography – will find a kind of consolation in the perennial glories of a no longer corrupt material world; such transcendence emanating from the simplest of objects might represent

a new and optimistic interpretation of what Gnostics called the *Parousia*, the presence of the immanent.–

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