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Dramatic Undertones in the Documentary Film

Abstract

Documentary filmmaking is an art and therefore an issue of composition. This theoretical understanding has no doubt influenced the present documentary film on the Nigerian screen. Today, even disparate elements can be combined, if only it is effective or striking to do so as it clarifies a particular point of view. This paper focuses on the nature of the documentary film as a presentation of actual events and people; and as a dramatic statement of fact that relies on the ability to use the camera to build interesting and dramatic picture of life led and the work done in the world of everyday reality. It goes further to examine Chike Onwuegbu's The Oil Palm Tree (1978) and J.P. Clark's Tides of the Delta: The Saga of Ozidi (1969) as representative documentary films with dramatic undertones. The conclusion reached is that the documentary film is an art form which can be artistically and creatively explored by the ambitious and talented filmmaker. The suggesting obviously shifts the form away from the old simplistic, well orchestrated, continuous pattern to a more discontinuous network of patterns governed by the increasingly nurtured idea that film is a free form.

Preambles

Let cinema attempt the dramatization of the living scene and the living theme, springing from the living present instead of from the synthetic fabrication of the studio. Let cinema attempt film interpretation of modern problems and events of things as they really are today, and by so doing perform a definite function. Let cinema recognize the existence of real men and women, real things and real issues, and by so doing offer to state, industry, commerce to the public and private organization all kinds, a method of communication and propaganda to project not just personal opinions, but arguments for a world of common interest. (Rotha, 1668-70)

A statement like this demands a re-examination of the whole nature and practice of the documentary film. It also re-establishes the reason scholars may examine the practice of documentary films in the Nigerian screen media context in order to find out the appropriate basis for accessing the art against the background of approach appreciation. This is why we shall, in this paper, try to look more specifically at the structure of the documentary with a view to highlighting the dramatic undertones of the art form. In the Nigerian film industry, the documentary film features prominently; this was even so of the post independence period, when the documentary films featured prominently in the distribution/ exhibition circuit of the colonial films in Nigeria. The documentary is the oldest programme type on the Nigerian screen and this may slightly have accounted for its resilience in spite of the undue decapitation it has received over the time. What indeed happened was that with independence and the follow up of the feature coming from about just anywhere, the documentary faced some form of relegation in the distribution exhibition circuit.

Today, even disparate elements may be combined if only it is effective or striking or useful to do so, as long as it clarifies or strengthens a particular point of view and be "unimpeachable in its truthfulness" (Ekwuazi, 1996:14). The documentary film has obviously shifted from the old simplistic, well orchestrated, continuous patterns to a more discontinuous network of patterns governed by the increasingly nurtured idea that film is a free form. In composition, the documentary film thrives on the presentation of actual events and people, and on the dramatic statement of facts that relies on the "ability to use the camera to build up interesting dramatic picture of life led and the work done in the world of everyday reality" (Rotha, 1968:204).

The documentary film as an art form can be artistically and creatively explored by the ambitious and talented filmmaker. In terms of relationship, both the documentary film and the

documentary theatre do not feel bound by the usual play-writing conventions since films, posters, music, political speeches can be included in a single presentation. Whereas there may be dangers in this freedom, it offers, as well, the possibility of seeing a "theatre" that is exciting and relevant.

Theories and Concepts

The real difference between the narrative features or real story film and the documentary-film, is that the documentary film is generally shorter than the narrative feature film because it is often not planned through the specific phases of outline, treatment, scenario and shooting script. However, the documentary film is made up of various detailed shots which are based wholly on actualities, artistically arranged through the process of selection.

With the documentary came the birth of the creative cinema: skilful in style, wider in observation and more profound in implication than the plain interest story. This is why the documentary film serves to teach the society and to make clearer to the citizen his role as an individual in the state vis-a.-vis the way in which the state acts for the individual.

Various forms of socio-political factors determine the documentary film and thereby give primary importance to its persuasive ability. This ability is explained to go beyond the mere pictorial description of things and people and places of interest. It follows that in the documentary, aesthetics and good taste determine camera portrayal of action and movement, hence the filmmaker's observation alone is not everything. The documentary film as a drama of idea is oriented towards social change and thereby provides solutions to today's problems. The fact of dramatising actual materials underscores the quality of the documentary film. This stands out clearly when the three productional factors, which bring about mediation on the screen, are considered. There are, the condensation of time, the (pre) selection and process of composition, as imperatives by which the documentary expresses itself.

Forms and Dramatic Structure

In the world of the film art, the documentary film is a non-narrative form that is either categorical, rhetorical, abstract or associational

(Bordwell and Thompson, 1989). It differs from other non-narratives like the experimental film, the purely educational/instructional film and the newsreel because of its peculiar nature.

The documentary film has greater need to relate people to their familiar or actual surroundings thereby making them to assume new significance on a temporal basis. This need contrasts with the need to present people as they are or ought to be as we find in the feature film. This form of the documentary film provides for a wide range of artistic perception through visual appeal brought about by artistry and without any loss of real life quality. For instance, in the choice of material, in the compositional (dramatic) cues that seem to change an initial situation of opening to a final situation of closing, and in the desire to achieve a unified point of view, the documentary film attempts to sharpen, clarify and define the objectives of film as a medium of communication. This effort at creating a range of perception is much wider in descriptive films. It agrees with the view that:

In the use of the documentary for dialectical purpose, for example, we can conceive whole periods of time, symbolized by their existing heritages today, being arranged in dramatic shapes to express a variety of outlooks (Rotha et al, p.105).

The statement highlights the significance of content besides the compositional mode in a documentary film. It expresses the formal concern of the documentary film as a social weapon meant to propagate a new value in the society. At the same time it suggests the immense range of the descriptive power made possible by the technique of the film. The documentary film form and the feature film form differ to some extent. This is in terms of characterisation and production and in the conditions of manufacture, otherwise, there is really no difference in their goals because they both seek the truth.

While the documentary format is characterized by creative/ artistic recognition, the feature film format is characteristised by creative/artistic imagination. The point of convergence of both forms lies in the area of style. It follows, therefore, that as in other genres, style in the documentary film a matter of form.

As a free form, the documentary film has no absolute contrived form. Therefore the documentary filmmaker can try whatever he can think of. Besides finding and fulfilling, he can also seek and suggest. For instance, if an idea works, if it is effective for the film, if is creates an impact that will intrigue and delight the audience, then use it. This method is comparable to the mounting and assembling in one single picture various objective like cut out pictures, lettering, symbols and signs of different kinds into a collage of images.

Structure

The structure of the documentary can be ingeniously ruined if the subject matter does not readily lend itself to film. In other words, the selection of an idea for documentary film is determined by the use of an initial subject matter that is primarily dramatic. This provides the background for the film. If well proportioned and balanced, the varied parts of a documentary film can be united. The effort provides pleasure for the film audience. Manoogian (1968) has proposed three formats as the methods to such an approach. They are:-

- The Direct Problem Presentation (i)
- The Direct Intellectual Engagement (ii)
- The Direct Idea presentation (iii)

Both the Direct Problems Presentation (DPP) and the Direct Intellectual Engagement (DIE) are very simple forms. A demonstration of the structure based on a simple interview will show the interviewee dealing initially with a special, personal problem. This opening scene must be dramatic. Once the observation is made, the camera may move from time to time to dramatise the points raised by the interviewer.

In the Direct Problem Presentation (DPP), the final scene deals once again with the interviewee and the course of action he took on the problem.

Manoogian (1968) illustrates the arrangement like this:

Vignettes of Drama

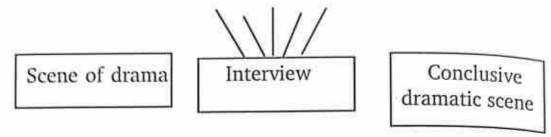


Fig. 1: The Structure of the Direct Problem Presentation (DPP).

In the Direct Intellectual Engagement (DIE) the emphasis is on the last drama scene which consists of other smaller scenes. These scenes are objectively approached and they tend to solve problems based on universal rather than personal actions. The whole idea is to confront the audience intellectually and disallow him from all forms of dramatic empathy by getting him detached throughout the course of the action or interview. By the time a conclusion is reached, a dramatic decision is used to close the action/interview. Again, Manoogian provides a fine illustration to buttress his point, but fails to show that an interview conducted through the vignettes of drama, first, presents problems and results objectively before it unfolds into a conclusion. Therefore an illustration that best presents the "DIE will look like this:

Scene of drama Interview Objective Presentation of problems, results Sequence 1 Sequence 2 Sequence 3 Sequence 4

Fig. 2: The structure of the Director Intellectual Engagement (DIE)

The third, the Direct Idea Presentation (DIP) is the simplest of the three structural arrangements. In this arrangement, there is a reliance on the weight of the subject to carry the film. One film

done in the form of this structural arrangement is usually the visual editorial and its relative success or failure depends primarily on how well the finished film is imparted and made clear in terms of its general organisation. The key factors to this format lies in the arrangement of motifs/shots from which the plus or minus value of propaganda may emerge. Again, this type of structure often attracts to itself the right music and sound to help prop up its specific function and thematic content. The arrangement is best used to convey happening of social, civil, economic or political nature as in war-time propaganda films.

Finally the format provides for little or no meaningful dramatic implication and therefore diminishes critical reading.

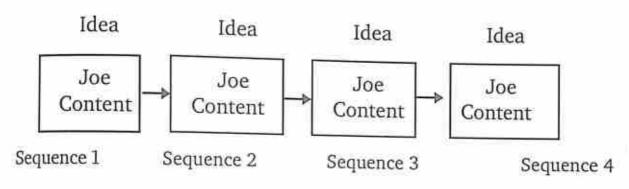


Fig. 3: The structure of Direct Idea Presentation (DIP)

These three structures are some of the varieties on which a documentary can be built especially in the determination of point of view. This means that the structure of the documentary film is the bulwark for expressing ideas, emotional progression including causality, mood, atmosphere and locale. Geographical arrangements, arrangements in time and space, physical groupings or combination from these are also useful resource materials on which the structure of the documentary film can be fashioned. All this must tap on scope of the visual image in order to foreground a philosophy about a concrete fact or event.

A structure that does not express any philosophy renders the film and dullness in any form result from lack of imagination. Therefore, from concept to screening, the documentary film is structured to achieve success through good scripts, a well conceived breakdown and shooting schedule, an efficient film director and experienced professional crew (Shehu, 2001:76).

Analysis

A number of documentary filmmakers have adopted several structural approaches in their works, Chike Onwuegbu's The Oil Palm Tree (1978) and J.P. Clark's Tides of The Delta: The Saga of Ozidi (1969) will now be used as representative texts or films in this portion of the paper. The choice is deliberate because the films represent some of the efforts in documentary filmmaking in the contemporary Nigerian TV-film industry.

(a) The Oil Palm Tree (1978)

This film is a twenty-five minutes documentary made by Mr. Chike Onwuegbu as a producer/director at the Nigerian Television Authority; Benin City. It was shot on location with an Electronic News Gathering (ENG) camera and edited into a U-Matic tape. Basically the significance of the film comes out partly through aestheticism and partly through its persuasive end. The film can be said to belong to the type classified as a categorical documentary film using the structure of the Direct Idea Presentation (DIP). This is because throughout the film one type or one aspect of the various stages of oil making is taken up, divided into parts and dealt with individually.

Firstly, African local oil industry and treats it from the point of view of how local oil is produced and used by man. Secondly, the film uses a signifying paradigm in the African oral culture. It is the Tortoise who is well known in African folktales for his vast dubiousness and elaborate cunningness that earns him the title of the King of Laughter. He is asked to settle a dispute that arose among men on what has contributed best to life. The tortoise settled for the "Oil Palm Tree". Thereafter the functional quality of the oil palm tree is highlighted as the film unfolds the various stages of palm oil making. In terms of segmentation, this film can be divided into three parts:

The first part opens to a wide shot of the oil palm tree and the voice/narrator tells us this tree has been chosen by the Tortoise to contribute best to life. This is followed by a montage, with music underneath, showing the different components of the tree: a wide shot of the palm leaves, a medium long shot of the stem itself and a close-up on a bunch with fruits. Over these, the opening credits are

laid out.

The second part of the film opens to a local farmer climbing the oil palm tree to harvest its fruits. The bunches are cut down and the fruits separated from one of the bunches. Cooking the fruits in a large pot follows this. The cooked fruits are collected, then mashed in a stationary canoe to the accompaniment of a traditional Urhobo song rendered by the people.

Plenty water is added, and soon, the crude oil separates from the fruits. The crude oil is again collected, and boiled. The used water is let out through a sieve at the bottom of the canoe while pure palm oil rises to the top. This is stored and made ready for use.

The third part of the film shows the ways the oil palm is used: To make broomsticks for sweeping, for shelter, cream-making and the dried brunch without the fruit for local soap making. When the husk is burnt to ashes and local oil is added, it becomes a black mass of soap.

At this point, there is a cut to the Tortoise. He projects his head from his shell and shakes it satisfactorily. The voice tells us that his contentment stems from what he has observed that can be provided to men from the oil palm tree. These portions of the film serve as a break and also as a point of transition to shots showing further uses of the oil palm tree. Yet the device is ineffective and improper because its space-time cinematographic property is restricted within the shot, far from the basic philosophy of the film.

For instance, only a single wide shot of the tortoise against a grassy background is used in a situation that allows for collision of shots in one or more cases: This anomaly is quite disturbing and of less aesthetic importance. Alternatively, a composition from different angles will lend variety to the significance of the tortoise as one character of different shades on the narrative scheme of the film. Obviously, this brings about space-time unity wherein the image of the tortoise can be linked to other shots by association/repetition or by coincidence or by contrast. As effort like this provides the rhythm and term appropriate to the film's subject and to the audience.

Back to the film: the narrator enumerates the further uses of the oil palm tree. For instance, the dried and-dead-oil palm tree is used to make-local bridges. It can also produce consumable larvae, which

in certain parts of Nigeria, is eaten with dried garri called "Kpokpogan" and finished up with fresh palm wine.

Cut to modem processing/packaging of the oil palm products: The proceeds from the mills or refineries are the by-products which include margarine, soap, body-cream, palm oilen, palm sterim and fatty acids. All these are illustrated graphically as captions. By using still shots" of captions at this stage, the filmmaker points at the theoretical extreme in which the time dimension is at infinity while space dimension is at zero. It is therefore certain that shots of this nature can only be admired on qualities outside their state of perpetual immobility.

The film ends almost the same way it began by showing the various aspects of the oil palm tree in a montage. The strongest point in the film is in being able to project a form of communal experience in the showing of what is most familiar to 4-a sort of reestablishment of common effort.

However the film lacks any conclusive dramatic scene and therefore does not create any new awareness. It also fails when considered against the premise that film is an interpretation of the vital aspect of all experiences and that the very act of seeing requires that data be organized to suit meaningful pattern or configuration.

Another failure of the film is that it does not project any concrete social vision and therefore it is ideologically weak. This superfluity can also be noticed in the unsuitable and foreign instrumental sound track that runs throughout the film; the inappropriateness of this lies in its inability to foreground the total image of the subject matter and the tortoise as cultural signposts. The alternative is to use to a local instrumental music.

These aspects hardly contribute to kinaesthetic structure of the film, on the one hand, and the bulk and relative movements of images displayed in the detailed long-wide shots and medium long shots of the film, on the other hand.

(b) Tides of The Delta: The Saga of Ozidi (1969)

Here, we are faced with an actual dramatic cycle of the Ijo culture lasting seven days or "nights" and preformed by a group of traveling players in the Niger Delta. This is an ethnographic documentary (i.e anon-narrative) film put together by two dexterous gentlemen,

Francis Speed (on camera) and John Pepper Clark Bekederemo as producer/director. The film runs for forty-five minutes, on 16mm colour. It oscillates between the Director Problem Presentation and the Direct Intellectual Engagement fcfrms of the documentary.

In outlook, it can easily be classified as categorical since it deals with one problem at a time, after the other. Yet its peculiar nature cannot be removed from the parameters used in judging the Abstract or Associational non-narrative; for example, its sonic qualities, its aural-qualities and its loosely connected images come together to excite the emotion.

It is exigent to point out that this film is a dramatic presentation with the narrator-protagonist-amidst a group of performers. In fact the film is very familiar to Nigerian theatre scholars and practitioners.

The film "portrays Ozidi in his career history and the way he grapples with life. Side by side it presents his politics and the changing attitude towards the hero. This is the point of view, objective or subjective, that provides the backbone for the film. The feeling aroused in the process of his career as it builds up to an advantage predicts the constant use of clashing wide shots in which the narrator remains dominant as he plays the character-role of Ozidi the hero and the one through whom the essentiality of action is revealed. This visual composition gives fluidity to the film and accentuates oral drama as an ambiguous art or an open-ended event.

This is the very nature of the actual drama which has been rendered into mass government and mass action much in the same way Eisenstein, the famous Russian film director, believed. The narrator-protagonist relies on this advantage to give sanity to the story of Ozidi as he (Ozidi) goes through the corridors of darkness to avenge his wrongfully killed father (Ozidi senior) by the elders of Orua, chief among them are: Azebabife-the Skeleton man, Agbogidi of the Naked parts, Oguaran of the Twenty Toes and Ofe, the short. Ozidi Gunior) summarily dispatches them and his father avenged at the end of the fifth day.

Generally, the film recreates the same varieties of the oral epic in a moment of performance with music, histrionic resources, and emotional relationship between singer and the audience. Such stark theatrical overtone is vividly missing in The Oil Palm Tree where there seems to have been an indeterminate contortion of form.

The mise-en-scene in *Tides of The Delta* is a mixture of media forms, of specific details within the setting that emphasize tones, proportion and object evocative of every situation in the drama. As a good oral performance its beauty lies in the maintenance of a healthy balance between the tale, the music and the histrionics and every thing else that a performer needs to rely upon in a live context. This is why the film is one which typically finds a format for itself. It tends to assault the continuity style at its very centre because it exists in the cogent presentation of a story.

Definite as the observations are in the total reading of the documentary film, Clark sought to arrange and balance his film along three main divisions, with twenty-four principal sequences

of picture arrangement. (Clark, 1977:401-408).

The opening sequence which is also the beginning of the first division of the film is a montage of various shots that reconstruct the socio-economic history of the Izon people; their cultural understanding of human relationship to environmental conditions. This signifying montage is sharpened and clarified by the slow progression of the shots. These shots are, the panning shot over the Forcados beach with citizens in a boat", "the fishing nets," "hooks on line" "the shot of the woman, who dips her child into the river in order to have the child taste of the surrounding energies" "the steam engine going by" etc. Against this symbolic construction of filmic time, we have a not-too fascinating remark about the tide, which "like time carries all kinds countless unknown drifts" (p. 40) resulting from the devastating effect of" the heavy rains and high floods that every year--overflow the banks of the Forcados" (p. 402).

This statement on the devastation of the Delta as it ends up in the limitless sea (the Atlantic Ocean) is tied up neatly with the beginning of the third principal sequence of picture arrangement in the film: the picture of merchant adventuring from overseas in towering seismic rigs and floating suburbia's draining the delta dry of oil (p. 402). Of course, this indicates, in dramatic terms, the degree of disaster arising from the economic and political depletion of the region's resources complete with the high tide that carries all kinds like the stump of the oil palm tree tossed headlong into midstream.

Surely if the "stump" remains there like others staggering in protest (pA02) to the total neglect of the area by government after

government, it is bound to arrest local and international traffic up and down the River Niger. Summarily, the first division of the film reflects the social situation of the Ijo people and their moral values. Again, it foreshadows "the story of revenge and its attending excesses as the bane of the filmic narration.

Division two of the film partly carries over from division one the picture of the social life of the people. It defines their lives as conditioned by the river: it is their road, their canoe, their bicycle and their home. Besides the open shot of a local industry of canoe making intercut with the shot of the brewing of the native gin called "ogogoro," to an appreciable extent, reveal the human relation and environmental conditions of the Ijo world. In another sequence, we come to terms with that aspect of the life of the people, which relates their health conditions. This is done against the backdrop of the aggressiveness of the youth that will as in during sport swim out midstream to board ships steaming full ahead, presumably in the pursuit of expectation of fuller life of greater pastures overseas.

Leaving this sequence of picture, we come to the fourth sequence of picture arrangements, which begins the epic-music-drama of Ozidi. It begins with a ritual procession of the narrator/protagonist in the company of seven virgins. They march towards the river followed closely by a dance party of ordinary citizens. The wideangle shot that contains all of them endorses a form of collective intervention in the rite between the living and the dead-the film's universe of meaning. The shot is a metonym since it reveals just a part of the community to signify the whole community's readiness for the performance.

A supplication is made to 'Tamara' (the river goddess), and the necessary permission is obtained. The party returns to the village square where they now position themselves for the performance; that is, performance that is the story of a boy who avenges the death of his father so that the father may be called home and offered sacrifices by his descendants. This knowledge explains the reason why the Ijo people hold in high esteem the ability to procreate as truly a matter of life and death.

The correspondence to the action is that shot which can be described as associational, in which a mother dips her child into the river to ensure that her child gets to know early enough the 'waters' that surround him. In this "waters" he will train to become a great swimmer and diver. Eventually Ozidi slays the wife of Ogueren, Azezabife and Ofe as a challenge to their men to defend neighbour, The-third day ends in this manner at Bolour Orua, after which the festival natural moves to Toro Orua (a town settlement to Bolou Orua).

On the fourth day at Toro Orua an appeal is made to "Tamara" the mother goddess to bless Ozidi's cause; soon after, he eliminates his adversaries, one after the other. Sequence nineteen of the film (now the fifth day) presents the' ironic encounter of Oreame/Ozidi on the one side and the team of Agonodi (Odogu's mother)/Odogu/ his wife on the other side. Ozidi is eventually victorious, only after a fierce encounter between both sorceress mother: "as one pulls out a charm so does the others" (p. 406). Next is the conformation between Ozidi and Tebesonoma on the sixth day, in which, it is claimed begins the overrating use of his powers. He slays the poor sister of Tebesonoma and her child leaving them lying like a plantain tree and its sucker. After this feat, Ozidi is restless and overwhelms more challengers, such as the cannibal team of Azema and Azemoroti who engages in unnatural lover-play that resembles the Oedipus complex of Greek mythology. This image can also be compared to the image of Oreame/Ozidi extraordinary relationship, which is apparently based on the female domination in Ijo family system.

Ozidi's adventure continued ceaselessly until "Engrandon" the small pox king is woken up by the tumult. In a form of divine mission, he strikes Ozidi down; a kind of retributive justice occasioned by Ozidi's excesses. This last predicament yields to purification and divine grace is manifested through Ozidi's mother, Orea who treats smallpox for yaws. Royalty is offended and the smallpox king goes off in a huff, as "party of players in a double dance formation representing the moving barrage" (c/f::Clark, 1966: 115; Wren, 1984:114)

In one perspective, Clark claims that the divine intervention was necessary to neutralize Ozidi's excesses. Okpewho (1979), in another perspective, feels that Ozidi' personality myth permits that he eliminates his challengers together with the smallpox king and so the question of retribution does not arise. Together, both reading

underscore the simple assumption that the intra-structure and structure of a documentary film require that an action ends in a conclusion or decision either ambiguous or closed. We can then generally believe that the factor of the smallpox has only been used as a way to settle the digressive tendencies of the tale on film. After the heavy pile-ups on the battlefield, a situation of calm is presented whereby dangerous explorations are no more and Ozidi is restored to the society of men. This is a situation that calls for joy for the simple reason that man has been able to triumph over human hardship and weakness as suffered by the hero.

Finally, the film ends the same way it began with people in supplication to 'Tamara' the mother earth. A wide angle shot of the dancers at the village square foregrounds this action. Cut to another montage/teaser (but unlike the first in picture sequence) to 'reed' again in the tide, the moon overhead shining over the sea to signal the closing day and the end of film.

Conclusion

The documentary format is obviously not the only kind of format in which film is realized on the Nigerian screen, but it proves to be of great significant innovation in our contemporary culture. This submission subsumes that the artist/film-maker has a peculiar way of believing and expressing values. He seeks to demonstrate consciously or subconsciously or even unconsciously his affinity to the principles of aesthetics, theatre practice and criticism. The real significance of this important critical perception on the part of the filmmaker/analyst is to achieve greater directness, greater clarity into the theme of his subject.

This means there must be in our generation a conventional methodology to thought and the reworking of "reality". Reality means in this case, the presentation of actual materials in an unselected way. In all cases; the degree of mediation by the director. cameraman and other artistic collaborators to select and present what is factual and what is dramatic aims at demystifying this notion of "reality". The documentary film-maker creates the proper situation for this overlap; from the orchestrated documentary film to a network of dramatic patterns and ideas in order to urge better social conditions. Done in this way, the documentary film is sure to loose its negative consequences.

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