

## Sounds of War: 'Alia'

Written by Susanna Hast

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# Sounds of War: 'Alia'

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SUSANNA HAST, MAR 18 2018

**This is an excerpt from *Sounds of War: Aesthetics, Emotions and Chechnya* – an E-IR open access book by Susanna Hast.**

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In the prologue to *The Oath*, Baiev (et al. 2003: xvi) writes “During the wars in Chechnya, I knew I could die any moment, so I used to keep a piece of paper in my pocket with my name and address written on it. I always prayed that whoever found my body would take it to my hometown for burial because the Koran commands us to bury the dead within twenty-four hours.” When Baiev is about to be executed after spending several days in a pit, his last wish is to have his body left at the outskirts of his village for someone to find and give him a proper burial. He tells how they made temporary burials for the dead so relatives could have proper funeral later. They were not only Chechens, but Russian soldiers too. He describes the women of *Mothers of Soldiers*, a Russian NGO, as courageous women who travelled to Chechnya across the frontline to search for their sons, or the remains of their sons with the help of Chechen mothers. I wondered about the women who disappeared, whose bodies were not found. I had not heard of them yet. It was Christmas time in 2014. I began to hear a story in my head about someone called Alia. It is still a mystery to me where the name came from.

Alia is a product of my imagination, a young woman whose story I invented. Maybe I made her up because I could not find stories told by young women at the time. For Alia, life is tender and she is happy. But it all changes, the world around her collapses, and she vanishes with it. She is never found and buried. Alia is my favourite song. It has it all. The funky arrangement celebrates hope and joy while the lyrics entail the tragedy. The song is a desperate cry that also asks the body to move, to dance.

“Alia”

*Do you know my story  
I think it's unheard of  
It's unheard of*

*I was walking by the street one day,  
sunny and warm  
When it hit me this thought, maybe I was,  
I was immortal*

*I was passing by the well one day,  
cloudy and cold  
When I heard the bell calling, calling me now,  
calling me beautiful*

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*Do you know my name,  
it's Alia  
It's written on a stone, I hope*

*I was walking by the street one day  
Sunny and warm  
When I heard the bell calling, calling me now,  
calling me beautiful*

*It was a land of the sad  
The eternal was agony  
The beautiful was long gone  
I was hidden deep and  
left to the beasts,  
to be buried in the ground*

*Do you know my name,  
it's Alia  
It's written on a stone, I hope*

### **Dance, Synchrony and Compassion**

Dance is a physical activity which war affects, and which affects war and political ordering. Dana Mills (2017: 77) writes that dance can witness “those moments that are too complex, contradictory, dense to be expressed in words; those which are in danger of going under the radar; those which defy a singular narrative.” The density and complexity of Chechen dance disables a singular narrative because many languages are written on the body and translated by the body.

According to Jaimoukha (2005: 194), dance is the most popular kind of folk art in Chechnya. He writes, “Music and dance are of such potent force in society that they stand to play a central role as rallying cries in national revival and the building of devastated Chechnya once the war is over.” Dance, in fact, is the bodily movement that connects collective emotion, national identity, and the private experience. In this chapter, I introduce the idea that dance can imply compassion through kinaesthetic empathy and that dance can also signify perseverance and resistance manifested in the body’s movements.

Dance is a multisensory activity. It requires interaction with the social world and physical environment. Dance involves interpretation, creativity, problem solving, sensing of time and perceiving of space, self-regulation, concentration, presence, emotions and imagination (see Anttila 2013). Dance in the context of war is important for understanding how emotions, coping mechanisms, healing and movement are in close relationship. First is the connection to others in movement through flesh, as Damasio (2010) explains, from actual movement we make somatosensory representations and visual representations which become part of our memory. For example, you can remember and recognise someone by the way they walk, or notice how someone’s posture reminds you of another person. Even if we do not pay conscious attention to corporeality, we do observe all the time the bodies of others in movement. Judith Lynne Hanna (2015), who has contributed significantly to knowledge on dance and the brain, explains how dance has multiple functions affecting learning and well-being. Dance, is a form of nonverbal language, an effective method of communication which affects the brain in a way similar to language. The physical exercise of dance sparks new brain cells and their connections (neuroplasticity), increases neurotransmitters, nerve growth factors, etc. Moreover, dance helps to regulate stress; it has cognitive, emotional and therapeutic functions.

Interaction and movement are central to our brain activity. As Damasio (2010) argues, the brain’s mapping of its

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outside world (the body proper included) takes place in the context of movement. The physicality of compassion is related to synchronised movement. In a clinical study by Valdesolo and DeSteno (2011), when two individuals tapped computer sensors in rhythmic synchrony they reported feeling more similar to each other than towards those with whom they tapped asynchronously. The synchronised tapping also correlated with compassion and willingness to help the other in a task. The researchers then asked questions to determine feelings of liking and compassion, and tested the participant's willingness to assist the person she tapped with. The participant would more likely help the victim if she had tapped a sensor in synchrony with the victim rather than not in synchrony. Valdesolo and DeSteno (2011) refer to this as synchrony-induced compassion.

There are other studies which attest to different affective/emotional impacts of synchrony, such as the study by Lumsden et al. (2014) in which researchers found intentional synchronous interpersonal movement positively affected self-esteem and social connection to the other. They suggest that we may feel better about ourselves when moving in synchrony instead of moving to our own rhythm (Lumsden et al. 2014). To achieve interpersonal synchrony with another person, the individual needs to adjust to and temporally align with, the movement of the other. Cacioppo et al. (2014) found out in their study how the referent person – the one to whose rhythm the other attunes – also experiences affiliative feelings towards the other. They found correlation between synchronised movement and feelings of affiliation in the referent person, thus synchrony affects the emotions of both parties. Launay et al. (2014) found that likability increases even with a virtual partner, and not just by perceived action, but even with only sound. Tarr et al. (2015) have studied how synchronised movement in group dancing promotes social bonding and increases people's pain thresholds. Colombetti (2014) argues that mimicry contributes to social bonding, and that moving in synchrony can help to alleviate unpleasant feelings. Moreover, there is a tendency for automatic body movement synchronisation in interpersonal interaction (Yun et al. 2012). These tests show a connection between synchronous movement and compassion.

Visible stillness does not mean the absence of movement. There is movement on the inside even if not visible on the outside. The living organism is moving when it is breathing, its organs are living, blood is running through the veins, and so forth. Thus, for example, breath can be synchronous as well, but difficult to notice. Synchronised movements often involve repetition (a sequence of movements and sounds). In comparison, mimicking of other's movement tends to follow behind, because the one following the other cannot fully anticipate what comes next. Tapping a sensor repeatedly is then a much easier means of achieving synchrony than trying to follow someone's body movement – also because sound is involved. It is repetition, the continuation of synchronous movement, which enables synchrony to begin affecting the bodymind.

If we perceive through movement, if we are able to simulate the movement of others, and if synchrony induces our feeling for the other – then compassion is related to movement and dance. Motion is even embedded in the word *emotion*. In light of Damasio's (2010) theory of emotion, movement such as dance seems a plausible part of the politics of compassion. But it has to be emphasised that dance should not be essentialised. There is no essence of dance, or ultimate emotion in it. Dance is not necessarily joyful. Dance can cause feelings of anxiety, fear and shame. There are many dances which do not aim for or spring from joy or happiness. Thus, compassion is not necessarily manifested in dance, nor does it necessarily cause the feeling of compassion. But the corporeal engagement with vulnerability, the self, and the other, contributes to an engagement with emotions, and a possibility for compassion.

In dance theory, the interaction of bodies is sometimes described in terms of kinaesthetic empathy or mimicking. Something corporeal is transmitted from the dancer to the spectator. According to dance professor Susan Foster (2010), this transmission is not spontaneous but born in a historical context of subjectivity and bodily sensations. Thus, both the dancer and the viewer represent a social moment through their bodies. Whereas Damasio writes about the brain's ability to map the body's state, Foster (2010: 2) refers to kinaesthesia, or kinaesthesia, as a "designated way of experiencing physicality and movement that, in turn, summons other bodies into a specific way of feeling towards it." The concept of kinaesthesia, itself, emerged in the 1880s to describe the nerve sensors of muscles and joints which produce knowledge of the body's movement and postures.

The product of dance is manifested in the body. Dance is body language, and often, yet not necessarily, has a story to tell. The experience of physicality and movement takes place in a social moment and is choreographed.

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Choreography does not only refer to dance as performative art, but broadly to the arrangement of relations between bodies in time and space.

Choreograph (v.): to arrange relations between bodies in time and space

Choreography (v.): act of framing relations between bodies; “a way of seeing the world” Choreography (n.): result of any of these actions

Choreography (n.): a dynamic constellation of any kind, consciously created or not, self-organising or super-imposed  
Choreography (n.): order observed . . . exchange of forces; a process that has an observable or observed embodied order  
Choreograph (v.): to recognize such an order

Choreography (v.): act of interfering with or negotiating such an order (Klien et al. 2008)

Choreography has as much to do with dance as with political ordering. Political agency and community are not pre-existent, but they appear through the body's movement, through choreography (Puumala et al. 2011). Choreography applies to the study of corporeal practices of power and resistance, such as politics around migrant bodies (Väyrynen 2013). Interest in bodily choreography enables the finding of political agency in previously unknown places, outside of pre-existing categories. Viewing war through the concept of choreography shifts the focus away from abstractions of political and military theory to corporeal agency (Morris and Giersdorf 2016). The notion of choreography is needed in order to establish a relationship between movement and (political) ordering. When bodies move in time and space they arrange relationships, connections, emotions.

Choreography for Foster (2010) is a plan or score according to which movement unfolds, but also an expression of identity. There are always cultural, political and economic values embedded in choreography. Dance implies values, but also memory. I return to what I wrote in Chapter one: a dancer can begin to remember herself (Monni 1995). The dancing body also remembers the political, “the struggle of power over the force to inscribe upon it” and “the struggle itself, the quest for power” (Mills 2017: 75). Dance is then part of political struggle (see Lasarati 2013; Martin 2016; Morris and Giersdorf 2016). Dance is used for political ordering and reordering, for the training of militaries, as a warning for the enemy, and to celebrate victories; but also in resisting power. Dance researcher Rosemary Martin (2016: 208) writes

Dance does not often feature in current, dominant accounts of the uprisings that have been sweeping the southern Mediterranean region, yet dance has been present in public protests—from the collective Dabkeh 3 being performed through the streets of Homs in defiance of the Assad regime, to dance as an expression alongside theatre, music, and visual art in locations that could be considered hubs of the revolutions, such as Tahrir Square.

Martin (2016: 218) argues, based on her ethnographic research among dancers in Egypt, that “dance has the potential to act as a political utterance during contemporary revolutionary moments.” Yet, dance and choreography do not *necessarily* mobilise or function as an organising principle and structuring device. As Morris and Giersdorf (2016) suggest, choreography could also be ontologically disordered. Perhaps dance does not produce a coherent story but contradictions, incomprehension and loss of control. When I first saw Chechen dance, I saw it as embodied compassion, compassion in movement and dialogue. But when I interviewed two Chechen men on dance (Ali and Said 2017), I had to abandon this single narrative because dance was also associated with shame; the shame of enjoyment and pleasure due to religious commitments. At the same time, the interviewed men described dance as bodily protest and manifestation of freedom. I return to this theme at the end of the chapter.

The transformative potential of dance in war is an individual experience, and in this study, it is observed from the outside through aesthetic sensing. It is acknowledged that the dancer can begin to remember herself, the body and the movement which might have been forgotten. Dance is a study into ways of being. Chechen dance denotes spirituality; there is a communal and historical memory inscribed in the dance, but also a personal becoming. Dance in the context of war can be a return to the forgotten pre-war self, or it can be a new becoming. Moreover, it can be a micropolitical resistance of war.

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### Film Witnessing War

In this chapter, I discuss compassion and dance in Mantas Kvedaravicius's documentary film *Barzakh* (2012) and Nikita Mikhalkov's (2007) motion picture *12*. The films are art that transmit the private experience as part of a wider context of violence and its justifications. They communicate life-states, capacities and emotions, one following the life worlds of Chechens looking for their disappeared family members, and the other painting a story of a young Chechen man's faith in the hands of a Russian jury. Even though they are different genres of film, both are witness to war. *Barzakh* was chosen here because it does not rely on macabre aesthetics. It offers a view of war, not as a spectacle, but through the everyday. Second, *Barzakh* does not portray individuals as passive sufferers, but shows capable people making efforts to live, to find the disappeared, to paint the walls, to dance at weddings. *Barzakh* makes visible the invisible politics: families looking for their sons, and authorities unwilling to help. It shows the emotional side of the economy which produces terrorism for profits, to those taking part in cleansings. It also shows dance in a social moment – the (post-)war – during which people continued experiencing war in their daily lives.

Ilona Hongisto (2015: 11) writes, "What distinguishes the documentary from other cinematic modalities is its involvement with a world that continues beyond the film's frame." As Rens Van Munster and Casper Sylvest (2013) argue, documentary film is not a window to reality but a set of visual constellations of reality. Documentary film is already an interpretation of reality. Hongisto refers to fabulation as one aspect of what documentaries can do. She describes fabulation as the space in-between people who tell stories and the documentary camera that observes these fabulous acts. In that relationship is an undoing of an "antagonistic dichotomy between the true and the false" (Hongisto 2015, 67). Documentaries can then fabulate alternative ways of being in the world. The filmmaker is active, making aesthetic decisions along the way. She shares the moment with the filmed, and chooses the stories to tell, but not the way the viewer sees them.

I am less curious about the intentions of the filmmaker than with the aesthetic as an opening to something not yet conceived or envisioned. The documentaries chosen here are looked at from a fabulating perspective, without the assumption that the filmmaker intended for them to unsettle anything.

Politics is found in the gaps between bodies and in the actions which make the gaps wider or narrower, or which blur the boundary between the private body and the collective body, the self and the other. I return to what I wrote in the introduction: text, film, images and sounds act upon the reader's, viewer's or listener's body. At the same time, the audience is not passively receiving an aesthetic message, but co-creates it from her own experience and perception. Embodied insight is then born *in-between bodies*. Politics does not exist simply between representation and represented as *ideas*, but as living organisms which move in relation to each other. I have developed this idea by moving with a character in the film *12* in order to investigate the possibilities for shrinking the space or negotiating the difference between us.

There are many things to say about politics, cinema and the brain (see Connolly 2002), but I contend here with some notes on film technique and the role of film in politics. Bodies do not have to be in the same physical space to affect each other, as Anthony D'Aloia (2012) explains when discussing cinematic empathy. The film I analyse affects my body (bodymind). The bodies moving on the screen excite my body, activating the brain regions related to movement when perceiving others' movement. D'Aloia (2012) refers to the bodies on the screen as quasi-bodies which present vitality and tension which the spectator can accompany. Moreover, the film itself is a body. Film's "mechanical movements embody human spectator's modes of experiencing the world," for example, in the case of fluid tracking or a close-up (D'Aloia 2012:101). The camera – its perspective, cuts and moves become the body we follow, creating a cinematic embodiment.

The reason I use a fiction film to discuss war experience in the second part of the chapter is that popular culture and politics are not two separate phenomena, they are co-constitutive (Dodds 2015; Shepherd 2013). Popular culture is used in politics (like propaganda) and it is a part of the global economy. Popular culture makes ideas, resistance, ideologies and emotions flow across borders (Weldes and Rowley 2015). While empirical reality is often contrasted with fictional stories of human experience, as Shapiro (2009: 5) argues, "cinema provides superior access to

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empirical veracity than other forms of managed perception.” The film’s advantage is the possibility to rewind, to return to the images and sounds, to focus perception on details, and different details each viewing. The film-body can offer unusual and changing perspectives – close-ups, views from far away, above or underneath. There are limitations, because the film’s perspective is forced upon the viewer, but any kind of observation is biased because the body is not an all-perceiving, all-processing machine. Most importantly, film excites the imagination from a multisensory perspective, leaving smell and touch away, but enabling kinaesthetic, visual and auditory experiences.

### Dance Under the Surface

In *Barzakh*, people are living a non-life, waiting for news about their friends and relatives who have disappeared. News which often never comes. The film begins with a misty image of a woman praying for her disappeared son, and is followed by images of water which represents a dreamy state. The film is composed of lingering and longing, stillness and silence, and then – a wedding dance. Dance in *Barzakh* is the politics in-between bodies, a rhythmic rupture in the sensual experience. Dance is not only a great meta-phor for compassion, but one possible (but not necessary) way compassion can be experienced. In a group, dancers need to attune to each other’s bodies. They are many in body yet together they form *one body*, mindful of timing, synchrony and use of space. Dance is also a great metaphor for and a manifestation of vulnerability. Chechens dancing in the (post-)war context let themselves – their dancing bodies – be seen by others. Dance’s aesthetics, in *Barzakh*, emerge as a form of courage, an active and joyful occurrence, even though not everyone present or dancing is necessarily experiencing joy. The dancing body is still vulnerable, but in a different sense: it celebrates life in the face of fear, anxiety, loss and trauma, and the bodily suffering caused by war.

*Barzakh* was filmed in Chechnya between 2006 and 2009. Mantas Kvedaravicius filmed the documentary along with his anthropological study, and built bonds of trust with his research subjects. He had to consider the risk his work posed to those who housed him, informed him and allowed him to film. *Barzakh* is a film that can be seen as research material, research report, or even a product of artistic research.

As mentioned, during the second Chechen war (1999-2009), Chechnya was established as a Counter-Terrorist Zone which produced terrorism by allowing violence, torture and kidnapping (Kvedaravicius 2012). The normalisation period (still ongoing as I write this), after the active war phase (1999-2000), is presented in the film through glimpses of the reconstructed capital Grozny and the villagers’ attempts to rebuild their homes and continue their lives. The documentary is an intimate description of family and village life in a war-torn territory with kidnappings and disappearances casting a shadow on the community. In the film, war manifests through the vulnerable bodies – the scars, the longing and the uncertainty. Wounds are not healing and life is not advancing. *Barzakh* is a state of being between two worlds – past and present – a dreadful living as though waiting for a loved one to return, not knowing if the disappeared is still alive.

The beginning of the film shows a family trying to launch a legal process in order to find out what happened to their missing family member, Hamdan, one of the thousands disappeared. The scene is like a painting, lasting almost 20 seconds. The family members are positioned in groups of two, one pair in the front and the children at the back. Their heads are down and nothing is happening but waiting. In contrast to such stillness and silence, at about 10 minutes, there is a wedding scene – lively and loud. This scene, consisting of dance and music, enters between two silent scenes, as if breaking the dominant war narrative. Through dance, *Barzakh* comes up to the surface of the water and wakes those present from the dream – even if for only an instant.

After the wedding scene, the camera returns to a silent image portraying the back of the woman who is trying to find her disappeared husband. She is looking at a distance, away from the camera, not moving, hands crossed. She is an aesthetic subject to me, the viewer, because I cannot know what she is thinking. I have to use imagination based on her body posture, her stillness, the silence and the space where she stands. The woman is staring ahead, her face invisible to the viewer. Her stillness communicates waiting and the frustration of not receiving answers from authorities. The refusal to help the families of the disappeared find out the truth keeps the bodies still, and time stops because hope and despair are kept alive simultaneously. The body movement of compassion can mean approaching and looking towards the other person. But compassion is also in following, mimicking, and taking someone else’s

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perspective, which does not necessitate physical convergence. The woman with her back against the camera has not turned her back on the camera, but rather the camera-body is following her. The spectator is looking in the same direction, positioned in the same direction. The perspective does not necessarily make her distant, but close, allowing the viewer to look *with* her rather than *at* her. Compassion embodied is then a focus of the bodymind *in the same direction*. The scene supports this realisation. There is enough time to start wondering: what is she looking at, what is she seeing, what is she thinking and feeling? It takes time to see someone. Compassion is an engagement with time as well.

The transition to the language of movement and sound is striking: young Chechen men are tapping their bare feet on the ground rhythmically followed by silenced bodies keeping to themselves. The film moves between withdrawn, almost sunken bodies, and open moving bodies. The youth is dancing a traditional Vainakh (Chechen and Ingush) dance, *lezginka*. The bodily energy of the dance marks a change from the aesthetics of the surrounding scenes and a transition from sadness to celebration. Dance represents knowing through moving. A dancing pair must move together – they must see each other, and their bodies communicate intimately even when not touching. The tempo of the music and the way people are in the dance as spectators, tell a story which actively (even if non-consciously) resists war's hurtful effects on the body through kinaesthetic empathy directed at the self and others. The wedding scene provides a landscape of non-violence, a kinaesthesia of dance in the social moment of (post-)war, of mourning and longing. Even if dance does not wipe war away, or erase the hurt, it feels like there is a corporeal becoming taking place, a conversation led by the body. At the same time, the scene shows not only people smiling and clapping hands, but people with the same serious faces and closed positions, as if to serve as a reminder of the war's burden on people.

According to Shapiro, focus on the aesthetic rather than psychological subject emphasises images rather than narrative. He argues that "the post-mimetic aesthetic that cinema animates inter-articulates and mobilizes images to provoke thinking outside of any narrative determination" (Shapiro 2009: 10). *Barzakh* relies heavily on images at the expense of (a single) narrative. The same is true for the film *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia*, which I discuss later, and even the film *12* relies on images for its most powerful parts. But the wedding scene is not only about imagery. It is built upon sound and rhythm. If the other scenes are almost as if still, the wedding dance invites the body's metronome to pulsate with it.

There is a woman shown in the beginning of the wedding scene. Her face is radiating with joy and her smile is childish when she watches the youthful dance. Even if I cannot know what she feels, I can see the smile is spontaneous. A forced smile differs from a spontaneous smile – the difference is visually detectable. This difference exists because different regions of the brain handle forced and spontaneous smiles (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998). The face of the woman smiling is not expressing the pains of war but the kind side of life. The smile does not mean she did not experience and witness violence, it means dance and music are having at least a momentary, positive effect on her bodymind; dance and music can be comforting, soothing, energising. They can be all that even when the body is not moving because of the brain's capacity to map the body states of others (Damasio 2010). Shadowed by war, people can still enjoy a special moment as it unfolds.

As the scene proceeds, suddenly there are gunshots in the middle of the festivities. Firing weapons at a wedding is part of life in Chechnya so there is nothing peculiar about it – combat officers are known to carry their AK-47s and shoot them into the air while dancing at weddings (Kvedaravicius 2012). A man in a uniform fired the gun, and he decides to join the dance, leaving the gun aside. The same woman who danced with the talented and fit young men keeps dancing with the officer. The PPSM on his uniform indicates that he belongs to a security force under the Chechen Ministry of Interior. Judging by his uniform, he is part of the so-called Kadyrov regiment, or *kadyrovtsy*, which fights the insurgency under the leadership of President Ramzan Kadyrov, who has been accused of human rights violations such as torture and kidnapping.

People show signs of discomfort in body postures as the officer enters the wedding party. Guests' eyes wander and the film does not show anyone greeting him or initiating contact with him. In Chechnya, homes and parties have open doors even to strangers, yet I do not know if the officer was a wanted guest, except for reading the body language, which indicates he was not. From an aesthetic perspective, the soldier enters and leaves as if intruding peacefully.

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His entrance and exit, with rifle firing in the air, is shown in the film, when other guests are shown already present, and not leaving. Whoever the man is to those present, he enters with a uniform that does not signal security, but murder, kidnapping, torture and corruption (see Kvedaravicius 2012). The frames of entering and leaving make this a visit of a visibly militarised body with a weapon and a uniform wanting to take part in, and make his mark on, the party. The politics of movement, or choreography, is an officer who is not standing, but dancing; not talking, or staring or taking on any other role but that of a dancer. The dance seems to have attracted the officer to join in an exchange, an interaction, which connects him to others present despite his possible separation from others due to his position, his clothing and his gun.

Returning to what I wrote in earlier chapters on the almost decade long counter-terrorist operation in Chechnya, healing and reconciliation has involved the presence of violence and the complexity of enmities. Kvedaravicius (2012) explains how terrorists are simultaneously produced and destroyed. People change sides when security and financial interests are at stake. Different agents, groups and institutions are abundant. "Thus, military battalions, combat units and institutions with strange acronyms, and special groups, police stations, prosecutors' offices, and courthouses [...] were now vying and collaborating in the production of terrorists while other, complex, post-war entanglements were weighing upon them" (Kvedaravicius 2012: 14). Kvedaravicius shows that there is no post-war situation in Chechnya because war and peace are not dichotomous.

Dance here is a coming together in the context of (post-)war, and maintaining the traditions, that were at risk of being lost during the war. The choreography of *lezginka* is also cultural. According to Lecha Ilyasov (2009), there are many genres of Chechen folk dances, originating in the milieu in which they appeared, such as ritual dances (like wedding dances), occupational dances (like war and shepherd dances), festive dances and liturgical dances. Chechen dance is marked by solemnity, refined precision of movement, dignity and respect for the female partner (Ilyasov 2009). Traditionally, the female dancer pays attention to the movement of hands and shoulders and the male dancer to the strength of the movement. In pair dance, the partner is not touched. In the demanding version of a male solo, the man beats time with his feet and repeatedly drops to his knees and leaps up (Jaimoukha 2005). Dance is also an opportunity to meet with the opposite sex and perform or show off. Aesthetically, *lezginka* is a very gendered dance. The male and female have their roles to play.

Milana Terloeva (2006) writes that in dance, the woman moves lightly and gracefully while the man is more dynamic and dances as if in combat. For her, Chechen dance is a beautiful, silent, precise conversation. Describing her brother's wedding, she writes that they continued the celebration late into the night, and were happy and joyful as if the war, soldiers, mercenaries, militia members, Wahhabis, and other profiteers did not exist. It is, in fact, the social moment, the not-so-post-war which gives a special meaning to the aesthetics of the scene, proposing dance as political movement. This is where kinaesthesia and the choreography of compassion meet the social moment. It is where the freedom to move and to dance meets the (post-)war political reality.

Dance can be a means to survive, to move in a difficult terrain and oppressive environment more freely, together with other bodies. An outsider can take part in the dance by simulating the dancer's body state from a distance or by participating in the dance. Many of those affected by war in Chechnya lost bodies that were once nearby. They lost parts of their own bodies and their bodies have been scarred. In dance, something lost can be regained. Connections can be formed and emotions can be expressed.

### Dance in a Social Moment

According to Puumala et al. (2011) political agency means that the body moves and bodies interact in ways that enable resistance. The body is political when it moves towards or away from something or someone – or together with someone or something. In the wedding scene, we can see the bodies moving together, both dancers and spectators. Even as the spectator of a film, you might want to move in the same rhythm. Movement is agency informed or constructed by choreography. Dance expresses identity in cultural, political and social contexts – who a person is, who she was and who she can be. You are the way you move. Dance dislocates the person in war from the category of victim towards the agency of a dancer. I say *towards* because I try to avoid stilling and I cannot know what the subject body actually feels.



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When we situate Chechen dance in a social moment, it is not only the war and its continuation but also the socio-cultural context in general that we have to look at. For example, Chechen weddings have their own traditions. One such custom is that the wedding party is mainly for the fiancé's family. Kvedaravicius makes sure we see in the film how the bride does not take part in the festivities and how she seems upset, as if not wanting to marry. The bride's body is tense and withdrawn, and she does not share the same joy as the others. She could be a kidnapped bride (another Chechen tradition, which I address in Chapter six) forced to marry. Or she could simply express what is expected of her. Traditionally in a Chechen wedding, the groom has his own party and the bride's family is at home mourning the loss of their daughter. The bride remains standing and silent at the wedding, which can be exhausting (Murphy 2010). So, in fact, the bride in *Barzakh* is an ordinary sight. This is where tradition and culture strongly affect the reading of emotions from the body. What looks like a sad bride to me, can be that, but she can also be a tired bride, a bride who is expected to look and behave the way she does. The gendered expectations weigh on her body.

The idea of compassion is found in Chechen ethics. According to Ilyasov, *Adamallah* (humanity) is a central category of the Chechen ethical system, and it represents the values of compassion, empathy, charity and nobility. Ilyasov (2009: 80–81) uses the term *active compassion* and refers to equality, protection of the weak and abstinence from cruelty (for example in war, towards the enemy). Baiev's *The Oath* is an example of this (et al. 2003). Yet, general moral principles tell only a partial story of compassion in everyday life. Compassion cannot be separated from patriarchy, which defines the woman's role in the society, and allows the practices of shaming and violence against women, and sexual minorities. I return to this theme in Chapter six. The bride, separated from the guests, disturbs the serenity of the dance scene, and makes me think even more about the gendering of war.

### Dance as Embodied Compassion

Dance makes a person vulnerable, exposed. A dancer has to tolerate the stare of the spectators. Yet, vulnerable bodies are not weak, they are capable. To be vulnerable is also to be creative. Vulnerable is a life which can be harmed and ended, but the other side of vulnerability – the other side of war – is the compassionate agency enabled by the willingness to be seen by others. Vulnerability means taking a risk – a risk of change, of failure, of shame. In the war context, this risk is greater and more grave. Dance makes the person visible, because it is always somehow special, standing out from other everyday choreographies. It makes a choreography of kinaesthetic empathy. Filmed, the dance communicates to people outside the community, to the international.

Vulnerability and compassion become more nuanced and more complex when sensed from the dancing Chechen bodies. People might not show their vulnerability explicitly. They might not let others see what they feel and what they think, but their bodies in movement, in dance, do. Chechen folk dance is an important cultural heritage, but I propose it has wider implications. Putting one's own body at risk in dance signifies that side of vulnerability that opens up possibilities for healing. In dance, life's precariousness is experienced, and vulnerability is lived as a part of the war experience, not outside of it. As a tool for peace, dance offers an opportunity to get close to or even to touch a strange body. Dance makes possible a particular politics of compassion transmitted from body to body.

*Barzakh* produces political reality without a promise of truth and it portrays a new aesthetic world. Perception relies on our senses and emotions. Like Damasio (2010) writes, there is no consciousness without emotions. Emotions are like background music, always present in mental processes. Emotions edit, evaluate and order the images that enter our consciousness. Because compassion is so intimately tied to physicality, we can assume that the dance which brings people to interact together through the body evokes emotions, of which compassion can be one. I came to this conclusion through an embodied sensing of the dance. I allowed my body to move with the dancers'. I joined the dance, connected to the rhythm and clapped my hands in synchrony.

Later, when I witnessed young Chechen women dance and sing with pride and dedication, it became evident that dance cannot be overlooked as a site of embodied compassion. Dance was something to relate to, something universal, something that makes a possible platform for compassion because it excites the body directly.

### Synchrony in 12

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Written by Susanna Hast

In the film *Barzakh*, young men are clapping hands in synchrony. It is not casual clapping, but focused and strong in order to be synchronous. It gives rhythm to the dancers, focuses them, energises their bodies and sharpens their minds. Bodies in synchrony occupy the same space – they hear and feel each other. The synchronous clapping at the wedding has likely affected their emotions and helped them form a muscular bond. If the neuroscientists are right, the participants are feeling better about themselves, and about each other, while clapping.

In the Russian film *12* directed by Nikita Mikhalkov (2007), a young Chechen man is waiting in his solitary cell accused of the murder of his Russian stepfather, a military officer who was a family friend to his parents. The jury, consisting of twelve male members, will decide his fate. They are escorted to a school gym with orders to come out after they have reached a unitary decision. When the door is opened for them, the prison cell door is opened to the young Chechen man, as if at the exact same time.

Because he is Chechen, all of the members except one are ready to vote him guilty. He says to the others that the Chechen man is a human being, so they should at least talk first before condemning him to a life sentence. The others are surprised because they believe it is such an obvious case – of course he is guilty. But regardless of their prejudice, the one man's compassion begins to take root, to spread. The one member of the jury cannot know how the young man in the cell is feeling, or what his life was like. He does not know the man, and has been shown evidence indicating the young Chechen is guilty. But he has compassion towards him as a human being, and it is all that matters.

The accused is sitting with his eyes closed in the cell, and the film shows a destroyed house – the accused's home. The film travels between the spaces of the gym, the cell and Chechnya. The man's story unravels at the same time and is temporally intertwined with the stories of the members of the jury. As the members of the jury let themselves be seen, they, and the film audience, begin to see the Chechen man. The men are all sharing their life stories – their fears, their losses, their love – one after the other. As they open up about their lives, they realise that they have all suffered, and the accused Chechen man in the cell is no exception. Everyone has their story, and pain others know nothing about. Unlike the men of the jury, the young Chechen has no voice to tell his story. He has no personality for the jury. They do not call him by his name. But the camera-body acts as his voice, showing images of his past to the viewers. The jury is unable to see the frames, but they still begin to feel the young man's existence and presence.

The jury votes again to see if anyone has changed their mind. When the chairman reads aloud the second vote “not guilty,” an opening of eyes takes place. The eyes of the man who first defended the accused Chechen open wide, and simultaneously, almost as if in synchrony, the accused's eyes also open as he waits in his cell.

While two members of the jury have voted “not guilty,” the Chechen man walks back and forth in his small cell with some rays of light from the window reflected on the wall creating spaces of light and shadow. It is cold and the accused wears his winter clothes. He paces in the cell and opens and closes his fists. We travel to his home again, but this time it is not ruined and there is a dog barking outside. There are chickens in their yard and a woman walks by with goats. It is a serene sight. He is a little boy playing with a toy tanker, and the Russian officer is outside on the porch with the boy's parents. We move to a scene with chicken feathers and a bullet on the ground, and then return back to the cell which is empty. The Chechen man is outside the frame, as if he had stopped somewhere to reminisce.

The light in the cell is almost gone as the jury keeps on discussing. The accused gets up sitting, trying to keep warm. Back at the gym it is also getting dark, and yet one man votes “not guilty.” A choreography of kinaesthetic empathy begins to unfold between the young man in the cell, and the jury members in the gym – bodies connected through choreography but not their physical presence. Back in the cell, the young Chechen begins moving his arms to get warm. But he is not moving only to warm up. The movement is more meaningful, it makes his body remember. The movement transforms to a dance: the young man's hands move close to his chest, and down at his side in repetition, while he lifts his legs up gently, not yet energetically. At the school gym, one by one the members of the jury begin to challenge their prejudice, and vote “not guilty.” A bird suddenly flies wildly around in the gym, captive in the space, but free to fly.

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Voting “not guilty” is not a decision based on rational thought. Evidence of the young Chechen’s innocence begins to mount only when several members have already changed their minds. To vote “not guilty” seems an emotional decision, and here emotional is not meant as a negative feature. The members of the jury do not change their minds because they would have evidence to support the young man’s innocence, but because they begin to reflect on their own lives. They share intimate stories of their own life tragedies, or tragedies of people they knew. They tap into their own suffering, and begin to see that they might have been wrong about the Chechen. They might be all wrong about him. They do not know him, his story or his life. They do not know how he danced with Chechen fighters, how his father commanded him to return home from the bad company, how his parents were killed by these same fighters, how his dog died on the street when the shooting began, or how the Russian officer found him hiding amidst rotting corpses in a cellar.

The film takes the viewer back to the dark prison cell in which the young man has started dancing again, turning in pirouettes and marching. He has a smile on his face, hope in the corner of his eye, and his movement has become bigger, more determined. It is no longer a warm up, it is an expression of not giving up. The dance reflects an internal state rather than external circumstances. He is imprisoned, but his spirit is free. And when the camera returns to the gym, the image from the prison cell and the voice from the jury overlap as if to underline the coincidental nature of the events in the two spaces.

The bird keeps flying around and the members of the jury begin to approach the truth. The young man in the cell is like the bird in the gym – when he dances he has wings. He cannot escape, but his dance will not be taken away from him. When he dances, the jury realises that the Russian officer, the young man’s step-father, Volodya, was killed because he refused to leave his apartment which would be demolished to make way for luxury buildings and profit. One more changes his mind, and the camera goes back to the cell where the accused is making skilful pirouettes, with even more optimism in his body and face.

Only one member of the jury is still voting “guilty.” He is the one who knew all along the young man was not guilty, but wanted him in prison rather than on the street where the real killers would find him, or before he would find them. This member of the jury was in war too. He knows Chechnya and Chechen revenge, and he believes the young man would live longer in prison. But he agrees to vote “not guilty,” and as the jury reaches that decision, the young man finally becomes a person with a name. He is Umar. Naming is an act of making the individual lives anti-disposable (Enloe 2014b) by recovering who people were, what ideas they had, how they felt and acted.

When Umar is found not guilty, a Chechen dance can truly begin. Umar as a child dancing with the fighters – he is so talented, doing the pirouettes. He is proud with his head up high. Back to the cell, where Umar is dancing; back to his childhood dance; back to the cell. With music now, it is definitely not a warm up any longer. It is hope, vulnerability and connection. Umar is released and he meets a man at an alley, the one who wanted to keep him in prison, the one who knew Chechnya. His name is Nikolai and the actor is the film’s director, Nikita Mikhalkov, himself. They talk in Chechen and Umar says his father’s name was Ruslan, and that he knows who the killers are. Nikolai promises they will find them.

Umar’s lonely dance, so connected to his community and tradition, represents being in a place simultaneously alone and with others. He is in the cell experiencing exclusion, in Chechnya experiencing war, and with the jury experiencing compassion. Physically and socially separated by many boundaries, the jury members and Umar find each other, through synchrony and compassion that is embodied in the personal experiences of the members of the jury and the dance of Umar. The members of the jury do not only tell their experiences but relive them corporeally – they play, act, move, feel sick, sweat, yell. They open up about personal matters and express emotions openly and physically. The men are violent and threatening when they act out imagined scenarios, embodying the violence they are supposedly condemning. At the same time, or rather after their violent outbursts, they become vulnerable as they begin to emote and feel compassion.

There is synchrony in the way that Umar begins to rise, move and dance when the jury begins to see him, and believe in his innocence. It is not only the storyline, but the visuals and the camera cuts – the fast transfers at crucial moments between spaces – that make synchrony part of embodied compassion. There is a spatial element to the

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choreography between the three locations: the cell, the gymnasium and Chechnya, in which all movement takes place. There is a temporal element to the choreography through memories, and the present circumstances. Remembering something forgotten when bodies begin to move. Synchrony in the film *12* is not synchrony as in the clinical experiments where people felt more friendly or compassionate towards each other because of experiencing synchronous movement with the other. Synchrony is more metaphorical, or even spiritual – spiritual, meaning lives which are deeply and often invisibly connected. Cause and effect seem simultaneous in *12*. The frames of the jury contemplating the value and precariousness of life, and the young Chechen dancing more fiercely, follow in succession. This is the effect of the camera-body: the 12 men's lived experiences merge with the accused's. Their bodyminds change together.

Making a difficult decision, Khassan Baiev decided to treat Russian mercenaries even if he felt anger and resentment towards them (Chapter two). I suggested that he overcame his feelings and did what he thought – and felt – was the right thing to do. According to Jonathan Haidt (2000), moral reasoning is based on intuition rather than careful premeditation. He calls it *social intuition* because reasoning is also affected by what others think. Rational explanation comes after the intuitive conclusion has been drawn. Decisions are often made based on heuristics, such as 'thumb rules' and common sense. But if the decision to be made is complex, a more systematic processing is needed. We do not use complex rational reasoning if we can get by with intuition or gut feeling, which is based on our experiences and interpersonal influences.

Haidt (2000) expresses this with the metaphor of an emotional dog and its rational tail. It is emotion and intuition which drive the one member of the jury to insist the young man deserves better than their hasty decision. This man was once saved by a woman who saw him as a human being when he was at his lowest. Similarly, the other members of the jury change their minds because of the wisdom springing from lived experience, emotion and social intuition. It is social intuition because they are affected by their interaction with each other; that is, emotions circulate between them. This is important because it exemplifies a politics of compassion – a decision-making process in which emotion and lived experience are at the centre. When the members of the jury begin receiving conflicting information contradicting their initial prejudices, when social pressure arises as one after another changes their mind and when their bodies begin to remember what suffering feels like, they finally uncover the empirical evidence of the boy's innocence. It is not compassion based on knowing the accused or interacting with him, it is an overcoming of resentment against a Chechen, an overcoming of arrogance, and a finding of a common humanity. An emotional dog with a rational tail.

Director Mikhalkov is considered President Vladimir Putin's supporter, yet for the spectator, the film comes out as a critique of war, enmities and prejudices. There is nothing glorious about war in *12* and nothing to support Russia's cause. The heroes of the film are the young Chechen man and the compassionate Russian who are ordinary yet extraordinary individuals that resist the hamstringing influence of their environment with their compassionate action. Through dance, Umar gradually rises up from passivity to fearlessness, and even if he looks lonely, he is not alone. In dance he is with Chechens, he is with the jury and the jury is with him. He came to Moscow with uncle Volodya, the Russian officer, is recognised as a human being by one member of the jury, and leaves the prison with Nikolai.

Setting the rhythm of the scenes from the jury's room and the prison cell are Umar's childhood war memories – landscapes from the destroyed Chechnya. Dance is related to militarisation in *12*, which Åhäll (2016: 9) describes through the metaphor of dance "because it captures subtle movements, bodies and emotions." But dance is not metaphorical here, it is real. It is dance in a tiny prison cell, a dance which takes shape through tradition and self-awareness. It is a militarised and excited dance which takes place among soldiers and a child who participates, making his pirouettes with a knife in his hand. This knife kills, and Umar is ready for revenge.

### Dance as Resistance

When I became curious about Chechen dance, and the relationship between dance and emotions, I envisioned dance as rooted in compassion directed towards the self and others: dance with a partner, the corporeal transmission from the dancer to the spectator, dancing to remember. But I began to think that dance was also a form of resistance in Chechnya. Of course, dance is always an experience of the lived body, and everyone experiences

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dance uniquely. Nevertheless, dance also has a collective side, especially when it relates to collective identity and shared historical narratives.

Jay Rothman (1997: xi), who helped run a conflict resolution workshop in the Caucasus shares this story:

One night the vodka was flowing a little more freely than usual, and this 6'5", three-hundred-pound Chechen announced, 'Now I will dance!' The group became still as Shamil began his traditional Chechen dance. Soon he was virtually flying through the air, slapping his huge hands against his knees and feet. The passion of his dance, of his identity, seemed to levitate him off the ground. Six months later when Russian troops stormed into Chechnya expecting a lightning-fast victory, I thought, 'Boris Yeltsin would know there is no way this war will end quickly and easily if he had experienced that Chechen dance.'

Dance in its performative element is a form of resistance. It is resistance through demonstrating bodily capacity, the acquired physical skills and the bodily freedom to move as one pleases. 'Dance like no one is watching' is perhaps a similar affective state – dance without a drop of shame.

I wanted to further explore Chechen dance and its dimensions through two means. First, I asked a Chechen family for an interview specifically on the topic of dance and asked: "When do you dance?" and "What does dance mean to you?" I was able to speak to two men about their relationship to dance. Second, I wanted to explore the kinaesthetics, the sensations of where my body parts are and how they are moving, in relation to the quasi-body of Umar in the film *12*. I made a recording of the chapter above in public spaces, stumbling and staggering, and filmed a dance in which I tried to mimic and mirror Umar's dance, and create my own choreography in relation to his. I mixed the soundscapes and visuals of my recording, the film's sounds, my dance, and Umar's dance into a video.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of dancing with the film *12* was to step out of the limitations of the linguistic-knowing subject to the embodied-minded subject; that is, to transform text into movement, and to rehearse kinaesthetic empathy. Mimicry, and other forms of bodily encounters, are more direct paths to negotiating difference than verbal communication or any intellectual exercise. Writing this book, I struggled more and more with difference, and how to write about others' experiences, appearances, movements and stories; and I have come to the conclusion that an embodied methodology enables both respect for individuality, and the discovery of common humanity. Kinaesthetic empathy is then an active practice – it can be rehearsed. I did this rehearsal by becoming familiar with Umar's unfamiliar steps, choreography, muscle tensions, spins and rhythms, while being aware of the self and its position. Use of a mirror in the film materialises mirroring as an act of kinaesthetic empathy and the presence of a laptop is a reminder of the researcher's positionality.

When I interviewed Ali and Said in 2017, I found out the two men had a complicated relationship to dance. They see dance as being in conflict with their faith, while it is at the same time an important cultural heritage. They emphasise that they do not enjoy dance and would not dance for pleasure. At first it seems dance is not important at all because when I say 'dance,' they understand it as professional dance, but once we begin talking more explicitly about *lezzinka*, dance turns from a profession to an important cultural tradition to be maintained.

Said tells me that Chechen dance is a way of showing off, showing one's skills, and for women, a way to present themselves as suitable wives. He avoids dance because of religious beliefs and repeats the word "haram" or forbidden. Thus, there is a culture of dance, and a religion for which dance does not belong. Said talks about Muslim weddings and arranged marriages, and he touches upon the topic of bride kidnapping, or stealing. He considers bride stealing a good practice because it enables the young to choose their partners themselves. Poor families might not be able to afford the costs of an arranged marriage, thus bride stealing helps the poor families. Said's view 'unstills' the image of bride kidnapping from a violent practice to a convenient way to avoid the costs of tradition. Said mentions shame related to the practise of bride kidnapping – the shaming of women is the very basis of bride kidnapping – but he emphasises that the kidnapped woman stays in the house with the female members of the family and is not violated against her will.

Dance has several functions other than to become visible to the opposite sex. The men tell me how the dance

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practices of Chechen girls can help them bond, which is especially important for a diaspora which struggles to maintain its connection to the homeland. Dance also teaches women to behave correctly. Again, dance is strongly gendered, not only aesthetically, but also in how it emphasises the qualities of womanhood and manhood. Yet, they emphasise that *lezginka* expresses equality and “does not repress women.”

As a cultural heritage of both Chechen and Ingush (Vainakh), dance is important as such – “you need to remember where you came from,” Ali says. He continues, “It is enough to learn the basics of dance, there is no need to become particularly good at it.” Dance has a strong affective side to it, coming from movement and sound. The men tell me that dance allows them to show emotions. Ali continues, “Chechen music gives me internal strength.” There is thus a personal element of empowerment which comes with music and dance.

We also talk about *zīkr*, the Sufi ritual, because it relates to religious practice; but for Ali and Said, who do not practice Sufism, *zīkr* is closer to dance than to a religious ritual. *Zīkr* is also a fighting dance, a means to attain a state of trance to increase fighting force. The men consider *zīkr* a non-Islamic practice even though at least Ali has taken part in it. Ali says he participated in *zīkr* because he did not originally understand it is not part of Islam, nor is it mentioned in the Koran. But then he learned more (from the Internet) and understood it is not the correct way to practice Islam. Thus, he formed his own opinion. For the two men, *zīkr* relates to the present political order in Chechnya, to Kadyrov’s rule. Their criticism of *zīkr* as religious practice relates to their critique of Kadyrov.

I ask one more time, what dance means to them, when we talk about the emotional power of dance and music. Ali finally shares this great story with me and explains it later again in an email. In the 1980s, young Chechen men like him were taken to serve in the Soviet army. They took a train from Grozny to Moscow, and danced *lezginka*, the traditional Vainakh dance, at each train station to show their rebellion. The militia could know nothing about it. “This is what Chechens often do,” Ali said. They danced to show the Soviet militia that they were independent, that they could not be controlled. Dance means freedom, “being free like a flying eagle,” in Ali’s words. Milana Terloeva (2006) writes about the dance of an eagle too – the accents of the warrior, the strength the dance gives to the male dancer. It is dance as resistance against the occupier. Chechen soldiers danced this way in wartime, with the aim of upsetting the Russians and showing them their freedom. Thus, dance is no longer something shameful, a bodily pleasure, but it is deeply political, impacting the sensual experience. Dance is a corporeal protest against Russia and a personal tool for feeling stronger.

From dance, I want to take the reader next to the world of children. Children, which are portrayed typically as those in need of rescue; but also children who are not simply victims but personalities who leave their own mark in this world.

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### About the author:

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