

The Artistic Disenfranchisement of Philosophy

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Over the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, the idea that art is self-purposed and self-referential, that it need be concerned only with itself and its specific formal problems, has dominated art discourse. But the discourse around the works that some have labelled as ‘post post-modernist’ often bear witness, to the contrary, to a vision that is centrifugal rather than centripetal: such works are said to ‘interrogate’, ‘question’, ‘challenge established ideas about’, ‘invite further reflection upon’ the world. This interrogative lexicon incorporates a long list of entries: it includes ‘providing ways to think the world’, ‘interrogating the human in all its contradictions’, ‘inviting us to ask ourselves questions’. The artist is one who ‘shakes the foundations of our consciences’ or who ‘thoroughly disturbs our stereotypes’.¹ Art is no longer thought of as a self-purposeful practice standing apart from the world, but as an activity directly associated with the extra-artistic domain. This association is one of critical questioning.

Inciting thought, stimulating reflection, addressing the world with a critical eye, all such expressions hint towards the Socratic foundation of philosophy. In Plato’s *Apology*, the philosopher puts into the mouth of his master Socrates a speech in which the latter compares himself to a gadfly. Socrates presents himself as being ‘given to the State by the God; and the State is like a great and noble steed, but who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life’. He goes on: ‘I am that gadfly which God has given the State and all day long and in all places I am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you’ (30e). By employing the goad of his questions, Socrates revealed the basic fragility of opinion, uncovered prejudice, dismantled popular beliefs and convictions that were not well-founded in reason. Granted, all philosophy is not so Socratic in nature; with Plato, a second pathway was opened, that of the elaboration and summation of knowledge. Descartes’s *Principles of Philosophy* and Hobbes’s *Elements of Law* arise more from this latter type of enterprise. But the former, Socratic, pathway remains well-trodden – one may think of the critiques of Kant or the works of Bertrand Russell – and each instance is more or less independent of or engaged with the second direction. It is thus first and foremost to the treasure of philosophy that there continues such a ceaselessly reactivated demand for criticism to avoid thought becoming ossified as doxa.

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By adopting philosophy's lexicon of critical questioning, the present-day doxa in relation to art intends conferring on works the functions that were those of the Socratic dialogue, and on the artist the role of the stingray – which was another label applied to Socrates.

Thus, after the Hegelian moment when art was taken over by philosophy, as theorized by Arthur Danto in his book *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (1986), we are being led to consider the contemporary situation as the moment when art is taking over what has been hitherto the prerogative of philosophy or of the philosopher-intellectual: the role of the critical calling into question of the world. This *artistic disenfranchisement of philosophy* has become so common, so mainstream, that it is itself not subject to any interrogation. But that is precisely what it is appropriate to do, if only that art might thus be able to realize its programme raised to the squared degree: if art is to interrogate and bring into question the comfortable and slothful certainties of the doxa, it should also invite questioning of *art as critical interrogation*.

I shall proceed here by firstly looking into the aspects involved in the historical genesis of the current paradigm, and then by examining if, in what sense, and under what conditions, art can adopt the critical function of philosophy. For this enquiry to have sufficient sharpness, it has been necessary to limit this latter question to a particular category of the arts. The matter presents very differently according to whether one is dealing with language-based or visual arts. I have chosen particularly to take up the latter as it is in relation to these that the idea of critical interrogation is as paradoxical as it is widespread. The results derived in the second part of this study will thus hold only for them.

It is certainly not in the works of Plato – which were particularly critical of painted images, reproached by the philosopher as spreading the poison of the simulacrum – that one might seek to substantiate the thesis that visual arts could be the vehicle for critical thought. This idea was also quite inconceivable for the Middle Ages. The simple fact that painting and sculpture had long been ranked among the mechanical arts gives proof that no-one at that time would have thought of making them an intellectual activity. Though this of course does not signify that such arts carried no meaning. Their images (those of the painters and 'hewers of images') are, to the contrary, saturated with signification; their content is eminently imbued with meaning. An *Annunciation*, a *Descent from the Cross*, a battle scene all have considerable intellectual depth, which engages the cognitive capacities of beholders as much as their aesthetic sensibility. But the fact that these works have a meaningful content does not for all that make them works of *critical questioning*. Painting and sculpture teach, instruct and edify, but they do not *question*. It is their content itself which is instructive, and not the art, which belongs to the paradigm of *mimesis*. Painters and sculptors are artisans, not intellectuals.

When Leonardo defined painting as a *cosa mentale*, he assuredly accomplished a decisive advance in the direction of a rapprochement between artistic and intellectual activity. By representing Plato through the figure of Leonardo da Vinci in his *School of Athens* fresco in the Vatican, Raphael united in a single figure that of the philosopher and the artist. Might we see in these two steps the first premises of the present-day doxa we are interested in? Surely not, and for two reasons. Firstly, since what is manifest in these is the changing status of the painter: but they do not bear upon the capacity of the work to invite a critical questioning. Certainly, the artistic activity was gaining intellectual depth, but the spectator's involvement remained what it always had been. Next, though we can uphold the assertion that Leonardo embodied the transformation of the artisan to a '*philosophe*', it was in the very general sense of 'savant' that this word retained up until the end of the eighteenth century. His studies in botany, in anatomy, in optics, in hydrodynamics, his accomplishments as an engineer made him a savant as much as an artist. By choosing to represent Leonardo as Plato rather than as Socrates, Raphael very

legitimately associated art with the second pathway of philosophy: to the enterprise of the constitution of knowledge rather than that of critical interrogation. The fact that the schools of art which emerged from the Renaissance period onwards, first in Italy then throughout Europe, were called ‘Academies’, after the name of name of Plato’s school of philosophy, attests not only the ennoblement of the visual arts, no longer to be considered merely as an activity of artisans, but also the patronage of those who represented a certain idea of philosophy. The artist was a savant, but not an intellectual in the present-day sense of that term. So it is not in the Renaissance rapprochement of art and philosophy thus understood that the origin of the artistic disenfranchisement of philosophy should be sought.

The great period of aestheticization of art which began in the eighteenth century took art temporarily away from its cognitive preoccupations. In the modern idea of fine arts, the Beautiful – the aesthetic quality *par excellence* – was projected as the essential purpose of art: the pursuit of the beautiful, to avoid its being involved with aspects which would render it impure: interests that were utilitarian or ethical, but also intellectual ones. Art, as Kant wrote in the *Critique of Judgement*, should ‘be concerned only with form’. Lessing (1984: 55) wrote very clearly in his *Laocoon*: ‘I should prefer that only those be called works of art in which the artist had occasion to show himself as such and in which beauty was his first and ultimate aim’. To hold that the pursuit of beauty is the ‘first and ultimate’ aim of art is to say that it has no other value than the aesthetic one. The primacy of the aim tends towards exclusivity. Art became self-purposed and the *l’art pour l’art* movements of the nineteenth century simply pushed to its extreme consequences a vision of art that was becoming generalized. Such a conception of art is bound up with an *aesthetic* idea, which privileges an aesthetic attitude placed under the sign of the Kantian *disinterest* and demands an attention focused solely on the aspectual qualities of that which is presented to view. The idea which came to dominate a very great part of the aesthetic of modernity was that the experience of art should be centripetal, not centrifugal: that everything which might draw the spectator outside of the work – what it represents, naturally, but also, in the light of the issue concerning us here, its cognitive effects – was to be proscribed. If the work was to stimulate thought, it was not to be about the world but about the artwork’s intrinsic conditions of possibility.

Parallel to this formal progression of art, a marked tendency nevertheless developed during the nineteenth century within German Romanticism for the bringing together of art and philosophy. However, the ‘philosophy of art’ did not then mean thought about art, but thought *proceeding from* art. It did not involve the theorization of a practice (as is the case for the *Treatise on Painting* of Leonardo da Vinci), nor a discourse explaining and justifying a work of art or movement (such as Zola’s texts on the experimental novel, or the manifestos of surrealism or futurism) nor an artist’s discussion document containing general reflections on art (like Duchamp’s writings collected under the title *Duchamp du signe*). Rather it involved a philosophical discourse *that would be embedded within the art itself*. Jean-Marie Schaeffer has shown how the Romantic revolution was a response to a situation of crisis: the Enlightenment had called into question the religious foundations of the real while Kantian critique had sapped the transcendental foundations of philosophy. Kant had effectively established that it was impossible for man to attain to a knowledge of being and of God (Ideas of Reason), concepts that henceforth could only be objects of belief. In reaction to this dry philosophy of the limits of knowledge, Romanticism set forth its nostalgia for the unity of the different domains of life incarnate in the beautiful totality of the Greek vision and its need for metaphysics. The Romantic movement believed there was a way of outflanking the Kantian interdict regarding onto-theology by conferring the task of penetrating this knowledge to art. To that which philosophy was incapable of attaining, art could permit access. Where philosophical discursiveness had shown its limits, art could still proceed (Schaeffer 1992). The Romantic

revolution thus consisted foremost in a new way of thinking art: art was neither productive activity, nor ornamentation, nor play or diversion – it was metaphysical knowledge.

Romanticism also signified a new way of thinking philosophy, in the sense of that philosophy which must well up out of art: philosophy that was no longer a rational method of investigation, a discursive and conceptual form of thought, but a sort of intuitive and absolute knowledge. In complete contrast to Plato's driving of Homer from the ideal state in the name of the demand for truth and reason, Romanticism took for models the pre-Socratic philosopher-poets like Heraclitus and Parmenides.

In opposition to the English and French psychological aesthetics of the eighteenth century, Romanticism in this way massively reintroduced into art the question of meaning. Art was less a matter of aesthetics in the narrow sense than it was of hermeneutics. It was invested with a radically new metaphysical mission: to provide access to the divine and to the nature of being, which philosophy could no longer assure, and doing so, no longer by following the classical paths of discursive investigation and rational thought, but those of artistic intuition. In so doing, the artist became a prophet, a mediator between the empirical world and transcendence. The object of the artist, wrote Friedrich Schlegel in his *History of European Literature* (1803) was 'the infinite, the Beautiful, the Good, God, the World, Nature and Humanity'. Art was not ornament, diversion, entertainment but onto-theological knowledge.

However, if that disclosed a previously unrecognized place for intellectuality in art, the plastic arts nevertheless did not undergo transformation to an enterprise of criticism. This for two reasons, one specific, the other general.

Let us consider the first of these: it was upon poetry, much more than to the plastic arts, that the Romantics conferred the task of accomplishing the philosophical function. All non-verbal arts reduce to literature, and poetry is literature's essence. It was thus poetry which, in Novalis's words, was 'the self-consciousness of the universe'. Poetry, the Romantic genre *par excellence*, was besides, something more than just an artistic form. For its content was being in all its different determinations (the infinite, nature, humanity, good, the beautiful ...). Schlegel (1958: XI, 9) could consequently reduce, to the point of erasing it altogether, the difference between philosophy and poetry: 'what cannot be put together in a concept perhaps allows itself to be represented through an image; and thus the imperatives of knowledge lead to representation, philosophy leads to poetry'.

Despite that, it should be noted that this Romantic philosophy of art did not present art as a critical interrogation of the world: it promoted an *understanding* of the whole universe in the element of art. The philosophy that is art is a knowledge, knowledge of being, of the soul or of God – a task classically devolved to metaphysics – but a knowledge obtained by following previously untrodden paths, those of artistic intuition. The matter is one of *knowledge*, and what is more, not of a knowledge of any one area, but a knowledge of the totality: 'In the philosophy of art I accordingly intend to construe first of all not art *as* art, as this *particular*, but rather *the universe in the form of art*, and the philosophy of art is *the science of the All in the form or potency of art*' wrote Friedrich Schelling in 1859 in his *The Philosophy of Art* (1989: 16). Absolute knowledge is not an interrogation. However, the hermeneutics of contemporary art is an interrogative hermeneutics. This major difference thus prevents seeing in Romanticism the beginnings of the artistic disenfranchisement of philosophy that we are enquiring into here.

It is rather in the direction of Adorno's thesis of a critical function of art that its origins must be sought. According to Adorno, the conquest of its autonomy that art achieved during the eighteenth century was an important forward step in its historical development, a conquest which allowed it to become detached from ritual practices, to be emancipated from the Horatian precept of the *utilitarian* and to rid itself from what Adorno calls its 'tasteful savouring' (2004: 15). But this

autonomy of art does not mean that it has no relation with the world, and that one must refuse it any effect on that reality. Thus, Adorno (2004: 405) castigates the theories of *l'art pour l'art*, the 'small-mindedness and desperate rapture of an art religion that convinced itself that the world was created for the sake of a beautiful verse or a well-turned phrase'. He thus asserts both that art has and does not have a social function: 'Insofar as a social function can be predicated for artworks, it is their functionlessness' (Adorno 2004: 297). Which amounts to saying that art does not have a direct function, but an indirect one. But what is that saying precisely?

It is saying that art, exactly because it is an autonomous form of culture, has a critical impact on the world. It is precisely through the independence of its values that it acts. Art is a realm apart, but an exemplary one; and exemplary because it stands apart. The critical function of art arises from the fact that, in a society where everything has value only in relation to something else, artworks are the exception. It is only to the extent that it is autonomous that art adopts an antagonist position in relation to society: 'by crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as "socially useful", it criticizes society by merely existing' (Adorno 2004: 296). In a society where everything exists in view of something else, art which exists only for itself is, by the mere fact of its existence, a silent critique: 'There is nothing pure, nothing structured simply according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society' (ibid.).

Adorno thus clearly breaks with the aestheticism emerging from the eighteenth century which rejects hermeneutics beyond the sphere of art, without nevertheless adopting the speculative theories of art arising out of German Romanticism. Adorno's thesis in effect distances itself from the metaphysical and speculative character of the latter's positions. Art does not enable an ecstatic experience of being, but is to do with the human world, the here and now of a given society, and these can work towards social regeneration such as thought by the Marxism of the Frankfurt School.

Moreover, the fact that Adorno does not mean that art acts through its content leads to not conferring the philosophical task to poetry alone. Because the functionalism that he defends is an indirect functionalism, plastic arts may indeed be invested with this task. In Adorno's view, the critical power of art does not reside in its conceptual significance. Quite the contrary: the wish to disseminate critical judgements is playing the game of communication in which the literature of engagement lost its way. All the language-based arts should consequently use language not as a signifying vehicle but as a procedure for the deconstruction of meaning. Hermeticism proceeds from this obligation to separate the artistic element of the work from its thematic content or from the intentions of its author. The artwork should 'become eloquent with wordless gesture' (Adorno 2004: 310). Consequently, the truly critical is not that which disseminates judgement, but that which gives birth to a *process of reflection*. It is Brecht against Sartre. The complex and uncertain relationship of the visible to meaning thus ceases to be an obstacle. Painting itself must refrain from representations whose signification is too transparent. Thus Adorno praises Klee for having renounced his caricatures showing the emperor Wilhelm II as a devourer of steel, and having painted in 1920 his *Angelus novus*, the angel machine which, says Adorno, does not bear any visible sign of caricature or commitment and 'flies far beyond both' (Adorno 1992: 94). The caricatures were too obvious, too expected and rang false; the *Angelus novus*, however, is mute and disturbing: 'The machine angel's enigmatic eyes force the onlooker to try to decide whether he is announcing the culmination of disaster or salvation hidden within it' (ibid.).

Thus the artwork 'criticizes', 'denounces', 'discomposes meanings', 'provokes self-questioning'. Adorno's lexicon is clearly that whose presence we noted in the contemporary discourse on the

subject. It is therefore not doubtful that it is in the work of Adorno that the origin of this discourse should be sought.

The archaeology of the idea of art as critical questioning which we have undertaken to explore shows sufficiently that this idea does not have the absoluteness that some would wish to accord it; that it is neither the 'essence' of art nor its natural end-purpose. It draws its roots in a relatively recent period with regard to the history of thought about art; it is circumscribed to within a given time period and a given geographical range.

One can only assign to art tasks that it is, or might be, capable of accomplishing. Yet the ability of works to fulfil the mission they are charged with is scarcely questioned. The matter seems to be self-evident. But this is not the case, and it is appropriate to consider under what conditions and to what degree art may incite thought. It is at this point that we should cease speaking of art in general and consider arts in the particular, since the question will present differently depending on the medium which is proper to each. So let us restrict ourselves here to the visual arts in contrast to all those that make use of language.

A questioning presupposes concepts. In that case, is there room for concepts in the plastic arts? Can or does the pictorial or sculptural object, two-dimensional or three, an object of canvas, wood, marble or composed through 'mixed techniques' support abstract and general ideas? How can the concept be linked with the visual?

This matter is quite clear in cases which present mimetic doubles bearing a symbolic value. Mediaeval and Renaissance painting was full of such symbols: the lily signifying purity, the serpent biting its tail representing eternity, the soap bubbles which told of the fragility of life on earth... The symbol called to mind a concept by way of a more or less natural analogical correspondence. The allegory which gave flesh to an abstract idea contains a concept in bodily form: in Vasari's *Allegory of Justice*, the tall and beautiful woman, noble and grave, is justice. Beyond these specific forms of expression of the idea through the form, the whole of mediaeval painting can be read as an iconography. David's *Belisarius Begging Alms*, or Poussin's *The Judgement of Solomon* or *The Israelites Gathering the Manna in the Desert* are indeed signifying compositions presenting, in the expression of Louis Marin, 'figurative texts in which the visible and the legible are bound one to another'. Such paintings invite reading, penetrating, deciphering.

At the dawn on modernity, the presence of meaning in the visible ceased to be the ambition of the plastic arts, and Manet, the emblematic figure of art's modern becoming, reduced painting to 'the nudity of what one sees' (Bataille 1983: 76 *trans.*). Modern painting, in its concern for the pictoriality of what is painted, has often wanted to evacuate any meaning. More precisely the meaning at the *surface level* of the image, for it is self-evident that, whatever period of art may be considered, there always remains, beyond any primary meanings, beyond the presence or absence of secondary meanings, what Panofsky calls 'content' or in other words 'what the work manifests without making outward show of it', and without the artist necessarily being aware of it. Thus, if the plastic arts have wanted to express ideas through form, modernity, to the contrary, has deployed all sorts of strategies to keep the visible pure of any intrusion of meaning. *The artistic disenfranchisement of philosophy* bears witness to the nostalgia for meaning that is proper to the contemporary age. But what form can the presence of the concept take in the image?

Meaning is not laid down in the visible dimension in the way that colours and shapes are. To grasp it, one must recognize signs in the figured objects and comprehend the significance of these signs. For anyone unaware of their symbolic sense, a lily is but a flower and a snake is just a creature. One who knows nothing of the history of the French Revolution cannot understand that David's *Rape of the Sabine Women* contains a message of reconciliation between the rival factions. The level of what Panofsky calls the 'primary meanings' is not transcended. If, in the Middle Ages,

St Thomas Aquinas could rightly declare that painting educated the unlettered, it was because these latter, despite having not read the sacred texts, had heard a great deal of them and were immersed in a culture which ceaselessly referred back to them. Such familiarity conceals both the lexical and the syntactic deficiency of the image. There is indeed a syntactic deficiency, because the image is incapable of transposing such fundamental intellectual operations as abstraction, the alternative, consequence, implication, negation ... All these thought-operations contain an element of the void which is completely unsuited to the *Dasein* of representation. Now, as we mentioned earlier, all iconic monstrosity is accompanied by a positive effect of presence. But when it is no longer with images but with mute objects that one is confronted – a sponge and two long metal beams in Giovanni Anselmo's *Respiro*, a composition made up of bobbins of thread and a long rubber tongue all attached to a steel stand (*In Respite*) – one comes face to face with the mute and enigmatic presence of things. There is no room in these works for a meta-language. This deficiency of the visible, in view of the *logos*, clearly emerges when, confronted by an *Annunciation* or a *Visitation*, a de-Christianized public finds itself before an enigma. But this should be extended further: even when this type of knowledge is not indispensable, the relationship to meaning in the image is always complex and indirect. It supposes a process of mediation. When such mediation is absent, the visible is presented in all its polysemy, open to a multitude of possible discourses and irreducible to none in particular. Consider Fragonard's *The Bolt*: what should be perceived in it? The representation of carnal desire and weakening resistance? But if one follows one of the diagonals across the painting, one will note that it leads from the door-bolt that the lover is on the point of sliding shut to an apple placed on a bed-side table, the symbol of Original Sin. So is it simply a case of a complacent painting about passions of the flesh or a moral warning? A good example of the image's inevitable polysemy.

In any painting seeking to convey meaning, the concept has difficulty in being isolated. What is the case for figurative works is even more so for those that are not, abstract paintings, composite objects, perplexing installations. Arising from this conclusion, two antithetical positions may be understood: the view that considers that the imperfection of this means of signifying is the indicator of the impotence of art to transpose or provoke a particular thought experience (that, for example, is the sense of Schopenhauer's criticism of allegory in painting),² and that which considers that art enables us to rise at one bound above and beyond finite understanding (a notion nowhere as clearly represented as by German Romanticism which considered that art is where intuitive and absolute knowledge is lodged, a knowledge much higher than that procured by discursive and rational thought). In the first of these cases, art remains to the hither side of the concept, and is thus incapable of realizing the intellectual programme that it pretends to. In the other case, it lies to the far side of the concept and opens up metaphysical experiences to which the philosophy of understanding cannot pretend. Through its deficiency for the upholders of the one view, through its excessive capability for those of the other, in either case the concept does not find its place in the visible. Something that Sartre (1978: 3) points out very clearly in his commentary on the yellow rift in the sky above Golgotha in Tintoretto's *Crucifixion*: 'Tintoretto did not choose [it] to signify anguish or to provoke it. It is anguish and yellow sky at the same time. Not sky of anguish or anguished sky; it is anguish become thing [...]. That is, it is no longer readable. It is like an immense and vain effort, forever arrested half-way between sky and earth, to express what their nature keeps them from expressing.'

Thus, it is in Adorno's idea of *art as a critical function*, itself inscribed in the lineage of the speculative theories of art of German Romanticism, that the interrogative hermeneutics of contemporary art grounds its roots. But a capital difference distances it from this idea. For Adorno, the critical function of art came from the fact that art is a denunciation of the culture industry and a

protest against a state of society dominated by capitalism. In other words, the task of awakening critical thought was with the prospect of ideological change. The questioning is linked to a response given elsewhere: in the Marxist vision of the world. In similar fashion, David wished through his painting to serve the cause of the French Revolution, just as the Constructivists that of the Russian Revolution. But the rhetoric of critical questioning that we see developing today is much more loosely linked – if linked at all – to any positive thesis. The end of the grand narratives makes questioning a sort of end in itself.

But the plastic arts do not have the means to realize this philosophical enterprise. The syntactic deficiencies of two- or three-dimensional images, and *a fortiori* of those objects without ‘directions for use’ – abstract compositions such as *ready-mades* and installations – mean that such works do not encompass the dimension of negativity required for all forms of questioning: abstraction, alternativity, negation and so on. When Chrissy Conant, who sells her own ova in jars carrying the label ‘Human Caviar, Caucasian Origin’, asserts that she is wishing by this process to provoke reflection about ‘new forms of biological prostitution and exploitation’, she is speaking *on behalf of* her work and causing it to say what it could not say alone. Only this type of ventriloquism can suggest that the plastic work, which by its nature evolves beyond the sphere of the logos, can achieve a task that philosophy can only undertake as discursive activity. One should therefore not confuse the astonishment, the perplexity even, provoked by certain works that Rosenberg called ‘anxious objects’³ and the questioning, not of themselves but of the world, that some would like them see arouse.

One cannot but be sceptical before the current idea, one that is more or less implicit but rarely questioned, of a fusion of the task of art and that of philosophy. This excessively swift, over-superficial, over-enthusiastic association is more appropriately to be interpreted as one more manifestation of the very ancient fascination that philosophy has for art, and which is an adjunct to that equally ancient fascination, but which constitutes a completely different story, that art has for philosophy.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. Source references for these expressions can be found in Talon-Hugon (2006).
2. See *The World as Will and Representation*, Book III, § 50.
3. ‘The nature of art has become uncertain. At least, it is ambiguous. No one can say with assurance what a work of art is – or, more important, what it is not. Where an art object is still present, as in painting, it is what I have called an anxious object: it does not know whether it is a masterpiece or junk’ (Rosenberg 1972: 12).

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