

EVERYTHING IN ITS RIGHT PLACE:
FOUCAULT AND THE 'IDEOLOGY OF THE AESTHETIC'

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There are several ways in which we 'rediscover' things. Sometimes rediscovering means finding something we had thought lost—to take a relevant example, let's say a painting that was stolen, or thought destroyed, that turns up in a dingy attic, from where it is rescued, and then authenticated, valued and preserved, finally restored to its rightful place. In such an instance, there will be a place waiting for the rediscovered painting from where it has been missing, and known to have been missing; a blank space on a gallery wall. Rediscovery, in this mode, is a kind of restoration. But there is another sense in which we 'rediscover'—when, for example, re-reading a book and finding something in it that was overlooked the first time around—it might be that a book which had meant little when read as a child, is rediscovered as a classic when re-read as an adult. In this sense, what is rediscovered has been overlooked, not lost, and such a rediscovery has the character of a re-appraisal.

In a recent issue of the journal *Art History* devoted to the rise of 'visual culture,' Peter Osborne argues persuasively that the philosophical tradition of aesthetic theory in its Kantian form has become divorced from the critical task of thinking about the specificity, the historical ontology, of contemporary art.¹ Contemporary art is 'post-conceptual' Osborne claims, and as such has moved 'beyond aesthetics.' Nonetheless, he sees philosophical or critical thought as key to the possibility of re-empowering art critical discourse and assessing its relationship to art history. His

¹ Osborne, P. (2004), .

aim, which I endorse, is to think through the historicity of contemporary art criticism and its relationship to art history. That this aim derives from a conscious *need* is axiomatic for my argument here. I will return, later in this essay, to another invocation of a 'historical ontology' that announces its grounding in a contemporary critical need—one that appears in the work of Michel Foucault—to sketch some general principles for a 'rediscovered' and reappraised aesthetics.

Key to Osborne's argument is his reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* as inaugurating a tradition that wrongly identifies aesthetics with the philosophical discourse on art. Though an aesthetic dimension may be ineliminable from art (this Osborne sees as one lesson of Conceptualism), it is nonetheless the case that the 'art as aesthetics' discourse runs aground in trying to deal with contemporary artistic practices that do not operate primarily via the aesthetic. This has led, in what Osborne terms 'a form of philosophical *ressentiment*,' to the 'end of art' thesis, in various modes.² In a detailed argument that can only be alluded to here, Osborne sees 'aesthetics,' in the sense given to it by Kant, as a 'principled ignorance of art.'³ The conception of art developed by Jena Romanticism, which Osborne terms 'art as ontology' is presented as more adequate to the historical specificity of contemporary art and the critical scene. But how is this contemporary reality itself characterised?

The reconfigurations of discourse within the Humanities, the effects of postmodernism understood both as late capitalist epoch and as post-structuralist theory, have led to much debate within theoretically inclined art history concerning its relationships with philosophy—especially insofar as art history is understood as founded on Kantian principles—and with criticism, perceived as undergoing a crisis induced by its institutional redundancy.⁴ One consequence of these reconfigurations is the increasing prominence of 'visual culture,' with its massive expansion of the types of objects considered along with paintings and sculptures under one remit, which promises to democratise art history at the same time as it threatens to shatter the specificity of its relationship to a set of privileged and canonical objects. As Osborne notes, one of the problems

² *Ibid.*, 655.

³ *Ibid.*, 660.

⁴ See, for instance, Podro, M. *The Critical Historians of Art*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, and Baker, G., Buchloh, B. *et al* 'Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism,' *October*, No. 100 (Spring 2002).

raised by 'visual studies' as adjunct or replacement for art history is that it runs the risk of affirming the idealist emphasis on opticality characteristic of formalist modernism, and of treating synchronic connections across an expanded cultural field of analysis, whilst neglecting the historical dimension.⁵ That art historians might seek interdisciplinary connections with philosophy in these circumstances is understandable, though the extent to which this necessitates 'rediscovering aesthetics' remains to be seen. As Osborne argues, the aesthetics which philosophy has traditionally associated with art is not what is needed to understand or to try to remedy, the negative effects of convergent historical processes on art critical thought.

The word 'aesthetics' might itself be a complicating factor for the establishing of such connections. Aesthetics signifies not only a branch of philosophy, itself hardly homogenous, but also serves within recent art history as a name for the dynamics of the interpellatory operations of art works or other cultural objects (where it is a question of the specific operations of a work), as a name for the 'period eye,' a historically specific sensibility. If there has been a recurrence of the term 'aesthetics' in recent art history and art criticism, it often signifies not the philosophical tradition, but the specifics of a particular art work's mode of producing meaning, understood as relating to a broader system of 'aesthetics-at-large.' Recent art history has tended to be more interested in the way aesthetics make an art work *work* than in how they make it *art*. It might seem that the solution to this confusing state of affairs should be a rigorous separation between aesthetics in a philosophical, specialist sense, and general discussions of period sensibility etc. But a rediscovered aesthetics cannot abandon either, not least because aesthetic experience as it takes place in relation to art of the 20th century is deeply engaged with 'aesthetics at large' or 'at work.' As Osborne notes, the aesthetic is a necessary dimension of the historico-ontological conception of art, but is 'both *partial* and *relational*.'⁶ As such, the analysis of a given work will need to treat the specific historically determined character of the relationship between aesthetic and other factors. 'Furthermore, these relations between the aesthetic and other aspects of art works derive their critical meaning from their relations to the equally variable aesthetic dimension of other (non-

⁵ Osborne (2004), 652.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 661.

art) cultural forms...'.⁷ The multiple meanings and sites of 'aesthetics' are thus what we must rediscover, rather than a harmonious and well-ordered organisation of clearly defined terms. If the predominant metaphors that describe the role of aesthetics within the changing relationships between philosophy, art practice, art criticism and art history, are of spatial expansion and retraction, it is also important to figure these relationships via *dispersal*. The multiple loci of invocations of 'the aesthetic' effect a decentring of its philosophical determination, and while this is to an extent a consequence of processes of aestheticisation and of critical atrophy, it is also the condition for a possible renewing of the critical project in the wake of poststructuralism.

The death of Jacques Derrida marks a key moment in the history of critical thought, in which we not forced to decide again whether or not we wish to follow those who reconfigured so much of 'theory.' With his passing, after that of Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze, *et al*, do we have, finally, closure on these authors, on this period, which is part of the history of critical thought, but perhaps no longer defines it? One way of understanding the 'rediscovery' of aesthetics might be to see it as a return to a way of thinking about philosophy and about art that was obscured by the emphasis in poststructuralist theory on textuality, discourse, power etc. and by the irresponsible 'aestheticization' of critical writing. But the most urgent need for a 'rediscovered' aesthetics results from the historical specificity of the place(s) of aesthetics in the present, not least in the textual strategies of poststructuralism itself, which largely still await an aesthetically aware reading. Rather than rediscovering a disciplined and secure locus for aesthetics within a hypothetically ideal architecture of knowledge, I would argue that the task facing us is the discovery of modes of critiquing and thinking about the ubiquity, undecidability, and centrality of aesthetics in every aspect of our culture and our knowledge. As you may gather from the terminology I use here, I think that this necessitates a continued engagement with poststructuralist thought. Particularly within art history *as it is practised* this means a repetition of the reading of the now canonical texts that were received within it as 'theory' at least 30 years ago. If, as Freud suggests, it takes two traumas to make a trauma, I hope that such a continued engagement will facilitate a traumatic rupturing of disciplinary boundaries and enable a more far-reaching critical investigation of

⁷ *Ibid.*, 661.

aesthetics.

It is apparent now that postmodern culture as 'anti-aesthetic'—and the conjunction of artistic and critical practices which promoted that concept—had an aesthetic of their own. The retrospective recognition of an 'aesthetic' in works or texts that seemed formerly anti-aesthetic is not a sign of their failure, nor of a dialectical reversal; rather I would argue it is part of the becoming historical of things. The aesthetic is part of historical ontology. Historical distance makes it clear that even those works that seemed the last word in the anti-aesthetic in fact partook of a highly particular form, a mode of meaning that constitutes, and is usefully named, their aesthetic. Of course, this interpretation might seem too general, too much in tune with common usage, which tends to employ 'aesthetic' as a synonym for 'style,' and thus apply it to almost all cultural objects. But it is the ubiquity, the pervasiveness of aesthetic questions that seems to me precisely what needs to be theorized - an analysis of the aesthetics at work in all the ways in which the world is interpreted and changed for us is politically important. I would argue, then, that what Roland Barthes does in *Mythologies*, when he critiques the role of the haircuts in Julius Caesar, the symbolic import to French culture of steak and chips, or a black child saluting the French flag, is an analysis of the aesthetic at a certain level.⁸ If we assume that all cultural stylizations are products of an aesthetic by which they mean, then analysis of specific aesthetics means seeing cultural forms, modes, objects, as determinate (to a degree) and knowable; and what is to be analysed is the specificities of form, of surface.

It was just this analysis of surface that Foucault proposed as the aim of what he termed 'archaeology' or later 'genealogy.' It is Foucault's generation and their followers who may well be held accountable for the 'loss' of aesthetics, and it is a certain distance from the hegemony of 'poststructuralism' that may make a restitution of traditional aesthetics possible. However, though theoretically-inclined art historians have long utilised poststructuralist texts in the general project of an attack on their discipline's bourgeois, connoisseurly bases, its 'bad' aestheticism, they have paid little attention to the aesthetics at work in poststructuralist texts themselves. Michel Foucault has been both enlisted by art historians wishing to overthrow their discipline's aestheticism, and been

⁸ Barthes (1993).

indicted by theorists (primarily Habermasians) who read him as an irresponsible aestheticist (especially with regard to questions of normative judgement).⁹ That diametrically opposite readings of Foucault's position in relation to aesthetics can be made is all the more surprising when we consider that similar interpretations of aesthetics are made by each camp. Both sides in this example interpret aesthetics negatively because aestheticism is identified, with complicity with forces of capital. How can Foucault be both a weapon against, and a victim of, these forces?

The concluding chapter of Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 'From Polis to Postmodernism'—which includes a discussion of Foucault's *The Use of Pleasure*—questions the historical position of aesthetics in late-capitalism, and the discourses that seek to describe it. Eagleton traces the historical fate of the concept of the aesthetic, with particular sympathy for the meanings given to it by Kant and by Marx. The product of a response to historical developments including particularly the rise of the bourgeoisie, the aesthetic is from the start implicated in what it opposes.

On the one hand, it figures as a genuinely emancipatory force—as a community of subjects now linked by sensuous impulse and fellow-feeling rather than by heteronomous law, each safeguarded in its unique particularity while bound at the same time into social harmony. The aesthetic offers the middle class a superbly versatile model of their political aspirations, exemplifying new forms of autonomy and self-determination, transforming the relations between law and desire, morality and knowledge, recasting the links between individual and totality, and revising social relations on the basis of custom, affection and sympathy. On the other hand, the aesthetic signifies ... a kind of "internalized repression", inserting social power more deeply into the very bodies of those it subjugates, and so operating as a supremely effective mode of political hegemony.¹⁰

This basic model of the contradictory status of the aesthetic is found again and again in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, but it is given different inflections along the historical path Eagleton narrates.

Eagleton imagines that there was a time, before the rise of the bourgeoisie, when 'the three mighty regions of the cognitive, the ethico-political and the libidinal-aesthetic were still to a large

⁹ See, for example, the essays collected in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. M. Kelly, London: MIT, 1994.

¹⁰ Eagleton (1990), 28.

extent intermeshed.¹¹ With modernity however, each region became autonomous; knowledge slipped free of ethical constraint, and ethical questions became detached from cognitive ones. Ethics now looked to the model of autonomous aesthetics as its guide, while the aesthetic, for its part, became an end in itself, so detached from economic and political systems as to have little choice in the matter. Of course, this autonomization is one way of characterising the achievements of Enlightenment, and is thus not seen entirely negatively by Eagleton. Rather, and art is given as the key example, an ambiguous process of autonomization as both increasing room for manoeuvre and diminishing of critical purchase characterises the historical fate of the 'three mighty regions' in modernity. Art becomes autonomous, paradoxically, in its integration into capitalist production, and while art is marginalized, the aesthetic is generalized. 'Indeed one might risk the rather exaggerated formulation that aesthetics is born at the moment of art's effective demise as a political force, flourishes on the corpse of its social relevance.'¹² Art production withers in significance, but bequeaths aesthetics as an ideological salve to a social order which has 'marginalized pleasure and the body, reified reason, and struck morality entirely empty. The aesthetic offers to reverse this division of labour, to bring these three alienated regions back into touch with one another, but the price it demands for this generosity is high: it offers to interrelate these discourses by effectively swallowing up the other two. 'Everything should now become aesthetic.'¹³ It is worth noting here that Eagleton's diagnosis is the opposite of Osborne's, for whom it is art that outlives aesthetics, not *vice versa*.

In the post-war period instrumentalization cannot be simply opposed to 'culture' any longer; 'civil society' reshaped by consumer capitalism becomes 'pervasively aestheticized' via the saturation of late capitalism's 'fetishism of style and surface, its cult of hedonism and technique, its reifying of the signifier and displacement of discursive meaning with random intensities.'¹⁴ Where capitalism had first severed the symbolic and the economic, it now harnessed the former to the latter, with postmodernism resulting. Though postmodernism could be viewed as a new variant of

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 366.

¹² *Ibid.*, 368.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 368.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 373.

avant-gardism, it is clear that Eagleton sees it in a negative light, as a *ressentiment* against truth, morality and beauty, and against any hope of recovering them from instrumentality. This capitulation is witnessed, or so Eagleton would have us believe, in postmodernism's 'consumerist hedonism and philistine anti-historicism, its wholesale abandonment of critique and commitment, its cynical erasure of truth, meaning and subjectivity, its blank, reified technologism.'¹⁵

Eagleton, keen to diagnose poststructuralism as ailing from the same disease as late capitalist culture generally, sees Foucault's 'radical, implacable refusal' as compromised by his relativism. If politics must have recourse to normativity, and cultural relativism undermines this ground, Eagleton sees Foucault's objection to *regime as such*' as his response to this problem.¹⁶ Foucault, Eagleton argues, is both a fantastical escapist, imagining life outwith institutional regime, and a pessimistic pragmatist. 'This ambivalence then allows him [Foucault] to combine, in a manner typical of much post-structuralism, a kind of secret apocalyptic ultra-leftism with a dry-eyed, pragmatic political reformism. It protects him at once from the reactionary and the romantic...'¹⁷ Thus, for Eagleton, Foucault has neither grounds, nor desire, to distinguish fascism from liberalism.

Eagleton accuses Foucault of being in thrall to power, of finding 'aesthetic gratification'¹⁸ in it, something that is apparently betrayed by Foucault's stylistic 'carefully calculated clinical neutrality'.¹⁹ The judgement which relativism had undermined as epistemologically viable, is in fact passed over into the realm of the aesthetic, leading Foucault, according to Eagleton, to display a 'dangerous inclination towards absolutist coercion as against Enlightenment hegemony.'²⁰ In the light of this reading of Foucault's general project, which does not in the end seem to do more than exemplify the double-bind Eagleton has associated with the aesthetic from the start ('In so far as power remains politically oppressive, it must call forth refusal and resistance; in so far as it is aestheticized, it acts as the medium of a pleasurable expansion and productivity of capacities')²¹, *The Use of Pleasure* is presented as an aesthetic response to an ethical lacuna in Foucault's

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 373.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 385.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 386.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 388.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 384.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 389.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 390.

œuvre. From Foucault's presentation of Greek sexual ethics as based on an aesthetics of conduct and an economics of pleasure, Eagleton extrapolates the total renunciation of any criteria of judgement other than stylistic, and reads *The Use of Pleasure* not at the level it was written, as counter-point to the modern hermeneutic of the subject, but as if it intended to found a social morality in general. This licences, it seems, a piece of insinuation that sits uneasily with Eagleton's tone of ethical outrage. Having claimed that 'It is true... that Foucault, at least at one point in his life, opposed the criminalization of rape.' This is itself a severe simplification, but its rhetorical force is added to when later in the same paragraph Eagleton asks 'Does it all come down to a question of how, in postmodernist vein, one "stylizes" one's conduct? What would a stylish rape look like, precisely?'²² The rhetorical escalation that occurs here shows how Eagleton's own understanding of an aesthetic that should function in relation to, but distinction from, the ethical and the cognitive leads him to read Foucault as symptom of a contemporary malaise. It does so moreover, in a most ironic way, for Eagleton's own unethical recourse to an aesthetic device, a rhetoric of persuasion, shows that he too cannot keep these realms as pure as he would like. Unable to read Foucault's text as an aesthetically charged response to ethical and cognitive problems in contemporary Western society, Eagleton performs the operation he accuses Foucault of, the dissolution of ethico-political and epistemological concerns in a hypertrophied aesthetic.

Eagleton's idealised/idealist view of the aesthetic, his attempt to keep it separate from the life-world he sees as disastrously aestheticized by capital, in fact works counter-productively. Unlike Foucault he is unable to rearticulate historical processes and their concomitant transformations of subjectivity as sites of critical intervention and resistance. Thus, whereas the late Foucault began a project of 'the aesthetics of existence' that took contemporary narcissism as one of its inspirations, Eagleton remains unable to utilise any of the aestheticising developments he can so lucidly describe, instead harking back to a prelapsarian and narrowly metaphysical version of the aesthetic as the ludic grounds of affective community.²³ This particular and elusive version of

²² *Ibid.*, 394. On the episode to which Eagleton misleadingly alludes see Macey, D. *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, London: Hutchinson, 1993.

²³ On Foucault's utilization of narcissism as a means of a critical 'aesthetics of the self' see *Technologies of the self: a seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. L. Martin, H. Gutman, P. Hutton, Amherst, Mass: University of

aesthetics is not only unjustifiably kept separate from aesthetics-at-large, but also fails to respond to the critical need for a counter-ideological investigation, and use of, such aesthetics as at work in critical and theoretical writing.

Why is it that Eagleton, whose project as set out in the foreword of *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, should be accommodating to Foucault, finds it necessary to refuse him so thoroughly? The answer to this lies, I think, in a resistance to one of the consequences of his own argument regarding the ubiquity of the aesthetic. Capitalism having so thoroughly and insidiously disseminated aesthetics via the commodity, Eagleton wishes to re-establish the grounds for a more decorous and restrained aesthetics that is kept check by ethics and epistemology. The problem Eagleton both recognises and obscures in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* is the impossibility of keeping the aesthetic in its place. This is one reason, perhaps, why his reading of Foucault proves unproductive for him—because he cannot make sense of the aesthetics at work in the text, aesthetics which play out the ethical and epistemological effectiveness of Foucault's writing. That Eagleton's oversight on this point is inseparable from the unethical use of insinuation with regard to Foucault, and from the epistemological shape of his reading demonstrates the inevitable coexistence of these three, hypothetically separate modes. The supposed incommensurability between the aims of Eagleton's analysis of the 'Ideology of the Aesthetic' and Foucault's genealogical project remains undecidably located, neither finally assignable to epistemological or aesthetic objections. The role ethics plays here is key. If, as Derrida has argued, the ethical moment occurs precisely when one is faced with genuine undecidability, then we might question Eagleton's ethical response to equivocations that occur both within Foucault's text and in Eagleton's reading of it.²⁴ That Eagleton seems resistant to both negative and positive consequences of the ubiquitous 'aestheticization' he theorises as the postmodern condition does not mean that his project is not worthwhile, merely that we cannot expect a rigid architecture of aesthetic, ethical, epistemological to satisfactorily analyse a state of affairs in which such an

Massachusetts Press, 1988.

²⁴ Derrida (2004).

architecture doesn't any longer exist.

That Foucault's project can in fact be seen as contributing to the 'historical ontology' outlined by Osborne as the motivating need behind the rethinking of the relations between philosophy, art history and art criticism, is clear from his essay *What is Enlightenment?*²⁵ This essay, further, shows how aesthetic concerns are indeed central for Foucault, but that they do not, *contra* Eagleton, overwhelm or undermine historico-critical ones. *What is Enlightenment?* brings together two perspectives on the critical project; that of Kant, summarised as the posing of the question *Was ist Aufklärung?* (seen as a new way of reflecting on the present), and that of Baudelaire, whose aesthetic theory facilitates Foucault's transition from the self-questioning of the Enlightenment to what he terms 'the historical ontology of ourselves.'²⁶ This transition both locates, in Kant's critique, the point of departure for modernity, and conceives modernity not as an epoch, but as an 'attitude,' by which Foucault means 'a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task.'²⁷ Baudelaire, acutely aware of modernity, does not see being modern as merely a matter of recognizing its fleetingness, its contingency. Rather, Foucault stresses, it is a matter of adopting a deliberate attitude which 'consists in capturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it... Modernity ... is the will to "heroize" the present.'²⁸ Baudelaire's famous comments about the 'poetic beauty' of the black frock-coat, and on Guys as 'painter of modern life' are quoted in support of this. Guys is quintessentially modern in that he doesn't just depict, but transfigures the world he sees. 'For the attitude of modernity, the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is.' But, further to this modernity is a relationship to oneself, not just to the present, and for Foucault, the

²⁵ Foucault (1997).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 315

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 309.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 310.

attitude of modernity is 'tied to an indispensable ascetism.'²⁹ Ascetism is perhaps Foucault's key term for the understanding of the relation to self as aesthetic practice, for the self as work of art. The brief characterisations of Kant and Baudelaire are not given as historical summaries of epochs: while for Foucault we remain rooted in the Enlightenment, this connection is found not in 'faithfulness to doctrinal elements' but in 'the permanent reactivation of an attitude—that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era.'³⁰

The 'historical ontology of ourselves' Foucault proposes in *What is Enlightenment?* reflects on limits, but in a different modality from Kantianism: 'if the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge had to renounce exceeding... the critical question today must be turned back into a positive one: In what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints? The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible crossing-over.'³¹ If Eagleton reads Foucault as dissolving the ethical and the cognitive into the aesthetic, *What is Enlightenment?* makes it clear that the role of aesthetics for critical thought is thoroughly historical, and connected to an ethics at both personal and societal levels. That 'crossing-over' is thought by Foucault as an aesthetic, political and an epistemological task is made eminently clear by the intertwining of these themes in the writing collected in the *Essential Works*.³²

Osborne's analysis of the conditions under which art criticism might be reimagined as a historical ontology of the present establishes both the inadequacy of the 'art as aesthetics' thesis, and the ineliminability of the aesthetic dimension of artworks. Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* offers a historical analysis of the social forces that have shaped the contemporary scene from which Osborne starts out, and which continues to produce the need for critical and philosophical engagement with art historical problematics. Yet it is Foucault, I would argue, overlooked by Osborne and rejected by Eagleton, who comes closest to articulating aesthetic

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 311.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 312.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 315.

³² The interrelation of these domains is evident not least in the blurring of lines across the three volumes of the *Essential Works: Ethics, Aesthetics and Power*.

concerns with the ongoing critical task of a 'historical ontology of ourselves.' It is in the service of this aim that a rediscovery of aesthetics would be most useful.

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