

## Fetishism and Symbolic Violence: Anish Kapoor's *Svayambh*<sup>1</sup>

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My first encounter with *Svayambh* took place one rainy night in December, 2009, when I visited an exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. I arrived quite late but had time to wander through the exhibition rooms rearranged to accommodate coloured forms and mirroring surfaces which immediately exerted a deep fascination on me. The event was dedicated to the contemporary sculptor Anish Kapoor, and one of his works in particular attracted my attention; a huge block of red material placed on a long track which passed through several rooms of the Academy in continuous but almost unnoticeable motion: *Svayambh*.<sup>2</sup> In this article I offer a reflection on the psychoanalytic notion of fetishism and the concept of symbolic violence. I have borrowed the latter idea from the late Pierre Bourdieu, although I will not be discussing his approach to art and cultural transmission in this article. The juxtaposition of these two notions was inspired by the slow movement of *Svayambh* combined with the atmosphere of that night and came to me in the days after my visit to the exhibition. In what follows I will not provide a detailed analysis of *Svayambh* but rather, my writing will attempt to reproduce on a philosophical and discursive level the physical, retinal impression that it made upon me on that occasion. *Svayambh* will not be the object of a discourse but rather the source, literally invisible but also intimately and strongly present, underlying a purely philosophical argument. I will refer to the work in order to mark the place where the physical impression and intellectual meditation provoked by what I posit as a fundamentally unreadable artwork could momentarily converge. My methodological intention is to prevent *Svayambh* from becoming a paradigmatic case or an example to be easily encapsulated in a predefined discursive framework, and also to avoid that hermeneutic preoccupation which Homi Bhabha (2009), in a remarkable essay published in the catalogue of the exhibition, calls the 'anxiety of attribution'(26). I hope my reasoning will participate in what Kapoor himself (2007) designates as the 'immaterial becoming of an object', in its passage from the realm of material presence to any word or concept that could be forged after it and because of it. My reading will be also inspired by what Martin Heidegger (1971: 169)

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<sup>2</sup> *Svayambh* was first exhibited in Nantes in 2007.

calls a ‘semi-poetic way of looking at things’: a way of focusing our attention on the thing itself or disclosing something of it without transforming it into the fixated and rigid object of our own representation. In its cogitative meanderings, this article will attempt to enact a tentative dismantling of the violence of critical textuality, namely that kind of violence practised in the interpretative identification of a work of art, that domesticating procedure which reduces the enigmatic specificity of a work to the concatenating categories of art history or art criticism. For this reason, my aim will be the somehow paradoxical formulation of a discourse that recognises its closeness and debt to the figure but also the figure’s irremediable distance and originality.

### 1. Fetishism

Unlike a passive object of artistic contemplation, *Svayambh* reveals a field of phenomenological experience which can be neither mastered by its subject, both as spectator and creator, nor totally embraced by the spatio-temporal frame of its display, and which seems to reflect a kind of immensity that cannot be entirely circumscribed by its architectural setting. Borrowing from Lacoue-Labarthe’s fascinating reflection on poetry, it could be said that the poetic existence of this object:

allows itself to be spoken of in and by he who is drawn to it in spite of himself, who receives it as unreceivable, and who submits to it. Accepts it, trembling lest it refuse him, it being so strange, fleeting and ungraspable, as is all the meaning of what is. (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989: 26)

This enigmatic exhibition of an entity whose title can be roughly translated from the Sanskrit as ‘self-generated’ (Rosenthal 2009: 44) epitomises an unobtainable essence that might clarify an essentially aesthetic quality: ‘the paradox that something made exists for its own sake’ (Adorno 1997: 29). As Theodor Adorno emphasises, this founding mis-recognition of authorial heteronomy (something that resonates with Kapoor’s separation of the object from its objecthood and with his idea that ‘the object must maintain its mystery and never reveal its plan’ (Kapoor, 2007)), this aesthetic also corresponds to the fetishistic element in art, an element that bears the mark of a powerfully ideological component but also the promise of liberation represented by ‘things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity’ (Adorno 1997: 298). This form of fetishism must not be confused with a colonising commodification of the thing but may be affiliated to the psychoanalytic speculation about this concept, a meditation that could, in the case of *Svayambh*, perceptively address the unreconciled tension between the object’s tangible

expression and the relative work of conceptualisation. In *Stanzas. Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, Giorgio Agamben writes that:

the fetish confronts us with the paradox of an unattainable object that satisfies a human need precisely through its being unattainable. Insofar as it is a presence, the fetish object is in fact something concrete and tangible; but insofar as it is the presence of an absence, it is, at the same time, immaterial and intangible, because it alludes continuously beyond itself to something that can never really be possessed. (Agamben 1993: 33)

This unattainable presence is related to the mechanism described by Freud as *Verleugnung* (disavowal), a ‘negative reference’ determined by the fact that ‘the substituted term is [...] at once negated and evoked by the substitution’ (32). If this intriguing description of the fetish seems to give conceptual consistency to an important property conveyed by *Svayambh*, the fact that its absolute materiality does not result in objectification but rather in an immanent and formless immateriality, it could also be suggested that this sculptural object points to a different idea of fetishism, one with extraordinary aesthetic and philosophical potentialities. In fact, within the psychoanalytic intellectual genealogy, even this economy of undecidable resistance to appropriation and logic equivalence (negation/evocation) rests upon the persistence of a ‘substituted term’, the phallus, which inscribes the formation of identities in a logic of singularity: presence (of the same) or lack. Similarly, Julia Kristeva defines fetishism as ‘a stasis that acts as a thesis’, that is ‘a telescoping of the symbolic’s characteristic thetic moment and of one of those instinctually invested stases (bodies, part of bodies, orifices, containing objects, and so forth). This stasis thus becomes the ersatz of the sign’ (Kristeva 1984: 64), the disavowal of the enunciative mastering of the thing, or the negation of the unspeakable absence moulded by the object, a negation that replaces it with an impossible supplement. This mechanism entails a perversion of the ‘thesis’, a Greek word that Heidegger translated as ‘a setting up in the unconcealed’ or ‘taking possession’, close to the idea of ‘placing, as for instance, letting a statue be set up’ (Heidegger 1971: 79), a bringing forth which establishes a boundary by means of a fixing in place. Fetishism displaces this ‘bringing forth’, inherent in every cultural production, from the law of symbolic differentiation to the inner layer of a pre-subjective realm of drives, embodying the refusal to channel the unexpected or unpredictable into the structuring apparatus of perceptual identification. It is for this reason that, as Agamben points out, fetishistic passion concerns not an irreplaceable and unique entity but rather a proliferation of never-satisfying surrogates. From this psychoanalytic perspective, the negative reference of fetishism indicates a tentative escape from the regulative principle of social determination and from the affirmative positing of the object. As Kristeva makes clear, this diversion is not in the nature of art – the specificity of

the poetic function – because art maintains a signification, a symbolic operation which defines its function of sign. In fact, this psychoanalytic explanation of the fetish is extremely important as it allows us to contrastively appreciate the socio-ideological symptom of the aesthetic space. Nevertheless, it is also true that this view is grounded in a restricted framework, an epistemic context that precludes the thought of fetishism originally inspired by the perception of this artwork's specific objecthood. In particular, the reflection provoked by the encounter with *Svayambh* has something to do with the definition of art as an 'irruption of the drives in the universal signifying order, that of "natural language" which binds together the social unit' (Kristeva 1984: 62), a process which ensures and preserves the thetic moment rather than simply obliterating the subject function. From this standpoint, the figural opacity of art is reduced to the never totally accomplished disruptive pressure of the drives on a textual chain, something Adorno was able to criticise with unparalleled lucidity: 'Freud's adaptation of the aesthetic to the theory of the instincts seems to seal itself off from art's spiritual essence; for Freud, artworks are indeed, even though sublimated, little more than plenipotentiaries of sensual impulses' (Adorno 1997: 13). According to Kristeva, art's ability to 'signify the un-signifying' makes it different from a fetish and prevents it from 'foundering in an "unsayable" without limits': the poetic function 'therefore converges with fetishism; it is not, however, identical with it' (Kristeva 1984: 65). Art reproduces the machinery of the sign rather than being simply a substitute for it, so that its transgression of the symbolic order (understood in terms of objective projection and subjective predication) takes place after the latter's consolidation rather than, as with fetishism itself, in the pre-symbolic locus of an undeniable and unacceptable perceptual discovery. The question that *Svayambh*'s spatio-temporal oscillations could pose to this reintroduction of libidinal economy into our idea of art is inspired by their ability to express a poetic function which can be *de facto* identified with a form of fetishism: as an unattainable object that cannot be properly recognised by our sensory organisation this poetic function also challenges the privilege of the symbolic codification of the subject. This experience of non-appropriable negation/evocation is manifested by a certain creative power or vitality in the thing itself, a dynamic that cannot be encompassed by any metaphysics of singularity and that, by the insertion of the unintelligible in the opening up of a deformed logic of visibility, does not uphold and repeat the persistence of the thetic phase. In its figural dimension, this dynamic can be assimilated into neither the practice of signification nor the stasis of sensual investment: rather, it unsettles the sedimentation of conventional and normalised perceptual suppositions. Anish Kapoor states

that as creator and artist he has ‘nothing to say’ (Kapoor 2006-2007), an affirmation that introduces the idea that *Svayambh* works on a level which can be critically contrasted with that tendency outlined by Craig Owens (1979: 122) as ‘the eruption of language into the field of the visual arts’. More importantly, this particular sculptural practice reveals that the price we pay for the recognition of ‘that crucial place on the basis of which the human being constitutes himself as signifying and/or social’ (Kristeva 1984: 67) in the sphere of aesthetics is the assimilation of artistic practice into *textual* practice, or the violent reduction of its figurative logic to discursive reason. As a consequence, experiencing this artwork could lead us to call into question the idea that ‘textual experience reaches the very foundation of the social’ (67), and its constitutive annex, namely the statement that the non-textual or fetishistic dismantling of the symbolic *of necessity* sinks into the irrationality of the drives, leading to the dissolution of the subject and of its capacity to cope with reality. This sculptural experiment could articulate a form of poetic existence that is not deducible from the model of language and that, borrowing a passage from Agamben’s *Infancy and History*, could be depicted as ‘the simple difference between the human and the linguistic’:

a pure, transcendental experience which, like human infancy, is free both of the subject and of any psychological substratum. It is not simply an event to be isolated chronologically, nor anything like a psychosomatic state which either child psychology (at the level of *parole*) or palaeoanthropology (at the level of *langue*) could ever construct as a human event independent of language. However, it is not even something that can be wholly resolved within language, except as a transcendental source or an Ur-limit. (Agamben 1993: 50)

If this transcendental source, which produces the opening of historicity and brings with itself the burden of a truth content, cannot be wholly resolved within language, at the same time it implicates a mystery, an ineffable space of reality that, by virtue of its unspeakable nature, corresponds to the interminable and necessary waiting for what Adorno called ‘the redemptive word that would dissolve its constitutive darkening’ (1997: 162). In its erasure of the entangling of the poetic in the symbolic function, *Svayambh* reveals a mysterious element of *pathos*, an imageless sensuality that transcends the appearance of the thing and that, for this reason, enables us to dislocate the latent opposition of presence and lack underlying the psychoanalytic conceptualisation of fetishism, a conception that assumes the characterisation of a subject ‘unable to acknowledge that what it is that he sees might be the *actuality of another being*: one that may well resemble him but is other than him. All “man” can see the absence of himself or the lack in the other’ (Rooney 2000: 80). Against this inability or, better, in order to raise a disorientating consciousness of this problem in the most intimate and

familiar part of our experience, our chronotopical location, Kapoor's artwork is able to provoke a sense of surprise:

the moment between narcissistic reflection and the thought of 'not me' which is the moment in which the surprise or shock of there being another there may be registered: being as incomplete and not completed, in that there are other living beings (Rooney 2000: 80)

By incarnating the essence of an 'other living being', the occurrence of a work like *Svayambh* could bring about a reformulation of the fetish, a concept which could provoke 'a different ontological understanding of being, one which is not opposed to non-being' (Rooney 2000: 81). If *Svayambh* points to a particular realisation of the creative potential of art, the perceptual intensity of the object seems to resonate with a different conception of fetishism:

What does it mean to generalise a *sexual* economy of fetishism when Western knowledge so often generalises on the basis of a sexual differential? Why always this as the starting point? Is there a way in which spirits may be primary, prior to a thinking of "man"? (Rooney 2000: 90)

It may be said that the aim of this meditation is to produce an original answer to this questioning, one that does not depend on thethetic or divisive doubling of sexual difference and that corresponds to the defamiliarising project of making the aesthetic subject conscious of a possibly anti/thetic dimension in our faculty of perceptual recognition. Accordingly, Kapoor's work could bring to mind a spiritual character comparable to that cinematic fetishism described by Christian Metz: 'the whole of cinematic fetishism consists in the constant and teasing displacement of the cutting line which separates the seen from the unseen' (Metz 1985: 88). Rather than entralling our gaze through an imaginary fixation, *Svayambh* could be depicted as an 'extraordinary activator of fetishism', the site of a dynamic interaction between immanence and immateriality. For this reason this artwork could be said to point to a fascinating logic of the invisible, an invisible redefined not as absence or lack but rather as the oscillation of a spirited material presence which cannot be appropriated. The self-moving and unrecognisable framing and deframing of this object prevents it from being totally domesticated by the subjective field of vision and by the violence of theoretical discourse, thus introducing in our discourse an unsolved dialectic that the philosopher Jacques Rancière (2009) portrays as the innermost tension between *logos* and *pathos*. This specific artistic production might engender a spirited philosophy of alterity related to a sculptural technique of perceptual defamiliarisation. If Kapoor's artwork can be interpreted in these terms, the most compelling question concerns how might a non-textual and auratic experience such as this huge self-moving block of wax and paint can retain its social or subjective

moment without being reduced to the semiotic or impulsive breaching of the symbolic syntax. The answer might be found in the unfolding of the subversive temporality of this work.

## 2. Symbolic violence

The element of time cannot be wholly resolved by the perceptual immediacy of the spectator when experiencing *Svayambh*. Instead, this experiencing operates a shift from empirical time to a dissonant and unreconciled temporal synthesis evoked by the artwork itself. This particular materialisation of time achieves an unexpectedly impressive and disturbing visuality, shaped by the movement of a gigantic wax block making its way through the doors of contiguous exhibition rooms, a block of red material which marks the door frames through which it traverses with traces of its passage. Its movement embodies a fundamental sense of rhythm that the limitations of space make unavailable to the stable or static positioning of the spectator. Kapoor's principle of composition, that 'the space contained in an object must be bigger than the object which contains it' (Kapoor 2007), achieves a powerfully effective fulfilment in this work. The constraints of the containing space are thus visualised as the negative of the work's autonomous law of temporality, a law pointing to the immensity of the contained space, the intimate unfolding of the immaterial non-factuality of the object itself. The phenomenological level is hence dislocated by the alternative temporal worlding of the artwork, the prolongation of the fabric of its dense material in a slow but continuous rhythm, a process that may be understood as investigating the very genesis of time.

Because of its eccentric reshaping of our temporal perception, *Svayambh* evokes a sense of reality beyond the reach of subjective experience or textual concatenation, something that cannot be reduced to neither the performative function of the symbolic order nor the phenomenological activity of the subject, nor the realm of the drives. Rather, this non-textual aesthetic process is able to bring about the possibility of a new consciousness in the subject, a fact that suggests that the materiality of the work presents a transforming capacity, as the indication of a different space summoned by the visualisation of a counter-empirical time. The work creates its own temporality, a field of in-visibility which contains a certain spirit of art or what could be named its negativity. This essence, not fixed by the artwork but rather manifested by a hidden glimpse glimmering through the oscillation or combination of its elements, could explain the mystery of artistic creation as an 'assimilative transfiguration of rhythmic intervals', a process which generates 'the modified intensity of the individual occurrences' (Abraham & Rand 1986: 4). In his reflections on the relevance of psychoanalysis to the individuation of the peculiarities of the aesthetic sphere, Nicolas

Abraham proposed an extremely intriguing perspective on this subject. He writes that, from the psychoanalytic point of view, time:

is never dealt with explicitly as an issue or problem; our acquisition of time is parallel to our integration into society. And yet, both clinical and theoretical psychoanalysis constantly make use of concepts referring to aspects of temporality. Certainly, this temporality bears no relation to objective time, nor does it concern the subjective time of "lived experiences." [...] This particular time – which may properly be called transphenomenal – is implied in many psychoanalytic concepts. (Abraham & Rand 1986: 5)

The interesting aspect of this redefinition of time lies in its transphenomenal and negative character: it is neither the time of the individual lived experience, of phenomenology, nor is it the structuring time of socio-ideological conformation, the time which is never questioned or considered in the mysterious space of its origination. Rather, by pointing to an antithetical temporality triggered by the dynamic exchange between consciousness and the unconscious, Abraham develops the possibility of a genetics of time, something which *Svayambh* seems to be capable of raising to a remarkable threshold of tangibility. Following Ferenczi (1952), Abraham demonstrates that the essential correspondence between the subject (the ego in its dynamic relationship with its atemporal counterparts, the super-ego and the unconscious) and reality relies on this temporal dynamism:

In relation to its unconscious counterpart, the ego contrives detours, differrals [*diffèrements*], and displacements. [...] It possesses a correlate in the outside world, the reality referred to by psychoanalysts: the sum total of the paths and obstacles the ego has acquired as its own knowledge. The temporal structure of reality thus faithfully corresponds to the structure of the ego (Abraham & Rand 1986: 6)

The temporal expansion of this artwork embodies something of this intimate correspondence, a faithful relation which links the subject to the real and which obstructs the forcing of abstraction upon the field of sensuality. The essence of this transphenomenal time could be grasped in the oxymoron that this work of art represents, an anti/thesis produced in the rescue of a corporeal immediacy by means of its negation, a paradoxical spirituality of the thing that might recall Adorno's reflection that 'if art were to free itself from the once perceived illusion of duration, were to internalize its own transience in sympathy with the ephemeral life, it would approximate an idea of truth conceived not as something abstractly enduring but in consciousness of its temporal essence' (Adorno 1997: 36–37). An object like *Svayambh* evokes a sense of time that cannot be exhausted by phenomenological terms and that 'sows a deep doubt about the mastery of human historical time' (Bhabha 1998: 39). As a consequence, the philosophical awareness raised by its slow and uninterrupted self-movement may result in a figural deconstruction of the solitude and solidification of the subject, a

mirroring of the dialectic articulation of the unsatisfied unconscious wish and the activity of the ego:

If the fulfilment of the ego's every desire entails the disappointment of an underlying unconscious wish, if what comes is always "something other" than what is expected in one's heart of hearts, the present cannot solidify into a definitive accomplishment. [...] It must slide implacably toward another present, itself, of course, tinged with the same inherent ambiguity. (Abraham & Rand 1986: 6)

The ontology of incompleteness implicated by this shifting or sliding reverberates in the movement of *Svayambh*, a fundamentally creative act that cannot be appropriated as domesticated product or object of contemplation and that for this very reason opens up a world, that 'something other' which displays a shared but undecidable ground of co-existence between the aesthetic subject and reality. This opening of a not yet codified field of poetic experience may be linked to a particular socio-political issue, the question of the inscription of systems of power and ideological adaptation which inhabit the most intimate part of individual experience. The resistance to the violence of intellectual appropriation, a dislocation of the 'thesis' which operates on the level of the bodily apprehension of the real, also foregrounds a critique of the naturalisation of the violence involved by the social inclusion of the subject, a structuring violence which is not simply denied in favour of a celebration of a dispersive annihilation.<sup>3</sup> Rather, this violence is exposed and materialised in a negative act that retains its aesthetic nature and demonstrates the arbitrariness of the categories of spatial and temporal discernment of the perceived world which are most familiar and most often taken for granted. In other words, a meditation inspired by *Svayambh* is able to address in a critical way that thetic principle of collective and ideological structuration which the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines as 'symbolic violence'.

The adjective 'symbolic' can be understood as concerning not just a purely representative domain but rather the locus of intersection between the individual and the collective order, a site where the perception and evidence of the social world is organised, something which Kristeva pictured as 'a social effect of the relation to the other, established through the objective constraints of biological (including sexual) differences and concrete, historical family structures' (Kristeva 1984: 29). Both naturalised and conventional, necessary and arbitrary, the practice of legitimisation and re-production of systems of domination that Bourdieu connotes with the term 'symbolic' is a form of violence '*which is exercised upon a*

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<sup>3</sup> A movement which, following Kristeva, could be defined as negation of that signifying split which does not simply deconstruct the illusion of a transcendental ego, but rather makes the formation of a socially re-defined subject possible.

*social agent with his or her complicity*' and which concerns the practice of sensory recognition, 'the set of fundamental, prereflexive assumptions that social agents engage by the mere fact of taking the world for granted, of accepting the world as it is, and of finding it natural because *their mind is constructed according to cognitive structures that are issued out of the very structures of the world.*' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2004: 272; original emphases in this and the next quotation from this authority). This form of violence constitutes the hidden persuasion of a non-elaborated and naturalised 'imprisonment effected via the body': it '*accomplishes itself through an act of cognition and of misrecognition that lies beyond – or beneath – the controls of consciousness and will*, in the obscurities of the schemata of habitus that are at once gendered and gendering' (273). Bourdieu explained this form of incorporated and non-perceived violence by granting a privileged position to the constitution of the gendered subject, a site where the fit between culturally arbitrary determinants, both structuring and structured by social agents, and the most innate or non-reflexive categories of perception could be exhibited in its brutality and conventionality. As a result, symbolic violence could be described as both spontaneous and extorted: it 'is a form of power that is exerted on bodies, directly and as if by magic, without any physical constraint; but this magic works only on the basis of the dispositions deposited, like springs, at the deepest level of the body' (Bourdieu 2004: 340). The most relevant feature of this kind of violence is that it does not operate with the awareness of both the victim and the perpetrator, but rather it concerns the invisible and unconscious schemes of perception, appreciation and action at the core of every socio-political and ideological disposition. This mechanism works at the level of the lived experience of the physical world, in the immediate context of perception and bodily apprehension, rather than in the articulation of discourses or representations about it. Making a culturally-shaped relation of domination appear as natural, it works on a corporeal ground that does not enter the level of a conscious speculation and critical elaboration: Bourdieu (1989) borrowed the idea of 'world-making' from the philosopher Nelson Goodman as a suggestive way of understanding the extent of this pre-reflexive and fundamentally expropriating power of classification of the reality around us.

## **Conclusion**

From this point of view *Svayambh*, as I encountered it in the rooms of the Royal Academy, inspires a reflection on time, space, and the false immediacy engendering the ideological and material reproduction of symbolic violence. This artistic experiment inaugurates a critical gesture because of its ability to make available to consciousness those socially automatised

procedures of collective projection embedded in our sensory schemata. The presence or absolute materialism of this self-moving formless form was able to substantially misrecognise or de-naturalise (de-familiarise) the sensuous organisation of the locus of its exhibition and, in its bewildering extension and unattainable proximity, to provoke a suspension or re/figuration of the subject's codification of the surrounding time and space. Because of this interruption of the structuring practice of normalised identification and perceptual constitution, this displacement of habitual diagrams of observation could not be entirely enclosed in terms of a purely phenomenological experience. Its irreducibility to the violent encapsulation of visual and plastic opacity in the regulated surface of discursive explanation could be understood as exemplifying the character of a poetic existence which denounces in a disorientating, non-textual, bodily and figurative, mode the procedures of symbolic regulation of a social field. In fact, its oscillation could be discursively developed by an idea of fetishism that does not concern a completely intra-subjective antagonism between the drives and the singular economy of symbolic differentiation. Rather, fetishism is refigured as something that regards the socially posited relation between the subject and reality, a relation which could be reformulated in terms of an aesthetically captivating encounter with an other living being. This critique of textual and symbolic violence could introduce a reconsidered concept of art, one which challenges the alleged compulsiveness of incorporated structures of collective and individual disposition and is therefore able to outline an original reconsideration of the specificity of the aesthetic space. More precisely, *Svayambh* inspires a negative aesthetics that should not be limited to the strictures of a subversive textual practice but that can be related to a sort of hesitation in our encounter with reality, the poetic suggestion of a non-representational and auratic dismantling of the metaphysics of singularity at the core of any epistemic ordering of the real.

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