



MARX AT THE MOVIES

REVISITING HISTORY, THEORY AND PRACTICE

Edited by EWA MAZIERSKA and LARS KRISTENSEN



Marx at the Movies

Also by Ewa Mazierska

POSTCOLONIAL APPROACHES TO EASTERN EUROPEAN CINEMA:
Portraying Neighbours On-Screen (*co-edited with Eva Näripea and Lars Kristensen*)

WORK IN CINEMA: Labor and Human Condition (*editor*)

EUROPEAN CINEMA AND INTERTEXTUALITY: History, Memory, Politics

JERZY SKOLIMOWSKI: The Cinema of a Nonconformist

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(*co-authored with Laura Rascaroli*)

Also by Lars Kristensen

POSTCOLONIAL APPROACHES TO EASTERN EUROPEAN CINEMA: Portraying
Neighbours On-Screen (*co-edited with Eva Näripea and Ewa Mazierska*)

POSTCOMMUNIST FILM – RUSSIA, EASTERN EUROPE AND WORLD CULTURE:
Moving Images of Postcommunism (*editor*)

Marx at the Movies

Revisiting History, Theory and Practice

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Introduction

Marx at the Movies: Revisiting History, Theory and Practice

Ewa Mazierska and Lars Kristensen

The history of the 21st century cannot be told without reference to both cinema and communism. Whilst communism presented itself as the political system entrusted with implementing Marxist ideas and challenging the hegemony of capitalism, cinema became the main tool of social communication and a major cultural institution. However, by the end of the century both had lost their privileged positions. Cinema as an institution became supplanted by other forms of visual communication, such as television and the internet. Its privileged access to reality also became questioned as a result of technological developments, most importantly through a gradual replacement of analogue by digital technologies. Communism, almost everywhere it ruled, gave way to a neoliberal version of capitalism. But neither cinema nor Marxism disappeared from political and artistic debates. On the contrary, in the last decade we observe intensified discussions about their importance, although usually conducted separately. This book intends to bring them together, pointing both to their common fate and differences in relation to culture, social life and politics.

Post-communist Marxism, neoliberal communism

An important task of this book is to reconceptualise and develop Marxism as an analytical framework within the realm of film studies. In this regard, it is necessary to distinguish initially between Marxism as manifested in different spheres – most importantly, politics on the one hand, and philosophy and culture on the other hand, even if this means temporarily departing from the spirit of Marxism, which requires philosophy to be intimately linked to practice. According to

Jacques Bidet, two political systems could claim allegiance to Marxism: first, regimes in the communist sphere, where official doctrine claimed to be rooted in Marxism, and second, those in all developed capitalist countries, particularly in Europe, where the Marxist aspect manifested itself through a 'social state' or 'welfare state' (Bidet 2008: 4–5; see also Kouvelakis 2008: 30–38). Both of these systems collapsed, albeit at different speeds, with a welfare state lingering in some parts of Europe, such as Scandinavia. The question worth posing is this: How did their collapse affect the standing of communism as a political alternative to capitalism and Marxism as a world view? It is worth mentioning that the very fact that such a question is posed, suggesting that Marxism might be in crisis, demonstrates that Marxism is not like any other philosophy. As Stathis Kouvelakis points out, it is unlikely that Platonists will speak of 'a crisis of Platonism' or Kantians of a 'crisis of Kantianism' (Kouvelakis 2008: 23).

Regarding the actuality of communism and, by the same token, the validity of Marxism as a political project, there are several distinct positions. According to one, probably the most common, communism is finished and consequently history is finished, reaching its culmination with the victory of the system based on market economy and parliamentary democracy. Such a position is famously attributed to Francis Fukuyama and his term 'the end of history' (1992), but we can also find it among authors such as Fredric Jameson, who famously said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (2003), and Slavoj Žižek, who gave his last book the title *Living in the End Times* (2011). However, the tone of these pronouncements is different. Fukuyama celebrated the end of history, claiming that there is no need to treat communism in different terms to historical ones. Jameson mourned the death of communism and explicitly challenged his readers to change the course of history. In the early 1990s, Fukuyama's capitalist future looked economically prosperous. However, as the decade faded away and the universal prosperity that had been promised through a free labour market and liberal democracy had not been delivered, leading to an increase in international terrorism, urban warfare, nationalism and religious fanaticism, his predictions started to look naive. Žižek's observation, that we live at a time when the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point, has more currency. Its 'four riders of the apocalypse' comprise the ecological crisis, consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself (problems with intellectual property, forthcoming struggles over raw materials, food and water), and the explosive growth of social divisions and

exclusions' (Žižek 2011: x). These and other authors argue that even if communism in a certain form was defeated, this does not exclude its chance of resurrection (Groys 2009: 103–127).

The second position regarding the actuality of Marxism and communism pronounces that, although communism was officially abolished in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, it survived elsewhere and even colonised the world. Its incarnation is a system known as post-Fordism or neoliberalism, which supplanted a regime known as embedded liberalism in the Western world from the early 1980s and communism from the early 1990s. This opinion is most clearly presented by Paolo Virno in the widely quoted final thesis of his *A Grammar of the Multitude: 'Post-Fordism is the "communism of capital"'* (Virno 2004: 110). Virno comes to such a conclusion by comparing the 1980s and the 1990s in the West with the Western response to the October Revolution and the crisis of 1929. He claims that the first moment consisted of 'the gigantic socialisation (or better, nationalisation) of the means of production', which amounted to 'an abolition of the capitalist private industry on the basis of the capitalist system itself' (110). At that time, to survive, capitalism had to adapt some elements of the communist programme. Then he proceeds to argue that the changes in capitalism which occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, which include the extinction of the state as an industry of coercion and as a monopoly of political decision-making, and the great reduction in wage labour 'guarantee a calm version of realism for the potential communist' (110). In his brief discussion of the history of work in the 20th century, Virno suggests that communism is always a part or aspect of capitalism. Following this line of thought, it is interesting to look at China and Vietnam, because in these countries market capitalism is upheld by a communist party (Harvey 2005: 120–51). Moreover, rather than coercing the population to accept the economic and political *status quo* by appealing to its class consciousness, the ruling elites in these countries are justifying their one party system through calls for national unity (Zhang 2004: 53). In his claim that a neoliberal version of capitalism is 'minimalistic communism' or 'communism for realists', Virno echoes French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, who in their influential book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, published for the first time in France in 1999, argued that neoliberalism is a response to the critique of capitalism, voiced in France and Europe at large in the years 1968–1975. This critique, which they describe as an 'artistic critique' as it was articulated largely by students participating in the events of May '68, consisted of a critique of alienation and decreasing chances for autonomous and creative work, as well as demands

for more autonomy, flexibility and scope for creativity. Boltanski and Chiapello claimed that capitalist organisations addressed this critique by changing their structures and mode of operating, becoming open to creativity and flexibility (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 184). Creativity and flexibility became not just a privilege of working under neoliberalism, but a basic requirement, as reflected by the demand of workers to participate in continuous training, often at their own expense.

Other thinkers claim that capitalism's positive response to the 'artistic critique' did not make the current system communist or Marxist. This is because neoliberalism destroyed the welfare state and with that deepened class inequalities and consolidated the capitalist class power, eroded social security, atomised the working class, strengthened external surveillance and self-surveillance and homogenised culture, rendering it deadly for the soul (Augé 1995; Harvey 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Lash and Urry 1987; Sennett 1998, 2006). In due course it also led to wars and misery, as exemplified by military conflicts in former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Such an idea is summarised by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who wrote that capitalism only produces capitalism. To counteract it, one has to attack it from a distinctly anti-capitalist, egalitarian and emancipatory position. The actuality of communism is thus the actuality of this critique, of rejecting the capitalist *status quo* in the name of egalitarian values. Rancière describes such a position as being 'intempestive', which means:

that one belongs and yet does not belong to the same time, just as *atopia* means that one belongs and yet does not belong to the same place. An *intempestive* or *atopian* communist thinks and acts so as to enact the unconditional equality of each and everyone in a world where communism has no actuality except for the network framed by communist thoughts and actions. This means that there is no 'objective' communism already at work in the forms of capitalist production, no communism anticipated by the logic of capitalism. Capitalism may produce more and more immateriality, yet this immateriality will never be more than the immateriality of capitalism. Capitalism only produces capitalism. If communism means something, it means something that is radically heterogeneous to the logic of capitalism, entirely heterogeneous to the materiality of the capitalist world. (Rancière 2010: 135)

For Rancière, Marxism and communism are thus alive as long as there are people willing and able to fight in their name, including in the

field of cultural production. These people might live in the capitalist world, but at the same time they belong to a different world. But such an attitude raises the question as to whether Rancière's definition of an 'intempestive' communist is not too wide, because if we accept it, then we can argue that almost everybody is a communist of some sort. Even ardent capitalists like Bill Gates dream, at least publicly, about a world without misery or injustice. Slavoj Žižek labels such individuals 'liberal communists' (Žižek 2009: 13–14).

In our view, even if the fall of the 'real' or 'state' socialism weakened the chance of creating a communist society, it helped rather than hindered the revival of Marxism as a worldview. This is because what Hannah Arendt regards as the most formidable charge ever raised against Marx, namely 'that one form of totalitarian domination uses, and apparently developed directly from, Marxism', concerns the past connection rather than the present (Arendt 2002: 276). The fall of the Berlin Wall freed Marx from, or at least weakened his connection with, Bolshevism in a similar way as the end of Nazism freed Nietzsche, Hegel, Luther or Plato from an accusation of being the ancestors of Nazism (276). Instead, the end of this system has allowed us to see with greater clarity that it was in fact a form of capitalism, rather than a dictatorship of the proletariat (Burawoy and Lukács 1992; Groys 2009). Equally its replacement by neoliberalism has demonstrated that capitalism has more in common with the way it was described in *Capital* than with the paradise dreamt of by an average person living behind the Iron Curtain. Thus, those from the East who before were 'instinctive Marxists', but were afraid to act on their views from the fear of being accused of supporting the disgraced authorities, are no longer at risk of such accusations and can find support for their ideas nationally as well as transnationally. It is thus not a surprise that the last decade or so has seen a Marxist revival in countries such as Poland and Ukraine. Neither is it unexpected that philosophers, historians and political activists in the countries of former Yugoslavia continue an interest in Marxist ideas, with Slavoj Žižek serving as a prime example (see, for example, Douzinas and Žižek 2010). Moreover, as a result of the fall of the Berlin Wall, communism is no longer tied to a geographical place or space. It is truly universal, even if only abstract or theoretical, as some authors argue. For authors such as Hardt and Negri, it is a question of transnational or even global phenomena, such as 'Empire' and 'multitude', which can be seen as reconfigured forces of capitalism on the one hand and socialism on the other (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2006).

Marxism, modernism and postmodernism

Even those who regard the 'positive' part of Marx's output as impossible to fulfil, both on practical and moral grounds, believe that it is useful as a superior theorisation and critique of capitalism; hence it can be productively utilised by the apologists of the capitalist system. In particular, Marx's writings on overaccumulation of capital, capitalist crises and internal and external colonisation as the means to overcome these crises (Marx 1965, 1966, 1967, 1973) can be seen as a recipe for avoiding the perennial problems of capitalism and ensure capitalist growth.

But there is more to Marx's actuality than being able to help capitalists avoid economic crises. Marx also had specific views on the future of the material world and human identity. From the first perspective, according to Hannah Arendt and Marshall Berman, he is a model modernist, because he saw the world in terms of dramatic change, of continuous destruction. As they notice, he was not the first to conceive the world in such a way, but followed in the footsteps of earlier German authors, such as Goethe and Hegel (Arendt 2002: 276; Berman 1988: 96). He also predicted that this continuous change will lead to diminishing the world's material dimension, most importantly in his 'fragment on the machines' from *Grundrisse* (Marx 1973: 693–95), which proved a major inspiration to the theorists of immaterial labour. This is captured by these words from *The Communist Manifesto*: 'All that is solid melts into air' (Marx and Engels 2008: 38), which is also a perfect slogan for the age of digital communication, genetic experimentation and obsessive protection of copyrights and patents, rather than material goods.

By the same token, Marx posed a question about the essence and destiny of humanity. If everything melts, does the world and 'man' remain unchanged; should we, perhaps, redefine them? In relation to this issue, there are two distinct answers. According to the prevailing one, Marx was a teleological thinker, who saw the end of the world as paradise on earth, ensured by socialist revolution. In this paradise man will finally reject his identity as labourer and appropriate a new one, that of 'amateur'. According to a second opinion, which is closer to that of the authors of this introduction, even if Marx was a teleological thinker, his work is rich enough to imagine different scenarios of human destiny, including that there is no ultimate destiny or human essence: the world will keep melting, people drift and mutate forever. Such an opinion chimes with Marx's refusal to say much about the shape of future communist society, as if he was assuming that 'man' of the future might be quite different from what we understand by that term today.

Marxist actuality also lies in his approach to the role of an intellectual in social and cultural life. This approach is captured by Maurice Blanchot, who attributed to this thinker three types of speech: 'writer of thoughts', 'political speech' and 'scientific discourse' (Blanchot 2010: 103–5). A similar attitude to Marx is revealed by Eric Hobsbawm, who referring to a recent biography of Marx written by Jacques Attali, maintains that his work 'is not "interdisciplinary" in the conventional sense but integrates all disciplines. [...] Philosophers before him have thought of man in his totality, but he was the first to apprehend the world as a whole which is at once political, economic, scientific and philosophical' (Hobsbawm 2011: 12).

We argue that in his desire to capture man in his/her totality and respond to that totality, Marx is neither a modernist nor postmodernist thinker. He is not a modernist, because the modernist ambition was to divide science into separate compartments and defend specificity and irreducibility of each of the disciplines; an approach epitomised by the rigid division of disciplines in Western academia, archives and museums. Postmodernism, on the other hand, although rejecting such rigid divisions, equally rejects a desire to create an all-encompassing theory. This is conveyed most importantly in its interest in marginality, in local and subjective phenomena and 'small narratives'. Such an approach can be lauded for giving voice to those whose views were previously suppressed, such as women, people of colour, victims of colonial conquest, sexual minorities and children, but also for losing the larger picture, and with that a larger political project (Bertens 1995), and even for supporting the capitalist *status quo*. Such an opinion is expressed by Iain Hamilton-Grant, who describes this situation in such terms: 'Where the political will of a people, a nation or a culture used to be harnessed to long-term general goals, now fragmented groups engage in short-term struggles. The spread of identity politics over the last twenty years is testimony to this, with its emphasis on ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality replacing political credo' (Hamilton-Grant 2001: 30). He further observes that the consequence of engaging in identity and micro-politics is leaving macro-decisions to the enemy: 'By concentrating all the attention on "micro-political" issues, or on short-term single-issue politics, the very real large-scale political structures that govern our everyday lives are disregarded and left uncontested to the enemy, which simply translates into covert support for, or actual complicity with, the *status quo*' (31).

According to Alain Badiou, this shift from modernist to postmodernist politics was to a large extent the consequence of May '68 in France. This seemingly radical event ultimately led to the loss of hierarchy of political

agents and causes, and to the downgrading of the proletariat from its special position as the main agent of emancipation (Badiou 2010: 52–3). Hence, it is not an accident that the interest in Marxism both declined and changed its course after the 1970s, when post-structuralism and post-modernism triumphed,¹ with their focus on a decentred and subjective reading of reality. The post-structuralist readings of Marx, if they were at all sympathetic to this thinker,² usually attempted to merge him with ideas such as ‘minority politics’ and changing the world without taking power (Choat 2010; Thoburn 2003). Meaningfully, Slavoj Žižek begins his book on Krzysztof Kieslowski, published in 2001, with the words: ‘If this book had been published twenty-five years ago, in the heyday of “structuralist Marxism”, its subtitle, undoubtedly, would have been “On Class Struggle in Cinema”’ (Žižek 2001: 1). The obvious implication of such a statement is that in 2001 it was no longer the case – class struggle stopped mattering in cinema and elsewhere, giving way to other issues.

However, after dominating the humanities for 30 years or so, post-modernism understood as a period or theory of ‘small narratives’ is in decline too, as reflected by a widespread sense that it led to unproductive relativism and subjectivism. Mike Wayne, following Georg Lukács and Fredric Jameson, reminds us that ‘beneath the appearance of flux, fragmentation and unpredictability lies an ever more integrated and concentrated socioeconomic system’ (Wayne 2005: 15). Consequently, there is a search for getting beneath the shattering of narrative worlds of postmodernism, albeit without losing sight of the specific and the marginal, for assessing the state of humanity from an objective vantage point and a new revolutionary subject (Douzinas and Žižek 2010). Marx is an excellent starting point for such a search, because in his works we identify such ambitions. Marx can serve as a matrix for a method of critique and a dialogue about what a post-capitalist future would look like. Not surprisingly, the most discussed interventions in the humanities and social sciences (when humanities also include economy) of the last 20 years or so, continue Marxist thought in one way or another (on this see especially Hutnyk’s chapter in this volume). Together with many of the most cited cultural critics of today, the authors of this volume argue that art can play an important role in political and social transformation.

Marxism, art and cinema

It is a well-known fact that economy and politics, rather than art, were at the centre of Marx’s work. However, as Maynard Solomon writes in the introduction to his impressive collection (until now the most

extensive anthology of Marxist aesthetics), *Marxism and Art*, 'Perhaps it is the very absence of a definitive work by Marx on criticism or aesthetic theory which has opened the door to interpretation, prevented the reduction of Marxist aesthetics to a rigid set of accepted formulas, and made impossible descent into academicism' (Solomon 1979: 8); and elsewhere: 'the Marxist texts on aesthetics are aphorisms pregnant with an aesthetics – an unsystematised aesthetics open to endless analogical and metaphorical development' (9).

Indeed, the field of Marxist aesthetics is very wide and versatile, as demonstrated by the names mentioned in Solomon's anthology, which include William Morris, Franz Mehring, Karl Kautsky, Georgi Plekhanov, Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Maxim Gorki, Mao Tse-Tung, Jean-Paul Sartre, Antonio Gramsci, Béla Balázs, Mikhail Bakhtin, Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno, George Lukács, André Breton, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, André Malraux and Ernst Bloch.³ If somebody were to update such an anthology, they would have to add many more names, such as Raymond Williams, Pierre Macherey, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Jean-Luc Nancy, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek. These authors work in different fields, with some interested in literature, others in music and still others in film, and some dealing with general aesthetic questions, such as the relationship between class and taste, art and reality or the genesis and future of art. However, what transpires from studying them is that the vast majority, with the exception of a small group of authors, whom Solomon puts together under the label 'Zhdanovism', proclaim art as a relatively autonomous sphere of human production, whose influence on people's values and behaviour is somewhat mysterious. Art is both social and individual; it tends to convey dominant ideology, but also the idiosyncratic views of the author. It both expresses and represses, as put by the title of the famous essay of Pierre Macherey: 'The Text Says What It Does Not Say' (Macherey 1978). This also means that pre-socialist or even 'bourgeois' art, especially if it is art of high aesthetic value, might serve the purposes of socialist revolution as well as, if not better than, art created specifically for the purpose of subverting the capitalist *status quo*. This point was made by Marx himself, who praised Honoré de Balzac. He did so because Balzac, in spite of being conservative and royalist, was able to reveal the immorality of capitalism and potentially help to fight it (Praver 1976: 318). After Marx, this point was reiterated by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, two of the main architects of the new, socialist art, and in contemporary times by Jacques Rancière. Lenin devoted much of his attention to Tolstoy, writing:

Tolstoy is dead, and the pre-revolutionary Russia whose weakness and impotence found their expression in philosophy and are depicted in the works of the great artist, has become a thing of the past. But the heritage which he has left includes that which has not become a thing of the past, but belongs to the future. [...] The Russian proletariat will explain to the masses of the toilers and the exploited the meaning of Tolstoy's criticism of the state, the church, private property in land [...]. The Russian proletariat will explain to the masses Tolstoy's criticism of capitalism, [...] to create a new society in which the people will not be doomed to poverty, in which there will be no exploitation of man by man (Lenin 1979: 176).

Trotsky argued: 'Works of art developed in a medieval Italian city can, we find, affect us too. What does this require? A small thing: it requires that these feelings and moods shall have received such broad, intense, powerful expression as to have raised them above the limitations of the life of those days' (Trotsky 1979: 197). Jacques Rancière builds on these insights, by drawing attention to the political significance of *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert. Despite Flaubert's aristocratic situation and political conformity (and, of course, using capitalist channels of communications with his readers, namely profit-oriented publishing houses), he regards *Madame Bovary* as a progressive work of art of great significance, helping in the emancipation of women (Rancière 2004: 12–19).

Marxist aestheticians also point to the fact that art which might help the revolution should inform and move – it should appeal to our brains, including the more hidden layers, and to our hearts. In popular understanding of Marxist aesthetics, however, the opinion prevails that realist styles are closer to Marxism than non-realist styles. Such opinion has some foundation in the fact that Friedrich Engels, who is attributed with a more developed aesthetic theory than Marx, was a proponent of realism, and Balzac, who was Marx's favourite writer, is also seen as a master of realist fiction. However, even if we agree with such an opinion, we have to qualify it by accepting that the criteria of realism change. The realism of Maxim Gorki is different to that of Vladimir Mayakovsky and different still to that of André Breton and other surrealists who also believed that they unearth reality, albeit that of a dream and the unconscious. Nothing is more foreign to the spirit of Marx than a demand to freeze art in one privileged style.⁴

Marxism always looked into the future; hence there is a natural rapport between Marxism and the avant-garde. On the other hand, Marxism was meant to appeal to the most economically and culturally impoverished sections of society. This fact was widely recognised

by Gramsci and Trotsky. The former argued: 'Marxism was confronted with two tasks: to combat modern ideologies in their most refined form in order to create its own core of independent intellectuals; and to educate the masses of the people whose level of culture was medieval' (Gramsci 1979: 268). Trotsky asked:

Does the proletariat of today offer such a cultural-ideological milieu, in which the new artist may obtain, without leaving it in his day-to-day existence, all the inspirations he needs while at the same time mastering the procedures of his craft? No, the working masses are culturally extremely backward; the illiteracy or low level of literacy of the majority of the workers presents in itself a very great obstacle to this. And above all, the proletariat, in so far as it remains a proletariat, is compelled to expand its best forces in political struggle, in restoring the economy, and in meeting elementary cultural needs, fighting against illiteracy, lousiness, syphilis, etc. (Trotsky 1979: 195).

Hence, the challenge for Marxist artists was to create popular masterpieces. Marx himself showed the way by creating in *The Communist Manifesto* a work which is both sophisticated and simple, saturated with metaphors, yet describing capitalist society in vivid images, while also looking into the communist future. In due course it was discovered that cinema can fulfil the above-mentioned requirements perfectly, as noted by Lenin, who pronounced it the most important of all arts (Christie and Taylor 1991: xv).⁵ This was because it was avant-garde, even in the most basic sense of being a new art, born out of photography, similar to theatre, music and painting, but irreducible to them. At the same time, it was popular because, at the beginning being silent, it could be understood by the illiterate and later, when it found its 'voice', talk to the people in a language they could understand. In addition, cinema has a dual ability to tell the truth and lie. The first property relies on cinema's mimetic qualities, its ability to show the world as we perceive it with our own eyes, or even better. These qualities are analysed by a long list of authors, from the pioneer Bolesław Matuszewski, through classics of realist film theory, such as Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin, to Alain Badiou (2009), who proclaims cinema to be an 'ontological art' in an intimate relation with reality, and authors researching the specificity of digital cinema.

The opportunities offered by montage, of connecting distant places and times, and objects seen from different distances and perspectives, render film as a privileged means to link micro- with macro-economy, personal experience with politics, and work's history with its present day and future. Such opportunities were discussed not only by philosophers

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