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Crossing a Productive Melancholia in Artistic Work Based on Xerography

Abstract: This paper suggests that xerography or copy art – also called "generative systems" – may incite melancholia. The theoretical framework for this analysis includes Svetlana Boym's concept of "broken-tech arts" (2001) and her conceptualization of ruins (2010), as well as Laura Marks' model of "haptic visuality" (2002). With the proliferation of copy machines, including Xerox, in the US in the 1960s, artists began producing new work through inventive use and creative manipulation of copiers. Copy machines allowed distinct effects, such as stretching and degeneration, and specifically resulted in the generation of haptic images: synthetic ruins that can trigger melancholia in an aesthetic experience. I posit that melancholia has the potential to inspire one to contemplate the ruined image and explore new meanings. Xerography work by Stevlana Boym, Sonia Sheridan, and Timm Ulrichs will be analyzed as relevant examples. This review contributes to melancholia studies by linking the field of xerography to the concept and experience of melancholia.

Keywords: productive melancholia, xerography, copy art, haptic image, synthetic ruin, ruined image, degeneration.

Introduction

Melancholia can play a significant role in encounters with works of art. The concept of melancholia in relation to technology has been changing – the meaning and understanding of melancholia in contemporary art practice has been updated and re-imagined differently than in the past. Melancholia has appeared in art, film, and media studies with variety of purposes and interpretations. Research on melancholia has recently embraced examples in experimental film and video art (Marks 1997,

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2000, 2002), articulated melancholia as an emotion in the context of aesthetics (Brady and Haapala 2003) and investigated through the theories of representation and of the object (Schwenger 2000, 2006). What are other visual forms and creative practices that trigger discussion of melancholia? This paper asks the following questions: Can melancholia be engendered in artists' practice with copy machines? What has contemporary art's involvement with technologies, such as Xerox machines, wrought for artists that specifically facilitate an intensified and aesthetic experience of melancholia in encounters with works of art?

Xerography has not yet been explored in relation to melancholia. This field of image-making – recognized since the 1960s and 1970s with the proliferation of copy machines and artists' deployments of them as creative tools – is worth examining and researching, and may be an unusual trigger for the aesthetic experience of melancholia.

This paper argues that melancholia is associated with the emergence of specific qualities in xerographic images. Melancholia is provoked when an image is metamorphosized by the xerographic process and becomes ruined, a state of intrinsic melancholy. Examples for this include ruined images that have become aesthetic objects – images that are degenerated, stretched, and deformed through the copy machines' manipulations. In xerography's ruined images, the myth of reproduction is disrupted as artists have challenged the concept of the copier as a black box and purposefully forced it to malfunction. Xerographic art imposes ruin on an image and creates an opportunity for reflective and sensory engagement with the materiality of the medium. In an encounter with a ruined image, indeed, we encounter unique qualities that we could not experience otherwise. The haptic quality of the ruined image is imbued with melancholic qualities and engages the audience in an aesthetic experience. In this sense, experiencing melancholia is about being attentive; it is a potential to think *with*, and to imagine new and unstable meanings.

Melancholia and Reflectivity

Melancholia is polysemic, and beyond its clinical definitions, has been variously adopted in aesthetics and arts. Melancholia is often used synonymously with *nostalgia*, for both terms may have shared "symptoms," or peculiarities, as Svetlana Boym puts it (2001). To highlight their difference, however, Boym states that melancholia carries a more "philosophical dimension" than nostalgia, as read through Robert Burton's seminal book, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). For the first time, Burton expanded the concept of melancholia beyond medical discourse and into the creative fringes of the individual mind. Boym clarifies that melancholia is "an ailment of intellectuals, a Hamletian doubt and a side effect of critical reason," so it is primarily associated with "affect" and a more equivocal and sophisticated state of the mind (2001, 5). On the other hand, nostalgia denotes collective rather than individual feelings and

experiences, as Boym explains: "the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory, individual home and collective homeland" (xvi).

Boym's comparison between melancholia and nostalgia is illuminating; it offers a solid foundation for understanding melancholia alone or juxtaposed with other common terms. In her introduction to the concept of "reflective" nostalgia[1], Boym emphasizes that melancholia and nostalgia overlap in a contemporary sense (2001, xviii). Melancholia —like "reflective" nostalgia— "does not follow a single plot," and is meant to "call [anything already established or registered as truth] into doubt," as she proposes (xviii). As concepts, they both facilitate contemplation and are porous – open to interpretation and construction in an individual's engagement. What follows is an emphasis on melancholia's productive forces, which can give rise to unfamiliar meanings in the context of artistic practice. In this sense, as an indefinite concept, melancholia is speculative rather than fixed and conformative. As Jane Rendell suggests, melancholia provides "a dialectical condition" and "an active thought," as read through Max Pensky (2006, 96-97). Considering this comparison, I posit that melancholia can embody the open, unstable, and creative aspects of the individual's imagination; it becomes a capacity to delve into new meanings, enter a state of inventive play, crack open established significance, and imagine the unimagined potential in a work of art.

Mediums of Melancholy:
The Proposition of Haptic Visuality and Non-Western Thoughts

Through their mediations and reflections on various media, authors and philosophers have argued that some mediums, because of the specific conditions of their operation or viewing, inherently provoke significant melancholic experiences or feelings in the audience. Among these mediums that are subject to melancholia, examples include photography, film, and analog video.

In her seminal essay, "Loving A Disappearing Image," Laura Marks (1997) explains that media such as film and magnetic tape provoke melancholic experiences. Referring to chemical films and analog videos as mediums of melancholy, Marks articulates her theory of "haptic visuality," in which the specific qualities of a fading image cause possible feelings of melancholia (2002). As film and tape inevitably age, they become blurry, gain grains, and their coherence and legibility are slowly lost in the process of decay. Marks argues that a fading image becomes haptic and inspires melancholia. Throughout the history of film and media, many experimental filmmakers and early video artists, such as Stan Brakhage, Aldo Tambellini, and Steina and Woody Vasulka, to name only a few, purposefully accelerated the process of image degradation and deterioration in their film and video to create aesthetic meanings. Looking at these artists' work whose images are deliberately deteriorated, I cannot avoid the outburst of melancholic feelings. However, this melancholia activates my imagination and

calls my attention into other (hidden) layers of meaning: the (unnoticed) materiality of the film/video.

When images become haptic, their communication effects are disrupted, and they produce "diminished visibility" for their viewers, as Marks states (91). In this sense, with a "haptic look," art brings forth a tactile and multisensory bodily engagement as "they approach the viewer not through the eyes alone but along the skin" (2). In an encounter with a haptic image, one identifies with the aging and dying self, she suggests. Drawing on Vivian Sobchack, Marks justifies that this identification can be "a bodily [sensory] relationship with the [body of] screen" (92). This way, haptic images can inevitably fuel melancholic reflections. When we witness the destruction of an image, we identify our own mortality and death. Thus, our melancholic feelings toward haptic images might be a fear response to the realization that we are all earthly, mortal, dying bodies. In this view, melancholia is brought on by a sense of our own eventual disappearance.

In addition, in the chapter, "Melancholy Objects," in her book *On Photography* (1973), Susan Sontag links photography to melancholy for its specific condition of existing – the purpose of taking a photo is to preserve what eventually ceases to exist. "Photography offers instant romanticism about the present," she suggests, emphasizing further that "the effectiveness of photography's statement of loss" is related to its ability to amplify the sense of loss, mortality, and transience (52). For some like Roland Barthes, photography is melancholic due to its relationship to death. In his book *Camera Lucia* (1981), he has discussed photography as a notable source of melancholia. Regarding the relationship between the act of photography and death, he states: "All those young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of Death" (92). Commenting on Barthes' remarks, Peter Schwenger reminds us of the reason for such melancholic observations: "with a click of the shutter time is frozen in pastness," like death, "and reality becomes image" (2000, 395). In reflecting on the mortality of the photographs, Barthes' melancholic response is ineffable: "The only 'thought' I can have," he melancholically insisted, "is that at the end of this first death, my own death is inscribed" (1981, 93). For Barthes, a photograph becomes a reminder of his own death and an object of fearful and unwanted melancholia. Thus, his reaction to the perishability of the photograph is abject refusal.

As described above, melancholia is negative, considered unfavorable, and avoided for having obstructive and unhelpful dynamics. However, Marks questions views in which melancholia is not indulged. Can melancholia be imagined as delight rather than horror? In her re-evaluation of melancholia, Marks juxtaposes non-Western and Western philosophies to redefine the notion of melancholia (1997). Unlike in Western philosophies, such as Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories, melancholia in some non-Western thoughts, such as in the work of Islamic, Persian poets, Rumi (1207-1273) and Hafez (1315-1390), is regarded as constructive and seen as a practice

of cleansing the soul. Rumi believed melancholia can prepare room for joy to enter one's heart:

> Sorrow prepares you for joy. It violently sweeps everything out of your house, so that new joy can find space to enter. It shakes the yellow leaves from the bough of your heart, so that fresh, green leaves can grow in their place... Whatever sorrow shakes from your heart, far better things will take their place. (Rumi and Barks 2004, 109)

Likewise, for Hafez, melancholic feelings can be found in the soul of a lover and thought of as a reunion with someone or something that is lost. In these assertions, the melancholic individual is being prepared to love, and through melancholy, is given a chance to traverse revelatory dimensions. Rather than avoiding it, one is encouraged to seek melancholia as a condition for future gratification. Leaning on non-Western philosophy and through her model of "haptic visuality," Marks suggests that haptic images have the potential to bring upon a state in which one can *affirmatively* acknowledge the experience and understanding of loss and death as part of our existence. In this sense, melancholia – through a sensory involvement with haptic images – becomes a joyous experience.

How can this alternative interpretation of melancholia bring about new insight and experiences of a work of art, and in particular xerographic art? I advocate that positive melancholia allows us to imagine an appealing and original encounter with a ruined image created in xerography practice. A joyful melancholia asks "what if?" and allows us to celebrate an image for its disintegration, deterioration, and imperfection. In this sense, melancholia brought on by art can be thought of as a privileged state in which one can envision new possibilities in the haptic image. In this context, one may enjoy viewing a ruined image melancholically rather than fearing it or one's own death.

Xerography's Ruined Image
and Its Proposition for Melancholia

Can copy art elicit a productive melancholia? I suggest it can. Beyond photography, film, and cinema, xerography, I believe, has potential to bring about melancholia as a desired experience in which one can enjoy media in a state of destruction and loss.

Before xerography, methods of printing were wet, onerous, and often required toxic processes and materials[2]. Regarding the impact of xerography in the world of art and communication, Kate Eichhorn states: "xerography changed who could copy materials," as it made the process much quicker and more efficient, but also "had a tremendous impact on the types of texts and images that ultimately circulated in the late 20th century" (2016b). With this revolution, some artists began producing new art by using and manipulating various models of copy machines. Xerography has been widely discussed in its noteworthy associations with the avant-garde, punk

movements, and conceptual art, and was notably favored for its "democratizing potential," as Eichhorn discusses (2016a, 46). In other words, as a new tool that could be accessed by nearly anyone, xerography brought about a significant revolution in the context of social, political, feminist, and activist events in the 20th century.

While research on xerography has primarily focused on the privilege this technology gave artists for democratic, massive, cheap, and easy content-oriented reproduction and distribution (Cowan 2006, Ensminger 2012, Schwartz 2014, Eichhorn 2016), it has not been further explored in the context of melancholia studies. To trace the possible intersection between xerography and melancholia, I discuss the ways in which xerography's ruined images may evoke melancholia in the audience.

Copy machines are easy tools to work with that have been deployed for diverse inventive purposes, creations and techniques. In their creative practice, many of early xerographic artists aimed to challenge the copier as black box – that is, they planned to misuse the copy machines, force them to malfunction, and make them fail at their conventional task: mechanical (or digital) reproduction. Xerography offers new and interesting effects to artists, such as stretching, distortion, degeneration, and solarization, which all contribute to the aesthetic ruination of an image. Even though xerography "quickly became synonymous with superficiality and consumerism," as David Ensminger puts it (2012, 18), it was a tool that could be manipulated, and thus, capable of making unique, evocative, and original images. This way, unexpected and unplanned effects and accidents were achieved through artists' primary reliance on the tools' manipulation, such as technical errors or fruitful failures in the machine's functionality. Regarding the copiers' creative potentials, the pioneer artist in the field, Sonia Sheridan, calls them Generative Systems[3]. Xerography enabled artists to ruin an image using a diverse range of creative techniques and to generate haptic images. Ruined images were created with uncontrollable, unpredictable, and unrepeatable effects that copiers made possible. In this sense, xerographic techniques – as Generative Systems – have allowed artists to imbue their work with melancholic aura and to intensify the image's affective quality.

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Broken-tech Art:
Ruination and Melancholia

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In 2001, Svetlana Boym articulated her concept of "broken-tech art" to refer to artwork being made with technological errors, failure of machines, and the creative manipulation of technology. The examples of broken-tech art are many and encompass a diverse array of art practices, including examples in which artists have planned to manipulate imaging tools and interrupt the regular performance of the copy machines. In the examples presented here, artists have misused copy machines to invert the Benjaminian account of mechanical reproduction and loss of aura. While Benjamin argued that the media (art) such as film and photography produce images that lack aura (originality or authenticity) for being mass-produced, the xerographic

ruined images that were created through manipulation of copiers, could ironically resurface aura in their artwork. These artists have not been interested in simply reproducing an image, or in using tools as they originally were designed to function; rather, they meant to break, disrupt, or dismantle their devices, making creative work with the tool's malfunction and errors to create original work. This way, every image coming out of the machine became unique, auratic, and tactile.

Examples of copy art in which the image become melancholic as it was ruined include Boym's bodies of work known as *Ruined Prints*. In her series of "Cities in Transit," Boym relied on technological errors in the printer to make new, authentic images and play with the fallacy of reproduction tools. By taking papers prematurely out of the printer while the machine was in the middle of performing, she purposefully intervened in the machine's regular function and disrupted the process of printing. Each print she made in this series was a ruined image. The errors were not duplicable, so each printed image came into being in an unusual and irreproducible way – contrary to the purpose of copy machines. She believed that "an error has an aura" (2017, 17). As the ruined prints lose their coherence and legibility, they become haptic images with double meanings. In her work, each image is a failed representation: a ruined architectonic thing that the dysfunctional, erratic, and anthropomorphic technology has built. While they partially fail in their task of representation through ruination process, they are simultaneously endowed with melancholic qualities and affect. Boym calls these printing errors "broken-tech art," in which the act of photography as an art of mechanical (or digital) reproduction has been halted: "Art's new technology is a broken technology," she maintains (2018, 474). For Boym, "broken-tech art" is a success in that the loss of aura is reversed. The ruined image brings on melancholia, as the ruination restores aura or imbues the image with another, different aura.

That ruins and melancholia are connected is established. In this intersection, one who gazes upon ruins, the ruin gazer, is encouraged to contemplate the melancholic significance of the loss and ruination. In this context, Johannes von Moltke argues that the ruin gazer is offered – in the same way that the film spectator might be – a chance to experience a new relationship with time and simultaneously opposite perceptions, such as shock, astonishment, and melancholic contemplation (2010). The aesthetics of ruins, as von Moltke suggests, "engages the viewer in the space and time of a melancholic mise-en-scene that suspends historicity" (411). Ruins let us reconsider that which is already known and imagine a new potential spatiotemporality. Likewise, the ruined image generated by the copier can provoke melancholic contemplation as a way to create new significations. The ambivalence and effect of ruination in "Cities in Transit" draw me into melancholia and sting me with wonder. I contemplate in *alliance with* melancholia, thinking through the materiality of photographic representation that has become opaque in the haptic, ruined images. In "Cities in Transit," the images no longer act as a transparent window to the world that I already know, but become a ghostly landscape open to new imagination and interpretation.

Viewing the images, I begin to participate melancholically in building this dreamed-up, fictional world as I contemplate the dialectic between the double ruination: the ruined image of the ruins in the image. "Broken-tech art" becomes the art of surface: the haptic textures that envelope the images of the ruins and construct a new account for them. Here, melancholia as a catalyst incorporates the absence into presence and opens me up to the possibility of a different experience.

Boym emphasizes that the meaning in ruins is favorably "unstable," an analogy in which ruins are comparable to labyrinths (2017, 46). The process of ruination in the xerographic image is, indeed, a process of creation of variable meanings through melancholia. In encountering a ruined image, one thinks *with* melancholia – like a ruin gazer might. Rendered as unfinished things with unfixed implications, xerographic ruined images become newly visible for our experience and encourage us to think and imagine beyond their immediate meanings. Drawing from George Simmel, Boym frames architectural ruins as "the opposite of the perfect moment pregnant with potential," emphasizing further that ruin and ruination offer spectators "a certain imaginative perspectivism" (2010, 59). She illuminates:

> A tour of ruins leads you into a labyrinth of ambivalent prepositions— "no longer" and "not yet," "nevertheless," "albeit," and "still"— that play tricks with causality and mediate between syntax and parataxis, between metaphor and metonymy. (2001, 43)

Melancholia takes center stage through various ruination process and techniques used in copy art. In taking advantage of some creative techniques that can result in ruination of the image, copy artists have been able to evoke a positive melancholic experience in their audience. In her series titled "Layering, Stretching and Compressing Sonia in Time" (1974), Sonia Sheridan used a specific copier, Versatile Quality Copier (VCQ) made by 3M, to capture and visualize the flow of time in an image. VQC allowed her to generate a series of highly contrasted images with random textures and printing accidents. As a pioneer in the emerging field of xerography practice, Sheridan was interested in dismantling the copier to explore new potentials in the tool and discover the alternative ways the machine could work creatively beyond its regular use and purpose. Using this method, she created highly tactile images in which the captured figure (of the artist's hand, face, torso, etc.) was subject to a considerable amount of deformation, degeneration, and loss due to stretching effects. Regarding "Layering, Stretching and Compressing Sonia in Time" series, Gemma Cowan explains:

> The resulting image refer[s] the viewer to the object's position in time and space, but it also refers directly to the moving mechanism of the machine the object appears to have fused with due to the close proximity to the imaging screen. (2006, 331)

To stretch an object or image, Sheridan moved her body with the moving light of the photocopier across the platen, so her image became unpredictably squashed and

incredibly deformed in this process. The tactile qualities and melancholic disfigurations are distinct in Sheridan's work and resemble some photography of corpses[4] that became prevalent in the 1970s. The disfigured image in Sheridan's work suggests a melancholic ambivalence: is this a corpse at which I am gazing? To visualize the time, she produced images with uncanny qualities. Affected by the transience and loss in "Layering, Stretching and Compressing Sonia in Time," I feel I am moved and unsettled by contact with a ruined image whose familiar figures are violently dismembered, but I am also drawn into it and forced to scrutinize any possibility of identification with both death and life. In my contemplation, I feel the corpse-like image (a ghost figure who is fused with her own mutilated self) has a story – more than I can actually know. The intensity of this xerographic ruination leads me to melancholia and to imagine possibilities: when movement and time can be captured in a static image.

Unlike photographs in which a moment of the past is frozen, as Cowan reminds us, Sheridan's work presents continuity, motion, movement, and fluidity. A tool of reproduction (the copier) has failed in the task it is typically expected to perform. In this series, the ruined image, stretched in time, zigzags between the distinct border of moving image and still photograph. The piece evokes melancholia, which invites me to consider other imagined temporalities. While the notion of time may seem complicated enough to be realized and caught in a material form, Sheridan creatively manipulated the process of copying to distort time through stretching and destruction of the image. In her work, the ruined image denotes something beyond death: like a ruin gazer, here I become a melancholic who enjoys contemplating a reversal of past-future, absence-presence, and death-life in the xerographic image.

One of the other effective techniques in xerography that is used to ruin an image and can be tied to melancholia is the degenerative process. Copy artists such as Timm Ulrichs, Ed Seman, and Arlene Schloss, among others, are best known for utilizing this particular method. In this technique, artists make copies of copies of copies in several runs, and with each cycle, the image degrades and is less like the original. Every copier creates its own distinct degenerative effects. If copying is repeated for several many generations — for one hundred runs or more, for instance — the image begins loses coherence and definition, and eventually disappears into abstract patterns and textures. The machine builds a torn down, haptic image which has lost its legibility or representational content.

In 1967, Timm Ulrichs used this specific technique to recycle the book cover of Walter Benjamin's famous work, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Ulrichs' final work was exhibited as a mural of 100 frames in letter size copy papers mounted on the wall of a gallery. Together, the frames presented the number of copies that the artist generated in 100 cycles in order to challenge the copier in its task of reproducibility. Looking at the frames from left to right and top to bottom, the final image was completely faded out into an illegible grey-color non-pictorial image with no resemblance to its original due to the degeneration effects.

The work is a powerful and playful commentary on the discourse of original and copy, while it simultaneously incorporates melancholic feeling and experience. As Hillel Schwartz argues,

> Contemplating the culture of the copy from his library of first editions, Benjamin the collector (for whom 'not only books but copies of books have their fate') proposed that mass-produced text were dislodging the authority of original manuscripts to the same serious extent that photographic reproduction were dissolving the aura of original works of visual art. (2014, 199)

The work proposes a meditation on melancholia as the image purposefully is ruined. Putting the copy of each successive copy of the original image through the copier 100 times, creates a new aura in the final image. In encountering an image that is progressively flattened and obscured, one is motivated to consider the fragility of the machine and technological failure. While technology is meant to reduce its own level of neglect and error, it inevitably fails. The copier gives the artist an opportunity to call into question the myth of machine's perfection, both ironically and paradoxically. As Boym recalls, "To err is human" (2018, 395). The ruined image links the machine to the state of being human, revealing the unexpected, disorienting, and anthropomorphic energies of the erring apparatus. In other words, as I contemplate, Ulrichs' work becomes melancholic through a reversal: when the state of technology's perfection becomes almost impossible.

In conclusion, melancholia is not an unwanted sadness, obstructive mourning, or useless feeling; rather, it manifests itself as a valued potential with which one is able to consider new thoughts and unimagined inventions. This understanding of melancholia encourages an appealing connection with – or imagination for – the haptic materiality and the deteriorating body of the medium (xerographic ruined image). The concept of melancholia suggests a useful state of being and a productive way of thinking beyond superficial and immediate meanings in the artwork. Melancholia can be inspired by xerographic ruined images, and provides the audience with a new perspective that allows for reflective and contemplative engagement with the medium and its material mediation. This research hopefully contributes to the expansion of the concept of melancholia and also widens understanding of the field of generative systems, xerography, or copy art in light of melancholia studies.

Endnotes

1   Boym introduces "reflective" nostalgia as an open concept in contrast to "retrospective" nostalgia, which tends to protect the absolute truth. The latter is primarily associated with idea of lost home, returning to homeland, while the former is more openly taken in relation to technology and media's implications. See Boym, Svetlana. *The future of nostalgia*. Basic books, 2001.

2   The term xerography literally means "dry writing," and refers to a dry method of printing that came to be known after the invention of the process of electrophotography by Chester Carlson in 1938. Xerography was later developed and commercialized by the Xerox Corporation (formerly

called Haloid), a company that released Xerox 914, the first commercial automatic copier, to the world in the 1960s. For more details on terminology and the history of the tool, see: Eichhorn, Kate. *Adjusted margin: Xerography, art, and activism in the late twentieth century*. MIT Press, 2016.

3 In 1970, Sonia Sheridan pioneered an inventive research-practice program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, called "Generative Systems," where artists and educators from around the world came together to work with various copy machines. See more: Sheridan, Sonia Landy. "Generative Systems at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1970–1980." *Visual Resources* 22.4 (2006): 315-324; and also, Sheridan, Sonia Landy. "Mind/Senses/Hand: The Generative Systems Program at the Art Institute of Chicago 1970–1980." *Leonardo* 23.2 (1990): 175-181.

4 About corpse photography, see work by Joel-Peter Witkin, Andres Serrano, Rudolf Schifer, Jeffrey Silverthorne, Rosamond Purcell, Gwen Akin, and Allan Ludwig. See more: Schwenger, Peter. "Corpsing the image." *Critical Inquiry* 26.3 (2000): 395-413.

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