

Patterns of Contemporary Nihilism è il tema del primo convegno dell'*International Center of Studies on Contemporary Nihilism* (Ce-Nic). Vi hanno partecipato molti studiosi provenienti da tutto il mondo. Essi hanno discusso il tema del nichilismo con riferimento ad alcuni momenti della sua storia, mettendo a confronto il pensiero occidentale con quello orientale, sviluppando alcune riflessioni sulle conseguenze nichilistiche degli sviluppi tecnologici.

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Patterns of Contemporary Nihilism

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Forme del nichilismo contemporaneo
Patterns of Contemporary Nihilism
Formas del nihilismo contemporaneo
Gestalten des gegenwärtigen Nihilismus

TEORIA

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Premise / Premessa

Patterns of Contemporary Nihilism is the topic of the first meeting of the *International Centre of Studies on Contemporary Nihilism* (CeNic), held in Pisa from 4th to 6th November 2019. It was attended by lots of international scholars from CeNic as well as quite a few researchers from the University of Pisa. The profiles of those who attended CeNic can be found at www.nihilismocontemporaneo.org, along with a description of what the Centre does.

Promoted by Alfredo Rocha de la Torre (Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia) and Adriano Fabris (University of Pisa, Italy), CeNiC acts as a place for the study and coordination of global initiatives about one of the main topics of contemporary philosophy: the problem of nihilism. Throughout its history, philosophy has inherently been confronted with such issue. However, since the eighteenth century, dealing with such issue has become a matter of urgency: a matter that philosophy must take on board.

The authors of this instalment of «Teoria» did not shy away from the challenge. Their analyses focus on specific moments in the history of nihilism (as they discuss such authors as Jacobi and Nietzsche, Heidegger and Levinas), make comparisons between Western and Eastern philosophy, work out reflections on the nihilistic consequences of technological advancement. The result is a broad overview of such phenomenon, its birth, the ways in which philosophy can provide an antidote to this virus that still infects the lives and thoughts of humans.

Patterns of Contemporary Nihilism è il tema del primo convegno dell'*International Center of Studies on Contemporary Nihilism* (CeNic), che si è svolto a Pisa dal 4 al 6 novembre 2019. Vi hanno partecipato molti studiosi del CeNic provenienti da tutto il mondo, oltre ad alcuni ricercatori dell'Univer-

sità di Pisa. I profili dei partecipanti al CeNic si trovano sul sito www.nihilismocontemporaneo.org, a cui si rimanda anche per la descrizione delle attività del Centro.

Il CeNiC, promosso da Alfredo Rocha de la Torre (Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia) e Adriano Fabris (Università di Pisa, Italia) vuol essere un luogo di studio e di collegamento per le varie iniziative a livello globale che riguardano uno dei temi chiave della filosofia contemporanea: il problema del nichilismo. Con questo problema si è confrontata implicitamente l'intera storia della filosofia. A partire dal Settecento, però, fare i conti con esso è diventato un compito urgente: un compito che la filosofia deve fare proprio.

Gli autori di questo fascicolo di «Teoria» non si sottraggono a questa sfida. Essi svolgono le loro analisi con riferimento ad alcuni momenti della storia del nichilismo (discutendo autori come Jacobi e Nietzsche, Heidegger e Levinas), mettono a confronto il pensiero occidentale con quello orientale, sviluppano alcune riflessioni sulle conseguenze nichilistiche degli sviluppi tecnologici. Ne risulta un'ampia panoramica su questo fenomeno, sulla sua genesi, sui modi in cui la filosofia può offrire un antidoto per questo virus, che infetta tuttora la vita e il pensiero degli esseri umani.

Adriano Fabris
Alfredo Rocha de la Torre

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Technology, Art, and Second Order Nihilism in Heidegger

Alberto L. Siani*

1. *Heidegger on Planetary Nihilism*

I should state from the beginning that my paper is less ambitious than the title may let one think. Art, technology and nihilism in Heidegger are clearly inexhaustible topics, both conceptually and with regard to the array of texts one has to consider. In a way, my paper preventively renounces to expand on the shifts, the complexity, and the nuances of Heidegger's philosophy after the *Kehre*. Instead, I explicitly endeavour to simplify this complexity by reducing it to, or at the very least by structuring it around, a core binary opposition. I am well aware that this attempt seems to fly in the face of the letter and spirit of Heidegger's philosophy, and that obviously it leaves a lot out that a deep-going, nuanced interpretation of Heidegger should not leave out. My aim, after all, is not to illuminate a piece of Heideggerian philosophy per se, but rather to "use" it, so to speak, as an ideal-type of a certain form of reaction to modern rationalism and the centrality that the practical idea of subjective autonomy plays within it¹.

Nihilism, for Heidegger, is inherent to the entire history of Western metaphysics, and culminates in the contemporary essence and unlimited dominion

* I want to thank the audience of the 1st International Conference of CENIC *Patterns of Contemporary Nihilism* (Università di Pisa, 04-06/11/2019) for their feedback and Elena Romagnoli for her precious comments on a first draft of this paper.

¹ For this reason, and given the space constraints, I have also decided to strongly limit the references to the secondary literature. For a broader overview of related topics and further bibliographical references see my chapter: A.L. Siani, *Eine Kunstreligion für Europa? Heidegger und Hölderlin*, in A. Meier, A. Costazza, G. Laudin (eds.), *Kunstreligion*, vol. 2: *Radikalisierung des Konzepts nach 1850*, de Gruyter, Berlin-New York 2012, pp. 299-321.

of technology and extreme forgetfulness of Being. It is not an incidental path error, but an historical destiny, at the same time enabling and concealing the possibility of its overcoming². The contemporary world is immersed in a squared nihilism: not only do we live in extreme need and destitution (what Heidegger calls the «time of need»³), but we are also not able to experience it, hidden as it is under the accumulated, massive yet delusional wealth and efficiency of our technology. Moreover, insofar as the Western principle has become global, as Heidegger remarks, this extreme nihilism has become planetary too. Heidegger's diagnosis is therefore all-embracing, as it concerns not only the whole history of the Western technical-metaphysical interpretation of the world, both in its theoretical and its practical aspect, but also planet Earth in its entirety:

The boundless domination of modern technicity in every corner of this planet is only the late consequence of a very old, technical interpretation of the world, an interpretation otherwise called metaphysics. The essential origin of modern technicity lies in the beginning of metaphysics with Plato. The modern technicity experiences its last metaphysical justification through that metaphysics that knowingly conceives of itself as the inversion of Platonism: through the metaphysics of the will of power that was thought by Nietzsche. The distinction made between the lawfulness of nature and freedom is in truth a technical one, and that means one in which being itself no longer comes to word from out of its truth⁴.

The question about art is consequently raised in the framework of Heidegger's reflection on the essence of technology: «Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it. Such a realm is art»⁵. Heidegger refers here to the originary Greek

² «The danger, then, is not the destruction of nature or culture but certain totalizing kinds of practices – a leveling of our understanding of being. This threat is not a *problem* for which we must find a *solution*, but an *ontological condition* that requires a *transformation of our understanding of being*» (H.L. Dreyfus, *Heidegger on the connection between nihilism, art, technology, and politics*, in C.B. Guignon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, pp. 289-316, p. 305).

³ M. Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, GA 39, p. 47 (transl. by K. Hoeller, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, Humanity Books, Amherst 2000, p. 64).

⁴ M. Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymne »Andenken«*, GA 52, p. 91 (transl. by W. McNeill and J. Ireland, *Hölderlin's Hymn "Remembrance"*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 2018, p. 80).

⁵ M. Heidegger, *Die Frage nach der Technik*, in GA 7, pp. 7-36, p. 36 (transl. by W. Lovitt, *The Question concerning Technology*, in *The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Garland Publishing, New York-London 1977, pp. 3-35, p. 35).

unity of art and technology as a mode of bringing-forth the truth (*poiesis*), falling under one and the same denomination, i.e. *techne*⁶.

The modern age has witnessed a deepening rift between the originary meaning of *techne* and technology. This rift is determined by the fact that our relationship to the truth has entered the dominion of what Heidegger calls Enframing (*Gestell*), defined as «the gathering together of that setting-upon which sets upon man, i.e., challenges him forth, to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve [*Bestand*]»⁷, insofar as «the essence of modern technology lies in Enframing. Enframing belongs within the destining of revealing»⁸. Revealing in the way of Enframing is tied to a double capital danger⁹. On the one hand, there is the danger of humans treating and disposing of other humans as standing-reserve, in a perverse, yet consistent reversion of the apparent metaphysical domination of the subject over his world. On the other hand, the dominion of Enframing leads to the impossibility of the revealing of truth, since it conceals its own origin.

Vis-à-vis this double capital danger, which we are not even able to experience in its true dimension, Heidegger resorts to the Hölderlinian motto: «But where danger is, grows the saving power also», hence «precisely the essence of technology must harbor in itself the growth of the saving power»¹⁰. Clarifying, as far as possible, the extreme, totalizing condition of danger in which we live enables us to glance at the possible salvation. In the very loss and concealment of the dominion of technology we are brought back to technology's lost twin, art.

2. A Poetic Way Out of the Gestell

Thus, the aim of Heidegger's interpretation of poetry and art in general is more radical than a philosophical interpretation of a work of art: «Each time it is *we* who dispose over the poem as we will. But our task is the contrary: The poetry is to prevail over us, so that our Dasein becomes the living bearer of the power of this poetry»¹¹. The declared task of Heidegger's interpretation

⁶ In the following I will use the terms "poetry" (in the sense of *Dichtung*) and "art" (in the sense of authentic, truth-bearing art) interchangeably.

⁷ M. Heidegger, *Die Frage nach der Technik*, cit., p. 20 (transl. cit., p. 20).

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 26 (transl. cit., p. 25).

⁹ See *ivi*, pp. 27-28 (transl. cit., pp. 26-27).

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 29 (transl. cit., p. 28).

¹¹ M. Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymnen „Germanien“ und „Der Rhein“*, GA 39, p. 19 (transl. by

of poetry is to overturn the “aesthetic” power relationship between subject and poetry. Instead of the subject arbitrarily disposing over poetry, poetry has to prevail over the subject, thus dispelling the influence of other, currently more powerful realities. With respect to this shift, Heidegger asks: «How can a poem – I speak only of Hölderlin’s poems – still become a power today, when altogether different “realities” determine our Dasein?»¹², and how can we move into the «Domain in Which Poetry Unfolds Its Power [*Machtbereich der Dichtung*]»¹³?

The elucidation of Hölderlin’s poetry will contribute to the radical transition from the traditional metaphysical understanding of Being as a present object, one of the many topics philosophy can approach and dispose of, to that of Being as something that escapes us the more we try to approach and own it. Being consequently assumes, in Heidegger’s thought, the form of the Event (*Ereignis*), the historical presence of which is largely independent of the subject’s will and knowledge. Hence, for Heidegger, «there would be, and there is, the sole necessity, by thinking our way soberly into what [Hölderlin’s] poetry says, to come to learn what is unspoken. That is the course of the history of Being»¹⁴. The dialogue with Hölderlin is a destiny, an epochal (in the sense of *seinsgeschichtlich*) necessity, not an individual one: Hölderlin’s poetry is possibly the only way out of the metaphysical forgetfulness of being and the extreme danger posed by the contemporary essence of technology.

Heidegger is very clear that, on the one hand, our time is a wholly unpoetic one and, on the other hand, only a re-evaluation of poetry can show us the way out of our destitution: «Do *we* dwell poetically? Presumably we dwell altogether unpoetically. [...] Whether, and when, we may come to a turning point in our unpoetic dwelling is something we may expect to happen only if we remain heedful of the poetic. How and to what extent our doings can share in this turn we alone can prove, if we take the poetic seriously»¹⁵. A poetic way out of the Enframing, however, cannot follow a path of domination and accumulation, lest it brings us back to the starting point, confirming the

W. McNeill and J. Ireland, *Hölderlin’s Hymns “Germania” and “The Rhine”*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 2014, p. 21).

¹² *Ivi*, p. 20 (transl. cit., p. 21).

¹³ *Ivi*, p. 19 (transl. cit., p. 21).

¹⁴ M. Heidegger, *Wozu Dichter?*, in GA 5, pp. 269-320, pp. 273-274 (transl. by A. Hofstadter, *What are Poets for?*, in M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, HarperCollins, New York 2001, pp. 91-142, p. 93).

¹⁵ M. Heidegger, *...dichterisch wohnt der Mensch...*, in GA 7, pp. 191-208, pp. 196-197 (transl. by A. Hofstadter, *...Poetically Man Dwells...*, in M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, cit., pp. 213-229, pp. 225-226).

hopelessness of our time. On the contrary, we need to be aware that the destitution of our time can only be confronted by renouncing the subjectivistic drive for domination and accumulation: «Yet we men of this age are presumably not even within the humbleness and neediness of that need [...]. We are scarcely in need. Its need consists in that the mortals do not catch sight of, and do not heed, what may possibly come, comes to us all the more, the further we step back [*zurücktreten*] from it. But to where could we step back? Into the awaiting reserve [*In die erwartende Zurückhaltung*]»¹⁶.

We need to learn to correspond to destiny's silence and denial, and yet the contemporary human being «is still unable to correspond to this destiny of denial. Rather, he evades it through his more and more hopeless attempts to master technology with his mortal will»¹⁷. The contemporary dominating attitude is contrasted with the originary, artistically substantiated revealing of the destiny of ancient Greece: if technology hides in itself the call of a higher, yet silent voice, «only with the greatest difficulty can we hear the silent voice of this joining. For in preparation for this listening, we must first learn again to hear an older saying, in which the once great destiny of Greece rang out»¹⁸.

What makes the recovery of the poetic element so difficult for us is that, unlike technology, art in its authentic sense cannot be the product of human effort and mastery. It is important to underline that art itself, in our age, has become a piece of the Enframing, and counts now as «standing-reserve», insofar as it has become for us the object of aesthetic experience (what Heidegger elsewhere derogatively calls *Erlebnis*¹⁹), pleasure, leisure, and cultural creativity – all concepts and attitudes unknown to ancient Greece²⁰. Thus, Heidegger is not romantically claiming that we should abandon technology and turn to art: in fact, under current conditions, choosing art over technology would be a delusion perpetuating the Enframing. Rather, what the contemporary extreme danger condition can teach us is the necessity to retreat into a

¹⁶ M. Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, cit., pp. 177-178 (transl. cit., pp. 201-202).

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 178 (transl. cit., p. 202).

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 179 (transl. cit., p. 203).

¹⁹ See e.g. M. Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, in GA 5, pp. 1-74, p. 66 (transl. by J. Young and K. Haynes, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in M. Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 1-56, p. 50). On this see L. Amoroso, *L'arte muore nell'esperienza vissuta?*, in Id., *Da Kant a Heidegger. Saggi di estetica*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2017, pp. 119-132.

²⁰ See also M. Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymnen „Germanien“ und „Der Rhein“*, cit., p. 19 (transl. cit., p. 21).

non-dominating, non-subjectivistic attitude. Then, and only then, we might be able to access the poetic element not in terms of an aesthetic experience, but as the letting happening of truth: «The essence of art is poetry. The essence of poetry, however, is the founding [*Stiftung*] of truth»²¹. The opposition to «modern subjectivism»²² is hence essential to art. Art, in its originary sense, has nothing to do with the artist's creation: «As knowledge experienced in the Greek manner, τέχνη is a bringing forth of beings in that it brings *forth* what is present, as such, *out* of concealment, specifically *into* the unconcealment of their appearance. τέχνη never designates the activity of making»²³.

We need to learn again to let truth happen, without attempting to dominate its revealing. The unchained modern subjectivism must step back into an attitude of awaiting reserve. This is the saving element growing amidst extreme danger, this is the necessity of our destitute and needy time, and this is the ultimate aim of Heidegger's turn to poetry: to establish the possibility of a poetically founded relationship to the absence and the new beginning. Through Heidegger's interpretation of poetry, and in particular of Hölderlin's poetry, we should learn to retreat from the power dominion of the Enframing and “humbly” prepare the turn toward what may possibly come. Art, in its authentic sense, will then be able to disclose the absence of the gods, and, with it, the possibility of the coming salvation, currently precluded to our subjectivistic attitude.

The difference between art in its truth-bearing sense and art in its aesthetic-metaphysical one is, evidently, not an external or material one. Not only an artwork in the first sense can be identical to an artwork in the second sense: we can also exploit an originally truth-bearing artwork for aesthetic purposes. Thus, everything revolves around our attitude: consistently with his declared intention, Heidegger is not providing a contribution to a better knowledge of art objects and history, but rather exposing a necessity of thought, i.e. the extreme, epochal necessity of a new beginning.

3. *Second-Order Nihilism?*

How are we to evaluate the technology/art dichotomy in view of the question it addresses, i.e. the nihilism one? To begin with, it is clear that vis-à-

²¹ M. Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, cit., p. 63 (transl. cit., p. 47).

²² *Ivi*, p. 59 (transl. cit., p. 48).

²³ *Ivi*, p. 47 (transl. cit., p. 35).

vis the extreme danger of contemporary nihilism, Heidegger's proposed way out is just as much radical: the voice of the poet and the retreat into silence against the loud uproar of Enframing. From his perspective, this is the only option, since any compromise, any attempt to regulate, reform, or moderate the unchained dominion of technology would itself be an attempt to quantify, dominate, and exploit, and would hence itself fall prey to the Enframing. One cannot overcome nihilism through accumulation and domination, but rather through renouncement and awaiting reserve: the unconscious, concealed nothingness of Enframing cannot be filled, but must be revealed. As a matter of fact, for Heidegger, the current reality hides in itself the reasons and modalities of a transition to the future one, and it is the task of his own philosophy to prepare this transition, most notably by commenting Hölderlin's poetry. Hence, the current and the possible future reality are not opposed as a real and an ideal one. Instead, the core opposition is, on a closer look, between two comprehensive opposing attitudes of the subject, a nihilistic one and a non-nihilistic one.

At the bottom of the technology/art dichotomy, I want to suggest, lies a quite precise oppositional couple serving as a deontological matrix for the evaluation of subjectivity in a broad sense, covering individual and collective action, political identity, pursuit of knowledge, art creation and fruition etc. On the one hand, we have a nihilistic (though largely unaware of it), dominating, objectifying, "aesthetic", "metaphysical" subjectivity. On the opposite hand, we have a subjectivity aware of the void and yet not trying to fill it through accumulation, but rather through renouncement, silence, and listening to the «harmless and ineffectual»²⁴ voice of poetry. The radical, uncompromising character of this dichotomy has several weighty implications, only partly made explicit by Heidegger. It is not possible to explore them exhaustively in the limited remaining space of this article. However, in conclusion, I want to underline a major critical aspect, directly linked with an overall evaluation of Heidegger's proposed way out of global contemporary nihilism.

My main criticism can be stated as follows: while Heidegger's radical dichotomy may look appealing in dealing with certain evident dangers of our contemporary world, one may ask whether it does not pave the way to an even more threatening form of nihilism. A clear, desired implication of Heidegger's argument is the limitation, or even obliteration, of the subject's self-aware autonomy, capacity and responsibility to decide and to act²⁵. The

²⁴ M. Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, cit., p. 35 (transl. cit., p. 53).

²⁵ «Heidegger sees no hope of overcoming nihilism if one accepts the faith in rational au-

approach of the “coming god” is not the outcome of the subject’s will, insight, and action, but of the subject’s renouncement to his power. The subject’s renouncement opens a power void that should in turn enable us to move into the domain of power of poetry. The subject must inhabit this power void in order to (re)establish the poetic tie with his world, without attempting to dominate a process that is necessarily desubjectivized. The void can only be filled by a destined conceived Event, in front of which the subject has to retreat in an awaiting reserve²⁶.

The danger implicit in this idea is the historically concrete one of emptying the subject of any ethical and political responsibility over the process, and hence of asking him to uncritically follow and accept the silent voice of destiny²⁷. Power voids, however, are sooner or later filled by a foundational act, with its own political aims, mythology, worldview etc., which the subject has pre-emptively renounced to guide or criticize. The subject’s awaiting reserve is met and corresponded by the totalizing or totalitarian narration of the new power. The subject’s rational and autonomous (in Heidegger’s terminology, “metaphysical”) capacity for assessment and control is easily replaced by the self-mythologization of the historical destiny of the *Volk* and its leader, or *Führer*. This is not to say that Heidegger’s dichotomy necessarily results in support for Nazism. The point is rather that in order to confront the nihilism deriving from the subject’s practical autonomy (which for Heidegger is indeed a major dimension of the Enframing), this dichotomy risks replacing the latter altogether with a poetic-mythological heteronomy, thus obliterating the very criteria to adjudicate nihilistic forces, such as the Nazi mythology, imaginary, political objectives. In short, we risk having a second-order nihilism.

Heidegger’s ontological premises are consistent with the suggested deontological dichotomy. Being might be accessible to the subject in the form of the Event only based on the subject’s poetic acknowledgment of the distance from and self-subordination to it. Being is no longer a subjective thought form, but a poetically construed and hypostatized destiny, withdrawn from the possibility of a subjective discursive mediation, and signalling the distant

tonomy central to the Enlightenment. In fact, he sees the pursuit of autonomy as the cause of our dangerous contemporary condition» (H.L. Dreyfus, *op. cit.*, p. 312).

²⁶ One may refer in this regard to the Heideggerian topic of *Gelassenheit* or releasement, which however cannot be pursued here.

²⁷ On this “deresponsabilization” of the subject see also A. Gethmann-Siefert, *Heidegger und Hölderlin. Die Überforderung des Dichters in dürtiger Zeit*, in A. Gethmann-Siefert, O. Pöggeler (eds.), *Heidegger und die praktische Philosophie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1988, pp. 191-227, pp. 215-216.

possibility of a new beginning that lies out of the subject's hands. Heidegger's apparently appealing rhetoric of non-domination and non-objectification does not and cannot, in fact, clarify just how and by whom the void power has to be filled. It leaves it open, as if "poetic dwelling" itself implied the end of all domination and objectification. However, in doing so, it cannot by itself eliminate them, but it rather restricts or eliminates the subject's control and responsibility over them. In short, Heidegger's radical dichotomy may look like a radical choice between domination and non-domination. This is but a merely philosophically construed choice, as it is utterly unclear how domination as such can be eliminated. Heidegger's dichotomy hence amounts to a choice between current nihilism and a second order nihilism, i.e. between the possibility to subjectively evaluate actions, historical processes, and political institutions (including nihilistic ones) based on the acknowledgment of the subject's freedom and responsibility, and the impossibility to do so.

Abstract

This paper explores Heidegger's juxtaposition of art and technology from the angle of the nihilism issue. After sketching reasons and aims of Heidegger's turn to poetry I interpret this juxtaposition in terms of a core deontological dichotomy between the metaphysical-technological and the poetic-destinal forms of subjectivity and their relationship to the world, aimed at overcoming the extreme danger of contemporary nihilism. Finally, I highlight the danger of an even more threatening second order nihilism implicit in this dichotomy.

Keywords: Heidegger; technology; nihilism; poetry; metaphysics.

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