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*Europe as Seen from Hollywood and America Seen
Through the Mirror of European Cinema*

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Abstract

**Ed Wood : a Hollywood cult film-maker and
a European legend**

A deep-rooted transvestite in real life as well as on the screen, Ed Wood puzzles by his sexual and artistic identity. A troubling character, a multi-facet figure, his bodily presence going far beyond the interpretation of his films' characters and embodying a legend : that of a *cult* film-maker. Such a presence on the screen, as well as the artist's fame and that of his work, are not enough to explain the legend – a “fantasy” film maker, a fantastical fiction biography – but can be grasped through a complicated device where human beings, objects, practical experiences, speeches and performances are the reactive elements of an original creating process. Between denial and adulation, judgements on Ed Wood have changed and the reconstruction of reception mechanisms acting upon Ed Wood's work and career remain partial. Still, his figure already delineates an established portrait joining in – in a minor way – the modern Pantheon of unclassifiable characters and of artists blessed with a remarkable uniqueness.

Ed Wood : a Hollywood cult film-maker and a European legend

*« Pull the strings ! Pull the strings !
Dance to that for you were created »
Bela Lugosi, *Glen or Glenda* (1953)*

The more or less proven queer elements of Ed Wood's career together with the legends which go along with his films build up a representation in which the part played by fiction and the realistic element of Ed Wood's biography are uneasily dissociated and liable to interpenetrate; the interpretation of Ed Wood's films vary according to the legend and mythification process that are his nowadays. Deep-rootedly travestied as it is both in life and on the screen, Ed Wood's sexual identity is quite intriguing. The mixture of genres does not only imply a questioning about his own status as film-maker – “a living cult film-maker in Hollywood”, a true accursed film-maker, an “author” film-maker? The narrowing of the gap between plural identities of his work and the several shapes of the artist Ed Wood enables us to grasp a social construction of how his films and life were received where movie uses, ideological perspectives and multifarious interpretations come across and meet.

Ed Wood a carrier and artistic failure

Ed Wood embodies a single presence both in his film and in his biographies which is extremely wealthy of quite few romantic hypotheses¹. A veteran of WWII and a passionate transvestite in angora wools sweaters, Ed Wood signs the scenario, directs and interprets the

¹ Edward D. Wood Jr, was born in 1924 in Poughkeepsie, near New York.

major characters Glen and Glenda in what will become, as early as the release of the film in 1953, the first of a series of commercial and critical failures. *Glen or Glenda*² is a tale combination of the fantastic, the thriller and autobiography on the condition of transvestites and the desire urging a few men to wish changing their own sex and gender. What is most surprising in such a personal film, “is the refusal to come to terms with such a deviance as a vice and the need to justify it in a rational way (women’s clothes are more comfortable for a man), and legitimate it socially. What is also disconcerting is how the film is built up and Bela Lugosi³’s recurring interventions as a supra-human demiurge, hurling obscure incantations: “*Beware the big green dragon in front of your doorstep. He eats little boys*”⁴. The very topic and Ed Wood’s presence on screen, refer to transvestisement and sexual ambivalence. Despite a touching sincerity, the film unsettles altogether the unmastered approach, the unlikelihood, candid grandiloquence, and the mixture of genres seems rather out of sorts.

The major characteristic of this film and the following ones will not take place through discredit but through an almost definitive silence. Ed Wood is yet all the same prolix. In the same breath he directed quite a few films, i.e.: *Jailbait* (1954), *Bride of the monster* (or *Bride of the Atom* – 1955), and in 1956, *Plan 9 outer space*, his last film with Bela Lugosi who died during the shooting. The latter film, considered as it was as the most accomplished of the film-maker will have a new life on the television screens with quite a few reruns on specialized channels. As early as 1961, WPIX-11, a New York free independent television channel bought the rights of both *Bride of the monster* and *Plan 9 outer space* and broadcasted the films every seven weeks for five years. Henceforward, Ed Wood’s films will find an echo with TV viewers and those who enjoyed fantasy films and science fiction. The sequel of Ed Wood’s career is far more erratic and inexorably looks like a descent into Hell. His job as film-maker changes in the turn of the 60’s towards “erotic-documentary” films such as *The sinister urge* (1960), then gradually towards fantastic pornography which he directs, writes the scenario of, or sometimes produces. Rudolph Grey’s biography credits him with quite a few scenarios (most of the time never directed) for the movie world and television and of a vast quantity of erotic and pornographic books. Between 1963 and 1978, Ed Wood seems to take refuge in both writing and alcohol, he lives by his own wits, periodically works for a few TV channels, such as KTTV (1964) and diligently works for obscure publications such as *Pendulum*, *Calga*, *Gallery Pressi* in which he writes hundreds of short stories, now and then signing with pseudonyms. Ed Wood died of a heart attack, when 54 in Los Angeles, while watching

² Ed Wood directed two short films *The street of Laredo* (1948) and *The sun was setting* (1951) and wrote the scenario of Yakima Canutt’s film *The Lawless Rider* before *Glen or Glenda*, his first long film.

³ A Hungarian immigrant Bela Lugosi was in the 1930’s the star in Tod Browning’s *Dracula*. During both decades following Tod Browning’s film, Lugosi gradually became more and more anonymous and became more and more addicted to morphine that had been prescribed to him to heal a war wound. Ed Wood wished to restart Lugosi’s career by allowing him to play in his films, what he tried to do in *Glen or Glenda*.

⁴ Vincent Ostria, « Ed le cinéaste discount », *Les Inrockuptibles*, June 21. 1995 p. 17.

soccer. Homeless, poor and with no one caring, his death was not even echoed in the press and no obituary was ever written.

However unclassified, marginal and highly communicative in his dynamism, Ed Wood experienced however a route which was at the crossroads of a specific era: the end of the golden age of the cinema of the great Hollywood studios and the rise of the industries of the American audio-visual medias. Taking into account his failures, the absence of any interest from critics and a deficiency in notoriousness, Ed Wood was doomed to oblivion. Yet, when all is said, the swing between failure and acknowledgement is established with time when gradually a new reception grows. In order to do so, quite a few elements will be a major factor of rehabilitation.

When transposed into a different context, Ed Wood becomes a precursor and his approach finds *a posteriori* a justification within the field of contemporary film industry in which transformation of conventions turns Ed Wood's films into an easily understandable cinematographic writing. The presence of false link shots, for example, thus becomes a sign of the modernity of cinematographic language. Nowadays, other elements make the expressivity of Ed Wood as a film director acceptable, namely the fact that he added documentary fragments to fiction which resembles a work on the very texture of the image and the non observance of a narrative continuity which might be interpreted as a subtlety of the dramatic construction. The aesthetics of Ed Wood's films also relates to conditions of production which acquire another dimension with time. Put back with its context of mode of production of the film *Glen or Glenda*⁵ with its spare aesthetics and incredible stylistic devices becomes a document on what would have likely been a Z series film. The almost self production of Ed Wood's other films could also be compared to the approach of the *Nouvelle vague*⁶ film makers and even today to the conditions of productions of fiction film makers editing their own films with video cameras⁷. Finally, Ed Wood mythic dimension takes a specific dimension when one mentions quite a few sulphurous topics for the mores of those days during the McCarthy's years. Through recourse to the fantastic and to science fiction Ed Wood was getting round the moral conventions by tackling the theme of transvestisement and, between the lines, of homosexuality in films.

⁵ *Glen or Glenda* was financed by a producer specializing in extremely cheap films for a third category cinema houses (nowadays, it would correspond to productions of low price audiovisual fictions meant to be viewed on multiple TV channels) by placing a bet on the presence of a former silent movie star Bela Lugosi. Besides, one may suspect Ed Wood to have partly drawn some profit from Bela Lugosi's presence without, in the long run, having had achieved positively his artistic project; the priority having been to convince the producer George Weiss to finance a low quality product in order to initiate a career.

⁶ Claude Chabrol first film *le Beau Serge* was also an example of a totally self produced.

⁷ One may also think about some of the *Dogme*. film makers

A cult film maker: the Californian saga

Ed Wood's fabulous posthumous fortune depends from the start of a renewed interest expressed through denial and derision. Both indifference and silence which have prevailed during the whole of Ed Wood's career are modified by a rather long and confused rehabilitation process of the film maker within a different historical context where irony, hidden meaning, the cult of the uncanny and sometimes bad taste become fashionable values. As a complement to the very small circle of fantasy films lovers who remember a few Ed Wood's films, Harry et Michael Medved publish *The Golden Turkey Awards*⁸.

In this panorama dedicated to the worst, Ed Wood comes side by side with personalities well-known in Hollywood (e.g. Gary Cooper, Richard Burton, Marlon Brando, Raquel Welch, etc.) and he is granted two awards, amid such an iconoclastic honours list, for his film *Plan 9 from outer space* considered as the worst film and, at the same time, he is granted the title of "worst Hollywood film maker". Such a denial will become with Tim Burton film a slogan disclosing an advertising process around the parallel with the topic of the film, i.e. a "fiction on a bad editor" by one of the most worshipped film maker. The Medved brothers undertaking is at the start quite different since the idea is to make fun of the absurdity of Ed Wood's films and his nonetheless very long obstinacy to try and promote the singularity of his approach.

Henceforth and quite against them, the Medved brothers contribute to attract attention and succeed in rising a marginal but growing interest; there had indeed been some traces of Ed Wood's work, e.g. notably a commentary made by Aline Mosby, the United Press Hollywood correspondent who compares Ed Wood to "some kind of Orson Welles of low-budget movies"⁹. The magazine *Cult movie*¹⁰, specialized in science fiction, also delineates a comparative picture between Ed Wood's and Orson Welles' careers by suggesting quite a few connections, among which precociousness, singularity and misunderstanding of each one's compatriots. Such short term and long term misadventures however were not detrimental to Orson Welles who, on the contrary, benefited from a planetary acknowledgement for his capacity to enable new standards which were breaking up from the American movie industry of the 40's and the 50's to be accepted, and for his new approach of what the movie industry and film maker should be bound to be. With Ed

⁸ This book is credited with giving the movie *Plan 9 from Outer Space* by Edward D. Wood, Jr. the reputation of being the "worst movie ever made". Medved, Michael, and Harry Medved. *The Golden Turkey Awards*. Putnam, 1980. The Golden Turkey Awards formed the basis of a 1983 television series *The Worst of Hollywood* hosted by Michael Medved. Medved, Harry, and Randy Dreyfuss. *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time (And How They Got That Way)*. 1978, Warner Books

⁹ « Director Wood a kind of Orson Welles of low-budget pictures, wrote, directed and starred in the movie » Aline Mosby, *How a man changes his sex soon will be rushed on the screen*, in Rudolph Grey, *Nightmare of Extasy, The life and Art of Edward D. Wood, Jr.*, (first publication USA, Feral House Books, 1994) Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.

¹⁰ The magazine *Cult movie* devoted two special issues (vol. 11 & 12) on the topic. These documents were consulted during the *Cultura Porqueria* exhibition organized May 20. - July 31. 2003 by the « *Centro de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona* » (CCCB).

Wood's case, the failure was not only linked to the fact of being accused of being a bad film-maker but the denial was also associated to the very idea that keeping in mind his weaknesses and uneasiness (and this despite his being far-related to an "author" approach as was Orson Welles') he was not worthy to be considered as a fully film maker.

However, new and discordant approaches, readings and interpretations seem to deposit multiple layers of meanings on Ed Wood's art and life. What seems to come out through several lights, is a distinction between the effects of constraints that were weighing on the editing of every single film, the product of resources called forth to enable projects to come being achieved, the expression of the universe of the film maker, the way Ed Wood's work is received so long as the film maker is alive and the several subsequent fields of interpretation having resulted in a new analysis of the all in all modest place given to Ed Wood in the history of the film industry. Ed Wood singular course is described in Rudolph Grey's biography through the personal accounts of his relatives and several collaborators. The biographer's approach is a singular one since the purpose was to draw up an inventory of what remained of an almost unknown character who, in the end, mainly struck by his perseverance to explore his universe by creations both fiddled and ignored by most. The enterprise was quite a perilous one and ten years at least and over a hundred interviews were needed to relocate such fragments of interviews building up a contrasted and sometimes contradictory image of the film maker. The approach of Ed Wood's life and art seems to be altered by such a biography finding an echo with Tim Burton¹¹ when the latter bought the rights of the book and adapted it for the cinema.

***Ed Wood*, Tim Burton's biopic**

Among the building processes of an artistic notoriousness, he who comes close under the acknowledgement an artist grants another¹²

¹¹ "Tim Burton discovered a documentary film (edited by Jonathan Ross) devoted to Ed Wood, and then he started using Rudolph Grey's book. He most probably also used Mark Patrick Carducci's documentary film, *Flying Saucers Over Hollywood: The 'Plan 9' Companion* (1992). In the book, *Tim Burton par Tim Burton*, one learns that the scenario writers Larry Karaszewski et Scott Alexander are at the origin of the project. A dozen pages reached Denise Di Novi's desk, who was Tim Burton's producer (via Michael Lehman, an ld pal of the *University of South California* and *Fatal Games's* editor, also produced by Di Novi. An agreement had planned that Lehman was to edit the film, whereas Tim Burton and Di Novi were to produce it. When he was, when all was said, cast aside from *Mary Reilly* by the VIPs of Columbia's Pictures. Tim Burton glimpsed the possibility to edit *Ed Wood* himself if the film were to start being shot extremely quickly. Then Karaszewski and Alexander wrote the scenario in only six weeks. Tim Burton read the first draft and immediately agreed without asking for either any changes or re-writing". Mark Salisbury *Tim Burton par Tim Burton*, Le Cinéphage, 2000.

¹² In literature, the best mediators of a work seem often to be writers such as, for example, Baudelaire introducing Edgar Poe in France. Acknowledgement also plays a specific part with the public: for example, one learns through papers dealing with Ed Wood in the 90's that *Glen or Glenda* is one of David Lynch's favourite films. It also of course gives some credit to the rehabilitation of Ed Wood's films.

gives rise to an immediate curiosity mainly when it refers to an artist of an international reputation, and excellent in the field of fantasy movies and of the box office. Tim Burton's film *Ed Wood* thus produces an effect whose range turns Ed Wood's unknown story into a positive representation of an unrecognized creator. The partial rehabilitation of "the worst editor of all times" calls forth a new approach of the myth of the doomed artist clad in the most flattering characteristics: a fully unflinching dynamism, a fascinating sincerity, a very friendly cunningness, a circle of friends both strange and devoted. Tim Burton's fiction delineates the film maker's itinerary ever since his first attempts – in the film, it takes the form of a play, entitled *The casual company* – until the first public showing of his film *Plan 9 outer space*. Tim Burton's film closes on an optimistic note. The audience seems to applaud, the whole film team is thrilled. On screen, Martin Landau takes the part of Bela Lugosi in the reconstitution of the first sequence of *Plan 9 outer space* while Johnny Depp contemplates the film and mimes the commentary with an off voice of the true Ed Wood (i.e. the original sound track of *Plan 9 outer space*). At the end of the film projection, the audience is very enthusiastic. Due to this atmosphere of euphoria, Ed Wood proposes to Kathy (his new girl friend), willing to get married on the spot despite the rain and a car in a terribly bad state. Following this *happy end*, portraits of most characters come to conclude the film and suggest a moderate stance to the final impression, in particular as regards Ed Wood himself: "Edward D. Wood Jr. followed his career in Hollywood but he never ceased to eschew success. After a slow wreck into alcoholic addiction and rather "nude" films, he died in 1978, aged 54. Two years later, he was acclaimed "worst film maker of all times, which granted him international acknowledgement".

In this epilogue, one recalls Medved Brothers' argument ("worst film maker of all times") together with the biographical logic of the film. Besides, *Ed Wood* indeed corresponds to a specific genre, the "« biopic » (biographical pictures), i.e. a "filmed biography"; It is also inscribed within the tradition of the movie film (as opposed or different from the TV film) on the movie¹³ but it differs by the choice of the reference register. Indeed, if the period at stake corresponds to the 50's in Hollywood, the scenic universe is that of the silent film, of the fantastic stammering and TV programmes specializing in science fiction. In Martin Scorsese's *History of the American movie*, both latter elements are less valued to the detriment of "genre" films such as the western, the thriller, the musical comedy and sometimes even series B movies. All Tim Burton film previous to *Ed Wood*¹⁴ introduces a kind of culture of the film industry, quite illegitimate till then. With *Ed Wood*, it casts a new light and makes it legitimately acceptable. It grants a new acceptance to the "fantastic" film, it legitimates cultural eclectic cultural practices of specialists of

¹³ Among others, one may quote Vincente Minelli's *The bad and the beautiful*, Joseph Mankiewicz's *The barefoot Contessa*, Federico Fellini's *8 1/2*, Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris*, François Truffaut's *La nuit américaine* Abbas Kiarostami's *Close Up*, etc.

¹⁴ (*Vincent* (1982), *Frankenweenie* (1982), *Hansel and Gretel* (1982), *Aladin and his wonderful lamp*, (1984), *Pee-Wee's big adventure*, (1985), *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Batman* (1989), *Edward Scissorhands* (1991), *Batman le défi* (1992), *L'étrange Noël de monsieur Jack* (1993))

unclassified films, redefines the identity of cinema enthusiasm and by extension transforms an already multiple definition of the film industry.

Ed Wood requalified as an artist

For want of public success¹⁵ Tim Burton film is acknowledge by its peers and propagates a definition of creation in the film industry which is the culmination of an artistic process. Ed Wood's legend, on its part, has a posthumous fame which is the result of a construction equally built up by an "artistic world" attached to the promotion of an ideology of counter-culture and transgression. The surge of a critical reaction, the biographical interest, Tim Burton's film and its institutionalization through selections in festivals and prestigious prizes build and strengthen *a posteriori* a reputation of "cult film maker". Incapable of having been the author of his own biography, Ed Wood's notoriety became more autonomous by the joint effect of a growing legend and subtle recompositions. Such an artist figure hereby reinvented henceforth benefits from the status of "singular creator" within the mythological pantheon of "cult film makers".

Independently from his contribution to acknowledging of a genre and of a film enthusiasm still despised, one of Tim Burton's preoccupations refers to a questioning about artistic creation and identity. In extracts of interviews taken from Mark Salisbury's *Tim Burton by Tim Burton*, Tim Burton elucidates the parallel between Ed Wood and his conception of what a creator is together with his choice to speak of an artist process even when a failure is at stake: "*Ed was consumed by his passion, so am I. It is like a drug. When you shoot a film, you always have the impression that you achieve an absolute work of art – and one must think thus. But to believe thus is not enough; any how in order that the audience be convinced too. If I admire Ed Wood, it is indeed because he is a true creator. I admire all creators be they painters, directors, and sculptors piling up car carcasses in the desert or what else. No matter whether I like their work or not, what truly matters in my eyes is that they create whereas others don't.*"¹⁶

Another way to project onto Ed Wood an artist's approach and some of the elements of Tim Burton's universe consists in trying to connect the bibliographical elements that suit him proper. Tim Burton confided that, when still an adolescent, he watched *Plan 9 outer space* on TV, he got the impression that it was taking place near the airport and Burbank's cemetery, in his native town. Besides, the relationship between Ed Wood and Bela Lugosi comes quite close to the support then to the bond Tim Burton received from Vincent Price¹⁷. The embodiment on

¹⁵ *Ed Wood* is the first box office failure in Tim Burton's career but he receives a unanimously favourable welcome from the critics. Notably, the film was officially selected for the official selection of the Cannes Film festival, a Laureate of the Globe, was nominated twice and received two Oscars in 1995.

¹⁶ Mark Salisbury *Tim Burton par Tim Burton*, Le Cinéphage, 2000.

¹⁷ Vincent Price acted in quite a few films of Tim Burton's, e.g. notably *Edward Scissorhands*. He also wrote a documentary film about him; Vincent Price died shortly before the shooting of *Ed Wood* which represents another opportunity for him to be

screen of the pair Ed Wood/ Bela Lugosi interpreted by Johnny Depp and Martin Landau also recalls a special kind of relationship between the actors. Since *Edward Scissorhands*, there was indeed a kind of fusion like complicity between Johnny Depp's universe as an actor and that of Tim Burton as a film maker. The bond with Martin Landau recalls another kind of modality since the latter, as an actor "over the hill"¹⁸ recaptures a new first class reputation with the part of an has-been both pathetic and funny. His career of an unequal quality must have helped him to embody the part of the Hungarian actor, Bela Lugosi in *Ed Wood* which will grant him the acknowledgement of the profession in the form of an Oscar in 1995 for best actor for a supporting role¹⁹. Quite a few sequences in the film show how perverse the relationships between Ed Wood and Bela Lugosi are. Both sincere and a manipulator, Ed Wood, mainly for commercial reasons, artificially mixes a scene with Bela Lugosi at the beginning of the film *Plan 9 from outer space* (an actor within the continuity of the film will have the task to play the silhouette of the character half masked under a cape). Tim Burton's film puts forward the idea that even if Ed Wood's motivations were self-interested, both men were related by a mutual admiration. However, whatever the plausible interpretations of Ed Wood's fictitious or true situations and motivations, the former are now linked according to artistic or biographical hypotheses within a configuration different from the context of how Hollywood films of the 50's had been received.

Through the way it was received by the public, the phenomenon embodied in Tim Burton's film introduces a reflexive dimension on the film industry and works as a fantastic analysis of the creation process by choosing a counter-example of cinematographic success in Hollywood and a true artistic success of an "author" whose work was not understood by his contemporaries, such as may be seen in the literary and /or art world and also within the approach of what is understood as European "author cinema". Through what may seem to be a failure, Tim Burton plays a large part in inventing a new approach resting on the approach rather than on creation and resets the figure of the artist acceptable for posterity. In such a reflexive hindsight on the collective imaginary of the artistic world, he can produce meaning and identity to an unclassifiable creative act. Thus, the reconstruction of Ed Wood's legend starting from Tim Burton's preoccupations may be defined as a point of view on the boundaries between the several genres or medias, i.e. the fantastic, the B and Z series, television, the documentary film, animation films, etc. – together with a conception of the film maker defined as it may be in Europe when one uses the term of "author for the cinema".

close to him and suggests another biographical bond to Vincent Price through the fictitious tribute paid by Ed Wood to Bela Lugosi.

¹⁸ A former student of the Actor's Studio, he plays the supporting role in Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*; he is the hero in series such as *Mission impossible* and *Cosmos 1999*. After an unproductive period, he resumes more prestigious parts by collaborating to Raoul Ruiz, Woody Allen, Francis Coppola and of course Tim Burton.

¹⁹ Rick Baker having done a super make-up on the actor playing the part of Bela Lugosi also got an Oscar for best make-up.

Between denial and adulation, the way people consider Ed Wood films has changed since the 50's. For all that, the reconstitution of reception pacts, i.e. those by Z movies amateurs, fantasy films amateurs, critics, film makers, specialists of movie clubs, scholars, teachers or any kind of professionals working in the film industry, around Ed Wood work and career remains very incomplete. However we may suggest the idea that it is the sum of communities of interpretations, produced from Ed Wood, within different contexts and different periods, around several consensuses, that the reception modalities were invented. The dynamics of such participation generated by the aesthetic emotion of the films goes along with multiple processes of integration of definitions of the film maker. Quite a few years after his death the artistic figure of Ed Wood seems to join within a lesser extent the modern pantheon of unclassifiable monsters, i.e. Dracula, Frankenstein, Dr Jekyll et Mr Hyde, Dorian Grey, etc., and the martyr list of the great unusual characters in the film industry, i.e. Stroheim, Welles, Eisenstein... He may also be (provisionally, undoubtedly) considered, within the contemporary context, as the embodiment of both a legend and a myth. The exhibition entitled *Cultura Porqueria* organized by the «Centro de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona» (CCCB – May 31-July 31, 2003) evidences such a tendency towards integrating the myth within the museum institution. Indeed, the *Cultura Porqueria* exhibition devoted a space in the museum where he could delineate his work, his career and personal development within one of the declensions of archaeology of “poor taste”. Within such a satirizing, Ed Wood thus becomes no longer a film maker, but also an artist among other artists within an extension of the framework of how the film industry world may be received. The reconstruction of Ed Wood reputation as an artist thus demonstrates that the reputation of a work and of an artist cannot be reduced either to his films and to his biography, or even to a specific community of viewers but to a complex process in which human beings, objects, practices, discourses and representations build up the configuration of an art world which becomes forever unpredictable and totally new.

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