Book Review

The Interpretation of Technology:
Arthur Kroker and the Canadian Mind

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

If Canadians have demonstrated any extraordinary capacity to contribute to modern culture, our singular gift is arguably best found in the domain of social communication - its practice in the popular arts and entertainment, its facilitation by means of technological innovation and its interpretation by philosophers and commentators especially concerned with the impact of mass communication on our daily lives.

It is generally agreed that Canadians added only modestly to the lasting store of 19th century prose and poetry in English but, even though there are plenty of 20th century literati of sufficient stature (Margaret Atwood, Earl Birnie, Neil Bissoondath, Morley and Barry Callaghan, Robertson Davies, Marion Engle, Timothy Findley, Hugh MacLennan, Margaret Laurence, W. O. Mitchell, Brian Moore, Alice Munro, Susan Musgrave, Michael Ondaatje, Mordechai Richler and so on) to make up for past provincialism, it has been in motion pictures, radio and television that Canadian stars have most brightly shone. So, when compelled to admit that ice hockey games between Anaheim and Tampa Bay no longer stir the great, white northern soul, Canadians can amuse themselves by constructing an inventory of performance artists who left their homes and/or native land to gain international (i.e., American) approval and to become statistically over-represented in the shimmering skies of the U.S. cultural night.

Canadians as Performance Artists

Such a catalogue would sensibly open with "America's Sweetheart" Mary Pickford (alias Gladys Mary Smith of Toronto), Fay (King Kong) Wray, Boris Karloff (at least a temporary Canadian and an actor who scared the pants off movie-goers), and Jack Warner (a Hollywood mogul who scared the pants off movie actors). It could feature a number of leading men and occasional leading ladies from Walter Pidgeon, Raymond Massey, Glenn Ford, Alexis Smith and Leslie Neilsen, through Lorne Greene, Raymond Burr and William Shatner.(the latter three, as TV's "Pa" Cartwright, Perry Mason and Capt. James Tiberius Kirk brought American justice to the old west, the criminal courts and remote galaxies where no "man" had gone before). It would have to include Walter Huston. It could surely accomodate Christopher Plummer (the patriarch Von Trapp in The Sound of Music) and Donald Sutherland (the original "Hawkeye" in the film M.A.S.H.), and it might even make room for Sutherland scion Keefer and the elusive Margot Kidder. News specialists Morley Safer, Robert MacNeill, Peter Jennings and, lately, Kevin Newman would fit the bill. Singers might be represented by Giselle Mackenzie, Ian and Sylvia, Gordon Lightfoot, Ann Murray, Joni Mitchell, Buffy Saint-Marie, Steppenwolf, David Clayton Thomas, Neil Young, Burton Cummings and Randy Bachman, most members of The Band, Leonard Cohen, k. d. lang, Bryan Adams, Shania Twain, Alanis Morisette, Sarah McLachlan and the ubiquitous Céline Dion. Nor have the lights of comedians and comic actors dimmed as Canadians from Mack Sennett to Wayne and Schuster (whose record for most appearances on

the Ed Sullivan Show can never be broken) through Mort Sahl, David Steinberg, Michael J. Fox, Howie Mandel, Leslie Neilsen (again), John Candy and Jim Carrey to what sometimes seemed like half the cast of Saturday Night Live made and continue to make Americans laugh and laugh. Not to be ignored are music producer David Foster, the University of Guelph (Ontario) English teacher who wrotethe original Rambo, and the motion picture producer who most recently sank the Titanic. Who knows? There could even be places for David Letterman side-kick Paul Shaffer, magician and Natural Law Party enthusiast Doug Henning, Hollywood hangers-on Alan Thicke and Suzanne Somers' husband, Let's Make a Deal impresario Monty Hall, and that darnedest kid of all, Art Linkletter. The list can and does go on and on and relentlessly on.

Canadians as Technical Innovators

A modest registry of "firsts" in technological innovations can similarly be developed with neither serious thought nor extensive research required. Many Canadians will know that the first telephone call was made by Alexander Graham Bell in Brantford, Ontario; that Marconi sent the first trans-Atlantic radio message from Newfoundland's Signal Hill; that Edward S. Rogers invented the "batteryless radio"; that the first regularly scheduled radio station was XWA(now CFCF in Montréal); that the first continent-wide radio network was put in place by the Canadian National Railway; and that, in the days before communications satellites such as the pioneering Anik, the world's first regularly scheduled commercial jet aircraft (the North Star) was available to fly the film of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II to Canada for subsequent television viewing (I remember the broadcast well, for Alex Michael, who owned a gas station and was therefore one of the three wealthiest men in my rural village, bought a TV for the occasion and crowded about 40 of his closest friends - me included - into his 12 x 18 foot living room to witness the event and, incidentally, television for the first time). Now, of course, Canada participates exhaustively in the various electronic media and can claim to be the world's most fully "wired" country in terms, for example, of cable television.

The point? Canadians communicate amply and amusingly among themselves and with others and have helped devise, no doubt in response to well-known geographic and demographic factors, remarkable means to do so through technology.

Canadians as Analysts and Critics

What is less commonly appreciated is the extent to which Canadian intellectuals have been instrumental in shaping local and global understanding of what these talents and technologies have meant for human communication in the modern and postmodern world.

The relative obscurity of Canadian intellectuals may partly be explained as a function of our overall national dopiness (a trait frequently documented in quizzes in which otherwise functioning citizens – many with certified post-secondary education - can be counted upon to display an appalling ignorance of the most common facts of science, history and the arts). It may also be assisted by a kind of perverse pride that many take in the distance between themselves and minimal cultural literacy. William Burrill, the "senior writer" of one of Toronto's "alternative" newspapers, Eye, recently provided a fine example by ridiculing Maclean's magazine's list of "the 100 most important Canadians in history." He apparently found nothing wrong with the concept of such a list but disagreed vehemently with the people Maclean's

included. Individuals such as William Aberhart, Harold Innis, Cornelius Kreighoff, Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine, André Laurendeau, Henry Morgentaler, O. D. Skelton and Catherine Parr Trail were derisively dismissed as members of a "baffling Who's Who of Who the Hell Are These Guys?" With a couple of exceptions such as Billy Bishop and Marc Garneau, William Burrill's preferred list, by the way, was made up exclusively of artists and athletes. I mean no offense to the likes of Paul Henderson, Gordie Howe, Fergie Jenkins, Bobby Orr, Elvis Stojko, and Gilles and Jacques Villeneuve but identifying these physically gifted sportsmen as among the reveals a gap between Maclean's and the counter-cultural subsidiary of the Toronto Star that is all symptomatic of our fixation on popular entertainment as the means of choice to evade serious public issues.

A third problem, however, has more to do with the faults of the communications analysts than with the masses who cheerfully ignore them. As newspaper baron Roy Thomson (among many others) once said of Marshall McLuhan: How can a communications expert be such a lousy communicator? Whether by means of turgid, academic prose or self-indulgently avant-garde argot, the propensity of the denizens of the ivory tower of babble to speak in codes for exclusive, self-selected audiences is as unfortunate as it is widespread.

Still, in some cases, the struggle to demystify sometimes difficult texts is worth the trouble. Especially notable authorities whose analyses of communication and (in the principle cases) the relationship among ideology, technology and global empires are, of course, Burrill's "nobody" Harold Innis, Northrop Frye, Marshall McLuhan, George Grant and (I am tempted to add) Neil Postman, the most "accessible" of the lot – who, though not a Canadian, has spent so much time and energy in Canada popularizing his views in speeches, seminars and on the CBC that he sometimes seems to be one.

It is no accident that each of these theorists can be called "conservative" at least in the sense that they are not uncritically enthralled by the nature and effects of the electronic media on contemporary society in general and Canadian society in particular. All were aware of the precarious nature of Canadian political and economic autonomy. Each saw the Canadian experiment as a contest between the will and imagination of its stubbornly un-American inhabitants and the hegemonic American empire with its influence extended northward as much by cultural as by political, economic and military means. As far as Canadian independence was concerned, their mood was often tinged with melancholy and sometimes with bitterness on those occasions when it was not utterly tragic. In The Strategy of Culture (1952), Harold Innis described the influence of "mechanized communication" originating in the United States as "fatal" for Canada. In Letters in Canada (1959), Frye said that Canada "is practically the only country left in the world which is a pure colony, colonial in psychology and well as in mercantile economics." In The Bush Garden (1971), he offered this: "To enter the United States is a matter of crossing an ocean: to enter Canada is a matter of being silently swallowed by an alien continent." McLuhan's expansive, universalistic Catholicism denied him the option of being a nationalist (he had only contempt for the "national question" and embraced Pierre Trudeau largely because of their shared hostility to so-called "tribalism"); nonetheless, his media studies provided much of the groundwork to help others understand and lament the fate of small societies caught up in the maelstrom of global information technology. George Grant, of course, did not require McLuhan's aid in order to fashion his obituary for Canada Lament for a Nation (1965). He wrote: "As Canadians we attempted a ridiculous task in trying to build a conservative

nation in the age of progress, on a continent we share with the most dynamic nation on earth." The medium for this dynamism was industrial technology and especially the technology of communications which insinuated itself into our lives, our living rooms and ultimately our living bodies. Whether or not the Canadian project was doomed from the beginning, it was the most popular of these sages, Marshall McLuhan - the putative guru of the global village - who more than once opined that no greater blessing could be bestowed upon humanity than the immediate and permanent destruction of all television sets!

To this formidable group of scholars, it is surely time to add the name of Arthur Kroker. He is hip, he is hyped, and he has some important and possibly profoundly conservative things to say.

Arthur Kroker Is Hip

What other fifty-something Canadian professor of political science publishes dense polysyllabic tomes with accompanying musical CDs to provide the appropriate ambiance for his insights? What other established academic can get away with book subtitles that promise an intellectual exploration of "panic sex" and "electric flesh" only to fulfill those promises with scholarly references to Nietzsche, Heidegger and Baudrillard, interspersed with photographs of tattoos, Christian Dior cosmetics ads, transvestite pornography, garden variety leather bondage and Penthouse centerfolds without the staples? What other schoolman would admit to having a "hyper-rock band" called Sex Without Secretions and would say such things in print as: "We are data trash and it is good"?

Arthur Kroker Is Hyped

He is widely publicized as a "Nietzsche for the 90s," a "McLuhan for the millennium." His appearances on television shows such as the CBC Newsworld's Future World and the attention paid to him by right-of-mainstream magazines such as Saturday Night (which entitled its 1996 profile "Geek with an Argument") demonstrate that his influence is spreading beyond the coteries of obscure and obscurantist "culture critics" who once read his so very reputable professional publication The Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory in the late 1970s and 1980s. The Journal, it might be mentioned, boasted articles by Canadian and international authors of such impressive stature and wildly diverse opinion as Ben Agger, Zygmunt Bauman, Barry Cooper, Terry Eagleton, Anthony Giddens, Jürgen Habermas, Ernesto Laclau, Irving Layton, Herbert Marcuse, C. B. Macpherson, Eli Mandel, W. L. Morton, J. G. A. Pocock, Charles Taylor, George Woodcock and, of course, Arthur Kroker. As academic social critics and literary theorists go, these ain't small potatoes!

Being utterly out of the avant-garde loop, I wasn't among the first to get the hint that there was more to Kroker than the extensive footnotes, unparsable prose, intimations of irrationalism and fuzzball concepts normally attributable to postliterate chatterers. When, however, I noticed that my newly purchased copy of the Winter, 1984 edition of the Journal had abandoned its earlier dull pumpkin pulp hue (though not its ever so respectable typeface and properly restrained inside lay-out) to display "before" and "after" pictures of Elvis Presley on a shocking pink background with the caption "Cynical Commodity," I knew something was up. When I then read the Baudrillardian bromide accompanying Elvis: "This time we are in a full

universe, a space radiating with power but also cracked, like a shattered windshield still holding together," I finally figured it out. Arthur Kroker was a force with which to be reckoned.

And to think: Brian Mulroney had yet to sing a duet with Ronald Reagan.

Arthur Kroker and the Cage

Now, for the tough stuff. I have long admired the words that Max Weber used as he was coming to the close of his classic work, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. As early as 1904, he had pretty much summed up the 20th century. "The modern economic order" and its accompanying technology would, he said, "determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism ... with irresistible force ... until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt." Then, in language which belied his fame as the exemplar of objective social science, Weber foresaw that life in the frenzied materialism and ruthless competition of late capitalism would be lived as in an "iron cage." His prognosis was bleak: "No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: 'Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved'" [italics added].

Arthur Kroker goes him one better. Arthur Kroker is not of the iron age. A century after Weber, we need worry less about the last ton of coal than about the next kilogram of nuclear waste. Our age is not industrial but electronic. And Arthur Kroker - possible accusations of "compulsive self-importance" or at least of clever self-promotion aside - knows better than most of us about the nature and dimensions of our silicon cells.

"The electronic cage," he tells us, "is that point where technology comes alive, acquires organicity, and takes possession of us." Neo-Luddite hyperbole at the dawn of biotechnology? Perhaps, but it is well to step back and see Kroker in situ, uttering his own words.

Technology and Virtual Life

Canada's beloved George Grant, who imported the very wisest sayings of Nietzsche and the most troubling notions of Heidegger is revered as well by Kroker, but he also dissents. "Heidegger," he says, "was wrong. Technology is not something restless, dynamic and ever expanding, but just the opposite. The will to technology equals the will to virtuality. And the will to virtuality is about the recline of western civilization: a great shutting down of experience, with a veneer of technological dynamism over an inner reality of inertia, exhaustion and disappearances ..."

Kroker's somewhat precious microtopics ("Dead Dogs and Daddy under the Christmas Tree," "The Pleasure of Catastrophe," "Panic Penis," "Panic Plague," "Panic Politics" and "Blurred Images of Panic Bodies Moving to Escape Velocity at Warp Speeds") all seem rather far from the domain of rational public policy formulation. But two things should be remembered: (1) John Maynard Keynes' observation that the apparent pragmatism of today's bureaucrat merely echoes the musings of some ancient academic dreamer; (2) while contemporary corporate

communication retains few spaces for humane language, Arthur Kroker's message is, in the end, deeply humane.

He points to the evisceration of authentic life. He urges us to notice how our direct experience is replaced by simulacra, substitutions for reality. He uses imaginative ascriptions such a "cold sex" (Madonna mutant), "pure sex" (Michael Jackson), "dead sex" (Elvis) and, I would add, "virtual sex" (Spice Girls) to show a devaluing of any intimacy not mediated or initiated by machines.

Provocatively and playfully turning language back upon itself in the quest for what literary critic Kenneth Burke once called "perspective by incongruity," Kroker announces that "the computer has no memory, if by memory we mean the presence of political judgment and aesthetic reflection. Everything is data in cold storage." In a particularly compelling narrative on the subject of "memory crash," Kroker explains that a major effect of digital communications is the abandonment of chronology, pattern and coherence in the assembly of information. "Recombinant" history is familiarly discussed in his book Spasm using the example of commonplace "sampler" music recordings.

Stories

Kroker begins by acknowledging that natural human memory is selective. Vast numbers of facts are ordered according to the predilections of historians and arranged in comprehensible themes that ascribe "meaning" to the jumble of recalled events. While neither complete nor objective, the stories we tell ourselves do make our past intelligible. When, as always happens, competing versions of the same history appear, the possibility for dialogue, debate and disputation sometimes leads to at least a temporary negotiated consensus. Few uncontested truths are told, but enough common understanding can be generated to permit us to keep living and talking together within a sustainable community. So it happens that our memories - whether public or personal - constitute a useful fiction that serves (again using a Kenneth Burke phrase) as an "equipment for living." Not so with sampler music.

Data

Decontextualized data, as in the case of digitalized sound stored in computers, can be retrieved randomly and recombined according to aesthetic choices made by android processors in what Kroker calls, "transactional space." Therein, art is reconstructed outside of time, in multiple spaces quite beyond the creative intention of the composers, the attentive reflection of critics, and the authentic appreciation of an audience. "Art," he says, "is now a quantum fluctuation: a phase shift where all the old classical certainties dissolve, and where everything can finally be uncertain, probabilistic, and indeterminate." We now face "a manic art of dispersion and retrieval that marks the dissolution and cancellation of the social field. A quantum art that moves into sonic over-drive, actually dissolving into a detritus of acceleration and infinite speed." Such giddy prose may itself be part of the euphoria of the technological fetishism that Kroker elsewhere condemns as leading only to the revisitation of "the territory of remembered objects but remembered in a distorted way." Or, it may simply and accurately mimic the noise that surrounds us.

Kroker then extends his analysis from sampler music to the more worrisome fields of sampler genetics ("Why shouldn't genes go cybernetic?"), sampler politics, sampler economics and sampler strategies for environmental survival. Recombinant art may, after all, be a valid form of individual creativity, a kind of electronically-mediated collage of pictures, sounds, shapes and written words cleverly arranged to shock, amuse or instruct. But the juxtaposition of incongruous material for aesthetic or even didactic reasons implies the willingness to test the boundaries of reason; when such judgemental agnosticism goes further and seeks to erase those boundaries or to deny the legitimacy of any boundaries at all, it becomes monstrous. It allows "creation science" equal time with evolution; it permits UFOlogy the same status as astronomy; in the name of an uncritical cultural relativity, it equates cannibalism with French cuisine; it goes far beyond Jeremy Bentham's crude utilitarian admonition that the quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry, for it dispenses both with all empirical standards of judging facts and with any normative standards, even those that might privilege pleasure over pain.

Arthur Kroker insists that Weber's "dark intimation has already been eclipsed by our descent into the electronic cage of virtual reality. This electronic cage," he continues, "is driven by specialists fiercely possessed by the vision of technology as freedom, which can be so seductive because of the promise of a fantastic extension of the range of human (electronic) experience."

Freedom and Technology

We are especially susceptible to the attraction of information technology because we are beyond Nietzsche, who experienced an "unmediated sense of the death of God." We are beyond Weber who recoiled from the algorithm of greed in an age yet to be dominated by the motor car. We (to say nothing of our children and grandchildren) are "a generation born already post-historical ... we can only understand technology as freedom because for us the language of technology - fractals, holograms, brownian motion, chaos theory, smart drugs, data uplinks - is coeval with our own identity." And here, then, is the connection with conservatism and with the technologically obsolete language of George Grant.

Deprivation

In his essay, "A Platitude," which closed Technology and Empire (1969), Grant concluded that "all languages of good except the language of the drive for freedom have disintegrated, so it is just to pass some antique wind to speak of goods that belong to man as man. Yet the answer is always the same: if we cannot so speak, then we can either only celebrate or stand in silence before that drive. Only in listening for the intimations of deprivation can we live critically in that dynamo."

Arthur Kroker plays us a cyberpunk cacophony of the sounds of deprival. His recombinant, mutant, metamorphosed, total-immersion, postmodernist, postcapitalist, postcommunist, poststructuralist, posthistorical, postcritical, pre-posthumous cant may irritate some and dazzle others (pop philosopher Mark Kingwell surely hit the mark when he suggested that "a lot of Kroker's fans don't really know what the books mean but they like them anyway"). Still, Kroker descends into lucidity often enough to remind us that our culture is in a state of

degeneration. When he sometimes displays what seems like a lurid interest in the cyber-fringes of body piercing and automated bank tellers, he is only lightly masking an urgent sense of loss.

"Any intimations of authentic deprival are precious," argued George Grant, "because they are the ways through which intimations of good, unthinkable in public terms, may yet appear to us."

Question one: how can an awareness of deprival be launched into cyberspace? Marshall McLuhan understood that electronic communications technologies privileged the medium over the message, substituting new rhetorical and machine-generated special effects for meanings commonly shared. Question two: apart from blaming Protestantism for everything wicked in the world, how could McLuhan seek to infuse his Catholic sensibilities into cyberspace?

The Politics of Bill Gates

Kroker attempts to answers both questions. In a brief, poignant juxtaposition of events (barely coincidental as mere data but "deeply entwined" in Kroker's story), he associates the launching of Windows 95 and the fall of Srebenica. For him, it is the (almost?) "final division of the world into virtual flesh and surplus flesh." As Bill Gates sold his new compulsory software package, the United Nations allowed the destruction of one of its "safe havens" and lots and lots of people were wounded, maimed, mutilated and exterminated.

Arthur Kroker put it this way: "Windows 95 opens out onto the dominant ideology and privileged life position of digital flesh. It installs the new codes of the master occupants of virtual worlds: frenzied devotion to cyber-business, life in a multi-media virtual context, digital tunnel vision, and, most of all, embedded deep in the cerebral cortex of the virtual elite an I-chip: I, that is, for complete indifference. Technological acceleration is accompanied by a big shutting-down of ethical perception."

Kroker's conclusion to this short piece is worth repeating in whole: "In technology as in life, every opening is also a closing, and what is closed down by the tech hype of Windows 95 is consciousness of surplus flesh. That's Srebenica: the surplus flesh of Bosnian Muslims who do not have anything to contribute to virtual worlds: fit subjects only to be ethnically, and physically, disappeared. They can be ethnically cleansed because they have first been technically cleansed. They are surplus to world domination in a cyber-box."

Marx and Lenin and So On

Which brings up the fateful Leninist question: What is to be done? Michael A. Weinstein, collaborator and contributor to Arthur and Marilouise Kroker's erudite anthology Power and Ideology in the Age of Lenin in Ruins, has no trouble railing at the "parasite-predators" of corporate late capitalism, at Ronald Reagan's "postmodern mind ... at the level of the paneled basement den," and at the apocalyptic vision "of the day in which Jacobinism and capitalism finally fuse into techno-fascism." And yet ... and yet, there is hope.

Arthur Kroker does understand what power is. When he and Weinstein elaborated their theory of the virtual class, they were not jettisoning orthodox Marxism in favor of an amorphous critique of lifestyle, a "pousse-café" analysis of class divisions. Instead, they were affirming the

importance of ideology in the maintenance of social control and the importance of control over the media and the messages of electronic information.

For now, the messages seem to flow freely enough. People throughout China knew of the 1989 slaughter in Beijing because no government censorship could preclude faxes from North America. By similar means, people in southern Ontario knew the grisly details of the Karla Homolka trial despite a judicial "gag order" simply by "downloading" information feely published in American newspapers. Electronic information respects neither political borders nor juridical injunctions. All the virtual world knows about President Bill, Monica Lewinsky and the Starr Chamber. In all of this, Arthur Kroker occasionally and perhaps whimsically takes heart. He presents himself as a recombinant techno-populist nodding approvingly toward attempts to wire whole cities for electronic town meetings and digital plebiscites. He also knows that control over information technology means control over information in an age when the means of communication are more invasive than even before.

The obvious implication is that would-be policy innovators, who aspire to involve citizens in a participatory process leading to policy outcomes that genuinely reflect the "will of the people," have two related challenges. One is to ensure access to electronic information exchange for all people affected by particular policy choices; the other is to minimize the ability of established interests to dominate electronic discussion both by controlling what information is made available and by deciding what information shall be protected from public scrutiny. What seems inevitable are calls for a "bill of information rights" to include, perhaps, guarantees of privacy for individuals and of public disclosure for institutions.

Laudible as such an initiative might be, I worry some. Working men thought the universal male franchise would win them a world. Women thought that female suffrage would win them at least half a world. Somehow, though, the ideas of John Stuart Mill and HarrietTaylor Mill concerning both the legitimacy of democracy and the need for a knowledgeable electorate must be readdressed in the context of emerging communications technology. Before the potential for an informed citizenry has been "dumbed" out of existence and digital plebiscites have become authoritative public opinion polls on which dispossessed group most deserves to be cut off welfare, which public service might most usefully be privatized and which level of an inevitably lower standard of living we must accept in the interest of greater efficiency in the global marketplace, it is required of us that we reflect deeply on the notion of the civic society, the polity wherein concern for the public good takes at least an equal place with concern for private interests. If this either does not happen or if such reflection produces no pertinent political results, corporate control of cyberspace will subject perhaps the most innovative communications technology and the most dramatic opportunity for effective free expression since the printing press to succomb to the dictates of a political, economic and cultural agenda that may prove to be anything but democratic.

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An Arthur Kroker Sampler

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