Photographs of the Belgian landscape time and again in the same locations, reveal changes in plant population, in habitation and in architecture.

Recollecting Landscapes: landscape photography as a didactic tool

Bruno Notteboom

Recollecting Landscapes is a rephotographic survey project which documents a century of landscape transformation in Belgium.¹ It is based on the successive photography of sixty sites at three moments in time between 1904 and 2004 [1, 2]. This paper takes the project as a starting point to investigate the subject of the image and its presentation. This means that the text develops some thoughts on how the images in the project are displayed and read, rather than on the content they display.

Document and discourse

Recollecting Landscapes is marked by two ambitions: first, to make an inventory of representative landscapes and, second, to present this inventory to other scholars and to the general public. The project constructs a specific kind of archive, one that is set up both as an interpretative instrument and as a didactic tool. According to photographer Allan Sekula, in an archive the possibility of meaning is 'liberated': the archive is marked by a 'semantic availability'. It constitutes a 'territory of images' whose meanings are up for grabs.² Rephotography takes this availability as a starting point to embed images in a new logic and discourse. Images are reframed and meaning is redirected by layout, captions, text, and site and mode of presentation. Rephotography – like documentary photography in general – thus oscillates between document and discourse.³

An important evolution in the course of this project is the transition from print to pixel. The most recent rephotographic series in the *Recollecting Landscapes* project resulted in a proliferation of media: a sourcebook, a multimedia exhibition, a documentary film and an interactive website with an on-line archive (www.recollectinglandscapes.be). Digital technology seems to expose the oscillation

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¹ Rephotographic series from *Recollecting Landscapes* showing the evolution from an agricultural to a residential area

a Jean Massart, flax processing pits and fields in the Waas region, 1911.

b rephotography by Georges Charlier, 1980.

c rephotography by Jan Kempnaers, 2003. Source: Ghent University Library. © Georges Charlier, Jan Kempnaers

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2 Rephotographic series from *Recollecting Landscapes* showing the evolution from an agricultural to an industrial area

a Jean Massart, small-scale cultures in the village of Ruiselede, 1911.
b rephotography by Georges Charlier, 1980.

c rephotography by Jan Kempnaers, 2003. Source: Ghent University Library. © Georges Charlier, Jan Kempnaers

between document and discourse inherent in this kind of archival material. On the one hand, web applications enhance the accuracy of information storage. Web-related databases are an aid to adding unambiguous metadata about the original context of images: year, place and date of production, photographer, institutional context and so on. On the other hand, the availability of information on the web allows us to recontextualise images with an unprecedented ease. In the age of the internet, search engines such as Google Images have become an

important source of information for students as well as scholars. Anyone can now produce an instant PowerPoint presentation on any subject from behind their own desk. It goes without saying that in the limitless image archive of the internet, easy access prevails over accurate metadata. This evolution leads to one of the main questions behind this issue of *arq*: how should scholars deal with the proliferation of images? How do we prevent new technologies such as the web and PowerPoint presentations from resulting in a mere rhetorical parade of images without context? More generally speaking: how do we deal with the issue of information control when images migrate from one discursive context to another?

Archive, classroom, exhibition space

Each phase of *Recollecting Landscapes* took place in a specific context and served a different agenda. The first series was produced by botanist Jean Massart between 1904 and 1911 for his series of photographic albums *Les aspects de la végétation en Belgique* (*Aspects the vegetation of Belgium*).⁴ These albums were commissioned by the National Botanical Garden and the Ministry of Agriculture in order to make Massart's scientific research accessible to an audience beyond university staff and students. Because of the outbreak of the First World War, however, only the Flemish part of the country was documented. The second phase began in 1980 when the National Botanical Garden of Belgium asked Georges Charlier to rephotograph sixty of these sites, resulting in the book *Landschappen in Vlaanderen vroeger en nu. Van groene armoede tot grijze overvloed* (*Landscapes in Flanders then and now. From green poverty to grey abundance*).⁵ While the first two phases of the project were anchored in a botanical interest, the initiative for the most recent rephotography originated in a different disciplinary context. In 2004, the Flemish Architectural Institute commissioned photographer Jan Kempnaers to follow in the footsteps of Massart and Charlier. The rephotography this time was embedded in a research project on landscape transformation guided by the Department of Architecture & Urban Planning of Ghent University and the Ghent University Library under the title *Recollecting Landscapes*. This context broadened the scope of interest: apart from botany and agriculture, other aspects of landscapes were studied, especially in the field of architecture and urban planning.

To understand the didactic strategies involved in the various stages of the project, it is important to consider not only the maker of the images and the context in which they were created but also the viewer and the mechanisms of appropriation and control related to the context in which images are viewed. The following paragraphs explore the idea that in each phase of *Recollecting Landscapes* images have been viewed in a setting that relates to one or more of the following archetypical spaces of knowledge storage and display: the archive, the classroom and the exhibition space. These three types of spaces act – in varying configurations – as discursive spaces that mediate between maker and viewer.⁶

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The natural habitat of Massart's images is the classroom.⁷ His image archive was the main didactic aid for his teaching at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB). In addition, his photographic plates were used in the context of secondary education, particularly in agricultural schools. The plates of *Les aspects de la végétation en Belgique* were especially suitable for this purpose because of their large size (30 x 40 cm) and their clear, systematic overview of the Belgian geobotanical regions. Moreover, Massart made the educational space of the classroom accessible to a large section of the population by means of numerous lectures all over the country and by special courses at the ULB aimed at the middle and working classes.⁸

Right from the start, Massart conceived of his image archive as a tool for the communication of knowledge: apart from his scientific atlases he published numerous popularising books, articles, tourist guides and similar material.⁹ He was convinced of the advantages of modern techniques for didactic purposes. Stereo photography, for example, served in the geobotanical atlases as the medium that allowed the most faithful depiction of the vegetation. To create a maximum effect of immersion, the classroom was transformed into a projection room, making use of the large collection of projection slides that was the core of his archive. One step further were the mobile laboratories used by Massart to organise guided botanical excursions, especially at the Belgian coast [3]. By this means the logic of the classroom was projected back on the physical landscape.

In the process of translation from photographic image to presentation, the work of Massart shifted from document to discourse in a subtle way. He repeatedly stressed that his photographic archive

3 Excursion at the Belgian coast, guided by Jean Massart (1912). Source:

Massart, J. (1912), 'La 50e herborisation de la Société Royale Belge de Botanique.

Sur le littoral Belge', *Bulletin de la Société Royale Belge de Botanique* (51): 70–185

was a scientific, systematic and therefore objective registration of the Belgian geobotanical regions – which he opposed to contemporary artistic and 'pseudo-poetic' landscape imagery.¹⁰ Indeed, the dreamy scenography of simple peasant life that was characteristic of contemporary pictorialist landscapes, was absent in Massart's pinpoint-sharp images. The objectifying aim was underlined by the data that surround the photographic images in the plates of *Les Aspects*: the date, the coordinates of the viewpoint, the direction in which the photo was taken, and so on. However, considered in its entirety, this photographic series was not a neutral inventory of representative landscapes, but constructed a narrative of its own. Modern phenomena that had changed the rural world, such as the railway and modern agricultural techniques, were left out. Massart created an image of clearly distinguished geobotanical districts, where the peasants' way of life was in close correspondence with the geographical features of the landscape, an image of a reality that in the early twentieth century had already largely disappeared. From this perspective, his photographic plates were not only inscribed in the logic of the classroom, but in a museum logic as well: these photos can almost be read as dioramas of representative landscapes of the past of the type found in science museums all over the world. This was soon acknowledged by Massart: in 1912 he published his influential *Pour la protection de la nature en Belgique* (*For the protection of nature in Belgium*), a plea to preserve samples of typical landscapes of the various geobotanical districts.¹¹

1904. De Gaijeschore, een groot lang te droogtelevan van de zeeschelde, strekte zich wegten die in 1900 herstelde toefograafische kaart uit over een reeks van 300-400 m en ten singele van twee anderhalf km. De vaartwater omtrent wegden nooit in totaal behouden. Wat vermaad: Maarsia (1910) dat wet het verzoelen van de Godelde naar Antwerpen toe, zoosten als lampen (Limonium vulgare), Engels gra (Amaris maritima) en andere, achtertieve blaau, wietten soeten als soeren (Rigidum), zeeveegden (Paragus maritima) en zeelien (Scirpus maritima) ten beang soosten.

De fides van de Gaijeschore was in 1904 niet anders dan de fides van de Godelde. De fides van de Gaijeschore was zchaalr ten schat der schone. Een algoutkrake vegetatie, vermoedelijk van zeelien, strekt zich uit in de diepe inham die zchaalr is naar de aan te achtertieve toe. Schone en achtertieve gullen zeiken zoogen op die van Nieuwpoort (1910) naar, wat vermoedelijk bestaat de graast ten overwegend op groen weelsterges (Puccinellia maritima). Het korpelchoren uitzicht laan

Antwerpen (ex Lillo), Galgeschors, rechtsboven van de Schelde, 51°16' 28" Nbr., 4°17' 00" Cl. NW
Foto links: 22.9.1904 (Messart 1905a: pl. 46), foto rechts: 25.7.1990 (Charlier)

2

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Charlier 37
Libe (nu Antwerpen)
natuurreserveaat
Galgeschoor
25 juli 1980
51° 16' 28" NR
04° 17' 08" OL
NW

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The 1980 rephotography project aligned with the mission of Massart in its objectifying ambition. Indeed, even today researchers at the National Botanical Garden still stress the ‘completely objective’ goal of rephotography: it is a scientific, not an artistic project.¹² According to Georges Charlier, the role of the photographer is to serve science, not to make a personal interpretation. The results of the rephotography were communicated by means of a didactic book that unequivocally confronted ‘before’ and ‘after’: a selection of Massart’s landscapes on the left pages of the book and their 1980 counterparts on

the right pages [4]. However, even if the photographer claims a neutral registration of landscape transformations, the layout and the captions of the book steer the interpretation of the photos in one direction: the decline of biodiversity. Not surprisingly, the co-editor of the book was the Belgian Association for Nature and Bird Reserves. On the cover, the subtitle of the book – *From green poverty to grey abundance* – unambiguously reveals its agenda. In the book itself, the reader's gaze is steered in a more subtle way. The framing of the photos aimed at a comparison without being distracted by

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4 Double page from *Landschappen in Vlaanderen vroeger en nu*, displaying the evolution of the vegetation at the banks of the River Scheldt and the construction of a nuclear plant in the background. On the left page: a reproduction of the image from a didactic plate from *Les aspects de la végétation en Belgique* of Massart, photographed in 1904. The information in the margin of the plate has been cut off. On the right page, rephotography by Charlier from 1980. Source: Vanhecke, L. et al., *Landschappen in Vlaanderen*

vroeger en nu. Van groene armoede naar grijze overvloed (Meise: Nationale Plantentuin van België, 1981). © Georges Charlier

5 Image section of *Recollecting Landscapes*, showing the same location as fig. 2. On the left page the didactic plate of Massart is displayed in its entirety. On the right page: rephotography by Georges Charlier in 1980 and by Jan Kempenaers in 2003 (in colour). Source: Uyttenhove, P. et al., *Recollecting Landscapes. Herfotografie, geheugen en transformatie 1904–1980–2004* (Ghent:

A&S Books, 2006). © Georges Charlier, Jan Kempenaers

6 Exhibition installation for *Recollecting Landscapes* at the SMAK museum for contemporary art in Ghent in 2006. On the left the 'archive' volume with the analogue photographic series; on the right the 'classroom' volume with the digital photographs and documentary film. © Geert Roels

7 Analogue photographic material in the 'archive' volume at the *Recollecting Landscapes* exhibition. © Geert Roels

coincidental details: all landscapes were rephotographed at the same time of year under the same kind of light, and the sepia of the images of Massart was translated to the black and white of Charlier. The original captions that accompanied Massart's didactic plates were replaced by new ones that focused on the disappearance of the majority of the plant species and crops from the early century. In the images in which natural or agricultural landscapes had made way for industrial or residential developments, the evolution to a 'grey abundance' was unmistakable. But these captions

helped the viewer to read the decline in biodiversity also in landscapes that, to the untrained eye, seemed to have changed very little over time. As a result, the 'objective' exactitude of rephotography was a perfect rhetorical instrument with which to stress only certain aspects of landscape transformation. The message of the project was further communicated to the public at large by means of a travelling exhibition. This exhibition was displayed in local community centres all over the country, temporarily transforming them into the didactic space of the classroom.

In both Massart's original project and in the 1980 rephotography, little space is left between document and discourse. In an aura of scientific objectivity the meaning of the photographic image is directly and unambiguously steered by its presentation. The research team behind the 2004 rephotography was fully aware of the impact on the viewer of the various kinds of didactic spaces and chose this observation as the starting point for an exhibition in the SMAK, the Ghent museum for contemporary art, in 2006. The tension between document and discourse was thematised by displaying the exhibition material in two separate architectural volumes [4, 6]. The first volume, containing the rephotographic triptychs, evoked the space of the archive while the second volume can be regarded as a series of classrooms. The wall of photographic prints in the first volume allowed the visitor to look at the photos as documents, without being distracted by textual interpretations [7]. The second volume consisted of three rooms, separated by glass walls [8]. In the first room – a projection room – a documentary film was on display, following photographer Jan Kempenaers on his journey. In the second room the visitor could consult the website. The third room showed *Interpretations*, another documentary in which five specialists on domains such as urban planning, agriculture and history of photography commented upon the photos.¹³ This film conveys the extensive scholarly research conducted by faculty staff and students to the audience. At the same time it exposes the aspect of appropriation that is inherent in any interpretation of archival material: the camera slowly follows the gaze and comments of the (all male) specialists, with their bookshelves as background [9]. In this way, the documentary acts not only as an analysis of the content of the images but also as a commentary on how we read them.

The most prominent media produced to disseminate the academic research, however, are the book *Recollecting Landscapes* and the website www.recollectinglandscapes.be. The book fulfils multiple functions: it is part an inventory, part an art catalogue and part a scientific atlas [5]. In the image section, apart from a third image, new captions were added. However, to expose the history of interpretations and narratives, the captions of the two previous stages were also displayed, as were Massart's original plates displayed in their entirety. A second part of the book consists of a selection of case studies. These are detailed analyses of the mechanisms behind the landscape transformations of five rephotographic series. The final part offers, as in the documentary *Interpretations*, a reflection on the content and the presentation of the images by means of a number of discussions between specialists.

The website, developed by Ghent University Library, is in essence a transposition of the material offered in the exhibition and the book to the space of the web [10]. However, this medium allows an endless variety of connections between the research materials. For instance, the photographic archive can be consulted by means of a map that gives an overview of the sixty sites; a click of the mouse leads

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8 Digital photographic material, documentary films and website inside the 'classroom' volume at the *Recollecting Landscapes* exhibition. © SMAK Ghent

9 Still from the documentary film *Interpretations*. © Terenja Van Dijk

10 *Recollecting Landscapes* website. The dots on the map indicate the location of the photographed sites. When a dot is clicked on, a 'timescape' (the three moments in time shown in a loop) appears. Source: www.recollectinglandscapes.be. © Georges Charlier, Jan Kempenaers

the visitor to a 'timescape' of every site. Another way to explore the photos is to view all the images from one time period one after another. The structure of the website allows multiple trajectories through the archive, searching by location, date or photographer, accompanied by textual captions. As with many similar websites, digital technology allows users to

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construct their own path in a myriad of images and textual information. The website – also on display in the exhibition – in fact becomes a virtual exhibition space in itself, parallel to the museum. But whereas the museum scenography literally articulates the archive and the classroom as two separate spaces, the website hybridises them.

Conclusion: the researcher as curator of knowledge

Throughout the three phases of *Recollecting Landscapes*, landscape images are viewed in a context that can be read as an interplay between archetypical spaces: the archive, the classroom and the exhibition space. While in the first two phases the stress was on the scientific-didactic mission of (re)photography, the third phase acknowledged other discursive layers. Not only was the tension between discourse and document made explicit by the design of the exhibition; reflection on how and in which context we read images also became an integral part of the project. The creation of a critical distance towards the photographic material and its interpretation must be situated within two – interrelated – evolutions: the changing institutional context in which documentary photography is displayed and the changing position of the viewer. These changes have an undeniable influence on the role of the researcher today. The researcher operates in a field of knowledge creation and distribution that spreads beyond the boundaries of the academic world.

The fact that the third phase of the project was displayed in an art museum, literally transfers the photographic archive from a scientific to an artistic context. Jan Kempenaers, the photographer of the third series, can be situated in line with what is often called the Becher-Schule, in reference to the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher and their pupils, who introduced documentary photography into the art world in the early 1990s. 'Liberating' documentary photography from a tradition of scientific argumentation, narration and direct engagement opened the possibility for new references, for instance art history.¹⁴ In Kempenaers' images this is reflected in the use of colour and a slightly different camera angle. By lowering the horizon, in many images he draws the attention to the landscape composition as a whole, rather than to the (disappearing) plant species in the foreground. Kempenaers' landscapes thus derive their meaning not only from their position in the scientific narrative created by the series of images – each image is also meant as a tableau in itself.

The introduction of a project as *Recollecting Landscapes* in the museum was made possible by the changing positions between institutions of knowledge production and display. Today, interdisciplinarity has become a key term in the academic world as well as in the arts. Universities are exploring new modes of knowledge, in Belgium for example by means of alliances with art schools. Meanwhile, museums are aspiring to a more central role in society. The director of the SMAK compares the role of the contemporary museum with an engine: it has the ambition to bring together different actors (artists, scientists, institutions, ...) and to offer them a forum.¹⁵

Apart from this institutional setting, the position of the viewer has changed through the various stages of the project. While in the first two phases archival material was displayed and explained in a single direction – from maker to viewer – the proliferation of media in the last stage seems to offer the viewer

the possibility to create his or her own trajectory. This shift from a passive to an active viewer is strongly connected with the rise of digital image processing: we now live in an era in which the public is not only constantly exposed to images but has also the tools to distribute and manipulate them. The role of the researcher, on the other hand, becomes comparable with that of the curator in an art museum. Instead of offering one narrative that determines how the public looks at the photos, the researcher offers many layers of information: the researcher becomes a 'curator of knowledge'.

However, in spite of the more active role of the public in this last phase, the role of this curator remained crucial in the project. After all, it is still this curator who steers and controls the transfer of information, albeit in a more subtle and pluriform way. Although in the 2006 exhibition the boundaries between archive, classroom and exhibition space seem to have blurred, especially in the virtual space of the website, these environments still offer a closed space, an 'inside' in which it is possible to communicate a critical and informed attitude towards research material.¹⁶ Such a critical attitude proved difficult to maintain in the 'outside' world of the press, both digital and paper-based. The team of curators saw the popular media as a means of expanding the audience from scholars and art connoisseurs to the public at large – not least because rephotography is a very comprehensive medium. Nevertheless, it turned out to be very difficult to find the different layers of information in

the numerous articles that appeared in newspapers and magazines around the opening of the exhibition, which mostly focused on the more spectacular forms of landscape transformation. A complex project such as *Recollecting Landscapes* proves to be very vulnerable outside its controlled environment. It is only within this didactic space that photography can fully develop its critical potential regarding its historical, social and political context.

To address the question of how one can avoid ranking presentation over content, this paper has considered the form of presentation, the position of the viewer and the context in which s/he operates. *Recollecting Landscapes* is an example of how traditional didactic spaces can survive in the digital era. Although the way an image is presented in the space of the world-wide web differs radically from the traditional presentation of analogue material in the museum, both spaces encounter the same questions of appropriation, control and distribution of information. If the web blurs the boundaries of traditional didactical spaces, those who decide how images are viewed become all the more important. Because of the presence of the figure of the curator/researcher as mediator, the presentation of the photographic material in *Recollecting Landscapes* still takes place in the 'inside' spaces of the archive, the classroom and the exhibition space – even if they have become virtual. The presence of such an 'inside' prevents the presentation from disconnecting document and discourse.

Notes

- The results of this project can be consulted in: Uyttenhove, P., D. Vanbelleghem, et al., *Recollecting Landscapes. Herfotografie, geheugen en transformatie 1904–1980–2004* (Ghent: A&S Books, 2006). For more information on the rephotographic project: Notteboom, B. and P. Uyttenhove (2004), 'A Documentary of the Flemish Countryside. Photography of Jean Massart, Georges Charlier and Jan Kempnaers 1904–2003', *Oase* (63): 14–31 and Notteboom, B. and P. Uyttenhove (2005), 'Rephotographier les paysages flamands en transformation, 1904–2004', *Les Carnets du Paysage* (12): 150–75.
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- See: Krauss, R. (1982), 'Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View', *Art Journal* 42(4): 311–19 and Herschberger, A. E. (2006), 'Krauss's Foucault and the foundations of postmodern history of photography', *History of Photography* 30(1): 55–67.
- On the work of Jean Massart: Notteboom, B. (2006), 'Een neutraal beeld bestaat niet. De fotografie van Jean Massart', in: Uyttenhove, P. et al., *Recollecting Landscapes*: 22–37.
- Within the framework of the so-called Extension de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, a of people's university organised by the ULB. See: B. Notteboom, 'Ouvrons les yeux!' *Stedenbouw en beeldvorming van het landschap in België 1890–1940* (doctoral dissertation) (Ghent: Ghent University, 2009), 83–4.
- For example: Massart, J., 'Histoire naturelle du littoral', in: *La Mer* (Brussels: Touring Club de Belgique, 1922), 39–117; Massart, J., *Le Front de Flandre* (Brussels: Touring Club de Belgique, 1919).
- Massart, J., *Nos Arbres* (Brussels: Lamertin, 1911), p. iii.
- Massart, J., *Pour la protection de la nature en Belgique* (Brussels: Lamertin, 1912). Massart also projected this museum logic on the actual territory: in 1914 he pleaded for the conservation of a number of representative farms

- and the surrounding agricultural landscapes as, effectively, on-site open-air museums. (1914). 'Section des Sites. Séances des 20 juin et 22 août 1914', *Bulletin des Commissions Royales d'Art et d'Archéologie*: 126–35.
12. Avermaete, T., G. Charlier, et al. (2006). 'Conserveren, digitaliseren, toegankelijk maken', in: Uyttenhove et al. *Recollecting Landscapes*: 364–372 and Vanhecke et al. (1981), *Landschappen in Vlaanderen vroeger en nu*: 9.
 13. Terenja Van Dijk (2006), *Interpretations* (documentary film).
 14. Gierstberg, F. (2005). 'Van realisme naar reality?', in: Gierstberg et al. *Documentaire nu!*: 130–53.
 15. Uyttenhove et al. (2006). *Recollecting Landscapes*: 357–8.
 16. On the idea of such an 'inside': Gierstberg, F. (2005). 'Van realisme naar reality': 147–9. Gierstberg distinguishes the classroom and the theatre as archetypical spaces of representation in relation to documentary photography.

Illustration credits

arq gratefully acknowledges
 Georges Charlier, 4
 Georges Charlier, Jan Kempnaers, 1,
 2, 5, 10
 Geert Roels, 6, 7
 SMAK Ghent, 8
 Terenja Van Dijk, 9

Biography

Bruno Notteboom is an engineer-architect and urban planner. He has worked in practice and as a researcher at the Universities of Ghent, Leuven and Tel Aviv. His doctorate is from Ghent University with the dissertation 'Ouvrons les yeux'. *Stedenbouw en beeldvorming van het landschap in België*

1890–1940 / 'Ouvrons les yeux'. *Urban planning and landscape iconography in Belgium 1890–1940*. Now he works as a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Architecture & Urban Planning at Ghent University. He is co-founder of the research project *Recollecting Landscapes* (since 2006, see www.recollectinglandscapes.be) and co-director of the research project *The Photographer and The City. The practice of Edmond Sacré* (2008–2011). He is member of the editorial board of *Oase*.

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