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LEV VYGOTSKY'S THEORY OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

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Not everything that flowered once must wilt,
Not everything that was must pass.
Tiutchev (1826)

Introduction

Nowadays the contemporary debate about the function and place of aesthetic experience in the art education is a returning theme visited by philosophers, psychologists and all educators. The aesthetic education for the XXI century demands a crossing between understanding and knowledge of the theoretic proposal presented by authors in this area. Within the group of classical authors Lev Semeonovitch Vygotsky (1896-1934), and his theoretic contribute towards the psychology of art is the object of analysis in this chapter. We pretend to identify the possibilities and understand the potentialities of his theoretic proposal in the modern research of aesthetic education. Lev Vygotsky is a remarkable author, and founder of cultural psychology with his understanding of the psychological and pedagogical thought. We shall essay here a chart of central concepts of the psychology of aesthetic experience where the definition of catharsis, sublimation, creativity and imagination shall be included.

The studies developed by Lev Vygotsky on psychology have had an important impact in several fields of knowledge and throughout the last decade his work has been theoretically enlarged by Michael Cole (1998, 2007), James Wertsch (1988, 2007), Vasily Davydov (1995), while his texts on art and aesthetics have been interpreted by Valdimir Sobkin and Dmitry Leontiev (1992), David West (1999, 2001) and Gunila Lindqvist (2003).

Lev Vygotsky is known to have been one an amazing personality of XX century Psychology (Toulmin, 1978, Rivière, 1985). The theory of psychologic development, which was elaborated in a short space of time, using an amazing creativity in visual arts, literature, critics and philosophy of art is inserted within a particular political and intellectual geography. During the 1924 to 1934 decade developed an intense scientific activity placing himself in the front line of XX century psychologists, such as James Baldwin (1861-1934), Jean Piaget (1896-1980) or Henry Wallon (1879-1962), they revealed the importance of aesthetic dimension as an integrating element of the cognitive and moral development of the

human being.¹ The originality of his work, with an inestimable epistemological interest towards several areas of knowledge, was recognised worldwide through the English version of his book *Thought and Language* (1962). His first articles, which were written during his period as a student in Moscow and teacher in the city of Gomel (Vygotskaya and Lifanova, 1996), were about literature and theatre/drama critic. There is a clear relationship between these works on artistic creativity and the historic-cultural theory of the psychological development, where he is better known for the non-classical model of psychology.

Lev Vygotsky has worked three specific scopes of knowledge: The education, aesthetics and psychology. His ideas, formed during the Russian revolutionary years, reflected upon scientific and social ideas of the times, were all related to the human historic development present in the Marxist philosophy. His views on mental development are related with the theory and practice of the Russian symbolist movement, patent in poetry, plastic arts, theatre and cinema. In the arts, the symbolism was born in opposition to the naturalism, and in Russia heard through the verses of Andrei Belyi, Alexander Blok, Osip Mandelshtam, and Boris Pasternak amongst others. This movement spread into the performances of Vsevolod Meyerhold and in the films of Sergei Eisenstein. As well as, in the speech on aesthetics and arts the symbolism also had its role part, usually, in opposition to the scientific naturalism, in psychology.

The importance given to aesthetic education and the psychology of artistic creativity was revealed by Lev Vygotsky in his works in aesthetic currents, with incidence in the critic of currents of thought in formalistic and symbolism in the art and in psychology. In 1927 and 1928 published, in the magazine *Soviet Art Journal*, 2 articles under the title *Psychology and Contemporary Art*. In the beginning of the twenties wrote about Hamlet, Andrei Bely and Viacheslav Ivanov and on the new tendencies of the theatre and literature. Before writing the book *Psychology of Art*, wrote the essay named *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Nevertheless, in fact he initiated his writing of *Psychology of Art* during the period he lived in Gomel, at the end of 1924 or in the beginning of 1925, when he moved to Moscow. During this period he produced several interpretations of Hamlet's works, the most important of them all is the *Psychology of Art* presented, in 1925, as his Doctoral thesis at the University of Moscow.

The structural unities of his aesthetic theory are found fundamentally in chapter XIII of the book *Educational Psychology*, published for the first time in 1926 and reedited in Russia 1991². At the end of the thirties, this text was taken off circulation because references to Leon Trotsky and to Bukharine were found. In this chapter defends that the aesthetic and artistic dimension of human development should be an important component of the educational process; considering aesthetic education within the specific sense of artistic education. In fact, It was in this chapter where he revealed with a clear formulation of such thought

¹ On the contribution of James Baldwin towards the psychology of aesthetic development see Michael Parsons chapter Aesthetic Development published in the book edited by John Broughton, *The cognitive developmental psychology of James Mark Baldwin: Current theory and research in genetic psychology*, New Jersey, Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1980.

² Apart from the texts on literary and aesthetic critic mentioned in 1932, wrote *To the problem of the psychology of the actor and creativity* published in 1936 by Roman Jakobson in *Psychology of the actor's stage sentiments* (1936). This text is part of the 6th volume of the complete Works of L S Vygotsky (1984) edited in URSS.

the structural analogies in specific processes of art creation and preception: “Before we ask ourselves why it is that we read, we must ask ourselves why it is that people write” (Vygotsky, 1997: 250). The analysis of the creative process defended also positions him close to the thesis in sublimatory process, the most probable of the conceptions about creativity of modern psychology, which Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) turned into an issue in his texts about arts, mainly on literary creation. The answer given by Vygotsky to indagations formulated in the following way “our capacities exceed our activity, what a person accomplishes in life is only an insignificant fraction of all those sensations that arise in the nervous system, and it is precisely this discrepancy between capacities and realization, between the potential and the real in our life, which is fully encompassed by the creative effort.” Vygotsky, 1997: 251).

For Vygotsky, until that time, the main representatives of psychology and pedagogy had not solved the fundamental problems that involved nature, the objects, and the methods of aesthetic education. Some authors denied the educative role inherent to the experiences and aesthetic sentiments, other pedagogues and psychologists exaggerated the sense of aesthetic emotions seeing them as a radical pedagogic resource that solves the difficult and complex problems inherent to education. Between these two opposite poles were the most moderate attitudes, such as, the ones that considered the sense of aesthetic education like an entertainment function and hedonic benefit inherent to the practice of arts. Aesthetics put to the service of education and pedagogy would perform, according with their opinion, a strictly functional purpose, would serve to know, feel and educate the moral purpose, which for Lev Vygotsky wasn't at all an end itself, but would lead to the instrumentation of art. It was indispensable thus to let go the conception that the aesthetic emotions had a strict relation with the moral thought and all work of art would involve a kind of impulse towards behaviours ruled by moral laws. The interpretation of art and the aesthetic emotion under the light of the moral interpretation minimized the aesthetic experience, such as the “contamination theory of art” defended by Lev Tolstoy (Vygotsky, 1927/1928; 1997). The aesthetic education (artistic) in his opinion could not be equally reduced to the mere social and factual knowledge of the world of arts – “It is just as impossible to study the history of the Russian intelligentsia using Works of Russian literature as it is to study geography using the novels of Jules Verne, though, of course both have left their mark in literature” (Vygotsky, 1997: 245). At last, considers that the aesthetic feeling cannot be reduced to an hedonic dimension of the relation with the arts because it distances itself from the actual purpose of art approximating to the actual life experience. The uninterested relation with the objects, their contemplation, the lack of a personal position regarding the aesthetic object are all an indispensable condition for the aesthetic answer to break through, but all these elements are only half true elements regarding the nature of experience and aesthetic reaction. Vygotsky prefers to consider that aesthetic experience, which is organised and built from the relation with works of art stimulate in the organism a kind of reaction different from what usually occurs and it is that specificness, bounded to the aesthetic stimulus that the author will explore in his proposal of psychology of art and concurrently on the idea of a psychology of aesthetic experience.

The Psychology of Art and Aesthetic Experience

The psychological mechanisms of the literary creation and the semiologic questions that related with structure, and the functions of symbols, signs and poetic images are the heart of Lev Vygotsky aesthetic theory (West, 1999, 2001). Like Baruch Espinosa (1632-1677) understood that Mankind, himself, is an instrument of thought. The feelings and affections are not only the feel of the body, but are also the ideas on that feel; a part of the emotional life that is a question mark itself for the psychological science. Apart from social relations, the heart of personality is organised through the emotions, which in their turn are revealed and demonstrated through, mime, voice, body language and their body peripheries. The emotions are also revealed through mental life, in the internal mental procedure of actions, in the semantic subtleness of artistic nature introduced in the works of art. If this link, between the emotional and the semantic does not happen then art is reduced to a mere formalism and conceptualism. Therefore, emotions occur within the thought. Vygotsky describes the thought, which involves the production and fruition of art, as an “emotional thought”. The products of both imagination and/or fantasy are primordial for the arts and new intrapsychic elaborations. We do not associate only, but just as well, affections and feelings that follow those images; Most of mental dynamics, such as the oniric process or creative process are associated to this type of thought. Mental life understands it like a continuous drainage, an open building process of meanings linked. The purpose of this approximation is the understanding of the whole, but the whole is nothing without the parts, and vice-versa. In this sense, the dialog with works of arts must not be only analysed through emotions and feelings otherwise, they will disturb the interpretation of art analysis.

For Vygotsky the “To be or not to be” of the psychology of art and aesthetic experience is materialised through method. Vygotsky questioned the two main research directions of his time. Emphasised the complexity inherent to the creative processes and artistic fruition, and of the probability of these being represented by laws. This difficulty will determine the unfeasibility of going from the work of the artist to his psychology. On the other hand, and generally speaking, it was also frustrating to analyse the emotions of the creators, considering that they usually hide behind the individual sphere of unconsciousness. Refuting these two poles of research, the object of study of art psychology would be focused, in the actual work of art and its structural study, and not in its author or creator, the structure of the work of art is determinant for the aesthetic answer and it does not reveal one specific aspect of the individual psychic processes. The psychological study of art ran within two areas: The area of the psychology of the creator revealed in the specific work and the experience and reaction of the spectator and reader of the works. The direct study of these two processes it is ineffective, therefore, it is necessary to find an indirect method, similar to the methods used in criminal investigation. Vygotsky knew that direct testimonies were difficult to obtain and their truthfulness uncertain. The indirect methods used in natural and social sciences could be used in the psychological approximation of art and artistic creation, for which was necessary the presence of the work of art, or of literature and not its reader or creator. Just as it happens in crime evidence or in the researches of a geologist, there would be anything immediately psychological in this object, in the work of art. The scheme would follow a path: Starting at the artistic shape, crossing the functional analysis of their elements and structures to

reach the recreation of the aesthetic answer and meet the general laws. In this approach, the creative process was isolated from the perceptive process.

For the psychology of art, Lev Vygotsky, apart from the method that he calls of analytical-objective, proposes a definition of art like a “Social technique of the emotions” with a prospective function (anticipating) and the aesthetic shape is the instrument of affectionate transformation (Leontiev, 1997). The analytical-objective method in his own words – “assure us enough objectivity of the results gathered and of the whole research system, because it always starts from the study of realities that exist objectively and taken into account from the following formulation: From the shape of the work of art, going to the functional analysis of its elements and from the structure to the recreation of the aesthetic answer and the establishment of their general laws” (Vygotsky, 1998: 27).

Once defined the scope of the relation between art and the human development the method and the object of the psychology of art will include the research of the psychic functions related intrinsically with the aesthetic experience, imagination, aesthetic feelings and their aesthetic perception. The structuring characteristics of this conception of art psychology are organised around the work, the creator and fruiter: 1.) The art [and artistic creation] is always associated to a complex mental activity; 2.) The work of art is polysemous; 3.) The sensorial, motor, associating, intellectual and emotional factors interfere in the “aesthetic answer”; 4.) The common emotions are of peripheral nature, and bounded to external manifestations, while the aesthetic emotions are of cortical nature (with components of intellectual nature; 5); The images generated under the influx of certain emotions, may exercise a role of stimulus which in their turn generate new images; 6.) The generated images have very little to do with reality; 7.) The aesthetic emotions are illusionary, central and cognitive and associated to imagination and fantasy. Vygotsky does not disregard the affectionate sphere and the feelings of the being from the theoretic operational field because it will be difficult to understand art without the involvement of the allured dimensions. Then psychology of art can be, on one hand, orientated towards the discovery of complex relations between the shape and contents of the works, between arising emotions and evoked meanings and on the other, for the unconscious processes that are the basis of creation and artistic fruition.

“...All works of art are naturally seen by the psychologist as a system of stimulus, organised in a conscious but deliberate manner with the purpose of reaching the “aesthetic answer”. By analysing the structure of stimulus, we recreate the structure of answer. This is explained with the simplest example. We study the rhythmic structure of some part of a speech, we deal all the time with the non psychological facts, but by analysing that rhythmic structure of the speech as oriented in several ways in order to get a correspondingly functional answer, through that analysis and with basis in totally objective data we recreate some of the lines of the aesthetic answer. Apart from this, it is evident that, recreated like this, the aesthetic answer will be absolutely impersonal, i.e. it will not belong to any specific individual neither will reflect an individual psychic process in its wholeness, thus this will be solely its merit. This circumstance will help us organising the nature of aesthetic answer in its genuine shape, without mixing it with all the surrounded processes, which occur in the individual psychic.” (Vygotsky, 1998: 26)

The aesthetic experience as written by Vygotsky includes the perception and the aesthetic answer, catharsis and sublimation, imagination and creativity. How does Vygotsky understand the aesthetic experience? In the first place, he considered it, ambiguous in its nature i.e., reflected in a simple manner in the irony or in the most complex shapes like in the tragedy. Such ambivalence arises from the contradictory nature of the aesthetic feeling where physical pain can occur resulting from the contemplation of a tragic event and, at the same time, a unique sensation of triumph evoked by the tragedy on its whole. These transformations, in fact, do not occur in a spontaneous manner they occur under the influence of complex semiotic mechanisms of construction of senses, which characterise certain artistic types and attribute its aesthetic value. Going from the principle that each way of expression has its own characteristics, suggests a provisional understanding system of the aesthetic experience: The unconscious impulse of the creator is codified in social semiotic forms that are revealed in the “literary text” as materials and formal techniques. The reader by trying out this double structure of the “text” develops contradictory affectionate sensations that are in conflict and associated to the contents and to the artistic shape. The original source of these affections can also be related with the unconscious: the tension will increase up to the moment where the reader – fruiter reaches a state of catharsis, i.e., when the formal and artistic aspect, can overcome the material aspect of the “text”. The affectionate discharge takes the shape of intense fantasy which restructures totally, the personal experience of the reader - fruiter.

It seems “easy” to see that the proposal of Vygotsky for aesthetic experience is harmonious with his theory on “psychological tools” developed for his general theory about cognitive development. The aesthetic experience involves unconscious processes of the author codified in specific semiotic forms that are born in the work of art. In contact with the art, the observer develops an affectionate conflictual direction whose origin can be situated in the unconscious. The tension increases up until the moment where affectionate discharges occur in the shape of fantasy allowing the restructure the personal experience of the subject. In fact, the analogy which Vygotsky proposes, in the psychology of art, between material and technical semiotic tools used by the creators in their activity is on the whole similar to the parallelism between the material and symbolic tools which help to transform the “natural” cognitive functions into “cultural” functions. In this system, the cultural scope includes in its origin the aesthetic dimension of human development.

We find here an interpretation of artistic creation as an energy liberating process, going from the sublimation of the non-conscious processes leading to consciousness. By being elaborated symbolically, they return to the mental life with a new value. As a counter current of the official ideological atmosphere in the Russia of the twenties, Vygotsky considered that the art in its essence and the reality of life relate in a complex manner. The reality transfigures into art, there is no place for a direct transference regarding what occurs in art in general and in the works of art for the phenomenon of life. The art is assumed as symbolization of the reality of the cultural phenomena, as a modified reality and expression of the unconscious.

A structuring pivot of the aesthetic experience relates with the congeniality of the artistic creation and perception: “The reader must be congenial and solidaire with the poet. By perceiving the work of art, we recreate it every time we are in touch

with it. One can define perception as a recreation process and the reproduction of creation itself.” (Vygotsky, 1999: 251). One of the most important consequences of this conceptualization regarding aesthetic perception is based on the conviction that perception is an internal and complex activity and that the act of seeing and listening is only a cover up for the perceptive act. This idea distances the structural and impersonal analysis of art and approximates it to the psychological analysis of the relation between art and the real person: “A work of art can not be understood by any person”, says, “The perception process is a complex and difficult mental work” (Vygotsky, 1999: 252). The mental work involved in the creative process and in the artistic perception, it will always be open, unsolved; concretely because there is place for an extreme complexity which evolves the activity of the listener and of the reader, creates and builds an aesthetic object with basis in the external impressions where all the subsequent answers are referred exclusively to this object – “a painting is for sure more than a rectangular piece of canvas with colour”. When the observer interprets the painting and its colours as a representation of a person, an object or of any other event this complex work of transforming a coloured canvas into painting is the work of the spectator’s mind.

One other concept used is the concept of catharsis. Catharsis is the best way of understanding the relationship of the individual with the art. It means the purification of passions and the freedom of “resented emotions”. If the arts affect the emotions of its fruiter, then communication has failed. The highest manifestation of emotional influence in the public is realised through the catharsis, where it is used by the author clearly in the book *Psychology of Art*, to designate the discharge of emotions accumulated by the spectator or by the reader when “affected” by a work of art. This concept was integrated in several theories on art, from Lessing to Goeth. It is equally about ethical, ethic-aesthetic, psychophysical, religious and mystic conceptions. Although, its utilization in several moments and situations is real, its definition has carried out vague and few concepts but has provoked so many dissertations and interpretations such this one. The fragment of Aristotle’s “Poetics”, which mentions it, does not last more than a few words; however, its influence in theories over the aesthetic fruition was very important. The theoretic elaborations on catharsis demonstrate that this concept has not lost its interest in the present actuality.

In fact, the purification brought by catharsis, not only discharges tensions, but also transforms the human feelings. The individual, by living the experience becomes the core of this process: The aesthetic feeling occurs with the catharsis as consequence of several dramatic confronts between shape and contents of the narration, between the facts and the ideas. From this presupposition results that the objective quality of the “aesthetic text” must guarantee this double attraction: On one hand considering the contents of the story and, on the other, considering the corporal shape in plot and other “literacy artifices” or plastic. In order to reach catharsis one must follow a string of the two dimensions, the material and the formal. When one of the aspects is too fragile, i.e. when the work is no more than mere “passerelle” of formal artifices then there is nothing to overcome or “tension to release”. This approximation is a consequence of the active participation of the reader or spectator, who is not just sensitive to the formal aspects of the work of art but also because it participates in the reconstruction of the worlds created by the author.

Because of the originality brought through its treatment and distinctive interpretation of the Aristotle's, the debate on art, as catharsis or a social technique of emotions is interesting: The discharge of nervous energy, the essence of all the sentiment, in the cathartic process is realised in the opposite direction of the usual. In this way, art and its works, spring out as a very powerful instrument originating the release of nervous energy and the cognitive and affectionate transformation. For Vygotsky catharsis is, after all in the psychological sense, an emotion or affection with is developed in two opposite directions finding within "destruction" its culminant point, somewhat nervous, psychic, emotional and projective short-circuit. As well noticed by one of his fellows, Alexander Leontiev: "catharsis it is not suppose to simply overcome repressive affectionate tendencies, the release of 'impurities' through the art; it treats, before hand, the solution of certain personality problems, the discovery of the most human truth, the highest, most elevated phenomena's and situations of life" (Leontiev in Vygotsky, 1971: 11). If catharsis is understood as the most positive influence in an individual – emotional, ethical an aesthetical, and the highest artistic demonstration then the anti catharsis (Semeonov, 1997) is an extremely negative manifestation that sometimes-modern art awakes in the "observers".

Another the element of the aesthetic experience is related with the mechanism of artistic creation. For Vygotsky the conflict between shape and artistic contents is solved through the creation of the work of art. From this presupposition, occurs that the material of a story is in the same relation with the narration, as words are for sentences in a verse, the scale is for music, and colours are for painting. The shape is for the narration as verses are for poetry, melody for music, and visual elements for plastic arts. In other words, it is about the relations between the constituting parts of the shape and how it relates with the originating material – "The shape is not a shell that covers the substance" quite the opposite is an active agent where the material is processed an occasionally overcomes its more inherent and elementary properties. The shape is a constituting part of the work of art; it depends on the its contents. Vygotsky believed that it was this premise that leads to obtaining the psychological effect through the work of art. This idea on the mechanism of creation leads to two central concepts related to the aesthetic experience: The imagination concept and the creativity concept. For its clear understanding he used the theory of Théodule Ribot (1839-1916), on creative imagination in order to state: "Creativity is all the human realization in the creation of something new, whether one talks about reflexes of an object of the outside world, or of certain "Brain constructions" or of the sentiments which live in and are only demonstrated by the human being" (Vygotsky, 1998: 7).

The imagination arises, within this system, such as William James (1842-1910) had also proposed, as the capacity to represent concepts and mental images, subordinated to the experience of the actual individual and his experiences, engine of the creative activity, this is revealed in all aspects of cultural life, allowing the artistic, scientific and technical creation – "All big and small discovery before it is realised in practice and before it is consolidated was united in the imagination as a rigid structure of the mind in detriment to a new combination or co-relations" (Vygotsky, 1971, 1998: 7). Creative imagination as an independent element of the real is a catalyser for the creation of new realities. It exists not as a separate function, but as part of a more complex system that is altered throughout the development stages of the individuals. The imagination cannot be studied

separately from other superior psychological functions. Therefore, there is dialectic in the relations between the memory, the perception, the abstract thought and the motivation, which cannot be ignored in the systemic analysis of the imagination and of creative process. Conjugating two moments: one, centred in the actual creative process, and the other, in the organization of fundamental structures for the mental, social, and cultural development of the individuals.

Vygotsky, as we have understood, used the potentialities of the dialectic method and the theoretic architecture proposed and structured in the fact that the superior psychological functions originating from social processes. The specificity of the historic-cultural theory was therefore defined from a group of cooperating concepts such as conscience, sociability, culture, social interaction, mediation, sign, meaning, instrument, history, communication and activity. Vygotsky defines it from three fundamental scopes – the instrumental, the cultural and the historic. Each one of them expresses a particular aspect towards the interpretation of the superior psychological functions (Luria, 1979). The instrumental scope is inherent to the mediated nature of the complex psychological functions. The superior mental functions incorporate in its structure new elements, which are elaborated by the subjects, instruments for the symbolisation process that change the cognitive and behavioural structure. The cultural scope is exclusive of the human being, it reflects ways of being and acting socially – The verbal language and the literary production are cultural instruments with a significance for the organization of the thought. The historic scope is unified with the cultural – Language, arithmetic's, art and other symbolic systems are carriers of a long development path. Its social influence arises before it was available for the psychological development of the child; in this sense, the historic does not only mean something of the past, it is linked to the particularities of what is contemporaneous and to what it unites the past with the future. It is important to underline two ideas of the Lev Vygotsky' thought for the development of the psychology of the aesthetic experience. The first one relates it with the existence of extracorporeal shapes of the mental functions, specially affections, that are fundamental regarding its intrapsychic existence, and formed from the law of psychological development that he proposed, i.e. the transformation of inter psychological processes into intra psychological ones. The second idea is about the mediating and constructive nature of sense of mental activity, which includes the experiential and aesthetic dimension specific of the mind and intimately related with the transformations that are operated in each subject. The mental activity's semiotic character and the possibility of creation of sense through the cultural and artistic products, are the structuring elements of the historical-cultural theory of Lev Vygotsky it is the only way of overcoming the limitations of the models of the mind, which at the time were developing through the objective psychology. By working in the area of aesthetic development, experience within the arts and of the study of complex products of the human creation Vygotsky underlined the importance of resisting the existing reductionisms and the biologic determinism which the psychology and the aesthetic of his time navigated proposing an integrating science of the natural, social and cultural.

In the contemporary aesthetic and art education we speak of building meanings and not in discovering them, in interpreting paintings and not detecting in them world representations. As Maxine Greene (2005) notes apart from this, we also reflect in the forces of conscience and language creating and generating the

language of form and we analyse the importance of people articulating their way of thinking as “shared realities” through the creation of meanings; to this new attitude, we often name it “constructivist” because through it we reject the notion that there is a world “objectively meaningful”, and at the same time, we refuse visions of a self-sufficient “real” idealised and deprived of sensibility. This “new” vision on aesthetic education was also generated through the ideas of Lev Vygotsky in the beginning of the XX century.

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