

Aesthetic Theory and The Philosophy of Nature

Said Mikki

E-mail: said.m.mikki@gmail.com

Abstract. We investigate the fundamental relationship between philosophical aesthetics and the philosophy of nature, arguing for a position in which the latter encompasses the former. Two traditions are set against each other, one is natural aesthetics, whose covering philosophy is Idealism, and the other is the aesthetics of nature, the position defended in this article, with the general program of a comprehensive philosophy of nature as its covering theory. Our approach is philosophical, operating within the framework of the ontology of the process of the production of art, especially the views of Antonin Artaud, Heidegger, Bakhtin, Deleuze, and Guattari. We interrogate Dilthey and Worringer while outlining an ontology of art based on the production of nonhuman images and a nonpersonal experiential field of nature.

Keywords: Philosophical aesthetics, philosophy of nature, ontology of art, Antonin Artaud, Nietzsche, expressionism, idealism.

1. Introduction

Let us ponder the transition from Aristotle [1] on one side, to Artaud [2], Eisenstein [3–6], Bakhtin [7–11], on another, and then back. The distance traversed in between spans the vast majority of some of the best aesthetic theories available so far. First of all, it is actually a full circle: Artaud [2] short-circuited Aristotle. How? Natural aesthetics is the essence of Aristotle’s *Poetics* [1]. In effect, Artaud had called for a *return to nature* where art is *expressive* of natural movements *as such*, i.e., a disclosure or unconcealment of the fundamental dynamics of events and happenings in the real world. In both Aristotle and Artaud, there is no mention of the term ‘external world’; there is no “inner” or “outer,” because in Aristotle’s time, the Ego-Subject pole had yet to be officially baptized by the seventeenth-century Cartesian Book of *Meditations* [12]. However, with Artaud we encounter a full revolt against the authoritarian strictures of Idealism and its new Gods, *Man*, *Subject*, *Ego-consciousness*, *the Signifier*.¹ Therefore, if it is possible to associate ‘natural aesthetics’ with Aristotle, and ‘aesthetics of nature’ with Artaud, then the natural question to ask here is that about the real *philosophical* difference between the two views of aesthetic theory. Explicating an answer to this question is the main subject of this article.

An Aristotelian theory of art as *imitation* ignores the human individual (artist or receiver) and directs attention to the natural object imitated, even if the latter is

¹A. Artaud, *To Have Done With the Judgement of God*, 1947 [2].

part of human phenomena like society and social relations. The main thrust here is clear: What is sublime lies in the natural world, and so all art is *our* poor attempt to *repeat* the magisterial in the “objective” natural world. Even the laws of art, forms of play and composition, are worked out by Aristotle in a way strongly resembling his famous approach to nature, especially the biological world: classification of cases and collected samples; logic and retrospective analysis; abduction of the rules of nature by observation and reflection. Consequently, we find ourselves forced to treat the Greek approach as *natural*, and label its aesthetic theory as *natural aesthetics*.

On the other side of time, throughout the “low and dishonest decade”² of the 1930s, Antonin Artaud had stood up to the prevailing order and composed his great *For the Theatre and its Double* [2], where he boldly announced that the goal of theatre (or art in general) is not enforcing opinions expressed by words (ideology), but the living again of the real as *corporeal*, that is, nature in its true formal manifestation: *Bodies* in interaction with each others. The emphasis on the physicality of the flesh is part of the new program’s desire to redirect art toward its home abode: Nature. According to Artaud, performance on the stage must avoid the intentional broadcasting of ready-made ideas and propaganda lines, moving instead toward the *reenactment of natural processes* by the production of incorporeal expressions while playing and manipulating purely corporeal elements. And that is why we can call such approach to the philosophy of art *the aesthetics of nature*.

Similarly, and independently of Artaud, who worked completely alone, other thinkers had advanced complex and radical theories of the aesthetics of nature, most prominently Mikhail Bakhtin [7–11], Sergei Eisenstein [3–6], Nietzsche [14–19], and Fernando Pessoa [20]. A detailed engagement with their corresponding thinking about the connection between art and nature will be taken up by the author in future publications.³ We add here that in spite of the extreme diversity of the technical contents of their philosophies of art, they all share with Artaud a common characteristic, which is the attempt to demonstrate that the artistic process is not a commentary by humans on nature, but is the living through of the natural process as such, where “living” does not signify “lived experience,” but the re-actualization of the virtual by opening up to outside fluxes and lines of flights and possibilities. Felix Guattari, an avid reader of both Artaud and Bakhtin, captured this spirit extremely well in some of his best books [25, 26].

For our immediate purposes in this article, we focus on Artaud as a representative of the aesthetics of nature. Aristotle’s view is treated as the inceptual point of Aesthetics. The main proponents of natural aesthetics are the group of philosophers and artists associated with Idealism. We interrogate the idealistic position through a dialogue with Dilthey and Worringer, two key transitional figure from the modernism of the nineteenth century to the postmodernism of the twentieth century. We propose an ontology for art based on the concept of *nonhuman experiential field in nature*, which is connected with another idea, that of the *nonpersonalistic image*. The ontological model is proposed and developed in parallel with a critical reexamination of the conventional approach within Idealism.

²Auden’s poem *September 1, 1939* [13].

³There is already a significant secondary literature covering various other aspects of their philosophies of art, e.g., see [21–24].

2. Schiller's Law

It appears to us that art and nature are essentially related to each other, though not in the peculiar way found in German Idealism. Let us recall Dilthey's expression of what he called *Schiller law*:

I shall designate by Schiller's law the thesis that the aesthetic process can either discern a liveliness of feeling in outer form and thus enliven what is visible, or make life visible in outer form and thus give life form. This law thus involves the constant translation of lived experience into form and form into lived experience.⁴

Schiller's law presents the nucleus of post-Aristotelian aesthetic theory. This theory does *not* consider the classic Aristotelian text *Poetics* [1] as the principal bible for the post-Cartesian aesthetic era. In fact, both Spanish and English dramatists viewed Greek tragedy as a bad model for expressing the needs of the new bourgeoisie world with its commercialism and anti-religious sensibilities. Regardless to the fact that both Goethe and Schiller were delighted by discovering the eventual agreement between their own aesthetic theories and Aristotle's, the fact remains that the theoretical formulation of the problem as compactly represented by the Diltheyian Schiller's law above is a complete departure from the Aristotelian style of thinking. The German theory takes it for granted that form is by default dead. Form is the "soul" of nature, but nature is defined – following idealism – as that which is not human, i.e., the external or outer world per se. Everything that is not "me" or "us" belongs to the natural order of beings. It follows then that form – conceived here on the model of geometric (Euclidean) figures – is necessarily passive and static. On the other hand, life belongs to "us" human beings, and therefore to everything that is inner or internal. The dialectic of life and nature, the inner and the outer, makes its appearance here, and Hegel [28] – following earlier formulations by Schilling [29] and the Schlegels [30] – will take this "dynamic duality" into the most extreme level reached by pre-Husserlian Kantianism, that of the logic of the Absolute [31].

Schiller's law states that the essence of art resides in bringing this inner feature of dynamic *life* (the Lifeforce) into the "dead externalism" of form: Art consists of merging the *lively* found within *experience* with the formal dryness of the outside. It is not difficult to see then that – according to this new formulation– *that* which lies *within* is to be taken as the privileged pole: The human *subject* is conceived here as *the* ultimate goal of the art process (idealism, Romanticism, phenomenology, existentialism, etc). Nature would acquire an aesthetic significance only by manifesting herself to the observer as an external totality infused with the human value of becoming *a life for us*.

The key term 'visibility' enjoys a prominent position in the German aesthetic theories of Goethe, Schiller, the Schlegels, Hegel, and others [30], indicating how *seeing*, that central organ of Kantianism, is still the fundamental ontological process. Art is here understood as an apparatus or process capable of altering the mode of visibility of "dead objects" by transforming them into carriers of human values. Within the overall theoretical program of Idealism, we may view the creation of artwork as the *alteration of perspectives*, a change in the device we employ to evaluate entities and things. A sculpture transforms into an artwork by investing its passive matter with aesthetic value. A perfect analogy with the new economic order of mechanized mass

⁴Dilthey [27], page 45.

production in the emerging global industrialism of the late nineteenth century [32], for Marx would theorize that production transfers labour value to the “dead object” and hence enlivening it – making it a *commodity* [33, 34]. Similarly, in idealism, artworks and commodities are products of the assembly lines of modern time: Life is injected into dead matter by skilled craft, a metamorphosis of the dead into vibrancy and livelihood.

But if nature and life are one and the same, then Schiller’s law becomes an immediate triviality. What is the point of art if it strives to reaffirm the known and obvious? It is for this reason that the philosophy of nature cannot accept the pre-Artuad, pre-Nietzsche contribution to aesthetic theory as final. The failure of German Idealism in this regard can be approached from two different but related perspectives. First, the ontological perspective where knowledge of the identity of form and life leads us to question the originality of Schiller’s law. The second perceptive is political and relates to the Marxian analysis of the way in which idealism had flirted with art in order to integrate the production of artworks with the firmly established capitalist regime, subsuming the “spiritual” inner life of the individual as manifested through artistic expression to the material laws of the economy, and ending up by enforcing culture therefore to become a determined or dominated superstrata in society.

It should be noted here that the Marxian perspective is *not* necessarily Marxist, and that in the philosophy of nature what *should* be understood by technical terms like *matter* and *form* is very different from the Hegelian concepts so prevalent in Orthodox Marxism, e.g., Lukacs [35], Adorno [36, 37], and Marcuse [38]. By allying itself with Hegel’s *Logic* [31], Marxism relapsed into Kantianism and missed a fundamental insight brought by Marx’s work: the critique of *both* idealism and capitalism in one and the same book, *Capital* [39, 40].

The need to search for organic connections between art and nature is not a retreat into inhuman modes of expressions. What is *nonhuman* is not necessarily inhumane. The new aesthetics of nature is neither pro-Rousseau nor anti-Rousseau, and the model after the poet-as-Goethe and his characteristic relation to nature is not really a direct concern for us here. By declaring Schiller’s law a triviality, the intention is to reorient art toward the nexus of natural events as singularities impregnated in the real world and generating the flux of experience, the very inner flesh of Nature’s lifeworld itself. The concepts of living and lived experience have been initially developed by the introspective techniques inaugurated by Augustine then rediscovered by Descartes and Fichte, always focusing on the interior of the person, the *selfworld*. Here, it is the human *psyche* as a model, a universe populated by thousands of small little shattered selves, each associated with desires and pleasures, connecting instinctive drives with culturally-acquired habits and social motifs, all marching with Reason in unison.

3. The Nonhuman Experiential Field of Nature

The sum total of all these atomic happenings taking place in the depths of the self – eruptions of the soul and the waning of will, the adumbration of feeling tones and harmony, dark intimate moments of visions – all such inner inflections have been baptized, in the hands of past thinkers and artists, by the generic term ‘experience.’ Idealism, then, reemerges into the scene, again. The concept of experience is strongly entangled with *ideology*, no doubt, for how do we know that the selfworld is the ultimate locus of experience? Isn’t this, again, an ego-centred attitude motivated by the inherited techniques of self-introspection? The meaning of the self is not disclosed

by experience: It is the self that is *generated* from within a *nonpersonal* experience in nature, manifested as a *field of affects*; empirical persons are simply “objects” tapped into this universal field. Nature is too rich and broad a concept to be exhausted by reductionism or atomism, but experience is one of its fundamental modes of existence. Even though we find it utterly impossible to define nature using “psychological” terms, it is not too much oversimplification to state that nature *becomes* through *experience*; or, in other words, one may say that there *has been* a world since, from the beginning, there *was* something like an experiential field of Nature (before even the emergence of consciousness.) The various physiological and mechanical effects preserved inside the enclosing bio-surface of the organism and forming the biological self are in direct communication and interaction with this global field [41]. Self excitations in the experiential field lead to the genesis of the ego, the self, the person, and so on, but overall there remains a deeper significance than that, for the enlivening of the self through experience generates *values, signs, meaning-wholes*, hence giving rise to connective semiotic networks radiating away from the enclosing surface of the individual [42].

Within the cosmic program of the philosophy of nature, we define art as *the enactment of a phenomenological description of this experiential field*. As such, art naturally first strives for communication. To accomplish that, it gets entangled right from the beginning with the reproduction of meaningful blocks of signs and symbols. This is why there is no art without a theory of meaning, and no meaning in independence of a metaphysics of nonpersonal experience. During the technical process of the production of the artwork, Nature recedes to the background, functioning only in a metaphorical manner, while the real process of living through experience is left for the private imagination and the creative virtuosity of the artist as a *finite self*. Therefore, a tension inevitably arises between the self-pole and the nonpersonal experiential field during the process of recording lived experiences by the ego-consciousness and the subsequent production of meaning antecedent to forming the artwork. There appears to be a conflict in nature between the personal self and the nonpersonal field, but the entire difficulty of artistic creation hinges on devising stable methods capable of generating a temporary resolution in terms of signs emitted from the individual through the work of art.

How does the artist approach experience then? Not introspectively, like the comic figure of a person “psychoanalyzing” his own self in order to seize on fruitful materials for productive work; and there is certainly no comparison here with the solemn vocation administered by Aristotelianism centered on *imitation*, which nowadays are resurfacing in the various aesthetic theories of *mimesis* [43]. Experience is approached artistically only through the medium of *imagination*, that is the process of production of lived images. Once an image is produced, it enters into the surrounding nonpersonal experiential field of Nature and stays there. An *image* is to be sharply contrasted with the idealistic concept of *fantasy*⁵ by the fact that the former is objective and real while the latter is subjective (but still real.) Fantasy can be induced by drugs or ideology, while images require a concentrated mental effort akin to creation. Average men and women engage with *pre-fabricated* images distributed into society through the agencies of mass culture and media [46, 47]. A “propaganda engineer” is a person responsible of designing and building various types of images for wide circulation and consumption

⁵Though sometimes both image and fantasy can be studied by similar phenomenological methods [44]. Deleuze approached the relation between image and phantasm using poststructuralist, hence non-phenomenological, methods [45].

under the hegemony of the dominant ideological field, and it is such kind of artificially created images that is usually used up by typical persons [48, 49]. Artists, on the other hand, possess a rich psychological constitution and enough intellectual facility to create their own internal images. But while those images are created privately, art re-injects them into the existing social and cultural fields, ensuring that the interior (self) is safely connected with the exterior (world) through a semantically functioning circuit of exchange. Here, communication emanates from the self-pole of the creative person toward nonpersonal experiential fields, not necessarily in the direction of other persons. True art transcends the ideological field by striving to connect with the ubiquitous field of natural experience, cutting through the existing web of power relations dictated by the dominant ideology. This is why artistic imagination is fully objective when it gives birth to images belonging to the nonpersonal world of nature, while fantasy is in comparison a local subjective phenomenon occurring only within the ego-consciousness of private individuals consuming pre-made iconic and symbolic imageries handed down to them from media and mass culture institutions.

Artistic creation is the production of new images embodied in a material form. Therefore, the antecedent stage involving the artist's pure phenomenological description of lived expedience is not by itself sufficient for completing the task. After generating an internal image, the result must be translated into a communicable form, and this in turn requires molding the imageries thus attained into a concrete material shape: music, sculpture, painting, performed act, literary text, and so on. An artwork is always a *concrete* object laden with meaning, waiting to be transmitted, in one way or another, to some potential audience, we don't know exactly who, but the absolute ability to achieve the successful transfer of a signifying essence to other receivers is fundamental, even if this receiver happens to be one and only one individual: the artist himself. Art and communicability are therefore indissolubly linked, and Bakhtin was profoundly right when he theorized about the fundamental notion of the *answerability* of the work of art and its various ontological dimensions [11].

We must, however, be careful to avoid any subjective bias at this point. When we talk about the *internal* image, this is not to be understood as a "representation" generated in the interior world of the artist's psyche. The latter is certainly involved, at least on the empirical side of the process, but from the ontological (fundamental and applied) perspective, an internal image is as objective and real as an "external" image, both being one and the same matter but expressed differently in the two situations; in one case the image is presented to the self-pole through materials largely derived from sensations and sense impressions, the basic building blocks of the psychic lifeworld (selfworld). In the other case, the internal image is converted into a material representation using physical or linguistic signs or other means. The *formal essence* of the image is generated only once (in the artist's imagination), but once released, it can live independent lives in unlimited number of material expressions. An image is essentially *indestructible*. This explains the apparent paradox about the contradiction between the *concrete* material realization of the completed artwork and the *universality* of the formal essence of any artistic creation. The resolution can be found once we realize that the so-called "completed artwork" is in reality one material expression among infinitely possible others. The artwork is a physical or semiotic material realization of an image that happened to be generated initially inside the artist's imagination, the image itself becoming – once created – an eternal object joining the inhabitants of the experiential field of nature. Therefore, a singular artwork remains laden with "universal essence" though not in the sense of idealism or

Kantianism, but rather in the specifically ontological way we prefer to deploy in the philosophy of nature.

The underlying matter of the artwork is the image. In nature's experiential field, the image is permanent. This eternal object may be manifested in myriad expressive forms depending on the context of the social fields in the "vicinity" of the image. The same image may be expressed in music, poetry, drama, painting, etc, but if new art media are invented, it is still possible to express the very same image in the new language of form. In other words, to make an image concretely embodied in the artwork is merely a *technical* problem. Sometimes a profound image can be expressed in one medium only, like music, where afterwards it becomes hard to find a proper material expression in other languages.

4. Image vs. Impression: A Critique of Idealist Aesthetic Theories

An image, as understood in the aesthetics of nature, is not to be confused with the psychological concept created by the British empiricists Locke, Hume, Berkeley, and their continuation in the German schools of Kant, Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, Schlegel, Wundt, and Dilthey. In all such quarters, one finds the newly founded domain of aesthetics constantly conflated with the systematic study of psychic impressions and feeling-tones defined personalistically and approached using language and methods derived from perception and introspection. The proclamation of the scientificity of the emerging discipline was certainly among the main factors responsible of the psychological approach to the topic of art reception, which was equated, at least since Kant, with "sensation." To sense the beautiful in an artwork is therefore a special kind of feeling to be "rigorously" distinguished from other forms of impressions crowding the inner sphere of the person. Now, while it is true that art is an exclusively "human" domain of creativity, the ego-pole serves only as a *point of departure* (creation) and a *spot for termination* (reception) of artworks without the need to restrict the actual process of communication to the psychic level. In other words, the person is contingent on putting the internally generated image in a form amenable to understanding within existing social and cultural fields.

But in the philosophy of nature the image itself, its laws of formation and production, its manner of communicability and exchange, its mode of movement and transfer, and finally its ability to interact with other ego-poles, all such natural modulations of the functional role, are *not* psychological but in fact *ontological*. Starting with Kant [50], German Idealism had attempted to steer aesthetics away from the "metaphysical" Leibniz by proclaiming the study of art as a scientific and systematic endeavour to be carried out with utmost care and using the most rigorous methods [28]. This counterattack by Kantianism relied on a self-conscious deployment of various readily available Cartesian methodological apparatuses exploited in order to undermine the essential advance made by Leibniz [51] over Descartes in this area of research. Everywhere, and up to the present day, the idealistic approach to art continues to concentrate on how a person perceives the signs emitted by the artwork, whether within a context of interpretation (hermeneutics [52]) or sensation (scientific aesthetics [53]), where in any case the outcome is a reduction of the art problem to the personal sphere of human players within a social field. Even Western Marxism [54,55], with its characteristic concern for the literary and the beautiful, have not been able to fully appreciate the *ontological* irrelevance of the human dimension in the process of artistic creation and communication. It is mainly starting with Nietzsche [14,18,56,57]

and Artaud [2] that the heavy hand of the doctrine of ego-consciousness (Cartesianism, Kantianism, Hegelianism, Romanticism, orthodox Marxism, Neo-Kantianism, etc.) began to loosen their grip on the mainstream ideology of aesthetics within the tradition of idealism, virtually the only direction of investigation open to inquiry in the academic world up to that point.

Within the parameters of the world-historical reformulation of Idealism espoused by Dilthey, he defined the scope of “rational aesthetics,” or the scientific approach to art, in the following essentially complete description:

Rationalist aesthetics conceives of beauty as a *manifestation of the logical in the sensuous* and of art as a visible presentation of the harmonious nexus of the world. In his sensuous intuition, the artist obtains an obscure but intensely felt awareness of this nexus. As there is but a single world-nexus, the sensuous relationships that exist within it must ultimately be formulated in one principle. Natural beauty and artistic beauty express this nexus in their respective languages. Even the most spontaneous expression of imagination is subject to rules. Such rules are found in harmonics and metrics; they are operative in the flow of a line, in the formation of a figure, and in the ornamentation produced by the architect and the artist. The taste of a poet is developed as an embodiment of such rules. Unity of action and precepts deriving from it govern drama. And all these rules are grounded ultimately in the rational order of the universe.⁶

Here we find the infamous presupposed isomorphism between the world and the mind. The “logical,” therefore, expressed in and through the “sensuous.” Within this framework, aesthetics is essentially the study of the laws governing the production and combination of sensations. Harmony in sensations and the rational order of the universe are unified in one and the same intellectual and artistic discourse. Idealism sees the essence of the *cosmos* reflected in the *person* contemplating nature.

Although Kantians revere natural beauty, including the pre-Kant Rousseau and the post-Kant Goethe, expending great effort to expound the uniqueness of the position of the physical and living worlds with respect to the observer, in Idealism it is ultimately the *human* factor, or – philosophically – the perceiving subject, to whom the entire process of nature is referred to. Natural beauty is equated with artistic beauty and hence the return to a modern interpretation of Aristotle in terms of the Cartesian subject, the latter is now viewed as “imitating” the universal ideal of reason as manifested in the natural world. The cosmos is ordered according to the mental *a priori* conceptions of our mind. If there is a beauty “out there,” it is because the internal image thus generated in the perception of the natural entity reflects the harmonious relations put into the very same “object” itself created after the entity through the act of perception (the transcendental reduction.) In Kantianism, the movement from “something unknown” (the entity, or Object X) to the “perceived something” (object) exhausts experience. Experience here becomes *lived* experience, while any nonpersonal experience is rejected as a relic of the pre-scientific metaphysics of the ancients, including even modernizers like Leibniz and Spinoza. The new aesthetics is an unashamed, fully-fledged Cartesianism: the study of art is reduced to the search for “rules” and “natural laws” governing the dynamics of the “sensations of the heart” according to the dicta of Universal Reason.

⁶Dilthey [27], page 187.

There is then a *double* reduction at the heart of idealist aesthetic theory. First, a reduction of the matter of the beautiful into ultimate sensations in the human subject forming the basic building blocks of the aesthetic lived experience. Second, a reduction of these sensuous “aesthetic atoms discoursing on the world” into the rational disciplining of the perceived by positing strict universal rules and laws behaving according to the dicta of Reason and the Beautiful Soul. The Beautiful is that in nature which is discerned by Taste. In Kantianism, *Nature is subjugated to Taste* [50].

5. Interlude: Goethe and the Process of Nature

An admirer of Kant and a self-proclaimed “idealist” like Goethe, however, proceeded differently. With this world genius, we don’t meet the obligatory incentives of Kantian aesthetics and its authoritarian prescriptive rules of discourse, but rather the creative process itself, which, in Goethe’s case, is exclusively reduced to the embodiment of the collective mind or unconscious in the contingent body and person of the artist-genius, hence directing the real focus of inquiry. Art is not about sensations or pleasure, whether being interested or disinterested. Art has nothing to do with subjective feelings, and perception is always secondary, relegated to the merely biographical. Instead, nature and art become one in the process of *production*: The production of images (art), the production of concepts (science), the production of ideas (philosophy), the production of objects (perception), the production of organisms (ontogenesis), the production of desire (psychogenesis), and so on. The natural process and the artistic process are not two parallel developments, one belonging to a contemplating human mind and the other to a dead, passive “nature.” Rather it is the other way around: feelings and aesthetic pleasures and lived memories are the redundant and secondary part of the entire story: It is nature that is alive and productive, while the human pole and its correlate, the ego-consciousness, are tapped into the cosmic process of becoming we find in the Whiteheadian concept of nature [58, 59].

In fact, Bakhtin had already noted that this cosmic concept of nature was fully developed in Goethe [10].⁷ In a beautiful passage, Dilthey summarized this Spinozist worldview of Goethe in the following manner:

.. Goethe’s poetic imagination unlocked the mystery of nature and art. Because Goethe’s efforts to intuit nature were akin to the process of artistic productivity, his experience of the creative power of his own imagination was at the same time a disclosure of the power of nature itself. He regarded nature as a purposive power, governed by laws, which express itself in metamorphosis, intensification, an architectonic of typical forms, and the harmony of the whole. Consequently, art was for him the highest manifestation of the workings of nature.⁸

Therefore, the scientific study of nature through postmodern mathematics and artistic creation are not set in opposition to each other, but act more or less like two complementary aspects of a single intellectual endeavour aspiring to achieve a profound understanding of nature and life. This is not a return to English Romanticism or early nineteenth-century German thinking. We are fully aware of the deep difficulties

⁷Bakhtin’s book-length manuscript on Goethe was destroyed by a German raid during World War II. Luckily for us, a very dense and substantial fragment survived, published in the collection [10].

⁸Dilthey [27], page 250.

inherent in any non-empirical approach to nature and to the problematic aspects of *Naturphilosophie*, especially its inevitable entanglement with Cartesianism in one way or another. There is also no *royal* way back to the Greeks as envisioned by Wagner [60], dreamed by Nietzsche [14], and indefatigably analyzed by Heidegger (in almost all of his books.) The most effective path remaining open to the philosopher, we believe, is the one chosen by Artaud: To be both the theorist/aesthete and the artist: reflecting on art by first creating new art forms then constructing an original aesthetic theory not by way of commentary and amassing observations and notes, but by working directly at the *ontological* level of the metaphysics of the nature-art complex.

6. Nature and Art, Bodies and Schizophrenia: Sweet Artaud

In order to see, hear, and feel an artistic experience, theories about “the rational depiction of nature” or the bourgeoisie disinterested pleasure must be bracketed out and suspended [25, 61–63]. In fact, it is *schizophrenia* as a *productive field* – in both the political and artistic sense – what counts most when it comes to experiencing and recording new modes of creativity within modern culture [64–66]. Dilthey’s account of the poetic experience [27] remains tainted by idealism, whose machinations he was unable to break free from, even until the end of his intellectual career, in spite of the fact that Kantian standard aesthetics was not the major focal point in the *oeuvre* of this otherwise remarkable writer.

Let us start by asking the following question: Why should “joy” be ascribed to the art vocation? When the Enlightenment turned toward the aesthetic experience [30], everything was planned within a large-scale production scheme intended to supply the crowds with mass entertainment [32, 46]. Although this task was already present in the Greek world, where tragedy, inseparable of its theatrical public staging, served as one of the fundamental communication channels connecting intellectuals with the “people” [67], the modern period has been consistently undermining the true relationship between the art experience as creative *production* on one side, and its corresponding *consumption* by the receiver. We are currently entering into these strange times where everything on the stage is premeditated and pre-orchestrated by meticulous calculations performed by the “creative art director” (the modern art “executive”), whose sole purpose in many cases appears to be addressing the crude and vulgar instincts of art mass consumers [48, 68]. Within this overall political framework, genuine interest in what really takes place inside the productive genius’ mind would naturally decline, shifting into neighboring disciplines like psychology or sociology. If art is all about the production of singular images nowhere to be found in mass culture, then the “state of mind” of the actual producer in this supreme process will itself become an essential ingredient of the created image as such.

This is why when reading the private papers of great artists and thinkers, we just can’t help but assume that the writing process *itself* was part of an overall plan or mission pursued *unconsciously* by a *collective* (nonpersonal) mind irreducible to the concrete empirical ego of the artist in question. In a letter addressed to his doctor, Artaud described his personal feeling-tones using the following extraordinary sentences:

Something which has almost disappeared from the field of my observation and which no longer characterizes my condition is the impression of incredible

fatigue, of total exhaustion, an exhaustion which seems to undermine the resistance, the muscular coordination of the organism on all levels and in all senses. And this sensation of monstrous, horrible fatigue, this vast, extraordinary pressure on the top of the skull and the back of the neck, a pressure whose force and whose volume, seemingly, is so great that it feels like a weight of the world on one's shoulders, is accompanied by one knows not what cosmic emotion, is combined with the tactile sensitivity, the vast feel of interstellar space, and the proof of this is that when I am lying in bed the sensation, far from disappearing, grows worse, is transformed into an impression of painful emptiness, operating magnetically, which presses on the limbs and the whole length of the spinal column and surrounds the pelvis.⁹

Everything is described with a strict photographic prose that is both rosy and at the same time mechanical, anatomical, and scholarly, the masterful blending of the ugly with the lively being one of the key features of the Artaud Universe.

There is no “beautiful soul” to be found here [61]. Like Nietzsche before and the subsequent Deleuze, the grandiose “duty of the genius” as a “responsible” figure in modern capitalist society striving to establish a balance between industrialism on one side, while keeping aflame the spiritual secular sphere of the post-medieval order on the other side, is ridiculed and rejected by the art theorist. We are not dwelling in the interior introspective world of the subjective artist exploring his ego (young Joyce), but rather living up the crushing, suffocating, and intolerable birth of an image ejected into the world with unbearable pain and agony. *Pain is an element of desire*. Nonpersonal desire is the *transcendental field* of creative art production. It was Nietzsche [19] who first came up with this formula and Artaud rediscovered it by undergoing a process of becoming-schizo just after Jung himself had gone into the same metamorphosis [69–71].

Nature herself is at work in the body of Artaud's mind where the mental becomes pure primary matter: an infinite concentration of sheer productive virtuality. The inextricable link between pain and productivity has only a passing resemblance to the classical agony of the great artist meticulously described by idealist aestheticians and art historians. There is nothing sublime or otherworldly or magisterial about the forehead of the master or his divine eyes; only flows of shit, urine, blood, flesh, sperm, clay, mud, lava, are what populate the schizo's cosmos [64]: it is neither pitiful nor ironic nor even humorous, but absolute *de*-composition and *dis*-connection; neither decay nor dissolution, but, like the Heidegger machine, an ontological *construction* that must first be preceded by *destruction* [72, 73], and what has been dis-connected may be *re*-wired again in the future [74].

The above graphic Artaudian clinical depiction of the aesthetic experience is followed by a sobering description of the hardcore of the creative process as such, that concerning the eruption of *nonhuman images*:

When I am in these states, a number of *unconscious* images persist, they themselves are *not* sick, but the malady seems to manifest itself the moment an image *becomes* conscious, however slightly, the moment it is invested with *sensibility*, emotion, will. As soon as the slightest suggestion of an intellectual desire appears to help some image or idea take a body by taking a form, as soon as one tries to pronounce in a clear and lucid manner any one of those

⁹Artaud [2], page 291.

unspoken words which the mind associates endlessly, the disease manifest its presence, its continuity; it is as if the mind needs only decide to enjoy an internal idea or image for this enjoyment to be taken away from it: the *spoken* image regularly miscarries, and to try to bring this idea or image into the world is even more difficult, and only serves to reveal more flagrantly and more rapidly the lack of continuity, the lack of nervous density which is fundamental to my present personality.¹⁰

Theoretical psychology, clinical psychology, aesthetics, physiology, ontology, literature, all mixed together and integrated within the singular aspect of viewing and “seeing” the image produced in the interior space of the artist. Sickness comes from *consciousness*, the moment an unconscious image becomes “sensible” (Artaud’s Law.) Schizos are not always miserable sick people, even when their pain and howling are intolerable, for they signify a state of tension in nature that has reached a limit point following long periods of accumulating exploding materials unconsciously transmitted throughout thousands of years [75–77], inevitably leading to the violent opening up we witness in those crushed persons now fatally experimenting with the bleak destiny of their fractured being [78].

Do we have to reject Artaud the thinker by projecting Artaud the individual as a “patient,” a mere philosophical “case study,” a representative sample of the prototypical “depressive maniac” popular in post-World War I modernism and post-World War II postmodernism? Not so fast, not now. It is one thing to declare the schizo’s private letters a documentary evidence indicative of his “morbid state of mind,” and a completely different matter to take him up as a model for political activism, mobilizing the body in its pure, non-moral, anti-bourgeoisie sense through which some artists become effectively the master teachers of humanity at large [79]. There is something so sweet, disarming, and even refreshing about Artaud’s private correspondence. The language is pure and simple. The grammar astonishingly transparent. The vocabulary compact and non-pedantic. The flow of the prose mind-blowing: it puts you in the presence of a supreme state of self clarity about the modern world, even when the discourse inaugurated by him is postmetaphysical and not technically demanding. Artaud followed Lawrence [80, 81] and Nietzsche [19]. A schizo line of development starts with Nietzsche and passes from Jung through Lawrence to Artaud, this is true, but the three wrote in isolation of each others, unaware of the existence of parallel friendly spheres of contact. Artaud’s maturity crystallized in the 1930s, immediately after Lawrence’s death in 1930. The Artaud decade par excellence. We are back to nature and naturalism, not through Aristotelian scholasticism, but via the door of natural life-forms. He digs under the ancient Greeks, Roman Stoics, and non-Western heritages, and overall he always extracts gold. Artaud had done it several times: with Balinese theatre, with Mexican people, with the Cabala and other inherited oriental traditions [2]. His program is cosmic and has nothing to do with an “archaeology of knowledge.” It is a cultural excavation not in search for the past or striving to establish points of connection with an extinguished golden age, but instead – similar to Nietzsche’s life-long quest – Artaud aimed at revitalizing modern culture by putting his finger on the real core of the problem: the political enslavement of artists and their submission to the authoritarianism of bourgeoisie morality and its satellite Kantian ethics. The methods available to him are meagre in power and comprehensiveness but quite efficient: self observation of his diseased body and disintegrating mind on

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, our italics.

one hand, and recording what is seen in nature outdoor. By combining cultural and clinical empirical data, Artaud was able to study the problem of art from within the medium of art itself. He never needed anybody's help even when material support was essential for keeping him alive for a while. The truth is that a schizo is a monadic singularity reflecting the entire cosmos, a self-subsisting whole encapsulated within superficial enclosures like the skin or the social position of the individual. Since the artist is the productive workshop generating all types of images and molding matter into the form of permanent, detachable structures floating in the experiential field of nature, then in a certain sense the art world here has to adapt to the creative genius, and not the other way around (Dilthey himself, the "serene thinker," had already admitted this [27].)

The process of image production undergoes a sharp sociopolitical twist when it becomes a guarantor of the artist's relevance to himself and also the grounding justification for the existence of the art complex in modern culture. We need only pay attention to the way Western theatre remains trapped within the false limits set by the ruling elite, how the counter-attack of the Theatre of Cruelty [82] was designed to shatter the refined sensibilities of the masses accumulated in the long-held European traditional conception of drama as a rational means for the salvation and purification of the spirit [83, 84] (the beautification of the soul [61].) In fact, drama understood this way is an instrument of domination and guidance leading the exhausted working-class crowds toward the next logical step after long weeks of toil: the intensification of desire and the amplification of the subjective ego at the expense of a true and authentic relationship with nature and life.

Working together, Deleuze and Guattari had developed this Lawrentian ethics based on the groundbreaking experimentation of Artaud with his own mental state of being, and the lessons learned from the violent rejection of the authoritarian French society of the Artaudian artistic vision [62, 64, 74, 85]. The schizo lineage comprising Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Lawrence, Artaud, Deleuze, and Guattari: this is the return of art to nature and the coming into being of the natural in the art form. In our interpretation, the key concept in this project is the Image: Productive fields of experience and the experiential field as such playing the role of the effective enviroing intellectual sphere enveloping the decisive generative act of the individual genius. Schizophrenia is the breakthrough of nature into the human individual expressed in and through art forms. These art forms are embodied by free-floating images inhabiting nonpersonal, nonhuman experiential fields signifying that ubiquitous ethico-aesthetic existential tonality expressing the presence of nature everywhere [25]. An image never lies, for it has neither ego nor consciousness; nor personal ideology nor rational faith.

7. Naturalism, Abstraction, and Expressionism

It is probably important now to say more about the doctrine of "naturalism" in art or aesthetics. The position advocated in this article, the aesthetics of nature, has nothing to do with such canonical naturalistic approach to the perception of artworks and artistic creativity. We are not referring to the same "Nature concept" of early nineteenth century romantic poetry and philosophy; nor do we operate with the same semantic connections imposed by late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century aesthetic theories. The term 'natural' in the philosophy of nature is not the pre-Heideggerian banal concept of being-in-the-large ("holistic being") that belongs to the

Occidental metaphysics inherited from the pre-Socratic philosophers. Within both art and mathematical physics, ‘Nature’ refers to the *virtual horizon* formally appropriated – though only provisionally – under the dangerous but unavoidable technical word ‘global.’ The global emerges from the local, but the local, in turn, is *constituted* by the global. Nature, in this sense, is not the sum total of entities existing outside a “human subject” or its Hegelian version, the Absolute [86]. By deploying the term ‘nature’ in our investigations, we suffer the inevitable consequences of an inherently imprecise approximation of the problematic of being. However, our hope for pushing forward along this direction is only a matter of the systematic convenience of carrying through an investigation combining art and mathematics, science and philosophy.

It is impossible at this stage to reduce nature to a “natural mode” by following the Platonic inception of aesthetics [87, 88]. In his masterful exposition of the history of art, Wilhelm Worringer very carefully emphasized the difference between the technical terms ‘imitation’ and ‘naturalism’ [89]. Indeed, it has been erroneously thought – even by philosophers – that imitating a model outside the subject is basically the same thing as being “naturalistic.” In fact, imitation is *not* really part of the overall movement in art history known as *naturalism*. The latter is a coherent well-articulated body of concepts and attitudes toward the process of artistic creativity that is more far reaching in its implications than the submission to the instinctive urge to copy a model. Instead, Worringer introduced the dichotomy *abstraction/empathy* and hoped to demonstrate, by means of a historical analysis, the fundamental irreducibility of the one to the other.

As a matter of fact, Worringer’s formulation of the problem had theoretically prepared for the contemporaneous event of the twentieth century’s rediscovery of abstract art, particularly in painting. What is more important at this stage of our analysis is the emphasis laid by the new formulation on the role played by the *psychological* process of *empathy* in explaining the conceptual substructure underlying naturalism. Worringer would rely on this not only to distinguish naturalism from imitation, but also to set naturalism *against* abstraction. Worringer writes:

We have therefore sought to demonstrate the fact that effacement of the fundamental diversity between mere imitation of nature and naturalism in art is consequent upon the fallacious or one-sided interpretation placed by posterity upon the great epochs of the Antique and the Renaissance. Of the two artistic genera, it is naturalism alone – which did indeed reach its zeniths in the Renaissance and the Antique – that pertains to the sphere of pure art, and therefore naturalism alone is accessible to aesthetic evaluation. Its psychic presupposition, as can be clearly understood, is the process of empathy, for which the object nearest to hand is always the cognate organic, i.e., formal processes occur within the work of art which correspond to the natural organic tendencies in man, and permit him, in aesthetic perception, to flow uninhibitedly with his inner feeling of vitality, with his inner need for activity, into the felicitous current of this formal happening.¹¹

The general thrust of Worringer’s argument is the demonstration that the foundations of representational art, which was reaching its ultimate peak in the Antique and Renaissance epochs, is a subjective psychic *attunement* to the other in nature, a private process through which we find ourselves “in harmony with the cosmic flux of beings out there in the natural world.” This does not only explain intellectual currents

¹¹Worringer [89], pages 32–33.

like the English Romantics, but, in fact, extends to all known and unknown world-historical spiritual movements aiming at bridging the gap between man and nature. The dualistic opposition itself between the ‘person’ and the ‘material-living whole’ (nature), to be found, for example, in religion and mysticism, is not accidental, for naturalism as a worldview does not work without this underlying striving toward the non-self via empathy. The love of animals and plants advocated by certain spiritual sects can always be traced back to some sort of emphatic identification with a non-subjective object [90], but Hegelianism just went as far as could be reached in this regard by simply annihilating the object and the subject in the Absolute [31], or the cosmic self-Knowing awareness of thinking as such (Hegel [86] misunderstanding Spinoza [91]? Emerson [92] misunderstood by Nietzsche [57]?) Empathy grounds naturalism though, metaphysically speaking, naturalism claims Being as essentially dwelling beyond the contingent boundaries of the empirical ego. But this is simply not true: Naturalism is an aesthetic theory that is *metaphysically* false precisely for the reason that it is grounded on an unambiguous *personalistic* bias toward the empathy of the ego-pole with the non-ego (material nature) and other egos.¹²

But if naturalism is not imitation because the former is based on empathy (while the latter is not), then why should naturalism fall out of consideration? Worringer had something both old and new to say. He was out to remind his readers about the pre-Western oriental art tradition that had not been assimilated to the transcendent religions of Judaism and Christianity. In contrast to empathy, the urge to *abstraction* is what defines the anti-naturalistic dimension of that unique and continuous non-Western artistic experience reaching one of its peaks in Ancient Egypt:

To this concept of naturalism we contrasted the concept of style. This concept is highly elastic in its use and meaning ... Nevertheless, we shall endeavour to give the concept a clear interpretation derived from the facts of the case. Since we recognize as only secondary the role played by the natural model in the work of art, and assume an absolute artistic volition, which makes itself the master of the external as mere objects to be made use of, as the primary factor in the process that gives birth to art, it stands to reason that we cannot accept the aforesaid popular interpretation of the concept of style; since this involves, as the primary and crucial factor, the endeavour to render the natural model ... Indeed, it is our intention, having associated the concept of naturalism with the process of empathy, to associate the concept of style with the other pole of the human artistic experience, namely with the urge to abstraction.¹³

Although we will not adopt the terminology proposed above by associating ‘style’ with abstraction, Worringer’s basic thesis remains correct. To understand the theory of post-naturalistic art we are advocating here, one must realize the absence in the creative act itself of not only empathy, but also the *irrelevance of all psychological motifs in general*. Dilthey, for one example, has *not* understood this point correctly, even while critical of the garden-variety naturalism he found in the mainstream materialistic aesthetic theories so popular toward the end of the nineteenth century.

¹²Husserl, the last great Kantian, will make the theme of empathy very prominent in his later philosophical writings (e.g. see [93] and other unpublished manuscripts), yet while still blindly insisting that he is “not doing psychology.” Although his use of empathy in the analysis of the genesis of intersubjective experience [94] is interesting, in our opinion it is *not* fundamentally *ontological* and hence remains within the parameters of the Kantian subject-based project metaphysics.

¹³Worringer [89], pages 33–34. Translation slightly edited.

On the other hand, Artaud *did* exorcise the psychic by formulating an original program for the aesthetics of nature completely based on bodies without organs and nonhuman images [2, 74].

Art is not only nonrepresentational, but even its non-figurative order and act cannot and should not be linked in a fundamental way to any internal “feeling” or “sensations.” In his influential text *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* [95], Kandinsky, one of the founders of Abstract Expressionism, attempted to facilitate the experiential content of abstract paintings by vaguely referring us to some ‘inner necessity’ felt by the artist while constructing his work. This term was not designed to generate mystical connotations, but rather implies that the creator *expresses* his internal states of wonder or excitement in a more direct, and hence “pure,” manner than when devising a plan based on some objective models found in nature. In such case, abstract art, or as Kandinsky prefers to call it, “concrete art,” becomes the most sublime form of art because it avoids traversing any direct or indirect route eventually forcing the artist to disclose his inner private feelings.

But we don’t know why should Abstract Expressionism be considered different from figurative art if both are to be grounded in *psychological* motifs. The fact that representational artworks operate by empathy, while abstraction (via expressionism) does *not*, would then require the *ontological* theorem that there is a *fundamental* difference between empathy and expression. But since most abstract artists (including Kandinsky and Picasso) have not been *philosophically* sophisticated enough to realize the identity of expression and empathy as variations on one and the same *psychological* substrate, then the attempt to establish a fundamental divide between figurative and non-figurative art founders at this conceptual level: There is no essential difference between, say, abstract and literal landscapes, if the purpose is to *communicate* an *internal psychic* image. Empathy is a *motive* for connecting with natural object; it serves as the prime mover in this respect, while the expressive urge finds its ultimate satisfaction by securing this empathetic bond on a solid formal ground, the artwork itself.

If the expressive drive is not satiated through figurative means, then the “concrete” treatment of the subject matter announced by Kandinsky and Abstract Expressionism finds its resolution in the *formal* possibility of manipulating and controlling the structural aspects of the material world. We are far away from imitation now, but certainly not as far as we must be from naturalism. Abstract Expressionism is a progressive movement in its *abstract* element, but had already become reactionary by devoting its energy to the problems of “expressions” (understood psychologically.) This applies not only to paintings, but to all art forms that can be treated by the broad methodological approach propounded by the expressionists. True, we find post-modernists working “abstractly,” but while conceiving their work psychologically, that is, internally, subjectively, personalistically, etc. That does not apply to everybody, but it is certainly the case with almost everyone in mainstream art nowadays (with few exceptions.) The *subjective* expression conceived internally is a *private* object sealed off from the public sphere; it comes “naturally” to the interior psychic world of the artist, after which it realizes its exterior concrete materialization in one physical form or another. Such process does not follow established customary rules of discourse, like representation or figuration, but quickly erects its own authoritarian regime of signs, laws of literacy, and rules of metaphors, collectively organizing, shaping, and controlling the vast sum total of everything that could be formally manipulated in the art world. Expressionism represents, then, a “purification” of High Modernism

by which the representational Cartesian Subject finds its most natural abode in the history of art. As in the colloquial formula ‘Marxism is capitalism gone mad,’ we find the parallel proposition ‘expressionism is representationalism gone mad.’

So what exactly is going on here? Are not those expressionists supposed to be the high priests of revolutionary modernism, the fearless destroyers of the naturalist cult and its traditions and customs? The answer is not very simple, but the various outcomes of the entire investigation carried out in this article point toward a turning twist in the history of art. There appears to be no possible further development in line with the previously established methods of artists working in conjunction with a caring, maternal society. Art can no longer be consumed by the public, and it is certainly not to be conceived with the public gaze in sight. And the discussion does not repeat the trite cliché of “art for art’s sake,” which was rightly declaimed before as a form of decadence. The problem facing art now is much more complex and dangerous. While it does not yet threaten the very definition of what counts as art or not, it singles out a mode of inquiry in philosophical aesthetics that, right from the beginning, leaves *behind* all known traditional domains. Only a very thin line separates abstract, *post-Cartesian*, *post-naturalistic* art from falling back into Cartesianism and naturalism, and that line is drawn by the subtle inflections of expressionism as a worldview. Although, in agreement with Worringer, abstraction has always been a force working invisibly inside civilization, it has been recently suppressed and repressed on a massive scale by capitalism and hence became one of its arch-enemies. Abstraction that is non-expressionistic is something very hard to define even in Worringer’s writings, which, as will be discussed somewhere else, remain operating with a mathematical conception of the world that is in essence Cartesian.

8. Conclusions

The view advocated here, that of the aesthetics of nature, exemplified by the works of Antonin Artaud and others, required that we develop a specific body of ontological concepts suitable for a post-human, post-subjective future society. Concepts of nonpersonal experiential fields and nonhuman images were outlined and developed in connection with Artaud’s ontology of the process of creative art production and the relation between art and society. The view of art within the philosophy of nature was termed the aesthetics of nature, setting the latter against natural aesthetics. Dilthey’s and Worringer’s writings were examined to understand the transition from natural aesthetics to the Artaudian framework of the aesthetics of nature. The analysis by Worringer pointed out expressionism as a philosophical movement transcending naturalism by way of abstraction. We criticised this attitude, suggesting that expressionism is still not far enough from idealism. The ontology of art production sketched out briefly above aspires to new modes of artistic experience that go beyond expressionism as such, say a *non-expressionist* position drawn from within a universal philosophy of nature, such as abstract materialism, non-expressionist abstract art, and other forms of art.

Non-expressionistic abstraction is a politico-philosophical counter-force against the domination of all kinds of signs and coding, and certainly it is a post-metaphysical movement in the tradition of Heidegger. Some of the artists whom we consider post-expressionist abstract-materialists, for example, Hans Hofmann [96–98] and Jackson Pollock [99] in abstract painting, Beckett [100] and Cormac McCarthy [101, 102] in literature, Stan Brakhage [103, 104] and Werner Herzog [105, 106] in film, are among

those *free spirits*, in the Nietzschean sense of the term, who opted for carving out a unique direction of their own, often clashing with their societies, but while all working from within the aesthetics of nature worldview. Although some of them or all are not infrequently considered “expressionistic” (by the academic standards of the term), we believe they are *not* part of any identifiable *mainstream* current. Their work has no direct relevance to “common” problems of life and society filtered through the established traditions of Western aesthetic theories. Yet everything those artists perform and achieve appears to reconstruct, at a deeper philosophical level, the complete totality of all virtual strata of the bodies and material forces constitutive of the Real *as such* (which in our theory *is* also the Imaginary), hence – *pace* Heidegger – gifting us with a supreme experiment in creative destruction *and* production both practiced simultaneously at the same *ontological* level of experience. The *abstract machines* of Deleuze and Guattari [74] are something of this sort, and so are the nomadic machines of history [107, 108], mathematics [109–112], and some philosophically-oriented esoteric underground religions [113].

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