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## Boring Magic

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Boring Magic

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

Madison Svendgard  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Drawing, 2016

May 2022  
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## Abstract

*Boring Magic* encompasses an interest in labor, boredom, and exhaustion.

Simultaneously, I am exploring what relief and escapism from these things look like. Escapism acts as the core of my work- what escapism looks like and what creates the need for escapism. I create narrative pieces that are always slightly removed from reality as a way to reflect on what I view as present-day dystopias. The worlds built to create this work are a combination of my lived experiences and invented characters and stories, which culminate in an alternate timeline set in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Relating to Mark Fisher's theories, nostalgia in the work acts not as a longing for the past but as a longing for a future that never happened. These worlds offer the viewer the ability to explore a relationship between privacy and nosiness: open windows, see-through walls, and cluttered surfaces allow the viewer to shuffle through the minutiae of fictional character's lives. In this work, I'd like to create inquiry around the possibilities of escapism, narrative, and magical realism in an attempt to find intrigue in the mundane.

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*Boring Magic* is a depiction of an alternate timeline constructed from works on paper and sculptural installation. Primarily depicting interior spaces, set designs are created for narratives around themes of labor, boredom, exhaustion, and escapism. I seek to create commentary on things I view as present-day dystopias, particularly the workforce and late-stage capitalism.

I spent 5 years working in a call center, listening to a dial tone and leaving the same answering machine message over and over again. I would always bring things like a book and my sketchbook to distract myself and get through the day. At the end of a shift, I would find myself feeling exhausted. What could be so exhausting about doing work which requires almost nothing of me mentally or physically? Yet I would get home from work, too tired to cook anything that didn't go in a microwave, and watch television reruns. My depictions of labor and office spaces are reflective of my feelings and fears regarding the workforce, the illusion of choice that surrounds the workforce, and the little freedoms we have within these spaces.

A lot of my thoughts around labor are reflected in *Bullshit Jobs* by David Graeber, who points to the proliferation of work that adds no social value and/or is inherently pernicious. (Graeber, 9-11). Graeber describes the demeaning nature of bullshit labor: "Working serves a purpose, or is meant to do so. Being forced to pretend to work just for the sake of working is an indignity, since the demand is perceived—rightly—as the pure exercise of power for its own sake" (Graeber, 85). Much of the labor that does not fall into the category of bullshit job then falls into the category of shit job- labor which needs to be done but in which the employee is treated and/or paid like shit: "Shit jobs tend to be blue collar and pay by the hour, whereas bullshit jobs tend to be white collar and salaried. Those who work shit jobs tend to be the object of indignities; they not only work hard but are also held in low esteem for that very reason"

(Graeber, 15). Both shit jobs and bullshit jobs are symptoms of a labor system where the value of labor is skewed beyond anything that makes logical sense.

The call center appears within my work not only because it relates to my direct experience, but it is representative of an entire line of work of which the majority could be constituted as bullshit jobs. The worker in a call center is subjected to dehumanization not only through the repetition of the same conversations, but the removal of a physical body allows people on the other end of the line to subject the worker to whatever language and abuse they would like without feeling guilty. Mark Fisher describes the call center as a symptom of a larger problem:

“The closest that most of us come to a direct experience of the centerlessness of capitalism is an encounter with the call center. As a consumer in late capitalism, you increasingly exist in two, distinct realities: the one in which the services are provided without a hitch, and another reality entirely, the crazed Kafkaesque labyrinth of call centers, a world without memory, where cause and effect connect together in mysterious, unfathomable ways, where it is a miracle that anything ever happens and you lose hope of ever passing back over to the other side where things seem to function smoothly” (Fisher, 63-64)

My representations of call centers and cubicle jobs reflect what it’s like to be a laborer in these positions. In *See-Through Cubicles*, the viewer takes on the role of manager, hovering from an impossibly high vantage point and peering through the cubicle walls of their employees, taking away the little privacy that they feel they have. Within this piece, small ornamentations and escapism methods, such as a CD player, Nintendo Gameboy, and doodled on notebook pages, sit through the cubicle walls.

Participating within these labor structures ultimately creates a need for escapism. In *Late Escapism and Contemporary Neoliberalism*, Greg Sharzer discusses the inherent desire for meaningful labor and the role of escapism within structures that do not allow for creative fulfillment within labor:

“To focus on escapism in the context of work does not mean the experiences of billions can be reduced to pain... however, positing escapism as a central feature of working-class lives suggests that something universal is embedded in the experience of selling one’s labour power. Not all the time for all people, but as a mode of coping with life’s vicissitudes- which are themselves part of the structuring, multifaceted whole of capitalist social life- escapism appears as the mediated response to pain. And equally important, escapism asserts self-worth when no other source is available: it is a refusal to participate in the mental labour of identifying with one’s role as a labourer, as an act that is available regardless of circumstance.” (Sharzer, 74-75)

Escapism is a daydream for the person at the cash register, the open game of *Solitaire* at the cubicle, and the consuming and revitalizing mode of relaxation when one is off the clock.

Escapism then acts as a reclamation of power within a system that provides little freedom and choice.

My artwork acts as my own reclamation of my labor power and a world built out of my own escapism. Although my artwork is a form of labor, my labor is an active choice and creates space for my creative fulfillment. Graeber sites the work of psychologist Karl Groos:

“Karl Groos discovered that infants express extraordinary happiness when they first figure out they can cause predictable effects in the world, pretty much regardless of what that effect is or whether it could be construed as having any benefit to them... Groos

coined the phrase ‘the pleasure at being the cause’, suggesting that it is the basis for play, which he saw as the exercise of powers simply for the sake of exercising them.”

(Graeber, 83)

My artwork then creates a space where I have “the pleasure at being the cause” in a system where most labor does not grant this.

Within my work, I like to bring attention to labor that happens within domestic spaces as well. Domestic labor has historically been gendered, unnoticed, off-the-clock labor. I feel that the combination of the unfulfilling labor of the working class with the household tasks that need to be accomplished add to greater feelings of exhaustion for individuals. In Liza Lou’s piece *Kitchen*, a 1:1 scale of a kitchen completely covered in small glass beads depict stereotypical women’s labor as an act of recognition. This piece highlights the monotony and the vastness of the quantity of labor done within home by constructing this installation in a tediously and absurdly laborious way. The labor of cooking appears in the piece *Grandma Didn’t Like my Movie Recommendation* as a glowing pink drawer which breakfast, lunch, and dinner magically appears out of. This acts to recognize the labor of cooking, historically (and too often currently) seen as something that women make magically appear.

Within my work, my relationship to household labor is also depicted in the form of microwave or fast-food meals, household pests, and cleaning supplies. In *Writer’s Block with Dishes in the Sink*, intrusive thoughts of unmet household tasks are displayed as miniature objects popping up on the desks. A tiny sponge, laundry detergent, and to-do list break the character’s focus away from their writing. These mundane, every day chores add to the labor of an individual, adding to their exhaustion, and diminishing their ability to pursue creative labor in their off-the-clock hours.



I highlight my discussion of labor throughout the formal aspects of my work. My lines waiver, emphasizing that this work was made by a human hand. The repetitive nature of the work also creates a conversation around the labor that went into the work itself: individual bricks are painted by hand and each miniature VHS tape is constructed and painted. Creating artwork is a place where my labor gives me fulfilment and I have a direct relationship with my labor, while many jobs remove the ability see a direct relationship between their time and the labor they are doing or feel it doesn't serve a purpose at all.

Labor which doesn't meet basic needs or create fulfillment leads to great feelings of dissatisfaction and a need to find pleasure elsewhere. Sharzer identifies this need to seek pleasure in *Late Escapism and Contemporary Neoliberalism*:

“Marcuse (1998) described the overpowering of the reality principle, in which we “give up momentary, uncertain, and destructive pleasure for delayed, restrained but ‘assured’ pleasure” by the performance principle. Late escapism is the result of the absolute end of that assurance. The performance principle remains in full effect, but we escape into imagined pleasures because the social contract at its dark heart has broken down.”

(Sharzer, 67)

The characters who exist in the scenes that I create are grappling with a desire to be creative within their spare time and to pursue more slow and meaningful activities (ex: reading, writing) and balance it with a desire to find immediate pleasure and soothe exhaustion. In *Dining with Words Left Unsaid*, this is shown with a fast-food meal sitting on the desk of someone attempting and failing to write a letter.

In *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher discusses the inability for individuals to pursue anything but pleasure within their free time due to the unfulfilling nature of our workforce. He

describes this as “depressive hedonia”, an inability to do anything except pursue pleasure. (Fisher, 21-22). This state leads to expediting everything and anything and builds upon the demand for fast-food restaurants and two-day shipping. This system is meant to serve exhausted workers while it places more demand on workers, creating more exhausted workers and more shit jobs.

The proliferation of expediency is not only present in the products we consume but in the spaces we inhabit. Tom McDonough states: “Contemporary life is lived, more and more frequently, in spaces defined by their anonymity, their blandness, their ordinariness, even their dullness. Such spaces – typified by transport infrastructure such as highways, train stations, or airports – aim to go unnoticed the better to accommodate the accelerated circulation of people and goods through them” (McDonough, 12). I think about this often when I move into a new apartment. These are spaces meant to be homes for not one person but for many different people. They never feel like long term homes (and in the case of most of my apartments, I am very thankful for this) but are spaces I am simply moving through. In my work, I adorn the walls in these fictional spaces with bland beige colors, representative of spaces meant to be moved through.

Isolation sweeps across these spaces, both in pleased privacy and in loneliness. Being alone is not represented as an inherently negative experience, but also becomes an opportunity to be present and focus on slow, creative pursuits. Isolation and pursuit of slow activities becomes an active refusal of the lifestyle of constant consumption and immediacy for pleasure as well as the lack of privacy within the age of social media and smart phones. I feel that labor exists within most slow pursuits. Although both are considered forms of leisure and escapism, there is more work in picking up a book than there is in turning on the television. This is not to place

these activities on a hierarchy, but to recognize when I feel I can pursue different types of escapism. The differentiation here is in active and passive attention required for these activities. When I feel exhausted, I'm much more likely to have an episode of *The Office* I've already seen on my television screen than I am to have a book in my hand. Yet I have so many books I'd like to read, and I have no need to rewatch *The Office* for the umpteenth time. The characters within the worlds I build are all grappling with their exhaustion and the desire to read the unread stack of books on their shelf or pursue something that expends creative energy in their free time.

The more negative aspects of isolation in my work flourish around the dehumanizing nature of capitalism, which causes anxiety and depression and makes an individual feel that it's their own fault for feeling this way. I seek to create connections between fictional characters as a way to soothe these feelings of isolation. I am inspired by the meaningless connections in Luis Buñuel's *The Phantom of Liberty*. As a narrative is developed within the film, the camera will suddenly follow a character walking by in the background, following their narrative until you are pulled into the next, not giving any sort of traditional narrative structure or comfort. The meaningless connections in my work take the form of a repetition of household objects, such as my childhood green plaid couch and an overhead desk lamp, adorned with fake woodgrain. There is no structure of a beginning, middle, and end narrative within my work, only the spaces that have implied occupancy and use. This connection is then used to draw attention to the fact that many of the characters within this world are dealing with the same anxieties and isolation—we may feel alone but we are not alone at all.

Despite the bleak nature of the topics I discuss, I still like to create room for humor within my work. I feel that humor acts as a way for this commentary to be more digestible, both for myself and for the viewer. Sometimes the humor is bleak. In a trip back to my hometown, I

drove past the location of what was once the Hollywood Video that I went to as a kid. It's important to note that I loved going to this place, my childhood dream job was to work at Hollywood Video. I wanted to be the kind of adult that had seen all of the movies on the shelves and know a lot about them. This location is now a Covid-19 testing site. This felt so dystopian that I couldn't help but find it funny. In *Goodnight Hollywood Video*, I created a collection of miniature VHS tapes, a recreation of the movies that would have been on the shelves of Hollywood Video in the early 2000s. This acts as a memorial for not only my childhood dream job, but also for a time period when renting a movie was a fun outing and not a doom scroll through Netflix.

Several pieces in the exhibition also display movie rentals from Hollywood Video. In *Sick Day Movie Rental*, a television sitting on top of a dresser plays a scene from Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, where a man is playing chess with death in the time of the plague. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected many things on a small scale and a massive scale. In many ways it led to an amplification of the issues surround the workforce and led to mass exhaustion. On a personal level, anxiety of unknowingly getting others sick shrouded the little time I spent around others, and I became very aware of my own mortality. Within this scene, I romanticized a sick day at home in bed with a simple cold and celebrating the relaxing break a sick day could once be, bra off and hung from the dresser knob. As an adult, it becomes difficult to take a sick day when tasks that need to be completed are never on pause. This sentiment is represented in a piece by Neil Farber and Michael Dumontier which depicts 2 flowers, one slightly shorter than the other and displays the text: "you took a day off, so you'll always be one day behind." There is a constant pressure to be productive at all times and to feel guilty for taking any rest, even when you are sick.

The romanticization of a childhood sick day is one aspect of the time period reflected in my work. Many of the objects depicted in my work were things I had around me growing up in the late 1990s and early 2000s and act as diaristic recollection of what I imagined adulthood to be like as a child and contrasting that to reality. In *Ghosts of My Life*, Mark Fisher discusses nostalgia not as a longing for the past, but as a longing for a future that didn't happen. Fisher asks:

“Why did the arrival of neoliberal, post-Fordist capitalism lead to a culture of retrospection and pastiche? Perhaps we can venture a couple of provisional conjectures here. The first concerns consumption. Could it be that neoliberal capitalism's destruction of solidarity and security brought about a compensatory hungering for the well-established and the familiar?... Or as, Berardi has argued, the intensity and precariousness of late capitalist work culture leaves people in a state where they are simultaneously exhausted and overstimulated. The combination of precarious work and digital communications leads to a besieging of attention” (Fisher, 14-15)

My interest in this time period is a culmination of a desire for a life that looks different from what is possible today.

This time period also marks a significant expanse of bullshit jobs as computers and the internet became commonplace and accessible and the time of office cubicles began. What was once possible for future generations is not possible for mine. In my life, I have watched the middle class shrink and progress towards a better world diminish. Sharzer states:

“Inertia is bad enough: we no longer progress. But just as bad is the sense that we are in perpetual motion, without any forward movement, discrediting the very idea that utopia could be reached. If stasis suggests the future is unattainable, to be replaced by the

constant recycling of the cultural tropes and their material avatars in the shape of commodities, then the very idea of utopia is lost. Even a stuck clock suggests that its hands once moved.” (Sharzer, 124-125)

The clocks in my work, with red digital numbers glowing over unoccupied spaces, mark a time for me where forward movement seemed to have potential towards progress and represent a time period where the clock moves forward. The scenes that I build live in this world of stasis.

Creating this fictional timeline which reflects on current themes but through another time period is a way that I grapple with my anxieties about endless technological advancement without ethical checks and balances.

The escapism that I have been drawn to and seek to create relates to narrative and fiction. I’ve always been very interested in world-building and exploring imaginary worlds. As a kid, I spent a lot of time sitting at a computer, building fictional characters or cities, or taking on the role of Nancy Drew and solving crime. I would hover my magnifying glass-shaped cursor over the screen, looking through every drawer to be sure I hadn’t missed any clues. I would obsess over completing every side quest in a video game to be sure I hadn’t missed any important elements of the story. I’ve always been interested in the details that help define fictional lives to make them feel more real.

I’m interested in building the images I create as a set design that can heighten the conceptual themes of my work and incorporate room for both humor and sadness. Cluttered surfaces appear across my work, creating lived-in scenes that contain the minutiae of fictional character’s lives. I display details which make fictional lives more real. Two pennies sit on the cluttered surface of my sculptural installation, one painted to look slightly more used than the other. In *Writer’s Block with Dishes in the Sink*, the yellowed pages of the books sit next to each

other, one slightly older than the other. Torn edges of notebook pages, used erasers, and filled laundry baskets make these spaces feel as though they have been occupied and create a greater sense of realism in these worlds.

Network narratives are also utilized to establish a greater sense of depth in the worlds I build. One example of this is a fake brand called *Grandma Jackie's* which acts as a stand in for large corporations. Different *Grandma Jackie's* products take on many forms in my work to show the expanse of the corporation. *Grandma Jackie's* products appear across the exhibition as a fast-food meal, a littered crumpled soda can, and the brand of bland cereal sitting on the table in *Phone Call from the Breakfast Table*. Elements from other narratives from previous bodies of work appear within these scenes. In my sculptural installation, a miniature book titled *The Dowager* sits amongst the clutter. This character was a part of a story I wrote and made work around years ago and now appears within a book in this alternate timeline. This adds a sense of depth to the worlds I'm creating.

The viewer is invited to look through cut-away walls, peer through open windows, and shuffle through a cluttered desk. Here, fiction offers a space for consensual nosiness into spaces where privacy and solitude are sought. In these spaces, the viewer is invited to be alone, to enjoy the immersion of a movie or write a fictional story. I am greatly influenced by Chris Ware's *Building Stories*, which tells a narrative from several different perspectives, including from the perspective of the apartment the characters live at. The apartment is anthropomorphized and recalls each drip from a leaky faucet, each broken bone, and each spiritual crisis that took place within its walls. In *See-Through Apartments*, I make an homage to *Building Stories*. Rather than peering through the see-through walls of a cubicle, these walls reveal domestic spaces. My old green plaid couch makes a reappearance and the desk from *Dining with Words Left Unsaid* is

seen through an open window. This combination of different character's fictional lives is made to mark a similarity in their experiences. Glowing screens from televisions and computers fill the voids of their apartments. Although these characters all experience their own forms of exhaustion and isolation, this is not an isolation that is felt singularly, but is a shared experience among many.

Narrative is also placed within the work in the form of objects within my images. Both real and imaginary books, movies, and video games clutter the scenes I create. The media that I choose to incorporate often acts in direct conversation to the conceptual components of my work. *Metropolis* and *Office Space* make an appearance as a nod to other media discussing labor. Movies by Charlie Kaufmann and David Lynch represent my interest in surrealism. Science Fiction, both real and imagined, appears throughout the work as this representation of a desire to escape as far away from reality as possible. In *Writer's Block with Dishes in the Sink*, a Science Fiction novel is weighted down by a book which debunks UFO/Extraterrestrial sightings, a coupling creating a conversation about the relationship between escapism and reality. The piece *Rear Window* directly references Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, in which James Stewart's character sits at his window with binoculars, looking into all his neighbor's apartments. James Stewart and his binoculars are on the screen in this piece, which can only be seen by peering through an open window. Rather than an intrusive and unethical voyeurism, my work creates space for curiosity about the lives of others and because these characters are fictional, it isn't unethical to look through their drawers. There are constant reminders throughout the work, both in form and content that these scenes aren't real in hopes of creating more comfort for the viewer's curiosity.



The world I've created stands in a doorway, with one foot inside the world of reality and one foot outside of it. This body of work functions as an alternate timeline for a future that I will never have. The scenes that I create, while composed of real objects, don't exist. These objects sit askew, as though they don't quite sit on their surfaces. Martha Rosler proposes that removing things far enough from realism causes a discomfort for reflection and provides an effective form of societal critique (Rosler, 185-186). Scale shifts, skewed perspectives, and stylized forms break the viewer from the comfort of realism and place them into an unreal world and time.

In addition to the formal aspects of the work, the narratives often take a surreal tone as well. This acts to heighten the bleak aspects of the themes in my work and reflect on dystopian elements, creating humor through absurdity and proposing the magical aspects of escapism. Conceptually, I look to Charlie Kaufman, David Lynch, and Haruki Murakami to help inform the surreal aspects of my work.

Haruki Murakami creates a sense of mundanity at the beginning of his narratives to give the reader a greater sense of the main character's life. Things start to slowly shift until the narrative becomes completely surreal. The point where things make a slight shift towards the absurd is where I would like my work to sit. This is reflected in my work with things like scale shifts in mundane objects, cutaway walls, and a mundane object like eyedrops being used as a magic portal to another world. Magic affecting the mundane is discussed between characters in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*:

*"It's like when you put instant rice pudding mix in a bowl in the microwave and push the button, and you take the cover off when it rings, and there you've got rice pudding. I mean, what happens in between the time when you push the switch and when the microwave rings? You can't tell what's going on under the cover. Maybe the instant*

*rice pudding first turns into macaroni gratin in the darkness when nobody's looking and only then turns back into rice pudding. We think it's only natural to get rice pudding after we put rice pudding mix in the microwave and the bell rings, but to me that's just a presumption. I would be kind of relieved if, every once in a while, after you put rice pudding mix in the microwave and it rang and you opened the top, you got macaroni gratin. I suppose I'd be shocked, of course, but I don't know, I think I'd be kind of relieved too. Or at least I think I wouldn't be so upset, because that would feel, in some ways, a whole lot more real... I don't know—maybe the world has two different kinds of people, and for one kind the world is this completely logical, rice pudding place, and for the other it's all hit-or-miss macaroni gratin.” (Murakami, 460-462)*

I look to David Lynch and Charlie Kaufman for inspiration with humor through absurdity and their ability to bend the rules of reality. In my work, the absurd aspects are not only the see-through walls and miniature objects, but the realities of our current time and workforce. In *Twin Peaks*, there is absurdity within small events- a fish appearing in a percolator, in addition to the absurdity of human cruelty, which is turned into something which happens due only to surreal forces at play.

In Kaufman's *Being John Malkovich*, absurdity operates within the realm of the mundane. John Cusack's character Craig Schwartz has a job interview with LesterCorp on floor 7 ½. This floor with low ceilings was originally built out of love for a woman who wanted a space that would be suited to her height. Now, the space is used for a boring office job, employees needing to walk through the space hunched over because of the low ceilings. In a video discussing the history of the building, 2 actors joke about the office space as a way to cut down on rental costs because “the overhead is low”.

Adding magical elements to mundane things is a way that I reclaim stressful situations that I have no control over. While I was dealing with allergies that affected my eyes and vision, I created a world in which the eye drops I was using acted as a magical portal between three equally boring worlds. The fictional characters and narratives I create are always partially diaristic. If I am spraying Raid on a cockroach, my fictional characters are as well.

The title *Boring Magic* relates to an imagined timeline: what would magic look like if it was real? Within my work, I propose that if magic was real, it would be used to aid capitalism and would be as boring as anything else that currently exists. Magic then functions with laughable limitations: eye drops act as a magic portal, but only to worlds that are equally boring; the ability to see through objects is used to invade the privacy of workers; and a crappy cup of gas station coffee is a magic elixir.

But *Boring Magic* also proposes that there is magic in what already exists within our reality. I argue that one of the important forms of this magic is in escapism which can be soothing and create connection and engagement. In the essay *On the Radical Escapism of Magic Realism: or How to Become a God in Late Capitalism*, Eden Kupermintz argues for the importance of magical realism and discusses the ways in which magical realism differs from “high magic” or fantasy. Fantasy functions outside of our world, while magical realism functions within our reality. In my work, magic is conducted in a world that closely resembles our own. Kupermintz states:

“You are not magical because you learned magic or because you were born with an innate ability that no one else has. *You* are magical because your eyes can recast the world in brilliant colors, because your brain can tell itself stories about the world it sees,

because it can *pretend* that everything is touched with magic and, upon pretending, fills the world with magic.” (Kupermintz)

Magical Realism then becomes accessible to all, giving anyone who chooses the ability to manipulate the world around them and potential to reestablish “the pleasure at being the cause”.

In my artwork, I can recast the wood panel basement wall and yellow ochre carpet with the green glow of a movie rental’s opening screen.

The title *Boring Magic* also references the magic in the slow and the mundane and recognizes the importance and magic in escapism. Escapism is a beautiful and powerful tool that is accessible to all and takes many forms. Movies, books, and video games populate the scenes I create as the characters within my worlds find hope and joy within these magical escapist realms. These forms of magic and escapism are accessible to all and soothe exhaustion. The first piece as you enter the exhibition, *Magic Portal*, are the eye drops the viewer is invited to use upon entering the exhibition to escape into another world which reflects our own.

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