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LIGHT UPON DARK: THE ANTI-DICTATORSHIP WORK OF BRAZILIAN FILMMAKERS LÚCIA MURAT AND TATA AMARAL

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Write with your fingernails, scratch light upon these darkened days. Sholeh Wolpé, "See Them Coming." (*The Scar Saloon* 25)

How is it I am still alive? I'll tell you I'm alive because there's a temporary shortage of death. This is said with a grin, which is on the far side of a longing for normalcy, for an ordinary life. John Berger, "Undefeated Despair" (*Hold Everything Dear* 13)

I feel that one of the most important contributions that I have to offer to the discussion about memory, torture, the relationship between terror and aesthetics, political violence, and survival, is to pick up the pieces and try to assemble the dark puzzle that is the legacy of the dictatorial period. Quique Cruz, "Personal Story Relating to *Villa Grimaldi*." (*The Archeology of Memory* n.p.)

This essay is intended as a comparative study of two Brazilian films made twenty years apart: *Que bom te ver viva* by Lúcia Murat, produced in 1989, and *Trago comigo* by Tata Amaral, a 2009 four-part miniseries created for TV Cultura in partnership with SESC-TV.¹ They share their significance as aesthetic works that register and require us to reconstruct and remember a dark period in Brazilian history, in this case the dictatorship which lasted between 1964 and 1985. My analysis begins with the image suggested by Iranian-American poet Sholeh Wolpé. These two films metaphorically embody the act of writing with your fingernails in order to scratch light upon darkened days. For the purposes of my analysis I will refer to the twenty-

¹I wish to warmly thank Ana López and Rebecca Atencio, organizers of the Mulheres da Retomada: Women Filmmakers in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema conference at Tulane University in February 2011 for the invitation to present a preliminary version of this essay. I wish to publicly thank filmmaker Tata Amaral and Pedro Vieira at TV Cultura for granting me permission and making it possible for me to work with a pre-released version of the miniseries *Trago comigo*. In 2013 Tangerina Entretenimento released *Trago comigo* as a feature film.

two minute documentary “Making Of: Twenty Years Later” produced twenty years after *Que bom te ver viva*, to coincide with the DVD release. In terms of *Trago comigo*, I will rely on interviews with the director and online articles, in addition to my own observations about both films.

In the *Que bom te ver viva* “Making Of,” the director reflects retrospectively on the pervasiveness of internal and external scars; this essay aims to address the presence and necessity of scars. There is a moment in Tata Amaral’s *Trago comigo* when the main fictional character—theater director Telmo Marinicov—is on stage for a schematic representation of electrical torture, in order to show the actors what to do. In this short performatic segment he explains that during the military regime political oppressors were skilled in administering physical acts of torture designed to leave no permanent scars. In his words: “procuram não deixar cicatrizes; as cicatrizes somem sem deixar vestígios” (*Trago comigo* Episode 3). This calculated skill centered on the intentional concealment, or undetectability, of scars—in keeping with a regime’s official erasure of its heinous acts—reinforces the manipulations of a repressive apparatus forcing individuals to the limits of their resistance, in order to extract information meant to eradicate opposition at all costs.

For the victim of political torture there is no such thing as the erasure of scars. Nonetheless, there is an inner struggle on the part of torture survivors that might translate as a reluctance to accept one’s own survival, or as a tendency to recognize the state of being alive merely as a default. As John Berger explains, under extreme conditions such as political conflict and war, life might be the default simply because the situation unaccountably allows for a “temporary shortage of death.” If we apply Berger’s survival scale cited at the beginning of this essay, in which one functions from the “far side of a longing for normalcy” [and] of an ordinary life,” this reluctance to accept one’s own survival makes sense.

Given the extent of trauma they have endured, torture survivors are consigned to either hiding or revealing their scars, either keeping silent or speaking out. Speaking out in the film means unleashing agonizing recollections of torture sessions, in which one was forced to choose between withholding or surrendering information. As one of the torture testimonials in *Trago comigo* states: “Era um processo doloroso de negociar para preservar a vida” (*Trago comigo*, Episode 3). Another testimonial reinforces this process by stating: “Estava preparado para morrer, não para ser preso” (*Trago comigo*, Episode 3). Death, under these conditions, in other words, is preferable to torture.

Confronting the “Unwatchable”

Lúcia Murat’s *Que bom te ver viva* and Tata Amaral’s *Trago comigo* are two films that choose to speak out, rather than to remain silent. They bring to the surface the indelible presence of political scars, as well as the permanent need to reflect upon and resist oppression and violence. They uncover wounds—raw and deeply ingrained—whose scars may on the surface appear visibly absent. The scars are symbolic in the recognition of truth, of protest against impunity, of a collective need for healing through the process of un-silencing, of giving voice to the victims of a military regime. Set twenty years apart *Que bom te ver viva* and *Trago comigo* represent cinematic paradigms of violence, in the form of *cicatrizes*, of scars, evidence against a dictatorship that, in the words of *Trago comigo*’s Telmo, “oppressed, censored, killed and tortured” (*Trago comigo* Episode 3). As this essay hopes to establish, they are aesthetic works of condemnation against the erasure of this dark period in Brazilian history. Moreover, they each ultimately represent an acceptance of survival and a subsequent quest for understanding and forgiveness.

The camera lens in Murat's *Que bom te ver viva* and in Amaral's *Trago comigo* both focus on what it means to personally survive and publicly resist political oppression and torture. They are films that "confront the unwatchable":² true crimes against humanity. They resist an official past whose operational code is based on invasiveness, violation, and cruelty, replaced by suppression, erasure, and a sanctioned form of amnesia. Moreover, they beg for historical truth and perpetual reflection, by way of verbal and visual exposure to physical and emotional scars. Through unique cinematographic methods these two films bring to light different forms of memory: they portray a clash between individual and institutional memory, in order to underscore a justice-bound, restorative collective memory. This essay addresses the techniques they each use—emphasizing their commonalities and dissimilarities—to keep memory alive, to give voice to the silenced, and incite this enduring collective memory.

Establishing Continuity through Commonalities

As a point of departure my arguments will first focus on what these two films have in common. Despite their temporal and stylistic differences, *Que bom te ver viva* and *Trago comigo* share at least three interrelated characteristics on personal, structural, and ethical levels. First of all, both films reflect their filmmakers' personal pasts, in order to recreate a vivid portrait of survival. The fact that both Tata Amaral and Lúcia Murat have made statements about their past sociopolitical involvement as activists fighting against an authoritarian regime—albeit from different contexts and to varying degrees—makes it clear that their personal trajectories have influenced their narrative choices and styles of filmmaking, not just in these two examples, but throughout the course of their careers.

Murat has candidly articulated her own experience as a torture survivor in the documentary "Making Of" and in Lucia Nagib's *O cinema da retomada: depoimentos de 90 cineastas dos anos 90*. Murat speaks explicitly about her political involvement in the revolutionary movement against the dictatorship, revealing her clandestine life, her imprisonment, and eventual torture. This personal experience directly shaped her subsequent work and its thematic emphasis on violence, of which *Que bom te ver viva* is her first feature-length film. Here are a couple of her first-person comments printed in Nagib's book of interviews:

Boa parte do trabalho que faço se refere, direta ou indiretamente, a essa experiência. Toda essa violência me marcou profundamente. A violência passou a ser tema reiterado em minha reflexão sobre a vida. [...]

[...] Minha relação com o cinema passa pela necessidade de refletir a vida, a experiência da prisão, da tortura, da derrota política e da fantasia. (Nagib 323-24)

Although Tata Amaral is of a younger generation she credits her Marxist schooling and her personal sociopolitical activism during the latter part of the dictatorship as influencing her filmmaking career. In Nagib's book, Amaral openly recounts her own experience and pointedly expresses how it has directed her aesthetic choices and ethical course:

Em agosto de 1979 nasceu minha filha, em novembro morreu o pai dela. Eu estava de licença, mas em janeiro voltei a militar, continuando até 1982. A militância, claro, influenciou minha obra. Em termos éticos, de visão do mundo, acho que sou marxista em muitos aspectos até hoje. (Nagib 42)

²I borrow this phrase from a 2009-10 film festival sponsored by the University of California Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, entitled *Watching the Unwatchable: Films Confront Torture*. *Que bom te ver viva* was one of twelve films featured at the festival.

The fact that both Murat and Amaral repeatedly direct their cinematic eye toward the periphery rather than the center, or toward the subaltern in opposition to the hegemonic, demonstrates how closely their artistic preferences reflect these personal values.

Non-Linearity and Hybridity

As a second point of commonality, on a structural level, the two films depict abrupt shifts and an aesthetic predilection for contrasts of light and shadow, both figurative and literal. Murat and Amaral create a deliberately pieced-together, fragmented composition that draws the spectator into the process of sorting and making sense of its non-linear and non-sequential arrangement. In this way the two films mostly tend to register torture stylistically, through individual flashes of memory, rather than reveal it graphically; in other words, through the unveiling of scars rather than fresh wounds. Unlike other period films about the dictatorship that show action in the present tense, such as in *Cabra cega* (directed by Toni Venturi, 2004) or *O ano em que meus pais saíram de férias* (directed by Cao Hamburger, 2006), *Que bom te ver viva* and *Trago comigo* capture the effects after the fact; they favor the realm of emotions. Unlike films that chronicle the dictatorship in present-day mode, this technique underscores the act of remembrance and a prolonged path toward un-forgetting.

Both films shape their compositions by way of a pluri-dimensional, multi-textural layering. They utilize a hybrid form: part fiction, part documentary. Lúcia Murat has stated that she chose this form for its ability, among other things, to prompt a sense of proximity and distancing. In her words: "Certo dia acordei com a idéia do que viria a ser *Que bom te ver viva*, uma possibilidade de trabalhar com documentário e ficção, ego e superego, intimidade e distanciamento" (Nagib 324). This tension between documentary and fiction is, thus, a key element, and the film's driving force.

In terms of the actual sequencing of the film, Murat explains in the "Making Of: Twenty Years Later," that she constructed *Que bom te ver viva* from three distinct narratives that intermingle throughout the film and are interspersed by archival footage. Firstly, there is a fictional narrative thread expressed in first-person monologue by a hyper self-aware, anonymous woman, played by actress Irene Ravache. Filmed mostly in the confines of her home, she teeters on the border between reason and madness, unafraid to express outrage by lashing out against injustice and impunity.

Secondly, in the category of non-fiction there are individual testimonials by eight female torture survivors in face-to-face exchange with the spectator. These young women are filmed in extreme close-ups, with little external details, placing the viewer in direct, raw, face-to-face exchange with them. From their tentative, tense voices that record concealed moments of vulnerability and sheer terror surface real emotional impact. Although the film portrays torture without including any scene of actual torture (a point noted in the "Making Of"), the horrors are nonetheless in evidence, particularly as they relate to gender; the testimonials bring to light, for example, sexual abuse, verbal harassment, bodily degradation, and rape.

Lastly, there is Irene Ravache's narration in voice-over mode that communicates the present-day lives of these women in the early years of post-dictatorship Brazil. Although they have become teachers, social activists, and mothers, the voice-over reveals the heavy burden of their survival. The camera lingers on Irene Ravache at the end of the film, to insist on the lasting damage that these women carry with them. She communicates the need for us to witness their revelations, taking shape from traumatic experiences and permanent scars.

Similarly in terms of form, Tata Amaral constructs *Trago comigo* by interspersing three distinctive segments within the four episodes. Firstly, there is the present-day fictional story of theater director Telmo Marinicov (played by actor Carlos Alberto Riccelli), who confronts his

own erasure of memory from his days as a young revolutionary. His steady recall of this period in his youth is prompted during the opening shots of the miniseries by an interviewer who questions Marinicov's participation in anti-dictatorship activity, and specifically inquires about a missing person with whom he would have collaborated.

Secondly, we experience the action of the play that Marinicov has been commissioned to direct and is, in fact, in the process of creating. The mounting of the play, conditioned by the improvisational participation of its actors, comes to represent his gradual re-construction of memory. Integral to this component is Telmo's interaction with the five young actors who are hired to perform in his theatrical production, including a current girlfriend who prompts the search for his past.

Lastly, there are non-fiction segments of individual testimonials by torture survivors, interspersed throughout the episodes. Unlike in *Que bom te ver viva*, in these interview segments the camera captures a deliberate contradiction between visual and verbal elements. The visual composure and sense of routine these individuals experience in their present-day homes clashes with the chilling words they express about their past horrors. They go so far as to reveal their torturers' names, names that the spectator experiences as bleeped out.³

It is significant that in this made-for-television miniseries Marinicov's play is never performed in its entirety, nor does the reconstruction of his memory occur by way of the conventional use of flashbacks, as Tata Amaral confirms in a 2009 article by Patricia Villalba that appeared in an online version of the *Estadão* (Villalba 1). Instead, the spectator is presented with fragmented, non-linear scenes from the play, interspersed with episodes that portray the formulating and rehearsing of the play. The interview portions of the film are also edited into the narrative mix in such a skillful way as to comment on, and ultimately reinforce, the particular direction of the individual fictional scenes.

The episodes are seamless in their junctures. Nonetheless the spectator experiences an upsurge of emotions as Telmo's multilayered memory puzzle unfolds. The episodes contain an element of metafiction visible in the miniseries' unique construction: snippets of the play as a full-dress performance are interwoven with scenes that mirror the unfinished rehearsals for a play still in the making, in the process of being formed. Thus, the miniseries' narrative scaffolding simulates the fragmented lives and conjures up emotions and memories piecemeal of the individuals it represents, as well as the complex process of un-forgetting and remembering.

Beyond the notion that many ordinary citizens, such as those represented, survived political torture, the miniseries insists on yet another, more multifaceted implication: that beyond a passionate plea for justice, those depicted are also seeking understanding and forgiveness. Specifically, they seek understanding from a post-dictatorship generation who is ignorant of the sacrifices they made in the fight for democracy, as well as of the military regime's atrocities. A plea for forgiveness is also a key element because survivors like Telmo have carried the burden of guilt knowing that other lives were lost due to their own weaknesses under torture. Essential to the storyline, therefore, is Marinicov's memory lapse as a double-edged sword: Lia, the missing woman he has forgotten, turns out to be someone who in the heat of the resistance was very dear to him; moreover, she is central as an absence, representing someone Telmo thought he had betrayed when he succumbed to his torturers, thus revealing her whereabouts, and ultimately causing her death.

Also integral to the narrative plot are the actors in Marinicov's theatrical production who, in their youthful naiveté, literally stand in for all who were born in the post-dictatorship era. Their ignorance and misunderstandings, as well as their gradual realization of existing parallels

³According to Lúcia Murat, who was present at the *Mulheres da Retomada* conference at Tulane, and who had served as consultant to *Trago comigo*, this bleeping out of the names was a decision made by TV Cultura, in consultation with the filmmaker.

between political repression in the past and socioeconomic oppression in the present, are highlighted in the film as a didactic tool.⁴ In Villalba's article mentioned above, Tata Amaral is quoted as saying that she wanted to focus on the dictatorship's contemporary repercussions. Her goal in *Trago comigo* was, in her words: "[...] iluminar esse passado que assombra" (Villalba 1).

Imbued with emotion, the non-fiction testimonials themselves in both films are nevertheless restrained and unusually reasonable, given the unfathomable subject matter they recall. They provide context through intimate, individual perspectives. Amaral insists that the role of eye witnesses who are still alive and are active participants in society adds substance and strength to the narrative (Villalba 1).

In terms of the interviews, there exists a remarkable sense of intertextual synergy and continuity between *Que bom te ver viva* and *Trago comigo*. Torture survivor Maria Amélia de Almeida Teles appears in both films. Her dual presence creates a bond between the two, and the time periods they each represent. At the very least she stands for longevity, since within the scope of these two works her presence spans three decades. She represents a bit more than that as well, to my mind: her presence supports the strength of individual memory found in the actions of a young woman who survived political torture. Moreover, she reinforces a collective memory bank publicly committed to human justice, and to the eradication of torture of all kinds.

If the testimonials convey disciplined fortitude, the fictional threads provide the overarching moral and ethical underpinnings at a fever pitch, true to both films. A cinematic conscience, so to speak, can be found in the voices and actions of Irene in *Que bom te ver viva* and of Telmo in *Trago comigo*. These two protagonists unleash unbounded emotions, express outrage, and provide fiery arguments aimed at the skeptics. As David William Foster maintains in *Gender and Society in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema*, much of the criticism in *Que bom te ver viva* is directed at men because, as he claims, women are doubly vulnerable under a repressive authoritarian power whose dominance is conceived as male (Foster 96-103).

In *Trago comigo*, young people view resistance to the dictatorship with skepticism and need to be educated about the role played by guerrilla fighters who, as Telmo insists, were not terrorists. In this vein, Irene Ravache and Telmo Marinicov, therefore, find fault with the oppressive apparatus of which they are survivors, even as they are shown to internalize the trauma they experienced under torture. They proclaim the need for un-forgetting and revealing, steps toward the truth. The constant sense of raveling and unraveling in both films centers on this tug and pull of these multiple framings.

Ethical Underpinnings

This element leads to the third cinematic correlation between *Que bom te ver viva* and *Trago comigo*. It is an ethical one that entails, as Chilean artist Quique Cruz recommends, "to pick up the pieces and try to assemble the dark puzzle that is the legacy of the dictatorial period" (Cruz). Although focused on political torture and its effects, both films make it clear that post-dictatorship Brazil—either the Brazil of twenty years ago, soon after the end of the military regime when *Que bom te ver viva* was made, or of just a few years ago, when *Trago comigo* aired for the first time—is beholden to an authoritarian legacy: as Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro has defined, a legacy alive and unbridled in present tense. As Pinheiro succinctly describes, this

⁴Lúcia Murat explained to me privately that in her role as consultant to *Trago comigo* she caught several errors and misunderstandings present in early versions of the script. She added that it was a directorial choice to incorporate these inaccuracies into the final screenplay as mistakes the young actors were prone to make.

authoritarian legacy is characterized by endemic violence and compounded by impunity and lack of accountability (Pinheiro and Almeida 29-34).

If we look at the filmography of either of these directors, we will see this ethical element in evidence, extending into other works. In Murat's cinematic trajectory from her first feature-film forward, that is, from *Que bom te ver viva* to more recent films such as *Quase dois irmãos* (2004) and *Maré: nossa história de amor* (2007), there is an ever-present sociopolitical message. *Quase dois irmãos* best illustrates Pinheiro's concept of endemic violence by closely portraying the lives of two individuals who grew up together: one who becomes a political prisoner and the other a criminal. More recently, Murat's new film, *A memória que me contam* (2012), harks back to the dictatorship period as background, while focusing on the contemporary moment. As Tiago Gonçalves describes, the plot gathers ex-guerilla fighters (coincidentally, one of them is a film director played by Irene Ravache) in a hospital waiting room as one of their friends is dying (Gonçalves 1).

Likewise, if we follow Amaral's cinematographic path, through *Um céu de estrelas* (1996) and *Antônia* (2006), for instance, it registers a continuum of attention to social issues, usually from the standpoint of the periphery, representing, for instance, single mothers and working women from lower income brackets. Ironically, it is Amaral's work that seems to largely problematize gender issues, such as domestic violence and work discrimination, rather than Murat's, whose *Que bom te ver viva* focused solely on women torture survivors.⁵ Tata Amaral's latest film, *Hoje* (2011), also references the dictatorship as a backdrop, and having been conceived first, loosely served as thematic inspiration for *Trago comigo* ("TV Cultura estreia minissérie sobre a ditadura"). In *Hoje* the protagonist wishes to move forward into the present, but becomes entrapped in the shadows of her husband's political past.

From Immediacy to Reflection

Despite elements of cohesiveness and correspondence, there are, certainly, critical differences between *Que bom te ver viva* and *Trago comigo*. These differences are based on the interrelated issues of timing, audience, and style. One of the obvious differences relates to timing. While many cinematic productions have only recently begun to depict the dictatorship, *Que bom te ver viva* captures a sense of immediacy and urgency in its bold choice to portray political torture during a period just after the military regime. By contrast, *Trago comigo* does not project this type of immediacy due to the fact that it was produced twenty years later. Contextualized historically, *Que bom te ver viva* conveys a raw directness in its individual testimonials as well as in Irene Ravache's candid performances, even as the film also communicates a visceral desire for moving forward, for returning to normalcy, by way of a conscious effort and illusory process of forgetting. By contrast, *Trago comigo* tackles a single individual's loss of memory and the subsequent public rescuing of that memory, magnified on a larger scale to encompass a collective memory. The miniseries therefore creates a palpable tension between Telmo and the young actors, by juxtaposing the former's gradual recuperation of memory with a steady lessening of indifference and apathy on the part of the latter.

In terms of audience and style, the two productions express divergent goals. Because *Trago comigo* is a miniseries produced for a television audience, albeit a culturally-informed one, there is inevitably a didactic element present, even though it is expertly presented. Its seamless style is aimed at a broader fan base. *Trago comigo* was the third presentation in the "Direções," series, a joint initiative of TV Cultura and SESC-TV, dedicated to promoting culture

⁵According to Murat, the choice to focus on women was motivated by a desire to create dramatic effect and intimacy, rather than to prioritize gender issues ("Making of").

and education. This series was designed to establish new avenues of experimentation in the creation of television dramas. One of its aims was to bring together playwrights and filmmakers for the purposes of collaboration and in the spirit of innovation (“Direções,” SESC-TV).

By comparison Murat feared the grittier, more sober *Que bom te ver viva* would have no initial audience at all. Twenty years after the film was produced actress Irene Ravache reflects on the film’s audience in the “Making Of,” by commenting on the fact that they were essentially creating a film no one would wish to see. We could argue that in this vein *Que bom te ver viva* is a film turned inwardly toward the torture survivors themselves, a group to which director Lúcia Murat herself belonged. Conversely, *Trago comigo* is turned outwardly, reliant on an audience now increasingly removed from and oblivious to its historical timeframe. In their own way, each film experiments with form and content, pushing aesthetic elements like cinematography, structure, and narrative to edgier limits, in order to force the viewer to encounter such a taboo subject as state-induced torture. Furthermore, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that differences between the two films might also reflect distinct cinematic trajectories: *Que bom te ver viva* was Murat’s first feature film, whereas *Trago comigo* corresponds to Amaral’s success at mid-career.

A major difference between the two films refers to their overarching themes: *Que bom te ver viva* focuses on the conflict between trauma and survival, articulated through the gradual need to *forget*. Focused on the need to *remember*, *Trago comigo*’s main objective becomes forgiveness, or at best, a release from guilt, aimed primarily at those torture survivors who, like Telmo, believed that surrendering to their torturers meant the betrayal (and resultant murder) of their comrades. This is why the dialogue exchange at the end of Marinicov’s play, in which forgiveness is requested, and mercifully granted, resonates:

Trago comigo a culpa , trago comigo um pedido de perdão.

Trago comigo o perdão. (*Trago comigo* Episode 4)

Trago comigo is also, more deliberately, a public quest for governmental accountability, by way of a symbolic transfer of guilt from the torture survivors to the torturers, who have escaped thus far with impunity.

Beyond commonalities and differences, *Que bom te ver viva* and *Trago comigo* are powerful, artistic testaments of resistance and survival. Whereas they inexorably bring to the surface the horrors of torture, they also underscore a positive note, as each of their titles suggests: a tribute to life and its struggles, as captured in the salutation “how nice to see you alive.” And an acknowledgment of human resilience in upholding the truth, suggested in the phrase “trago comigo” which, in this context, might stand for the foundational essence of who we are: our inner selves, our moral fiber and human spirit. The individuals represented in these two cinematographic renderings—whether fictional or real—are human beings made of flesh and blood *and scars*, whose stories need to be told.

As Lúcia Murat and Tata Amaral make visibly and emotionally clear, it is the simple fact that these torture survivors are alive that needs to be documented and commemorated. Moreover, these individuals articulate to us the insistence that a democratic society is beholden to such principles as transparency, accountability, human rights and justice for all citizens. The ultimate message the two films wish to impart, from either end of the temporal spectrum and directed at various audiences, is this: to resist tyranny and restore citizenship, we must make visible the political scars. Much like Quique Cruz’s 2008 multimedia art-piece *Archeology of Memory* cited at the beginning of this essay, these two Brazilian films thus “explore the contradictions of terror and aesthetics, the notion of pain and beauty and how to convert darkness into light” (Cruz). Lastly, to persist with the notion of light upon dark: they direct us toward actively registering and remembering, “to scratch light upon these darkened days” and somber, leaden years.

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