Chapter 12

"You're a dangerous Girl": The Fashioning of Satanic Liberation in The *VVithch* (2015), *The Neon Demon* (2016), and *Midsommar* (2019)

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In the three films discussed in this chapter, the central young woman protagonist is stylised as the contemporary incarnation of Gothic heroine par excellence: she is psychologically traumatised, or vulnerable, she is inexperienced, naïve but aspiring. Aesthetically, she is the white, petite, blonde ingenue who is presented to us as exceptional, coloured as singular, and Othered within her family as wider society. Satan clearly has 'a type' insofar as these twenty-first-century film texts provide a reflection of the cultural afterlives of the traditions of white colonial Gothic literature and the female Gothic of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, as argued by Per Faxneld (2017), such texts also provide narratives of feminist liberation via Satanic inculcation. From the dual perspective of Queer Gothic Studies and Fashion Studies, this chapter aims to reconcile the level of feminist liberation available to Thomasin (*The VVitch*), Jesse (*The Neon Demon*), and Dani (*Midsommar*) and, in turn, available to the spectator, with each film's use of queerbaiting and misogynistic tropes. The chapter will chart how each of these films presents a stylised performance of exceptional femininity, it will consider how these films reflect the male gaze, and it will contend that the Satanic liberation extant is an uneasy and profoundly ambivalent thing.

The images of girlhood, young womanhood, and femininity offered by the three films we take as our central texts in this chapter have a stylistic replicability which can be commodified, and has been, if not overtly then certainly indirectly, in the fast fashion industry which undergirds much of the global high-street and online fashion economy. However, while it is interesting to imagine these films have impacted the premiership of trends featuring flower

crowns and embroidered folk dress, the likes of which Dani dons in *Midsommar*, or the milkmaid maxis like that which Thomasin sheds at the end of *The VVitch*, our aims in this chapter have more to do with analysing how costume design communicates culture, narrative, and politics. We have brought these contemporary horror texts together because they provide incredibly dynamic representations of the archetypal young, thin, and beautiful ingenue of Gothic literary tradition. In these films, each female protagonist is maligned by their own society, singled out in their vulnerability, their exceptionality, or their 'damage' – to quote *The Craft's* Nancy – and each is shown to have been failed by and ousted from heteronormative, puritanical, and nuclear familiar constructs. They are, indeed, attractive figures to contemporary queer and feminist scholars because they are untethered from those systems of being, and successfully queer the feminine mores signalled by their narrative context; before being gobbled up by cannibal supermodels, adopted into an ancient Swedish cult, or flung high into the night sky on finding their coven. The Devil cannot strictly be blamed for everything these young women are put through in these films, all of which show cultures of consumption as the greatest source of harm and transformation. Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy), Jesse (Elle Fanning), and Dani (Florence Pugh) are each engulfed, embraced, and assimilated into a new order, where perceptions shift, power is won, and they are swallowed by their new environments.

Each of the films selected builds an intricate and multi-layered aesthetic which is not possible through the 'vision' of one man, as is the common misconception when it comes to the output of male auteurs. It is our hope to show in this chapter that there are many incredibly talented designers and other creative professionals without whom these films would not have achieved such impactful worlds, characters, and narratives. In our close comparative analysis of these three films, each of which is often attributed to 'the vision' of its male auteur director, it is our aim to show that these films offer an incredibly ambivalent liberation to their respective

central suffering young women. While these female protagonists might not completely escape the confines of whichever stifling patriarchal culture they find themselves in, the films do each offer insightful and complex reflections on gender dynamics, agency, and control in a capitalist society, so we will unpack how the central figures and key sets are designed and styled to illustrate the four main themes which we have identified as essential to the world building, characterisation, and cultural crafting work, or, the creative labour behind the films. Such creative labour, after all, is not exclusive to the male auteur director, as we will show. We have, therefore, chosen to organise our analysis into three subsections: first we will set the scene, in more ways than one, by connecting the creative labour on- and off-screen in "Dressing to Cultivate Character, Narrative and Culture"; then, we will analyse the extent to which "Abject Femininity and Corruption" work to convey complex relations between identity, place, and power, before providing a reading of the central films around notions of women's relationship to their capitalist patriarchal societies in our final section, "Accumulation and Belonging". In our discussion of these essential vectors, we will make our case that it is through the creative labour of design, and the politics of those aesthetics, that these texts so effectively present narratives and characters that play with audience expectations and thrill us with alternative and queerly anti-social trajectories.

Dressing to Cultivate Character, Narrative and Culture

The Neon Demon is an allegory about consumption that uses the dog-eat-dog world of high fashion in LA to comment upon internalised misogyny, female competition, dehumanising beauty standards, narcissism, and insatiability. To create his world of haute couture, Nicolas Winding Refn relied heavily on costume designer, Erin Benach, and cinematographer, Natasha Braier, who worked tirelessly and with a limited budget to build a world that reflects the incredibly expensive and glamourous yet uncanny and unsettling fashion culture of LA. Refn

comments that “the film isn’t about men and women but purely about women where the men have no real function” (Refn, “Creativity breeds”), which is curious since men do appear in the film, as love interests, as sexual threats, as objectifying spectators and photographers, auteurs who project their vision onto Jesse’s body. The scene showing Jesse’s first shoot sees the male photographer slather her in gold paint and literally sculpt Jesse into the ‘perfect’ image in his mind’s eye. However, these men function less as characters and more to emphasise the mechanics of gazing, of which the central female characters are the objects, particularly Jesse, whose youth and beauty are unparalleled in their exceptionality. Throughout the film it is revealed that the three women who encircle Jesse are hyper-aware of the effect she has on any and all spectators, and their dynamic is “very much designed around the witchcraft ceremony” (Refn, “Creativity breeds”). Jesse herself appears in this world as a complete outsider, a waif from a small town with a dubious past; no one knows where she came from, she is otherworldly, ethereal, barely even there. Benach emphasised her incredible lightness of character in distinctly feminine outfits of cheap floaty fabrics in pinks and purples. She dances across the skyline when with would-be boyfriend and amateur photographer, Dean (Karl Glusman), and looks like a little girl dressed up as a fairy, playfully and poignantly dipping her toe into the city. Through styling, we see Jesse transform from this feminine and ethereal girl-child, into a harder, more masculine, sculptured model, which parallels her quick rise to fame and success.

Midsommar begins and ends with incredibly loaded fabric, using styling and costume throughout to build the world as well as the narrative of the film. The Hårga commune foreshadows the events of the film by displaying a tapestry of the narrative, which director, Ari Aster, returns our attention to at key moments. When showing his guests around, Pelle describes part of the tapestry as a “love story”: the panels prefigure the steps Hårga teen, Maja (Isabelle Grill), takes in the intoxication and seduction of Christian (Jack Raynor). Pagan iconography and runic symbols punctuate the Hårga commune, which is otherworldly in its

midsummer brightness, and colour is injected into this world gradually, building towards a crescendo festooned with bright, multi-coloured florals. Dani, at the centre of celebrations as the newly crowned May Queen, is overwhelmed with a bright, shining, new position in a world in which she felt completely lost.

Costume and set design communicate another transition and transformation in *The VVitch* where set and characters slowly begin to merge, and whites turn to browns which we argue demonstrates the challenges of trying to tame the land. Painstaking detail towards historical accuracy and verisimilitude see director Robert Eggers and costume designer Linda Muir collaborate to build a wholly immersive period and place setting. Muir fashions all costumes using specially sourced natural fabrics (wool, linen, and hemp), and conveys much drama with colour, despite the remit of a muted, austere palette. Like Jesse, we see a girlish young woman, initially depicted in whites and very pale pinks, accumulate all this dirt before she becomes the witch of the wood, evermore fastened to the land she has come to settle upon.

Abject Femininity and Contaminating colour

In this section we analyse how femininity is perceived as threatening to the social and psychological structures the characters exist within. The costume design is integral to each of these films; we argue it is an essential tool for characterisation, narrative, and affect, particularly considering all three films convey a sense of escalating tension via a steady increase of colour, detail, texture, and noise. These transitions have a more specific function, however, in mirroring the transformations of the respective female protagonists, particularly in the construction of their abject femininity. *Midsommar*'s steady increase in detail can best be noted in the embroidered folk dresses worn by members of the Hårga community. In *The VVitch*, whiteness is steadily co-opted by brown, black, and grey tones as the family struggle to eke out a living in exile, reflecting the dying crops they tend and the naked trees that form a backdrop to their homestead. *The Neon Demon's* sets offer a disorientating effect to reflect the

artifice, violence, and superficiality of a culture dominated by highly unachievable and untenable beauty standards. Our first glimpse of Jesse shows her looking like a prone corpse strewn across a chez lounge. Muir dresses Fanning in a metallic blue strapless Emporio Armani top and matching skirt, her make-up is outlandish, and she is styled to look over-drawn: the ambitions of the photographer-artist-boyfriend not only projected but projectile-vomited onto her. In this way Muir captures layers of desperation and hunger, and the sweet-shop palette of this shoot establishes Jesse as a food object, just as fellow model, Sarah (Abbey Lee), points out in a later scene: "She's dessert, because she's so sweet." This is after Make-up Artist (MUA) Ruby asks, using the logic of identifying oneself with a lipstick shade, "are you food or sex?" In this instance and throughout the film women are products and commodities to be eaten, used, and fucked.

Ruby, Sarah, and Gigi are a triptych of abject femininity at its most raw. Like many literary and on-screen representations of witches, Refn's trio consumes the young to regenerate their youth, looks, and vitality. So extreme is their desire to consume, they prey upon Jesse, poignantly shoving her in at the deep end of a drained pool – a didactic lesson in jumping in too deep when you have nothing to break your fall; no loved ones to support you; no safety net, no buoyancy. Ruby, the MUA who functions in the world of the film as an engineer of beauty, and an essential queer desiring eye, is unlike Sarah and Gigi, established models whose increasing umbrage reaches breaking point. In short, they all must have her, these predatory women crave Jesse. Rebuffed sexually, Ruby uses the corpse of a young blonde women as a surrogate sex partner. Mounting her, kissing her, and masturbating, she grasps the corpse's face violently as she fantasises about Jesse. In this way, the queerness demonstrated by the film is a profoundly anti-social representation which has slightly less to do with desire than it does with notions of gore capitalism in the fashion industry. Matt Wheatly described the film's use of cannibalism as "a vehicle to facilitate the final extreme of dehumanisation when those

working within creative industries can no longer identify themselves or others as anything but products to be consumed" (Wheatley 129). With heavy allusions to Elizabeth Bathory, Ruby reclines in a bathtub, soaking in Jesse's blood, backgrounded by Sarah and Gigi sharing a shower to complete the blood-bathing tableaux where cannibal consumption reflects the horror of inequality and exploitation suffered by garment workers around the world. The hunger, desire, lust, and greed of the very privileged supports an industry which works many women around the world into early graves, after working lives devoid of proper rights, paid well below a living wage, while industry bosses profit by the billions year on year. Yes, "the rivalry inherent to capitalist infrastructures leads to cannibalistic competition between creatives as they attempt to consume and surpass their peers" (Wheatley 118), but this example is surely nothing compared with the steady diet of blood supplied by those working further down the capitalist food chain.

Abject femininity is expressed to great bloody affect in *Midsommar* and *The VVitch* across lines of anthropophagy too, particularly as a means of inculcation into the Hårga or the Devil's company, considering the special menstruation brew Maja serves Christian before inviting him into a Hårga coupling ceremony, or, indeed, the examples of blood contaminating milk in *The VVitch*. In the next section, we will connect the steady saturation of colour in each film's aesthetic to our readings of these texts as critiques of capitalist accumulation.

In *Midsommar*, accumulation and acceleration connect abjection with communion. In the topsy-turvy world of Hälsingland, everything is part of one life cycle, death is celebrated as a part of life, and it is Dani's grief and trauma from recently losing her family that open her up to accepting the Hårga people as her new tribe or family. Andrea Flesch dresses Dani in comfortable clothes which are usually monochromatically blue or beige for the film's early scenes. In this way, she is emotionally and simplistically coded 'blue.' Her sister, Terri, performs a murder suicide, killing their parents and herself by connecting a canary yellow

hosepipe from the family car's exhaust to her parents' bedroom and her own mouth. The same canary yellow can be spotted on Terri's t-shirt, their parent's bedspread, and the flowers that form a path guiding Dani's troupe to the commune's entrance. The gateway they pass through as they enter is made from yellow-painted boards arranged into a sun structure, where the Hårga greet their guests wearing brilliant white robes. The coding does not follow a strict pattern but loosely follows the trajectory of Dani processing her trauma. The consolatory birthday cake and candle Christian present are canary yellow; they match the sacred structure in which he burns along with his fellow human sacrifices. There is light in all dark, and perceived madness could unlock some sense of feminist liberation for Dani as it does the narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's touchstone Gothic novella "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). Gazing at the elders as they voluntarily leap from the cliff in one the film's first shockingly violent scenes, an extremely bright close-up shot of Dani's eyes shows an abundance of yellow flecks in her green irises. This suggests a continuity between Dani, her trauma, and this new environment which invites fresh perspectives, structures, and relationships.

A similar transition can be seen in *The VVitch*. In this film, there is no stark evolution into technicolour in the vein of T*he Wizard of Oz* (1939), but a slow, creeping homogenisation between the family and the wood, building to a climax of blood and mud where sole survivor, Thomasin, sheds her accumulated dirt and viscera to dance naked with the devil as the Witch of the Wood. Head of the family William (Ralph Ineson), uses constant sermons to remind eldest children, Thomasin and Caleb (Harvey Scrimshaw), of their original sin and fickle natures. With sin and corruption at the forefront of her mind, Thomasin's first lines are spoken in the new homestead where she sits, doe-eyed, peering up into a God's-eye camera, wearing a pink pinafore and white shift: "I confess I have lived in sin; I've been idle in me work." Thomasin fails in her duties of watching over her younger siblings: baby Samuel is snatched by the witch, Caleb is seduced and poisoned by the witch, twins Mercy (Ellie Grainger) and

Jonas (Lucas Dawson) are corrupted by Black Phillip. Other examples of her labour include tending the goats, which run riot with the twins, knocking William down; it becomes Thomasin's job to "brush out his woollens." "Help him!", her mother bids. It is around this division of domestic labour that Mercy and Thomasin compete in their fantasies about being 'the Witch of the Wood' to scare and dominate one another. In this way, supernatural fancies allow some small reprieve to the least powerful members of the family, before suspicions of true 'evil' and witchcraft see them all turn against each other.

As we have established, costume and set design coalesce to irrevocably assimilate the family with the land: they effectively become their destitution which is quite appropriate if we consider the 'semantic slippage' of common people and common lands in English society of the seventeenth century (McNally 43). "The Commons" was a phrase used interchangeably to describe both the land and the people who worked and lived on the land. However, costume design also functions to contrast the family/land with Thomasin's exceptionality. When her family is decimated, she conjures Black Phillip to speak, and the camera holds focus on the book of the beast in the foreground while Black Phillip transforms into the shape of a man almost (but not quite) out of shot. He passes by the book on the barn's dirt floor. As blurry and fleeting as this moment is, we are given a glimpse of a cavalier boot, complete with chiming spur, as he walks towards her and flashes the boot's red sole. The only swatch of colour on an otherwise black outfit calls attention to and subverts the use of red throughout the film to signal contamination and corruption. The Devil bids her to remove her clothes and guides her hand as she signs his book. Colour, in this case red specifically, accompanies Thomasin's transformation and suggests a richer life. She escapes a life of struggle and labour to instead live "deliciously".

Primitive Accumulation, Excess, Becoming, and Belonging

Each of the texts studied here critique capitalist patriarchy in their depiction of female protagonists who are physically and metaphorically laden with layers of clothing which in some ways represent the burden of responsibility they must shoulder, as women, as beautiful women, and as exceptional women. In *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), Silvia Federici describes the rise of capitalism as "coeval with the war against women," and highlights the persecution of 'witches' in the Feudal period as the labour pains of early capitalism (5). Her thesis of primitive accumulation, connecting the threat posed by wise women and abortionists to the project of population growth narrates a history of women's reproductive, physical, domestic, and sexual labour and the sexist economics underpinning them. We argue that this accumulation, seen in the excess of layering, the dizzying increase or the slow bleed of colour, texture, and visual noise seen in these films and experienced by the central female figures, work to parody the position that women have historically been placed in, ironically subjecting them to the pressures and associated trauma that come with being so put upon. Thomasin, Dani, and Jesse each begin their respective narratives as proverbial blank canvases, Thomasin and Dani especially, begin their narrative almost completely defined by their relationship to their families, whereas Jesse is untethered and mysterious. All three are seeking something beyond the traditional family and each experiences a kind of accumulation of identity as well as of material, and the accumulation of material suggests personal acquisition, whether that be "a pretty dress", flower gowns, or haute couture. Through achieving this excess, these young women become 'dangerous' queer figures:

By diverting reproductive energies into the dangerous and sterile process of individual acquisition of money and commodities, the witchcraft of accumulation undermines female biological reproduction. Yet, where women are concerned, this raises profound contradictions. After all, while threatening their normal socio-cultural role in a patriarchal

society, witchcraft also opens up the possibility that women might pursue sex and wealth for individual purposes rather than for the reproduction of the community (McNally 192).

What each demonstration of monstrous liberty suggests is that these female accumulators are a threat to normative society. Women are connected to the land and nature, whereas man is the idealised "appropriating unit, an accumulator of privatised property" (McNally 44). The scene where Jesse finds a mountain lion in her motel room emphasises her vulnerability, particularly around menacing motelier, Hank (Keanu Reeves), who normalises scopophilic gazing at the young runaways who pass through seeking refuge: he recommends a room to jilted Dean, advertising "real Lolita shit [...] room 214, gotta be seen!" However, like Thomasin and Dani, Refn binds Jesse to the natural world; instead of attaching her to the land, he does this with the almost surreal appearance of a mountain lion trashing her room. Goldenberg notes that "Witchcraft's view of other forms of life, as equal to the human form is certainly not shared by Judaism and mainstream Christianity, and not easily tolerated by them," after noting that in these traditions woman is often seen as "an inferior being, in need of taming and cultivation by 'man'" (Goldenberg 105-6). Aster shows the male characters of *Midsommar* playing up to the patriarchal aspiration of accumulation when Pelle says things like "don't forget about all the Swedish women you can impregnate in June" when in exclusively male company.

The hallucinogenic mushroom teas the group is served throughout their visit ceremonially induct Dani into visual manifestations of grass growing painlessly through her hand. Later, when dancing, she suddenly starts being able to speak to the other dancers in their Swedish tongue; flowers bulge out in bloom, pulsing; she is part of the ecosystem here, the land embraces her in a very similar way that it does Thomasin in *The VVitch.* However, the "dangerously porous" feminised common land is unruly; it transgresses limits and boundaries, (McNally 44) and, as William drills into Caleb: "corrupt nature is empty of grace, bent onto sin, only onto sin." So, we might perceive that the central women in *Midsommar* and *The Vvitch*

are preyed upon, singled out for their exceptionality, by a Satan or supernatural forces, or we can understand them as embraced by the very land, the places they occupy in their alterity. The "rich men eat up poore men, as beasts doo eat grasse," as Phillip Stubbes, a Puritan pamphleteer, wrote in 1583 (117). We use this metaphor to illustrate that the dynamics of exploitation in capitalism, as in feudalism, are gendered. Our selected cinematic texts highlight the broader reality that all women, and femme-presenting people necessarily must understand their position in global power structures as a means of self-preservation. Any opportunity to subvert that positioning should be celebrated, even if that means eating the next generation as Thomasin threatens Mercy: "perchance I'll boil and bake thee since we're alack of food," embracing her persecution.

As well as accumulating herself, it becomes clear that *Midsommar*'s Dani is very much a new foundling member of the Hårga commune and is representative in herself of their recruited population. She discovers, along with her anthropology student friends, that they are a true collective – they eat together, sleep together, pick wildflowers while walking backwards together. Babies born into the community are seen to be collectively soothed with eerie off-key hooting because they are "raised by everyone"; and this is only the first instance of collective, communal expressions of care. The women accompanying the ritualistic intercourse between Christian and Maja punctuate every thrust with their own chorus of undulating moans. Then, when Dani learns about Christian's encounter, the Hårga women surround her too and join in her hyperventilating screams of anguish. The effect is uncanny, it disrupts the internalisation of suffering, and makes public experiences and emotions usually dealt with privately. She is told by Pelle, "I have always felt held… by my family", which describes exactly what her life is missing.

In *Midsommar's* most overt demonstration of accumulation, which reconciles the position of women in the labour force, particularly within creative industries, we have the final

scenes of Dani bedecked in over 10,000 flowers, some of which appear to be blossoming or breathing, connecting them to the heady, disorientating effect of the psychotropic tea she continues to be served. She breathes new life into her new community, crowning their Midsommar celebrations while she watches her old life burn.

Figure 6. Model Maggie Rizer for Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren, Autumn/Winter collection from 1999

Figure 7. Dani's flower dress in Midsommar

This powerfully ambivalent ending of grimaces turned to smiles is reminiscent of Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren's Autumn/Winter collection from 1999, which remains iconic but at the time was described by André Leon Talley as "the Viagra of couture week" (Bateman 2017). The collection was based on a Russian matryoshka doll. Model Maggie Rizer arrives on stage wearing the first garment of the collection, a costume fashioned from hessian sacking. She steps into a pair of shoes placed onto a turntable, slowly rotating to give the audience a 360-degree view of each piece she is wearing. She is continually clothed with a total of eight more pieces. Each piece references the previous, the embroidery or crystal embellishment of one garment offers clues towards the next design. Not unlike the tapestry we see at the beginning of *Midsommar*, this collection also makes a larger statement by commenting on the systemic and structural issues in the fashion industry, particularly around our obscene consumption of clothing. Like Dani, in her final May Queen flower dress and floral crown, Rizer is swallowed up, consumed by fabrics and ornamentation as the collection progresses. It is a spectacle, it is overwhelmingly beautiful yet troubling to see the central woman engulfed by the garments, these accumulating layers hung on her mannequin-

still body – the weight and heat of which are increasing too. With each revolution, there is accumulation of detail, colour, and sparkle as we watch her grow with pity-tinged awe, much like how we are encouraged to view Dani's dance around the maypole, and her glistening, hallucinatory accession into a new role. It all conjures de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, where girls are put on "a pivot, [...] naked and bound and turn[ed] until he discharges," upon which "she uninterruptedly revolves until dead" (de Sade 449, 486). Dani does not turn until dead, but she is the only survivor of her troupe by the end of the film.

By the time celebrations reach the May pole, Dani has shed her neutral tones of blue or beige, much like Rizer's first layer of hessian sacking, and has been dressed by the Hårga women in intricate and bold embroidered folk dress. The hyper-sensory overload of colour, dancing, turning, and the once slow accumulation of colour and detail all accelerate towards the end of the film where Dani, having won the flower crown, is seen dressed in a huge pyramid cloak of flowers – an explosion of colour which produces the same effect as Viktor and Rolf's Russian matryoshka doll on her final rotations: the accumulation is extreme, it is a beautiful burden, the process to reach this point took time and work. What the show effectively presents is the labour involved in dressing models in garments, labour which is usually kept from view off-stage. Not only do we see Viktor and Rolf scrambling around to wrap Rizer up in the next garment, we also see the absolute resolve and determination of Rizer to remain composed and beautiful while her body snowballs into a pyramid-esque monolith and is ultimately confined by her haute couture cage of cloth.

Conclusion

The films we have brought together under our dual perspective of Gender Studies and Fashion Studies work describe the plight of women in capitalist heteropatriarchal societies, particularly in industries like fashion but also women working in the film industry. Eggers, Aster, and Refn

did not work in an auteur vacuum: their films rely heavily on the talent of women behind the scenes. Refn could not have conveyed an aesthetically or politically impactful film without a costume and design team comprised of Erin Benach, Marina Hoermanseder, and Sara Rose, nor without Mary Laws, Polly Stenham, or Natasha Braier. Equally, Aster and Eggers are indebted to Andrea Flesch and Linda Muir, respectively. The arguments of this chapter coalesce around the notion of accumulation wherein fashion and design use the language of queer theory and the tradition of the literary Gothic to present alternative trajectories of accumulated identity, value, and power. The collaborations of creatives in the production teams discussed have achieved film worlds which are wholly immersive, they draw you in, no matter who you are, with the invitation of a polymorphous gaze. For those interested in interrogating consumption through culture, the devil is indeed in the details.

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