



# **REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG**

**A Film by Nancy D. Kates**

**PREMIERES ON HBO IN FALL 2014**

Running time: 100 mins.

**HBO DOCUMENTARY FILMS**  
**REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG**  
**SYNOPSIS**

REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG is an intimate and nuanced investigation into the life of one of the most influential and provocative thinkers of the 20th century. Passionate and gracefully outspoken throughout her career, Susan Sontag became one of the most important literary, political and feminist icons of her generation. The documentary explores Sontag's life through archival materials, accounts from friends, family, colleagues, and lovers, as well as her own words, as read by Patricia Clarkson. From her early infatuation with books to her first experience in a gay bar; from her early marriage to her last lover, REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG is a fascinating look at a towering cultural critic and writer whose works on photography, war, illness, and terrorism still resonate today.

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**DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

I was inspired to make a film about Susan Sontag because of my sadness at her passing. When she died in late 2004, I felt that an important voice had been silenced. Sontag fascinates in part because of her internal contradictions, as well as the way in which she mirrors divides and conflicts in the culture. She was the foremost female intellectual of her day, and refused to be reduced to her gender, but was also perfectly willing to use her beauty and sensuality to advance her career. She wrote about low culture from a position within high culture, which was quite a radical act in the mid-1960s. Sontag stood publicly against the Vietnam War, but not against the actions of the state of Israel, at least in the 1970s. She was politically brave, but fearful about exposing her personal life; ahead of her time in many ways, and yet closeted.

A few months after her death, I found myself having an argument with a colleague about whether Sontag had been a lesbian. Neither the *New York Times* nor the *Los Angeles Times* obituaries mentioned her same-sex relationships. For the national paper of record to make such an omission seemed, to many, to be homophobic, though it was likely done with the intention of protecting her privacy. As I walked back to my office after this conversation, the idea to make a documentary on Sontag hit me like a brick. The task was daunting, however. Sontag was fascinating, complex and difficult.

For decades, I have been interested in Susan Sontag—as both thinker and icon. Sontag represents the possibility of a committed life, an intellectual life, and a life of thinking and writing not defined by educational institutions. She certainly embodied an ideal for female undergraduates of the 1970s and '80s: Sontag was the zenith that none could equal but many aspired to. The film also comes out of my obsession with books and writing—it is, in part, a reader's tribute to a writer and the literary world.

Publicly, Sontag was the fierce “dragon lady” of American letters; in private, she was as confused and vulnerable as the next person. Nor did she feel free to reveal her vulnerabilities, for fear of being dismissed as weak and emotional by her fellow writers—often men with large egos. She kept her sexuality private, assuming it would be used against her, even in later years, when admirers demanded that she come out. The film explores the contrast between the private, vulnerable Sontag and her self-assured public persona, and, above all, the ways in which Sontag did not wish to be seen.

I am also interested in documenting the issues Sontag championed, and demonstrating why her ideas continue to resonate in the culture. She wrote eloquently about photography and its importance in consumer culture, calling for an “ecology” of images. In many ways, we live in a Sontagian world of complete visual overload, a media environment dominated by the image culture of television, advertising, YouTube, Facebook and instant access to information. The film creatively uses archival materials in the effort to excavate the past, partly by creating visual metaphors for her ideas.

REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG is a deep, associative engagement with a serious subject, and one that raises more questions than it answers. We hope that those familiar with Sontag's work will gain fresh insights into her life and legacy; the documentary is primarily intended for a broad audience, including those who are less familiar with her. I would like the film to inspire new audiences, young people who may have never heard of her, and others with only a cursory knowledge of Sontag as a cultural figure.

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**NOTES ON SUSAN SONTAG**

Susan Sontag was a controversial, larger-than-life figure: beautiful, compassionate, maddening, insightful, sometimes arrogant, and always utterly dedicated to her work. As her friend Gary Indiana wrote in a remembrance in the *Village Voice*: “she was the indispensable voice of moral responsibility, perceptual clarity, passionate advocacy... social justice. Sontag took it as a given that our duty as sentient beings is to rescue the world.”

Sontag was born in New York City in 1933, and raised in Arizona and Los Angeles. She was a second-generation Jewish American whose grandparents left Europe for the Lower East Side. Sontag’s parents were separated for long periods of time while her father, Jack Rosenblatt, ran a fur trading business in China. He died overseas of tuberculosis when Sontag was only five and when her mother remarried seven years later, Sontag took her stepfather’s name and became Susan Sontag. A precocious, bookish child, she graduated from North Hollywood High School at the age of 15, going on to Berkeley for a semester, and then to the University of Chicago. She received a master’s degree in philosophy from Harvard, and also studied at Oxford and the Sorbonne. After teaching at Columbia University and elsewhere, she eventually left academia to focus on her writing and creative projects.

For more than 40 years, Sontag wrote with tremendous insight about the cultural and political forces shaping this country. In the ‘60s and ‘70s, her essays were efforts to expand what could be taken seriously in the arts. By being serious about subjects and art forms that had not been given their intellectual due, Sontag’s writings were a shock to the American system. That was never more true than in the aftermath of 9/11, when her brief comments in *The New Yorker* about the underlying causes of the tragedy unleashed a firestorm of anger. For her willingness to criticize American foreign policy, Sontag was labeled a traitor. At the very end of her life, she wrote *Regarding the Pain of Others*, a book examining our responses to images of war and torture. Even while she was dying of leukemia, Sontag continued to provide a moral compass through which to understand the issues of the day. “I’m interested in various kinds of passionate engagement,” she said. “All my work says ‘be serious, be passionate, wake up!’”

Why should we care about Susan Sontag, or watch a film about her? She was an enormously influential writer who sold millions of copies of her books, and yet the public knows very little about her. Many found Sontag to be often brilliant, frequently infuriating, and occasionally maddeningly obtuse but invariably fascinating. Before her death, she hesitatingly admitted to being bisexual; her diaries are much more explicit. “My desire to write is connected to my homosexuality,” she confided in a 1959 journal entry. “I need the identity as a weapon to match the weapon that society has against me. I am just becoming aware of how guilty I feel being queer.”

Sontag did not shrink from political controversy, confounding her literary colleagues with political stands that changed radically over time. Reviewers such as Hilton Kramer and Walter Kendrick publicly called her inconsistent and elitist. Yet even her detractors acknowledged her bravery. Sontag vehemently opposed the Vietnam War, notoriously proclaiming “the white race is the cancer of human history.” Demonstrating her beliefs through action, she famously visited Hanoi in 1968, in the midst of heavy American bombing, to show solidarity with the North Vietnamese. Sontag continued bearing witness to war after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, when she went to Israel to make *PROMISED LANDS*, a film about the Palestinian situation in Israel. She supported writer Salman Rushdie when he was under the threat of death from a fundamentalist Islamic *fatwah*. In the 1990s, she made numerous trips to Sarajevo during the war

there, eventually mounting a staged production of *Waiting for Godot* in the midst of siege. Sontag also survived a terminal breast cancer diagnosis and a mastectomy at the age of 40. She lived with other forms of cancer for the next 30 years, becoming a role model for all women who struggle with the disease.

Susan Sontag died on December 28, 2004 of acute myelogenous leukemia, after an intense struggle with the disease, her third form of cancer. While her eloquent voice has been silenced, she lives on in her books, essays, letters, and in the dramatic interviews and footage she left behind.

- Nancy Kates, *Filmmaker*

**HBO DOCUMENTARY FILMS**  
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**FILMMAKER BIOS**

**Nancy D. Kates, Producer/Director**

Nancy D. Kates produced and directed *BROTHER OUTSIDER: THE LIFE OF BAYARD RUSTIN*, which went on to win more than 25 awards worldwide, including the 2004 GLAAD Media Award. *BROTHER OUTSIDER* received significant attention in the national press: critics described it as “a potent piece of historical rediscovery” (*L.A. Times*); “beautifully crafted” (*Boston Globe*); “powerful and startling” (*The Advocate*); and “poignant” (*TIME*).

Kates received her M.A. from Stanford’s documentary film program. Her master’s thesis, *THEIR OWN VIETNAM*, received the 1995 Student Academy Award in documentary, and was exhibited, among other festivals, at the 1996 Sundance Film Festival. Kates has worked on a number of other documentary projects as a writer, producer, story consultant, and editor. She writes occasionally for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and other publications.

**Sophie Constantinou, Cinematographer**

Sophie Constantinou has earned international acclaim for tackling difficult subjects with artistry. Her directing credits include *DIVIDED LOYALTIES*, a personal exploration of the conflict in Cyprus, and *BETWEEN THE LINES*, a lyrical documentary about women who cut themselves. Her shooting credits include PBS’s award-winning *MAQUILAPOLIS*; HBO’s *UNCHAINED MEMORIES*, which tells the stories of former slaves; and the PBS film *PRESUMED GUILTY*, a portrait of a public defender’s office. She is working on *OPEN MINDS*, *OPEN MOUTHS*, a film about the movement for sustainable, organic lunches in public schools.

**John Haptas, Editor**

John Haptas practiced law in Oakland, California before meeting his wife, Kristine Samuelson, and turning to film. He became a documentary editor after several decades of work as a location sound mixer. His editing credits include *SOUNDTRACK TO A RIOT* for Frontline World (Emmy nomination); *HUNTING THE HIDDEN DIMENSION*, a program on fractal geometry for PBS Nova; and *INSIDE GUANTANAMO BAY*, a two-hour National Geographic Explorer special (editor/co-writer; Emmy nominations for Best Documentary and for Writing). With Samuelson, he made the recent *TOKYO WAKA*, a meditation on the crows of Tokyo, and a number of earlier films.

**Tom Dolby, Executive Producer**

Tom Dolby is an American producer, director, novelist, and editor. His novels include *The Trouble Boy*, *The Sixth Form* and his *Secret Society* series. He also served as co-editor of the anthology *Girls Who Like Boys Who Like Boys*, which became a Sundance Channel reality television series, for which he was a consulting producer. In 2012, Dolby wrote and co-directed (with Tom Williams) the film *LAST WEEKEND*, starring Patricia Clarkson. He pursues film and television projects through his film company Water’s End Productions.

**Rachel Antell, Co-Producer**

Rachel Antell is a documentary filmmaker and editor based in the San Francisco Bay Area. Among the films she’s produced are *FREMONT, USA*, which looks at one city’s response to its growing religious pluralism; *ACTING ON FAITH*, which profiles American women activists from the Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist faiths; and *DEATH ON A FRIENDLY BORDER*, about the rising number of migrants who have died crossing the US-Mexico border since its militarization. Antell has also edited several documentaries, including *WHY WE SING*, about LGBT choruses, which aired nationally on PBS; and *OCCUPIED MINDS*, which followed a US-Israeli and US-Palestinian’s joint journey to their homeland and was broadcast on Link-TV. Antell received her

M.A. in Documentary Film and Television from Stanford University.

**Laura Karpman, Composer**

Laura Karpman brings to her music feverish imagination, impeccable musicianship, complexity, versatility, joy, and fearlessness. In the words of George Manahan, music director of New York City Opera, Karpman's work exhibits "a rare combination of heart and groin." Having scored numerous television and film productions, Karpman has won four Emmys, and been nominated for seven more. Her acclaimed operatic orchestral work *Ask Your Mama*, co-created with renowned soprano Jessye Norman, premiered at Carnegie Hall in 2009, and was reprised in 2013. Karpman was named one of the most important women in Hollywood by *Variety*, and teaches music and film composition at UCLA and the Berklee College of Music in Valencia, Spain.

**Nora Kroll-Rosenbaum, Composer**

Nora Kroll-Rosenbaum leads a diverse musical life, writing music for film, television, video games, theater and the concert hall. She recently completed *Quotes*, a large commission for the 40th Anniversary of The London Symphony Chorus with string orchestra; her choral work *A Simple Oath*, commissioned by Essential Voices USA, premiered on NPR. Her concert commissions include The Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music, The London Symphony Chorus, and the Seattle, Detroit and San Francisco Symphonies. As a co-founder of VisionIntoArt, she has created numerous interdisciplinary multimedia productions. She studied composition with Samuel Adler and Milton Babbitt at Juilliard.

**David Tecson, Motion Graphic Designer**

David Tecson is a Creative Director and User Experience designer in the fields of film, television and online media. He has served as president of Edgeworx, making graphics and visual effects for projects such as OPERATION HOMECOMING, HERBIE: FULLY LOADED, THE KID STAYS IN THE PICTURE, D.E.B.S., and HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH. He is the Creative Director at CoSA, The Company of Science & Art, where he helped develop the software After Effects. He is a board member of the downtown theater company Clubbed Thumb.

**Veronica Selver, Creative Consultant**

Veronica Selver has been an editor and producer for the last 30 years. She co-produced and directed KPFA ON THE AIR and her co-directing credits include YOU GOT TO MOVE and the Columbia duPont award-winner WORD IS OUT (1978), the first feature documentary on growing up gay. She edited the award-winning films ON COMPANY BUSINESS; the Academy Award-nominated BERKELEY IN THE SIXTIES; HARRY BRIDGES: A MAN AND HIS UNION; ABSOLUTELY POSITIVE; COMING OUT UNDER FIRE; BLACKS AND JEWS; and BROTHER OUTSIDER: THE LIFE OF BAYARD RUSTIN.

**Arwen Curry, Associate Producer**

Arwen Curry is a graduate of the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. Her documentary film STUFFED screened at the 2006 Mill Valley Film Festival, the New England Film & Video Festival and other festivals. Her current documentary project is a biography of writer Ursula K. Le Guin, supported by Cal Humanities and other documentary funders.

**Susannah Patrice Morse, Associate Producer**

Susannah Patrice Morse is an independent filmmaker and writer. She received a Harvard Film Study Center Fellowship and a media grant from the Jerome Foundation for her work-in-progress HAUNTED BY THE LIGHT, an experimental 16mm film studying children's fantasy writer Susan Cooper. She is also co-directing ELWOOD SNOCK & THE LAND OF LO-FL, an experimental documentary exploring the life of outsider folk musician Michael Hurley.

**HBO DOCUMENTARY FILMS**  
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**FEATURED INTERVIEWS**

**Noël Burch** is an expatriate American filmmaker and film critic who has been living in France since the 1950s. He is best known for his book, *Theory of Film Practice*.

**Terry Castle** is Walter A. Haas Professor in the Humanities at Stanford University, where she teaches 18th century literature and popular culture, biography and autobiography, the history of the novel, and gay and lesbian literature. She is the author of nine books, including *The Professor and Other Writings*, 2010.

**Lucinda Childs** is a world-famous choreographer and dancer, best known for her avant-garde work in the 1960s at Judson Church, and her collaborations with Robert Wilson and Philip Glass.

**Judith Sontag Cohen** is Susan Sontag's younger sister. She lives in Maui, Hawaii.

**Mark Danner** writes about foreign affairs and American politics, and is a former staff writer at *The New Yorker*. He teaches at UC Berkeley and at Bard College, and writes frequently for *The New York Review of Books* and other publications.

**Nadine Gordimer** is a celebrated South African novelist and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

**Peter Haidu** taught Medieval French Studies for many years at UCLA. He now lives in Brooklyn, NY.

**Richard Howard** is an American poet, translator, literary critic, scholar and essayist. He received the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his 1969 work *Untitled Subjects*.

**Alice Kaplan** is the John M. Musser Professor of French and chair of the French Department. She is known for *French Lessons: A Memoir*, and other books, including *Dreaming in French: the Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag and Angela Davis*.

**Stephen Koch** is the author of numerous books, including *Stargazer*, a portrait of Andy Warhol and his work, and is the former chair of the creative writing program at Columbia University.

**Wayne Koestenbaum** is a poet and literary critic and teaches at CUNY.

**Eva Kollisch** taught German literature at Sarah Lawrence College for many years, and is the author of two memoirs, *Girl in Movement* and *The Ground Under My Feet*.

**Fran Lebowitz** is a well-known comic essayist. She wrote for *Interview* magazine for many years, and is the subject of the Martin Scorsese documentary PUBLIC SPEAKING.

**Don Levine** is a professor of film studies and comparative literature at the University of Massachusetts. He co-edited *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings* with Susan Sontag.

**Deborah Nelson** is professor of English and Deputy Provost for Graduate Education at the University of Chicago, where she specializes in late 20th century American culture and politics. Her forthcoming book, *Tough Broads*, looks at the work of Susan Sontag and Diane Arbus, among other writers and artists.



**Sigrid Nunez** has written six novels, as well as the recent work *Sempre Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag*.

**Darryl Pinckney** writes frequently for *The New York Review of Books*. He is the author of the novel *High Cotton*, as well as plays, critical essays and the book *Out There: Mavericks of Black Literature*.

**Monique de Rothschild** is the sister of French actress/director Nicole Stéphane.

**Catherine Stimpson** is a feminist writer and scholar, and University Professor and former Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Science at New York University.

**Harriet Sohmers Zwerling** is a writer, retired New York City schoolteacher, and former artist's model. Her book *Abroad: An Expatriate's Journals, 1950-59*, will be published in August 2014.

**HBO DOCUMENTARY FILMS**  
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**CREDITS**

**Produced and Directed by**

Nancy Kates

**Editor**

John Haptas

**Director of Photography**

Sophie Constantinou

**Voice of Susan Sontag**

Patricia Clarkson

**Music by**

Laura Karpman and Nora Kroll-Rosenbaum

**Graphic Design and Motion Graphics**

Dave Tecson

**Written by**

Nancy Kates

John Haptas

**Executive Producer**

Tom Dolby

**Co-producer**

Rachel Antell

**FOR HBO**

**Supervising Producer**

Lisa Heller

**Executive Producer**

Sheila Nevins

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**Strip Collage Sequences**

Lewis Klahr

**Creative Consultant**

Veronica Selver

**Associate Producers**

Arwen Curry

Susannah Morse

**Original Artwork**

Michael Davey

**Additional Photography**

Nancy Kates

Ian McAlpin  
Sandi Sissel, ASC  
Laleh Soomekh

**Location Sound**

Arwen Curry  
John Romeo

**Line Producers**

Laurie Coyle  
Deepa Donde  
Jane Greenberg  
Monica Lam

**Production Assistants**

Christina Hibbs  
Kiersten Lane  
Nina Perthro

**Figure Model**

Simone Rene

**Post-Production Supervisor**

Nina Goodby

**Additional Editing**

Jeffrey Friedman  
David Petersen

**Story Consultant**

Steve Most

**Archival Producers**

Rachel Antell  
Prudence Arndt  
Mridu Chandra

**Archival Consultants**

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Michael Dolan  
Helen Weiss

**Photoshop and Archival Still Restoration**

Tomoyuki Okada

**Transcription**

Kathryn Drury  
Julia Maryanski  
Nina Perthro

**Translation**

Nicole Ball  
Julia Maryanski  
Veronica Selver

**Funders**

Anonymous  
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Cal Humanities

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Lucius and Eva Eastman Fund, Inc.  
Foundation for Jewish Culture's Lynn and Jules Kroll Fund for Jewish Documentary Film  
Horizons Foundation  
Jacqueline R. Kates  
National Endowment for the Arts  
National Endowment for the Humanities  
Rainbow Endowment  
Estate of Kyle Stone  
Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program and Fund  
Women in Film Foundation Film Finishing Fund

**Advisors**

Howard Brick  
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Mia Fineman  
Kevin Gaines  
Adam Green  
Neil Jumonville  
Alice Kaplan  
Liam Kennedy  
Wayne Koestenbaum  
Nancy K. Miller  
Deborah Nelson  
Leland Poague  
B. Ruby Rich  
Craig Seligman

**Paper Archives**

The Joseph Chaikin Papers, Department of Special Collections and Archives, Kent State Univ. Libraries  
Farrar Straus Giroux, Inc. Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library  
FBI  
Susan Sontag Papers, Special Collections Division, Charles E. Young Library, UCLA

**Artworks**

Howard Hodgkin, paintings from "The Way We Live Now"  
George Segal sculpture, "The Holocaust." © The George and Helen Segal Foundation, licensed by  
VAGA, New York, NY  
Vertical Submarine, Singapore, still from "Paper Room" installation

**Archival Footage and Still Photographs**

Lucinda Childs  
Judith Sontag Cohen  
Peter Haidu  
Eva Kollisch  
Sigrid Nunez  
Monique de Rothschild  
Giovannella Zannoni  
Harriet Sohmers Zwerling

ABC News VideoSource  
Bob Adelman/Corbis  
Artpix / Experiments in Art and Technology  
The Associated Press  
Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum Archives  
Sophie Bassouls/Sygman/Corbis  
Jerry Bauer/Agence Opale  
The Big Think, Inc.

Gina Blumenfeld  
Bookforum  
Robert D. Farber University Archives &  
Special Collections, Brandeis University  
Brooklyn Academy of Music  
The Dick Cavett Show, courtesy of Daphne  
Productions  
CMC Video

Nancy Crampton/Agence Opale  
Creative Arts Television  
CSPAN  
Bruce Davidson/ Magnum Photos  
Democracy Now!  
Everett Collection, Inc.  
Christopher Felver/Corbis  
Footage Farm USA  
Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical  
Society  
Getty Images  
Globalvision. Inc.  
James D. Gossage Photographs, The New York  
Public Library  
The Granger Collection, NY  
Anabel Guerrero/Agence Opale  
Serge Hambourg/Agence Opale  
Harvard University Public Affairs and  
Communications  
Hoover Institution Archives  
Peter Hujar Archive  
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João Pedro Jorge  
Kelly Writers House, University of Pennsylvania  
KQED  
Jill Kremenz Archive  
Annie Leibovitz/Contact Press Images  
Mikhail Lemkhin  
Matthew Levine  
Lcb - Literarisches Colloquium Berlin  
Library of Congress  
Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection  
Maine Humanities Council  
State Museum at Majdanek  
Adam Marcus, Phd.  
Dr. Andrew McAinsh and James Bancroft,  
University of Warwick, UK

Renate von Mangoldt  
Babette Mangolte, from "Calico Mingling"  
Dominique Nabokov  
National Archives and Record Administration  
NBC Universal Archives  
North Hollywood High School Archives  
Oddball Film and Video, San Francisco  
The Jenni Olson Queer Film Archive  
Pars International  
Pennebaker Hegedus Films, Inc.  
University of Pennsylvania, University Archives  
and Record Center  
Kai Pfaffenbach/Reuters/Corbis  
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Sveriges Television AB  
T3 Media  
Witi de Tera/Agence Opale  
Beverly Torok-Storb, Fred Hutchinson Cancer  
Research Center, Seattle, WA  
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
Riccardo Vecchio  
Vertical Submarine  
Vienna University Archives  
Andy Warhol Museum  
WGBH Media Library and Archives  
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Gross"

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MacDowell Colony  
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