

B A R B A R A S U K O W A



A FILM BY MARGARETHE VON TROTTA
V I S I O N
FROM THE LIFE OF HILDEGARD VON BINGEN

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V I S I O N

FROM THE LIFE OF HILDEGARD VON BINGEN

Hildegard von Bingen was truly a woman ahead of her time. A visionary in every sense of the word, this famed 12th-century Benedictine nun was a Christian mystic, composer, philosopher, playwright, poet, naturalist, scientist, physician, herbalist and ecological activist.

In *Vision – From the Life of Hildegard von Bingen*, New German Cinema auteur Margarethe von Trotta (*Marianne and Juliane*, *Rosa Luxemburg*, *Rosenstrasse*) reunites with recurrent star Barbara Sukowa (*Zentropa*, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*) to bring the story of this extraordinary woman to life. In a staggering performance, Sukowa portrays von Bingen's fierce determination to expand the responsibilities of women within the order, even as she fends off outrage from some in the Church over the visions she claims to receive from God. Lushly shot in the original medieval cloisters of the fairytale-like German countryside, *Vision* is a profoundly inspirational portrait of a woman who has emerged from the shadows of history as a forward-thinking and iconoclastic pioneer of faith, change and enlightenment.



An Interview with Director Margarethe Von Trotta

When and where did you first come across the name of Hildegard von Bingen?

In the 1970s, women involved in the Women's Movement were looking for historical role models. At that time there were few female role models. History was written by men and made by men. The history of women was not told, and women were marginalized, as if they had never played any role. We came across Hildegard von Bingen in this search for forgotten women. Some time thereafter, a lot of people were becoming involved with alternative medicine, and were looking into the effectiveness of medicinal plants. It was then that Hildegard's name resurfaced anew. So, I had already become interested in her before writing the screenplay for *Rosa Luxemburg*. That was in 1983, and soon thereafter I asked myself whether her life wouldn't be good material for a movie. I even wrote a few scenes, but I thought that there wouldn't be a producer who was ready to make this movie. So, I shelved it for a while.

What was the draw for you personally to make a movie about this medieval nun?

Well, first of all she belongs to our early history, and she was, as one would say nowadays, multitasking. She was a visionary, but at the same time fully grounded. She was a highly intelligent woman who nevertheless had to hide her light under her nun's habit, because, as a woman and a nun, she was not allowed to express herself publicly. The only chance for her to do so was as a visionary acknowledged by the Pope, but even in that she was an exception. At the time there were many eccentric women who drove themselves to religious ecstasy, and experienced their communion with Christ in this delirious state. Hildegard von Bingen experienced her visions consciously, and with a clear presence of mind. She must have had a very strong subconscious that showed her how to assert herself. Of course she believed in God, and that God sent these visions to her. Everyone believed in God, the Devil, Heaven and Hell. What is interesting to me is how Hildegard von Bingen used her visions. As a woman and a nun, she was actually unknown and subordinated – one had to remain unseen – and, furthermore, she was locked up in a convent, which she was not permitted to leave after taking her vows. She "used" the visions in order to become known as a seer. This step also entailed a huge risk for her; she could just as well have been excommunicated if she hadn't been believed, and had instead been judged as possessed by the Devil.

How did she get men to pay attention to her beliefs?

Using her diplomatic skills, because she understood men and their vanities, she turned to Bernard of Clairvaux as a "lowly woman and servant." So first she was allowed to publicize her visions, and then – this is the greater, more revolutionary step – she managed, through these visions, to be able to found her own convent. She left Disibodenberg – the province, as one might say today – and moved to Bingen on the Rhine, which at the time was a "traffic intersection" near the important Archbishopric of Mainz. Pilgrims and traders came through,

and visited the convent. She was closer to the world; she received news of the latest developments in medicine, and encountered the knowledge of her time.

How is she significant or relevant to the present day?

The film addresses two issues that are important to us today. One is the holistic approach to medicine. She once said, "First the soul must heal; then the body will follow." The other was the warning that the elements could turn against us. At the time people spoke of elements; today we speak of nature turning against us, or destroying us, if we don't protect it. Both of these points make her relevant. Then of course we have her incredible opus as a composer; she wrote over ninety songs.

Can you talk about the "lyrical drama" scene in the film? It really stands out against the dark, monastic tone of the rest of the film.

This scene, which is an excerpt from Hildegard's lyrical drama *Ordo Virtutum* is genuine; I found it in the historical accounts. On certain holidays, her nuns were allowed to wrap themselves in white silk gowns, wear jewelry, let down their hair, and decorate themselves with garlands. It must have been a very happy and innocent sisterhood. Hildegard von Bingen said that Heaven knew no ugliness, and because as virgins they belonged to Heaven, they should also rejoice in their own beauty. There were two directions within the Benedictine Order: one, which was very severe and ascetic, to the point of self-castigation, which Hildegard refused; and the one that embraced life, that also wanted to draw happiness from religion. I tried to show this through her *Ordo Virtutum*.

Your movie refuses to take up of the notion that one comes closer to God through suffering, particularly through a scene after Jutta von Sponheim's death, in which Hildegard discovers that she is wearing a belt of thorns.

Exactly. In a short scene beforehand, I show Hildegard, as a child, watching Jutta von Sponheim flagellate herself in the hopes of coming closer to God through her pain. The discovery of this self-castigation shook Hildegard von Bingen tremendously. She never flagellated herself, and never asked anyone else to. She was also opposed to severe fasting. For her, faith was intertwined with happiness, and the love of mankind.

What is the appeal for you in placing strong women at the forefront of your films?

The figures that appeal to me are always strong women who also have moments of weakness; therefore, I never try to make heroines out of them. Instead I show how they fought to find their own way, how they put themselves out there, and how much they had to swallow in order to find themselves. I am fascinated by how they overcome obstacles in order to achieve their goals. Hildegard von Bingen had a dream of founding her own abbey, and she suffered a lot of setbacks in the process. The moments of her greatest weakness are when the nun Richardis is to be taken away from her. In this situation, she behaves either like a small, abandoned child, or with fury. This conduct is all recorded in her letters. And it is precisely these moments of extreme self-abandonment that I find so beautiful, surprising, and contradictory. Hildegard von Bingen demands for herself what she usually gives to others. I absolutely did not want to portray her as a saint.

What writings or records did you use?

Among other things, there is a biography written during her lifetime; not by her, but in part dictated by her, which documents her life's journey from birth until old age. I also used her writings as documentation: for example, the "Scivias," her first book of visions, and two others on naturopathy and healing. I also made use of her correspondence with Emperor Barbarossa, various Popes, and abbots and abbesses of other convents. There is also the *Rule of St. Benedict*, which contains a lot of information about monastic life at the time. A friend of mine, who is a medievalist, told me that people kissed each other on the mouth when they concluded a contract, and to celebrate other meetings as well, so I included this. They weren't as puritanical as we think; instead they had a much less inhibited relationship to their bodies and the physical world.

What role does Hildegard's music have, and what criteria did you use for choosing it?

I chose the songs that I liked the most, that touched my heart and gave me goosebumps the first time I heard them. Salome Kammer, the actress and singer, who also acted and sang in Edgar Reitz's *Heimat*, sings two songs dressed as a nun. I didn't want to take music from a recorded CD, which always makes the music sound so flat. Of course the songs also had to fit the respective scenes in terms of their content. Barbara Sukowa, who in the last twenty years has performed more as a singer than as an actress, also had the opportunity to sing her own part in the *Ordo Virtutum*.

How did you recreate the atmosphere of the convent so vividly?

Axel Block, the cinematographer, and I discussed the look of the film for a long time. We were in agreement that we did not want to film it glamorously. The film was not meant as some saint's portrait to put in your Bible or hymnal. This time is very far away from ours, but the people should nevertheless feel close to us, and alive.

An Interview with Barbara Sukowa

Hildegard von Bingen was a great visionary for her time; does she still have something to teach us?

There are efforts and endeavors everywhere to approach religion and spirituality from a scientific perspective. It is in the context of this movement that interest in Hildegard von Bingen has sprung forth and grown.

How did you get a sense of Hildegard von Bingen on a personal level?

Hildegard von Bingen was a woman who took something for herself that society at the time denied her. Her social power as a nun and abbess in a convent was actually very limited. She transcended these limits through her visions, and managed to have the institution of the Church acknowledge them. She carved out an independent space for herself. This has a lot to do with the fact that she was always sickly as a child. Here I sense a point of contact with *Rosa Luxemburg*, which I also worked on with Margarethe von Trotta. Rosa Luxemburg was also sick as a child. Many people who spend a lot of time in bed as kids, and are unable to experience the outside world, develop a very strong inner life and sense of fantasy. This was the case with Hildegard von Bingen, who was very intellectually vital, determined, persistent, and powerful despite her physical weakness. She was a fighter who knew how to achieve her goals, and who often made herself appear small in the male-dominated world of the Church in order to be heard. She was able to insinuate herself very delicately, and in my opinion she also knew how to manipulate very well.

What was the greatest challenge for you in performing this role?

To embody a woman who stood very firmly within a 12th-century framework of beliefs — in which people believed in Heaven and Hell, in condemnation and in resurrection. The difficulty is that this woman lived 1000 years ago, and obviously it's not possible to enter the mind of someone who thinks like that. So, you look for material that is resonant today, and pull something out of a persona that relates to you personally. I cannot claim to represent this woman, or anyone else, from that age.

What was your involvement with the music in the film? You have been a successful singer yourself for many years.

I love this music. It's beautiful, and a little unusual for the time; there is something very serene and spiritual about it. In her compositions, Hildegard von Bingen did not follow the rules of the time; whether she did so consciously, or simply didn't know the rules, we can't exactly tell. Anyhow, it was a pleasure for me to sing these parts.

Do you approach historical material any differently from something contemporary? Is one easier or harder than the other?

Actually, hard or easy doesn't have so much to do with material being historical or contemporary. Hard or easy has everything to do with how close you feel to the character, or how much you may have to change things in order to understand the character — this change may be something you have to break through within yourself. In a historical film, you try to familiarize yourself with the history, as well as peoples' limits. In preparing for this role, I looked at old paintings, and made notes of how people folded their hands, what kind of clothing they wore, and what poses they affected. To that extent, yes, there is a difference between playing a Hildegard von Bingen and a woman of today.

You have often worked with Margarethe von Trotta. What is your connection across the decades?

Certainly a friendship. It is always a special treat for me to work with Margarethe von Trotta, because she used to be an actress herself; she truly understands actors, and so she understands both positions. She is helpful and listens very carefully. I also find her very exciting as a person. On the one hand she is very intelligent and intellectually minded, and on the other, very warm and open to anything, even the irrational. When she began to make films, women still had to fight hard within the male-dominated world of cinema. So, sometimes she came across as harder than she is, because of how much she had to assert herself. Her other, more humorous side has come through even more so over the years.

About Margarethe von Trotta

Born in Berlin, Margarethe von Trotta is one of the leaders of the New German Cinema movement, as well as one of the world's most important feminist filmmakers. From the early 1960s, after returning to Germany from Paris (where she encountered the Nouvelle Vague and the films of Ingmar Bergman), von Trotta then pursued acting, working closely with both Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Volker Schlöndorff, who later became her husband in 1971. Her first film, *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*, which she co-directed with Schlöndorff in 1975, tells the story of a young woman who has a casual affair with a man she later discovers to be a terrorist. In 1977, she wrote and directed her first solo feature, *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages*, which introduced many of the themes that she would return to in her later films: female bonding, sisterhood, and the uses and effects of violence. Based on a true story, *Christa Klages* tells the story of a young woman who resorts to bank robbery in order to keep her kindergarten open.

Starting in 1979, von Trotta began a cinematic trilogy that cemented her reputation as one of the leading directors of the German new wave. *Sisters, or the Balance of Happiness*, describes the life of two sisters deeply joined, both emotionally and intellectually, in a symbiotic relationship that weighs heavily on them, even after one of them commits suicide. In 1981 she followed this up with *Marianne and Juliane* (winner of the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival). The film portrays two sisters—one a reporter, the other a terrorist—during the social and political upheaval of 1968 Germany. This was followed in 1986 by *Rosa Luxemburg*, an epic portrait of one of the leading figures of European socialism. Portrayed with stunning grace by Barbara Sukowa (who also gave an award-winning performance in *Marianne and Juliane*), the character is based primarily on Luxemburg's letters and diaries, and strikes a balance between the deeply personal and the exactingly political. Her more recent films include *Love and Fear* (1988), *The African Woman* (1990), *The Promise* (1995), and *Rosenstrasse* (2003). *Rosenstrasse* tells the story of a non-violent protest in 1943 Berlin, carried out by the non-Jewish wives and relatives of Jewish men who had been arrested for deportation. *Vision – From the Life of Hildegard von Bingen* is her latest film.

Von Trotta's son with first husband Jürgen Moeller, Felix Moeller, is a respected filmmaker in his own right and a partner with her in Blueprint Media, their Munich-based production company. In 2010, Zeitgeist Films released his acclaimed documentary *Harlan: In the Shadow of Jew Süß*.

Despite being seen as a leading feminist director, Margarethe von Trotta herself rejects the description of her films as the product of "woman's filmmaking," arguing that it confines one to a ghetto of sorts. She believes that she should instead be seen as a filmmaker who is at once a woman, as well as a director who examines the interior of the feminine personal as well as the exterior of the political. She is also a Professor of Film at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland, and remains an important personality of German cinema.

Margarethe von Trotta

Selected Filmography

- 2010 VISION – FROM THE LIFE OF HILDEGARD VON BINGEN
- 2006 I AM THE OTHER WOMAN
- 2003 ROSENSTRASSE
- 1995 THE PROMISE
- 1993 THE LONG SILENCE
- 1990 THE AFRICAN WOMAN
- 1988 LOVE AND FEAR
- 1987 FELIX
- 1986 ROSA LUXEMBURG
- 1983 SHEER MADNESS
- 1981 MARIANNE & JULIANNE
- 1979 SISTERS, OR THE BALANCE OF HAPPINESS
- 1977 THE SECOND AWAKENING OF CHRISTA KLAGES
- 1971 THE LOST HONOR OF KATHARINA BLUM
(Co-directed with Volker Schlöndorff)

About Barbara Sukowa

Born in Bremen, actress Barbara Sukowa began her theater career in Berlin in 1971. She played leading roles in productions in Germany and across Europe including Ibsen's *The Master Builder*, and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It* and *Othello*. Currently she is starring in a touring production of Heiner Mueller's *Quartett*.

In the U.S., Sukowa is perhaps better known for her performances in some of the most iconic films of the New German Cinema. Her breakthrough role was "Mieze" in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's monumental *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980), which earned her the German Best Young Actress Award. Working again with Fassbinder, Sukowa received the German Film Award (Gold) for her performance as the title character in his 1981 film *Lola*. In addition to *Vision – From the Life of Hildegard von Bingen*, Sukowa has collaborated with director Margarethe von Trotta on five other films, most notably *Marianne and Juliane*, for which she won Best Actress at the 1981 Venice Film Festival; and *Rosa Luxemburg*, for which she received the Best Actress honors at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival. She has twice received the Bavarian Film Award, most recently for *Vision*. In 2008, she won Best Actress for *The Invention of the Curried Sausage* at the Montréal World Film Festival. Sukowa's other films include work by internationally acclaimed auteurs such as Michael Cimino, Lars Von Trier, David Cronenberg, Volker Schlöndorff, Agnieszka Holland and Tim Robbins; as well as projects directed by Serge Gainsbourg, actor John Turturro, and artists Cindy Sherman and Robert Longo (who is also her husband).

Barbara Sukowa has also developed a career as a classical music narrator and singer. As a narrator, she has performed Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* with the Schoenberg Ensemble under Reinbert de Leeuw; and with the Brentano Quartet and Mitsuko Uchida at Carnegie Hall. She has also worked with the Berlin Philharmonic, the Vienna Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and the St. Louis Symphony; and with such renowned conductors as Claudio Abbado, Esa-Pekka Salonen and David Robertson. Other music performances include Arthur Honegger's *Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher*; Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*; and the U.S. premiere of Michael Jarrell's *Cassandra* at Carnegie Hall.

Sukowa sang in the U.S. premiere of *Im wunderschönen Monat Mai* (*In the Wonderful Month of May*), de Leeuw's adaptation of love songs by Schubert and Schumann, also at Carnegie Hall. The 2007 recording (released by German label Winter & Winter) received Edison and Echo Klassik Awards, and a Grammy Nomination. She has also narrated recordings of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder*.

Sukowa is also the lead singer of the band the X-Patsys, which she founded with visual artists Jon Kessler and Robert Longo. In summer 2010, Winter & Winter released their album *Devouring Time: Barbara Sukowa and the X-Patsys*. She lives in Brooklyn.

Barbara Sukowa

Selected Filmography

- 2010 VISION – FROM THE LIFE OF HILDEGARD VON BINGEN (Margarethe von Trotta)
- 2008 THE INVENTION OF THE CURRIED SAUSAGE (Ulla Wagner)
- 2005 ROMANCE & CIGARETTES (John Turturro)
- 2001 THIRTEEN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ONE THING (Jill Sprecher)
- 1999 THE THIRD MIRACLE (Agnieszka Holland)
- 1998 THE CRADLE WILL ROCK (Tim Robbins)
- 1997 OFFICE KILLER (Cindy Sherman)
- 1995 JOHNNY MNEMONIC (Robert Longo)
- 1993 M. BUTTERFLY (David Cronenberg)
- 1991 VOYAGER (Volker Schlöndorff)
- 1990 ZENTROPA (Lars von Trier)
- 1990 THE AFRICAN WOMAN (Margarethe von Trotta)
- 1987 DAYS TO REMEMBER (Jeanine Meerapfel)
- 1987 THE SICILIAN (Michael Cimino)
- 1986 ROSA LUXEMBURG (Margarethe von Trotta)
- 1983 A COP'S SUNDAY (Michel Vianey)
- 1982 EQUATEUR (Serge Gainsbourg)
- 1981 MARIANNE & JULIANNE (Margarethe von Trotta)
- 1981 LOLA (Rainer Werner Fassbinder)
- 1980 BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ (Rainer Werner Fassbinder)

The Locations of "Vision"

To successfully create the right atmosphere for this historical film, it was important for the filmmakers to use buildings with intact, period-correct architecture. The shoot took place on location in the former Cistercian convent of Cloister Maulbronn in Baden Württemberg. According to *Vision – From the Life of Hildegard von Bingen* producer Markus Zimmer, "The convent, which is placed on the list of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites, proved to be the ideal location. Unlike other structures it had never been restored with baroque or gothic architectural elements in later centuries and its Romanic basic structure has survived to this day, similar to Convent Eberbach in Hessa."

Hildegard von Bingen's convent, Cloister Rupertsberg, which featured a three-nave pillar basilica in its center, was almost entirely destroyed during construction of the Nahetal railroad system. Of the original nave, only five arcades of the mid-nave wall have survived.

For the look of *Vision*, it was very important to director Margarethe von Trotta that the film would authentically mirror the darkness of that bygone world. Another important style element was the use of a highly mobile camera that could get as close to the actors as possible. To achieve the dark look, the cloister's cells were furnished with very small windows and illuminated mostly by torches and candles, which immersed the scenery in a magical and mystical light. For Hildegard's visions, von Trotta used a specifically different lighting composition, which served as a counterpoint to the darkness of night and the candlelit night prayers.

Nobody knows exactly how daily life unfolded in medieval convent—illustrations from old texts consulted by set and costume designers are never 1:1 models—"But our camera conveys a distinct feeling for the austerity of that period, and wasn't replicated easily. It was surely one of the biggest challenges of the production," says Zimmer. To the producer, filming in historical locations feels like a trip back to the Middle Ages. The shooting of Richardis' procession to Convent Eberbach "was a very spiritual and touching moment. You could feel the singularity of the ritual and place and what the people must have felt when they made the decision to devote themselves to the Church and religion." *Vision* leads audiences back to the past, while building a bridge to the present by virtue of the modernity of von Bingen's character: a fascinating woman who has been rediscovered spiritually, religiously, therapeutically and musically.

Hildegard von Bingen: A Timeline

Born nearly 1000 years ago, Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179) remains a popular figure to this day. A polymath ahead of her time who was at once spiritual and practical, von Bingen challenged Church rules and founded two convents. She was a visionary and modern theologian who, at age 60, explained the lunar eclipse not as a divine occurrence, but rather from a scientific viewpoint. With a keen mind, von Bingen was someone who believed in a positive image of humanity. A gentle revolutionary who excelled as abbess, visionary, scientist, physician, prophet, theologian, author and composer, von Bingen demonstrates the importance of women's contributions to the intellectual life of the Middle Ages. In 1233, Pope Gregor IX initiated the process of canonizing her but for formal reasons the canonization was never completed. Regardless, Hildegard von Bingen has continued to acquire an ever-expanding faction of admirers worldwide.

1098: Hildegard von Bingen was born in Bermershein (in what is now Germany) to Hildebert and Mechthild Burggraf von Bermersheim. She was their tenth and last child, and sickly from the time of her birth.

1106: At the age of eight, Hildegard is sent to live in a retreat adjacent to a friary in Disibodenberg. It is here that sister Jutta von Sponheim prepares her for convent life.

1113: Hildegard takes monastic vows and becomes a Benedictine nun.

1136: Von Sponheim dies and Hildegard is elected Head of her sister community by her fellow nuns.

1141: Hildegard, who claimed to have visions from a very young age, receives a prophetic call from God demanding her to record her visions. She starts writing them down with the help of Brother Volmar and Sister Richardis von Stade.

1148: Pope Eugene III hears of Hildegard von Bingen and creates a commission to determine whether her visions were divinely inspired. The commission visits her and reports the visions to be true. The Pope recognizes Hildegard as a seer and visionary.

1150: Hildegard founds the all-female Convent Rupertsberg, near Bingen.

1151–58: Hildegard finishes her volume "Liber scivias domini" (Know the Paths of the Lord). She also writes books on natural sciences, including "Physica" (The Healing Power of Nature) and "Causae et curae" (Holistic Healing).

1158–63: Hildegard makes several teaching and missionary tours through the Rhineland and France.

1163: Hildegard writes "Liber vitae meritorum" (Book of Life's Merits) and begins work on "Liber divinorum operum" (Book of Divine Works), the last of her texts on her visions.

1165–1170: Hildegard founds the all-female Convent Elbingen, near Rudesheim, and embarks on additional teaching and missionary tours throughout Europe.

1178: Hildegard runs into conflicts with the Church for refusing to have the body of an excommunicated man who had been buried in consecrated ground dug up. The Church rules that she is not allowed to take the Eucharist.

1179: The Church reverses the ruling against her that spring; on September 17, Hildegard von Bingen dies at the age of 81.

VISION

FROM THE LIFE OF HILDEGARD VON BINGEN

CAST

Hildegard von Bingen	Barbara Sukowa
Brother Volmar	Heino Ferch
Richardis von Stade	Hannah Herzprung
Abbot Kuno	Alexander Held
Jutta	Lena Stolze
Richardis' Mother	Sunnyi Melles
Clara	Paula Kalenberg
Jutta von Sponheim	Mareile Blendl
Hildegard as a child	Stella Holzapfel
Abbess Tengwich	Annemarie Düringer
Emperor Frederick Barbarossa	Devid Striesow

CREW

Directed and Written by	Margarethe von Trotta
Produced by	Markus Zimmer
Executive Producer	Hengameh Panahi
Cinematography	Axel Block
Music	Chris Heyne
With original compositions by	Hildegard von Bingen
Sound	Michael Busch
Sound Mixing	Hubertus Rath
Art Direction	Heike Bauersfeld
Editing	Corina Dietz
Casting	Sabine Schroth
Make-up Artists	Jeanette Latzelsberger, Kerstin Sattmann
Costume Design	Ursula Welter
Production Manager	Richard Bolz
Line Producer	Manfred Thureau

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In German with English subtitles**

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