"We're not here anymore": The cultural dislocations of creative organizations in outlying regions

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Abstract: The marketing communications industry, whose most visible manifestation can be found in advertising, is closely connected to creativity—so much so, in fact, that this creativity constitutes one of its cornerstones. Within the industry itself, the cult of creativity is legitimized, reaffirmed, and maintained via various competitions, the press, and professional associations, without mentioning the discourse of agencies that put creativity at the heart of their business models, adopting it as their very purpose. Yet this creative *doxa*, associated with prestigious clients and major campaigns, and spread virally by social media, appears to be the province of the major metropolitan agencies. What about the small agencies outside the major urban networks that are animated by the same *doxa*, but that rarely or never acquire high-profile clients, win awards, or produce creations whose public notoriety would legitimize their creative value? This article sets out to investigate how organizational dynamics are actualized, maintained, and debated; in short, how they are *cultivated* in the name of this regional creativity, particularly in the context of small advertising agencies in outlying regions (SAORs). Taking up the ideas of ventriloquism and based on two case studies, we will demonstrate how regionality percolates into and constantly (re)appears in the discourse of these agencies' employees. Moreover, we will demonstrate, using five "iconic figures" of creative culture, – namely seclusion, defense, distinctiveness, maturity, and expansiveness – that to maintain such a creative culture outside the legitimizing structures, SAORs must dislocate to a "creative elsewhere". In doing so, we develop a five-pronged theory of creative culture that offers a way to observe and analyze a creative industry, not based on a socio-economic or socio-political standpoint but rather on the discursive agency of the region within the organizational culture of SOARs.

Keywords: Creative culture, advertising agency, regionality, dislocation, organizational culture, discourse.

1. Introduction

To be creative, in a small agency, in an outlying region.[1] The mere evocation of this triad might cause one to smile, as if this condition were antinomic, and outside the major centers, there would be little hope of (real) creativity. Certain urban-centric views consider outlying areas as cemeteries of ambition (Bell & Jayne 2010) where the absence of creative clusters, of a creative class (Delgado et al. 2010; Florida 2003; Harvey et al. 2012), and of sociocultural vibrancy relegates creativity to a pale shadow of the industry's creative *doxa*: "With all due respect to devotees of rurality, it is in the *city* that the most creative individuals are to be found" (Froment 2012, our translation).

Yet in Quebec, Canada, such small agencies abound, accounting for more than 40% of the gross revenue generated by the province's advertising industry (CICQ 2007). Almost 30% of Quebec advertising agencies are located outside the metropolitan regions (Statistique Canada 2014). Given that creativity is the bedrock of agencies (Nixon 2003) and creative individuals, their very source of vitality (Hackley & Kover 2007), we might ask ourselves how and on what conditions SAORs and their employees are able to exist and carry on their business.

Accordingly, in this article we examine the creativity-organization-regionality triad as it relates to the creative culture of agencies. More specifically, adopting a discursive viewpoint and borrowing the ideas of ventriloquism (Cooren 2013, 2010b), we will illustrate how a great deal of these organizations' discourse constantly brings regionality into play', at the same time as it dislocates the organizational culture by situating it in a figurative "elsewhere." We maintain that this dislocation is part and parcel of the organizational culture of SAORs: indeed, to "perform"

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1   In Quebec, Canada, the term "region" refers to all cities located outside the major urban centres of Quebec City and Montreal.

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creativity in an outlying region, it is necessary to escape this location.

We will begin by establishing the nature of the relationship between discourse and regionality, particularly as regards creativity and via the concepts of ventriloquism and of "cultural figures." After having briefly presented the case studies that supplied the empirical material for this study, we will describe the five iconic cultural figures of SAORs' creative culture and their agency within organizations, before addressing their power in constituting the creative culture of such organizations. This in turn will allow us to propose a five-pronged theory of the creative organizational culture of SAORs.

2.   On the sense of "place": discourse, regionality, and organizational culture

The literature on creative industries has looked into the conditions favourable to the emergence of creative classes (Florida 2003; Le Corf 2012), of creative clusters (Delgado et al. 2010; Porter 2007), and of cities with creative potential, whether it be real or imagined (Collis et al. 2010; Keil & Boudreau 2010).

However, some recent works (Bell & Jayne 2006; Chapain & Comunian 2010; Collis et al. 2010; Gibson 2010; Harvey et al. 2012; Leibovitz 2006) argue for a characterization of creativity that is not grounded in the standpoint of urban scripts—in other words, the idea that outlying regions must develop their creativity based on the same parameters and indicators as those in metropolitan areas—but rather that takes into account region-specific networks, practices, and cultures.

This characterization is especially relevant because non-metropolitan regions' relationship to business itself implies different entrepreneurial sociabilities and different professional pathways that affect the conditions under which professional activities are exercised.

> Atterton describes rural traditions that make certain networks acceptable and familiar, based upon the multiple roles played by individuals, in contrast to urban entrepreneurial and inter-firm behaviour of networking and clustering associated with the urban creative economy. (Bell & Jayne 2010: 212).

Yet even if the socio-economic conditions of creative industries seem critical, the fact remains that agencies' connection to their regionality is *first and foremost* about the way they experience their region, and their relationship to this experience. Soja (1996), echoed by others (Olwig 2002; Waitt 2006; Waitt et al. 2006), defines "place" as having three interdependent facets: an objective material space, the way it is imagined and represented, and the space as it is experienced by people. Waitt (2006) sums up the idea in these words:

> Cityscapes are also grounded in the material, given they are conceptualized as produced through and embedded in everyday life. Cityscapes are continually made and remade through everyday actions. Cityscapes are reflections of social practices. Therefore, beneath the groundworks and dreamworks of cityscapes lie very different social relationships. (2006: 169)

This view, culturally and symbolically co-constructed via physical and imagined representations of space, is thus conveyed through discourse, even as discourse in turn affects relationships to the "place" in question. Philipsen (1992), in an ethnography of speaking,[2] has observed how symbols

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2   "The ethnography of speaking, then, consists of hearing and representing distinctive ways of speaking in particular speech communities. An ethnography of speaking is a report of a culture, as that culture thematizes communication and of the ways that culture is expressed in some historical situation" (Philipsen 1992: 9).

(vehicles of conceptions), conceptions (meanings, notions, and definitions), premises (beliefs of existence and of value), and rules (prescriptions on the prevailing behaviors in certain contexts) all ultimately lead to a cultural speech code: "a socially constructed and historically transmitted system of symbols and meanings pertaining to communication" (1992: 7-8).

2.1. Regional discourse and organizational discourse

In short, the outlying region as a "place" is as much a physical location as a culturally co-constructed site internalized and mobilized through social relationships. The region, then, acts as much as it is acted upon in discourse.

Accordingly, while it is important to take account of the economic or social forces specific to a region, in their agency, we must not perceive these forces as determinisms. This becomes especially relevant insofar as socio-economic conditions are often cited as determinisms of creative and identity work in outlying regions: "there are fewer clients," "the talent is elsewhere," "there's less innovation." As Cooren points out, in relating the work of Philipsen:

> To look at these figures or issues *only* in terms of resources would be a mistake, insofar as the fact that they are cited "in all interactions" (Sanders & Fitch, 2001, p. 265, our translation), proves that they largely define how these people perceive themselves and others. … I wouldn't go so far as to reduce being to having (or vice versa), but Tarde's lesson is crucial in that invites us to acknowledge that *any statement of identity* (I am something) *can be translated into a statement of possession* (I have something). (Cooren, 2013: 165,166, our translation; original italics).

This symbolic and objective way of seeing "place" can be related to the notion of organizational culture. Indeed, although organizations can be understood from a variety of epistemological perspectives (Grosjean & Bonneville 2011), one of these is the culture metaphor: "[…] a shared and learned world of experiences, meanings, values, and understandings which inform people and which are expressed, reproduced, and communicated partly in symbolic form" (Alvesson 2002: 6). Since we want to address a way of thinking about the relation between regionality, creativity and organization other than from a socio-economic or socio-political standpoint – the culture metaphor is well-suited to grasping how SAORs actually *experience* and cultivate regionality. This is especially relevant since, according to Martin's nexus approach, an organizational culture is informed by its ambient culture, i.e., its political, social, ethnic and economic context: "When a basic assumption generates collectivity-wide consensus, it is likely that this assumption is a reflection of cultural influences from outside the collectivity" (Martin, 2002: 165).

Alvesson (1994) likewise points out this relationship between economic and social conditions, on one hand, and how they pervade organizational discourse and define advertising agencies' work, on the other. By suggesting that although it may not be a direct reflection of reality, discourse is rooted in the material "base" [3] of the agency's working conditions, Alvesson shows that this discourse offers a way to retrace certain conditions associated with identity. An advertising agency's anti-bureaucratic culture, for instance, might serve as a base to stake out its place and achieve recognition in its field, even as it is rooted in the material reality of the agency's practices. Hence, being against hierarchy, schedules, and serial production marks a disposition within the field — creatives are free and unbridled, like wild horses — while also reflecting the material reality that this creativity is always subordinate to budget imperatives and deadlines.

The way discourse animates and is animated by regionality thus offers a way to observe how

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3   Alvesson borrows from Asplund the concept of base as "…a totality of production factors, that corresponds with a defined development stage of materialistic production forces, [and that] include[s] circumstances such as e.g. material objects, places, buildings and physical distance dimension." (1994: 537).

organization is created within an SAOR. In this vein, Cooren (2010a; 2013; 2010b) suggests linking what is "cultivated" within interactions, on one hand, and the figures that are invoked through them, on the other. With his concept of ventriloquism, "the phenomenon by which an actor gives voice to another through an utterance, or more generally, a behavior" (Cooren 2013:13, our translation), Cooren illustrates that in discourse, we are animated by these figures (ideas, principles, values, and ideologies) as much as we animate them. For example, during a meeting, if I say "the budget does not allow it": this budget is a figure that makes me take decisions as much as I use it to influence other people. Hence, I animate this figure of the budget as much as it animates me. This dynamic of inter-influence—animating and being animated by a figure—makes it possible to delegate agency to texts and objects insofar as they embody these figures. The physical existence of that budget, i.e., the budget spreadsheets, embodies the ideologies conveyed by the budget figure and act as its delegate. Hence, *in the name of* these conditions of practice, certain texts and discourse come to animate the advertising agency and actively partake in its organizing (Cooren et al. 2006).

Ventriloquism furthermore provides a way to bridge the macro and the micro, structures and individual experience:

> As long as a sterile opposition is maintained between action and structure, social actors may seem or consider themselves to be powerless and to lack any real influence on the course of events, insofar as their actions appear to be disconnected from a structure (whatever it may be) that is thought to extend above and beyond their practices. (Cooren 2013: 241, our translation).

When the actions of such a figure become strong, regular, and recurrent within an organization, the figure can attain the level of *cultural figure*. Identifying and analyzing these cultural figures helps to reveal what is being re-presented and constantly, frequently, and recurrently acting within a given speech community. Indeed, as we will see, these cultural figures' embodiment and mobilization in discourse acts upon the organizational culture.

Although we are not assuming that creativity is the sole component of an advertising agency's culture, it is certainly a keystone. Indeed, this culture is founded on the trope of creativity, a posture acquired over the course of various historical and institutional struggles (Leiss et al., 1990, 2005) that actors have waged to legitimize themselves as the sole purveyors of creativity (Nixon 2003) as opposed to various other intermediaries such as media companies, public relations specialists, consultants, and the like (McFall 2004). More specifically, this creativity is based on mastering a knowledge and know-how rooted in the reflection surrounding advertising and marketing strategy campaigns and their production. These campaigns must be highly original and appropriate not just for clients and targeted consumers (Smith & Yang 2004), but also for industry actors themselves:

> […] producing new and original work was the central goal of advertising creatives and, moreover, this work had to be produced in the face of those constraints set by "mainstream" advertising and the dominant communicative ethos of the sector (Nixon 2003: 75).

It is in the name of this creativity that many organizational actions are cultivated: creative individuals are granted the most prestigious positions, the highest salaries (Smith & Yang 2004) and the most influential roles (Till & Baack 2005). Even the physical and structural organization of agencies confers special status on such individuals (Nixon 2003).

As mentioned previously, the discourse on creativity serves as both an act of legitimization and validation—thus requiring a constant effort of disambiguation—and a manifestation of the

conditions for producing and maintaining this creativity. Understanding a creative culture thus requires us to look at how the agency's organizational culture is animated by this trope of creativity within the agency, which is embodied in various cultural figures. In turn, by identifying these cultural figures, we might understand how SAORs maintain and perform their creative culture.

3.   Presentation of cases and methodology

Organizations can be analyzed in many ways (see Van Maanen 1998). Since we wished to draw on conversations, discourses and relationships to organizational symbols, we determined that case studies were well suited for our study, since they allow "a deep understanding of interaction between participants, their behaviour and feelings […], and the various phenomena, processes and people involved therein" (Gagnon 2011: 103, our translation)

This article draws on two case studies conducted in two small advertising agencies located in outlying regions of Quebec (Canada), each with a dozen employees: Agency K and Agency L, both situated in the town of Villégion.[4] We chose Villégion as our region of study given that it is home to an almost equal proportion of service, commercial, and industrial businesses, and therefore exhibits significant diversity in its advertising content (tourism, industrial products, services, etc.) (Villégion annual report, 2011) and thus in the creative challenges it offers agencies.

After having reviewed the agencies that met our criteria—namely, having 5 to 19 employees and offering marketing communications services—we set out to find a first agency showing signs of an active creative culture. We visited agency websites in search of a specific creative ethos: Did the agency promote creativity? Who were its clients? How big were they? What services did they offer? We chose the initial site for our study, Agency K, not for its representativeness but rather for its situations and phenomena that connected with and informed our theoretical concepts (Jaccoud & Mayer 1997). Agency K was especially active on social networks, with several posts mentioning the agency's creativity. We contacted this agency first. To establish our second site, we enquired, over the course of interviews with Agency K, about other agencies that might be interesting for us to meet with. Agency L was mentioned several times as being representative of the "new creativity" in Villégion.

Our fieldwork began with in-depth semi-structured interviews, an interview type that is promising for determining "what is going on" in a given situation, and that tends to activate certain identity scripts (Charmaz & Belgrave 2012). In all, 33 individuals were interviewed over 51 semi-structured interviews amounting to a total of 44 hours, with each interview averaging 52 minutes long. During the interviews, we also identified opportunities to observe employees' work, including meeting clients, holding production meetings, and getting together for work meetings, all of which are ideal times to observe the dynamics that legitimize who and what is creative, as "spaces where knowledge, routines, experiences, uses and experiences can flow, be reconstructed, support problem solving, define new work avenues, etc." (Grosjean 2011: 37). During production meetings, for example, employees make their actions intelligible through references to people, places and documents, even as they are " in the process of creating" this knowledge, hence animating several cultural figures. After having noted the agency's creations and their contexts of use in our logbook, we photographed or digitized them for safeguarding purposes. In all, 90 texts and artifacts were collected.

After each visit to the agency, the interviews were transcribed and processed using the qualitative data mining software TAMS Analyzer. This program, which stands for "Text Analysis Markup System," is open-source and uses thematic markers to encode and subsequently extract and analyze data from a variety of qualitative materials, such as interviews, videos, .pdf documents or

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4   To maintain the confidentiality of the participants, the names of the towns, agencies and employees have been changed.

images. Further on (see section 4), we will describe how we analyzed these materials.

In the end, both cases studies were based on a mixed methodology comprising 51 semi-structured interviews, 45 hours of non-participant observation, and a document collection process, and were examined using an embedded multiple-case design[5].

3.1. Presentation of the study sites

3.1.1. Agency K

Agency K was founded in 2009. Its clients are mainly local (54%), with 75% having their main address in Villégion.[6] Its client base is fairly eclectic; however, many (a substantial proportion) are in the real estate and construction sector. At the time of our visit, the agency was at a crossroads in terms of whether to accumulate small ad hoc assignments or create a longer-term pool of clients. The agency's sales development team had recently expanded from 1 to 3 employees, and the agency had begun receiving a few project assignments from Montreal, a major urban center 150 km from Villégion. The agency had undergone rapid growth, going from a 3-person team in 2010 to a staff of 12 as of July 2013.

3.1.2. Agency L

Agency L was founded in 2008. Although the agency has clients in Montérégie (periphery of Montreal), in the Montreal area, and elsewhere in Quebec, 72% of its 156 clients (since the agency's inception) have been located in the region. Of this number, 73% are headquartered in Villégion. However, according to the latest estimates of the managers, 50% of the agency's clients are now situated outside the Villégion area. Agency L's clients, most of whom are in services (77%), are distributed across an array of sectors, the main ones being professional services, manufacturing, and construction/renovation/building.

## 4. Geo-discursivity and the figures of regionality

In the employees' discourse, their region appears as both a constrictive dimension and a reservoir of possibilities. To study those discourses, we used Attride-Stirling thematic network analysis (TNA), which "defines and elaborates the typical, formal elements of arguments as a means of exploring the connections between the explicit statements and the implicit meanings in people's discourse" (Attride-Stirling 2001: 287). TNA constructs an interpretation by going from the specific to the general, i.e., from field materials to conceptual interpretation. This approach involves two stages, namely deconstructing and then exploring a text. Each phase is divided into sub-stages that ascend to greater levels of abstraction. This method ultimately yields a perceptual map that reveals the concentric relationship between the basic themes explicitly mentioned in empirical materials, the organizing themes that structure these basic themes, and finally the global themes that unite all the materials and offer up a conceptual interpretation of the situation under study (Figure 1).

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5 The same protocol was thus adopted in addressing each unit of analysis (advertising agency), taking into account all possible levels, from individual to intermediate (employee groups) to organizational. The protocol also allowed observation of the organizations in relation to their context, as "small advertising agencies in an outlying region." Although this strategy enables comparisons, this study is not comparative per se.
6 The name of the city has been changed.

Figure 1: Structure of a thematic network. (Attride-Stirling 2001)
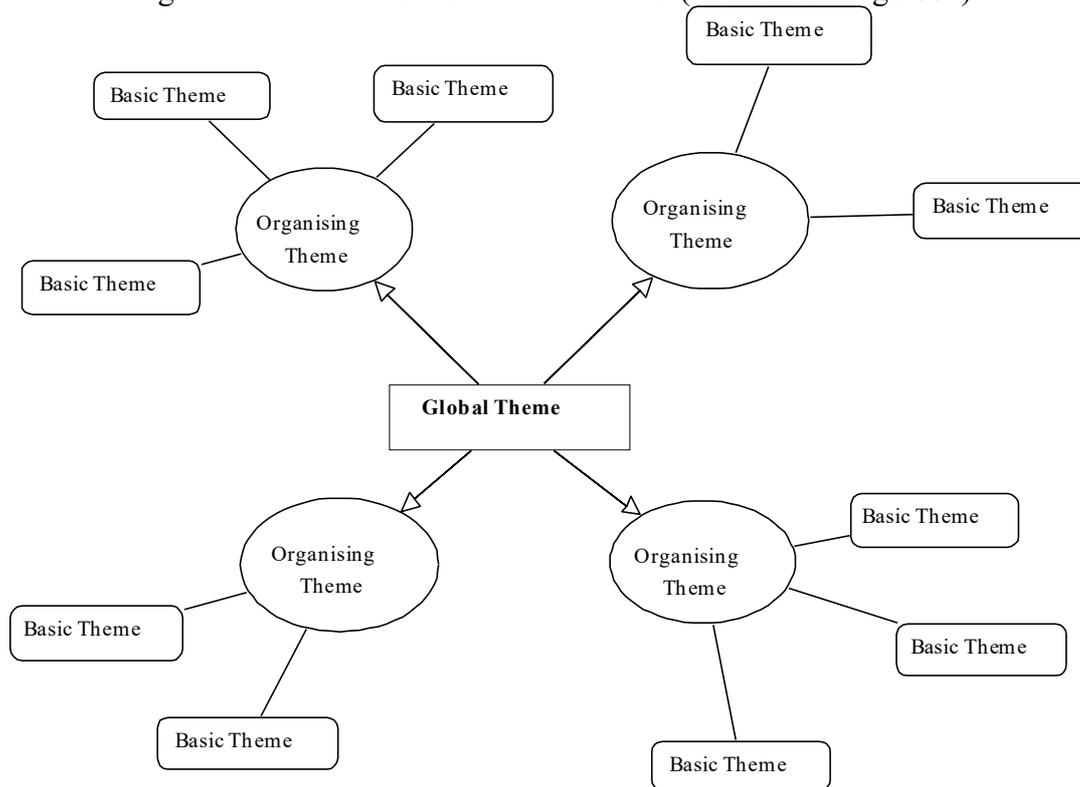
We thus deconstructed all of the empirical material from the study—interviews, observations, and documents—to identify which figures were animated therein. This constituted the basic theme level. The following passage is an example:

> "If I'm working with Marie-Chantal based on our budget, you know … she's used to working in Montreal, with bigger budgets and everything. I have clients, I have a big network of restaurant clients and all, but I can't be offering posters with, like, $700 visuals."

This excerpt was assigned the basic themes "constraints>regional clients," "constraints>budget" and "tension>personal experience>metropolitan area vs. region." We deconstructed the various texts and artifacts in a similar way. For example, a sticker on the back of one designer's computer monitor read "creativity with a purpose." When I asked the designer where this came from, she explained that it was the agency's creed, namely that creativity is not just about "pretty pictures" but has to meet clients' specific needs and goals. This artifact was encoded as "creativity>definition>solution." Over the course of field interactions, we refined, re-evaluated and amended these basic themes, with TAMS software enabling us to see overlaps, duplicates and "orphans." Of the 453 initial themes, we narrowed down 247 as our most convincing basic themes.

When they appeared recursively, these basic themes were organized into cultural figures (at the "organizing theme" level). We then further investigated relationships between the various figures, discovering along the way that some ascribed a certain fatality to creative work in non-urban agencies, as if the weight of their working conditions relegated them to minority or diminutive status. Other figures seemed to nuance this weight, without altogether eliminating it. Another series of cultural figures marked a break with the region by emphasizing the agency's uniqueness: "although located in an outlying region, we're different from the others." Still others

seemed to ventriloquize how the agency had become a respectable firm in spite of its regional status. Finally, another series of figures attested that the participants considered their agency as being not only unsubjected to regionality, but completely freed from this status. In all, we identified five categories of figures (global themes) that we have ranked by their "geo-discursive" distance, i.e., the distance they take from regionality, as observed in the participants' discourse: the figures of seclusion, defense, distinctiveness, maturity, and expansiveness. Each of these categories, which we will call "iconic figures," includes many cultural figures and their various embodiments, which we will present further on.

4.1. Figures of seclusion

For the study participants, regionality carries a weight. The figures of "seclusion" are embodied, first, in the *cultural figure of the lack of resources*, characterized by "regional" budgets that cut down the time for creative research; the absence of talent required for an ideal creative team; and a vision of the region as having too small a pool of interesting clients with inspiring projects: "The best resources are [in Montreal, a major city], the best clients are there, and that's where the cash is." -Félix, shareholder and account manager, Agency L.[7]

Seclusion can also be observed in the *figure of extinguished creativity*, whose manifestations include "regional clients" as narcissistic business owners who consider their advertising presence more important than their business itself; "timourous" clients who are afraid to stand out too much in the region's advertising landscape or are worried about the reactions of the people they know; and the profusion of "subsistence work," i.e., ad hoc assignments that lack vision or creative challenge: "There are shorts-sighted clients everywhere. But maybe in rural settings, they have less money." – Katherine, graphic designer, Agency K. The weight of the region is also ventriloquized through the *figure of low standards* typified by the "regional style," a look and feel that attests to the poor quality in the region: "This is the level of that narcissistic boss who says, 'well, I'm a plumber, so I'll just have a picture of myself in my plumber's attire saying that I'm a plumber" (Katherine, graphic designer, Agency K).

This seclusion is also social and relational, when it is animated by the *figure of exclusion*. Agencies subject to this figure repeatedly come up against the disparaging perceptions of metropolitan agencies when they attempt to forge business partnerships or to acquire clients located in urban centers. This seclusion is also embodied in the *figure of isolation*, in which all forms of sociability are marginalized owing to the absence of any real competition between agencies, as well as opportunities for networking and sharing best practices, which, according to the participants, is more highly valued in major urban centres: "And over there, there are more people in my field, people like me. In my field—when I was working in Montreal, I would talk design, go out to design evenings, think about design, and generally eat, breathe and sleep design. Here, there's nobody" (Katherine, designer, Agency K).

In short, for the participants, the figures of seclusion and their embodiments are frustrating effects of creative work outside major urban centres, and downgrade the creative identity of the agency and its staff.
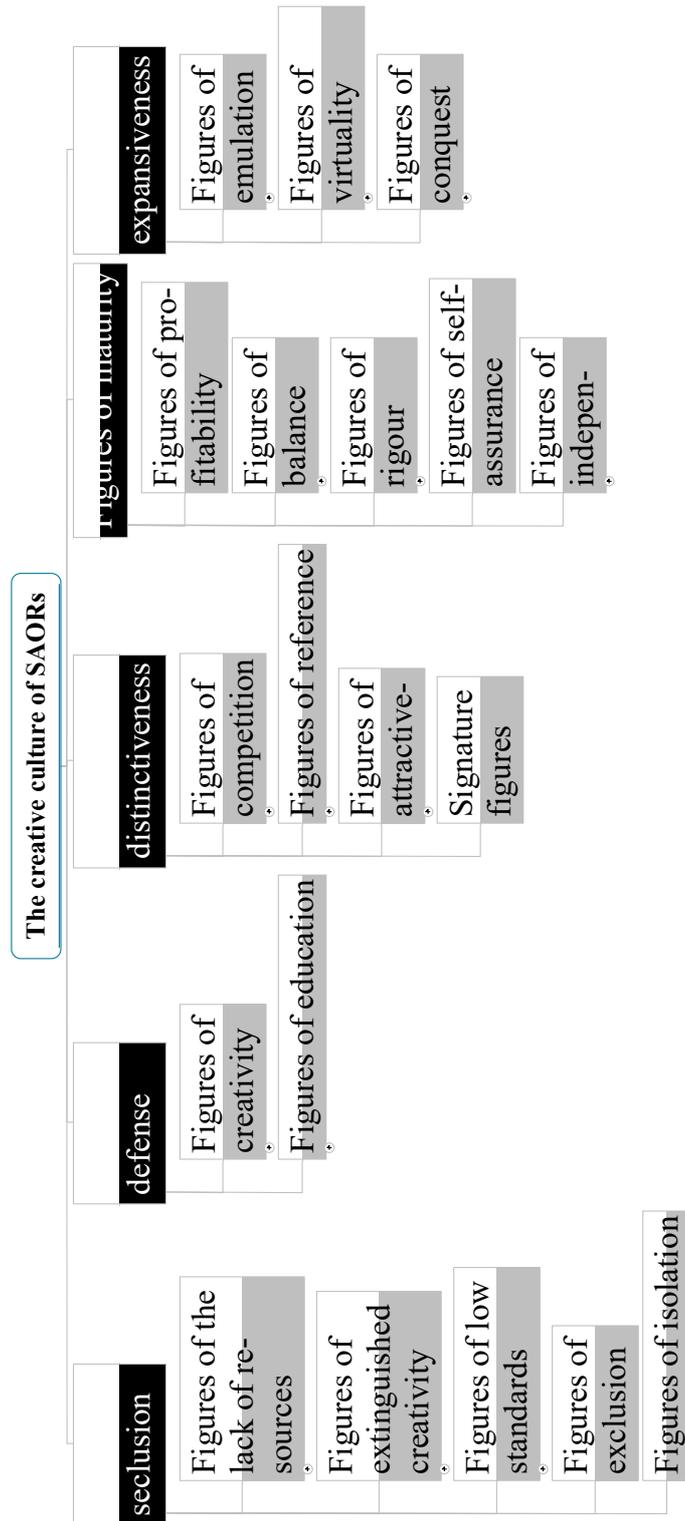
4.2. Figures of defense

In "response" to this seclusion and its repercussions, the agency's employees defend cultural figures in order to restore their identity as creative agents.

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7   All French-to-English translations of interview contents in this article are ours.

Figure 2 – Ranking of iconic figures according to their degree of geo-discursivity

The creative culture of SAORs

expansiveness
- Figures of emulation
- Figures of virtuality
- Figures of conquest

Figures of maturity
- Figures of profitability
- Figures of balance
- Figures of rigour
- Figures of self-assurance
- Figures of indepen-

distinctiveness
- Figures of competition
- Figures of reference
- Figures of attractive-
- Signature figures

defense
- Figures of creativity
- Figures of education

seclusion
- Figures of the lack of re-sources
- Figures of extinguished creativity
- Figures of low standards
- Figures of exclusion
- Figures of isolation

They do so, first, by cultivating the *figure of creativity*, i.e., ideologies of what constitutes creativity, regardless of the agency's actual output. These different figures of creativity support a creative *doxa* that is not demanded of the agency by clients, but that the participants themselves claim to value, and to which they subscribe. Examples of this creativity include bold creativity, solution-focused creativity, resourceful creativity, avant-garde creativity, and trendsetting creativity. Moreover, this creativity must be part of an integrated 360° view that goes beyond communication tactics alone. Finally, it must allow clients to access a vision of their businesses that they would not have come to by themselves. These forms of valued creativity are as many cultural figures that act upon the work and discourse of agency members, and in whose name they recognize themselves as creative agents: "Ultimately, I think Agency L always tries to take clients further than they thought they could go" (Mélissa, graphic designer, Agency L).

Because, owing to their fearfulness or narcissism (as discussed earlier), SAOR clients are unable to "appreciate good creativity" or "are not cultured enough" to value it, the participants also cultivate the *figure of the educator*, i.e., the figure of an agency that must guide, instruct, and reassure clients regarding the value of this creativity, among other things by means of agency literature, production meetings, written guides, etc. At the time of our visit, both agencies had undertaken to produce measures and documents in order to educate their clients. In this way, they demonstrated their added value for clients who flounder in marketing communications' inherent complexity: "they think they already know what communications is because they know how to communicate, you know, they write emails. So in their mind, that's what communication is" (Julie, project manager, Agency L).

4.3. Figures of distinctiveness

By cultivating the figures of creativity, which are mobilized in client education discourse, agency staff are able to maintain their image as a distinctive agency in the figurative *ecosystem of regional competition*, that is, the landscape of competing agencies, of course, but also other intermediaries such as promotional services of local media; printers; freelancers; and other communications agencies that do not offer the comprehensive services of an "integrated" agency. This figurative competition, then, allows the agency to distance itself from the region in terms of its competitive ecosystem: "… we sort of have blinders on, you know, I—we try to look at what others are doing [in the area] but we don't find it very inspiring" (Daniel, account planning manager and shareholder, Agency L).

This figure of distinctiveness is also embodied among other things in *the figure of the reference agency*, i.e., the benchmark agency that inspires others, that leads the creative pack by elevating the region's quality standards: "… we've always tried to deliver quality. It raises up Villégion to a whole other level; we're very pleased with that. Because when we started out, what we were coming up with was less than stellar" (Félix, account manager and shareholder, Agency L).

The quality of distinctiveness is thought to attract the top talent and the best clients, despite the region's small pool, through the *figure of attractiveness*. The figure of distinctiveness is also embodied in the *figure of the signature agency*, i.e., the agency with its own signature style prized by clients and talents alike: "It's about owning up to who we are, our image, our tone, and putting it out there … especially in the service sector; the only way to set yourself apart in services is to say here's who I am: if you like what you see, give us a call, if you don't, you can call someone else" (Luc, multimedia director and shareholder, Agency K).

4.4. Figures of maturity

Through these figures of distinctiveness, a fourth category of cultural figure is animated, namely figures that cultivate the idea that the agency has achieved maturity. Naturally, the mere fact of reaching maturity does not de facto allow the agency to break from its regional status, but it does

appear to be a prerequisite in this regard.

This mature status is embodied, first, in the *figure of the profitable agency*, in which the managers maintain that their portfolio is made up of long-standing clients; the sales development team no longer needs to actively seek out clients; and the agency is in demand by "inbound" clients for the quality of its portfolio.

Those who cultivate the figure of the mature agency do so by arguing that, in spite of the region's lack of talent, their agency's team is stable and the right people are in the right positions; these are all embodiments of the *figure of the balanced agency***:** "We're strong, we're solid. Our management is good, and our creation, operations, and finances are all good too" (Félix, account manager and shareholder, Agency L).

In addition, the *figure of the rigorous agency* is cultivated through the clarification of each employee's tasks, with a view to efficiently taking on the increasingly complex projects entrusted to the agency. Hence, the agency's workflow has been standardized, among other things thanks to project management software and clear quality control processes to handle overflow, which is a common problem during the "immature" stages: "So we sometimes struggled with having grand ideas for a project, but lacking the time to see them through, so the client had accepted, but we ended up realizing it was harder than we thought" (Christophe, graphic designer, Agency L).

This maturity maintained in the participants' discourse cultivates the *figure of self-assurance*, which in turn animates the *figure of independence* characterized by an agency that can pick and choose which clients "qualify" and are worthy of the agency's creative culture, and that can say "no" to timorous or narcissistic clients, to regional budgets, in short to the regional status of their creativity.

4.5. *Figures of expansiveness*

Expansiveness refers to the cultural figures that demonstrate that the agency might be in an outlying region, but that it is not a "regional agency."

This figure is first embodied in the *figure of the emulated agency*. In both their discourse and in their interior design, ways of doing things, business relationships, and so on, agencies in this case import the models and visions of the major agencies in urban centres: "So to use a, a, a stereoptypical term, we wanted to have a Montreal-type agency in Villégion. Not just in our decorations or location, but our products, the services we were offering. So we wanted to create things that would stand out, nice things, beautiful websites" (Daniel, account planning director and shareholder, Agency L).

Even more interestingly, agencies can attempt to rub out their physical location by renting "ghost" offices in urban centres and integrating the names of major cities into their websites in order to attract search engine users. This process of erasing regionality animates the *figure of virtuality*, in which, thanks to digital technologies, physical location is no longer of any real importance.

The figures of expansiveness are also animated in the *figure of conquest*, an embodiment of the agency's aspirations to conquer the "big league," with short-term development plans allowing it to rent an office or at least do business in a big city.

Finally, in spite of the hermetic character of industry competitions, where most prizes go to the major metropolitan agencies, the study participants believe in the importance of attending such competitions to rub shoulders with the best, to showcase their own products, and to forge ties with industry players. At the time of our visit, Kathering and Véronique, two graphic designers, had just returned from the Councours Grafika[8] (Figure 3).

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8   "The Grafika competition, which recognizes the best graphic design productions in Quebec, is back for an 18th consecutive year. … The competition is an initiative of Grafika and organized by Infopresse, in collaboration with the Société des designers graphiques du Québec (SDGQ)" (http://concours.infopresse.com/grafika/a-propos, our

Figure 3: "Grafika 2014" photo album from the Agency
K Facebook
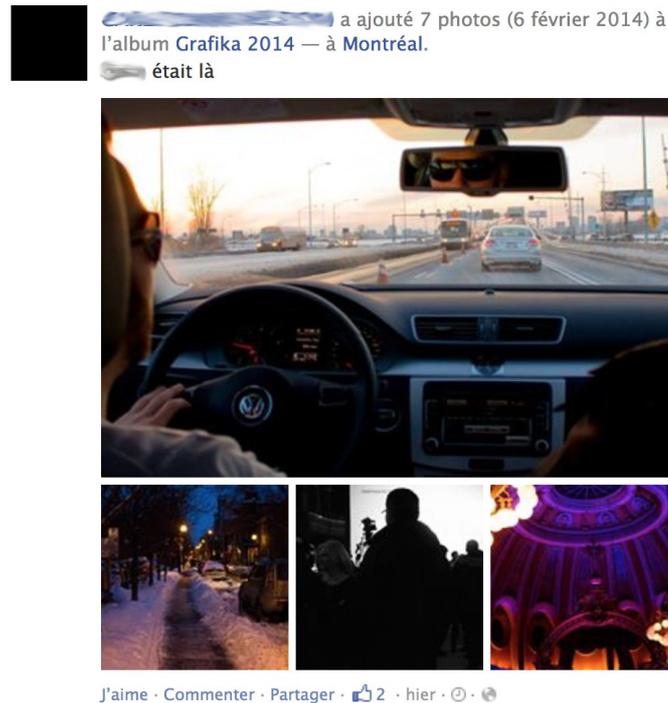
On their return, they summarized what they had witnessed to the entire team.

> Last week we had a meeting. The artistic directors presented the events at Grafika in Montreal and everything. So that's where we see ideas and everything, it helps us. You know, there was a small website component, and that's my passion, it's what allows us to bring in new ideas. Meetings like that are what help us learn and grow. (Charles, programmer, Agency K).

5.   Discussions: cultivating creativity from a regional perspective

Bringing to light the various figures that animate SAORs allows us to identify several constitutive dynamics of their creative culture: first, in the way they help build a rampart against their region, "a place within a place," but also, in the projective nature of these figures, which allows SAORs to dislocate their culture to a figurative elsewhere.

5.1.   *Endogenous legitimizations: creating a "place within a place"*

First, faced with the effects of regional "seclusion," SAORs must maintain the sense of a cohesive identity: in spite of the weight of shy clients, regional budgets, low standards, and their sense of exclusion and isolation, they must feel creative and successfully keep up a creative image.

Ventriloquism thus shows what is summoned up to give the agency stature and weight—in short, authority—in the context of interactions:

> We look (and really can be) more powerful because we are recognized as *mobilizing* various beings[9] when we act, authorize something, or make a decision. …This kind of

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translation).

9   In his article on ventriloquism, Cooren defines beings as "anything that seems effectively to act in our world … I am

authority is not manifested only for the duration of an act or turn of talk, but must also be recognized and taken into account by others, which indicates that it is indeed *co-constructed*, hence justifying the place of dialogue, interaction, and communication in general as a privileged site for the establishment of this authority (Cooren 2013: 111 [original italics])

In this respect, figures of maturity reveal themselves to have an important function: they grant permission to refuse the status of mere producer. Indeed, showing oneself to be confident or to have earned trust depends in part on the ability to demonstrate rigorous work and the embodiment of the forces required to produce it. If rigour and balance are cultivated, embodied and shared in procedures, hiring, and other manifestations of maturity, then employees can more readily allow themselves this self-assurance. Marie-Chantal, copywriter and account manager at Agency K, says, on the subject of this rigour, "For sure it isn't perfect, but we have more structure, we follow up more closely on our projects and we have a better handle on where we're going, and I think that *shows through* in our work and how *we're viewed from the outside*."

The figures of distinctiveness likewise play a part in this authority. SAORs, each in their own way, uphold that they are different and more integrated than others, and that they have achieved this status among other things by distancing themselves from their competitors within the figurative ecosystem of competition. In short, the figures of distinctiveness extract the agency from its condition by supporting an image of the agency as being in the region, but not entirely of the region. Moreover, the figures of distinctiveness cultivate and are cultivated by the sense that the agency is leading the pack, so much so that it is extracting the region from its low standards.

All of these embodiments of figures of distinctiveness, along with figures of maturity, enable a sense of self-assurance, allowing employees to legitimize their work based on these internally cultivated figures of distinctiveness.

The participants hence conceive the sense of a place within a place, a stronghold that offers protection while holding off the "regional invader." According to Philipsen, thanks to this "sense of place," they can "… see boundaries, social and physical, where others do not, and this vision serves as a major unifying perception in their worldview" (Philipsen 1992: 41).

It is interesting to note that this symbolic stronghold is built on a fragile foundation. In the employees' discourse, all the agencies that are "worthy" of being their competitors are also strategic, creative, reflexive, and innovative, yet the employees perceive their own as different. Nixon (2006) sees in this meliorative discourse a "narcissism of minor differences," i.e., in the face of similar constraints and challenges—ultimately, all agencies must contend with small budgets, timorous clients, and the need for client education—the participants stress a handful of minor differences in their conception of creativity and pursuit of innovation. In the case at hand, some agencies are perceived to take better care of their clients; others, to have an eye for detail in their programming or design; still others, to offer wiser advice. However, these are minor differences, since no client would be able to discriminatingly appreciate[10] this carefully crafted programming, different design, or maturity. The following conversation between Marie-Chantal, copywriter and account manager, and Luc, multimedia director and shareholder, is telling in this respect:

"Luc: Because it's all in the details and that's often where it's at: in the details where if

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thinking, for example, of those curious beings we call ideas, principles and values, ideologies, standards, laws, regulations, procedures, statutes, but also on another level organizations, groups and societies" (Cooren 2010b: 39, our translation).

10 Such a degree of client sophistication, implying the knowledge to appreciate minor differences, only comes with proper training and long and extensive experience in communications (Koslow et al. 2006), which is rarely the case with SAOR clients.

you have no comparison, you're going to say, 'hey, you're charging me extra for the same thing'."

"Marie-Chantal: Some people have no eye for these things, but sometimes if you have nothing to really compare with, you can't put your finger on it, you won't catch that the agency used Arial [font] instead of Gotham."

In the name of this nearly imperceptible quality, which implies that the result also contains a reflection, the participants maintain, *among themselves*, that such a difference is notable enough to justify their agency's distinctiveness. More interestingly still, the claim of a unique and distinctive touch is oddly universal. Martin et al. speak of a uniqueness paradox: "Thus, a culture's claim to uniqueness is expressed through cultural manifestations that are not in fact unique" (Martin et al. 1983: 439). Cultivating uniqueness offers a way to legitimize and make tolerable positions that seem contradictory: indeed, how it is possible to escape the status of a regional agency when that is precisely what one is? The agency's claim to have a unique creative culture in a sense allows it to don "blinders," to "look elsewhere" (as discussed earlier), but also to demonstrate that the inherent challenges of being a SAOR are external to the agency. In other words, the agency considers that it has all it takes to be a leading agency, but is unable to achieve this status because of constraints beyond its control. Thus we can see how SAOR staff activate figures in order to distinguish themselves and, once more, to *be something other than a regional agency*.

The function of this "place within a place" in organizing the culture of SAORs can be linked with the figure of isolation. Indeed, in the absence of professional sociabilities, compounded by an ecosystem where actors cultivate the idea that there are no other agencies offering job opportunities for truly creative individuals, employees *must* in a sense uphold this sense of a "place within a place" that protects their creative identity. Contrary to what is set forth in the literature on creative industries (Leiss et al. 1990, 2005; McFall 2004; Nixon 2003), employees do not work at SAORs merely to build up their resumés, or to develop social capital by moving horizontally from one agency to the next. Thanks to the internal legitimization we have described, the creative culture of SAORs makes it possible to revive the ambition that was destined for the cemetery of regionality (Bell & Jayne 2006). Experientially speaking, this function of a "place within a place" is reassuring, legitimizing, comfortable (Massey 1993 1994), and necessary in order to have a positive experience of creative work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011) in spite of the effects of the figures of seclusion.

In the absence of exogenous legitimizing structures—including awards, competitions, trade press, and professional associations—SAORs, then, strongly cultivate legitimacy on an internal basis. Hence, we can see the even greater emergence of what Soar (2000) considers to be a "short circuited code-decode" loop, in which the consumption and production of a culture are kept behind closed doors. In this context, regional competition is non-threatening and the dominant models do not really apply. This is altogether unique to the SAORs under study, given that the ethos of the major agencies in the metropolitan circuit, conversely, is built up in opposition to the dominant discourse:

… producing new and original work was the central goal of advertising creatives and, moreover, that this work had to be produced in the face of those constraints set by "mainstream" advertising and the dominant communicative ethos of the sector. (Nixon 2003: 75).

5.2. *Dislocating culture to counter creative saturation*
The geo-discursive weight of regionality is even greater when examining the link between

production and consumption, as in the case of agencies' creation of advertising for regional clients. The figurative region then shows through clearly in the *figures of seclusion*. The region is considered to be low in resources (*figures of resources*), inspiration (*figures of extinguished creativity*), and standards of ambient communicational culture (*figures of low standards*). What is cultivated in the discourse associated with this production-consumption is what we might call a form of *creative saturation*, which could be summed up as follows:

- Being creative requires sophisticated or cultivated clients;
- However, in this figurative region, sophisticated clients are rare;
- The region does not support good creation: it lacks good creative output;
- To attract sophisticated clients, what is needed is added value based on the team's skills, which must be displayed through its association with prestigious clients (who are hard to find outside the metropolitan centres);
- Hence the agency cultivates the idea that it will only achieve its full potential elsewhere.

In terms of consumption/production, this cultivated impression of saturation leads the agency to seek clients outside its home region. Above all, as we have seen, it leads the agency to project itself, through the figures of expansiveness, to this desaturated elsewhere.

There is something particularly interesting to note here about the agency of cultural figures: not only do they ventriloquize what matters to the agency and its staff, but they also orient them in a certain direction. Many figures of expansiveness can be observed to be projective: finding inspiration elsewhere, emulating a Montreal culture or agency, or identifying with a creative *doxa* become as many "elsewheres" that can never be attained, even as they constitute possibilities that must be attained. Hence, dislocation makes it possible to be somewhere while simultaneously being elsewhere. Moreover, the movement is projective: these cultural figures seem to push in the direction of the elsewhere as much as they import its features. Hence the figures' projective force. They can indeed be powerfully influential when they "encourage" the agency to create a page addressed to *potential* clients from urban centres, when they pervade the agency's development plans, when they are embodied in performance measures, and when they result in sending off employee delegates to competitions so they will come back with new practices. Hence the projection associated with figures of expansiveness takes place upstream, acting like a vision that employers, and especially managers, would like to see realized: "… managers try to represent their companies in as bright colours as possible, perhaps sometimes thinking or hoping that 'visionary' statements one day may come true" (Alvesson 2004: 80).

This creative saturation leads to an ideology of creativity in SAORs which, as we have maintained, is exogenous to the agency, situated in a creative elsewhere.

In fact, on closer examination, this figure of "*elsewhere*" is the iconic figure that seems to unify all the others. Indeed, as we have noted, the figures of expansiveness act antinomically, *against the name of*, the region and its haunting figures of seclusion. The result is that the discourse of expansiveness, with its projective character, brings into play an elsewhere that is not really present in the discussion, but most assuredly present in the backdrop.

To examine this phenomenon from a different angle, if Agency L and Agency K were located in a metropolitan area, this elsewhere would certainly not be marked by the same figures. For example, the two agencies would not need to virtualize their regionality by leading others to *believe* in their Montreal presence. They would not display Montreal-based samples of work (emulation) to *avoid* shooting themselves in the foot by showcasing regional samples of work. When one considers the importance of client education in production-consumption, and the fact that this education is based on figures that are elsewheres, the full importance of dislocation in the creative culture of SAORs becomes apparent.

6. Conclusion

To study a creative culture located on the sidelines of the legitimizing institutions thus supposes, from a ventriloquism standpoint, that we observe which figures are in place to support a sense of coherence in the culture of an SAOR that is confronted with its regionality. It seems obvious that when it comes to *regionality*, identities are supported by meliorative internal discourse that is *antinomic*—literally against the name of—a particular figurative view of this region. From the agency's standpoint, its region is home to fewer clients, talents, and resources, but *what counts* for its organizational culture is to remember that it identifies with the cultures of Montreal agencies, i.e., creative cultures that lie outside the region.

In sum, analysis of various iconic and cultural figures allows us to suggest a five-pronged theory of creative culture:

1- SAOR employees endogenously and self-referentially cultivate and legitimize a sense of identity coherence through the cultural figures of distinctiveness;
2- This sense of a cohesive identity is made possible by the experience of a "place within a place," which spares the agency's culture from the weight of regionality;
3- Employees cultivate a maturity that is "performed" through their search for rigour and balance between their team members, thus bolstering a sense of creative confidence and independence;
4- This maturity allows them to project themselves to a creative elsewhere that they cultivate and to which they tend;
5- The first three processes (distinctiveness, maturity, and expansiveness) are propped up against the haunting figures of regionality, which seclude the agency even as they produce a "place within a place" and an almost permanent dislocation of the agency's culture.

Using ventriloquism to assess the organizational culture of SAORs, we offer a new way to observe and analyze the relation between regionality, organizations and creativity without succumbing to the deterministic view of creative industries theories, and by better uniting the macro and the micro levels throughout organizational discourse. Looking at the figures that are animated and embodied in organizational discourses as well as the geodiscursive agency of the region within a given organization, we can see how SAORs maintain and perform their creative culture, from a non urban-centric point of view.

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