IN MEDIA RES1: NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN THE FILM ADAPTATION OF MARY LAVIN’S “THE CUCKOO SPIT”

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ABSTRACT: However complex critics might have regarded the relationship between literature and film, both media can find ways of converging in their respective art forms. In contrast to comparisons that seek to put them in mutual opposition, critics such as André Bazin have acknowledged that adaptation is an “established feature in the history of art”. Likewise, Linda Hutcheon criticizes the so-called “fidelity discourse” and the Manichaean reasoning that arises from such a polarized view. In this work, we establish a dialogue between the film The Cuckoo Spit (1974), directed by Deirdre Friel, and the short story of the same title from which it was adapted, written by Irish writer Mary Lavin and first published in 1964. We aim to investigate how Lavin’s modernist techniques were approached in the film, mainly in terms of how the stream-of-consciousness treatment given to the main character was conveyed in the adaptation. In the film structure, we focus on the construction of the narrative, with some reference to the elements discussed by David Bordwell in Film Art: openings, closings and patterns of development. Bearing these elements in mind, this paper examines whether the film adaptation of “The Cuckoo Spit” represents the non-spoken ideas which explicitly impact the development of the plot in the short story.

Key-words: Film Adaptation. Irish Short Story. Mary Lavin.


1 The Latin expression in media res, the translation of which into English – in the middle of things – Bordwell refers to in Film Art, was also extensively used by modernist short story writer Mary Lavin.

IN MEDIA RES²: ESTRATÉGIAS DE DESENVOLVIMENTO DA NARRATIVA NA ADAPTAÇÃO PARA O CINEMA DE “THE CUCKOO SPIT”, DE MARY LAVIN

RESUMO: Por mais complexa que a relação entre literatura e cinema tenha sido vista pelos críticos, os dois meios podem encontrar maneiras de convergir em suas respectivas formas artísticas. Em contraste com comparações que procuram colocá-los em oposição, críticos como André Bazin reconheceram que a adaptação é uma “característica estabelecida na história da arte”. Da mesma maneira, Linda Hutcheon critica o chamado “discurso da fidelidade” e o raciocínio maniqueísta que emerge como resultado dessa visão polarizada. Neste trabalho, estabelecemos um diálogo entre o filme The Cuckoo Spit (1974), dirigido por Deirdre Friel, e o conto homônimo do qual foi adaptado, escrito pela autora irlandesa Mary Lavin e publicado pela primeira vez em 1964. Nosso objetivo é analisar como as técnicas modernistas de Lavin foram abordadas no filme, principalmente em termos de como o fluxo de consciência, aplicado à personagem principal, foi conduzido na adaptação. Na estrutura do filme, focamos na construção narrativa, com referência aos elementos discutidos por David Bordwell em Film Art: aberturas, finais e padrões de desenvolvimento. Tendo em vista tais elementos, este artigo examina se a adaptação cinematográfica de “The Cuckoo Spit” representou as ideias não verbalizadas que explicitamente afetam o desenvolvimento do enredo no conto.


² A expressão em latim, in media res, a cuja tradução para o inglês – in the middle of things (no meio das coisas) – Bordwell se referiu em Film Art, também foi extensivamente usada pela contista modernista, Mary Lavin.

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To adapt is no longer to betray but to respect.
André Bazin³

If mutation is the means by which the evolutionary process advances, then we can also see filmic adaptations as “mutations” that help their source novel “survive.”
Robert Stam⁴

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between literature and film has been widely seen by critics as a troubled one: in our minds, at first look, the older medium wins due to its sacred tradition – and indeed the two means of artistic expression have been aggressively counterposed in a vain attempt to undermine the newer media’s creative enterprise. In the 1940s, André Bazin – film critic and theorist – took up the issue of comparing the two art forms, not only highlighting the intrinsic naturalness of adaptation, defining it as an “established feature in the history of art” (1967, p. 56), but also identifying its contribution to the enrichment and perpetuation of works of art in the most varied fields – narratives which might have been lost in the course of human history if it were not for the natural and inherent inclination of artists, somehow, to resort to their predecessors as a means of inspiration for their own creative processes (p. 56-57). As he put it: “the influence of a dominant neighbor on the other arts is probably a constant law” (p. 61).

In the 2000s, Robert Stam pointed to what he calls the “sources of hostility” (2008, p. 4) towards literature as seen on the screen: historically construed beliefs which rely on a commonsense ideal of the (dis)service movie adaptations do to the so-called “primary source” and on a lack of critical and theoretical apparatus in relation to the genre. Seeking to present a new perspective on adaptation studies rather than seeing literature and films as in mutual opposition, Stam sees the mutational aspect of evolutionary processes and the enduring benefits that adaptations can offer to the written source. In Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Adaptation (2007), Stam and Raengo successfully make us aware of these “roots of a prejudice” (p.

³ Quoted from the essay “In Defense of Mixed Cinema” (p. 69).
⁴ Quoted from the Introduction to the book Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation (p. 3).
3), especially in terms of the audience’s unconscious and unquestioning attitude to the film version of a literary work.

Accordingly, in her essay “In Defence of Literary Adaptation as Cultural Production” (2007), Linda Hutcheon points to the dangers of the “fidelity discourse” (2007, n. p.), that is so often applied to the analyses of adaptations, on the grounds that it disregards all the possible “rights” that such works can do to the “original” piece of art. With arguments akin to Bazin’s, though perhaps more fiercely, Hutcheon advocates for a view of adaptation as a natural development not only for the arts, but also for society and nature (n. p.). This rhetoric of the inescapability of adaptation leads her to the argument that, as an inherent part of a work of art that lives up to its reputation, there must be a dialogue not only with the neighboring arts per se, but with the ones that may come to establish a dialogue with it: other artists, creators, editors, publishers and even readers (2007, n. p.). Expressing the idea that the works of art need to be brought to life through the liaison between the artist and the public, Hutcheon concludes that the “un-interpreted, un-experienced art work is not worth calling art” (n. p.). The apparent radicalism of the statement serves a higher purpose in her defense of the validity of literature on screen: the connection established between the audience and the work of art is as important as the one established between the art work and the artist herself. Also, the complaint that adaptations are prejudicial betrays the ingrained system of hierarchical positioning that still exists, and is still encouraged, which we would rather believe had been long ago abandoned.

Bazin, Stam and Hutcheon approach the conflicted relationship between the written and the heard words distinctly, making use of different rhetoric strategies to emphasize their cases, and moving toward different destinations in their analyses – especially Bazin, who was one of the forerunners in the discussion of cinema as an art form, and who held a particular view in terms of the role of the author and the screenwriter’s approach to the work of art. But they agree on one thing that is highly relevant to the discussion to be developed in this paper: literature has nothing to lose from being used as a source of content by the seventh art. We rely greatly on the texts of Stam and Hutcheon, especially for they do not argue, in these essays, about the filmic approach as a type of translation from the paper to the screen, neither are they seeking to find equivalences between the two media – nor do they argue that the original author represents an individual genius, whose talent is unreachable, making adaptation a virtually impossible task.

Grounding the discussion in these terms, we establish a dialogue between the film The Cuckoo Spit (1974), directed by Deirdre Friel, and the short story of the same title, from which it was adapted, written by Irish writer Mary
Lavin and first published in *The New Yorker*, in 1964. Inspired by Hutcheon’s argument, we do not here address the two versions as primary and secondary sources, but as written and filmic ones – since the idea of chronological order might come to be problematic in the discussion – as Hutcheon herself well argues. As opposed to a simple comparison between the short story and the film, our objective is to analyze how Lavin’s modernist techniques were approached in the film, mainly in terms of how non-verbal reflections, or the stream of consciousness so thoroughly applied to Vera Traske, the main character, was conducted in the adaptation. In terms of filmic structure, we look at narrative construction, including elements discussed by David Bordwell in *Film Art*: openings, closings and patterns of development. By doing this, and considering Lavin’s overt modern writing enterprise altogether with her wide use of *in media res* and stream-of-consciousness techniques, this paper aims to analyze whether the film adaptation of “The Cuckoo Spit” represented those non-spoken ideas which explicitly impact the development of the plot.

CONSTRUING THE NARRATIVE

Hutcheon comments – with precision – that the images of films come to colonize readers’ and viewers’ imagination with their vivid representations and materialized characters. That is precisely what happens when one watches the film adaptation of “The Cuckoo Spit”. One can never guarantee that the public, in general, had first read the short story and then watched the film – for Mary Lavin’s writing had unfortunately been ostracized in her own country due to a whole non-literary concern. The reason for such a hostile reception to her work may have had to do with Lavin’s critical perception of Irish society; such perception, as clarified by Maurice Harmon (2013, p. 11), may be explained due to her American background. Born in Massachusetts in 1912, daughter to Irish immigrants, she lived until the age of eight in the small East Walpole neighborhood of Eastern Massachusetts. When she moved from a small town in the United States to the small town of Athenry, in County Galway, Ireland had a great impact on her; she would later recall her first impressions of life in Ireland as much more religion-centered and conservative than the life she had known in America (HARMON, 2013, p. 10-11). Lavin’s fictions dared to break with a tradition exercised by writers from previous generations – “a peculiarly masculine affair”, as Frank O’Connor put it (1985, p. 202) – which perhaps also triggered O’Connor’s criticism of her “too exclusively feminine” point of view (1963, p. 203).
According to Theresa Wray, “sustained critical attention only turned towards Lavin’s work in the 1960s and 1970s” (2015, p. 237). Scholars like Roger Chauviré – as early as in 1945 – and Augustine Martin (qtd. in WRAY, 2015, p. 237), in 1965, presented a positive view of her work. Chauviré acknowledges the distinct nature of Lavin’s fiction and her born talent for storytelling:

There are many distinguished craftsmen of the pen whose work you will read and enjoy; but they will remind you of somebody or something else. Few have that flash of ‘never before,’ that novelty, that uniqueness. Mary Lavin was born with her own vision of the world, and her own way of conveying it. (qtd. in WRAY, 2015, p. 241)

In 1975, Zack Bowen published the biography Mary Lavin, and “it is evident”, Wray writes, “that Lavin’s inclusion in The Irish Short Story [by Patrick Rafroidi and Terence Brown] in 1979 marked her out as a writer of some distinction” (2015, p. 237). Lavin’s stories have then been published in collections of her work and featured consistently in collections of Irish short stories. More recently, there has been a gradual reappraisal of Lavin’s work and role with publications such as, for example, Leah Levenson’s The Four Seasons of Mary Lavin, in 1998, and a collection of articles edited by Elke D’hoker, Mary Lavin, in 2013.

“The Cuckoo Spit” is a thoughtfully crafted story written in Lavin’s late writing phase, in which she explored the sorrows of widowhood for women in a society in which marriage held a sacred status. Going back to Hutcheon’s statement of the viewer’s mind being colonized by the vivid images of the film, we must say that Lavin’s writing has the power of creating that sense too. It is undeniable, however, speaking from our own experience in reading the tale and watching the film that, regardless of the order in which we got into contact with the story, which in our case was through the written medium and then the filmic one, our minds were invariably taken over by the remarkable performance of Siobhán McKenna, one of the greatest Irish actresses of all times. McKenna plays the role of Vera, the female protagonist who, as a widow in a still conservative society, lives the conflict of being attracted to a man many years younger, Fergus, played by Brian McGrath. Re-reading the story, shortly after watching the film for the very first time, gave us a specific distinct experience and view on the narrative – comparing the book’s narrative with what we had seen on screen, mainly in terms of space and time, but paying special attention to Vera’s voice in the film, as it contrasts with her often not explicit thoughts in the prose version.

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Lavin herself was involved in the text adaptation of the forty-minute television drama, produced and directed by Deirdre Friel, sharing the “Script/Adaptation” credit with screenwriter Norman Smythe. If we consider the extent to which women’s work was neglected in the cultural scenario in the Republic of Ireland, it is quite impressive to see the constellation of women involved in the production of *The Cuckoo Spit*. Deirdre Friel was one of the few women working at RTÉ as a director at RTÉ – the Irish national broadcaster – at the time. Born in Derry, she attended Queen’s University Belfast, and later joined the then nascent RTÉ, “at a time when television was a dark art, unknown, new” (Ó BUACHALLA, 2017, n. p.). In the first three decades of Irish television drama, she directed over a dozen titles for RTÉ. Her award-winning ground-breaking work, however, has received very little critical attention – to date. As Helena Sheehan has put it, in *Irish Television Drama: A Society and Its Stories*, “there was evidence in RTÉ drama of the seventies of the changing definitions of male and female roles working their way through Irish society at the time (1987, p. 253) – not only in the roles of women as directors and producers (even if they were very few), but also in the female portrayals. The traditional portrayal of women as mothers, wives and daughters “was beginning to open up and to reflect the new range of options opening to women. [...] These seventies women violated many taboos, both in the pursuit of their professions and in the expression of their sexuality” (SHEEHAN, 1987, p. 255-6).

Throughout her career, Lavin sought to give voice to those people who, as Irish critic and writer Frank O’Connor put it, were “wandering about the fringes of society” (1985, p. 19): people like Vera Traske, one of the many widow characters Lavin’s middle to late career phase. Lavin’s female characters are often depicted as women who, dispossessed of any mercy on the part of society, have to find a way out of such stifling regulatory mores. In “The Cuckoo Spit”, it becomes quite clear that the female protagonist, in feeling attracted by Fergus, the young man whom she meets on a nocturnal walk and with whom she quickly gets involved, tries to combat this involvement – mainly because she thinks she “couldn’t bear anything now, even happiness” (LAVIN, 1981, p. 105), and because she fears what would become of the both of them if they decided to follow a possible romantic path. In spite of the density of issues implicated in such a story, and the ingrained societal construction which might have prevented Vera from living her life, after her husband’s death, to the fullest, a summary of the film simply says: “A bitter-sweet love story develops from an encounter between an older woman and a young man” (Trinity College Dublin website). But is that all that the story is all about? Would such a summary fit the written version of the tale as well? Having attentively read the story, we know that the issues raised in the plot are much denser than simply a romantic
rendezvous between two people from different generations. Although this could be considered the main point of cause and effect within the narrative, it has far deeper implications than are discerned in that summary of the film. Is the supposedly bitter-sweet encounter between these two people the focus given on the adaptation, after all?

To better reflect upon these questions, we start by using some of Bordwell’s ideas on narrative development. As regards openings, one of the points he discusses in the third chapter of Film Art is that, like short stories, films also start in media res, a Latin expression which means “in the middle of things” (BORDWELL, 2008, p. 86). This is a technique often used by modernist writers, especially in short stories where the length of text space and amount of words – and the information they can convey – are on much smaller scale than in a novel.

In “The Cuckoo Spit”, we first meet Vera taking a walk in the surroundings of her house in an unnamed village in Ireland’s countryside, when she bumps into Fergus, whom she then meets again in the subsequent days, leading them to a quick emotional involvement. Through her conversations with him, we get to know that Vera is a widow, being such details of her previous life not given in the form of flashbacks or scenes, but in the form of her reminiscences and grief for a time that has long been lost and which she is apparently struggling to overcome. These pieces of information on past events, however, are only given to the extent that they are relevant to the main issues involving the characters’ inner conflict, in the present. The present, thus, is influenced by the past in that it causes at the same time a sense of uneasiness in Vera, and a frisson in Fergus, and this movement from past to the present – which permeates the whole plot – is the point of tension which leads to the main actions that trigger the range of cause-and-effect events within the story.

What intrigues us the most is the fact that there are several moments in the short story in which Lavin makes use of the stream-of-consciousness technique to shed light on Vera’s internal concerns and desires – either in the dialogues established with Fergus or when she is by herself. In the film, though, there is no narrator as source, who could, for instance, possibly fill in this gap and give voice to this inner material, which one sees clearly when reading the tale and which indisputably affects the audience’s understanding of the narrative development. We are not arguing that to make sense of the film one necessarily needs to have read the short story; indeed, we believe that – although making use of and resorting to different strategies – both the written and the film versions of “The Cuckoo Spit” to a certain extent converge in their artistic enterprises; each using its own particular beauty and tools to reach the audience.
In the written form, the stream-of-consciousness treatment enables the reader to see the context of Vera’s next moves, or at least have some clue about her thoughts towards Fergus, but in the film, the spectator is subjected to never-ending expectation on how she is going to position herself, since there is no means of reaching her feelings, apart from the visual component. Vera and Fergus first meet when she is out for a walk in the evening, when he is walking close to her house and she, distracted by the landscapes of the fields which surround her home, does not see the young man approaching. After engaging in quite a short conversation about Vera’s dead husband, and Fergus’ uncle (who happens to be her neighbor), and how she has been living alone in a place so full of memories, the two part with the expectation of meeting again soon.

In the written source, after their farewell, there is a very descriptive scene in which the readers become acquainted with Vera’s impression from that sudden interaction. The following excerpt from the short story details her turbulent feelings after this first encounter with Fergus, in which she displays an unarguably self-aware positioning regarding her own demeanor but, at the same time, demonstrates uncertainty about whether she is really in need of having a relationship of any kind:

As she went into the house, she wondered if he would come again. She hoped he would; it was a pleasant encounter. And she kept on thinking about it as she went around the house, fastening windows and locking the door. Even when she went upstairs, she stood for a while at the open window, looking out and going over scraps of their conversation. Some of the things she had said now seemed affected. Had she lost the knack of small talk? In particular, she thought of what she had said about happiness, and not being able now to bear it. That was so absurd, but surely he understood that she meant a certain kind of happiness, possible only to the young. Indeed, it might well be that it was when one let go all hope of ever knowing it again that the heart was emptied and ready for simpler relationships, those without tie, without pain. But when she put out the light and turned back the white counterpane, breaking the skin of light on it, she felt vaguely depressed. Would there not always be something purposeless in such attachments? (LAVIN, 1981, p. 106-107)

This very descriptive scene, in which we get to know Vera’s mindset in depth, is completely omitted in the film, however; we do not even see a gesture that might lead the audience to infer something about the main character’s ideas on that encounter, and the possible ones to come. In the filmic source, although Fergus’ excitement in possibly seeing Vera again is explicit, in spite of his imminent return to Dublin, the woman’s bodily expression and demeanor...
do not evidence what is on the inside: she is an enigma. In the film, one does not really get to be informed about Vera’s reflection upon possible future events, simply for such a scene is not depicted. After their farewell, instead of a representation of the previous scene, the next shot shows Fergus walking through an uncovered landscape, assumedly on his way to the second encounter with Vera.

In the written version of “The Cuckoo Spit”, there are other moments in which detailed and extended descriptive scenes are used, not only in the employment of stream of consciousness, but also in terms of setting. We noticed that such scenes do not carry the same load of minor details as the ones in the tale. It is, seemingly, a strategy adopted in the film production as a means of compensating some features of the written source which was not possible to depict in the filmic version. Hence, some characteristics naturally embodied in the use of such techniques needed to be lessened or eliminated for a coherent narrative development: for example, even Vera’s movements, such as fastening the windows and turning the light off, would not tell the spectator what was going on her mind, and were, thus, omitted.

Another interesting example of the non-expositional approach applied to Vera’s character in the film version can be seen towards the end of the story. In the screen where they last see each other, Vera and Fergus had arranged a meeting in a park in Dublin, where he lived. In the short story, we get to know that she specifically thought about giving up the idea of going to Dublin, but that being “too unsettled to stay at home” (LAVIN, 1981, p. 114), she decided to go for a few hours. When she arrives in the park, her uneasiness with the whole situation still lets her to consider turning around while she could. The subsequent excerpt, taken from the written source, well exposes her state of mind when she sees Fergus waiting for her:

It was, she thought, the suddenness of seeing him that made her heart leap; only that. The next moment, a line from an old mortuary card came involuntarily to her mind. The card had been given to her by an old nun at the time of Richard’s death, and her own pallid belief in a life beyond the grave had been quenched entirely by its facile promise: Oh, the joy to see you come. But now the words rushed back to her, ready and apt. I shouldn’t be here, she thought with terror. It was too late, though. He had seen her. (LAVIN, 1981, p. 115)

In the film, however, we see Vera’s apparent determined walk towards him (in the light dress with a black purse), as he sits on a bench, looking nervous and unquiet. If by any chance the viewer had read the short story before watching its adaptation to the screen, then she might have recalled Vera’s
emotional instability towards what was about to come. If not, though, the load of emotional tension presented in the subsequent scenes would be able to fill the mind of the attentive viewer. In contrast to the first examples given above, in this case, the actions which followed her arrival in the park well represented what was going on in her mind. Vera arrived determined to put an end to any sort of contact she had with Fergus – while he did not accept her resistance, and kept asking for whom she was speaking, and what she was afraid of. Finally, Vera left Dublin and they would see each other again only a year later, when Fergus went to the country to visit his uncle. The expectancy of a romance, nonetheless, was never fulfilled, as we can see in the dialogue that is presented both in the short story and in the film:

“I sometimes think love has nothing to do with people at all.” Her voice was tired.
“It’s like the weather. But isn’t it strange that a love that was so unrealized should have –”
“– given such joy?” he asked quietly.
“Yes, yes,” she said. Then she closed the door behind them. “And such pain.”
“Oh, Vera, Vera,” he said.
“Goodbye,” she said.
“Goodbye.”
(LAVIN, 1981, p. 122)

As Bordwell remarks, some narratives are “deliberately anticlimactic” (2008, p. 88). We would say that this is the case in the written version of “The Cuckoo Spit”, and to some extent in the film. This difference is precisely because of the strategies used in one medium and the other. In the short story the reader is placed all the time inside Vera’s head, which makes her/him more able to make the connections, in advance, that might lead to a solution to the puzzles presented over the course of the story. This is not the case for the film, however. The viewer does not have the same awareness of what is permeating Vera’s mind, because there is no source of information on this; the images, of course, speak a lot by themselves, but again, the spectator inhabits this inferential space, in which the ideas she/he has cannot always be sustained based on the elements of the plot.

As regards narrative development, we would like to underline the importance of Lavin’s modernist techniques – considering that she also adapted the text to the screen – and how such techniques impact on the plot. She makes use of the so-called “slice-of-life” storytelling technique in which we have just the exact amount of information necessary for that particular moment within

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the characters’ life in that precise period. As we mentioned above, previous information regarding their lives is given only when needed for understanding of present demands. Similarly, information on future events is also given if necessary – which did not happen in either the written or the film version of *The Cuckoo Spit*. In this sense, taking into account the *in media res* technique, the anticlimactic nature of the plot, and the limited amount of information the audience has access to, the path taken to develop the plot does not fit the “goal-oriented” and “search” models (BORDWELL, 2008, p. 86), but somehow resembles a “journey” (p. 87), if we focus on Vera’s own path to self-knowledge and the inner conflicts she undergoes to come to terms with her current *modus operandi*.

**FINAL REMARKS**

However complex the relationship between literature and cinema, in *The Cuckoo Spit*, both forms of artistic expression converge. Although the range of expository material differs due to the change in medium, it does not differ to the extent that we cannot recognize in the Vera played by Siobhán McKenna the thoughtful woman of the short story. By adapting certain elements within the plot, however, the emotional load falls greatly upon the characters’ bodily expression – and even being able to count on that element, the exposition of Vera’s inner struggles was considerably minimized in the film. This, in turn, we believe, led to a change in the general perspective on the politics involved in the issues brought forward by Lavin, notably: life as a widow in a society in which women were not considered equal citizens; prejudice regarding a relationship between people from different generations; and a woman’s awareness of her positioning within that societal construction. We believe that, by not offering a full account on Vera’s concerns, the film has somehow neglected its social role as a means of disclosing such systems.

We must emphasize the pleasure of working with an adaptation of Lavin’s tales by Deirdre Friel. We do believe that, for Lavin, to have a story adapted by the national television of Ireland by a female director in the 1970s was a remarkable achievement. Mary Lavin is, indeed, an author who still deserves more critical attention, and the value of her work still asks for dissemination. By reappraising her work, in the adaptation of “The Cuckoo Spit”, we believe that we are making our contribution to that enterprise, especially considering that Deirdre Friel’s work has been even more neglected.
than Lavin’s, and that there are no academic works approaching this adaptation – as far as we know. Lavin’s, Friel’s, and other women’s work, those “yells from the kitchen” (O’CONNOR, 1985, p. 211), need to be reconsidered and revalued.

**WORKS CITED**


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