



Frames, Windows, and Mirrors. Sensing Still Bodies in Films by Manoel de Oliveira

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Abstract. In the case of Oliveira’s *Doomed Love* (*Amor de Perdição*, 1978) (an adaptation of the homonymous classic Portuguese novel), Bresson’s model theory provides an adequate theoretical model for a melodrama in which characters, ‘hit by fate,’ are following their destinies as if ‘under hypnosis.’ Besides a typically frontal, iconic representation of bodies thoroughly framed by windows, doors, and mirrors, in this and many other films by Oliveira, the intermedial figure of *tableau vivant* also reveals the movement-stillness mechanisms of the medium of film by turning, under our eyes, the body into a picture. His *Abraham’s Valley* (*Vale Abraão*, 1993) is also relevant for a fetishistic representation of (female) feet and legs. This visual detail, somewhat reminding of Buñuel’s similar obsession, is not only subversive in terms of representation of socio-cultural taboos, but is also providing a compelling sensual experience of both the body and the medium.¹

Keywords: Manoel de Oliveira, intermediality, *tableau vivant*, representation of bodies.

Towards an Oliveirian Aesthetics of Stillness

At the beginning of the 1970s, after an absence of nearly 25 years, Manuel de Oliveira made his return to filmmaking and established his international reputation as a strange old man making odd, unbearably long, and slow films. The films that marked his return and brought him international recognition are commonly called the “Tetralogy of frustrated loves” by Portuguese critics and include *Past and Present* (*O Passado e o Presente*, 1971), *Benilde or the Virgin Mother* (*Benilde ou a Virgem Mãe*, 1975), *Doomed Love* (*Amor de Perdição*, 1978), and *Francisca* (1981). But the topic of doomed loves and dysfunctional marriages goes far beyond this

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series, becoming an obsession for Oliveira, and also, as I will argue below, a pre-text for staging on film and by film his original philosophy regarding image and movement and, respectively, visual sophistication and narration. At the beginning of the 70s this preoccupation was in line with a phenomenon characteristic to films made after the World War II, namely a preference for slowing down the movement and lingering over a static image which became, as Raymond Bellour (2002, 113) has remarked, one of the possible figures of cinema. Justin Remes in a recent article on the possible theoretical approaches to the so called “cinema of stasis” also points out that the “aesthetic force” of static films can be appreciated in a contrast with motion, still normative in cinema, although according to many scholars it is just one of the technical possibilities of film, just like sound and colour.² For both Bellour and Remes, as well as for all the ongoing discourse discrediting motion as a par excellence cinematic feature, Roland Barthes’s essay on the Third Meaning is a constant reference: according to this, the third or obtuse meaning (identified also with the “cinematic” or “filmique”) is “indifferent” and even “contrary” to the film movement (See Remes [2012, 265], Bellour [2002, 115], and David Company [2007]). The subversive attitude of modernist and New Wave films towards a sometimes “hysterical” pace of spectacle has inevitably implied an increased preoccupation with the sensual qualities and magic effect of the single, static image. Starting from the 70s this has been also reflected in a film theoretical interest in spectacle and spectatorship, visual pleasure, the still(ed) image as attraction versus issues of narration. This preoccupation with the magic of the image has been since represented most prominently by Laura Mulvey (1975, 2006), then Tom Gunning (1990), just to be taken further later by Vivian Sobchack in a phenomenological approach to the filmic experience (1992, 2004). Together with the “possessive spectator” – the fetishistic spectator “more fascinated by image than plot” (Mulvey 2006, 164) – another type of spectator has been described: the “pensive spectator” introduced by Raymond Bellour, made aware of time and consciousness by a still image, in Bellour’s example a photo and transforming the spectator of the classic cinema, “under pressure,” into a pensive, contemplating one (2002, 75–80). This line of thinking is obviously marked by Deleuze’s *Cinema 2* and the Time-Image concept, defining “a cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent” (1989, 126–129).

As static films “demand prolonged engagement and meditation in a way that is often encouraged by traditional visual art” (Remes 2012, 266), art history and theory have become another direction of researching these films, mainly preoccupied with

2 He refers to a dialogue around *Defining the Moving Image* between Noël Carroll (2006) and Robert Yanal (2008).

placing them in a visual cultural tradition – mostly that of painting and photography. This kind of approach identifies painterly style and composition as a concentration of figurative meanings, corresponding to Lessing’s “pregnant moment” (Bellour 2000, 119). As Pascal Bonitzer puts it, the “*plan tableau*,” due to its allusive character of imitation can reveal a profound secret of film (1985, 30). He also distinguishes two kinds of film directors: those who believe in reality and those who believe in the image (a typically French distinction, he argues, that can be traced back to Bazin), these latter ones being the opponents of the (narrative) illusionism characteristic to cinema. Instead of narrative illusion they prefer the *trompe l’oeil*, the *plan-tableau*, and *tableau vivant* which, instead of reinforcing illusion, are rather de-masking it³ (1985, 29–36). According to the famous statement of Deleuze, plans are “the consciousness of cinema” – not only because they are specific to certain periods of cinema, but also because the use of plans is approaching cinema to painting, its past, due to “framing” or “*décadrage*” as Bonitzer puts it (Bonitzer 1985). An image-centric approach characterizes the most recent film theory by Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2010), associating distinct senses to types of cinematic frames – windows, doors, or mirrors – thus realizing a phenomenological meta-theory when introducing a film history “through the senses.”

This overview of the phenomenological, art theoretical, cultural-anthropological discourses⁴ of the still cinematic image is far from being complete and only serves as a theoretical framework to the interpretation of two films by Oliveira, representative for his peculiar philosophy of cinematic image and motion. He is undoubtedly a director who believes in the magic of the image and although his narrative techniques are not spectacularly subversive, his stories either lack actuality, are unfinished, unbearably slow and stuck in details, merely serving as a contrasting background to a constant experimentation with the aesthetic possibilities of the image.

From Narrative and Emotional Excess to Visual Excess

Although the work of Oliveira, one of the longest in film history, extends through both above mentioned periods, that of preoccupation with narrative illusion and

3 Not surprisingly he takes as examples Godard’s *Passion* (1982) and Rohmer’s *Marquise de O...* (1976).

4 As, for example, Laura Marks has shown it, the “sensuality” of particular film images can be culturally coded and successfully used in the study of so called “intercultural films” as “trace of memory” and as an alternative to the more widespread “narrative memory” (Marks 2000).

motion before the Second World War and that of an increased interest in the figurative power of the still(ed) image after the War, he has always been an adept of this latter paradigm. This is why some of his critics, unable to place his work in any narrative tradition, chose to call him a vanguard artist.⁵ His adherence to the aesthetics of the image can also explain his puzzling approach to melodrama, a pertinent genre in both the pre-war and after war era. Intriguingly, his preference for melodrama doesn't mean his sharing the tradition of classic or modernist melodrama either. In most cases he is adapting 19th century novels, romantic melodramas, without any actuality in the last quarter of the 20th century and modernist film (for example, dying of TB). On this incompatibility see also Francis Ramasse (1979, 66).

But these films do not work as classic melodramas either, due to their alienating, vaguely modernist style evoking Bresson's model theory, some films of Rohmer or Resnais's *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961). Denis Lévy's observation on *Doomed Love* is valid for most films made by Oliveira after the late sixties: in these there is "gap between the character and the actor, the actor and the model, the frame and the scene and the world, the image and the text"⁶ (1998, 51–53). In this particular film instead of a representation of social alienation we find an alienation between narration and image: the voice over is not interpreting images and images are not illustrations of the voice over narration. They are separate and independent entities, tools used deliberately by a director who started his career in the age of silent cinema. The emotional and narrative excess characteristic to the genre (often reflected in long, passionate dialogs) is transformed into a visual excess, manifested in an overwhelming use of frames, mirrors, and painterly compositions. Similarly, the impulse-passivity mechanism regulating the narration of melodrama is translated into a movement – stilled movement dynamics and a preference for *tableaux vivants*. At the beginning of *Doomed Love*, for example, there is a scene of a duel emblematic for both the basic narrative model of the actual film, the melodrama genre in general and Oliveira's concept of film, conceived as a dynamics, a "duel" between image and narration, stillness, and movement. This duel is registered with an intense camera travelling

5 Jonathan Rosenbaum, for example, considers Oliveira's *Doomed Love* a vanguard film (1995, 213–217). His first short documentary, *Douro, Faina Fluvial (Labour on the Douro River, 1931)* about the labour on Douro River, following the Soviet vanguard aesthetics of montage, the work of Dziga Vertov in particular and also Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, a Symphony of a Great City* (1927), is like an early ars poetica in this respect. He has never really moved away from experimenting with the aesthetic possibilities of the static image.

6 "L'écart entre le personnage et l'acteur, l'acteur et le modèle, entre le cadre et la scène et le monde, entre l'image et le texte" (translation by me, H. K.).

to the right and to the left, following the movement and exchange of swords of the duellists. Then a sudden, unexpected turn occurs, one of the duellists takes out a shotgun and shoots the other: suddenly everybody and everything turns still, as if in a *tableau vivant*. This scene, besides being a concentration of the actual story (after a series of reciprocal insults Simão, the protagonist, who shoots his rival, Balthazar, is incarcerated and turns melancholic, passive) and of the psychological mechanisms underlying the melodrama genre in general (an increasingly tensioned confrontation of the hero with his circumstances, culminating in a dramatic turn, followed by stillness) is ultimately playing on the surprising effect of intense movement turned into stasis. As Gunning has repeatedly put it, both movement from still to moving images and the reverse, withholding briefly the illusion of motion is the apparatus's *raison d'être*, a source of attraction for spectators. Eivind Rosaak is reinforcing this when stating that "The relationship between the still and the moving in cinema is not simply a play with forms, but a way of demonstrating the abilities of a new medium" (2006, 321). Between still and moving images, in an emotional space between familiar and unfamiliar, canny and uncanny, emerge two qualities of the medium: the visual and the photographic on the one hand, and the narrative ability on the other. The deepest pleasure of cinema may reside in these attractions rather than in the way the story is narrated. In this respect becomes the title of Oliveira's film, *Doomed Love* a definition, as Jonathan Rosenbaum has half-mockingly observed, of *acute cinéphilie* (1995, 216). In the so called melodramas of Oliveira instead of melodramatic tensions, strong emotions are created in the interstice between media and different forms of representation, in accordance with Gunning's "astonishment principle" (Gunning 1990). However, this only involves "a subtle shock of subverted expectations" and engenders introspection – concludes Justin Remes (2012, 268). Oliveira himself confessed his "intention of affecting and moving spectators without any dissimulation of the artifice"⁷ (2009, 38). Thus, instead of representing strong emotions, he is representing what Laura Mulvey calls the "death drive:" that of a doomed couple, of the narration hurrying towards an end, and finally the tendency of the moving image to freeze and return to an earlier state, that of photography or painting (2006, 67–84).

In *Death 24 x a Second* Laura Mulvey approaches this movement-stillness dynamics in films and primarily melodramas from a psychoanalytical point of view, insisting upon a metaphoric relationship between the Freudian death drive and the tendency of cinematic narration and movement to turn still or

7 "Émuvoir et convaincre sans dissimuler l'artifice" (translation by me, H. K.).

freeze. She is citing Garrett Stewart: “Into the (metonymic) chain of continuity, continuous motion, of sequence, of plot, breaks the radical equation stasis equals death, the axis of substitution, the advent of metaphor” (2000, 25). Her conclusions regarding the medium-specificity of this dynamics resonate with those of Gunning, Sobchack, and Rosaak: “Just as the cinema offers a literal representation of narrative’s movement out of an initial inertia, with its return to stasis narrative offers the cinema a means through which its secret stillness can emerge in a medium-specific form” (Mulvey 2006, 79). What we have here is a multiple metaphorical relationship, a *metalepsis* between the death drive as desire to return to an earlier state, the urge of all narration towards an end and what Mulvey calls “the abrupt shift from the cinema’s illusion of animated movement to its inorganic, inanimate state” (2006, 70).

Framed Bodies

In *Doomed Love, Francisca* (1981) or *Abraham’s Valley* the frequent use of tableaux vivants is anticipating the final and definitive stillness of death, narration, and cinematic movement. In *Doomed Love*, after a dynamic first part dominated by the actions of an impulsive protagonist, both lovers are incarcerated: Thereza is closed away in a convent and Simão is imprisoned after killing the cousin of Thereza. Starting from that moment they both become increasingly passive, as if paralysed by their fate. They are literarily “fading away,” growing pale and white, turning the film image into its own negative. This effect is reinforced by a “fading away” of the very materiality of the medium too: Oliveira used 16 mm film, excellent for poetical purposes but not very enduring. By becoming increasingly aware of the *texture* of the image while contours of things and human figures become blurred, we are actually getting closer to what Laura Marks calls *haptic visuality* (2000).

As typical for the genre, the characters of Oliveira’s melodramas are often trapped between social restrictions, rivalry between families, are reduced to stillness due to illness (often Tuberculosis), are jailed, closed up in a convent or in a house. This is how “framing” and at times multiple framing becomes another metaphor of entrapment: characters are captured, framed, transformed into pictures and tableaux vivants meant to symbolize paralyzing social conventions, mostly related to religion or family roles. In *Doomed Love*, the image of bars becomes a recurrent metaphor of the melodramatic situation, the inability and helplessness to step out of it: the lovers are often shown behind bars, and Teresa is even “framed” as a conventional picture of Virgin Mary or a catholic

saint [Figs. 1–4]. The tableau vivant, called an “oxymoron” by Pascal Bonitzer, a sphinx, a composite monster playing “guessing games” with the spectator-Oedipe,⁸ has the similar double function of a coded image in *Abraham’s Valley* (a Portuguese version of *Madame Bovary*), as both an embodiment of the Oliveirian aesthetics of cinematic stillness and a critique of a rigid bourgeois social order. These tableaux show Ema, the protagonist in suffocating family reunions, at the church or around dinner tables. She is *beautiful as a picture* – and men are looking at her *as at a picture*, when trying to decypher her enigma (weather she is adulterous or just extravagant) in long, ekphrastic monologues. She is also trapped between a traditional image of the self and womanhood (represented by a tryptich family altar) and a “modern version” of this, a trifold mirror in which she is contemplating her glamorous self [Figs. 5–8].

Frames and mirrors are constant metaphors of the Oliveirian cinema after the 70s and they are also often interchangeable in a *trompe l’oeil*: a door or a window frame can be mistaken for a mirror by the spectator or conversely, a mirror appears as a frame opening to another space. This both refers metaphorically to the narration (in the ball scenes from *Francisca* to the illusionary character of wealth and power of aristocracy, or in *Doomed Love* to the assumption that the lovers contemplating each other through opposite windows *as if in mirrors* are soul mates) and becomes a complex self-reflexive figure of Oliveira’s approach to cinema. As Vivian Sobchack has put it, “the metaphor of the frame is emblematic of the *transcendental idealism* that infuses classical formalism and its belief in the film object as *expression-in-itself* – subjectivity freed from worldly constraint” while the metaphor of the mirror entails “a critical judgment of the cinema that is as damning as it is descriptive. It condemns the very ontological being of cinema as substitutive (rather than expansive) and deceptive (rather than disclosing)”⁹ (1992, 17). The frequent interchangeability of (door and window) frames and mirrors can be interpreted as an allusion to the curious position of Oliveira’s cinema between a classic formalist and a self-reflexive, modernist tradition. Mirrors in Oliveira’s films are not only figures of “pure representation” – as Pascal Bonitzer puts it (1985, 69) – by simply doubling the characters and scenes, but are constantly revealing the illusionary, *trompe l’oeil* nature of filmic representation.

8 “Le tableau vivant, cet oxymoron incarné est un monstre composite, un sphinx, qui pose de devinettes au spectateur-oedipe. Que veulent dire ces tableaux? Pourquoi sont-ils là? A quel mistere, á quel culte secret, á quel crime renvoient-ils?” (Bonitzer 1984, 32.)

9 Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Haneger in their *Film Theory. An Introduction through the Senses* (2010) are taking these metaphors as representative for particular chapters of film theory and are using them as central concepts in their original film theory.

As mentioned above, one of Oliveira's main concern is to thematize both the stasis and the motion *in the image* as illusion (the film doesn't stop turning) by halting the action and using *tableaux vivants* as "pregnant moments" of narration. By doing this, in accordance with Justin Remes's argumentation, he is defining time and not movement as essence of cinema, something that distinguishes it from photography and painting (Remes 2012, 265–66).

Doomed Love for instance presents a neat distinction between the Deleuzian movement-image characteristic to the first part of the movie, full of actions and dramatic turning points, as well as the time-image setting in with the incarceration of the protagonists, their turning still, meditative, and resigning. Long shots of their frontal images are taking over the scenes of action, while they are reciting the contents of their exchanged letters. As Francis Ramasse pointed out, in the second part of the film participation gives place to contemplation, emotion to intelligence, and what has been proper melodramatic pleasure becomes intellectual and often "cinéphilique" pleasure (1979, 66). Posing has a similar time effect in *Abraham's Valley*: the sudden halt of action or walking increases the spectatorial consciousness of time. Ema, the protagonist, is a female dandy, posing relentlessly, according to the rules of what Mulvey calls "delayed cinema," favouring a fetishistic spectator, who is more fascinated by the image than plot. For Ema a party-scene or a social event often functions as a catwalk: she walks in, not looking at anybody while everybody is watching her, then she stops, posing, as if in front of a voyeuristic "possessive" spectatorial gaze (Mulvey 2006, 161–163). As Simone de Beauvoir has put it: "Male beauty is an indicator of transcendence, that of woman has the passivity of immanence: only the latter is made to arrest the gaze and can therefore be caught in the immobile trap of the reflective surface, the man who feels and wants himself activity, subjectivity, does not recognize himself in his fixed image" (1975, 527–28).

In film, a pose is both revealing something of the nature of photography – as Barthes pointed out – and functions as a *pause*, a sudden emergence of time in a flow of events and actions. According to Laura Mulvey it "allows time for the cinema to denaturalize the human body" (2006b, 164). In *Abraham's Valley* posing woman and still image become synonyms due to their passivity: men (husbands and lovers) are away "with business," only the placid, feminine image remains "in the frame," as a prey of spectatorial gaze. There is no way out, no possibility of change or action for Ema: her sportscar, just like her feet and legs, are not vehicles of action, but fetishistic objects making her appearance more attractive *for male collectors*.

Feet and Legs. Fetishistic Image vs. Narration

“Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at [...]. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female” (Berger 1972, 47). John Berger’s statement, so often quoted by feminist criticism of visual culture finds, in fact, a paradigmatic representation in film history: in the classic melodrama genre, for example, the action and motion set off by men is often delayed, stopped, or derailed by a mesmerizing female appearance, *femme fatale*, or vamp. According to a definition from the Oxford English Dictionary, cited by Elizabeth Wilson, the meaning of the very term *glamour*, of Celtic origin, is closely related to “occult learning and magic” (grammar, grammarye): “when devils, wizards or jugglers deceive the sight, they are said to cast a glamour over the eye of the spectator” (early 18th century) (2007, 96).

As already discussed above, in *Abraham’s Valley* Oliveira celebrates cinematic stillness through an innovative thematization of fashion: glamour and subsequently *posing* become, once again, allegorical representations of the oscillation between stillness respectively stability and movement or contingency. Ema, the protagonist is constantly posing and looking into mirrors: she is “half doll, half idol.”¹⁰ Just like in many other films by Oliveira, the highly artificial quality of the image is meant to counterbalance here the “motoric” imperfections of movement and narration, just as Ema’s glamorous appearance is meant to hide her physical defect: she is limping. While this is part of the magic, the fashionable “asymmetrical body” making her *appearance* even more disturbing,¹¹ at times when we see her walking, it appears as a noisy intrusion into the still image. Similarly, narration, the intervention of a voice over narrator or movement often seems to be disturbing the quiescence of the image. As an alternative, Oliveira is modeling a silent, invisible observer, when one of the female characters, walking bare feet along soft carpets, is making a full circle around the scene that we are watching, without the others noticing her. In *Abraham’s Valley* the rather fetishistic significance of feet and legs is evocative of some films by Luis Buñuel’s (*Tristana*, 1970, most evidently) and by one of his disciples, Pedro Almodóvar (his *Live Flesh*, 1997, for example). Although Oliveira has been often compared to the former in terms of a subversive attitude towards the Catholic Church and the middle class morality, the social critique in his films has been always subdued by highly aesthetical considerations regarding the image,

10 On the “woman as spectacle” see also the article of Valérie Steel on *Fashion and Visual Culture in Fin-de Siècle Paris* (2004, 320).

11 On the relationship between the asymmetrical body and fashion see John Harvey 2007, 65–94.

movement, and narration. Instead of overtly critical representation of social and religious taboos, he merely uses a vaguely comic or ironic effect achievable by juxtaposition or comparison of images, as in the case of a contrastive fetishistic and non-fetishistic presentation of feet and legs in *Abraham's Valley* [see Figs. 9–10].

As many times during his career, in the case of this film Oliveira used the intermediation of a homonymous novel by Augustina Bessa Luís, a Portuguese version of *Madame Bovary*, with an interesting switch: here is not Hippolyte, the stable boy who has a limp, but Ema. According to the interpretation of Mary Donaldson Evans, this transfer is an allusion to Ema's sensuality, in accordance with the old superstition that one doesn't know anything about pleasure if she/he hasn't slept with a limping person (2005, 24).¹² In a scene where Ema is approaching the bedroom of her husband with a candle through a long dark corridor (which also became a widely used metaphor of sensual connotations in film history), because of the limp her face lit by the candle light appears as if pulsing of desire. In the last scene of the film, in a representation of death drive as desire to regress to stillness, we see Ema dressed as her younger self and her limp becomes a euphoric "floating" through orange trees. On the small pier she steps on a broken board, falls into the water and drowns. The death drive associated with the compulsion to repeat – in this case a moment of youth – leads to stillness that appears as a consequence of a mistaken step (a possible allusion to the adulterous past of Ema), *a bad move*.¹³ The film closes with the image of still water marking, according to Laura Mulvey, a point of narrative halt, but also a point "beyond narratability" that also suggests "a return of the repressed stillness in which cinema's illusion of movement depends" (2006, 78–79).

Conclusion

In my essay I was arguing that after his return to filmmaking in the early 70s, Manuel de Oliveira has been using the genre of melodrama as a pretext to conceptualize, to stage on film and by film an aesthetics of stillness, mainly theorized starting from the 70s, by scholars more preoccupied with the visual effect of the static image than the narrative illusion. The metaphor of death drive (that of narration hurrying

12 Donaldson-Evans quotes Montaigne, who in his essay *Des boiteux* translates an Italian proverb: "Celui-là ne connaît pas Vénus en sa parfaite douceur qui n'a couché avec la boiteuse" (2005, 24).

13 Donaldson-Evans also refers to an essay by Florence Emptaz about the importance of the role played by feet and footwear in the novel. Emptaz sees in Hippolyte an emblem for Emma's moral claudication, his "disequilibrium an image of the adulteress's *vertu chancelante*" (Emptaz, 23–81).

towards an end and of the moving image regressing to the earlier state of photograph or painting) appears in Oliveira's melodramas as "a displacement," "illuminating another context through refiguration, highlighting certain relations of structural or functional resemblance." A double metaphor or *metalepsis*: a trope of a trope, a scheme referring back to other figurative scheme (Sobchack 2004, 205). In *Doomed Love*, as well as in *Abraham's Valley*, the emotional excess of melodramas is translated into a visual excess of frames and mirrors: the characters are not only trapped by social conventions, regulations, illness, or a motoric defect, but their bodies are framed and captured as pictures, as sensual objects exposed to the gaze of a possessive (and pensive) spectator. Image and bodies are interchangeable: the "decomposing" images of *Doomed Love* are standing for the fading bodies of the unhappy, dying protagonists. In the spirit of Vivian Sobchack's *Carnal Thoughts*, we can say that in *Abraham's Valley* the image of Ema's transformation and her transformation of the image are reversible phenomena. Cinema is not only showing make-up, but *it is the make-up*, "able to 'fix' (in the doubled sense of repair and stasis), to fetishize and to reproduce faces and time as both 'unreal' before us" (Sobchack 2004, 50). Accordingly the limp, both a defect of the body and of narration techniques and moving image, is not only responsible for the anti-diegetic effect, but is transforming the film into "an expression of experience by experience" (Sobchack 1992, 3).

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