

## THE CINEMISING PROCESS: FILM-GOING IN THE SILENT ERA

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In the Surrealist text *Nadja*, published in 1928, André Breton reminisces about going to the cinema in the days ‘when, with Jacques Vaché we would settle down to dinner in the orchestra of [the cinema in] the former Théâtre des Folies-Dramatiques, opening cans, slicing bread, uncorking bottles, and talking in ordinary tones, as if around a table, to the great amazement of the spectators, who dared not say a word’ (Breton 1960 [1928]: 37). When Breton recalled these youthful antics, which had probably taken place in the late teens or early twenties, he characterized them as ‘a question of *going beyond* the bounds of what is “allowed,” which, in the cinema as nowhere else, prepared me to invite in the “forbidden” (Breton 1951; original emphasis). Breton’s remarks beg the following questions. How did such behaviour in a cinema come to be considered transgressive? How did the structures emerge that made it a transgressive act to speak or eat a meal in the cinema, to reject, in other words, the narrative absorption that had become a standard feature of the filmgoing experience?

The conventions that gave meaning to such forms of transgression emerged over the course of the silent era in what may be called, to adapt Norbert Elias’s term, ‘the cinemizing process’ (1994). The earliest historians of cinema already relied heavily on a rhetoric of lost innocence (witness the multiple accounts of the first cinema-goers cowering under their seats in front of the Lumière brothers’ film of a train pulling into a station); the cinemizing process thus presupposes a ‘golden age’ of naive, uninitiated spectatorship followed by

an evolution of audiences into worldly-wise creatures of habit. It is not the purpose of this chapter to condemn such nostalgia, but rather to examine its implications. This nostalgia may or may not have been grounded in myth, but the fact remains that the establishment of cinema as a cultural force required and gave rise to new forms of sociability that characterized turn-of-the-century French culture. This sociability was shaped by codes of spectatorial behaviour that emerged as cinema became part of daily—or, at any rate, weekly—life in metropolitan areas. These new codes of spectatorship were not present from the very beginning, but developed over time, with the result that expectations about film-going behaviour at the end of the silent period differed significantly from those that had been in place at the inception of the medium.

In 1894, film had already been invented, but cinema was yet to be born. It is the social activity of spectatorship that turns film into cinema, and that differentiated Edison's Kinetoscope from the Lumière brothers' historic *cinématographe* exhibition at the Grand Café in Paris on December 28, 1895. As Jacques Audiberti has pointed out, 'Parmi les motifs esthétiques ou intellectuels proposés aux égards humains, aucun n'exige, comme le cinéma, la présence, la collaboration du spectateur' [Of all the aesthetic or intellectual objects of human contemplation, none except the cinema requires the presence, and indeed the collaboration, of the spectator] (cited in Prieur 1993: 98). What, exactly, is the nature of this collaboration? Like any new technology, cinema slotted into existing entertainment traditions before developing a network of consumer practices all its own (see Hansen 1991: 29). It adapted to—and was shaped by—these traditions, and retained a residue of the earlier practices from which it evolved. Thus, the cinema of attractions maintained within it the astonishing

feats displayed in the live acts interspersed between films in early programmes, as if it had absorbed these characteristics metonymically. So, too, the musical, which grew out of the musical numbers featured in the *café-concert*—one of the first established cinematic venues in France—and which developed in two phases: first, around 1904, in the form of the *chanson filmée*, a direct precursor of the MTV video in which actors would lip sync the words and act out the narrative of a popular song recorded on an accompanying record; and then, with the advent of synchronized sound in France in 1929/30, in the form with which we are familiar today. In the silent era, a live narrator, called alternatively a *bonisseur*, a *bonimenteur*, or, in a more overtly pedagogical capacity, a *conférencier*, continued the role of the *raconteur* in a magic lantern show (on the various distinctions among these terms, see Restoueix 1996: 67-8 *et passim*). Likewise, the dancing popcorn boxes that greet audiences as the lights dim in today's multiplexes, welcoming viewers and urging them to buy plenty of food at the snack bar, might be an after-image of the turn-of-the-century barker tempting members of the public to attend early film screenings.

There has been much discussion of the roots of cinema in *flânerie*, in the mobilized gaze of the nineteenth-century pedestrian out for a leisurely stroll across the urban landscape. Anne Friedberg (1993) writes that '[t]he same impulses that sent flâneurs through the arcades, traversing the pavement and wearing thin their shoe leather, sent shoppers into the department stores, tourists to exhibitions, [and] spectators into the panorama, diorama, wax museum, and cinema' (94). Giuliana Bruno (1993) and Vanessa Schwartz (1995) have also emphasized the mobile nature of pre-cinematic spectatorship. But as cinema became an established and legitimate form of entertainment, spectators' physical

mobility was increasingly restricted: according to Friedberg, ‘as the gaze became more virtually *mobile*, the spectator became more physically *immobile* (1993: 61; original emphasis). Just as it is now taken for granted that cinema-going in its beginnings was characterized by mobility, it is also widely accepted that one of the requirements, perhaps the central requirement, of classical cinema spectatorship is immobility (see, for example, Baudry 1986b: 303 and *passim*). Certain physical constraints rendered spectators increasingly sedentary, but a whole host of psychological factors also contributed to the reduction of spectatorial mobility. As Christian Metz wrote, ‘. . .the cinematic institution is not just the cinema industry (. . .), it is also the mental machinery—another industry—which spectators “accustomed to the cinema” have internalised historically and which has adapted them to the consumption of films’ (1893: 7). It is this ‘mental machinery’ that is the key to film spectatorship in France. Just how did spectators become ‘accustomed to the cinema’ at the turn of the twentieth century?

For one thing, before spectators could become accustomed to the cinema, they had to become accustomed to cinemas *per se*. For the first decade after their invention, films were shown largely at travelling fairs—in fact, Charles Pathé, who went on to found the film production and distribution empire, started out as a fairground film exhibitor—or at venues primarily devoted to other functions, such as cafés, department stores, music-halls and other variety theatres, and museums (most notably the famous Grévin wax museum, but other museums as well, such as the musée de la Porte Saint-Martin); even the Palais-Bourbon was transformed, during the summer recess, into the Cinéma-Bourbon (see Coissac 1925: 356, and Meusy 1995: 154). Soon after the novelty of the

medium itself wore off, films were incorporated into other spectacles as ancillary features, often as part of the decor. Footage of 'travel scenes' was used as backdrop in lavish theatrical spectacles; footage of jungle scenery was projected onto a background behind animals at the zoo; and films of actual surgical procedures were shown at travelling fairs in rooms made to look like operating theatres, which were filled with wax anatomical figures, and into which spectators were led by actors dressed as nurses and hospital interns (Meusy 123-4).

Itinerant and incidental exhibition eventually gave way to permanent, purpose-built cinemas—at the very moment when, in an analagous shift, actuality footage shot by roving cameramen who travelled the world was supplanted by fiction films, shot in the studio by an immobile camera, as the main component of cinema programmes (Abel 1990a: 87). Although the first permanent cinema in Paris, which opened in December 1906, was situated directly across from the Musée Grévin, it did not take long for cinema to leave behind its association with the kind of mobile spectatorship suited to viewing the displays in a wax museum. In October 1916, a regional newspaper, *La Petite Gironde*, could declare: 'Le cinéma de quartier a tué le cinéma de foire' [The local, urban cinema has killed the fairground cinema] (cited in Berneau 1988: 26). As cinemas became increasingly fixed, so did both spectators and conventions of spectatorship.

One of the most important contributing factors in the development of film spectatorship was the structuring of time. Adapting Giuliana Bruno's notion of 'film architecture', or the spatial conditions that determine the spectatorial experience (1993: 56-7), it is possible to identify temporal aspects of this

experience in what might be called the temporal architecture of cinema. This temporal architecture was first and foremost determined externally: the rise of cinema spectatorship was tied to the rise of leisure time in France. The six-day work week became law in 1906, and the growth of trade unions and decrease in working hours (the eight-hour day was implemented in 1919) contributed to an increase in leisure pursuits (Forest 1995: 33). One poster, dating from shortly after the implementation of the six-day week, read: 'Coiffeurs! Profitez du repos hebdomadaire pour aller voir à Paris, le Cinéma en couleurs 104, rue de Vaugirard' [Hairdressers! Take advantage of the weekly day of rest to visit the Colour Cinema in Paris, at 104 rue de Vaugirard] (cited in Meusy 1995: 167). Most working people had more time on their hands and more money in their pockets as the new century progressed. This link between leisure time and cinema spectatorship was suggested presciently in the Lumière brothers' first movie, *La Sortie d'usine*, which showed workers leaving the Lumières' own photographic supplies factory after a day's work. Now the movies could begin.

Although Christian Metz observed that the cinema industry 'works to fill cinemas, not to empty them' (1983: 7), this same industry does seem to have attempted successfully to empty spectators themselves, as Metz famously compared movie-goers to fish watching other fish across a glass divide with helpless fascination: 'Spectator-fish, taking in everything with their eyes, nothing with their bodies: the institution of the cinema requires a silent, motionless spectator, a *vacant* spectator, constantly in a sub-motor and hyperperceptive state, a spectator at once alienated and happy...' (Metz 1983, 96; original emphasis). Full cinemas apparently required empty spectators. Such a vacancy presupposes an emptying out, an evacuation of the things that had

previously occupied the blank space that Metz reserves for the film viewer: mobility and a voice.

### **The Medusa effect**

The increase in free time for workers was accompanied by a reduction in temporal freedom at the cinema, or increasingly rigid temporal structures that placed limitations, however voluntary, on spectators' freedom to come and go as they pleased. A film programme in the early teens might advertise programmes from 2pm to 6:30, without providing any indication of when individual films were to begin. Rather than planning their evening around the film showing times at the cinema, as it is necessary to do today, viewers could enter and leave at any time during the long and varied programme.

Other material factors also contributed to the more porous and unbound, active mode of spectatorship in the first ten to fifteen years of film exhibition. Richard Abel (1998) points out that 'specific conditions—frequent reel changes and the sometimes irritating flicker-effect of early film projection, caused by irregular perforations in the film stock and unsteady hand cranking—simply confirmed the established model of constant program breaks' (25). One spectator, recalling viewing conditions in the first years of film projection (already a distant memory in the 1920s, when this *mémoire* was written), wrote: '*... la projection tremblait sur l'écran, s'y fixait mal, souffrait d'une fièvre épuisante, ondoyait, donnait le vertige et le mal de mer; au sortir de ces officines mystérieuses on continuait à trembler, à tanguer*' [the projection trembled on the screen, slipped in and out of focus, flitted about feverishly, undulated, and made you dizzy and seasick; when you came out of these mysterious chambers, you would continue

to tremble and quake] (Arnoux 1946: 27). This experience was such a widely recognized part of cultural life that it even inspired a popular song, 'La Cinématomagite', in 1907:

Dans le temps j'étais employé  
 Dans la cinématographie  
 Mais j'y ai bientôt attrapé  
 Un' drôl' de maladie  
 A force de voir trépider  
 Les vu's que l'on donne en séance,  
 J'peux pas m'empêcher d'remuer  
 J'ai tout le temps quelque chos' qui danse  
     J'ai d'la ci ci cici ci,  
     D'la cinématomagite....

[I used to work in the movies, but I quickly caught a curious affliction; after watching the flickering screen, I can't keep from flickering myself. My body is always doing a jerking dance; I have that moo-moo-moo-moo-movie bug, that moving picture bug...]

(words by Briollet and Léo Lelièvre; music by Vincent Scotto; cited by Meusy 1995: 134)

Advances in projection technology, however, soon drastically reduced the flicker effect, making it easier for spectators to settle in for an evening's entertainment without needing to rush out of the cinema to be sick. As well as the quality of the projection, a changing physical environment in which films were screened also imposed increasing limitations on spectatorial mobility.



Room lighting greatly affected the attention that viewers directed toward the film. At first, films were often screened with the house lights on (in programmes advertised as ‘projections en salle éclairée’). A lighted room encouraged mobility, as an article about a *cinéma forain* in Bordeaux published in March 1910 suggested: ‘Palais Electric Modern—M. Guillou donne pendant cette foire son spectacle avec la salle éclairée, sur un magnifique écran, ce qui évitera le danger des chutes si fréquentes chez les personnes fréquentant ce genre d’établissement’ [Modern Electric Palace—Mr. Guillou presents his fairground show on a magnificent screen in a lighted room, which will prevent people from stumbling, which is a danger so prevalent in this type of establishment] (cited in Berneau 1988: 25). Screening rooms in cinemas were eventually darkened, which not only presupposed or encouraged a certain degree of neighbourly trust on the part of the audience, but also made it difficult for viewers to focus on anything other than the spectacle before them.

Finally, the length of the films themselves played a pivotal role in decreasing viewer mobility. Between 1911 and 1913, average film length increased dramatically from 15 minutes to an hour or more (Abel 1988: 16), which necessarily affected the spectatorial experience, making it more sedentary, with less frequent coming and going, and providing greater opportunities for narrative absorption (as well, surely, as naps). Broadsheet newspapers did not start listing film programmes until around 1913, as showings began to be organised around one or two featured films rather than a much larger number of very short films, none of which was emphasised more than the others (Meusy 1995: 283). Longer films meant captivated, and, to a certain extent, more captive,

audiences. The moving pictures were turning all who gazed at them, Medusa-like, to stone.

### **The dumbing down of audiences**

While their time outside of work was becoming more structured, so the range of possible (or at least, socially acceptable) responses to what audiences saw was being restricted. In addition to being told when they could watch films, French audiences were also told *how* to watch them, as they were literally ‘dumbed down’, or silenced. By contrast, in the first years of the medium’s existence, going to the cinema was a participatory activity. In 1946, Jacques Audibert reminisced about cinema audiences of his youth: ‘Même au temps du muet, dans les débuts, du moins, le cinéma parlait. Dans la salle, en effet, on gueulait. La moitié de la chambre épelait, à haute voix, les sommaires intercalés. Toujours quelqu’un expliquait, de son propre chef, les évidences dévidées... *“Il prend son cheval... Il monte dessus... Dieu garde, si jamais il rencontre l’agent de police...”* [Even in the time of the silent film, at least in the beginning, the cinema had a voice. In the auditorium, people made a racket. Half the room spelled out the intertitles aloud. There was always someone who would take it upon himself to explain what was happening on screen, even if it was obvious. . . : ‘He’s going to his horse... He’s climbing up; God help him, if he ever runs into the police officer. . .’ (Prieur 1993: 97-8; original emphasis). Of course, there could be a certain amount of romanticized nostalgia here, a kind of exoticization of the past in which ‘now’ and ‘then’ becomes the historical equivalent of ‘the civilized’ and ‘the primitive’, but similar accounts of early French cinema audiences proliferate. For example, writing of ‘Le premier grand public du cinéma’, Francis Lacloue

(1981) notes: 'La foule qui se presse devant les salles foraines est bariolée et bruyante. Les séances se déroulent dans une atmosphère de kermesse. La bande casse souvent, et le public réagit en sifflant. Le film déclenche à l'occasion lazzis, sifflets, cris de joie ou pleurs' [The crowds that push their way into the travelling fairground cinemas are colourful and loud. The screenings take place in an atmosphere of carnival. The band often hits false notes, and the audience whistles loudly. The film unleashes gibes, whistles, gasps of joy or tears, accordingly.] (29).

Before the advent of intertitles around 1903, a narrator or film lecturer, often the exhibitor himself but sometimes an employee who also acted as a barker to draw customers in, was often required in order to elucidate the films' narratives, which might otherwise remain somewhat opaque. But as intertitles became widespread, the film lecturer became less common. After the decline of the lecturer but before the rise of talkies, many viewers in working-class or immigrant neighborhoods where French literacy rates were low read intertitles aloud, either because they themselves were struggling with the language, or because they were assisting those viewers who could not read at all. In his autobiographical novel *Le Premier homme*, Albert Camus's character accompanies his illiterate grandmother to the pictures in French Algeria:

Les films, étant muets, comportaient en effet de nombreuses projections de texte écrit qui visaient à éclairer l'action. Comme la grand-mère ne savait pas lire, le rôle de Jacques consistait à les lui lire. Malgré son âge, la grand-mère n'était nullement sourde. Mais il fallait d'abord dominer le bruit du piano et celui de la salle, dont les réactions étaient

généreusees. De plus, malgré l'extrême simplicité de ces textes, beaucoup des mots qu'ils comportaient n'étaient pas familiers à la grand-mère et certains même lui étaient étrangers.

[The films, being silent, contained numerous written titles intended to explain the action. As his grandmother could not read, Jacques' role was to read the titles to her. In spite of her advanced years, the grandmother was not deaf, but Jacques had to compete with the sound of the piano and the noise coming from the audience, who reacted vociferously to the film. Moreover, despite the extreme simplicity of the titles, many words they contained were not familiar to the grandmother, and there were even some that were completely foreign to her.] (Camus 1994: 92)

Christophe Gauthier points out that in popular cinema magazines, '[o]n y multiplie les invites et les directives sur le comportement à adopter en salle' [exhortations and directives about the kind of behavior to adopt in the cinema proliferated], and that heading the list was the injunction to 'ne pas lire les sous-titres à haute voix' [not to read the intertitles aloud] (Gauthier 1999: 261). Clearly, directives published in magazine articles were not aimed directly at the illiterate, but they did help to foster a general filmgoing culture in which the reading of intertitles aloud was frowned upon.

Although early French cinema audiences were not as predominantly working class as those in the United States in the same period, they still included a significant proportion of working class viewers. Before about 1906, French audiences in urban areas were, according to Richard Abel, heterogeneous, but

after the construction of permanent cinemas, they became, if anything, increasingly white-collar (Abel 1990b: 28). This was also the case in urban centres in French-speaking Canada (Gaudreault and Lacasse 1993: 24 and *passim*). The gentrification of cinema audiences corresponded to a concerted effort on the part of cinema exhibitors and producers to attract a greater proportion of higher class customers. Advertisements and publicity posters featured well-dressed patrons from the middle and upper echelons of society, and playbills pointedly referred to the morally uplifting nature of the film programme. The Film d'Art company, established in 1907, was an organized expression of this desire to attract audiences to the cinema who had previously been accustomed to going to the theatre. Middle-class spectators tended to behave as they did at the theatre or music-hall, entertainment forms that they had, and continued to, frequent, while working-class spectators often whistled, cheered, and hissed characters on screen, because they were used to traditions such as Grand Guignol, where spectators were encouraged to participate actively in performances. It was the latter form of spectatorship that exhibitors discouraged, as they sought to bourgeoisify their clientele. Early film audiences had to be 'cinemized', taught how to be ideal spectators: taught, in other words, how to act middle class.

### **From the ideal narrator to the ideal spectator**

Not only the external viewing environment, but also the films themselves contributed to the development of a codified set of spectatorial conventions. Films functioned increasingly to hold spectators' attention, as they developed what has become known as a classical code of narration. André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning (1989) have written of how film evolved from the 'système

d'attractions monstratives' [system of monstrative attractions] from 1895-1908 to a 'système d'intégration narrative' [system of narrative integration] in the period between 1908 and 1914. This evolution entailed the gradual suppression of visible marks of enunciation (perceptible signs of editing, visible narration in the form of playing to the camera, bowing, etc.), as the storytelling process became hidden within the structure of the film in the form of an implied narrator 'dont l'existence n'est que théorique mais . . . dont la "voix" se fera entendre tout au long du déroulement de la bande par le biais de ses activités structurantes au niveau à la fois du profilmique, du travail de la caméra et des opérations de montage' [whose existence is only theoretical but whose 'voice' makes itself heard throughout the film by means of its structuring activities in the mise-en-scène, camera work and editing] (Gaudreault and Gunning 1989: 58).

There is a similar 'voice' constructed by the instructions and warnings that surround the moviegoer: the voice of the ideal spectator. It could be said that the process of suture between a film's implied narrator and the spectator also occurs at another level, between an ideal spectator and the real spectator. As narrative absorption, the product of evolving structures of narration within films themselves, became the rule, so this other form of suture emerged at the same time.

Apparatus theory has attempted to deal with the physical presence of the spectator, the material conditions of spectatorship. Some theorists of the apparatus have spoken of the panopticon effect, referring to Michel Foucault's discussion of Jeremy Bentham's invention, which allowed a single prison guard to shine his search light at random into the cells of the prisoners that formed a circle around him. But they all locate the film viewer as the prison-guard at the

centre of the apparatus, shining his spotlight on the screen—that is, solely as the viewer, but never the viewed. Anne Friedberg, for example, writes: ‘Like the central tower guard, the film spectator is totally invisible, absent not only from self-observation but from surveillance as well. But unlike the panoptic guard, the film spectator is not in the position of the central tower, with full scopic range, but is rather a subject with a limited (and preordained) scope’ (Friedberg 1993: 20). A further nuance may be added to Friedberg’s refinement of the panoptical model, if we consider the spectatorial subject’s status as the object of another—and, ultimately, its own—gaze. To extend Foucault’s metaphor, the source of the prison guard’s light is situated not with the spectator, but in the projection room, that is, in the cinematic apparatus itself, which necessarily sheds some light on the spectator as well as the screen. The early spectator was not exempt from the consciousness that he or she was being watched; on the contrary, this self-consciousness was the very prerequisite for the development of a classical code of spectatorship. Since subjectivity is by definition a function of splitting, the film viewer-subject is also, at some level, the viewed. The subject of the gaze in Lacan’s model of subjectivity is also the object of one and the same gaze: what the infant sees in the mirror is *itself being seen*. In the cinema, it is not the film that is looking back: the spectator is ‘watching’ at least two dramas unfold, one on the screen, and one that has already been internalized, and whose protagonists are returning the gaze.

The ‘voice’ of the ideal spectator, like the voice of the ideal narrator, was neither omnipresent nor eternal: it did not need to be. Just as film functions by means of ‘images whose only duration is one of retinal persistence’ (Virilio 1986: 29), so spectators only needed an occasional indication that they were being

monitored before explicit articulation of this disciplining activity was no longer required, because it persisted in the social and indeed the bodily behaviour of audiences. The exhortations of popular film magazines, for example, advocated a neighbourly awareness of the collective: '...soyez au cinéma ce que vous voudriez que soient vos voisins et tout le monde sera content' [behave at the cinema the way you would want your neighbors to behave, and everyone will be happy] (cited in Gauthier 1999: 261)—but such visible signs of spectatorial self-consciousness were, like narration within the film, eventually internalised by the spectator. The process of suture between the real and the ideal spectator worked to efface the particularity of real spectators, just as the real (or explicit) narrator was absorbed into the structure of the film with the development of a classical code of narration.

The effacement of heterogeneity effected in the first two decades of cinema in France found its logical extension in the First World War, as excision and absence became part of daily life. After the outbreak of war, cinema itself was effaced from the cultural landscape, as many cinemas closed temporarily: in Bordeaux, for example, screenings were suspended for six weeks (Berneau 1988: 31). When cinemas reopened, film-going demographics reflected other absences. Wartime audiences were composed largely of women, children, invalids, and the elderly: gone were the young men off fighting the war.

This logic of gaps also extended to the media. Newspapers appeared with large blank spaces indicating articles that had been censored at the last moment. The gaps in what could be written were matched by gaps in what could be shown on screen, as films were censored for any content deemed too controversial. Of particular concern in 1914 was 'tout ce qui pourrait donner au



public des émotions pénibles dans les circonstances présentes ou soulever des manifestations tumultueuses, notamment les représentations de scènes de guerre où figureraient des uniformes de soldats ennemis' [anything that could elicit painful emotions in the present circumstances or provoke violent reactions, notably scenes of war depicting enemy uniforms] (Meusy 1995: 415). Such concern over audience response at the beginning of the war suggests that the film-going public was still considered to be in need of monitoring. By the 1920s, however, many aspects of the cinemizing process were well in place. Spectators had internalized models of surveillance and discipline, and came to play the role expected of them, more or less (with exceptional acts of transgression, surrealist or otherwise, proving the rule).

Codes of spectatorship have been modified every so often to reflect changes in social and technological practices: Pearl and Dean's dancing popcorn boxes and exhortations to refrain from smoking, both successfully internalised by viewers, have given way to admonitions to turn off our mobile phones in the theatre. Even in our homes, we are threatened with prosecution for 'unauthorized' use of the video we are about to watch. The emptying out of the spectator has come full circle, culminating (as it began) in the emptying out of the consumer's wallet. As filmgoing sprang from shopping, so shoppers today are becoming as immobilized as filmgoers. We are becoming house-bound *flâneurs* as we watch and shop on television and the internet. Customers no longer shop for products, and people are going less often to the movies; products now shop for customers, as shopping, and spectatorship, come home. This, perhaps, is the end of the cinemizing process, its final stage and ultimate purpose.

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