

War in Bosnia — Moving Images



A continuous footage taken through the window of a moving car. The houses on both sides of the road are either fully burnt or semi-destroyed. It goes on like this mile after mile.

Footage taken with a hand-held camera. Men and women sitting in puddles of their own blood on the sidewalk where they were lining up for bread moments ago, stretching out hands to the man behind the camcorder, and thus to the spectator.

A medium-close of a scruffy peasant father, bending over a packet wrapped in a glittery green material – the body of his infant son. There is not even a casket for the baby, just this piece of bright synthetic fabric, leaving an intensely-coloured imprint of grief in one's visual memory.

Bosnia. Sarajevo. The image inventory continues with elderly villagers now lying in the mud of their own back- yards with bullet holes in the backs of their hand-knit jackets, checkpoints controlled by paramilitary thugs with self-styled pony-tails and cockades on fur caps, pedestrians on city streets half-running to escape the sniper fire, and large peasant women in black kerchiefs and aprons, shouting at the camera in discontent, fed up of being filmed again and again asking about their missing husbands. The iconic repertoire only slightly changes with the change of circumstance, particularly visible with the eruption of the new crisis in Kosovo, as virtually the same visual tropes are being repeatedly used. The face of the Balkans remains the same – destroyed churches and mosques, refugee women in camps, stray sheep on the dusty streets of Muslim enclaves, and alien UN forces.

So much death and destruction has been filmed, and the footage of crippled children and desolate people is so abundant that it is difficult to forget that behind each one of these images there is the enormity of real suffering.

This text surveys the wide range and variety of films that were made in response to the 1990s crisis in the Balkans, and mostly the Bosnian war. Why film? Because looking at cinematic texts helps bringing to light the underlying dynamics of cross-cultural dialogue as it unravels within the wider context of mediated perceptions and misperceptions. In addition to looking at the written word, it is very important to look at the films and the visual materials related to the Balkans in the 1990s. The visual has a crucial role in discourse formation at any level and the transmitted images function in a variety of ways that are at least as influential as the exchange of ideas and concepts. In today's world it is much more likely that images have been seen by many rather than written comments. It is not difficult to sustain the claim that nowadays the moving image has attained a bigger persuasive power compared to the printed word in spite the fact that this important role of the visual is rarely being pointed at in a

persistent manner. The role of mediated images, however, is so subtle that it often remains unaccounted for.

Contrary to the commonly shared opinion, I do not think that these images left everybody indifferent. There is plenty of evidence suggesting that print and broadcast media, as well as journalists and filmmakers did a lot to show the ugly face of ethnic war. The lessened receptiveness and responsiveness of the audience living in an over saturated media environment is a whole different matter. Still, the efforts of those who did not stay indifferent but did their best to take the moving image of war and pass it around through the modern medium of film were really comprehensive and deserve to be recognized.

Body of works

The body of film productions about the Balkan conflict is, in its nature, a truly international project. From the point of view of its international perception, the Bosnian war has often been compared to the Civil War in Spain. Writers like Susan Sontag or Roger Cohen wondered why intellectuals from around the world did not go to Sarajevo to express their solidarity, as they went to Madrid. In fact, however, hundreds of intellectuals engaged in public support to the cause of ending the war in ex-Yugoslavia and went to Sarajevo and Bosnia.

The best visible expression of solidarity, however, came from the international community of filmmakers. They gathered in the Balkans from many different countries around the world - from the UK, USA, Canada, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Norway, Spain, Italy, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Greece, Australia, New Zealand, and Russia.

References to the Balkan war can be found in a big number of films from the 1990s – from late British Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993) who, while chronicling his own death from AIDS,

talks about the plight of Bosnian refugees to Hungarian Ibolya Fekete's *Bolshe Vita* (1996) featuring documentary footage from the Bosnian war in its epilogue.

The number of films – feature and documentary – made in response to the Bosnian war, is at least two hundred. There are reasons, however, to set the actual number at around three hundred.

Features

At least thirty-five feature films have been made inter- nationally in direct or indirect response to the Bosnian war. The global trend that turns all feature filmmaking into a multi-national enterprise is clearly visible in the case of the features that look at aspects of the Yugoslav breakup. *Comanche Territory* (1997), for example, tells a story about Sarajevo but is a co-production of Spain, Germany, France, and Argentina. *Someone Else's America* (1995) was written and directed by Serbs and was telling the story of exiles from Montenegro and Spain who lived in New York but who also travelled to the Mexican border at Rio Grande. The film was produced by France, UK, Germany, and Greece – neither one of these countries being referred to in the film in any way. *Before the Rain* (1994) was financed by France, the UK, and Macedonia. *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997) was a UK-USA co-production.

Some of the films, indeed, were produced with financing from only one country, but nevertheless featured an ethnically diverse production crew and international cast. The New Zealand production, *Broken English* (1996), the story of an inter-ethnic couple oppressed by a violent Croatian father, brought Maoris, Croatians, and Chinese together on the set. The Italian *Gamebag* (1997) used a Bulgarian actress in the leading role and told the story of two Italian hunters caught in the middle of the Sarajevan siege. Greek *Ulysses Gaze* (1995) featured an international cast which included American Harvey Keitel, Swede Erland

Josephson, and Romanian Maya Morgenstern, and told the story of a weary Greek expatriate travelling through the Balkan lands in search of lost memories of harmonious co-existence.

Major European directors turned their attentiveness to the Balkans: some to enjoy acclaim, like Theo Angelopoulos with his complex *Ulysses Gaze*, some to face criticism, like Jean-Luc Godard with his *For Ever Mozart* (1996), another projection of the crisis in the work of this formerly influential filmmaker.

Still, most features came from the countries of former Yugoslavia – Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Perfect Circle*), Serbia (*Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame*), Croatia (*How the War Started on My Little Island*), and Macedonia (*Before the Rain*, *Across the Lake*).

The films were telling different stories. The most ambitious ones were tackling the complex history of the Balkans, like *Underground* or *Ulysses Gaze*. Some chose to focus on the fate of displaced children in Sarajevo (*Perfect Circle*), others – on the stagnation in Belgrade (*Premeditated Murder*, *Marble Ass*), on committed journalists (*Welcome to Sarajevo*, *Comanche Territory*), on the difficult choices in taking sides (*Before the Rain*, *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame*, *Savior*), or on the experiences of displacement (*Broken English*, *Someone Else's America*, *Tired Companions*).

The mushrooming of new countries after the break-up of Yugoslavia was felt as far as the entertainment field – starting as early as 1994 critics in trade journals could not help noticing the proliferation of East European entries for the Oscar competition. Whereas before Yugoslavia would submit only a single entry, now there were five countries eager to compete. None of the submitted films has won an Academy award until now, but it is nevertheless interesting to look at the entries. Rump Yugoslavia's entry for 1994, for example, was *Vukovar: Poste Restante* (dir. Boro Draskovic) a production of USA, Cyprus,

Italy, and Yugoslavia, and for 1995 – *Underground* (dir. Emir Kusturica), a production of France, Germany, and Hungary with participation of Radio-TV Serbia. Many of the feature films were surrounded by controversies and by allegations of subtle propaganda. While in some cases the allegations were blown out of proportion, like *Vukovar*, in some others, like Kusturica's *Underground*, there is serious evidence that the director betrayed his own Sarajevan roots and put himself in the service of Belgrade.¹

Documentaries

In documentaries, the number of which surpasses one hundred and fifty, the Balkan crisis attracted the attention of internationally renowned documentarists, such as French veterans Chris Marker and Marcel Ophuls. Documentaries were made by well-known public intellectuals whose usual domain is the written word, like French Bernard-Henry Levy and Canadian Michael Ignatieff. Some displaced Yugoslav directors returned from exile to make their films, while some other Yugoslav directors had to go into exile to make their films.

There were documentaries that scrutinized and critically investigated Western mercenaries, the UNPROFOR and the UN involvement, the perpetrators, the workings of media, the Islamic point of view, and the refugee camps. There was a range of documentaries on issues as far apart as the Serbian point of view, the cultural criticism of Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) and Laibach, and the life in Bosnia after the war. The best-known documentary of all these probably remains the international TV co-production *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation*, produced by British-based Brian Lapping Associates, which used a large variety of documentary sources and featured interviews with most of the main political figures in the conflict.²

Critical voices from within Yugoslavia came up with a specific genre of short films, which can be placed somewhere between documentary and fiction and used re-enactment and

autobiographical elements. The hilarious Studio B92 Zelimir Zilnik's *Tito Among the Serbs for a Second Time* (1993) who sends a Tito impersonator to take a stroll around downtown Belgrade reveals a great deal about the state of mind of ordinary Serbs and provides more social insights than any piece of investigative journalism. Films like *Ghetto* (1995), again a production of the dissident Studio B92, showing a rock musician cruising around his native Belgrade and seeing his avant-garde artist friends gathering in basements while the public space is made readily available to ecstatic turbo-folk crowds, or *Hole in the Soul*, a Scottish BBC documentary by exiled Dusan Makavejev who witnesses the isolation of his Yugoslavia in a cosmopolitan context, are deeply personal works of people who painfully experience the gradual profanation of their homeland.

Films about Sarajevo

The topic of several dozens of films is Sarajevo, and this way parallel with its destruction, the city was perpetually revived in the films chronicling its proud survival. There were films telling about the inhumanity of everyday life in Sarajevo, about the children of Sarajevo, about the women, about the villains, about the artists, about the horrors of war, and the insanity. There were the features set in Sarajevo, seen by larger audiences. Of these, only the story of Ademir Kenovic's *Perfect Circle* (1997) about the bonding of a lonely writer and two orphaned boys, was told from a point of view of local people, while all others followed the formula of the transplanted Western narrator. There were well researched and well-presented human-interest stories, like the heart-breaking real story of a Sarajevo inter-ethnic couple who tried to escape the city but were shot down by snipers. There were films that told the story from a very personal point of view, like *Exile in Sarajevo* (1997) made by an Australian, Tahir Cambis, who, while making the movie, fell in love with his Bosnian translator. There have been films that proved that even black, the humour of Sarajevans is still intact, like *Mizaldo* (1994) which was made as an extended infomercial about the city.

And last, the most important genre – the chronicles that Sarajevans themselves shot about themselves – the works of the Sarajevo Group of Authors (SaGA), of Ademir Kenovic, Pjer Zalica, Mirza Idrizovic, Benjamin Filipovic, and many others who chronicled the agony and the strength of their city on a day-to-day basis.

Other formats

Besides the feature and documentary format, there have been many more productions that remain lesser known and difficult to chronicle. There have been local productions by filmmakers that never got into distribution. Besides the TV documentaries produced and aired by BBC 1 and 2, CNN, PBS, Channel Four, and others, there have been many more TV programmes that are difficult to trace. One should note that while most of the British documentaries were made for TV and thus received better exposure, the bulk of American documentaries were made independently and ended up underexposed, mostly seen at festivals or at occasional screenings.

Further, there was the genre of the so-called home-videos, shot on the spot in former Yugoslavia and then distributed via clandestine channels to the relevant diasporas across the world.³

I have also come across references to two more types of videotaped material but the information about them is not systematic. The first type are the many hours worth of videotaped victim's testimonies that the commission, appointed by the UN to investigate the war crimes in former Yugoslavia and chaired by DePaul University's law professor Cherif Bassiouni, has collected. Some of these videos are being currently used in the work of the Hague tribunal. The other type are the videotaped rapes that are being discussed by feminist writers such as Catherine McKinnon and Beverly Allen who report on allegations that such tapes are being sold at clandestine pornographic markets in Romania and other Central East

European countries. I, however, have not found sufficient evidence of the existence of such tapes.

In addition to film, there has been intensive activity in the field of multimedia, and new technologies have been used to pass the message across. Exploring those is not my subject, but nevertheless some interesting multimedia projects should be mentioned such as the French-supported Sarajevo on-line journalism project, the on-line exhibits of the Sarajevo pop-group Trio and of fine artists trapped by the siege in Sarajevo, or the web-site of the Zagreb-based feminist group Nona featuring the creative work of refugee women.

Festivals

Reputed international film festivals which have built an attentive and committed audience proved to be the ideal venue for the films about Bosnia. And, indeed, programmers across the world did a lot to bring the films about the conflict in former Yugoslavia to their festivals.

The first major festival to schedule a special series related to Bosnia was the one in Berlin. It held a programme called No More War in February 1993. Ironically, this scheduling was a bit rushed – only a few films had appeared by the time and the end of the war was nowhere near in sight. The programme included a few documentaries by German and French filmmakers. As no feature had yet been made at the time, the programme included a film by Bosnian-born Emir Kusturica – *Arizona Dream* (1992) – which, however, dealt with Kusturica's vision of America and barely touched the Bosnian crisis.

Since 1993 films related to the war in former Yugoslavia started regularly appearing at all major feature and documentary film festivals. In 1994 Milcho Manchevski's *Before the Rain* won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. The 1995 Cannes season brought awards to Kusturica's *Underground* and Angelopoulos's *Ulysses Gaze*. *Mizaldo* won the Grand Prize at

the Mediterranean Film Festival in Rome in 1995. Michael Winterbottom's *Welcome to Sarajevo*, the story of a Western journalist in Sarajevo who cannot remain neutral and helps a Bosnian girl to escape the horrors of war, was one of the main contestants at Cannes in 1997. Srdjan Dragojevic's *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*, telling the story of two childhood friends who end up fighting against each other in Bosnia, received recognition at festivals all over the world. Kenovic's *Perfect Circle* won the main award at the 1997 Tokyo Film Festival.



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Films from and about the Balkans played at special panoramas at the International Documentary Filmfest (IDFA) in Amsterdam in 1993, at the International Feminist Filmfest in Creteil, France in 1997, and at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1997. Regularly films about Bosnia were featured at the Sundance Film Festival, at the Human Rights Watch

Film Festival, at the festivals in Montreal, Vancouver, San Francisco, Chicago, Mannheim, Karlovy Vary, and London.

Two festivals that regularly showcase the production of and about the region should be mentioned in particular – the Thessaloniki Film Festival and the Alpe-Adria cinema meetings in Trieste. Local festivals that take place in the countries of former Yugoslavia are also important as here most of the domestic productions are shown – Pula, Belgrade, Subotica, and Bitolja. In 1995 a special series called Sarajevo Film Days was organized in Zagreb, Croatia. Sarajevans themselves have been quite active in scheduling film events and there have been several during the siege, organized by various courageous groups and individuals. The Sarajevo International Film Festival held in the fall of 1997 is now becoming a regular event. It is at this venue where Sarajevans can see many of the films made about Bosnia and about themselves.

Besides festivals, there have been many efforts by various groups to provide more exposure to the films. Many human rights activists, academics, or ad hoc groups have undertaken it to produce and distribute video materials to raise the consciousness about the war. TV stations have also had an input. Channel Four in the UK, for example, held the well-publicized Bloody Bosnia season for a week in August 1993 – an example followed by other TV stations in the West.

Distribution

Depending on the background of the filmmaker, the specific approach, or the target audiences of the distributor, various productions received visibility through various channels. *Miss Sarajevo* (1995), for example, made by U2 fan Bill Carter, became well known to the ones who follow Billboard and MTV, whereas all turbo-folk fans in Serbia watched the populist show called Arkan and Ceca's Wedding (1995). Mandy Jacanson's *Calling the Ghosts*

(1996) is the work best known to feminist audiences – it tells of the difficult path taken by Jadranka Sigelj and Nusreta Sivac, rape survivors from the Bosnian camps, who decide to talk publicly and to testify to the Hague tribunal of their ordeal. Other films reached out to religious audiences: the Croat story of Godmother's appearance, Jacov Sedlar's *Gospa* (1993), was exhibited by a California-based Catholic film distribution network, while the BBC documentary of Arab correspondent Robert Fisk, *From Beirut to Bosnia* (1993) explained today's Muslim ideas of world's dynamics. The gay community expressed interest in Zelimir Zilnik's *Marble Ass*, featuring a transvestite prostitute from Belgrade who fights violence in his own special way, while anthropologists showed their students films made by other anthropologists, featuring communal rituals at the intersection of tradition and modernity. As a result of this segmentation of audience, some films became really popular within a limited reception framework while remaining virtually unknown beyond it. Only a few enjoyed a wider exposure.

Many of the acclaimed films about the Balkans have been seen at festivals, but rarely make it to theatrical distribution. In the fall of 1996 New York Times' Linda Lee wrote a piece entitled "Films that Win Acclaim but not Distributors," exposing the trend that was making distributors, clearly concerned about box office returns, to avoid committing to films that would be classified as not entertaining.

When it comes to distribution, quality is not always the decisive consideration, as many other factors play a role. Whereas *Before the Rain*, for example, received a wide distribution, for the equally acclaimed *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* played only in non-theatrical chains. The situation is partially corrected by some distributors of arthouse type feature films, such as The New Yorker (they currently carry *For Ever Mozart*, *Underground*, *Vukovar: Poste Restante*) or October Films (they distribute *Someone Else's America*). There are also some paradoxes:

With a few exceptions, films made by filmmakers associated with Serbia (Srdjan Dragojevic, Boro Draskovic, Petar Antortijevic, Goran Paskaljevic) have had more exposure in the West than the ones made by Croats or Bosnians. Sarajevo-set Ademir Kenovic's *Perfect Circle*, Bato Cengic's *Mona Lisa in Sarajevo* (1998), and Francois Lunel's *Unexpected Walk* (1997) and *Heroes* (1999) have barely been seen in the West.

As if reiterating the old prejudices to people (respectively filmmakers) from the Balkans, films made about the Balkan conflict by Westerners have enjoyed much better exposure than films made by local filmmakers. A good example is the widely publicized *Predictions of Fire* (1996) by Michael Benson and the largely unknown *Laibach: A Film from Slovenia* (1993) by Goran Gajic, both dealing in an almost identical manner with the phenomenon of the Neue Slovenische Kunst and the rock-group Laibach.

Another example would be French Bernard-Henry Levy's *Bosna!* (1994) which extensively uses footage shot under fire by the members of SaGA, the Sarajevo Group of Authors.

Whereas Levy's film was distributed in both 35mm and on video, and seen on TV in most Western countries, the films produced by SaGA have rarely been screened even at festivals. There have been reports on many Western TV companies or documentary filmmakers who have expressed interest and have obtained permission to use SaGA's footage, while at the same time SaGA's attempts to distribute their own documentaries containing this same footage have failed.

One more example – I managed to see the very impressive *Death in Sarajevo* (1995) only after I had the chance to personally meet with its author, the exiled Sarajevo comparative literature professor Tvrtko Kulenovic, and he lent me his only video copy which was gathering dust on a bookshelf at his Chicago home. At the same time *Urbicide: A Sarajevo*

Diary (1993) a film of the same length, subject matter., and sensibility, made by British Bill Tribe, also a professor at Sarajevo, played on Channel Four and is available in video distribution.

Whereas the feature films have at least the chance to end up in the system of non-theatrical distribution or within the festival circuit., the picture in documentaries is deplorable. Only a few have found distributors, and even those are quite often poorly advertised or are listed at prices that even institutions can rarely afford. Electronic Arts Intermix, for example, which carries the remarkable Chris Marker's *Prime Time in the Camps* (1993) only advertises to programmers, and the Cinema Guild routinely charges \$300 in the average for a video – *Truth Under Siege* (1995), an excellent documentary tackling the workings of independent media across former Yugoslavia, has ended up with them which by definition limits its distribution chances. There is a huge unrealized potential in documentary distribution, and many of the best films still remain unseen.

There have been some archival efforts, like the International Monitor Institute in Los Angeles and the Documentation Centre of Social Movements in Amsterdam. The Audio-Visual Department at the Central European University, Budapest have a collection of videotapes related to the conflict in former Yugoslavia. The Soros Foundation branches in Bosnia, Croatia and other countries of former Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe have been involved with a number of various projects to promote the work of local filmmakers about the conflict. The researchers at the video department of the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. organized the exhibit *Faces of Sorrow* in 1994, and are collecting videotapes related to the conflict in former Yugoslavia. But even if they manage to compile a comprehensive collection of tapes, these will be available only to researchers. The

documentary body of work about Bosnia remains and will remain largely unseen and unexposed.

I first became interested in the films made in response to the Balkan crisis in 1994. Only in the fall of 1996, however, did I have the chance to start systematically researching and exploring this body of cinematic works. It was at that time when a well-wishing academic friend told me that I was probably wasting my time. The formal end of the hostilities, he claimed, meant also fading interest in the topic – and not only amidst the general public, but within academia as well. Only if the bloodshed continued could I expect to enjoy the interest of publishers and journal editors alike.

Well, I wish he was wrong. As I write this in the summer of 1999, however, we live in the aftermath of the disturbing Kosovo war, and new images of endless human suffering, of burned bodies and burning oil refineries have occupied our minds. To make the Kosovo-related documentaries and satisfy the immediate need of the day, in 1999 production companies hastily scan the archives for documentary footage of the notorious visit of Slobodan Milosevic to Kosovo in 1987 – this same footage that was discovered by accident in the archive of Belgrade TV by researchers for *Yugoslavia: The Death of a Nation* but was not used very much as it did not seem that important. Documentaries about Albania – some were made in the early 1990s by Gil Rossellini and Paul Jay, for example – are now retrieved and shown, and a number of films dealing with border-crossings between Albania, Greece, and Macedonia are in the process of making. Authors who wrote about Bosnia returned to their files looking for research notes dealing with the ethnic Albanians – material never used before as until recently it seemed irrelevant. The names of Bosnian places which appeared and then disappeared from the public mind – Gorazde, Prijedor, Jajce, Zvornik, are now replaced by another set of names – Pristina, Jakobica, Prizren, Blace.

Critics often underline that the best Vietnam-war films were made in America only years after the end of the war (*Deer Hunter*, 1978; *Apocalypse Now*, 1979; *Platoon*, 1986; *Full Metal Jacket*, 1987; *Good Morning, Vietnam*, 1987; *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*, 1988; *Born on the Fourth of July*, 1989), and the Vietnam-war topic featured powerfully in Hollywood as recently as 1995 with *Forest Gump*. In analogy, as time passes, further serious films about the Balkans will be made. Those whose lives were deeply affected and shattered by what happened in ex-Yugoslavia in the early 1990s will be coming to the topic of the Bosnian war again and again. The future works on the subject will not come from people like stardom-bound Michael Winterbottom or from Emir Kusturica, who does not seem to grasp what the critics against him are all about and who has turned to romantic comedy lately. One should expect more important works about the troubled Balkans, however, to come from Theo Angelopoulos, Ademir Kenovic, and Goran Paskaljevic, whose *Powder Keg* screened out of competition at the Venice film festival in 1998 to raving reviews. Every month there are reports of some new project in the works, mostly documentaries, but also features while the planned Hollywood production *Age of Aquarius* with Harrison Ford experienced financial difficulties and was cancelled, Canada is soon to release *West of Sarajevo*, shot near Vancouver, Britain – *Beautiful People* which is shot on location near Liverpool, and in Italian veteran Lina Wertmüller is completing work on *An Interesting State*, starring Daniel Auteuill, Harvey Keitel and Vanessa Redgrave. In the years to come, Balkan filmmakers themselves will be coming back to the topics of taking sides, villains and victims, displacement and migrations. Many more important works will appear that will treat the topic of the war in the Balkans. and of the healing process which has presumably begun. ■

Endnotes

1 I discuss this issue at length in my 'Kusturica's Underground: Historical Allegory or

Propaganda.' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and TV*, March 1999.

2 *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation*. (1995) Documentary in four parts. Production: Brian Lapping Associates Co-pro- duction: BBC (UK), Canal+ (France), Discovery Channel (USA), ORF (Austria), VRPO (The Netherlands), RTBF (Belgium), SVT2 (Sweden), NRK (Norway), Danmarks Radio (Denemark) et ABC (Australia). Exec. producer: Brian Lapping. Narrated by Robin Ellis. Directors Angus McQueen and Paul Mitchell.

3 For an interesting discussion of the reception of such home videos by the Croatian and Macedonian communities in Perth, Australia see Dona Kolar-Panov's book *Video, War and the Diasporic Imagination*. London and New York: Routledge. 1997.

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