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From Glory to Destruction: John Huston's Non-fictional Depictions of War

During the second World War John Huston became involved, together with other famous Hollywood filmmakers, in the U.S. Government propaganda film production. This paper argues that whereas *Report from the Aleutians*, Huston's first war documentary, may be incorporated within the propaganda genre, and depicts war as an instance where men may aspire to glory, his second non-fiction film, *San Pietro*, breaks free of this label and takes a clear, autonomous stand on the ultimate tragedy of war, and on the destruction which it brings about.

John Huston established his reputation as an important Hollywood personality in 1941 following his debut as a film director with the now classic *Maltese Falcon*. The following year, as the United States became more engaged in the world conflict, he joined the Signal Corps, a body of the U.S. Army specialized in film and photographic documentation of war. In his autobiography, written several years later, Huston admitted that he did not pay much attention to the enlisting papers given to him by his friend Sy Bartlett. Therefore, when the call came from the Army to report to duty he was rather surprised (Huston 111-2). At the time Huston was a 37-year old man with a promising career in front of him. Busily working on his next film, *Across the Pacific*, a sequel of sorts to the successful *Maltese Falcon*, the prospect of direct involvement in the war must have seemed quite foreign to him. Yet, the Japanese affront at Pearl Harbor, the spread of Fascism and Nazism in Europe, and the growing threat of the Axis power spurred him to join the list of other famous Hollywood directors, as John Ford, William Wyler, and Frank Capra, who were actively documenting the conflict.

HUSTON'S FIRST WAR DOCUMENTARY

Huston's initial duties within the Signal Corps was of a clerical nature in Washington. This disappointed his expectations of seeing action and made him fear that he would have to follow the war from behind a desk. This was a prospect that contrasted with his adventurous spirit and, as he writes in his autobiography, made him quite depressed (112). However, after a few weeks, his first real assignment arrived: he was to report to the Aleutian Islands where he would cover the war activity against the Japanese in the Pacific.

Huston collected large amounts of footage during the four months spent on the island of Adak, where a U.S. military base had been set up. Together with his crew of five U.S. Army Signal corps personnel, he covered every kind of situation from moments of leisure at the encampment to bombing missions and air battles, without sparing himself, and often risking his own life and that of his crew.¹ *Report from the Aleutians* was the film that resulted from his first effort as a combat filmmaker. It is a work that fits well within the main pattern of war documentaries. It reflects the "Bugle Call" attitude the Army expected from these kinds of films without giving in to the most explicit forms of propaganda. The film did not seek the support of the audience through enemy bashing, but rather from muscle flexing. The story line stresses the readiness and efficiency of the air squadrons that were guarding America's back door and protecting it from the Japanese. In this respect, even the inside look at life on the base, which the film offers, seems finalized to convey a sense of self-confidence and strength possessed by the U.S. Air Force pilots and their support crews. When we see the pilots merrily making music and singing together or, in contrast, participating in the funeral of one of their companions with total self-control and pride, we understand that this is a message both for the folks back home, who should feel secure, and for the enemy, who should be aware of the fearlessness and self-control of American fighters. Huston admitted, many years later, in a video interview on his war documentaries, that in this film "there was a little bit of a 'Hurrah' in it and that he was "cheering our boys on, as it were."²

This is not to say that *Report from the Aleutians* is not an important film, or that its images are not engaging. The use of Technicolor for example, enhances the magnificent quality of the aerial shots. Today, after decades of air travel, we tend to underestimate the spectacular nature of aviation; in the 1940s the relative novelty of flight, with its continuous technical innovations, still exercised a major attraction for the viewing public. *Report from the Aleutians* dwells extensively on takeoffs and landings of the small fighter planes (used in air combat against the Japanese "Zero" planes) and of the "flying fortresses" (big four-engine, propeller planes that were an innovation at the time) and offers many examples of bombing missions and combat. Possibly for these reasons the film was quite successful both with the military and with the general public. Civilians got a real "report from the front," showing them what war in the Pacific was like, whereas it provided the military with descriptions accurate enough to be able to use the film for training recruits. Following the success of this film Huston was promoted in rank to Captain.

REENACTING WAR

Upon his return to the continental U.S., traveling between Los Angeles, New York, and Washington while editing his film, Huston found civilian life rather unbearable and longed for more action. His next assignment, however, exposed him to another, less honorable side of war documentaries: the production of reenactments. Certainly, as a Hollywood director, Huston was aware of the powerful ability of movies to represent the real world, but in fictional films no one was asked to believe that real life was being presented. The documentary genre, however, was a different entity which, by definition, solicits the viewer's trust in its authenticity.

In the beginning of November 1942, shortly before Huston's return from the Aleutian Islands, the Allies landed in North Africa. In his autobiography Huston comments on how it was of crucial importance for the Pictorial Service of the Signal Corps to produce a film that would illustrate this event. Unfortunately, the footage that covered the North African landing was lost in a shipwreck. Thus, Frank Capra and John Huston were assigned the task

of reenacting as much of the action as feasible, in the shortest possible time. Huston gives us a detailed account of how they reenacted combat in the Mojave Desert and on the Florida coastline that were used as the settings for the bombing of North African fortifications (129-30). However, this was not what he had in mind upon joining the Signal Corps and he managed to play a less significant role in the project, which eventually became a joint production between the U.S. and Great Britain. With the addition of authentic British footage the film was released as *Tunisian Victory* (1944), and acquired considerable fame.³

Huston did not have to wait long for another opportunity to return to a real war front. In the fall of 1943, after a few weeks in London (in connection with the British-American film co-production) he was asked to report to Southern Italy. According to Signal Corps superiors he was to cover what seemed the imminent Allied liberation of Rome. He was happy to comply and convinced his new friend, Eric Ambler (the British detective novel writer, also involved in documenting the war scene in Europe), to join him on the mission. Upon their arrival in Italy, it became clear that the liberation of Rome was not as near as they had been led to believe. The new objective was to create a film that would explain to the American civilian population why the war on the Italian front was lingering on. Huston set out to do the job, though his account of the situation was probably much more realistic than what the War Department had expected. This time Huston's film turned out to be more than a report from the front; it became a clear statement about the ultimate tragedy of war and the finality of death and destruction which war carries with it.

PROPAGANDA FILMS AND THE WORLD WAR

San Pietro's uniqueness among war documentaries derives from its resistance to comply with the propaganda objectives of the U.S. Government. Even though Huston did not refrain from propaganda in his documentary on the Aleutian Islands, it should be remembered that this film was made shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor. During that time there was a general effort

within the country to encourage both the civilian population and military recruits as to the hopeful prospects of being victorious in the conflict. Shortly thereafter, however, Huston's attitude towards propaganda films appeared deeply altered.

The U.S. government's use of documentary film for propaganda precedes the war by several years. It goes back to the New Deal, and more specifically to the attempt by the first Roosevelt administration to win support for its agricultural and public works policies. The person in charge of this effort was Pare Lorentz, a firm believer in the New Deal. The two documentaries for which he is best known, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938), achieved wide visibility (the latter film won the 1938 Venice film festival best-documentary award.) Earlier production efforts by the government had been limited to internal usage and documentation (such as the U.S. Army Signal Corps footage shot during the first world conflict.) With Lorentz, however, the full potential of the medium as a way to influence public opinion became apparent. Instrumental to this end was the example given by John Grierson, the founder of the British Empire Marketing Board Film Unit, who had understood the remarkable possibilities linked to documentary film. In 1938, following the success of two of his own films, Lorentz convinced Roosevelt to promote legislation for the creation of the U.S. Film Service. However, the official sanctioning of the government's film producing role was destined to backfire. All those opposing the New Deal and its administration saw it as a dangerous manipulation of public funds and opinion, and the Hollywood film industry saw it as a form of unfair competition in an area traditionally left to the private sector.⁴

Notwithstanding the final demise of the U.S. Film Service, which was dissolved in 1940, its experience proved valuable in view of the American involvement in the war. Documentaries produced in Nazi Germany, such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (1935), on the 1934 National Socialist party rally in Nuremberg, sufficiently demonstrated to the world the power of propaganda films. In Great Britain (where the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit gave way to the General Post Office Film Unit, and then to the Crown

Film Unit) a group of Grierson's disciples, among whom Humphrey Jennings, started producing documentaries such as *London Can Take It* (1940) which aimed to boost the morale of the population and to instill hope for a final victory (Barnouw 139, 144). The United States Government followed suit, and established appropriate agencies and facilities to coordinate the production of documentary films designed to ease the way for a greater American role in the world conflict. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 precipitated this process.

In 1942 President Roosevelt decided to reunite all of the agencies and committees dealing with film and war propaganda under the O.W.I. (Office of War Information), to be directed by Lowell Mellett. Its function was to liaise with Hollywood and overview film production relating in any way to war issues. This, of course, was also meant for fiction films whose stories dealt always more frequently with the conflict and the crises in the international political scene.⁵ Initially the non-fiction films dealt with the training and the preparation of the recruits for the necessities of war. At first, these films were produced by Hollywood, which offered its collaboration. Later on, as the need increased, the War Department and the Army set up its own production facilities. The most important among these was the Signal Corps Photographic Center, in Astoria, New York, created in March 1942 in the old Paramount studios.

As the war developed, simple training films such as *Safeguarding Military Information*, *Sex Hygiene*, and *Personal Hygiene*, gave way to more complex and ambitious documentaries capable of instilling pride and hope in the soldiers who were heading to the front (MacCann, *World* 213-15). To achieve this objective the Signal Corps engaged Frank Capra, then at the height of his career and one of the most popular Hollywood directors. General George C. Marshall, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff, met with Capra in the newly built Pentagon, and explained the type of films that were needed (Barnouw 155-7). Shortly thereafter Capra started producing the celebrated *Why We Fight* series, whose first title, *Prelude to War* obtained the Oscar for Best Documentary at the 1942 Academy Awards.⁶ These were true "bugle call" and propaganda films, which explained, with the use of extensive off-screen narration, special

animation (often provided by Disney Studios) and various types of footage (at times produced by the enemy itself) the reasons for fighting against the Axis forces. They were required viewing for any training soldier, and were largely circulated among the civilian population.

Besides Capra and Huston, other well-known Hollywood film directors were also involved in the U.S. Government effort to document the war. John Ford and William Wyler were among them and both contributed significant works to the war documentary genre. Ford's *The Battle of Midway* (1942) tells of the first important victory against the Japanese naval forces in the Pacific. The film combines impressive air and naval combat footage with short, staged scenes from the U.S., depicting a pair of idealized parents who are both proud of their children's mission and concerned for their safety. Wyler's role as a war documentarian was particularly dear to Huston who comments on his bravery as a combat filmmaker.⁷ In *Memphis Bell* (1944), his most famous war documentary, Wyler describes with accuracy and pride the U.S. bombing missions over Germany. In his second film, *Thunderbolt* (1945), which he co-directed with John Sturges, the attention shifts to the air war in Italy.

These films were morale boosters: they told of a particularly well-done job by the U.S. military; of a victory which would be inevitable because of the strength and efficiency of the Allied forces; and of the nobility of a war in defense of democracy and against tyranny.⁸ Huston was unwilling to give such a simple and straightforward message in *San Pietro*. His major concern here seems to be that of being truthful; and the truth about war is one of death and destruction. It is fair to say that among the Hollywood filmmakers who turned to non-fiction films during the war years, Huston distinguished himself as the one who carried to the very end the obligation of telling those who stayed home the way things really were.⁹

REPORTING THE REAL THING

San Pietro is also referred to as *The Battle of San Pietro*, but the shorter title was used for the movie's first release and it was the way Huston himself generally referred to the film.¹⁰ When present the term "battle" seems to place

the film more firmly within the war genre. On the other hand, the shorter and — from my point of view more appropriate title underlines the crucial distance between this work and other war documentaries. Besides being the name of a town, situated a few miles south of the more renowned Cassino, in southern Italy, San Pietro is also the Italian name for Christ's disciple and founder of the Roman Catholic Church (and by extension, the name of the Cathedral in Rome that symbolizes the center of that religion.) Thus, ironically, one of the most distressful non-fiction films about warfare is named after a saint. Interestingly, Huston's later war documentary on the recovery of shell-shocked soldiers in a New Jersey mental clinic uses as its title one of the opening lines from the Bible "Let There Be Light."

From what we know, Huston was not a particularly religious person,¹¹ thus it would be excessive to give special meaning to this fact; nonetheless, one could argue that the two titles were yet another way for Huston to stress, through an ironic contrast, the violence and destruction of war. This hypothesis is further substantiated by the fact that one of the first images of the Italian film shows a damaged statue of St. Peter precariously leaning to one side among a mass of rubble that was once the town's church. Surrounding the church is the dilapidated village and beyond the wounded countryside shown to us through panoramic shots that reveal shattered olive trees and vines and the numerous craters left by the bombs and the artillery.

Not surprisingly the Army's initial reaction to *San Pietro* was mostly negative. In fact, during the first showing at the Pentagon the attending officers, including a three-star general, polemically abandoned the projection room when the film was barely one-third over. Shortly afterward Huston was accused, among other things, of having made a movie that was against war (to which he replied that he surely ought to be shot if he ever was to make a movie in favor of war.) Notwithstanding the official banning, the film soon acquired, however, a reputation among many officers for being extremely accurate on combat scenarios. The Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army himself George C. Marshall, became curious and demanded to see *San Pietro*. His reaction was extremely positive and determined the reversal of the previous

negative judgment. According to General Marshall the film, with some further editing and the addition of an explicatory prologue, could offer a very effective introduction to the hardships of war to the new recruits (Huston 149-150). From being the target of widespread criticism Huston was now promoted to major and complimented for his work (though his film would still be kept from public view until the end of the war.)

The corrective function of the two minute prologue, meant to re-conduct the film within the main tradition of war documentaries, appears, however, quite ineffective. Here Fifth Army General Mark Clark explains the importance of the Italian front (diversion of German forces from the Russian front and French coastal areas), the reasons for the slow advancing of the Allies through Italy (relocation of forces to England, in preparation for the Normandy landing), and the strategic relevance of the battle that the film portrays. As a closing note Clark affirms in a matter of fact way that the losses were not disproportionate to the end:

... San Pietro, in the 5th Army sector, was the key to the Liri Valley. We knew it, and the enemy knew it. We had to take it, even though the immediate cost would be high. We took it and the cost, in relation to the later advance, was not excessive.

The contrast between this dubious assertion, delivered with an unclenching and impassive expression, and the images of death and destruction that follow, is one of the most striking and unforgettable aspects of this film. It is difficult to ascertain with certainty how much of this is planned or whether it is just the result of fortuitous circumstances. Ironically, the final result of this addition was to strengthen the anti-war message of this film and to remove it even further from the category of propaganda material.

In analyzing war documentaries and combat films it is important to remember the degree of involvement in actual warfare experienced by the people who made them. A battleground had very little in common with a Hollywood set. MacCann rightly points out how very little planning could be done on the part of the filmmakers and how they "could not direct the shows they photographed." (*World* 213-14). The cameramen not only operated their equipment, but were active soldiers and several of them lost their lives on the front (*ibid.*).

The sense of fear and fatigue, the determination to be victorious in battle, and the solidarity and grief for fellow-soldiers and officers who lost their lives or became wounded and mangled was deeply felt by Huston and his crew, and validates even further the anti-war stance acknowledged in *San Pietro*.¹²

Besides being the director of a film on the Italian front, Huston was also the officer of the U.S. Army actively engaged in a war. Upon his arrival at Allied Headquarters in Caserta, in the late fall of 1943, he worked on setting up his film unit which comprised himself, his British friend, Captain Eric Ambler, and five combat-trained cameramen from the Astoria Signal Corps studios in New York (among these was Jules Buck, who later would distinguish himself in Hollywood and in England as a successful producer.) The unit was to operate with the 143rd Infantry regiment of the 36th Texas Infantry Division, itself part of General Clark's 5th Army. Huston proudly notes in his autobiography how the 143rd distinguished itself at the Salerno landing (suffering numerous casualties), how it was the first regiment to enter Naples and to pass the Volturno river and how it was among the first to fight in the Liri valley (137-8). The film commentary, written and spoken by Huston himself sadly notes how during the battle of San Pietro the 143rd regiment alone suffered over 1100 casualties.

The reasons for this carnage are explained in detail in *San Pietro* (in the commentary rather than in Clark's prologue): the unexpected tenacity of the German resistance, the torrential rains and the resulting mud which made it impossible for vehicles to function properly; the extremely rugged terrain, made of rivers, ravines, hills, and mountains (which hindered the advance of the Allied armies and offered good protection to the Germans); and the fatigue of the troops, used to their maximum capabilities (due to the under-sizing which resulted from the relocation of forces to the Northern European front.) In studying the film's images and the spoken commentary one cannot help noticing a rather critical attitude towards the military leadership responsible for certain strategic decisions.

In Huston's autobiography, written many years after the end of the war, this criticism becomes, for obvious reasons, much more explicit. Here the filmmaker

clearly states that expert field officers declared that the enemy positions would not be conquered with a frontal attack, and yet, these were the orders given to the officers and the men of the 143rd regiment. The implicit criticism of the military leadership that may be discerned in the film, however, does not overshadow the praise spoken in favor of the Allied troops. Through commentary and detailed footage *San Pietro* does not refrain from underlining noteworthy acts of heroism: soldiers who continue fighting even after their officers have succumbed to the enemy, or who attempt single-handedly to neutralize German strongholds by throwing hand grenades through fire openings, with the likelihood or certainty of losing their lives to snipers.

The actual battle is explained in detail by the documentary. More than once the frame is filled with a map of the area surrounding the village of San Pietro. With the aid of a pointer the off-screen narrator (Huston himself) points to the German and Allied positions, and argues the difficulty of making a breakthrough because of the strategically ideal location of the enemy strongholds (which included the village.) The relentless Allied attacks, in the valley and on mountains slopes, are illustrated in detail together with the unceasing German counter-attacks. The ten-day-long battle, which started on December 8, 1943 with the ill-fated attempt by an Italian regiment to expunge the German stronghold on Mount Lungo, is shown in all of its major phases: from the more successful attack against the German stronghold on Mount Sammucro to the slow progression of the infantry; from the hopeless use of tanks which became easy targets for enemy artillery to the final victorious assault on Mount Lungo which caused the enemy's retreat from the area and village within two days.

The different phases of the battle are also documented with extreme realism through the sharp black and white images of the film. The explosions are so close that often the earth shakes and the film jolts in the camera. Cannons and machineguns fire relentlessly and the incandescent fragments of exploding shells streak the twilight without pause. Soldiers are seen crawling among the shrubs in desperate search for cover or charging against the enemy heedless of exploding mines and bullets. As Nichols notes in his work on the

representation of reality in documentary cinema, this type of footage, and the way it is arranged, would indeed place *San Pietro* within the tradition of war documentary (*Reality* 26-7); however, what Nichols omits to point out is the relevance of a different kind of footage which places this documentary in a position of its own within the genre.

In his analysis of the film Nichols also maintains that Huston is careful in showing us only the faces of the enemy dead, whereas the shots of the Allied casualties never reveal their faces. This is undeniably the case in the 32 minute long version of *San Pietro* that exists today. Yet, it is known (and surprisingly Nichols does not acknowledge this) that in order to comply with the military censorship Huston edited out about 20 minutes from an earlier version of his film. This footage surfaced in recent years, when it lost its "classified" label. In Italy, for example, it was shown as part of a television program on combat film.¹³ Unfortunately, to date, a directors-cut version of *San Pietro* has not been released, and it is hard to know whether it ever will be; however, by viewing the extra footage in conjunction with the available version one can mentally envision how the film would have appeared had the military refrained from censoring it. Needless to say, its anti-war stance would have been even stronger than what it appears today.

The censored footage portrays, in much greater detail, instances that are already present in the film: the burial of the dead soldiers at the end of the battle's end; the shattered appearance of the village just freed from the Germans; the resurfacing of the villagers from the caves where they were hiding; and the hope-inspiring faces of the children. In a hypothetical uncut edition of *San Pietro* these parts could swing the balance towards themselves and away from the combat scenes (which instead prevail in the existing version of the film.)

The burial of the dead scene, in particular, was initially conceived by Huston to emphasize to a maximum degree the tragic and abrupt ending of so many young and vigorous lives. In the film as it appears today we see only a few seconds of the bodies of dead soldiers as they are put into white mattress covers that will be used as shrouds for the burial. In the censored version, instead, this scene is considerably longer and includes close-ups of several dead

soldiers' faces. According to Huston's original conceit previously recorded interviews with these men (referring to their future expectations) were to be played over their now lifeless bodies. Years later, in his autobiography, Huston conceded to having perhaps exaggerated with this idea which would have been too painful for the families of those soldiers and too demoralizing. Likewise, he admitted that the original presence in the film of scenes with scattered body parts and other atrocities left behind by the ferocious battle would have been too hard to take at the time.¹⁴ This may be true, though it is undeniable that such scenes would have carried Huston's commendable de-glorification of warfare even further.

Scenes of death and destruction were not the only way by which Huston denounced the inhumanity of war. Not surprisingly, the other footage that the military leaders wanted removed, and which evidently disturbed their belligerent sensibilities, referred to the children and the rest of the civilian population. The film as it now stands contains several scenes at the end that depict life in San Pietro in the aftermath of the battle. The beauty and strength of these shots is such that it would be hard to imagine them any different than what they already are. Possibly, the only benefit of including the censored footage in this case would lie in changing, as mentioned earlier, the overall balance between combat and non-combat footage.

San Pietro ends by returning to the countryside present at the beginning of the film. This time, however, the land appears restored to its luxuriant and fertile state. Like the children, it communicates the hope of regeneration. In the film's final moments Huston seems to imply that notwithstanding the tragedy of war, notwithstanding the death and suffering of endless numbers of people, and the destruction of hundreds of villages and towns, life prevails. The children regain their smiles, the land bears its fruits, and the people begin to hope for a less troublesome future. Perhaps this may appear as a rather naive, simplistic message, but in the midst of the war, and at the end of a film which so accurately described it, it was the message which the public was waiting to hear.

NOTES

1. In his autobiography Huston describes several such instances; in one of them he stays behind to film a damaged plane in flames on the runway, well aware that the bombs it contained could have easily exploded (114-5).
2. Cf. *John Huston-War Stories*, produced and directed by Midge Mackenzie; cinematography by Richard Leacock. London, 1998.
3. The film was directed by Roy Boulting, the British filmmaker who also directed *Desert Victory* (1943) on the African campaign that chased Rommel's Afrika Korps from El Alamein to Tripoli (Barnouw 147-8).
4. Richard Dyer MacCann offers a detailed analysis of the difficulties encountered by the U.S. Film Unit after its instatement (*People's* 87-117).
5. For a good review of the issues involved in fictional films and the World War see Giuliana Muscio's essay "Hollywood va in guerra," where there is also valuable information on the documentary film production of the period.
6. The other titles in the series were: *The Nazi Strike* (1942), *Divide and Conquer* (1943), *The Battle of Britain* (1943), *The Battle of Russia* (1943), *The Battle of China* (1944), and *War Comes to America* (1945). Most of these films were compilation documentaries made from previously shot footage, including the one produced by the enemy forces. A lot of the off-screen narration for these films was done by Huston's famous actor father, Walter Huston. For a detailed description of this series see Barnouw (158-62); for a stimulating analysis see Bazin, (20-27).
7. See the documentary *John Huston- War Stories. cit.*
8. In his detailed history of Non-Fiction film Barsam stresses the propaganda element of these films (230-31).
9. In this sense it is interesting to compare Huston's documentary with the writing of war reporters (particularly Homar Bigart and Ernie Pyle) who were writing about the different campaigns for American newspapers. The critical judgments on *San Pietro* have all been extremely positive. Representative of them all is Ellis' evaluation of the film: "Many think *The Battle of San Pietro* is the finest of the American wartime documentaries; I think it is among the finest films yet made about men in battle." (139).
10. Both in his autobiography and in the previously mentioned interview Huston refers to the film exclusively as *San Pietro*.
11. See Morandini's chapter "Un ateo per la Bibbia" (93-98), where he discusses Huston and the making of *The Bible... In the Beginning* (1966).
12. This is the impression one gets in reading the pages in the autobiography where Huston describes in detail his experience while filming the battle of San Pietro (135-148).
13. *Combat Film*, directed by Italo Moscati and Roberto Olla, RAIUno; distributed as a VHS cassette by RaiTrade.
14. See Huston's autobiography (139) and *John Huston-War Stories*.

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