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Sub/versions of History: a Meditation on Film and Historical Narrative by *Barbara Abrash and Daniel J. Walkowitz*

If history is, as the post-structuralists declare, composed of socially constructed narratives, told from particular perspectives to audiences that endlessly refashion them in changing contexts, then what remains for the historian? Over the past twenty years, we have engaged this question in our work as historians in film and video, primarily for public television. While we like to think of ourselves as people on the frontiers of intellectual and artistic life, we may be somewhat old-fashioned, for we actually do believe in historical reality. We explore and use texts, written and visual, not for their own sake, but for how they connect to and reveal events, social relations, and power structures. *Something* happened. Truths may be multiple, shifting and contingent, evidence may be slippery and unavailable to scientific certitude, the past may be seen from multiple perspectives, but there *are* historical truths that have profound political consequences. The challenge for us is to explore ways in which historian/film-makers can participate in developing new strategies for approaching shifting and contingent truths.

These issues, in turn, lead to a large question, which has been summarized nicely by Michael Frisch: if 'history' is all around us – albeit in distorted forms – in public settings as diverse as museums, shopping malls, Disney theme parks, Hollywood films and MTV, what is the role of the historian? Is there some special expertise, some unique perspective that the historian brings to the project? And, finally, assuming there *is* a role for the historian, what distinguishes OUR kind of history from more traditional versions?

Our sense of audience and the constraints of television programming and funding have, of course, shaped our work. In entering the arena of mass media, we recognize that U.S. television – including public television – serves corporate agendas far from our own, and that its programming is cast primarily as entertainment. Moreover, as a profoundly ahistorical medium, television enlists historical imagery primarily as backdrop, style, motif. Nonetheless, we see opportunities, at least in the interstices of television programming, for contesting those dominant media modes and for presenting historical narratives that disrupt, however slightly, the conventions of television, and that point to how power relations are embedded in the telling and comprehension of history.

In that regard, our work seeks to participate in creating a public sphere of ideas within mass media. We do this for two reasons: first because we want to reach a broad audience beyond professional historians, and second because working in visual media inspires new ways of telling history, broadening the range of evidence, and experimenting with narrative forms that resonate with the way reality is experienced and represented in the late twentieth century.

We began making films as new social historians who wanted to bring what we saw as fresh – even urgent – historical news to public audiences. Our first film was directly connected to written scholarship: the opening credits of *Molders of Troy* (1980) describe it as ‘based’ on Daniel Walkowitz’s book, *Worker City, Company Town* (1978). Today we still see film as a way to bring fresh – even urgent – historical news to public audiences, but also as an opportunity to ‘write history’ in film and video, to develop a practice of visual history, and to push the possibilities of written historical narrative.

These concerns place us in the middle of a series of current debates concerning first, the intellectual legitimacy of ‘writing’ history on film and second, what constitutes the ‘real’ in a world of representations. The first debate asks whether one can do serious history in visual media: can a film carry complex information, be responsible to its sources, allow for a process of thoughtful historical analysis, and otherwise meet the conventional standards of historical practice? How can ‘truth claims’ be established in media where the rules of scholarly history no longer prevail? On a more basic level, how can historians evaluate and interpret films and photographs as historical evidence: what kinds of information can they provide? If they are not ‘windows on reality’ – transparent evidence – how can they be understood and used by historians?

We should say first off that we do have a particular view of history, and it has informed all our work, both in writing and film. Quite simply, we see all history-writing as a political act. That is, we believe histories generally serve to validate or naturalize power relations, but also can be used to disrupt or destabilize taken-for-granted views of the past. Moreover, how the past is experienced and understood influences the ways in which people locate themselves, their circumstances, and their sense of possibilities for the present and future. The past lives in the present, and – whatever their subject or approach – historians inevitably write a history of the present. We became historians because of our commitment to social change, a belief that historical perspective matters in engaging the present.

Our film work has consistently drawn on this view of history as a political intervention in three ways. (For the sake of simplicity we will generally use the word ‘film’ to cover all cases, although much of our work is shot on video.) First, each film reflects the particular historical moment in which it was made, and stands as a historical commentary on the discourse of power shaping that particular historical moment.

Second, our films disrupt conventional ways of telling about the past.

Self-consciously working against comfortable received versions, we seek to question and challenge presumed 'truths', and to create connections that allow viewers to make the link between their sense of history and their own lives. The success of blockbuster series such as 'Roots' and 'The Civil War' suggests that people are hungry for information about the past. Film and TV producers often respond to viewers' troubling experiences of social contradictions, but generally resolve those contradictions in stories of reconciliation and acceptance, rather than pointing to social action of any sort. Thus, the American North and South – a white, male North and South, it must be added – shake hands at the end of Ken Burns' *Civil War*. The metaphor of 'healing' conceals the more complex and truer stories of the legacies of the U.S. Civil War – of lynching, Jim Crow, tenant farming and re-institutionalized racism. We seek to connect audiences to history in a different way, by suggesting how the past continues to kick and live in the present, in our lives.

Third, our narrative strategies have paralleled historiographical developments. Our work began with the New Social History of the 1970s, and moved to the new perspectives of feminist scholarship in the 1980s and then to post-structuralism by the early 1990s. While we began by translating the New Social History from the page to the screen, we are now equally influenced by the work of independent film and video makers who are experimenting with history telling outside the confines of the academy. There is now rich common ground on which historians and film-makers – those categories may sometimes be collapsed into historian/film-maker – can think together about what we understand history to be, what historical evidence consists of, and how history is encoded in visual and narrative representations.

The second debate which our work engages is the post-structuralist claim that all 'truths' are subjective positions. The issue for us is to interrogate the meanings that are attached to past events, by whom and for what purposes, and how they become part of public knowledge and social consciousness as historical narratives. It is in this zone of contested meanings that we argue history writing, whether in film or on the page, is a political act.

Two points are at issue for us. First, what do audiences, media makers and historians constitute as the 'stuff' of history; and second, what is the distinctive role played by historians? In the first case, we will argue that history is not a set of givens, of concrete 'facts' to be authenticated; it is an argument, a conception of the past. History is a complicated tale of multiple voices contesting for authority. In the second case, we will argue that historians ask a set of critical questions of the past working within structured rules of evidences and grounded in written documents and that they have been trained to hear those questions resonate in the language and categories of the present. Our enterprise is not simply an unmediated gathering of documentary evidence or essentially journalistic in character.

Rather, it is a meditation on the construction of memory, on the past as it lives in the present.

It has been twenty years since we began work on *Molders of Troy*, a ninety-minute docudrama about the nineteenth-century American industrial experience in Troy, a city in upstate New York. We both had worked in Troy, a quintessential Rust Belt city – but one whose decline had actually begun in the late nineteenth century. The city was a shell of its former self, a virtual museum of faded nineteenth-century municipal architecture (Martin Scorsese filmed the exteriors for *Age of Innocence* in Troy) with an underemployed and somewhat dispirited population.

Molders of Troy was made in the context of an emerging narrative of de-industrialization. Local residents were largely ignorant of the city's past, and – according to the popular press – corporate flight was an inevitable tale of market forces. In this city suffering from a common U.S. malady – historical amnesia – we aimed to reclaim a lost part of Troy's history, and to tell that history from the point of view of a group of its working people.

The New Social History allowed us to tell the story 'from the bottom up'. If the history of Troy had always been told as the story of the enterprising iron-founder James Burden and his fellow businessmen, we offered a counter-narrative. In *Molders*, it is the workers and their families – not merely the owners – who are the historical actors. Events are shaped by the competing priorities and visions of people with a variety of cultural assumptions, unequal access to power, and differing authority to realize their ambitions. And they occur within a context of larger economic and political forces, namely the rise of industrial capitalism, shifting axes of class and ethnicity, and the reorganization of political power in the industrial city.

Molders dramatizes the seeds of the decline in a significant American industrial city at the end of the nineteenth century in a story which – reflecting the New Social History – makes the hand of the market visible. It also foreshadows the de-industrialization in progress at the time we made the film, placing a contemporary social and economic crisis within an historical frame.

Many American documentary filmmakers in this period shared our outlook. Films such as Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, Sam Sills and Mary Dore's *The Good Fight*, Deborah Shaffer and Stu Bird's *The Wobblies*, and Larain Gray and Lyn Goldfarb's *With Babies and Banners* – to name only a few – privileged new voices, offered multiple perspectives, and used archival film, period music and oral history to expand the repertoire of historical evidence.

It should be noted that scholars writing the New Social History and these new documentary filmmakers shared the political outlook of the New Left, the experience of the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, and the academic environment of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These films rejected the assumptions of consensus history, introducing issues of racism, labor conflict, gender and social transformations into the fabric of American

history, and – mirroring the New Social History – sought to recover the voices and experiences of previously absent historical subjects. They told a different story of who ‘makes history’.

These films effectively brought the thinking of new social historians to a large public audience. At the same time, they had an explicit political agenda – to highlight injustice, to promote social change, and to document alternative political social movements – suggesting the continuing resonance of a radical political tradition in the U.S.

Oral history in film, again paralleling historical practice, gained new authority in this personalized production as ‘authentic’ documents of eyewitnesses. At the same time, film-makers became increasingly conscious of themselves in relationship to their subjects. Their films, often lyrical and moving testimonials to political confrontations and struggles for social equity (massacres of members of the Industrial Workers of the World, the unlawful imprisonment of Japanese-Americans, sit-down strikes, etc.) were spoken implicitly to a younger generation ready to transmit this knowledge in the service of radical action. The result was at the same time intensely political and cast in an aesthetic of what might be called romantic realism.

New funding agencies, each with implications for production, distribution, audience and content, further shaped – as they always do – the politics of representation. For example, the National Endowment for the Humanities was charged with funding films that brought scholarship to the general public. *Molders*, which was directly based on a scholarly book, therefore became a highly fundable project. Similarly, *Indians, Outlaws and Angie Debow* (1988), the second film we shall discuss, presented historian Angie Debow’s writing. Our 1990 film, *Perestroika From Below*, was funded as a kind of ‘eyewitness history’ by Channel 4 in London, which is distinguished for its independent productions. And *Margaret Sanger: A Public Nuisance*, our most recent film, was completed in 1992 with funding from the Independent Television Service in the U.S., which commissions programming that introduces alternative voices and issues to television. Finally, a sequel to *Perestroika From Below* on which we are presently working, *Surviving Perestroika*, was funded as a scholarly research project to videotape oral histories and document the changing conditions of daily life in Ukraine. Now archived in the U.S. and Moscow, these videotapes constitute our documentary film footage.

The direct involvement of historians in media production was in its infancy, however, twenty years ago, and we had much to learn about another industry. We also had to develop some new skills and rethink some old ones. When we began to work on *Molders* in the early 1970s, we had little knowledge of either the production or business sides of film-making. We had concepts, agendas and information, but little sense of how to make them happen on film. We *were* television and film enthusiasts though, and embraced the media as an arena for telling history. As historians, however,

we remained rooted in conventions of evidence and narrative which, as Hayden White has observed, reflect nineteenth-century notions of both art and science. We concentrated on words. When it came down to meaning, we did not understand how the transition from script to film would alter arguments, or how we could intervene.

Our first resolve after completing *Molders* (after congratulating ourselves on our sheer survival among the sharks – but that’s another story), was to take a more active role in production and to experiment with new forms. We have been struck, however, by how much our work continues to speak to the interplay between past and present; to offer counter-narratives to prevailing ‘official’ stories; and to reflect on the overlapping practices of historical writing and visual history.

While the history of our three other films illustrates shifts and continuities in our work, it also locates these works both in on-going historiographic and methodological debates. *Indians, Outlaws and Angie Debo* is the story of a woman historian excluded by her profession in the 1920s and 1930s who revealed the suppressed story of how American Indians were robbed and cheated by the U.S. government. *Perestroika From Below* is the story of Ukrainian coal miners conducting the first mass strike in the Soviet Union and struggling to create a democratic union. And *Margaret Sanger: A Public Nuisance* is the story of the opening of the first birth control clinic in America in 1916 – which was designed as a political confrontation and media event.

Indians, Outlaws and Angie Debo was made in a historical moment characterized both by the anti-feminist backlash of the Reagan era and the increasingly powerful contributions of feminist scholars, who were transforming our understanding of American history and culture. Similarly, Angie Debo’s life had been shaped in the tension between powerful conservative forces which tried to silence her and her prevailing vision as a scholar resisting ‘official’ history.

Angie’s American West was not the mythic stage of heroic white men. It was a place of contesting forces: of white settlers, oil interests, politicians, and tribal Indians – men, women and children with distinct biographies, rational intentions, and emotional attachments. The founding of *her* American West was marked by fraud, racism, violence, greed. For Angie Debo, history was not a thing of the past: in 1967 she was speaking out against U.S. involvement in Vietnam as, in her own words, a ‘tragic extension of our Indian policies’.

Debo was producing counter-narratives to official frontier and American Indian history from the early 1930s on. Her work presaged exactly the issues and points of view that the New Social History would embrace. She used oral histories and cultural evidence, along with written documents. She wrote history from the points of view of marginalized people. She staked out the ground for what might be called the new Native American history.

In this film, Angie Debo’s story is cast as another kind of Western heroic, one which runs against the grain of prevailing myths. A woman in a bonnet

in a sleepy prairie town turns out to be the truth-teller of a far-from-comfortable tale of American founding. Seen in domestic spaces – her kitchen, bedroom and living room, lace curtains and family photographs – in somewhat lyrically-shot compositions, she tells stories of murder and fraud. She is a survivor of the Western wars, nearly destroyed by the powerful men whose chicanery she exposed. Her battle to recuperate a suppressed version of history – and what she found – enabled Indian tribes to sue the government for sovereignty, land, and water rights that were rightfully theirs under law.

The subtext of the film is the story of Angie Debo and the Native American leader, Geronimo, who was imprisoned at Fort Sill, Oklahoma at about the same time Angie arrived in Oklahoma with her farmer parents, in the 1890s. As a child, she heard the terrible stories of him as a savage, and she lived to write the biography of Geronimo the man. Angie felt a great kinship with Geronimo, and that surprising fact led us to see them – a woman and an Apache Indian, members of groups systematically marginalized and trivialized in the history of the American West – as connected to one another and central to that history. In effect, it de-centers the myth of ‘civilizing’ settlers and ‘savage’ Indians, of macho men and the march of progress.

Our third film, *Perestroika From Below* (1990) was also shaped by our desire to intervene in the political discourse of the moment in which it was made: the crisis of socialism. Formally, the film grew out of an oral-history video documentary project. But, we were a group of U.S. historians of the left, trying to find out for ourselves what was happening in the Soviet Union in the momentous summer of 1989. At that time, U.S. newspapers and television stories were drawing almost exclusively on the views of the intelligentsia and politicians. Workers, we were told, were opposed to *perestroika*, to any change. Moreover, the media portrayed Soviet citizens within western social and political categories – as eager to embrace capitalism. While we were keenly aware of the ironies of our own subjective position, we remained deeply suspicious of such journalistic accounts; we wanted to see and hear for ourselves.

We arrived in Donetsk – a center of coal and steel production in the eastern Ukraine – to videotape interviews with retired pensioners, comparable to those done with former miners and steelworkers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh and Donetsk are ‘sister cities’). We planned to compare the struggle to restructure in two de-industrializing societies. Events, and our own sense of history and politics, took over.

Perestroika From Below is our counter-narrative to the one coming through the mass media. As historians, we recognized this as an astonishing historical moment: the first mass strike in the Soviet Union in sixty years. In a city which had long been closed to foreigners, we were given unprecedented access to meetings where miners asserted their public voices and struggled to establish democratic political forms.

As historians, too, we could recognize and hear old political language and

categories adapted to new possibilities. The past was not entirely rejected; we heard, for instance (possibly, in part, because we wanted to) reverberations of a quasi-syndicalist moment from the 1920s. Generations differed in their views; Lenin remained a revered figure even as other old leaders were rejected.

Because we had arrived with minimal equipment, appropriate for videotaping oral histories and loaned to us by Pittsburgh public-access TV, it was a challenge to capture the spontaneous and unanticipated (by us) debates among the miners. Shooting freewheeling meetings with a single camera and battery pack, with an inadequate lighting kit, and consumer-model camcorders as our only backup, we went for the action as best we could. In addition to the footage of the meeting, we came home with the interviews we did with pensioners, and a television documentary made by Donetsk TV which incorporated archival footage of Donetsk's history – a dub of which was given to us on 1/2" Secam. None of this material could generate the high production values demanded by U.S. public television, and, as noted above, completion funds were provided by England's Channel 4. Finally, it was the immediacy of the event that mattered, and the inadequate lighting and fuzzy 1/2" footage – we like to think – serves to highlight the spontaneity of the event. In fact, the footage we shot was an act of research, and the film has become a document – all the more unusual because it was made by historians who saw a moment of breaking news as just that: history.

We see *Perestroika From Below* as a meditation on history and subjectivity. Texts are juxtaposed to one another in ironic relationships. This process raises questions about developing methodologies in film for acknowledging historical sources and signalling the ways in which they have been manipulated and selectively used. This is an issue that becomes even more critical in the Margaret Sanger film.

In the meeting at which the miners challenge the authority of their old trade-union leader, the film contrasts the voices of the miners with those of the *apparachiks*. Similarly, the voices of the miners we interview are set in contrast with the archival footage wrapped in its Brezhnevian voice-of-God. The film also established the ambiguity of our own position as historian-narrators of a story filtered through our lens. The archival material is more complicated, however, for as documentary footage it is a kind of visual evidence, incorporated in a TV documentary overloaded with ideological baggage, and used in a highly ironic fashion.

In this film, we moved to a more self-conscious layering of texts. Here, the formal qualities of texts signify their sources. The archival footage is set off further from the recent footage with subtitles. Contemporary Russian rock music signals the new mood of the present and something of its relationship to Western influences. The issue of language translation is also handled differently in the U.S. and U.K., requiring multiple versions. Channel 4 required a natural voice track, to which they added subtitled

translations. American audiences are thought to lack the concentration required to read subtitles, and so the version for U.S. broadcast contains dramatized voice-over translations. (The issues surrounding translation in film raise significant and unexplored questions.)

While we structured the intended meanings of the film very carefully, in fact its meanings are constructed quite differently by different audiences and at different times. It was shown on Channel 4, in the context of programming on the Palestine Liberation Organization in the Mideast, the African National Congress in South Africa, political upheavals in Central Europe, etc. To the Donetsk miners, when we returned to show it to them in 1991, the film was received as biography: a personal triumph, warmly remembered. To the folks at Leningrad television (remember Leningrad?), it was just 'old news'. Now, four years later, *Perestroika From Below* is used in classrooms, viewed as an historical document.

Finally, we conclude with a discussion of *Margaret Sanger: A Public Nuisance*, which is an experiment in telling history. Funded by the Independent Television Service of U.S. public television, it was designed specifically to be shown in the context of the reproductive-rights debate. In 1990, when we began this film, reproductive rights, after a decade of Reagan and Bush, were under almost unrelieved siege. We did not set out to make a conventional documentary film, in the sense of a journalistic report on a social issue. We wanted to reach a general audience with a short film that got its message across, and could compete in an environment of television programming. We also meant to disrupt that environment a bit, by bringing a story from the past into the politically contested present.

The press was giving a lot of play to anti-choice forces who used language that sounded strangely reminiscent of Sanger's old adversaries. Pro-choice advocates were being put on the defensive. We wanted to show that the reproductive-rights debate did not begin with the abortion-rights struggle, that the issue had been given a very conscious and positive media spin over seventy years ago, in even tougher political times.

The film presents Sanger's story – in her words and from her point of view. It is based on the historical record – her words are all drawn from letters, diaries, her books and articles, court records and newspaper accounts. The film echoes the tone of the media environment of the time and the game that Sanger played with the press. Sanger's run-ins with the law – many of which she planned and organized – made great press opportunities, and reporters responded accordingly.

Sanger foregrounds media and its manipulations and calls attention to the fact that, for Sanger, media was an arena in which power relations were revealed and played out. Rather than *explain* what she did – for example by using an omniscient narrator – we decided to *show* it, by using her point of view, foregrounding media, and by suggesting the manner in which she engaged the press and created a media show, for a very serious purpose.

The film foregrounds mass media in order to highlight the way Sanger

created her own celebrity as a political strategy. There are broadly drawn fictional characters like ‘the Reporter’, and obvious video manipulations of archival film. The immigrant woman’s baby, for instance, is multiplying into a social statistic. While these devices present information, they also announce that this film’s claims to historical truth are not grounded in realism.

The Margaret Sanger film stretches, even violates, many of the rules of traditional written history. It does not claim to be objective; it has an ironic tone, it plays with genres, mixes up time, interjects parody, and otherwise jars you into noticing that it is not a ‘window on reality’, but is made of mediated bits and pieces of evidence. Recreated vaudeville skits are tinted to resemble documentary footage, for example, and then intercut with newspaper headlines from the period. In blurring lines between what is constituted as ‘the real’ and the ‘manipulated’, *Sanger* seeks to compel viewers to see film and photographs as produced by people and institutions with points of view, agendas, and particular ideas of what makes a good subject. From the opening driving beat of its soundtrack, which draws on a familiar melodramatic style, and the opening documentary photographs in which Sanger’s face is highlighted by video effects, *Margaret Sanger* announces itself and the process of representing the past as a self-interested construction.

The images and arguments we chose, of course, were intended to echo the contemporary reproductive-rights debate. There is a clear connection being made between the imagery and rhetoric of the reproductive-rights debate as it was shaped in 1916 and today. It suggests that history is not a thing of the past, safely over and done with – but that it resonates and stings in the present.

The Sanger film was not intended for a scholarly audience – its purpose is far more modest: to introduce a few ideas that TV viewers might pursue. Nonetheless it expresses a distinct set of assumptions about history, and it explores some of the possibilities of what constitutes historical evidence. This is not a history film that offers glimpses of the past in a realist mode. It does not use films and photographs as illustrations or as bits of transparent evidence. Rather it experiments with voice, point of view, and representations of time.

Conclusion

By and large, historians have best been able to relate to documentary films, which share the realist aesthetic of conventional history. These films seem to be reports of the real world: factual, chronological, and based on an assumption that there is a story, susceptible to objective reporting. In contrast to them, we suggest the Sanger film, and among others, Ross Gibson’s *Camera Natura* and John Hughes’s *One Way Street*, as beginnings of a genre that is sometimes called ‘post-modern’, which explores new strategies for historical narrative, both in terms of form and of content.

But, while our narrative strategies and styles have changed during the past twenty years, we continue to make historical films as political interventions, as narratives counter to prevailing accounts – whether of de-industrialization, anti-feminism, post-socialism or reproductive rights. Yet the historical concerns expressed in these visual texts have paralleled the theoretical and methodological concerns of the field, from the New Social History to feminist and post-modern theories of discourse and representation.

This is an auspicious moment for a convergence of historical writing and visual representations of history. Because film-makers imagine and represent the past in ways that expand the repertoire of historical evidence to include films, photographs, video and other visual materials, they open up important questions about the interpretation and understanding of that evidence. For example, how do we consider the impact of films and television, which have come to constitute a significant part of our shared social memory? As film-maker/historians we believe that one critical task is to confront the dilemma of historical veracity and the construction of ‘the real’.

As part of the politics of ‘representing reality’, as Bill Nichols frames it, historical films should offer meditations on reality. Things happened in the past, but actors see them from different perspectives and struggle to authorize their own view. Disparate sources of power, however, privilege some positions over others. In turn, audiences – and filmmakers – shape and respond to the past with present agendas. Media is unusually well-suited to create such complex narratives.

In sum, we cannot answer all the questions we raised at the outset, but are heartened that filmed history may be able, as Hayden White and Robert Rosenstone have urged, to lead history writing out of the narrative strictures of nineteenth-century historical conventions. Against traditions of empiricism and periodic calls for reinstating the ‘the master narrative’ (as if there were only one and it stood alone), we offer our own trajectory as part of the emergence of a postmodern cinematic historical practice.

We are building on the insights of Hayden White that drew historians’ attention to the narrative dimensions of their practice. New technologies such as CD-ROM and Hi-8 cameras will increase the development of non-linear stories where authors can stand in more immediate and interactive relation to subjects. Significant dangers of state and corporate surveillance and control exist in these technologies, and important questions of authorship and copyright remain unanswered. But the widespread availability of some of these technologies also promises to democratize self-representation and explode the proprietary claims of academic history. The past and present will interact, much as they do in history and memory, and in a much broadened public sphere. The challenge for historians will be to develop guidelines and criteria for its production, dissemination and authority in public discourse.

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