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DOCTORAL THESIS

LITERATURE, POLITICS AND THE MEDIA. ANGLO-AMERICAN REPRESENTATION OF 9/11

Abstract

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KEY WORDS: *9/11 fiction, representation, fictionalism, Muslim, terrorist attacks, otherness, television, political novel, documentary theatre*

Introduction

On September 11, 2001, the United States of America, and, at the same time, the entire Western world, were struck with the most devastating terrorist attack up to that date, orchestrated by the Muslim fundamentalist organisation Al-Qaeda, in which four planes were hijacked and turned into weapons of mass destruction. Three of them reach their targets, hitting the two towers of the World Trade Center complex in New York and the Pentagon building in Washington DC, and killing around 3,000 people, most of them, civilians. The event, metonymically referred to as 9/11 is live broadcast by the televisions around the world, thus entering the sphere of representation and fictionalisation. Its immediate outcome is the military operation in Afghanistan, initiated by the United States and supported by NATO, with the aims of overthrowing the Taliban regime and capturing the mastermind of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden. The Western coalition's military operations are further pursued in 2003 with an attack on Iraq and the deposition of the dictator Saddam Hussein. These events are known in historical and diplomatic sources, as well as in the press, as The War on Terror, a phrase coined by President George W. Bush in his address to the American Congress.

However, the attacks have had an equally powerful impact on the Western collective mindset, determining changes in understanding and accepting the Other, an unprecedented rise of phobia and paranoid reactions to the Muslim Arabs, but also adverse reactions of the Europeans, who saw themselves drawn into a war which not all deemed justified.

In this context, the cultural intertexts and interdiscursive relations produce a new literary subgenre, 9/11 fiction, which borrows from various text types in order to create new fictional patterns, some of them neorealist, anchored in the immediate reality of this event, others, still lingering into a postmodern paradigm, and then some looking back to the experimentalism of the first decades of the last century, in a desperate attempt to flee from reality and terror. These literary texts, at the crossroads between war literature and urban fiction, and also at that between trauma and political

engagement, represent the focal point of the doctoral thesis entitled **Literature, Politics and the Media – Anglo-American Representations of 9/11**.

Although it is, basically, a critical study of a form of Anglo-American literature, this thesis tackles the subgenre of 9/11 fiction interdisciplinarily, with reference to historical sources (official documents and press articles), trying to identify the ideological markers which may determine identity changes. The theoretical scaffolding is mainly based on the related theories of the American school of New Historicism and the British Cultural Materialism, which consider that literary texts are inseparable from the non-literary ones in a given temporal, cultural and socio-political context. Also reference is made to the writings of some important ideologists of the twentieth century, chief among whom Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. Equally useful are imagology, the concepts of author and authority, reality and fiction, and the sociological-oriented theories of anti-Americanism, Orientalism and Occidentalism.

The premise of the paper is that the media and political thinking influence the aesthetics and the discourse of contemporary literature, emphasising the complex relation between individual and history, constructing individual, national and global identities and manifesting a high degree of fictionalisation. The three discourses in the title – journalistic, political and literary – are therefore considered in terms of the representations they provide and not in terms of a reality which either eludes them or is purposefully altered by them. While the discursive elements belonging to politics and the media abound in the twenty-first century neorealist fiction, it is also true that fiction, in turn, pushes through the journalistic and the political text. These three types establish an interdiscursive relationship, providing trilateral overlapping, allusions and echoes. One cannot claim that 9/11 fiction is the only one borrowing from the other two discourses, traditionally regarded as objective, which is why the present thesis attempts to underline the fictional elements present in politics and the media, which is not intended so as to affect their credibility but to create a bridge between fiction and reality based on facts. What seems reality can easily be fictional or, at least, fictionalised/ fictionalising – through manipulation, disinformation, etc. Neither is literature, on the other hand, regarded as a faithful, believable mirror of reality, although the immixture of the real into fiction cannot be denied – which is easily proven

in relation to the general context and aspects of authorial authority more and more evident at the level of the literary text.

Yet another important aspect is the reconfiguration of ideas and reconstructed images of reality in a context in which the Western world becomes increasingly aware of the Oriental otherness. The second half of the thesis tries to argue that, wilfully or not, the three discourses, hybridised and influenced by ideologies and prejudices, accentuate the differences between the East and the West and the demarcation line thereof, even in the circumstances of free circulation and lack of geopolitical boundaries.

Thus, the aims of the doctoral thesis are as follows:

1. to recount the historical context (with emphasis on 9/11) by referring to its encodings in official records, in the media and literary texts;
2. to prove that reality is accessed through and impacted on by discourse and representation, regardless of the type of text which forwards it, and to map the role of literature among the apparatuses of cultural and social significance production;
3. to outline the tenets of 9/11 fiction, describing its negotiating between postmodernism's rewritings of modernism and the post-postmodern return to realism;
4. to discuss the trauma experienced on both shores of the Atlantic and its reflection in literary texts, by opposing American and British attitudinal patterns in relation to 9/11;
5. to analyse the Western identity as a mutable construct made up of multiple selves, partially reconfigured 'after the fall', underlining the idea that the West, though fragmented and shattered, is still a *Self* in the relation to the terrorist *Other*;
6. to look into the Western Islamophobia at the level of the media and of the public sphere, and to trace the representation of the Muslim Other in literary texts belonging to 9/11 fiction, and identify their stereotyping nature.

It is worth mentioning that 9/11 fiction has already come to the attention of academic researchers and literary critics, papers and books approaching it from various perspectives having been constantly published starting with 2008. The present undertaking aims to inscribe itself in this still insufficiently explored territory, its main originality elements being: the analysis of the non-fictional texts as discourse and representation, laying emphasis on their fictionalised/ fictionalising nature, the approach to 9/11 as political fiction and not as a traumatic one, the identification of the elements of ideologically-marked identity and alterity both in the texts in focus and outside the conventional worlds of fiction, in text generally perceived as forwarding objective truths. The perspective is transatlantic, which is useful in pointing the differences and similarities of the attitudes to 9/11 in the Western world, under the methodological constraints which only allow discussing British and American texts.

The corpus, selected according to the criterion of relevance, is made up of fictional writings which contain direct references to 9/11 or the war and terror and which embed elements of political or journalistic discourse into the literary text. It consists of four novels, one short-story and one play: *Falling Man* (2007) by Don DeLillo, *Bleeding Edge* (2013) by Thomas Pynchon, *Saturday* (2005) by Ian McEwan, *Dead Air* (2002) by Iain Banks, *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* (2006) by Martin Amis, and *Stuff Happens* (2004) by David Hare. Added to these are some political essays and editorials published shortly after the attacks by some of the authors of these literary texts: *Beyond Belief* and *Only Love, and then Oblivion* by Ian McEwan, *Fear and Loathing* (published in volume with the title *The Second Plane*) and *The Age of Horrorism* (republished as *Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind*) by Martin Amis, and, respectively, *In the Ruins of the Future by* Don DeLillo.

The thesis is structured into two parts with two chapters each, containing both theoretical and practical aspects. The first part, **September 11: Re-Encodings in the Media and the Literary Text**, opens the path towards an ancient form of critical investigation, reality versus fiction. The two chapters are built so as to stress the idea that the boundary between fiction and non-fiction has been blurred and that the reading audience has had more and more difficulties in winnowing one from the other. This

way, one may discuss reality in fiction at the literary level, in texts profoundly marked by the real – from dealing with some very recent real events to the author's political participation. It is also true that the fictionalisation of the press and political discourse through manipulation, propaganda, ideology, discourse, representation and power relations may be regarded as fiction in reality.

Chapter I
Re-readings and re-writings of history

Chapter I is structured, in its first part, **Cultural theories as reading grids**, as a review of the ideas formulated by the theorists of the main critical directions which support the analysis, i.e., New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, regarded as having similar but not identical tenets. Starting from Stephen Greenblatt – for the American school of New Historicism – and, respectively, Raymond Williams for the British Cultural Materialism, the chapter outlines the main contributions in the field, the influences which led to the foundation of the critical apparatus for the theorists of the two critical directions and, last but not least, the operational concepts they use. The choice of the theoretical grid is motivated by the interest of the two in exploring the power relations at the textual level and, at the same time, the intrinsic connection between literature and history and by the need to point out the ideological and political ends which permeate the literary text. As neorealist/ historical contemporary literature requires inclusion in a large web of texts and the permanent reference to historical context, the investigation of "both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text" (Greenblatt 2005: 6) has been deemed necessary, by stressing the idea that the literary and non-literary texts are inseparable and that "no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths" (Veeser 1989: xi). Whilst New Historicism primarily analyses the interaction between state power and cultural forms, Cultural Materialism aims to trace the way in which dominating structures, ideologically marked, influence the identity at the individual level and may also contaminate the national, Western or even global identity.

The second theoretical subchapter, **Representation of representation: all is representation**, deals with the concepts of discourse and representation, as understood

and used in this thesis. Discourse, in Michel Foucault's view, is a product of knowledge which makes up the a priori condition of possibility and establishes the formation rules by which the statements acquire unity as a text. The discursive practices are meant to create 'the order of truth' or the truth accepted as reality at a given historical moment. They contribute, together with the power structures (the so-called disciplinary societies), in the creation of the hegemonic or dominant discourses. In short, discourse is understood as a constructed representation of reality, representation having been defined by British cultural theorist Stuart Hall as "the way in which meaning is somehow given to the things which are depicted through the images or whatever it is, on screens or the words on a page which *stand for* what we're talking about" (1997: 6). Therefore, representation is an imperfect form of imitating life, in close connection with a number of factors outside the text: the author's distance in time and space from the represented real fact, his or her subjectivity, as well as various social, political, economic and cultural constraints.

To conclude, the notions of ideology and identity in the contemporary historical context and that of truth as a discursive construct influenced by power structures, together with the critical assessment of the political and journalistic texts, as a permanent source of non-fiction compulsory to the contextual analysis, are the major argument for opting for New Historicism and Cultural Materialism as the main reading grids.

Following the idea of historical conceptualization, of New Historicist inspiration, the latter half of the first chapter, **Making history: politics and the media in the twenty-first century**, is an outline of the extremely serious events which have led to the emergence of new forms of artistic expression meant to engrave them in the Western cultural memory. The attacks on September 11 are documented starting from the official *The 9/11 Commission Report* (2004), corroborated with the way in which the event was presented in the media – firstly in television, through the live broadcast from the scene of the disaster and through President George W. Bush's televised interventions, and, during the following days, in the written press. By emphasising the idea that the attacks had left the real when entering the area of representation as soon as CNN went live, soon followed by all the other important news channels, the

subchapter analyses the first few minutes of the broadcast from a literary-oriented perspective, proving that it is just an attempt at obtaining information, and not one of providing it, and that the discourse used on television, and not the event itself, ends up being a hypotext for the ulterior references to 9/11. By interviewing the eye-witnesses, CNN transforms them into narrators who provide their own subjective interpretations and representations of the events, although their role should be that of narratees.

Intended as a transition towards 9/11 fiction, the next subchapter discusses three editorial pieces published by the British newspaper The Guardian in the days following the attacks, signed by two of the most important contemporary British authors, Ian McEwan and Martin Amis. It raises the question as to whether this transposition of the author of fiction into non-fiction is an attempt to bring fiction closer to reality or whether it hints at a reversal of their roles through fiction's coming into the domain of the real. Noting that entire paragraphs from these press articles have further been embedded into the literary texts of the two, the distinction is made between the two authorial stances – the former, emotional, present at the level of the non-fictional text, and the latter, analytical, in the literary text, which is already a contradiction with the text functions – the analysis attempts to advance the idea that contemporary fiction, deeply anchored in the surrounded reality, has an active, participative dimension, and is intertextually inspired from the media.

In brief, the chapter aims to create a bridge between the communicational spheres in focus: the so-called objective, real-fact-based discourses, and the subjective literature. While fiction can never be taken for reality, the latter can still be altered through discourse and representation, thus acquiring a certain degree/ role of fictionalisation.

Chapter II
Literary re-writings of history and politics after 9/11

The chapter sets out with an overview of the most important literary texts belonging to 9/11 fiction, emphasising their heterogeneity in point of genre, style and narrative techniques. Moreover, the introductory part briefly accounts for the critics' dilemma with regard to the postmodernity or post-postmodernity of these texts, for the attempt

at establishing a 9/11 fiction canon and for the symbolism of the attacks, from Habermas's and Baudrillard's perspectives, and also justifies the choices made in point of selecting the titles included in the corpus. With consideration to the already mention heterogeneous character of the subgenre, which brings together neorealist narratives, almost-experimental novels reminding of the early twentieth-century modernism, metanarratives rewritings of political and journalistic discourses, and representations of trauma, the selection has been made in view of tracing aspects related to mass-media, politics, anti-Americanism, terrorism and Muslim alterity and Western trauma, but, naturally, not all the texts are equally relevant for these focal points. This is the reason why, based on their representativeness for more categories, some texts are analysed from two different points of view, whereas others have been relegated to the category which best fits their thematic contents.

This chapter is divided according to the temporal criterion into narratives which are set on September 11 and, respectively, texts whose action is set during the war on terror. It discusses the novel *Dead Air* (2002) by Scottish novelist Iain Banks, the play *Stuff Happens* (2004), by the renowned playwright and scriptwriter David Hare, and the novel *Saturday* (2005) by Ian McEwan.

Banks's novel, which begins with the news of the attacks during a party in London, may be read as a text about identity, the relationship between the individual and history, changes in the collective mindset, media manipulation and, of course, embedded politics commented by a radio journalist, a character whose views reminds those of the real author. The analysis has revealed a form of neorealism which departs from the rules of traditional realism, nearing, to a certain extent, those of historiographic metafiction. The text presents hypotheses and speculations about the attacks on the World Trade Center and does so with that carelessness of the writer who feels that literature should remain a censorship-free area, which allows him to speak up behind the guise of fiction. A rather transparent aim of the Scottish writer is that of helping his readers to draw away from the manipulation of the media.

A similar undertaking is also David Hare's play, *Stuff Happens*, but this is inspired from reality to a greater extent, borrowing entire excerpts from the real, documented and archived statements made by important British and American

politicians and mixing them with fictional speeches of the same figures. The play, which its author defines as historical, is close to documentary theatre in point of structure, the dramatization of the events triggering questions about the fact and fiction relationship. Hare's characters are named Bush, Blaire, Cheney, Rumsfeld or de Villepin, and their parts suggest, metatheatrically perhaps, their functioning as puppeteers of a world represented only by the unnamed, the anonymous: "a journalist", "an actor", "a Brit in New York", "an Iraqi exile", who maintain only the right to comment upon the events whose course has been established by the potentates behind closed doors.

The novel *Saturday* by Ian McEwan provides a completely different perspective, despite its construction as a cultural intertexts inspired from mass-media, which it also comments. Undoubtedly inspired by Virginia Woolf's writing, *Saturday* is an intellectualised refuge from the painful reality of the new millennium. The novel focuses on the trauma experienced by the Western world after the attacks on September 11, the characters living under the empire of the inexorability of another terrorist attack (which, otherwise, became extremely real for the Londoners on July 7, 2005, exactly in the year of publication of this novel). It is set on a single day, but one extremely resonant for recent history: February 15, 2003, the day of the great protests against the military intervention in Iraq, and (re)presents, through an imagined dialogue between a scientist (the neurosurgeon Perowne) and a woman of letters (his daughters), the two opposing positions of the Western world in relation to the American military operations supported by the United Kingdom.

Despite the obvious differences between the three literary texts discussed in this chapter, their analysis has proven that the relation between reality and fiction is bidirectional, in the sense that, on the one hand, apparent reality may contain fictionalising elements and, on the other hand, fiction may be useful in veiling some truths.

The second part of the thesis, **Ideological Reconfigurations of Identity in the Literary Representations of 9/11**, attempts to determine the way in which these fictional and non-fictional texts influence identity and the collective mindset with the

help of ideology. It focuses on the changes of paradigm at the individual and national levels after 9/11. The construction of the two chapters that make up this part, **The Shattered Self of the West** and **Extreme Otherness – The Muslim Menace** respectively, mirrors the dichotomy between Self and Other, between the West and the East, the West being considered the Self if only because the text analysed are all products of Western civilisation.

Chapter III
The Shattered Self of the West

The third chapter brings forth additional theoretical aspects, setting out from the idea of cultural hegemony, as it was outlined in the Italian ideologist Antonio Gramsci's writings. The premise of the chapter is the West is a Self which is made up of more hypostases, at varied Westernisation levels, the absolute hegemon of the latter half of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first being the United States of America, an economic and cultural colonizer rather than a political one. This is the reason why the Western civilisations east of the U.S. (i.e. the great European powers) experience reactions similar to those felt by the colonized nations during the age of the empire. Imagology comes to support the analysis of the Western Self, in view of identifying the stereotypes which operate at the literary level in the construction of national identity. For methodological purposes, this chapter has been divided according to the geographical criterion – America (the USA) and the rest of the world, here represented only by the United Kingdom. This way, the subchapter **At the heart of the storm: America after 9/11** discusses the impact of the events of 9/11 on the American people, confronted for the first time since the Civil War with a tragedy of such magnitude on their soil. The literary texts selected for analysis, *Falling Man* (2007) and *Bleeding Edge* (2013), are signed by two of the most important contemporary American writers, Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, respectively, and provide two complementary variants of the American hetero-images.

On the one hand, DeLillo's novel, ekphrastic, modernist, pointing to the inner dimension and suggesting psychoanalytical investigations into trauma and Freudian mourning and melancholy, provides images of the American who cannot understand

what has befallen them and is unable to move on. There are also political and journalistic insertions but they are relegated to a reality from which the characters try to distance themselves. *Falling Man* is not literally a novel about 9/11 but rather a novel about the many representations of 9/11. It is a novel of a falling empire, symbolically represented by the fall of the two towers. The depressing auto-image of the American defeated by history is counterbalanced in Pynchon's novel with that of the inquiring American who at least takes into consideration the idea that the conspiracy theories around the attacks on 9/11 may have a grain of truth.

Bleeding Edge is a political commentary on American cultural hegemony, an alternative history in which reality moves to the virtual domain, a contemporary historeme which does not regard history as the representation of the major events but as a sum of insignificant events and ordinary people. Pynchon's ordinary people are not the culturally-impaired Americans (a European stereotype, otherwise), nor DeLillo's beaten men; they represent typical Western cultural models which inhabit a New York seen as an essential space of American (and even Western) urbanism.

The second part of the chapter, **The Big (Br)Other: Anti-Americanism in British Contemporary Literature**, also focuses on the American, this time displacing them to the position of a Western Other, from the European perspective. The subchapter features an outline which reviews the centennial tradition of European prejudice against America, known as anti-Americanism, which emerged in the eighteenth century and perpetuated throughout the nineteenth as despise for a backward, uncivilised nation, only to turn, with the expansion of the American spheres of influence after World War II and especially after 9/11, into envy, resentment and even Schadenfreude. The British literary texts considered illustrative for this form of alterity, *Dead Air* by Iain Banks and *Stuff Happens* by David Hare, posit the question as to whether such attitudes reflect a marginal positioning in relation to American imperialism or, on the contrary, a Eurocentric one, which looks down on the Americans. The answer is − as always − somewhere in between, but it is more important that both texts provide a rather negative hetero-image of the Americans, be them ordinary people (in Banks's case) or the military and political leaders of the United States (and, by extension, of the entire world in Hare's case. It is also interesting that the European tendency is one of moving on

much quickly after the trauma induced by the terrorist attack. Westerners, sympathising with the American people and worried that they might be the next target, the Brits seem, nevertheless, to easily overcome the shock, which suggests once again that distance and mediation tend to attenuate the negative effects of what happens to somebody else.

However, this second part of the thesis has been intended to underline the idea that the West, though shattered by political events or by hegemonic claims on the two shores of the Atlantic Ocean, is still a Self in relation the threatening Other. This Other, represented in the twenty-first century by the Muslim terrorist, is the key element of the final chapter of the thesis.

Chapter IV
Extreme Otherness: The Muslim Menace

The fourth and the last chapter of this doctoral thesis is structured into four parts, starting from the antithetic description of two theories of representation, anchored in culture, history and sociology. The former refers to the famous concept of Orientalism, as understood since the publication of the work of the same title by Edward Said (1978), while the latter, Occidentalism, is a reaction to the arguments of the American scholar of Palestinian descent, who completely denies its existence by suggesting that the Western hegemony since the colonial era to the present day has prevented the Orient from offering, in its turn, representations of the Occident. The thesis only borrows from *Orientalism* aspects related to the constructed images of the Other, acquired through discourse and representation. In other words, it uses Foucault's influence on Said in order to prove that the products of the cultural sphere are representational, and focuses on the identification of the "contemporary Orientalist attitudes which flood the press and the popular mind" (Said 2003: 108), i.e. on the stereotypical representations of the Other projected in the contemporary collective mindset.

Occidentalism, on the other hand, should not be regarded as a grid of analysis, since the texts in focus are Western culture products. It should rather be construed as a reference frame and as intertextual resource for the construction of the characters embodying Muslim terrorists, be them real or imaginary. The subchapter gives

examples from the statements or writings of some important Muslim fundamentalist leaders and thinkers, which will be found, in the second part of the chapter, in the lines or ideas expressed by such characters.

In an attempt to understand the reasoning of those who choose to become martyrs, while also killing a large number of innocent people in the name of Allah, the following subchapter deals with the society control mechanisms, starting from Foucault's, Deleuze's and Althusser's ideas and emphasising the influence of religion as a main control factor in the Islamic civilisations. Prefaced by a short description of the Islamophobic nature of the press commentaries after 9/11, which had an overwhelming influence on the public opinion, resulting in unjustified attacks on the Muslim in general – stereotyped as terrorists – the literary analyses which make up the applicative part of this chapter focus on two very important texts belonging to 9/11 fiction, more precisely on Martin Amis's short story, *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* (2006) and, for the second time, on Don DeLillo's novel, *Falling Man* (2007), in an attempt to debunk the criticism that they would be two Orientalist texts loaded with prejudices, and to prove that the stereotypes present in the two texts make up portraits of some fundamentalist Islamists turned murdered through political or religious indoctrination. Amis, a well-known adversary of Islamism, which he clearly differentiates from Islam, exaggerates a familiar stereotype - that of the evil terrorist -, defamiliarising it by constructing his character as an atheist completely uninterested in the Qur'an's promises for the afterlife. DeLillo takes a different path to reach the same point, namely one of constructing a character which is normal by Western standards, which is manipulated and ends up being one of the nineteen hijackers who were nothing but instruments in the attacks on September 11.

Afterthoughts

The attacks of 9/11 have changed history with the effect they produced at the geopolitical level, becoming represented as soon as their broadcast on TV started. This, in turn, produced a large number of hypertextual representations in the world of politics, in the media and in fiction and art. The political and journalistic discourses

work together in imposing their truths and in manipulating history, whereas fiction takes two routes: either following the official, objective, accounts of the two, or subverting them in an attempt at drawing attention to their fictionalism. This is, otherwise, the most important aspect featured throughout the thesis: the representation of 9/11 takes many forms and comes through varied media, and it should be understood as such, and not as reality, whether it is forwarded by George W. Bush and The 9/11 Commission Report, by CNN and The New York Times, or by novelists and playwrights.

One of the forms of representing the attacks on the World Trade Center is 9/11 fiction (also featured in the literature as post-9/11 fiction), which is a literary subgenre which lacks stylistic cohesion, the texts often being political and activist, representative for the trauma at the level of the entire Western civilisation and, sometimes, accused of prejudiced stances against the Muslims. They can be considered as belonging either to urban fiction or to war fiction, creating alternative worlds in an attempt to overcome trauma.

Whether it is here to stay or is just a transient genre under the empire of emotions, which will soon fade away like the yesterday news, 9/11 fiction is worth of receiving critical attention for its interplay of reality and fiction, for its provocative realism and for bringing forth the terror experienced by the West, facing an enemy that they cannot comprehend. Prospectively, the research may be further pursued either by discussing a larger number of texts, thus compiling an exhaustive monograph of the genre, or by attempting a more linguistically- and less culturally-oriented approach of the political discourse embedded in the literary one (thus crossing the boundaries towards CDA), or by including the 9/11 fiction in a long-lasting tradition of war literature.

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