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# Discovering the Beauty of the Quotidian: The Contemporary *Flâneur* in Jim Jarmusch's *Paterson*

By Qingyang Zhou

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*American independent cinema*  
*Charles Baudelaire*  
*Walter Benjamin*

When asked to explain the motivation for setting his new film in Paterson, New Jersey, at a press conference during the Cannes Film Festival in 2016, director Jim Jarmusch mentioned his fascination with the convergence of a rich history and a diverse group of people in Paterson: “I was obsessed, for maybe twenty years, with this little city not far from New York City, and yet rarely spoken of, a kind of forgotten city, very ethnically diverse, with ... a very fascinating history from the Industrial Revolution.” The titular character in *Paterson* (2016) adopts the same inquisitive attitude toward the city as the director does. Working as a bus driver, Paterson (Adam Driver) routinely explores the man-made and natural landscapes of Paterson, NJ, by transporting passengers across town and eavesdropping on interesting conversations about the city’s bygone celebrities and events. Over the course of seven days, the film meticulously traces the repetitive daily routine of Paterson, recording the character’s encounters with the quotidian – seemingly insignificant objects and people. The film’s poetic structure and emphasis on mundane elements together advocate for a leisurely but also meticulous and inquisitive approach to life that often eludes contemporary American cinema.

Paterson’s act of traversing an urban landscape while recording his reflections on life through poetry harks back to the behaviors of the *flâneur* outlined by Charles Baudelaire in the 1860s and rearticulated by Walter Benjamin in the 1920s. Both Baudelaire and Benjamin define *flânerie* as a three-component process of walking among the crowd, observing the urban dwellers and then transforming these visual investigations into creative writing. The striking similarities between Paterson’s behaviors and those of the European *flâneur* justify using *flânerie* as the theoretical framework to analyze the relationship between poetic writing and driving in the film. Nevertheless, Jarmusch makes one significant change when adapting the concept to a contemporary American context: whereas the advent of consumerism in the early twentieth century undermines the European *flâneur*’s leisurely act of observing the city and commenting on its

dwellers, Jarmusch's *flâneur* resists the powerful effect of capitalism by declining to use modern technology or publish his poems. Paterson's evasion of the defining aspects of modern life does not marginalize him; instead, it empowers him to discover the hidden beauty in life that goes unnoticed by others. As such, Paterson becomes a reflection of Jarmusch, who adamantly refuses to enter mainstream cinema and has staunchly remained in the independent sector for the past three decades.

In essence, *Paterson* traces the main character's daily routine over the course of a week: after waking up precisely at 6:10 a.m., Paterson briefly converses with his wife, Laura (Golshifteh Farahani), before going to work. He jots down several lines of poetry before departure from the bus terminal. While en route, the driver listens to conversations of passengers on board, rivets on the movements of pedestrians and the city's landscape, while continuing to write the unfinished poetic verses in his mind. During his lunch break, he sits in a quiet park, enjoys the mellifluous sound of a waterfall nearby, and muses on his beloved Laura. At night, Paterson reunites with his wife for a delightful dinner and continues with his literary creations for a while before walking his dog Marvin to a nearby bar, where a glass of beer and some chats with the bar's owner and patrons end the day. The next day resumes the same routine, only with different conversations and new encounters. Explorations of the city and its people feature prominently in Paterson's diurnal activities. Conversations with the bar owner, Doc (Barry Shabaka Henley), and among the bus passengers inform the protagonist about celebrities from Paterson, such as black boxer Rubin Carter, Italian anarchist Gaetano Bresci, comedian Lou Costello, and poet Allen Ginsberg (Bowen). The camera frequently tracks Paterson driving past or walking through deserted textile factories that once dominated the urban landscape during the heyday of the Industrial Revolution. In his free time, Paterson continues his discoveries of the city by reading the five-volume epic poem anthology *Paterson* written by Williams Carlos Williams, while his own poems also employ the city as their muse.

Paterson's repetitive act of looking, observing, reading, writing, and surveying the city's past and present epitomizes the *flânerie* defined by French writer Charles Baudelaire. In his 1863 book *Le peintre de la vie moderne (The Painter of Modern Life)*, Baudelaire defines the figure of the *flâneur* as an observer and philosopher who marvels at the beauty and harmony of life in modern Paris and turns his passing observations into eternity through poems and novels (4-5, 11). The *flâneur* is a man of the world who "wants to know, understand and appreciate everything that happens on the surface of our globe" (Baudelaire 7). With a keen curiosity and a quest for knowledge similar to that of a child, he "pleasurably absorb[s] in gazing at the crowd, and mingling ... in the turmoil of thought that surrounds him" (Baudelaire 7).

Baudelaire's definition of the *flâneur* was expanded by German philosopher Walter Benjamin in the 1920s. Benjamin reconfigured the *flâneur* as a decipherer of urban and visual texts, a historian, and a sociologist. The act of *flânerie* now combines

*looking, observing (of people, social types, social contexts and constellations), ... reading the city and its population (its spatial images, its architecture, its human configurations), and ... reading written texts ... on the city.... The flâneur can also be a producer ... of literary texts (including lyrical and prose poetry as in the case of Baudelaire).*

(Frisby 82-83; all original emphases)

Whereas Baudelaire's *flâneur* concentrates on observing the present moment, Benjamin's *flâneur* incorporates the exploration of historiography and ethnography into his sociological adventure (Frisby 83). No longer rooted in Paris, the new *flâneur* could be a native of any given city, allowing the originally Eurocentric concept to enter the cultural investigation of Latin America (Bolle 19) and Japan (Goebel 377). Working like a detective who tirelessly searches for clues from the past, the *flâneur* is required to fall back on a daily routine, for it is through the repetitive pursuance of details that he could uncover long-forgotten fragments of history (Winks 245).

The main character in Jarmusch's film embodies the *flâneur* defined by Baudelaire and Benjamin. As a contemporary American *flâneur*, Paterson strives both to discern everything taking place in his vicinity at the present moment, as the Baudelairean *flâneur* does, and to explore the city's past as suggested by Benjamin. For instance, in the bar scene on Tuesday night, the owner Doc asks Paterson whether Iggy Pop qualifies to be put on the bar's "wall of fame," because Paterson's broad knowledge of historical figures from Paterson guarantees a sound judgment. Immediately afterward, Paterson discovers a new figure on the wall and asks Doc who the person is. Doc expresses his excitement at outsmarting the always well-informed Paterson by saying "Ha, I finally got you!" These brief exchanges between the two characters demonstrate both Paterson's acquaintance with the city's celebrities and his keen observation of the surroundings at any given moment.

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A key to the *flâneur's* success at responding to the multiplicity of life is, as defined by Baudelaire, to be "incognito," namely "to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world" (9). In this regard, Paterson's occupation as a bus driver directly contributes to his unique ability to perceive the minutiae in his vicinity. The bus's safety shield precisely serves this role of mediation by blocking Paterson from the gaze of the passengers, thus granting him the privilege of peeking at his observed subjects through the overhead monitor screen and eavesdropping on their dialogues while remaining unnoticed (see Figures 1 and 2). Similarly, the windshield allows Paterson a view of the outside, without being seen by the subjects of his observation. For instance, about a third of the way through the film, on Wednesday, Paterson is shown driving on the road and briefly stopping at the traffic light. A mother telling her twin daughters to be careful while crossing the street draws Paterson to look down (see Figure 3). A subsequent eyeline match from behind the windshield shows Paterson watching the girls walking past the bus. His vision lingers at the pedestrians for a moment before shifting back onto the road. The mother concentrates on her daughters, without even noticing the curious eyes behind the windshield. One of the girls turns her head slightly toward the direction of Paterson, but her vision is completely obscured by the thick black glasses she

Figure 1: Paterson gleefully eavesdrops on his passengers' conversation without being noticed (*Paterson*, Amazon Studios and K5 International, 2016).



Figure 2: Paterson looks at passengers through the overhead monitor, hidden behind the safety shield  
(*Paterson*, Amazon Studios and K5 International, 2016).



Figure 3: Paterson looks down on the three pedestrians (*Paterson*, Amazon Studios and K5 International, 2016).



wears (see Figure 4). Paterson's clear view of the three pedestrians contrasts with the girls' inability to return his gaze, thus epitomizing the anonymity of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, who mingles in the crowd, studies individuals in the crowd, yet always stays invisible from the gaze of his subjects.

Besides a passionate investigation of the city and an anonymous observation of the urban dwellers, the third important component of *flânerie* is the *flâneur's* act of reinvigorating his diurnal perceptions of the world in poetic writing. According to Baudelaire, the most important part of the day comes with the crimson glow of sunset, when the *flâneur* is compelled to return to his writing desk and resuscitate his daily encounters. Utilizing his full imagination, the *flâneur* reorganizes his memories and distills the natural beauty of life in writing, thereby bequeathing perpetuity to the ephemeral, transitory, and fugitive moments of modernity (Baudelaire 12). These highly creative and intellectual activities are the crucial elements that separate the *flâneur* from ordinary gapers and idlers on the street (Ferguson 28).

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The convergence of traversing the city, observing people, and rendering philosophical ruminations on the subjects through the creative rhetoric of poetry is beautifully presented in the second poetic sequence about eight minutes into the film. The sequence begins with slow-paced, melodic nondiegetic instrumental music, setting a pensive mood that carries throughout the scene. The camera is posited from the point of view of Paterson, moving along the streets as he drives through the man-made urban landscape, observing pedestrians, shoppers, and children on the playground. A dissolve then introduces a profile image of Paterson from behind (see Figure 5). At the same time, the title of a poem, "Love Poem" (see Appendix), appears in cursive on the right-hand side of the screen, while images of running water and an extreme long shot of the Paterson Great Falls gradually superimpose on the close-up of Paterson, taking the contemporary American *flâneur* away from the roads and onto the city's natural landscape. As these overlapping images fade out, a medium close-up followed by the camera's downward tilt shows Paterson writing a love poem for his wife Laura during his lunch break. Subsequently, an extreme close-up of Paterson holding an Ohio Blue Tip matchbox intermingles with a medium long shot of him against the backdrop of the waterfall (see Figure 6). Gradually, these two images fade into a black screen, and then a close-up of Laura in bed begins alternating with the longing and tender countenance of Paterson (see Figure 7). The constant fading in and fading out of shots with Paterson, Laura, the waterfall, the matchbox, and the roadway create a phantasmagoria that immerses the audience in the poetic amalgamation of words, music, and images. A sense of genuine, unmediated interpersonal connections stands at the core of this sequence and offers a celebration of uneventful but philosophical moments within a seemingly mundane daily routine.

It is perhaps not surprising that the very first poem of the film is a love poem. As Anne Friedberg argues, "the *flâneur* was a male urban subject, endowed with a gaze at an elusive and almost unseen *flâneuse*. The *flâneur* is an urban poet, whose movements through a newly configured urban space often transformed



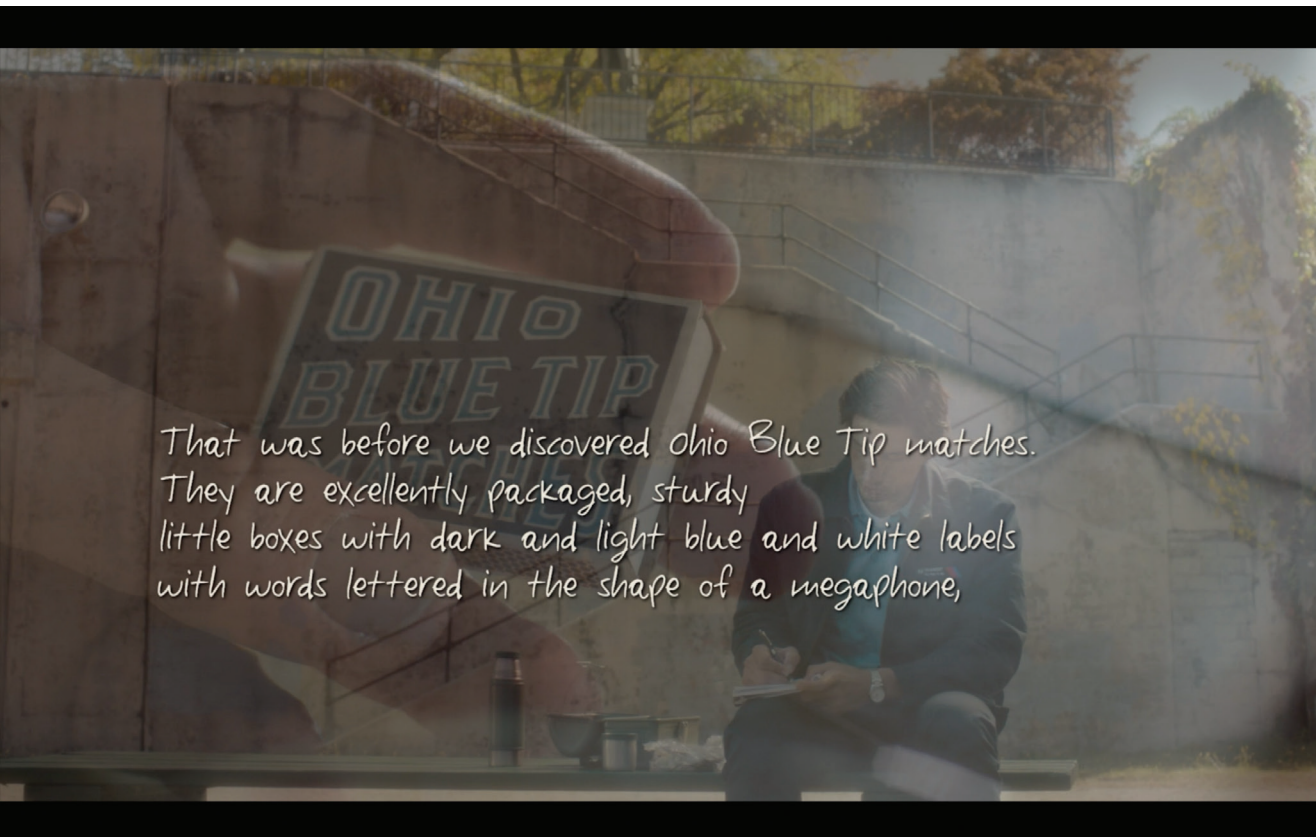
Figure 4: The mother and the daughters are unaware of the gaze (*Paterson*, Amazon Studios and K5 International, 2016).



Figure 5: The poetic use of dissolves (*Paterson*, Amazon Studios and K5 International, 2016).



Figure 6: Poetry and nature intermingled (*Paterson*, Amazon Studios and K5 International, 2016).



That was before we discovered Ohio Blue Tip matches. They are excellently packaged, sturdy little boxes with dark and light blue and white labels with words lettered in the shape of a megaphone,

Figure 7: The subject in the love poem (*Paterson*, Amazon Studios and K5 International, 2016).



lighting, perhaps, the cigarette of the woman you love,

the female's presence into a textual homage" (33). In other words, the female figure is the muse of the male poet and the source of his enjoyment (Ferguson 28). The way in which visual images from early morning (flickering a match), late morning (driving the bus), and noon (lunch at the waterfall) intermingle with each other adds an imaginative, surreal hue to the sequence, thereby fulfilling the creative task of the *flâneur* as envisioned by Baudelaire: "the external world is reborn upon his paper, natural and *more than natural*, beautiful and *more than beautiful*, *strange* and endowed with an impulsive life like the soul of its creator. The phantasmagoria has been distilled from nature" (12; all emphases added).

Despite striking similarities between Paterson and Baudelaire's *flâneur*, in that both are inquisitive explorers of quotidian aspects of the city, invisible observers of the urban dwellers, and passionate creators of art, Paterson differs from the European *flâneur* in the aspect of social class. Baudelaire's *flâneur* could invest his time in loitering and strolling in the city because his bourgeois status suspends him from many social obligations and offers him ample leisure time (Ferguson 26). As a bus driver in a small American city, Paterson is devoid of the affluence and idleness that characterize Baudelaire's *flâneur*. Paterson's working-class background nonetheless does not prevent him from carrying out the essence of Baudelairean *flânerie*. Although Paterson's journey across the town has a precise starting point and destination, it is precisely the monotony and repetitiousness of his job that allow him to "drift," as Jarmusch describes in his interview at Cannes. Paterson is able to engage in intense intellectual activity even when he appears to be mentally inert from the outside, just as Baudelaire's *flâneur* is at his busiest when he seems to be an ordinary gawker wandering on the street. As Baudelaire formulates, "this ability to be defining of the meaning and of the order of things is ... an event entirely in the realm of ideas and thus quite independent of material factors (the poet need not be rich in clothes to be rich in imagination)" (Tester 4). To convey the idea that Paterson's repetitive motion of driving does not impede his highly dynamic intellect, the film continuously superimposes Paterson's poetic stanzas on images of him driving across the city, thereby breaking societal stereotypes of the working class.

As Benjamin commented, Baudelaire's classical model of the *flâneur* has a limited temporality because of its close tie to a specific time and place: nineteenth-century Paris, the quintessential modern city replete with arcades—glass-covered and marble-paneled passageways—that could serve as the playground of the prowling *flâneur* (Ferguson 22, 35). According to Benjamin, the replacement of the Parisian arcades by department stores enmeshes the *flâneur* in capitalism, the definitive feature of the modern world. The arcade allows the Baudelairean *flâneur* to assume an ideal relationship with the city because when walking on the passageways, the *flâneur* is neither fully inside nor completely outside the shops, thereby passing through the commodities without actually consuming them (Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* 37; Ferguson 35). However, when the Parisian arcades started to disappear (Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* 50-51), the *flâneur* is coerced to redefine his identity in department stores, where his "dispassionate gaze dissipates under pressure from the shoppers' passionate engagement in the world of things to be purchased and possessed" (Ferguson 35). This suffocating consumerism of modern society corrupts the leisurely nature of *flânerie* and thus threatens the *flâneur's raison d'être*. Indeed, the *flâneur* is eventually absorbed by and assimilated into the capitalist apparatus. As he sells his artistic creations to the *feuilletons*, his creative writing becomes a commodity for the readers' consumption: "the intelligentsia sets foot in the marketplace—ostensibly to look around, but in truth to find a buyer" (Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin* 40; Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* 170-171). The *flâneur* who once proudly postured himself as

a gentleman of leisure and a connoisseur of the nascent urban landscape now becomes part of a specialized workforce (Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* 54).

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Unlike his European precursor, Paterson resists the corruptive effect of consumerism by refusing to use modern technological products. During the course of the film, he repeatedly states his intention not to purchase a smartphone. Both his house and the bar he frequents do not have a television, since Doc determinedly declines a patron's request to have one installed. The bus and the bar are the only two places where the contemporary American *flâneur* gathers information on historical figures from Paterson, because they are the only remaining public spaces not yet fully infiltrated by modern consumer goods. The lack of television and smartphones prevents Paterson from receiving voluminous information instantaneously. Nevertheless, precisely because of this lack, Paterson is able to capture the easily overlooked details in life that get lost in the vast pool of information clamoring for attention from the modern consumer. He is able to perceive time and navigate through time in a non-condensed, deliberate manner, as the camera's recurrent close-ups on Paterson's mechanical watch and his leisurely gait in slow motion so frequently signify.

Another way through which the contemporary American *flâneur* combats the negative effects of consumerism is by refusing to publicize his poetry. In the film, Laura repeatedly urges Paterson to make copies of his poems, saying "I know that your poetry is really, really good, and some day you might just decide to let the world get to read it," and asserting "you have many things in common with other great and famous poets." Despite his wife's confidence in his artistic talent, Paterson refrains from calling himself a poet. When a Japanese admirer of Williams Carlos Williams asks Paterson whether he is also a poet from Paterson, NJ, Paterson answers in the negative. By refusing to turn his private creations into books that could be bought and read by consumers, Paterson staunchly resists the capitalist forces that transformed the Baudelairean *flâneur* into a professional art critic, swept into the specialized workforce.

By refusing to turn his private creations into books that could be bought and read by consumers, Paterson staunchly resists the capitalistic forces that transformed the Baudelairean *flâneur* into a professional art critic, swept into the specialized workforce.

This desire to retain full control over one's brainchild echoes Jarmusch's resistance against capitalism in Hollywood. As the leading auteur of contemporary American independent cinema, Jarmusch refuses to be manipulated by powerful

capital, a strong will that finds its expression in the figure of Paterson. From his directorial debut, *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), to his most recent project, *The Dead Don't Die* (2019), Jarmusch employs a deadpan tone and a leisurely narrative pace that prompt the audience to sit back, reflect deeply on human connections and interpersonal relations, and rejoice in the small surprises that life offers. The subjects of his films are often atypical, marginalized, and displaced subjects of society – a runaway murderer in *Dead Man* (1995), an African American gangster in *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999), a depressed musician in *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013). Jarmusch's sober cinematic style concentrates on individuals ignored and abandoned by society, thus rendering a poignant portrayal of humanity that often eludes mainstream cinema. In this sense, *Paterson's* focus on the mundane, repetitive routines of daily life, its lower-class protagonist, and its lack of narrative tension constitute a statement of Jarmusch's defiant resistance against Hollywood capitalism. *Paterson* is as much a poetic celebration of the beauty of the quotidian as it is a manifesto of Jarmusch's distinctive persona as an independent director.

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Across the span of two centuries, the concept of the *flâneur* has gone through considerable change and has found its way into contemporary American cinema. The *flâneur* proves itself to be a fluid discourse that is highly adaptive to a wide range of cultural and social realities. When appropriating this traditionally European bourgeois figure, Jarmusch revitalizes him as an American bus driver who is capable of creative poetic writing and detective-like investigation into his native city's historiography and ethnography, in spite of a lower social status. In this sense, Jarmusch succeeds in both empowering an otherwise disadvantaged figure and resisting the effect of capitalism in modern society. While this article dissipates some of the mysteries around the *flâneur*, the figure's encounter with cinema and a globalized America will continue to generate fascinating combinations. Although prevailing social sentiments will never cease to develop in new directions, the *flâneur* and *flânerie* will remain intriguing keys to deciphering the cultural products of a given society.

## Appendix: “Love Poem”

We have plenty of matches in our house.  
We keep them on hand always.  
Currently our favorite brand is Ohio Blue Tip,  
Though we used to prefer Diamond Brand.  
That was before we discovered Ohio Blue Tip matches.  
They are excellently packaged, sturdy  
Little boxes with dark and light blue and white labels  
With words lettered in the shape of a megaphone,  
As if to say even louder to the world,  
“Here is the most beautiful match in the world,  
Its one-and-a-half-inch soft pine stem capped  
By a grainy dark purple head, so sober and furious  
And stubbornly ready to burst into flame,  
Lighting, perhaps, the cigarette of the woman you love,  
For the first time, and it was never really the same  
After that.  
All this will we give you.  
That is what you gave me, I  
Become the cigarette and you the match, or I  
The match and you the cigarette, blazing  
With kisses that smolder towards heaven.



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**Qingyang Zhou** graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in May 2020 with majors in German, Cinema and Media Studies, and Comparative Literature. She is currently a PhD candidate in German at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research focuses on German-East Asian cinematic entanglements during the Cold War and beyond.



### MENTOR BIOGRAPHY

**Dr. Meta Mazaj** is a senior lecturer in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. She has published on critical theory and contemporary world cinema. Her recent books include *Once Upon a Time There Was a Country: National and Cynicism in Post-1990s Balkan Cinema* (2008) and *World Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (2018), among others.



### DEPARTMENT OVERVIEW

The **Penn** Cinema and Media Studies curriculum draws on a rich pool of faculty and offers courses covering a range of methodological approaches. Students primarily engage in the critical study of national cinemas, international film movements, major filmmakers in various traditions, the forces governing film industry practice, and media theory.



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