

Bill Viola and the Art of Exploring the Sensory and Spiritual Dimensions of the Human

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Abstract: *Bill Viola is an important innovative contemporary artist. He can be considered an innovator of a special type of artistic discourse, in which video art, conceptual art, installation and New Media art propose a synesthetic aesthetic based on exploring the sensory and spiritual dimensions of the human being. The art proposed by Bill Viola is based, for the most part, on the central themes of human consciousness and experience - birth, death, love, emotion, spirituality. Throughout his career, the artist was inspired by mystical traditions, especially Zen Buddhism, but also by Christian mysticism and Islamic Sufism. In this respect, his immersive video installations are representative, focusing on extreme emotions and primary human experiences.*

Key-Words: *experimental studio; slow motion effect; sensitive sculpturality; synesthesia*

1. Introduction

Bill Viola is a contemporary American artist, born in 1951 in Queens, New York, USA, who is recognized as one of the most important internationally video artists. He creates videos, architectural video installations, sound environments, electronic music performances and various videos for television broadcasts. The video installations created by Viola aim to envelop the viewer in image and sound, the artist using state-of-the-art technologies. His video artwork has been featured in museums, galleries, film festivals and on public television around the world, and his writings have been published and anthologized internationally.

Since the early 1970s, Bill Viola has used the video to explore the phenomena of sense perception as a way of self-knowledge. His works focus on universal human experiences - birth, death, unfolding of consciousness - and are rooted in both Eastern and Western art as well as spiritual traditions, including Zen Buddhism, Islamic Sufism and Christian mysticism². Thus, his works of art represent a vital form of contemporary art, which has contributed to the expansion of its field of application in terms of technology, content and historical determination.

The beginnings of his orientation towards video art can be found during his studies at the art school at the University of Syracuse, a very traditional school, where, as the artist would say, in one of his interviews, "he practiced as in the seventeenth century"³, and where, being among the most untalented painters in the classroom, he had the chance to be integrated, by one of his teachers, Jack Nelson, who created a department for all students who did not fit into the other departments, in a special classroom. This was called *experimental studio* and was a totally

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² Matthias Berger. 2015. "Knowing the Language but not the Dialect: Bill Viola and the Churches". *Imaginatio et Ratio. A Journal of Theology and the Arts* 4, p. 27.

³ Raymond Bellour and Bill Viola. 1985. "An Interview with Bill Viola". *The MIT Press*, vol. 34, p. 91.

free space, where the video component was later introduced⁴. In this context, the artist studied both visual arts and electronic music.

In the 1970's, the artist lived for 18 months in Italy, in Florence, where he served as technical director of production at one of the first video art studios in Europe. Between 1976 and 1980, B. Viola received a position as a resident artist at the *WNET Channel 13 Television Laboratory* in New York, where he created a series of works of art, many of which were broadcast for the first time through television. Later, he traveled to different parts of the world, where he studied and recorded artistic components of traditional performances: in the Solomon Islands, Java, Bali and Japan. From 1980 to 1981, Viola lived in Japan with his wife, Kira Perov, on a cultural scholarship. Here, he studied Buddhism with Zen master Daien Tanaka and was a resident artist at the *Atsugi Sony Corporation* research laboratories. This period will be fundamental in terms of perfecting his conceptual artistic technique, problems such as sensitivity and the development of consciousness being a leitmotif of his artistic work. In 1984, Viola was a resident artist at the San Diego Zoo in California for an animal awareness project.

Since the 1990s, the artist has been actively involved in contemporary art life. Thus, in 1995, he represented the U.S.A. at the 46th Venice Biennale, where he presented an ensemble of five works of art, which formed an installation, entitled *Buried Secets*. Two years later, in 1997, the Whitney Museum of American Art hosted the *Bill Viola: A 25 - Year Survey*, an exhibition that traveled for two years to six museums in the United States and Europe. Then, in 1998, B. Viola received a residency scholarship from the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, and in the same year he created a suite of three new videos for the *Nine Inch Nails* rock band's world tour. In 2002, the artist proposed the project *Going Forth By Day*, a "fresco" cycle projected in five parts, in a digital High Definition video, commissioned by *Deutsche Guggenheim* Berlin. In 2011 was published the first biography of the artist. It is about the work entitled *Viola on Video*⁵, written by Federico Utrera, from *King Juan Carlos* University, Spain.

2. The technique and the central themes of Bill Viola's artistic creation

The art proposed by Bill Viola is based, for the most part, on the central themes of human consciousness and experience - birth, death, love, emotion, spirituality. Throughout his career, the artist has been inspired by mystical traditions, especially Zen Buddhism, but also by Christian mysticism and Islamic Sufism, which are often evident in a transcendental dimension in most works of art of B. Viola. In addition, his aesthetics are impregnated with the subject and manner of Western and Renaissance medieval devotional art⁶. Bill Viola creates immersive video installations that focus on extreme emotions and primary human experiences. For example, on the eve of the exhibition of *Sacred Geometry and Secular Science* at the Loyola University Museum of Art in Chicago, Illinois, the artist talks about meditative video games, Renaissance "punks" and the power of mystery⁷. In this regard, in an interview with Raymond Bellour in 1985, the artist says: "I realized that there is a strong connection, or a potential link, between what is happening with technology now and past artistic traditions in Oriental culture. Or even the traditions of Western culture before the Renaissance, when the Orient and the West

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Federico Utrera. 2011. *Viola on Video*. Hijos de Muley Rubio.

⁶ Maïté Metz. 2016. "Translucidité et transcendance: Bill Viola et la tradition espagnole du Siècle d'Or, un «dispositif mystique» ?". In *La Imagen Transhúcida En Los Mundos Hispánicos*, Pascale Peyraga, Marion Gautreau, Carmen Peña Ardid, Kepa Sojo Gil (Eds.). Éditions Orbis Tertius, pp. 67-91.

⁷ Kira Perov. 2012. "Q&A Bill Viola. Video maestro", *Nature*, vol 487, July 12. Macmillan Publishers, p. 168.

were really connected in terms of cultural patterns. Strangely, one of the main breaking points between them was the entire restructuring of the image through perspective - Brunelleschi and the formulation of the illusionist space. I think that, in a funny way, this slight rupture of the image base will lead back to certain aspects of the older tradition, to the way in which the images were created in the Middle Ages in Europe and are still in the Orient"⁸.

The period spent in Japan, by B. Viola, where he studied Zen meditation, calligraphy and traditional Japanese culture, but also the one spent at the Getty Research Institute in California, where he studied medieval and renaissance devotional art, had a special impact on the spiritual subjects which we find in his works of art. This is represented by an original technique, namely the use of the *slow motion* effect, whose role is to show that the image moves fractionally, very slowly, hypnotically, proposing a sensitive sculpturality. The artist is less interested in digital editing, the most technically challenging part of his work being the use of extremely slow motion.

In this respect, the receiver is encouraged to immerse itself in the image and to connect deeply to the meanings contained in it. For B. Viola media is not a vehicle for reproduction, which would aim at writing or grammarizing life⁹, but a mechanism for exposing a fundamental correlation of life with what Gilbert Simondon calls "pre-individual", ie the realm of a non-lived that is contemporary with the life and that is the condition of the possibility for its continued viability in the future¹⁰. We can speak in this sense of an ontological establishing determined by "this exposure to the pre-individual [which] occurs through the experience of affectivity, which names a way that differs fundamentally from perception. While perception is based on already constituted organic structures, affectivity mediates between the constituted (organic) individual and the pre-individual environment with which this being is structurally coupled"¹¹. This type of approach encountered in Viola's aesthetics has its origins, as the artist himself confessed, in the studies of perception and experimental psychology, which he reached through M. McLuhan¹², but also as a result of reflecting on that principle of quantum physics, according to which the presence of the observer always affects and becomes inseparable from the result of the experiment¹³.

Dualism or the idea that the understanding of a subject is incomplete without knowing its opposite, is a perspective constantly explored in the works of art proposed by the artist. We are talking about two hypostases of Viola's dualism. On the one hand there is a manifest dualism in the technique itself, the working method, which the artist proposes, through that tension between movement and stopped, in the continuous and transcendent flow, which reverberates in the environment chosen by the artist¹⁴. On the other hand there is a dualism of the thematic aspects approached. For, in his creations, subjects such as life and death, light and darkness, stress and calm, noise and silence are encountered. In this respect, B. Viola speaks of a "paradoxical duplicity of emotions"¹⁵, coming on the one hand from their status as the most

⁸ Raymond Bellour and Bill Viola, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁹ Mark B. N. Hansen. 2004. *New Philosophy for New Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, p. 264.

¹⁰ Mark B. N. Hansen, *op. cit.*, pp. 264-265.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 265.

¹² Raymond Bellour and Bill Viola, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 103.

¹⁴ Jamie Jewett. 2008. "Seeing the mind, stopping the mind, the art of Bill Viola". *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 86.

¹⁵ *Apud*. Mark B. N. Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

transient of experiences, and on the other hand from their autonomy or exteriority¹⁶, which determined the artist to conclude that "emotions are out of time [and] exist somewhere out of time"¹⁷.

The works of art made by Bill Viola can be divided into three categories: it belongs to conceptual art, video art or a unique combination between the two, expressed through installation art, which is mediated by spirituality and mysticism. James Gardner refers to two works of art of the artist, namely *The Veiling* and *The Crossing* and appreciates their double dimension, both conceptual and visual, as well as their synesthesia¹⁸. At the same time, we can talk about a "post-secular"¹⁹ approach to the artistic creation of B. Viola. This comes from an approach to the deepest spirituality - shamanic, esoteric, mystical - through practical means specific to contemporary art - video art²⁰.

3. The magic of mysticism - Renaissance - slow motion in the artistic projects of Bill Viola

From the early period of his artistic creation, B. Viola was obsessively attracted to the idea of capturing the essence of emotion through video recording. For example, in his work of art in 1976, *The Space Between the Teeth* (Fig.1), a video about himself shouting, the artist proposes this, and the same idea continues to be exploited to this day. We find it also in works of art from the 2000s, such as *45-Second Silent Mountain* and a work of art from 2001, which presents two figures in anxiety.



Fig. 1. Bill Viola, *The Space Between the Teeth*, 1976²¹

In addition to this type of work of art in which the artist proposes representations of emotional states without objective correlation, ie emotional states for which the viewer does not have an object or an external event to understand them, there is another series of works of art that he proposes, and they referred to medieval and classical representations of emotion. For example, his work of art *Catherine's Room*, from 2001 (Fig. 2), which is part of the group *The Passions*. Through five panel, the artist explores human emotions. "*Catherine's Room* is a private view into the room of a solitary woman who goes about a series of daily rituals from

¹⁶*Ibidem*.

¹⁷*Ibidem*, p. 263.

¹⁸ James Gardner. 1998. "Is it art? ". *The National Review*, May 4, Vol. 50, nr. 8, pp. 58-59.

¹⁹ Mike King. 2005. "Art and the Postsecular". *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, no. 1, vol. 4, p. 3.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Bil Viola. 1976. *The Space Between the Teeth*. Retrieved February 20, 2021, from <https://www.google.com/search?sxsrf=ALeKk01xD68G6Hg2a0yKIXwsNlpJDOMRjw:1591982793775&source=univ&tbm=isch&q=Bill+Viola,+The+Space+Between+the+Teeth&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjK7KSH5vzpAhUEuIsKHV1nC4YQsAR6BAgJEAE&biw=1366&bih=576>.

morning until night. Each panel represents a different time of day—morning, afternoon, sunset, evening and night. In the morning she is seen preparing for the new day by doing yoga exercises. In the afternoon she mends clothes as sunlight pours in through the window. At sunset, she struggles to overcome a block with her intellectual work as a writer. In the evening she enters a reflective state by lighting rows of candles to illuminate her darkened room. Finally, at night she prepares for bed: she puts out the lights, removes her clothes, and slowly drifts off to sleep, alone in the still dark room"²².

The work of art is inspired by early European devotional paintings, namely from predela of the altarpiece *Saint Catherine of Siena* (Fig. 3) by the fourteenth century artist Andrea di Bartolo Cini, a representative of the Sienese school²³.

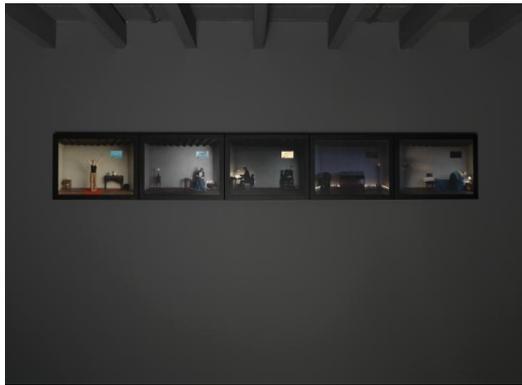


Fig. 2. Bill Viola, *Catherine's Room*, 2001²⁴



Fig. 3. Andrea di Bartolo Cini, *Saint Catherine of Siena*, 1394-98²⁵



Fig. 4. Bill Viola, *Catherine's Room* - details, 2001²⁶

In 1981, the artist presents *Hastu Yume / First Dream* (Fig. 5), a work of art that aims to highlight the greatness of Japanese culture. The video lasted less than an hour, and it was presented in the rhythm of "tai chi", which emphasizes the idea of opening the mind as a result

²² Viola, Bill. "Bill Viola: A Rerospective". Retrieved March 20, 2021, from <https://billviola.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/works>

²³ Bill Viola. April 5, 2021, from <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/76252/catherines-room>.

²⁴ Bill Viola. 2001. *Catherine's Room*. Retrieved April 5, 2021. from <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/viola-catherines-room-ar00042>.

²⁵Andrea di Bartolo Cini. 1394-98. *Saint Catherine of Siena*. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Catherine_of_Siena_and_Four_Dominican_Female_Blessed_by_Andrea_di_Bartolo.

²⁶ Bill Viola. April 5, 2021, from <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/76252/catherines-room>.

of slowing things down. The title that the artist proposes, *First Dream*, implies a romantic and poetic dimension and offers such feelings to the audience, as the video describes the infinity of emotions, senses and feelings, which are all unique to each person who follows it. The work of art refers to natural elements of the Earth, with a special focus on Japan, in an epic slow motion that forces the viewer to truly look at what is being shown, in order to understand: "Viola fuses a personal observation of Japanese culture with a metaphysical contemplation of life, death and nature, achieved through a symbolic exploration of the video relationship with light and reflection. Viola's vision of Japanese culture and landscape evolves into a dramatic language of almost hallucinatory passages and vivid images"²⁷.



Fig. 5. Bill Viola, *Hastu Yume (First Dream)*, 1981²⁸

In 1996, B. Viola proposed *The Crossing* (Fig. 6). This is based on the artist's desire to highlight a certain type of magic. The analysis of the work of art refers to the idea that the artist wants to emphasize, namely the certainty that contemporary technologies have the ability to transmit the direct experience of spiritual phenomena. The artist uses two LCD screens, which are placed with their backs to each other. One of the screens shows a figure flooded by a strong current of water, which falls from above his head and then spreads everywhere, filling the space with cold liquid. As the water begins to calm down, the viewer finds that the man who was sitting there just minutes ago has disappeared, as if he had turned into water. The slow technique that Viola

²⁷ Bill Viola. 1981. *Hastu Yume (First Dream)*. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from <https://www.eai.org/titles/hastu-yume-first-dream>.

²⁸ Bill Viola. 1981. *Hastu Yume (First Dream)*. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from [https://www.google.com/search?sxsrf=ALeKk03pj2c47ppi4D3582VF3JwD9jtytA:1591981012343&source=univ&tbnm=isch&q=Bill+Viola,+Hastu+Yume+\(First+Dream\),+1981&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwipgeu13_zpAhUoxosKHSyABzQQsAR6BAGKEAE&biw=1366&bih=576#imgrc=-cy6Ebg37c0XJM](https://www.google.com/search?sxsrf=ALeKk03pj2c47ppi4D3582VF3JwD9jtytA:1591981012343&source=univ&tbnm=isch&q=Bill+Viola,+Hastu+Yume+(First+Dream),+1981&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwipgeu13_zpAhUoxosKHSyABzQQsAR6BAGKEAE&biw=1366&bih=576#imgrc=-cy6Ebg37c0XJM).

uses and the problematization that the image proposes to the viewer, refer to the possibility of integrating the dimension of spirituality in contemporary technology²⁹.



Fig. 6. Bill Viola, *The Crossing*, 1996³⁰

Between 2000-2001, B. Viola proposes the *Quintet* series (Fig. 7), which includes four installations: *The Quintet of the Silent*, *The Quintet of the Remembrance*, *The Quintet of the Astonished* and *The Quintet of the Unseen*. This series of works of art is based on the research of the artist during his time at the Getty Research Institute in California, where he formed a series of passions for medieval and renaissance art. B. Viola focuses on the extremities of human emotions, which can be considered expressions of infinite resolution.



The Quintet of the Silent, 2000-2001³¹



The Quintet of the Unseen, 2000-2001³²



The Quintet of the Remembrance, 2000-2001³³ *The Quintet of the Astonished*, 2000-2001³⁴



Fig. 7. Bill Viola, *Quintet*, 2000 - 2001

²⁹ Viola, Bill. 1996. *The Crossing*. Retrieved April 15, 2021, from <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/4392>.

³⁰ Bill Viola. 1996. *The Crossing*. Retrieved April 15, 2021, from <https://collections.dma.org/artwork/5319379>.

³¹ Bill Viola. 2000-2001. *The Quintet of the Silent*. Retrieved April 15, 2021 from <https://www.phillips.com/detail/bill-viola/NY010207/11>

³² Bill Viola. 2000-2001. *The Quintet of the Unseen*. Retrieved April 15, 2021, from <https://jonsmalldon.wordpress.com/2011/02/28/viola-quintet-unseen/>.

³³ Bill Viola. 2000-2001. *The Quintet of the Remembrance*. Retrieved April 15, 2021, from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/492174>.

³⁴ Bill Viola. 2000-2001. *The Quintet of the Astonished*. Retrieved April 15, 2021, from https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Bill-Viola-The-Quintet-of-the-Astonished-2000-Color-video-rear-projection-on-screen_fig2_319347543.

For example, *The Quintet of the Remembrance* presents actions and expressions of sadness, anger, fear and despair in the most revealing way possible. The video includes two women and three men, filmed from the waist up, who display different expressions, blinking and turning, one by one, to each other, but all being in a state of dismay and presenting pain and tragedy in at the same time on their faces. The title of the work of art, in the context of traditional, may suggest that it could be a family that remembers the loss of a member of it. The slow-motion projection, proposed by the artist, displays the power and depth of each emotion experienced by each figure, experiencing and exploring human of the most extreme human emotions It can also identify in Bill Viola's work the use of chiaroscuro lighting, which Caravaggio himself used in many of his paintings, which may lead us to think that the artist would have been inspired by him when he made this series of works of art³⁵.

Observance (Fig. 8) proposes a way to represent how artists can review modern society and the novelties it brings. The work of art was completed in 2002 and was considered a response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers of World Trade Center, in New York. The artist focused on how people react to pain quietly and sometimes go unobserved.

The video shows some adults walking in an orderly fashion, each abandoning his place and moving at the end of the row, after displaying the explosive pain in his own way³⁶. *Observance* opens several perspectives of interpretation, it can be about how people respond to the emotions of sadness and anger, or about the possible victims of the September 11, 2001 - represented by moving people to the end of the line or about their waiting to enter a spiritual realm, but devastated by what they have become and the fact that they will never be able to return to their loved ones.



Fig. 8. Bill Viola, *Observance*, 2002³⁷

The Fall into Paradise (Fig. 9) is an installation proposed by B. Viola in 2006. It is part of a series of works of art for the German opera *Tristan and Isolde* by Richard Wagner. The title of the work refers to a strong antithesis: to the negative word of "fall", the artist juxtaposes

³⁵ Primrose, Alice. 2018. "A beginner's guide to Bill Viola". Retrieved April 15, 2021, from <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/bill-viola-michelangelo-beginners-guide-bill-viola>.

³⁶ Matthias Berger, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

³⁷ Bill Viola. 2002. *Observance*. Retrieved April 15, 2021, from <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/255.2011/>.

the paradise. The video begins with a dark closed room, in which a spot of light can be seen. The point of light is scattered on two figures that face the viewer, but suddenly fall on the surface of the ocean. The fall into the water can be associated with a fall into paradise, which feels magical and heavenly, as being under water opens a different world, in which the two figures float in melancholy. The idea that the work could convey is that paradise is something that can be obtained with effort, after going through certain difficulties (as happened in the case of Tristan and Isolde)³⁸. The spectacular fight in the water can end by reaching in "paradise", which, in this case, would be the surface of the ocean. The work of art may also recall the biblical story of Adam and Eve or *Paradise Lost* by John Milton.



Fig. 9. Bill Viola, *The Fall into Paradise*, 2006³⁹

In 2007, B. Viola was invited to the 52nd Venice Biennale. Here he presented the *Ocean Without a Shore* installation (Fig. 10). It was exhibited in a church in Venice, the Chiesa di San Gallo. The subject was that of exploring life and death, by depicting the dead returning to the world of life for a short time. Viola's interest in death seems to be related to an accident in the artist's childhood, when he was only six years old, when he fell from a raft into a lake. The work of art presented a section of an ocean, without a shore, and a series of figures, whose bodies spilled water, which produced waterfalls, collided with an invisible wall of water, representing the dead who collapsed back into the world of the living. There were several people involved in this work, different in terms of age, gender, social class or appearance. The idea was to convey on the one hand the fact that no one can escape death, and on the other hand the way in which the dead will always be absent from the living world⁴⁰. In the dark atmosphere of the church, the artist also used the bright lighting, the chiaroscuro and the lighting of the lights in the place where the people hit the water wall, blinding the people and offering connotations of life and hope.

³⁸ Viola, Bill. 2006. *The Fall into Paradise*. Retrieved April 15, 2021, from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9837756/>.

³⁹ Bill Viola. 2006. *The Fall into Paradise*. Retrieved April 15, 2021, from <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/fall-paradise-84516>.

⁴⁰ Bill Viola. 2007. *Ocean Without a Shore*. Retrieved April 15, 2021, from https://www.inquirer.com/philly/entertainment/20120108_Art_Ocean_Without_a_Shore_addresses_the_mystery_of_existence_through_video.html.



Fig. 10. Bill Viola, *Ocean Without a Shore*, 2007⁴¹

4. Conclusions

Through his artistic creations, Bill Viola proposes a synergistic approach between material, emotional and spiritual. Through his extremely slow motion technique applied to images in the video environment, the artist creates a new type of image, which evokes meditation. His works of art have an iconic dimension, they do not want to initiate a dialogue, but to demonstrate an attitude. Bill Viola's ambition and his perseverance to address the great themes of human life, closely related to human consciousness and experience, such as birth, death, love, emotion, spirituality, made his works of art much discussed and appreciated by critics of art, by its public, but also of art collectors. Bill Viola remains an important representative of contemporary art, an innovator of a special type of artistic discourse, in which video art, conceptual art, installation and New Media art propose a synesthetic aesthetic based on exploring sensory dimensions and spiritual aspects of the human being.

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⁴¹ Bill Viola. 2007. *Ocean Without a Shore*. Retrieved April 15, 2021, from <https://marymacgregorreid.wordpress.com/2014/12/06/ocean-without-a-shore-bill-viola/>.

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