



Citing

In *Blow Out*, Brian De Palma uses redundant visual elements, like Jack's shotgun microphone, that undermine the directionality of the Dolby Stereo soundtrack.

As a form of experimentation for late 1960s filmmakers, film sound offered an untheorized and relatively unchanged set of practices that were inherited artifacts from the studio system of production. The fact that filmmakers chose to manipulate, abstract, and reconfigure practices of sound recording and mixing during this period shows not only a willingness to break free from the restrictions of the studio system but also a drive to change audience perception. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, sound aestheticians explored new methods of constructing film soundtracks in an attempt to rethink regimes of seeing and hearing in narrative cinema. Formal alterations appeared in multilevel mixing, various miking strategies, location sound in lieu of looped dialogue, the reintroduction of stereo, and the dismantling of hierarchically structured systems of film sound editing and mixing. Filmmakers resisted models that dictated certain accepted structural aspects of how to correctly make a film and proceeded to challenge audiences with films that required spectator/auditors to engage the cinematic action on new, visceral levels.

the Sound

By JAY BECK

The Conversation, Blow Out,
and the Mythological
Ontology of the
Soundtrack in '70s Film

Two films that bookend this period are Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 film *The Conversation* and Brian De Palma's *Blow Out*, from 1981. Both films feature central characters who record and manipulate sounds for a living, and both characters become involved in a murder plot because of their occupation. However, Coppola's film effectively mobilizes the film's soundtrack to advance the narrative, whereas De Palma's film actively avoids such innovations, ostensibly denying the period of experimentation in the decade preceding it through its foregrounded emphasis of the ontological link between sounds and objects. By focusing on the sound practices in the early 1970s we can observe how alternative modes of soundtrack recording and mixing practices reflected the ideological and political turmoil of the era. Therefore, by contrasting the sound practices of *The Conversation* with those of *Blow Out*, the shift in the governing ideologies can be traced on both the formal and the narrative levels.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, cinematic practices were deconstructed in emergent styles, such as *cinéma vérité*, direct cinema, and the American avant-garde, that exposed the seemingly "transparent" methods of sound and image construction of classical Hollywood studio production. Several changes in image strategies emerged during the 1960s that were considered antirealistic or "accidental" in prior decades. These included greater use of grainy stock, direct lighting, handheld cameras, split diopter focus, and the "realist" aesthetic of lens flares. It was considered aesthetically acceptable to have deviations in image structure, but parallel changes in film sound lagged far behind. The demand for narrative intelligibility of scripted lines still meant that almost all dialogue was recorded at close range and mixed clearly in the final print. The 1960s saw the introduction of technologies including lightweight Nagra III magnetic tape recorders, smaller lavalier microphones with radio transmitters, graphic equalizers, and multitrack mixing boards, which allowed for film

sound to be reconceptualized and remobilized. Of course, this did not happen all at once, and many of the changes that did occur were structured around the existing regimes of audio-visibility. Despite this, several filmmakers began to apply film sound to creative ends.

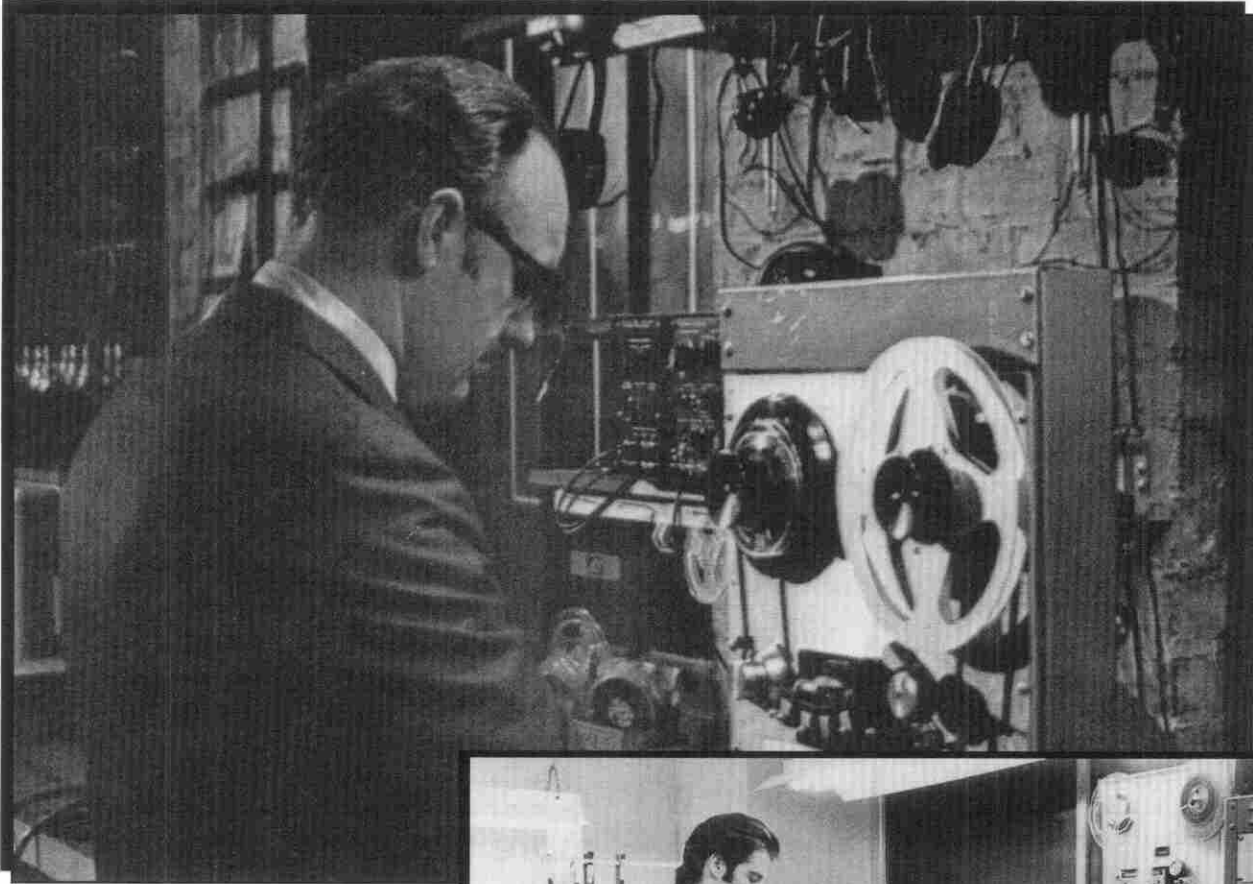
One obvious example of this is Robert Altman's use of "overlapping dialogue" in his films of the 1970s. Although overlapping dialogue was certainly not new to Hollywood filmmaking, Altman revitalized the technique by multiplying the number of speaking voices and divorcing them from their spatial relation to the frame. A byproduct of the lavalier microphone's position close to the speaker's mouth, voices in Altman films are heard "directly," without reverberation, regardless of their proximity to the camera or their location within the frame (see Levin, Webb). This odd "equality" of voices meant that spectator/auditors were able to follow competing conversations occurring in a single scene. This freedom of interpretation opened Altman's films to a new level of narrative complexity that was hitherto unheard in Hollywood filmmaking.

Other directors working within the Hollywood system, such as Martin Scorsese, Arthur Penn, Terence Malick, Monte Hellman, and Francis Ford Coppola, also were able to utilize the film soundtrack as an appropriate medium for expanding the dimensions of the narrative. Scorsese worked with location sound and live, improvised dialogue; Penn emphasized the physical aspect of violence through corporeal sounds; and Malick reveled in the ambient sounds of his films and their ability to allow the diegetic space to spill into the theater. To achieve these goals, they conceptualized the production team as a democratic endeavor, free to experiment with the effects of alternative miking and mixing strategies, rather than as a hierarchical construction passed on from classical Hollywood sound recording and mixing.

But perhaps no other director from the period foregrounds the constructed nature of recorded sound and the latent

aspects of cinematic representation than Coppola in *The Conversation*. By using a bugging expert, the overly zealous Harry Caul, as the central character, Coppola, along with sound mixer Walter Murch, deconstructs the ontological myth of recording technology through Harry's act of meticulously re-recording and "sweetening" his surveillance tapes. Harry's ultimate refusal (or inability) to recognize what the reconstructed voices are saying challenges the existence of empirical truth by revealing the fallibility of interpretation.

The primary problem of *The Conversation*, as well as *Blow Out*, is how audio sensations are rendered in a primarily visual medium. This is obviously not a simple question to answer, and each filmmaker goes about this task in distinctive ways. In the different approaches to the question we can see, and hear, the changes in the modes of representation. Coppola's depiction of Harry's recording and reconstructing an illicit conversation for an unknown employer places him at the center of a crucial matrix of ideologies. First, his career resonates with the timely events of the Watergate bugging, the full extent of which was unknown when Coppola made the film, and the revelation of Nixon's White House tapes. Although Coppola formulated the basic premise of the film as early as 1967 and completed filming in early 1973, the film takes on extra significance in its timeliness. Second, Harry's inability to act and to relate to the world around him is indicative of the sense of disconnection present in American life during the 1970s. Third, as a way to isolate him from the world surrounding him, Harry relies on technology as a protective shield. Finally, as Robert Kolker writes, "[Harry] is like a filmmaker, putting together bits and pieces to make a whole" (198). Not only does he stand in as narrative surrogate for Coppola as filmmaker, but also Harry's work in reconstructing a complete conversation out of pieces of recorded dialogue emulates the act of sound mixing for films. However, as Kolker further points out, "what he puts together is the wrong movie" (198).



(Top) Harry (Gene Hackman) with his recording equipment in *The Conversation*. (©1974 Paramount Pictures) (Bottom) Jack (John Travolta) with his recording equipment in *Blow Out*. (©1981 Filmways Pictures)



Coppola and De Palma were clearly influenced by the same idea in the creation of their films as both repeatedly cite Antonioni's *Blow-Up* in reviews (De Palma 30-31, Rosen 44, Amata 8). However, aside from the use of technology to discover and serve as evidence of a crime, the films diverge in their intent. For Coppola, *The Conversation* functions as an exploration of Harry's life rather than the lives of those he is spying on. The audience is introduced to Harry in a unique way. It happens by virtue of a slow long-take zoom from a rooftop to reveal a number of people wandering around San Francisco's Union Square until the camera finally settles on Harry moving through the crowd. Simultaneous with this action is the construction of an "audio-zoom" that increases the sounds in volume to match the changing shot scale.

But on top of the audio track are several disturbing sound effects—sounds that we later discover to be the digital interference caused by the high-powered, and aptly named, "shotgun" microphones. As quickly as the audience is introduced to Harry, the focus of visual attention then shifts to the characters played by Cindy Williams and Frederic Forrest while the sound picks up their incomplete snips of dialogue.

This mismatch between sound and image not only serves the purposes of the surveillance narrative but it also foregrounds the constructed nature of the soundtrack itself.

The film relies on this deconstructive gesture as a way to open up a sense of doubt in relation to the technology and Harry's perception. The sound mix is heightened to emphasize what things would sound like to some-

one who spent his life listening in on other people's conversations—everything is louder and more present than normal. Walter Murch mixed the optical track with the loudest passages at a maximum modulation while refusing to use compression or expansion on the rest of the soundtrack. The result is a film that sounds unusually quiet until certain passages are encountered in which the volume of the soundtrack is startling. Murch expressed the effect by saying that “the most successful sounds seem not only to alter what the audience sees, but to go further and trigger a kind of *conceptual resonance* between the image and the sound: the sound makes us see the image differently, and then this new image makes us hear the sound differently” (“Sound Design” 250, italics added).

A “conceptual resonance” is the quality that many filmmakers of the 1970s were seeking to unite the formal aspects of the film with the narrative. His creative use of sound allows Coppola to connect the audience with Harry's perceptual state. When Harry is recording his material, content is irrelevant. Instead he is concerned with providing his employer with what he calls “a big, fat recording.” All that concerns him is restoring the voices to a level of intelligibility, with no regard for the actual words being said. His role here emulates that of the dialogue mixer whose job is to select the best tracks and takes and to remix the recorded dialogue so that every word can be heard. Harry works like an artist while reassembling the conversation from the extant recordings, but his attentiveness to the sound of the conversation prevents him, and the audience, from clearly “understanding” the meaning behind the words. While Harry's job is to ensure the absolute intelligibility of the conversation, Coppola does not allow the audience such easy access to Harry's subjectivity. Although the critical line “He'd kill us if he had the chance” is revealed by cleaning up the recording of the couple in the park, its meaning is ultimately not fixed.

As a way of adding a conceptual depth to the picture, Coppola and

Murch play with this notion of intelligibility in cinema by making it difficult for the audience to hear all of the lines in the film. Scenes take place in Harry's cavernous workshop where a plurality of voices and sounds makes comprehension impossible. Instead of having the characters each individually wired for sound or looped in post-production, spatially oriented miking

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strategies keep the audience aligned with Harry's perspective. The audience is deliberately not allowed to hear certain conversations, thereby emphasizing Harry's inability to communicate. By being restricted to Harry's acoustic and visual perspective, the audience relies on the accuracy of his perception while questioning the ability of the recording apparatus to record the truth behind the words. The central concern of Coppola's film is not necessarily what was actually said, but rather what Harry thought was said. It is his perception and its inherent fallibility that Coppola emphasizes more than the murder plot exposed in the reconstructed recording.

This is done by restricting the narration to Harry's perspective, letting the audience believe that the technology revealed the truth behind the recording,

and then detonating that interpretation by foregrounding Harry's inability to interpret the words being said. Convinced that he has delivered evidence of his employer's wife's infidelity, Harry tries to intervene by bugging the hotel room where he fears that she will be murdered. However, when he hears his tape being played and the ensuing melee he is rendered incapable of action,

paralyzed by his overwhelming guilt. Only in the penultimate scene does he realize that the tape was not about the couple fearing for their own safety, but rather their plans to kill the husband. This is discovered when Harry, and the audience, hear the line one last time in its true context—“He'd kill us if he had the chance.”

Coppola and Murch understood the possibility of using film sound as a way to expand the story and to engage the audience on a higher level than through a simple redundancy between sound and image. The recording of the conversation

in the park is both a tool for advancing the narrative and a device that enunciates the constructed nature of cinema. Technology itself becomes an active agent, one that carries a simultaneous promise of the betterment of daily life and a threat of insidious ubiquity. It is not the technology alone that represents power and security in Coppola's film; it is those who have the ability to interpret its message. At the film's end, Harry is left alone in his destroyed apartment, torn to shreds in a vain search for a planted microphone. His protective shield of technology, turned against him, has become a prison of what David Denby called “stolen privacy.”

The use of sound in *The Conversation* was possible because of the freedom of the sound mixer to work

closely with the director and to marshal the soundtrack to the service of the narrative. But this period of opening for cinema sound was short lived in its potential. Concurrent with films like *Star Wars* in 1977, Dolby Stereo introduced new rules of film sound recording and mixing that effectively served to cover the gap created by prior sound experiments. Dolby Stereo was Dolby Laboratories' new procedure for mixing and encoding multichannel sound onto a pair of optical stereo tracks (see Allen, Blake). The system's backwards compatibility meant that mixing practices had to be standardized to require that dialogue would always be mixed in a central channel to ensure comprehension (see *Dolby Surround Mixing*

labor. Coincident with the introduction of a standard of postproduction sound mixing is a marked change in the way sound is utilized in narrative construction. Narrative emphasis tends to be placed in a single acoustic register, favoring only one component of the final soundtrack, in lieu of the film's sound containing a valuable *conceptual resonance*.

A film that represents this moment of lost potential is Brian De Palma's *Blow Out*. Through its insensitivity to its own subject material, the recording and manipulation of film sound effects, *Blow Out* reconstructs an illusory empirical link between sounds and their recordings. While *The Conversation* and its predecessor *Blow-Up*

ontological link between sound and image, thereby restoring the myth subtending the transparency of the classical mode of production.

De Palma plays with the resonant memory of Chappaquidick by having the central character, Jack (John Travolta), accidentally record the sound of a tire blow-out when a car careens off a bridge into a pond. Jack is unable to rescue the driver, a man revealed to be a leading presidential candidate, but he does save Sally, the prostitute who was with the candidate. While listening to the recording of the accident, the sounds ultimately reveal the "fact" that the candidate was assassinated when the car's tire was shot out. After Watergate there was an implicit distrust of recording technology, such as that used by James McCord to bug the Democratic National Committee headquarters and the extensive tape recording system set up in the White House. In *Blow Out*, De Palma separates technology from conspiracy by mobilizing the recording apparatus as a prosthetic extension of his sound effects recordist and localizing the conspiratorial elements in the psychopathic renegade Burke. By separating these two elements, the filmmaker is able to restore a sense of "faith" in the recording apparatus while "unmasking" and hystericizing the conspiracy. Stylistically, the film works to forge continuity with the shock methods of Hitchcock while it narratively relies on the standard, cause-and-effect logic of the thriller.

Central to *Blow Out* is Jack, a sound effects specialist working for a no-budget exploitation film company in Philadelphia. He describes his job to Sally by explaining, "You know when you hear a bird chirp, or a door slam, or wind—I do that. I record the *actual* sounds and put them in the movies." We are introduced to him after a brief interlude when *Co-Ed Fever*, the slasher flick that starts *Blow Out*, is interrupted by a horribly inappropriate scream. As a response to the uneven fit between the actress, who presumably is not registering the "fear" requisite for the scene, and her scream, Jack is sent out to gather all new sound effects



Harry refuses to turn over his "big, fat recording" to the director's assistant in *The Conversation*. (©1974 Paramount Pictures)

Manual ch. 5—"Mixing Techniques").¹ By separating dialogue mixing and elevating it to the top of the postproduction sound hierarchy, Dolby Stereo was a retreat from the creative construction of the soundtrack to a single strategy for mixing. The demands of the system meant that the practice of postproduction sound changed from an act of artistic creation, often guided by one individual or a closely knit team, back to a regimented system of hierarchical

foregrounded the indeterminacy of recorded media, *Blow Out* embarks on an attempt to restore a sense of directness between the technology and the events they record. The film is more concerned with an act of "papering over the cracks" introduced into cinema during the 1970s, as a means of restoring a link with the familiar conventions of classical Hollywood cinema. In doing so, De Palma rests his narrative on the restoration of the

for the film, particularly to find *the* appropriate scream for the shower sequence. Yet this scene in the editing room shows several cracks in De Palma's internal logic. When Jack and his employer are listening to the post-production mix of the film, all of the sound effects are faded to hear the production recording of the actress. Instead of hearing what would be present in a real production track—elements such as water from the shower, the curtain's rustling, and bathroom ambiance—we are left with a disturbing silence that is broken by a close-miked scream. To the casual auditor it is clear that the "scream" is not produced by that actress in the visualized space. But to our dismay, the director acknowledges to Jack, "You're right, it's her." The recording has presumably revealed the "truth" of the scream—one uttered by an actress unable to emote the proper sound commensurate with the event. While the film emphasizes the use of an "appropriate" scream for the slasher film, it sets up its premise by asking the audience to believe that there is a direct relationship between recorded sound and an empirical "essence" of the object producing that sound. This false ontology is elaborated in the sequence that follows.

While out recording extra wild sounds for the film, Jack is the unwitting "ear-witness" to a political assassination. To emphasize the inscrutable relationship between sound and image we have a sequence of Jack gathering sounds in a park where each sound is "revealed" by the visual rendering of the sound. This functions narratively to demonstrate Jack's mastery of his profession and to slyly introduce the presence of the murderer Burke, but it does so by ignoring some basic principles of sound recording. Each sound is heard directly, without reverberation, in a strategy that effaces the presence of the recording apparatus. The microphone eliminates the space between it and the object in an acoustic analog for the split-focus screen. Jack deploys his recording device as a prosthesis that apprehends its chosen subject without mediation—there is nothing

that interferes between the source and the recording of the sound. (Anyone who has ever gathered sound will know that you cannot record the sound of the wind by pointing a microphone into the breeze—you wind up with a collection of loud microphone pops.) De Palma is seemingly untroubled by the absolutely unrealistic presentation of Jack's job, because he is not interested in the practical function of sound but rather in how sound is used as a McGuffin to motivate the narrative.

As Michel Chion explains, "Brian De Palma works with sound as an idea, not as substance; more exactly, his subject has less to do with sound than with *hearing*" ("De l'écoute comme désir" 54). The "formal matrix" of the film is structured around the narrative closure provided by Jack's search for the perfect scream. Chion elaborates, "Ultimately, this scream is less important as an object, as a fetish, than the *point* where the scream is placed in the story: it becomes a sort of ineffable black hole, toward which there converges an entire fantastic, preposterous, extravagant mechanism" ("De l'écoute comme désir" 55). The film closes as it began—Jack has found the perfect scream to satisfy his director by accidentally recording Sally's murder. In the universe of De Palma's film, the only "appropriate" scream for a woman being murdered is that of a woman being murdered. This investment in an absolute relationship between the recording apparatus and truth comes at the cost of actively rejecting Jack's, and De Palma's, role in manufacturing soundtracks for films. *Blow Out's* work at rebuilding this mythological ontology of the soundtrack mirrors the effect created with the introduction of the standardized mixing practices of Dolby Stereo; both are invested in effacing their presence as constructions by restoring narrative and formal cohesion.

The analysis of these two films is meant to point to a larger problem in theorizing the evolution of film sound. Often the introduction of a technology is presumed to cause a rupture between the previously dominant mode of reproduction by exposing the representational apparatus of the system. Film sound experiments in the 1970s were grounded in deconstructing the codes of mainstream filmmaking inherited from the classical Hollywood period. The filmmakers of the period often questioned the "transparency" of the prior representational system by revealing its highly constructed nature. This resulted in the

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loss of spectatorial identification and a deferral of narrative pleasure onto a new, directly emotional link with characters and actions. Some of the most innovative filmmakers realized that film sound is an extremely effective means for rethinking modes of representation and for directly conveying emotional states through levels of subjectivity. The cinematic experiments of Coppola, Altman, Scorsese, Penn, Malick, Hellman, and other 1970s directors mark a brief period of innovation and change within mainstream Hollywood filmmaking.

But with the introduction of Dolby Stereo and the subsequent standardization of recording and mixing practices, many of these new modes of representation were effectively shut down. Dolby's strategy was to present the

technology as something "familiar" through two separate approaches. First, their advertising campaign promoted the multichannel sound system by playing on reader familiarity with the Dolby name. The promotional film circulated was titled "The Silent Revolution" as it presented Dolby Stereo as an extension of the noise-reduction systems widely used in postproduction facilities. Second, the hierarchical organization of sound mixing and recording readily mapped onto the previous divisions of labor from the heyday of studio production. The idea of single individuals or teams overseeing the construction of a soundtrack was directly antithetical to the demands of mixing Dolby Stereo. As sound designer Randy Thom recently noted, "Walter Murch's dream of someone with a 'sound mind' guiding the use of audio throughout the project is taken no more seriously now than it was a decade or two ago" (10).

Postproduction sound has become the domain of technicians who, like Harry and Jack, are more concerned with the technical perfection of the sounds than with the creative use of the sounds themselves. The warning about society's reliance on technology and the fallibility of interpretation raised in Coppola's film was subsequently ignored in *Blow Out*. Moreover, by downplaying the practical exigencies of filmmaking through the romanticization of the mythological ontology of recorded sound, De Palma forged a link with the thrillers of the 1950s by denying the influence of the deconstructive films of the 1970s. Audiences were interpellated through the familiar codes of classical cinematic representation into which Dolby Stereo had neatly assimilated itself. The result is a presumed "continuity" between the codes of classical Hollywood cinema and the films of the

1980s—thereby eliding and effacing the creative cinematic experiments of the 1970s. Thus it is the job of scholars to look to points of transition and periods of technological change for competing and resistant models of cinematic construction to avoid the risk of creating a teleological history of cinematic evolution.

NOTE

1. Although Dolby Laboratories did not state this initially, the mixing of a film soundtrack in Dolby Stereo placed primary importance on the soundtrack's ability to be reproduced in Academy mono without decoding. If dialogue were sent to the left or right channel only, the summing of the two channels would result in a perceived reduction in dialogue loudness of 6 dB. Because sounds sent to the surround channels are phase-shifted -90° in the left channel and $+90^\circ$ in the right channel, the summing of the two channels into mono cancels all surround channel information. Therefore, to ensure dialogue comprehension, almost all dialogue in Dolby Stereo mixes is sent equally to the left and right channels. If the film is properly decoded, the common signals are summed and sent to the center channel. If the film is played back in mono, the center channel information is preserved.

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