

Shakkei: the “here”, the “there” & the Selfie.

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The term *shakkei*, in Japanese, literally means “borrowed landscape”. Used in Japanese gardening, it describes the incorporated surrounding nature into the design of a garden. The boundaries of a Japanese garden do not stop at the fence, or the end of the plot, but indeed go beyond, way beyond, to incorporate distant trees, hills, lakes or mountains. We can relate *shakkei* to different modern and post-modern philosophies in order to make a connection between this ancient inclusive process of gardening to the post-modern phenomena that we call ‘selfie’. In order to achieve this, we draw comparisons between the first photograph of Niépce, Edward Said’s view on orientalist and colonialism, Marc Augé’s study of the transitional places he called non-places, Roland Barthes complete analysis of the photograph including “punctum-studium-spectrum” and “that has been” and finally Lev Manovich interpretation of the Augmented space. This paper discusses what is the space between the garden and the borrowed landscape and how that space relates to the ‘selfie’ with the help of the “Automatic Art Validating Machine” and the incorrect use of hashtags.

Keywords: shakkei, borrowed landscape, inclusion, selfie, art, philosophy, augmented reality, hashtag

1. Introduction

Sometime in 1826 or 1827, when Niépce turned his makeshift camera towards his window (Fig.1), in order to take what we have today as the first photograph (at least the oldest surviving photograph), Niépce was, as to say, making use of *shakkei* without realizing it. This photograph, made using a sheet of pewter covered with bitumen and developed with solvents, offers very little compared to the cameras we carry in our pockets onboard our smartphones today.

The cameras changed, the processes changed, the uses have changed, the way we ‘read’ a photograph has changed but one element remains the same.

Starting with Niépce’s photograph of the view of his window, and *shakkei*, a 17th century concept coined in China, we will be able to deconstruct the photograph, and photography, in order to show that the camera was, is, and will always be, a machine devoted to the production of *shakkei*.

What is the viable link that we may explore between the garden and the borrowed landscape in comparison to Edward Said’s Orientalism? To Marc



Figure 1: Niépce’s ‘View From the Window at Le Gras’, oldest surviving photograph.

Augé’s exploration of the anthropology of the near? To Barthes deconstruction of the photograph? To Benjamin’s study of the aura of the artwork and finally, to Manovich’s superimposition of reality in the this age of augmented reality? Where does the ‘selfie’ fit in?

From a philosophical viewpoint, is it possible to draw a parallel between Augé’s ‘here’ and ‘there’ with the garden and its surroundings? Is there a relation between the *shakkei* and the non-place? Is there a way to dissociate the camera, or its product from the borrowed landscape?

I propose the use of the camera as a creator, interpreter and facilitator of *shakkei*, non-place by shifting the focus to the near.

2. The origin of Shakkei

The term "shakkei" translates, literally, to "borrowed landscape". It originated in China and first appears in the 17th century (c.1635) Garden Treatise *Yuanye*, by Ji Cheng in the late Ming dynasty.

This term can be further broken down into the wish of integrating what is outside to what is inside. To promote continuity beyond one's plot of land; to include.

Today, we have the need to superimpose ourself inside (to place oneself inside) of something or somewhere you don't necessarily belong (whatever is outside); in essence, perfectly demonstrated with a selfie.

My personal encounter with *shakkei*, the term, not the actual, was in a far less romantic way. It happened through a short documentary produced by NHK Japan called "#Tokyo" and it showed the integration of urban public spaces to their surroundings, in particular a new penguin tank in the Ikebukuro neighborhood in Tokyo where one of the tanks has the Ikebukuro skyline as a backdrop (the tank is "see-through" and curves above your head so the skyline can be seen through the other side of the tank. It is not a matter of scenography; it is the actual). This way, the penguins swimming seem to actually be flying over Tokyo. (<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/ondemand/video/2064036/>)

Taking the Temple of Adonis (Fig. 2), in Faqra, Kfardebian - Lebanon, as a proposed example of *shakkei*, allows for a curious study of borrowed landscapes. Of all of the antiquities found in Lebanon, this one may not be the most significant, architecturally or historically, but definitely the one that expresses the greatest structure-environment integration.

This temple was erected in the middle of a dolomitic quarry that has been completely eroded and sculpted by melting of the deposited snow year after year. As if building one of these structures, thousands of years ago was not challenging enough, the architects chose to carve out a very large section of the rocky formation in order to nestle the temple inside.

The use of *shakkei*, even if much before this term was ever coined, is evident in this site. Many attributions have been made to the dedication of this

sanctuary and the most accepted is that it was erected to Zeus of Heliopolis.



Figure 2: A view from the Temple of Adonis. This attribution is widely accepted as incorrect and the right attribution is to Beelgalassos, the local Baal of Faqra. This temple is located in Kfardebian, Lebanon. The construction was erected inside a carved-out section of dolomitic quarry. Photo by the author.

In this paper, I would like to explore a few more ways that we may link this 17th century term, *shakkei*, to works of modern and post-modern philosophies along with some eccentricities that we witness in today's society, primarily with the 'selfie' phenomenon. Here, already, we can draw our first comparison:

Garden - Borrowed Landscape
(emphasis on the inclusion promoted by *shakkei*)

3. "Europe-Colony"

Before moving on, I would like to make a small detour into Said's critique of the Orientalists, that used their distorted lens in order to differentiate Europe from the colony. There was a purpose for this. More than that, there was a need for this. This study was a study of control; a power struggle; exclusive.

In a recent Mass MoCA artist talk featuring William Kentridge and Homi Bhabha, they speak about a recent theatrical production called "The Head and the Load". In essence, this work describes how European colonialists used African men as carries, many times, carrying the same weapons that would be used against themselves in battle (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sr4yjJqARQQ&t=388s>).

This orientalist lens was built to promote exclusion. It was designed to bias, to dehumanize.

Garden - Borrowed Landscape (Inclusive)
Europe - Colony (Exclusive)

4. Here-there

This brief explanation of the orientalist “lens” will serve as transition and we can follow with another layer of depth to the comparisons proposed by this paper. Marc Augé, in his book “Non-places - Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity” writes that “...European, Western ‘here’ assumes its full meaning in relation to the distant elsewhere - formerly ‘colonial’, now ‘underdeveloped’” (Augé, 1995, p.10). In other words, the ‘here’ is only manifest when opposed to the ‘there’.

Taking another look at the ruins of the temple presented above, if we were to remove the ruins (and we could try this with photo editing technologies), all that is left is the beautiful, but very common rock formations that are so frequent in the area of Kfardebian. The inverse also holds true. If we are to digitally remove the background, we are left with an ancient ruin that would hold nothing more than any other structure that are also commonly available throughout the Lebanese territory. There is a special bond that is binding the temple to the surrounding dolomitic stones; shakkei.

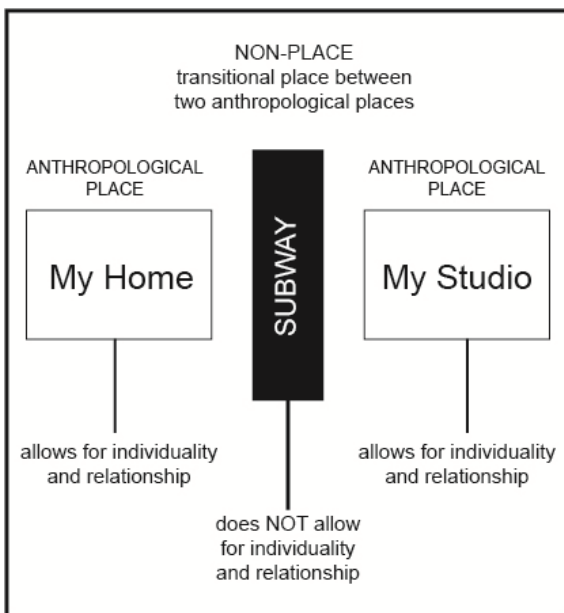


Figure 3: This small diagram shows how these two anthropological places become connected through a non-place and how at either ends of this system you have your place of individuality and relationship, only gapped by a transitional non-place.

At this point, it is important to highlight the relationship between the ‘garden’ and ‘shakkei’ of the example mentioned above. In plastic arts, we learn that in order for a color to acquire its full potential, it must be met with its complementary. In photography (here I will limit the example to analog photography for obvious reasons) the print (positive) only gains its full meaning after the photographic paper is exposed to a negative. These examples

permeate our day to day lives without us even perceiving it, and a great example is when you have a good bowl of sweet and sour chicken.

Augé refers to non-place as a place of transition between anthropological places (Fig. 3). Non-place is not a place for individuality or relations. Think of the last ‘big chain’ hotel you were a guest at. Try to remember the room and its interior design. If that room seemed pleasing, even if for a night’s stay, it was designed to be that way. To please the individual and the mass.

The same holds true for airports, airplanes, subway stations, shopping malls or supermarkets. The latter has an additional layer to be a place that was designed not for the ‘perfect shopping experience’ but for a shopping experience that will make the individual spend as much as possible.

With another small detour, we can compare Augé’s non-place to Deleuze’s reality as the space between two photograms in a reel of film. With that in mind, lets propose that this space between the two photograms is also present between the garden and the borrowed landscape. Both the garden and the borrowed landscape are anthropological places, and if that holds true, then this place between them must also be a non-place (Fig. 4).

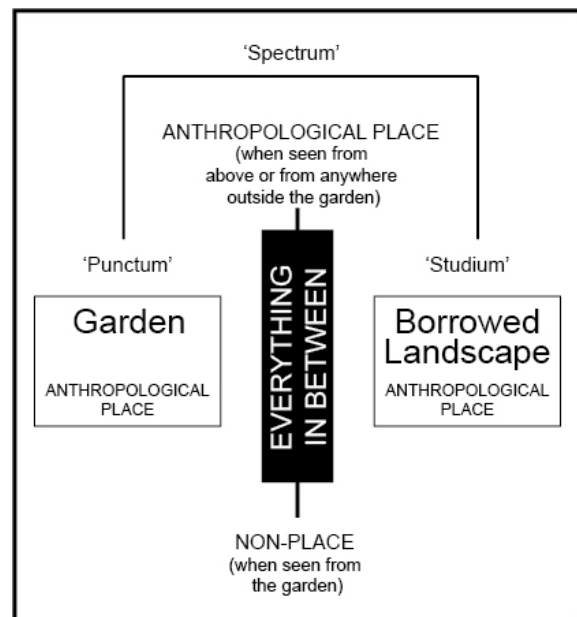


Figure 4: This diagram shows how both the garden and the borrowed landscape are ‘anthropological places’ and how the ‘place’ between the both must be a non-place, at least from the point of view of the observer inside the garden.

But there is a difference between the non-place of Augé and this non-place between the garden and the borrowed landscape. Augé’s non-places have the purpose to, in essence, reduce one’s individuality to nullity. The use of Shakkei, on the

other hand, makes this space between the garden and its surroundings a bond of inclusion that we may provisionally call '**Anthropological non-place**'.

Garden - Borrowed Landscape
Europe - Colony
Here - There

5. "Operator-Spectrum"

There are many reasons why we photograph. We can use photography as documentation, expression or commercially. Let's focus on documentation and expression. When used this way, when we photograph, you are manifesting the wish of studying whatever is being photographed, and depending on how it is administered, it can be a way of inclusion. We will see this again when we speak of the 'selfie'.

In "Camera Lucida", Barthes meticulously deconstructs the photograph, or how we read a photograph, at least, and from that reading we can borrow, initially, two terms: "operator" - the photographer or person taking the photograph and "Spectrum" - the subject of the photograph, be it a person, a landscape, a still life, etc.

Immediately we can make a connection between 'operator' to the garden and 'spectrum' to the borrowed landscape for the garden is 'looking out' to the borrowed landscape. We can go a step further. When we look at the garden, we become the 'operator', the garden with its borrowed landscape becomes the 'spectrum' and finally, the garden alone is 'punctum' and the borrowed landscape 'studium'.

Barthes goes on to explain the "that has been" concept that only photography, apart from every other form of representation, language or communication medium has the capability of achieving. The indisputable evidence that at a certain point in time and space, something has happened in front of the lens of a camera. He goes on to describe the photograph as "...a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, shared hallucination (on the one hand "it is not there," on the other "but it has indeed been"): a mad image, chafed by reality". (1981 p.115)

I will use a very personal example in order to continue with this thought. Many times, as I am onboard an airplane, taxiing for take-off, like a small child I have my nose against the window looking at all that is happening. One thought always crosses my mind. As I see the beautiful taxiway lights, I can't stop but wonder: Who was the last person to have changed that specific lightbulb? Who is the technician, in his grey or beige - maybe even

blue overall, that had the taxiway temporarily closed in order to park his servicing car, and change that exact lightbulb that I was looking at? If someone had ever taken a photograph of that man changing the lightbulb, I would be able to unquestionably know; for I would have the evidence of the photograph.

Moreover, Barthes explains that "...the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation." (1981 p.89) It is important to highlight this difference. It is clear that photography is, in essence a form of representation. But it is fundamentally more essential to understand that its role as validator of a "that has been" becomes more important and pushes it to the only medium that, until a few decades ago, was unquestionably used as evidence even in courtrooms (nowadays, however, with the advent of technologies of digital photo-editing, some courts only accept photographs of sworn photographers).

This is the essence of a photograph: a form of representation that has an even stronger validation power and that offers a complete shift in space and in time.

Garden - Borrowed Landscape
Europe - Colony
Here - There
Operator - Spectrum

6. Photography & Mechanical Reproduction

Before photography, other mediums were used as a way for mechanical reproduction of a work of art. Woodblock prints are the oldest form of reproduction that allowed for the multiplication of a unique artwork. The Diamond Sutra, a frontispiece from a Buddhist text, A.D. 868, is commonly accepted as the oldest woodblock print, or at least, that has survived time.

In the middle ages, woodcuts gave way to copperplate etchings, that only receive fierce competition in the turn of the 19th to 20th century with the advent of lithography. Copper plate engravings are very demanding both in talent and in time; plenty of time. The inking process requires that for each print pulled, the plate must be inked and wiped, and that again consumes much time. Lithography, on the other hand allows for prints to be pulled in a much more 'efficient' way once the stone only needs to be moistened and re-rolled with ink before another copy can be pulled. Lithography also takes talent, but the edition-pulling time is much less demanding than with copper plates.

This new form of mechanization of art soon made way for non-artistic reproduction such as printed news, books, and advertising. Nonetheless, as for art, it was short-lived as a form of representation once, photography, only a few decades after lithography, had been invented and perfected.

With the reproducibility of art, there is a major shift in the perception of art in itself. Benjamin writes "...the instant criterion of genuineness in art production failed, the entire social function of art underwent an upheaval. Rather than being underpinned by ritual, it came to be underpinned by a different practice: politics." (Benjamin, 1936, p.12).

Benjamin speaks about the original work of art as having an 'aura' as a "genuineness" related to tradition; to ritual. With the reproduction of a work of art, we remove, or at least diminish its 'aura' to a point of fully removing it from ritual shifting its weight to the political.

When a painting is kept in a cella, unavailable for anyone to see, it does not have the same political power as a copy, one of a million, hanging in homes all around the world. In short, the more an image is seen, the more political it is.

We add another layer to our comparison:

Garden - Borrowed Landscape
Europe - Colony
Here - There
Operator - Spectrum
Aura - Political

7. The camera as a tool for Shakkei

The camera, from its earliest ancestor to the most modern, is and has always been the perfect tool for studying borrowed landscapes, coming second only to the human eye. To an extent, its sole purpose is to capture on film, or in pixels, the *shakkei*, at any level of its use.

Going back to Barthes and his breakdown of the photograph, we are faced with the "studium" and the "punctum". Punctum is the lightning that flashes in a photograph when you least expect it. It is that detail you did not see at first but later you can't 'unsee', or you can't take your eyes off. Studium, is described as the general mood of the scenery, lighting, etc.

Let's look at the photograph below (Fig. 5). At first you see a photograph of a couple (spectrum) sitting in a park bench, the man gallantly having his arm around his wife while posing for a photograph (studium). Then you realize that something is unusual with this man's left leg (punctum).

A photograph lacking punctum, according to Barthes, is reduced to mere studium; "...application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general enthusiastic commitment..."(Barthes 1981 p.27). Studium, as described by Barthes can generally be compared to borrowed landscape.

We come to the following comparisons so far:

Garden - Borrowed Landscape
Europe - Colony
Here - There
Operator - Spectrum
Aura - Political
Punctum - Studium

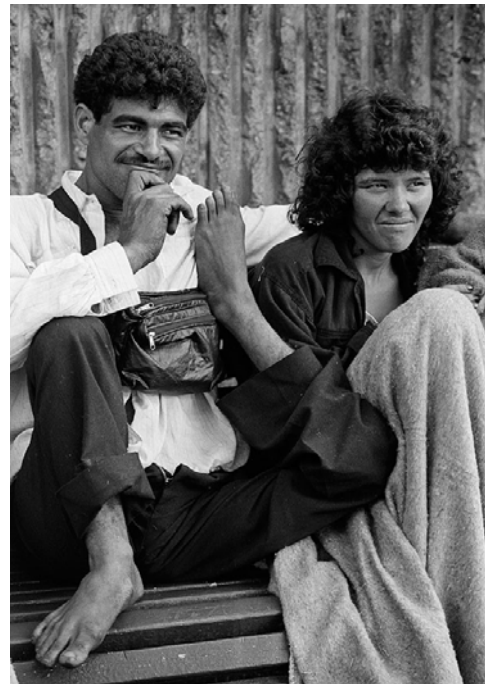


Figure 5: "Wrong Foot" from the exhibition *Anonymous Faces and the Space-time Characters*, 2016, by the author.

8. Hashtags

In order to properly understand the 'selfie', I used "The Automatic Art Validating Machine" (Fig. 6). Recently created, with the help of Omar Abou Nassif, a software designer, I was able to create this installation that was on view in the *Politics of the Machine* conference held at the International University of Beirut, in June 2019.

This machine allows for the user to 'curate' a hashtag. Once that is done, the machine will automatically pick up everything that was posted on social media from that moment on and validate it as Art by sending the photo to the printer with a text that read "This is art." Once the print left the printer, it was left to fall to the ground. During that exhibition, that lasted 4 days, the machine was curating the

hashtag '#conceptualart' and yielded a little over 2500 'validated artworks'.

The results, however, were not uniform. Most of the prints that eventually made their way to the floor showed images that had absolutely nothing to do with conceptual art. Tattoos, nail salons, random drawings, coffee 'art' (!), etc. This invited me to 1) better understand how hashtags are used - or better said - misused and 2) how people use different hashtags in order to get more 'views' or 'likes' on a photo uploaded to social media.

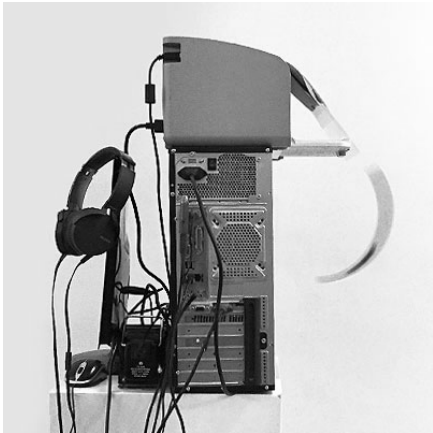


Figure 6: "The Automatic Art Validating Machine" exhibited during *Politics of the Machine* conference at the International University of Beirut in June 2019.

By searching for a particular hashtag on Instagram, and clicking on 'recent', we get a list of the most recent photographs uploaded with the hashtag in question. This gives a clear picture of how online retailers or retailers that use online platforms use hashtags to promote the sales of their products. Let's take the #beirut as an example (Fig. 7).

If we were not to scroll down, we are met with photographs that have absolutely no direct connection to Beirut. Therefore, let's consider only the 12 photos that we can see in their entirety. Out of the 12, 7 are direct product merchandising and 3 are vanity shots. The remaining two celebrate the National Army Day.

The second example, with #art, the results are very similar. At this point we will not discuss what art is but only how this hashtag was used to induce more hits. Out of the 12 visible shots, we have a miscellany that ranges from coffee decoration, t-shirts, cosmetics, shoes, crafts and maybe only one photograph of something that expresses any artistic initiative.



Figure 7: These two screenshots were taken on August 1st, 2019 at 1:58pm and 2:00pm respectively. The one on the left is the #beirut and on the right #art.

This brief hashtag study does not add any levels to our comparisons so far, but it is fundamental to understand this misuse before moving on.

9. Shakkei & the "Selfie"

We witness, with Augmentation, the constant need of superimpositions of different realities. One of these superimpositions, that offer a particular interest to this paper, is the 'selfie'. The 'selfie' is a direct byproduct of the smartphone and not of the augmented but it is the smartphone that allowed for the augmented.

A selfie is best described as a self-portrait taken by means of a smart phone that allows the 'operator' to take the photograph while looking at her/himself on the screen. The act of taking a selfie in itself is a manifestation of inclusion for it is the expression of 'wanting to belong' to whatever the 'operator' is standing in front of.

But the selfie is not enough and for this pseudo-inclusion to occur, the photograph must be posted on social media. The sooner it is posted, the sooner interactions of followers will start allowing for the inclusion process. If art becomes more political the more people see it, the more 'inclusion' this selfie will allow the more people see it.

Furthermore, for a selfie, we require the 'operator' and the 'spectrum' to be one and the same. I will take the liberty of calling this '**operator-spectrum**'. However similar to a self-portrait this may seem, its essence is not. For a self-portrait, the 'operator' is the 'spectrum'. With a selfie, the shakkei is the 'spectrum' and the 'operator' posing is merely reduced to 'studium'.

The moment the 'operator-spectrum' poses in front of the Eiffel Tower (Fig. 8), she/he is posing in front of something that is not inherent. The 'operator-

spectrum' uses the landmark (or another person, for that matter) that she/he is posing in/with as a borrowed identity. Where we read before about borrowed landscape, now it becomes borrowed identity.



Figure 8: This image was the first 'selfie' that showed up when the hashtag #paris was searched on August 1st, 2019. (The photograph was used with the authorization of the 'operator-spectrum'. Copyright @loreviajando)

Along with the 'selfie', a series of hashtags are used in order to boost the visibility of a photograph in the many algorithms that determine exposure or imprints and how many times that photograph will naturally appear on the 'discover' tab in Instagram. This is where the 'operator-spectrum' makes the misuse of hashtags to increase visualizations, interactions and **likes**. While on one hand the selfie can be a statement of inclusion, on the other, when abused, it is reduced to virtual food for vanity. For, on Instagram, like when in Las Vegas, we can be whoever we want, but that is not necessarily true when the battery of our smartphones run dry and we are left to actual reality.

The same 'Anthropological non-place' between the garden and shakkei also exists in the 'selfie'. Its precise location is online, the photograph itself, where "that has been" can't be denied but yet it represents a reality that is no more real than what it wishes to represent; this dichotomous interaction between what a 'selfie' allows the 'operator-spectrum' to be and what in fact she/he 'is'.

So far, we can make the following connections:

Garden - Borrowed Landscape
Europe - Colony
Here - There
Operator - Spectrum
Aura - Political
Punctum - Studium
Actual - Augmented

10. Conclusion

This short ride took us through some interesting ideas but there are a few loose ends that need attention.

We have spoken about the strong inclusive polarity between the garden and shakkei and how this space between the two is different from Augé's transitional non-places.

Augé's non-place is exclusive, allows for no relations and individuality but not so with shakkei. Like the photograph of the temple - even if a bland specimen that serves only the purpose of illustrating the idea - the place between the temple itself and the borrowed landscape is not non-place. All of this space in between can be latent from the point of view of the observer inside the garden, but definitely not for those perceiving the shakkei from a different angle or even from beyond the garden. For shakkei is not a misstatement, even if it uses artifacts of forced perspective or even illusion to make the observer perceive the full effect of inclusion.

A 'selfie' is a form of representation that is meant to misrepresent. Different than a self-portrait, it lacks 'punctum' and 'reduces the subject to studium' making its relevance to the 'here-there' to be nearly cosmetic. The operator and spectrum become one. Unlike a self-portrait, there is a detrimental aspect to the 'selfie', especially when hash-tagged improperly.

The overuse and the abuse of the selfie transforms it in its essence; and to that I will take the liberty of calling simply what it is; a mistake. A mistake that everyone seems to like (no pun intended).

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