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Old and New Medialities in Foer's Tree of Codes

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Abstract: In her article "Old and New Materialities in Foer's *Tree of Codes*" Kiene Brillenburg Wurth analyzes how intermediality works — not what it "is" — in the analysis of literary texts. How intermedial can texts "do," precisely when they consist only of words? Do such texts compel us to re-consider literature as a verbal art? Her analysis focuses on a recent book by Jonathan Safran Foer: *Tree of Codes* (2010), a literary work cut out of the remains of Bruno Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles* (1934). Brillenburg Wurth points out how intermediality works as a productive interaction not only between verbal, visual, and sculptural arts, but also between analog and digital media. She argues that this interaction signals a larger concern with bookness and paper materiality in the present of the age of screens and electronic textualities. Is this concern a sign of nostalgia, of the book coming to an end, or of an unsuspected vitality of paper-based literature?

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Kiene BRILLENBURG WURTH

Old and New Medialities in Foer's *Tree of Codes*

Intertextuality may refer to how texts "are," in general, but also to how texts "do," in particular: to, respectively, the fact that every text is a node in a web of other texts, and thus always already absorbing these texts, but also to local connections between texts — if they refer to each other, and how, if the one imitates or rewrites the other, and how both of them partake of a particular literary tradition (on the theory and practice of intertextuality, see, e.g., Juvan; Kristeva). What is a text without other texts? Yet, texts do not only relate to other texts. Sometimes texts do not want to be written texts at all, but try to be like paintings or works of music — or how they think painting and music "do." Sometimes novels are like films, even without being aware of it, as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) was "cinematographic," or at least "scenographic," before film had even emerged as a cultural medium. Novels and poems may materialize or perform the new media of the twentieth century, while words sometimes try to do what they — to all appearances — are not "meant" to be doing. Thus, Gerhard Rühm's concrete poem "Jetzt" ("Now" 1954) is a poem about the present: a poem consisting solely of the word "Jetzt" scattered across the page in different sizes, places, and fonts. This is a play and typography, one might say, of actuality: as if every "now" (twelve in total) suddenly appeared on the blank page (on Rühm, see Fisch).

A concrete poem is a poem in which words become objects, form and content coincide. Rühm's poem shows the seeming impossibility of words to capture "now" ("Jetzt") as now. "Now" is over before we know it, before we have even uttered the word. It moves, it is ungraspable. And words do not move, they register — or do they here? Rühm makes words into things to be looked at, but these things "do" nevertheless. His poem is a composition of word-things in a white space, some far away, others close by, some printed in bold, others vague and thin. They all appear in a different font, because no "now" can ever be the same. Every "now," every word in this poem is a trace of "now" as a singular event — a tribute to the difficulty to capture such an event. And yet it says: now, *Jetzt*. When we read and see these words, "now" happens after all, in a flash. When we read these words aloud, for just a split second, "now" sounds. Perhaps this poem is a score, a text to be performed, rather than one to be read alone. Perhaps words here have a performative function and perhaps they thus perfectly serve the "now" here happening: they do precisely, immediately, what they say. Now!

Where do literary texts cease to be a matter for reading alone: where, and how, do they (also) become visual, sculptural, musical, performative — or are they so already? Where do literature, the other arts, and the new media meet each other? How do they act on each other and remember each other? This is where intertextuality slides into intermediality. Intermediality has been defined so often, so carefully, and with so many subcategories — especially in German-language art and media criticism — that it is impossible to offer a short description of the term. Some scholars claim that intermediality is a form of intertextuality and others claim the opposite (see, e.g., Chapple and Kattenbelt; Rajewski; Wolf). Perhaps it does not really matter which of the two definitions is the right one, as long as we bear in mind that intermediality pertains to a productive dynamic between words, images, sounds, smells, and movements. I here use the term as a transformative exchange between two or more media: an exchange that allows these media to act in ways "improper" to their assigned, conventional function. In the meeting of words and images, something emerges that falls in-between both.

In this article, I discuss how intermediality works — not what it "is" — in the analysis of literary texts. How "intermedial" can texts "do," precisely when they consist only of words? Do such texts compel us to reconsider literature as a verbal art? My analysis focuses on Jonathan Safran Foer's 2010 *Tree of Codes*, a literary work cut out of the remains of Bruno Schulz's 1934 *Street of Crocodiles*. I discuss how intermediality works as a productive interaction not only between the verbal and visual arts, but also between analog and digital media. I argue that this interaction signals a larger concern with bookness and paper materiality in the present age of screens and electronic textualities. When Steven Heller asked Jonathan Safran Foer where his interest in design comes from, Foer replied: "Where would the lack of interest in design come from? ... we've drawn a deep line in the sand around what we consider the novel to be, and what we're supposed to care about … Literature doesn't need a

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visual component — my favorite books are all black words on white pages — but it could be well served to lower the drawbridge" (Heller <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/24/jonathan-safran-foers-book-as-art-object/>). What "is" the novel? What has it already been in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries as a verbal-visual mode, from experimental writers like James Joyce to graphic novelists and recent collage-auteurs like Graham Rawle? (on the graphic novel see, e.g., Baetens; on Rawle see Brillenburg Wurth). In *Tree of Codes* Foer lowers the bridge by merging the verbal with the visual in a sculptural sense. He has sculpted a paper object out of *The Street of Croco-diles* by erasing most of that collection of short stories with a knife, a few words remaining: a die-cut adaptation of Schulz's book, if we think of adaptation as appropriation (see Sanders). This means that Foer does not faithfully re-render this book in a different setting; rather, he distorts, displaces and de-centers it into a different configuration. Interestingly, distortion and displacement are already at issue in the English version of Schulz's collection of short stories which Foer has used as a canvas. The title in Polish is *Sklepy Cynamonowe* (Cinnamon Shops), referring to the story right before "The Street of Crocodiles" in Schulz's collection. While the cinnamon shops have the aura of an old and bygone world in the town of Drogobych, shops full of rustic smells and flavors, the street of crocodiles emerges as a tasteless location after commercialization has set in. Thus, Celina Wieniawska's translation of *Sklepy — Street of Crododiles —* supplants an old with a new world in its title: "While in the old city a nightly semiclandestine trade prevailed, marked by ceremonious solemnity, in the new district modern, sober forms of commercial endeavor had flourished at once. The pseudo-Americanism, grafted on the old, crumbling core of the city, shot up here in a rich but empty and colorless vegetation of pretentious vulgarity" (Schulz 101). Wittingly or unwittingly, the title change in the English translation doubles the process of a "pseudo-Americanism" overwriting an older and freer trade in the tale. The act of erasure had doubly begun — in the story, in the translation — before Foer even started cutting.

As an intervention in Schulz's text, *Tree of Codes* extends a literary practice from Cynthia Ozick and David Grossmann to Salman Rushdie, who have each appropriated Schulz and his work as a sym-bol of loss and absence (see Goldfarb). Schulz's small oeuvre has had a very rich afterlife, including those texts that have never been found after his murder in 1942. We cannot disengage *Tree of Codes* from this trail of "productive reception," which ranges from novelistic rewrites to animation films and photo projects (Turowski). If, as Plate suggests, literary rewrites are acts of remembrance – acts of "recollection in which the past is re-called and made sense of in terms of the present" – Foer has cre-ated a ruin in which the past, *The Street of Crocodiles*, remains palpably present as an index: the very physical features of *Tree of Codes*, the contours of its gaping holes, point to that older text (Plate 3). When we read *Tree of Codes*, our eyes skip these open spaces. They perform an act of overlooking, of forgetting, that Foer forces us to make with his obliterations. Yet, simultaneously, this is a skipping that takes time, the whites and holes halting our reading: we become aware of those blank spaces in-between the words — spaces once full and inhabited and now wrecked, as if constantly reminding us of an irreparable loss. What appeared to be a (physical) act of forgetting becomes a roundabout or peripheral mode of remembering: a mode that Foer invokes when he refers to *Tree of Codes* as "an-other note left in the cracks of the wall" that, in the Jewish tradition, symbolizes the last wall standing as an indelible trace of the ruined Second Temple (137).

With this gesture of remembrance, Foer adds something significant to a current of contemporary book art that converges in the work of Doug Beube and Brian Dettmer, who each in their own way cut into second-hand books as if they were archeologists uncovering new layers and meanings of text, redesigning the book as a visual object (on Dettmer, see Landow; on Beube, see Stewart). However, while Beube's and Dettmer's bookworks are not meant to be read — we see these works in galleries and museums, not in libraries and bookshops or on our bookshelves at home — *Tree of Codes* is still as much a work of literature as it is a work of sculpture: it hesitates in-between both. I can put it on my bookshelf, though I might also show it as a display object, every day a different page. Is it, alt-hough, as interesting as literature as it is as a work of art? This is a question that has been raised a lot in reviews of *Tree of Codes*, as has the suggestion that its material design would cover up a writerly lack: "All very interesting, but I suspect that this book will be appraised more as an artefact than as a story" (Faber <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/dec/18/tree-codes-safran-foer-review>). If so, what then? We hardly doubt the authenticity of Stéphane Mallarmé as a poet because he reframed

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poetry into a visual-spatial constellation in *Un coup de dés* (1914). I think that *Tree of Codes* works as a cultural artefact that explores the book as an analog object in our time of screens. It shows us the richness of reading as a verbal-visual act. Let us see how Foer appropriates *Street of Crocodiles*, making it his, yet conserving Schulz's words: "*The Street of Crocodiles*: My aunt was complaining. It was the principal burden of her conversation, the voice of white and fertile flesh, floating as it were outside the boundaries of her person, held only loosely in the fetters of individual form, and, despite those fetters, ready to multiply, to scatter, branch out, and divide into a family. It was an almost self-propagating fertility, a femininity without rein, morbidly expansive" (Schulz 32) *Tree of Codes*: her / boundaries / held only loosely / ready to scatter" (Foer 17).

As with Rühm's now-poem, the text does what it says: *Tree of Codes* leaves only the bare essentials, the outlines of the disintegration of aunt's fleshy form and performs it in the words that fall apart in a blank space, having lost their rectangular, enclosing frame. Aunt's fragmentation *is* Foer's fragmented text, and vice versa. And that — I hear Foer's text saying with a touch of John Keats, — is all you need to know. The rest is up to us: "In one word," Father concluded, / an instance" (53). Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and its ekphrastic evocation of eternity, may be of even more decisive importance here as *Tree of Codes* foregrounds the idea of an impossible arrest of time in *Street of Crocodiles* – a stillness coming off the blanks of the pages that make us hesitate briefly, as if we held our breath before proceeding to the next word: "the whole of   that year / a / day, / transcendental hour / a / moment / forever" (63). Foer's "moment," a year in a day, an hour in a moment, is more than a word: it becomes the moment itself, its visual rendering, as it hangs suspended without a (word) immediately before or after, a simulation of the "eternal now" that resists progression beyond its own hovering intensity. And yet, if "forever" is what follows after the moment, making that moment perpetual, what comes after "forever" is still a full stop – no matter how long the pause. "Before me all the future lay open," Schulz's narrator continues after this full stop in *Street of Crocodiles* – he has just been given a puppy, and this puppy opens up a whole world of new experiences (73). *Tree of Codes* cuts short the viability of this future. It may be Bruno Schulz's violent and untimely death ghosting through the text here, or that Foer's design prompts us to think of the improbability of forever as a presence that can be kept. Or even still: it may be that Foer's text, carved out of a passage that only refers to eternity in passing, attests to the creative act of interpretation, unearthing meanings that had seemed indiscernible on the surface and that only make sense in the context of the other stories. Whatever the answer, if we are in a word-universe here this universe is held together by visual design, its meanings emerging not out of words alone — and our ability to interpret them — but also out of the spacing in-between and the rhythms of these words on the page. Thus Foer makes us sensitive as to what it means to read a book, a page — not just a text — in an age where Kindle and other tablets are undoing the crucial dimension of page design.

Tree of Codes sculpts the text by Schulz anew and in doing so express something essential about it: in its visual form — at a glance — it expresses themes of timelessness, time, dreaming, and remembering that recur persistently in *Street of Crocodiles*. An over-writing of Schulz's collection of stories, *Tree of Codes* is at once a reading, a verbal-visual commentary of it. Indeed, Foer's "writing," his cutting, is here nothing more, or less, than deep reading: "I have never read another book so intensely or so many times. I've never memorized so many phrases, or, as the act of erasure progressed, forgotten so many phrases" (Foer 139) (and in turn, I, as a reader-viewer, am incorporating Foer's phrases to be able to think through his erasure book). *Tree of Codes* is the trace, the history of a reading that eventually started to lead a life of its own, with events and details obliterated in the erased text, images and characters cut out of each other (Father is cut out of Aunt Perasia on page 108, so that furious Perasia never appears in *Tree of Codes*, only as an amputed she: he). Its scattered words and ravaged pages exhibit a crucial aspect of remembering in *Street of Crocodiles* that may mark it out from Marcel Proust's *A la récherche du temps perdu*. For *Street of Crocodiles* is concerned not so much with a recovery of lost time as with a lost mode of perception: a childlike perception without a strict demarcation between what is real and imagined, logical and improbable. A "freshness," Colleen Taylor has put it long ago, "which lies at the roots of the creative process:" a lost imaginative sense (466). *Street of Crocodiles* evokes this freshness through the narrator as a child-focalizer who frames our perception of the madness of the father and the transfigurative force of that

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madness: "While Father pored over his large ornithological textbooks and studied their colored plates, these feathery phantasms seemed to rise from the pages and fill the rooms with colors, with splashes of crimson, strips of sapphire, verdigris, and silver. At feeding time they formed a motley, undulating bed on the floor, a living carpet which at the intrusion of a stranger would fall apart, scatter, into fragments, flutter in the air, and finally settle high under the ceilings" (48). Disintegration is central to the imaginative sense that is being re-invoked in *Street of Crocodiles*: a fragmentation of reality as the fantastic, always unexpectedly, interrupts reality in Schulz's memories. Birds rise up from book pages to fly away in the rooms of the narrator's house, bottles walk to town through the wind, Father turns eventually into a bird, while elsewhere the falling dusk makes everything literally fall apart like a virus — as if metaphors had come to life, interfering with the structures of everyday reality. The narrator notes that such a de-centred, fluid reality cannot be contained in words: "Our language has no definitions which would weigh, so to speak, the grade of reality, or define its suppleness" (109). *Tree of Codes* responds to this central problem in *Street of Crocodiles* by offering openness. If words fail, *Tree of Codes* shows a different possibility: the possibility to leave a blank, to erase words so that every unequivocal sense — depriving reality of its suppleness and mutability — evaporates with it. As double readers (reading *Tree of Codes* with *Street of Crocodiles*) we see how these blanks make an absence present, the absence of words on a page, the absence of a past holing through the present.

A coincidence of "form" and "content" — this old issue is the issue we keep returning to here: words, their specific position on the page, the layout of that page, and its cut-out forms display, perform, in short, "do" not just what they say but what they may have purported in their previous context, what they might have been, or, precisely, never could have been. It all depends on Foer's reading, the sedimentation of this reading that Tree of Codes ultimately is, and our response to that sedimentation as an intermedial work: no longer a novel in the conventional sense, yet not a purely visual-sculptural work either. Tree of Codes is certainly not the first work of the last decades to thus reinvent the novel in-between verbal and visual modalities. Referring to Tree of Codes as an "exhumation," Foer shows his indebtedness to Tom Philips's *A Humument* (1970-75), a continuing project since the 1970s when Philips — inspired by William Burroughs — said that "the first book I can buy for threepence, I will alter": Philips found the Victorian 1892 novel *A Human Document* by W.H. Mallock and started to overwrite, overdraw, overpaint, in short, "erase" it creatively like a true palimpsest, so that only a few words remained per page. It seems like a wonderful coincidence that the title could be reduced to *A Humument*, as Philips's lifework resembles an exhumation: a scraping off the surface until a new, fragmented text emerged. Although not as colorful as *A Humument*, *Tree of Codes* is one of the many heirs to Philips's technique of book-altering, of treating found novels. *A Humument* shows how the meaning, the physical state of a text, is determined by what it reveals and conceals at the same time. Acts of concealment — etching, erasing, overwriting, overdrawing — reveal potential, "hidden" textual layers precisely by highlighting small fragments of text. With *A Humument*, we become aware of verbal text as an open resource, a reservoir of potentialities that can be mined through a play of fore- and back-grounding. Thus the first page which resembles those old films eaten away by nitrate (as this page is eaten away by color), reads: "The following I sing, a book. a book of art of mind art that which he hid reveal I." (1): "That which he hid reveal I:" is a summation of Phillips's entire, life-long project, bringing meanings to the surface by ravaging, treating, scorching that surface. It is the bookwork itself that announces itself in the spaces that this scorching brings to light: "a book a book of art of mind art." A book of conceptual art, arising out of a set of rules of composition, that tells us something about "the book:" about texts as images in their own right, and the book as an object, rather than a channel and storage of information alone. It may even tell us something about the book to come, in the 1970s, the book as a body of literature as it would be transfigured into a hypertextual constellation in the 1990s. If hypertext revolves around fragments and a profusion of narratives, the one folded into the other, as well as multiple venues of narration, *A Humument* illustrates, as it were, the transition from classical to hypertextual narration – from the Victorian novel to hyperfiction as a configuration of fragmented, narrative texts traversed by the reader. A classical novel, *A Human Document* is about a found document with different storylines but the strategy here, as N. Katherine Hayles has shown, is precisely to smooth "many conflicting paths [of narration] into one

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coherent narrative" (79). *A Humument* undoes this coherence, teasing out an ambiguity and multiplicity that re-renders the book, as a body of literature, into an open source.

Thus, like *Tree of Codes*, *A Humument* is not simply a response to a found text, but in its intermedial design offers us a critical reading, a performative interpretation of that text. Both offer a writing that is the record of a reading, a record that is visually (in Foer's case sculpturally) portrayed, like an illuminated manuscript or a colorful palimpsest: this is the "new" novel returning to the oldest of narrative modes — the mode of the found document. Yet if *A Humument* anticipates the "new" literary modes and textualities of the digital age, *Tree of Codes* invokes likewise the presence of forms of reading and writing that have become prevalent in electronic media. The exchange between literature and other arts, in other words, is not limited to sculpture and the visual arts here, but extends to the digital media and their coded textualities as well: here, intermediality includes an exchange between "old" and "new" media, between paper and print on one hand and electronics on the other. Thus, owing to its see-through structure, its holes that turn into windows onto subsequent pages, reading *Tree of Codes* becomes something like the choose-it-yourself strategy of contemporary hyperfiction as it has been developed by Shelley Jackson, Stuart Moulthrop, Michael Joyce, and other writers at Eastgate. One could start anywhere on the one page and continue onto the next — not that it makes much sense, but this only enhances the dream-like sphere of *Tree of Codes*. All that is left on the pages is isolated words and punctuation marks that the reader actively collects, decoding phrases out of them, and finding a way (that is, by lifting one page slightly and carefully from the other) to render these pages legible. Reading *Tree of Codes* is an active, physical traversal of text, rendering this text as "ergodic" as cybertexts (see Aarseth).

If hyperfiction is thus present — willingly or not — in *Tree of Codes*, so is the computer as an archival machine: its title invokes concepts central to computer programming. Tree may refer to a directory tree, which could be any virtual container within a digital file system. In this light, *Tree of Codes* could be read as a directory (re-) restructuring the data of *Street of Crocodiles*: a couple of words on a page compressing the larger, original text. We could even regard *Tree of Codes* as a virtual container of *Street of Crocodiles*, the former a condensed version of the latter, epitomizing it in coded form — or providing entries to it. Indeed, to draw the parallel further, *Tree of Codes* offers us a textuality that has the look and feel of those ancient punch cards with holes in predefined positions to store and process data: a paper materiality "before" the digital. Encrypting *Street of Crocodiles*, Foer's condensed novel fits our age of distraction remarkably well – an age in which information is processed in bits and pieces, in codes and fragments, brief sentences, communicated through multiple channels. Condensed novels, though present in our culture since the nineteenth century, are growing rampant on the Internet, barely consisting of two sentences: "I turned myself invisible and it sucks" (H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* ultra-condensed by David J. Parker) or "You think you're reading a condensation of *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, but you're not" (Italo Calvino's postmodern classic ultra-condensed by Thomas Deeny). *Tree of Codes*, likewise, allows us — although not on every page — to read the bare essentials of Schulz's text. Indeed, Foer's book visually epitomizes — in its very design — the interplay of imagination, reality, and fragmentation central to that text. We "see" Schulz's stories at a glance.

These issues of distraction and fragmentation, interrupting the classical form of the novel, beg the following question: why produce a book, carefully cut to pieces, condensed yet also distorted, in a time when books are said to be increasingly out of step with our current modes of information and reading? (see, e.g., Birkerts; Murrie; Striphas; Poster). Is it to exhibit the fragility and transitoriness of the book in the digital age — an object we have hitherto taken for granted as a means of data storage and processing? Like Brian Dettmer's ravaged book sculptures, *Tree of Codes* may readily appear to us as a trace of the eroding force of digital media: the overwhelming stream of electronic information that seems to destroy and render obsolete books and paper as analog storage and knowledge media. Should we then read *Tree of Codes* as a monument — to *Street of Crocodiles* but also to the book "as such": fragmented, still a book, but no longer easily accessible and usable (just as, for that matter, inaccessibility is becoming a prominent concern in new media now that new programs, versions, and applications are replacing and outdating others ever more rapidly)? Does *Tree of Codes*, in other words, announce the end of the book? Is its paper materiality merely the sign of a nostalgia for "bookness," for an old materiality that is no longer the substance of a culturally dominant medium?

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Garrett Stewart has read contemporary book works in this way, as expressions of "demediation:" media, in this case books that have been neutralized in their function as bodies of literature. More specifically, demediation bears on "foreclosed book forms that manifest a no longer viable *work* in any verbal *oeuvre*. In their often amusing refusal of all normal use, such sculptural rather than functional books work against themselves when isolated for display: "they subtract meaning from their own vehicles" (Stewart 410). Demediation, in short, pays tribute to a colossal disuse of books. Stewart's 2011 *Bookworks* offers a convincing account of this cult of disuse of books reduced to works of display, moving from library to museum space, from a verbal to a visual culture, evolving from things to be read and used for information and storage, to things to be put on show. Yet, *Tree of Codes* is not a visual object alone, but also — and fundamentally so — a bearer of words: words to be read and interpreted. Along with many other contemporary works like Ann Carson's 2010 *Nox*, Graham Rawle's 2005 *Woman's World*, or the book works of Louise Paillé, *Tree of Codes* does not signal a current of demediation but one of reinvention: of books coming to life again. Rather than being a monument to the book, *Tree of Code* shows us that alternatives to electronic textuality are still viable. Emphatically, Foer has wanted to make a substantial book: "On the brink of the end of paper, I was attracted to the idea of a book that can't forget it has a body" (Foer qtd. in Heller <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/24/jonathan-safran-foers-book-as-art-object/>). A book that cannot forget its paper body is a book that can or will not become digital and that has no desire to become digital and escape the limits of print and paper. Such a book displays the possibilities of the medium by reasserting the substance of a bookish, paper materiality. The presence of a material limit is here, precisely, the occasion for a restructuring of the medium in a time of its foretold death as a body of literature (see Coover; Delany and Landow; Gess). This not only bears on the creative textuality of *Tree of Codes*, but also on the kind of reading it requires: the careful handling of the pages, the mindful scanning of the words. You become aware of your fingers and hands in the process of reading: of reading as a physical intervention in the text. You experience this text, which is about fragmentation, and about the idea of a fragmented reality in the text it scatters to pieces, *to* your hands touching the pages. Today we are mostly touching screens: Foer has us touch paper again, as if we were discovering the medium anew.

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