

“Keys to Words that are already there”: Chief Bromden’s Psychedelic Journey towards Redemption

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Abstract

This paper investigates how *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is an artistic piece of psychedelic creation that traces the journey inside the mind of a psychotic narrator. This psychedelic narrator only heals through the effect of the psychedelic hero who opens his Pandora’s Box and uncovers his book of mystery. This journey is nothing but an epitome for the actual psychedelic trip that Ken Kesey has undergone in reality. Kesey has recreated the same experience in fiction through the exploration of a highly traumatized consciousness of a delusional Indian American in the Oregon Mental Asylum. Most interestingly, this voyage inward is only possible through the ingestion of the blue pill and the influence of the most uncommon type of drug: Patrick Randle McMurphy. McMurphy functions as the catalyser of this literary experience attempting to probe deeply into the schizophrenic Chief’s troubled consciousness and uncovering the secrets of his tormented past. In this line of thought and drawing on James Kent’s Psychedelic Information Theory; I undertake to trace the psychedelic artistic journey into Chief Bromden’s schizophrenic mind as I shall delve deeper into the cultural inscriptions of psychedelic art. Eminently, my paper shall comprise three sections investigating *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* as the complete combination of a psychedelic author (Ken Kesey) communicating the journey through the psychedelic narrator (Chief Bromden) as it is induced by the psychedelic hero (Patrick Randle McMurphy).

Keywords: Psychedelic, Psychedelic Information Theory, the Psychedelic Journey

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Introduction

Psychedelic Fiction has always raised controversy due to its peculiarity. A fiction that is destined to describe the experience of drug intoxication shocks conservative readers. Nonetheless, the writing of psychedelic fiction is intricately a very complex practice, interconnecting several variables. The intermarriage between science and literature inaugurates the induction of slipstream genre as the licenced heir to the throne of outlaw surfiction. Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*¹ (1962) is a manifestation of a genre that relies on complex and fragmented storytelling and unorthodox heroism. Kesey's readers fall entranced by a tale of schizophrenic hybrid Indian about a sadistic Nurse, mentally-ill patients and a street-hustlers in an epic of rebellion against conformity. McMurphy and Big Nurse may seem as the typical hero and villain of any given romance. But, they are instead part of a hallucination erupting in the mind of a schizophrenic narrator after his ingestion of the "blue pill". Kesey does not write *Cuckoo's Nest* from pure imagination, he relies rather on a personal experience of ingesting LSD. As such, no author can profess to have insight into the psychedelic journey without having taken part in one. Accordingly, psychedelic fiction as an artistic expression analogizes the real experience through adherence to metaphor. Notably, three main components interact interdependently to insure the cohesion between the constituent determiners of the genre. An author who has experimented first hand with psychedelics, a narrator through which the writer conveys the experience and a drug-like protagonist serving as the ultimate catalyst. But before embarking further on the analysis of *Cuckoo's Nest* as a piece of psychedelic fiction, a brief overview of psychedelics is due.

Psychedelics: An Uncanny Discovery

It has been known that primitive cultures heavily ingested herbs and fungi to ascend to divine states of nirvana. Charles Hayes (2000) contends in his book *Tripping: An Anthology of True-Life Psychedelic Adventures* that the widespread of drugs in ancient civilization is a form of "veneration for the induced use of visionary experiences [having] roots in virtually every culture on earth." For instance, The Amazonians used a vine called Yagé in their rituals. The Soma practioners favoured different types of fungi and plants. In Europe, "pagan witches made potent brews incorporating Belladonna, thorn apple, and henbane or made hallucinogenic ointments from the roots of Mandrake" (Dodgson, *It is All Kind of Magic*, 2006). Probably, Plato and Sophocles in ancient Greece were the first to experiment with the raw form of LSD through drinking Kykeon. This latter contains Ergot mushroom from which the later derivative was synthesized (Dodgson, p. 101). Australian aborigines favoured Pituri whereas Aztecs ingested Ololuiqui, containing lysergic acid. The list is endless demonstrating the inclination towards intoxication through herbs or plantations as part of ritual worship in different parts of the world. Leo Hollister explains that taking these "psychotropic" substances vary in purposes between "religious or magical celebrations for increasing sociability for treating or understanding emotional disorders and for simply making an arduous life more pleasurable" (*Health Aspects of Cannabis*, 1986, p.8). Psychedelics are, then, the most primitive and natural form for recreation and transcendence. Still, they are beheld by Judaeo-Christian religions as symptomatic of infidel pagan worship. Churches and synagogues have fiercely

¹ *Abbreviated as Cuckoo's Nest*

declared war on the substance delaying its exploitation by the government to centuries ahead.

During the fourth century, The Roman Empire destroyed any residues of the “Elucnisian mysteries of ancient Greece”. Milleniums later, the Inquisition launched a witch-hunting campaign torturing those mixing potions. Conquistadores continued the banning of ritualistic hallucinogenic substances from ancient tribes of the Americas (Dodgson, p.102). This history saw the light in the book by Gordon and Valentina Wasson who have documented the spiritual practices of ancient civilizations. In *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (1972), Wasson reports his experience as seeing “visions and emerg[ing] from the experience awestruck”. So, despite all the attempts that religious authorities have made to obliterate these substances from resurfacing, a simple book has repositioned hallucinogenics back to the medical landscape. The uncanniness of drugs is basically traced to the unfathomability of its effects or their uncontrollability. At first, LSD-25 has been mistaken for uterotonics facilitating birth and reducing contractions. But, the Swiss chemist Albert Hauffman decided to dissolve the substance in water and drink it. He describes this experience as a miraculous seeing of “an interrupted stream of fantastic images of extraordinary plasticity and vividness accompanied by an intense kaleidoscopic play of colours” (*LSD: My Problem Child*, 1980, p.14-15). Wasson, Hauffman and ancient tribes have experienced the same effects resulting in streams of colours and visions. The US government and Timothy Leary have both found them fascinating and dedicated various efforts in the study of the substance.

Timothy Leary: Acid Guru

Leary found these effects purely artistic and to a certain extent therapeutic. The US government conceived of it as the ultimate weapon of “mass disorientation” (Driscoll, 2006). Timothy Leary along with his colleague Albert have started a drug testing research program in their department of psychology of Harvard. The subjects tested were 35 convicts in Massachusetts prison. They have observed that recidivism rates for these convicts were reduced from 70% to 10% (Dodgson, 2006, p.104). Leary has concluded that Pyscobin-the drug tested at that time- “reprints” and “regenerates behaviour. In this line of thought, he declares: “I learned more about the mind, the brain and its structures than I did in the preceding fifteen years as a diligent psychologist” (Burroughs, Ginsberg, 1988, p.57-69). History does repeat itself, Harvard Divinity School denied its students the opportunity to contribute to the advancement of the research mirroring the same actions of the inquisition four centuries ago (Dodgson, p.105). As a result, Leary organized psychedelic trips from home. His psychedelic experience would be summarized in the description of the phases of LSD sugar-laced ingestion while being guided by someone who remained straight throughout (p.106). Under massive public persecution and the claim of corrupting younger generations, Leary was fired from his position. He was accused of illicit distribution of narcotics on campus as well as undisciplinatory conduct. Richard Nixon even dubbed him as “the most dangerous man in America” and the inventor of the catch phrase “Turn on, turn in, drop out”. Ironically, the same government sought the same weapons to question apprehended suspects.

LSD: The Chemical Weapon

Martin. A. Lee and Bruce Shain came to the astonishing conclusion that “nearly every drug that appeared on the black market during the 1960s had previously been scrutinized, tested and refined by CIA and Army scientists. From 1947 till 1953, the US Navy Chatter and The US Army relied on LSD as a truth serum for interrogating, incapacitating and disorienting the enemy (Dodgson, p.109). But, the CIA was the main tester and developer of the substance devising various projects with the sole purpose of exploring and subduing the effects of these mind-altering substances. Operations like BLUEBIRD and Artichoke have attempted to develop behaviour-modification techniques in favour of more efficient interrogations. MK-Ultra was equally conceived to induce brainwashing among tested subjects (p.111). Interestingly, the phases following the ingestion of the substance were named “psychedelic trip”. Studies multiplied researching the effects on the psyche, the body and the mind and several research papers were written on the subject. LSD has become a revelation in medicine where mescaline was dimmed useful in “treating mental disorders, or at least in providing some insights into their nature” (p.112). Other studies have focused on their role in curing alcoholics and reintegrating them as “sober members of society” both economically and efficiently”². Overnight, what seemed to be unethical disorientation of the masses and cultural corruption of youngsters turned out to be a scientific breakthrough? Taking advantage of psychedelic success, Aldous Huxley has documented his journey in his book, *The Doors to Perception* inaugurating the “Psychedelic Movement” and giving birth to psychedelic fiction in 1960s.

Psychedelic Information Theory: Unlocking the Psychedelic Mind

Cuckoo's Nest is a book that combines all the historical elements about the emergence and evolution of LSD that I will be discussing lengthily in the following sections. But, what I am offering is a reading that combines neurology and literature. Basically, to analyse *Cuckoo's Nest* as a piece of psychedelic fiction, Kent's Psychedelic Information Theory is highly applicable. Psychedelic information theory dates to 2010 and is pioneered by James. L Kent. He has studied the process of the psychedelic journey as well as its aftermath on culture. It is a study that can be labelled as sociological neurology. Kent investigates in his book *Psychedelic Information Theory: Shamanism in the Age of Reason* how information is generated in the brain after the ingestion of the substance. Kent departs from the contention that like dreams which represent temporary breaks of reality and eruption of the unconscious. Drugs induce the same dissociative state. But, what Kent examines further is how information or input are remodelled through the psychedelic journey and how this output impacts not only the individual but also culture. He explains:

The spread of psychedelic information can be subtle or explicit information can be subtle or explicit, starting with the creation of art influenced by the psychedelic experience and culminating in the indoctrination to the amount of information that can be general within a single psychedelic session. (PIT, 2010, p.26)

² Quoted in Dodgson, 2013,p.112

Kent defines the psychedelic experience as a generator of artistic creation through undergoing what seems to be visionary hallucinations. Art emanates from the remodelling and the reconceptualization of the psychedelic output into concrete creations (p.25). He devises accordingly five stages that describe this journey. The psychedelic trip starts with the *Ingestion* of the substance, followed by its internal transmission, internal integration, and lastly becomes culturally transmitted and integrated. *Cuckoo's Nest* is the pure manifestation of how "Psychedelics create new information via spontaneous activation and organization of sensory and perceptual networks" (p.22). Ken Kesey was under LSD while writing his book and his hallucinations are documented in the very structure of the novel. Based on Kent's PIT, I argue that *Cuckoo's Nest* is a psychedelic piece of fiction in which a psychedelic author (Ken Kesey) remodels his visions through a psychedelic narrator (Chief Bromden) who describes his psychedelic experience that is induced through a psychedelic hero (McMurphy).

Ken Kesey: The Psychedelic Author

Kesey has experimented first hand with psychedelics and he has documented his hallucinations through a complex and innovative narrative that transcends the barriers of logic. To absolute accuracy, Kesey grants the reader insight into the world of kaleidoscopic hallucinations affirming: "You need to take the reader's mind places where it had never been before to convince him that this crazy Indian's world is his as well" (Kesey, p.19). This "crazy world" is the reflection of his own as he took part in the drug trials in Menlo Park Veteran hospital in 1959. His involvement lasted two months ingesting from eight to ten types of drugs such as mescaline, psilocybin and more obscure pharmaceuticals such as IT-290 and Mp-14 (Dodgson, p. 189). When asked about their effects, he responds: "[another] world happened...it slowly becomes evident to you that there's some awful and unique logic going on just as real as, in some ways as your other world" (Kesey, p.16). A world that mixes the fictional with the factual is the portal Kesey uses to unlock the "words that are already there". This story did not emanate from solely stretched imagination but rather it is an allegorical documentation of actual personal happenings. To his credit, Kesey knew how to tell a story that transforms the real world into a "combine" territory and how to incorporate his psychedelic experience into the psychological portrayal of a paranoid schizophrenic hybrid Indian. During his work as an orderly in The Menlo Park Veteran Hospital psychiatric ward, he relates, "I dealt all night with people crazy as hell" (Dodgson, p.191).

He describes that thanks to LSD, he could sense the suffering and anguish in the faces of the mental patients who were able to see the truth that sane doctors could not and that he most definitely could (Dodgson, p.160). To mark the 'intertext' between his personal history and the fictitious world he created in his novel, Kesey based many of the characters of the novel on real life patients that he had encountered on the ward during his midnight shift. He mentions that one of the patients approached him and said referring to the coke he was drinking "you could do a lot of damage with this." It is what inspired him to subtly address the theme of consumer madness in the early 1960s. Another instance, a mental patient shouted hysterically "f-f-f-uh the wife!" (Dodgson, p. 190). Soon after, that same expression echoed in the character of Ruckly denouncing the repercussions of patriarchy in the United States. Consequently, Psychedelic fiction is a fiction and a Metafiction. It is a fiction because it emanates

from the writer's imagination and metafictional because it is the description of the process of artistic creation. Ken Kesey's moments of struggle, his ability to sketch a character from the back of his mind and include others whom he has met in real life is quite clear in the novel's structure. The use of allegory is also a way for the writer to make statements and highlight the very purpose of his fiction. Respectively, Keseyian fiction is laden with hallucinations, a mind style that mixes fantasy with fact and a sketching of characters connected by the effects of psychedelics. It is by means of psychedelics that this Indian is brought to reflect on the American state of dehumanization and through them that Mc Murphy is conceived to vent Kesey's frustrations after seeing the people on the ward mistreating the patients and being helpless to save them (Dodgson, p.190). Kesey relies on the hyperactive state of consciousness induced by narcotics to reflect alternative allegorical spheres where completely fictional characters are created to make statements and change their worlds.

According to Kent, the ingestion of psychedelics is followed by its internal transmission in the system. In this phase, the psychedelics interact with the neural network and generate new information which take the forms of hallucinations. These hallucinations take the form of audio and visual visions that pop into the subject's imagination (Kent, p.23). In his book *Fun for the Revolution of it :A History of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters*, Richard Dodgson declares that "Kesey's long hours of writing *Cuckoo's Nest* ... may have been fueled by equal measures of ambition, talent and prescription pills, but it was psychedelics that provided the inscription" (p.187). Actually, it is safe to presume that *Cuckoo's Nest* came to Kesey as "epiphanies or brilliant ideas" (Kent, 2010, p.23) where he has actually seen the Indian's floating head in one of his camping trips emerging from the fire (Driscoll, p.92). Instead of forgetting his epiphanic vision, Kesey decides to remodel this information into the writing of *Cuckoo's Nest*. The recording of this novel reflects its cultural transmission from abstract kaleidoscopic noise to actual art activating "a process in which the realm of the psychological spills out in the realm of the physical" and fueling "artistic expression" (Kent, p.26). Finally, *Cuckoo's Nest* culminates in the cultural integration phase of the novel in landmarks of psychedelic fiction. The indoctrination of the psychedelic experience results from its materialization artistically through confirming or subverting a belief, or altering a reality. It allows Kesey to reflect any feelings he has experienced through his psychedelic trip and "create a lasting narrative of the journey" (Kent, p.27). In this respect, Kesey declares that "*Cuckoo's Nest* was supposed to be a revolutionary book. It was supposed to be about America, about how the sickness in America is in the consciousness of people, not the government, not the cops and not Big Nurse" (Dodgson, 2001, p.194). The journey ends with the cathartic inscription of the book as cornerstone of a psychedelic countercultural movement defying the very spirit of the age.

Chief Bromden and the Keys of Psychedelic Narration

Kesey gives his reader insight into his mystical psychedelic trip by means of his mouthpiece Chief Bromden. The latter describes in full details each psychedelic episode after the ingestion of the blue pill. The Chief reveals with the same precision how LSD affects the mind mirroring quite overtly the determiners of the phase of internal transmission. Relying on Masters and Houston's book *The Varieties of the Psychedelic Experience*, I shall attempt to dissect this phase. I attempt to offer a

diagnostic reading of Chief Bromden's as a narrator through the careful examinations of the symptoms he has shown in the novel. Masters and Houston describe the union drugs have with the system post ingestion as transcending the "dimensions of human fantasy" affording the "best access to the yet to the content and process of the human mind" (p.1). Chief Bromden gives access to his state through fragmented, dissociative narrative where he affirms a happening to deny it afterwards. He comments on his narrative that "it is the truth even if it didn't happen" (*Cuckoo's Nest*, p9). Visions do not have a logic order. In fact, they have effects that vary from entertainment, instruction to being "frightening and even therapeutic" (Houston, p. 54).

Chief Bromden's initial phases of the psychedelic journey begins with horror. He shouts "They are out there" (P.7). The first stage is sheer paranoia marked by a deformation of the body image. Bromden who is ironically six feet tall thinks of himself as a small child who can just hide in the "closet" or "under the bed". He "creeps along the wall quiet as dust in [his] canvas shoes" (p.8). His body dissolves and he experiences *somatopsychic depersonalization*. Bromden's paranoia results from his denial of his own body and his metamorphosis into an "invisible entity". Interestingly, it is not solely his body that he disfigures, he dehumanizes others around him as well. He sees big nurse as robot with wires coming out of her head (p.45). He sees one of the patients as a huge potato dangling from the ceiling (p.51), medical students as "rows of machines" and even sees blood as "shower of rust and ashes, glass and wires" (p.51). This disfiguration functions as a metaphoric portrayal of a reality that he is dissatisfied with subconsciously. Kesey chooses Chief Bromden as the teller of this mystical experience due to his ancient heritage with the substance. Kesey is aware of the fact that Indian tribes smoke hallucinogenic substances to achieve divine transcendence. Instead, he allows the Indian to redeem himself through retracing the steps of his ancestors and gaining insight into modern history. In the next phase of his journey, Chief Bromden's altered consciousness allows him to start questioning his surroundings. Houston and masters declare that this experience provides "helpful insights contributing to self-understanding and education" (p.57). As such, Chief Bromden shifts roles from mere observation to intricate analysis and questioning of his own reality. Respectively, he contends:

I know already what will happen: somebody will drag me out of the fog and we'll be back on the ward and there won't be a sign of what went on tonight and if I was fool enough to try and tell anybody about it they would say, idiot, you just had a nightmare; things as crazy as big as a machine room down in the bowels of the dam where people get up by robot workers don't exist. But, if they exist, how can a man see them? (p.51)

Through asking these questions, this once absurd narrative filled with incongruities and contrasts takes a more rational turn. The unpleasant experience fades restoring the body image to its previous status and paving the way a better self-affirmation and recognition. As a result, Chief Bromden regains the use of his physical faculties. Psychedelics ensure another state of rebirth while the subject can perceive things as "a child must perceive them, unblinckered by convention, his vision not yet limited and distorted by conditioning" (p.57). Chief remembers how to talk after choosing to feign muteness and dumbness and utters his first word "thank you" after twenty years (p.132). He remembers an old nursery song entitled forget Mrs Tingle Tangle Toes (p.140). He finally masters enough strength to deviate from "chief Broom" to be

called Chief Bromden. He has regained his force by beating the orderlies who molested his friend George and chosen to escape from the asylum into the wilderness. His rebirth as a character and as a narrator is simultaneously executed. His narrative becomes sequential, truthful and more detailed. The fog that predominates the entire narrative dissipates washing away the indeterminacies this novel is filled with and McMurphy who has been seen as a superman is reduced to a normal con man. The novel ends on a celebration of spiritual rebirth ornamenting the closure of the mystical journey of self-redemption. He “[runs] across the grounds in the direction ...toward the highway” feeling “like [he] was flying. Free” (p.178). Chief Bromden’s flight was never possible without the epitome of drugs themselves bearing the name of Randle Patrick McMurphy.

The psychedelic Superman

The most essential part in psychedelic fiction is having a drug-like catalyst. He is the heart and soul of the story. Probably, without McMurphy the novel would not be the same. Most importantly, because he serves as an epitome of psychedelics and is the main inductor of Chief Bromden’s hallucinations. Just like drugs, Mack³ is portrayed as an outlaw. Kesey portrays a character that has defied every societal norm refuting the preconditioned state of conformity. The Nurse ratchet who has been labelled by many critics as the Romance dragon and preserver of order introduces him with disgust as a felon and crazy street hustler. She declares:

[McMurphy] committed to the state from Pendleton Farm for correction, for diagnosis and possible treatment, thirty five years old, never married, distinguished Service Cross in Korea for leading an escape from a communist prison Camp, a dishonourable discharge, afterward for insubordination, followed by a history of street brawls and barroom fights and a series of arrests for drunkenness, assault and battery, disturbing the peace, repeated gambling and one arrest for rape. (p.28)

As drugs were seen corrupting to the public, banned by several communities and considered a transgression of the rule of the conscious, Mack is carefully chosen to incarnate all these qualities rendering him a psychedelic hero. Along with his unruliness and indiscipline, Mack is depicted as pagan God. He named himself as “the bull goose looney”. It is known for Kesey who is an Oregon native that Indians pass on legends about animal shaped gods from generation to the next. Psychedelics have also been part of a divine ascendance ritual. Consequently, Mack is portrayed as a sun God. According to Carol Havemann, Mack’s physical description is similar to an old legend about the goose being the God of the Sky. He was as “beautiful as a pine tree or a lake-trout with brass red-hair, his golden body, and his green clothes” (Havemann, p.94). Similarly, Mack is described as “big, tanned, red-headed, and wearing convalescents” (*Cuckoo’s Nest*, p.94). Chief Bromden perceives him as such since he is the only one with enough power to defy Big Nurse and defeat her. Big Nurse who controls the sun (p.145) is defeated by Mack who is able to use “the methods of pretended ignorance and self-deprecation defeats Big Nurse turning her humourlessness against her” (Morris, p. 35).

³ Randle Patrick McMurphy is abbreviated as Mack

Apart from defying the rules of conformity set by Big Nurse, Mack infiltrates in the system of the mental patients through a metaphorical blood connection. As a representative of psychedelics, he internally transmits his effects through a simple handshake. Chief affirms that “[Mc Murphy]’s fingers were thick closing over [his] like he was transmitting his own blood into it. It rang with blood and power” (p.18). Masters and Houston explain that the subject experiences divine-like qualities where everything becomes possible and they assume any shapes they see fitting (p.56-57). This empowerment allows the patients of the ward to heal and control their own illness. The patients were able to leave the asylum and embark on a new journey thanks to Mack’s therapeutic influence. Like drugs, he was able to “gain an insight into the world of ideas and sensations of mental patients” (Hoffman, 1980c, p.23). He calls patients by their names reaffirming their identity and not as “acutes and “chronics”. He calls Chief as Bromden instead of mocking him as “the great Chief Broom” and attempts to cure Billy Bibbit’s severe oedipal complex through liberating his repressed sexuality (*Cuckoo’s Nest*, p. 101-150). Dr. Ronald Siegal contends that LSD was thought to be useful to “elicit release of repressed material and provide mental relaxation, particularly in anxiety states and obsessional neuroses” (p.6). Mack has eventually led the Chief towards his redemption after evaporating symbolically from his system. As temporary and ephemeral LSD is, Mack dies after being euthanized by his disciple. Bromden who could not bear to see his mentor, a wheeled vegetable chokes him to death with his pillow (p.162). By doing so, He has declared his independence from the altered state of mind that he has been under. Mack becomes culturally and internally integrated in the system of the Chief and his fellow inmates. He becomes a belief of defiance and a culture of resistance.

Conclusion

Psychedelic fiction is a slipstream fiction because it combines the scientific quality of science fiction with mainstream romance. It is far more complex because it establishes a parallelism between the medical and the literary discourse. Kesey has skilfully integrated the metaphoric effects of his own psychedelic experience into a complex narrative of loss and redemption. Choosing a schizophrenic Indian as his mouth piece, Kesey reveals the circumstances of being entranced by LSD. Internal integration, transmission, cultural integration and transmission take the psychedelic experience from an individual private ritual to an artistically rebellious creation. Kesey self-fashions a character that possesses the same qualities of narcotics who not only induces Chief Bromden’s journey into redemption but also takes the readers to a different state of consciousness. Psychedelic fiction arises as an amalgam of reality and imagination mixed in an ontological world of contradictory intersections, yet completely logical. Defying consciousness leads to creation where “psychedelics do not stay in head, if they did there would be no psychedelic art, no psychedelic music, no psychedelic spirituality and no psychedelic revolution” (Kent, p.28).

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