

Pallas Art College
Department of Media Design

Parallel narrative and multi-layered visual composition
based on the short film *Whispers of the Forest*
Thesis

Jaanika Kozlova

Supervisors:

Veiko Vaatmann, MA

Tallinn University, Baltic Film, Media and Arts Institute (BFM)

Head of Academic Film Direction, Lecturer in Dramaturgy and Screenwriting

Christopher Farley, MA

Film Producer and Director

Gritnova Global Campus, Lecturer in Film Studies Module

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INTRODUCTION

Short film is one of the greatest challenges for a filmmaker. Within limited screen time, it is necessary to create a cohesive whole that resonates with the viewer emotionally and tells a meaningful story. The written part of this thesis is based on the problems that emerged during the production of the practical component of the thesis, the short film *Whispers of the Forest*. The most important of these was how to fit the dramaturgical and emotional scope suitable for a feature-length film into the short film format in such a way that the stories of the two main characters could be conveyed smoothly and understandably. In search of answers, it was necessary to turn to both film theory and classical cinema, while the theoretical tools were tested through real creative decisions. The solution was the use of parallel narrative and multi-layered visual composition, which this thesis focuses on.

The short film format, together with documentary content, now accounts for more than 35% of total digital engagement, representing significant growth compared to previous years. More than 60% of film viewing takes place on streaming platforms, which provide a highly favourable environment for short films (Film Market Size... 2026). Short films function both as an important stepping stone in the careers of emerging directors and as an independent art form distributed through international festivals and digital platforms. At the same time, there is a lack of theoretical literature that specifically addresses the narrative and visual solutions characteristic of short films. This study attempts to partially fill that gap by connecting general film theory with the practice of short filmmaking.

The central problem of the thesis is threefold. First: How does multi-layered visual composition, or *mise-en-scène*, shape the viewer's attention and guide their interpretation? Second: How does parallel narrative – the juxtaposition of two or more simultaneously unfolding stories – create dramaturgical and meaningful depth in a short film? Third: What is the impact of these techniques on the viewer's emotional and interpretive experience? These questions emerged directly from the production process of the short film *Whispers of the Forest*, where concrete visual and narrative solutions had to be found.

The aim of the thesis is to analyse how parallel narrative and multi-layered visual composition function in a short film both theoretically and practically, and to assess the meanings these techniques created in the film. The object of study is the short film *Whispers of the Forest* as a whole – specifically its visual structure and narrative

composition. The material of the study consists of the film's specific *mise-en-scène* and parallel narrative solutions, analysed through examples from film theory and film history.

To achieve this aim, this thesis examines the theoretical foundations of *mise-en-scène* and parallel narrative based on film literature, analyses examples from classical cinema, and compares both with the completed short film. Based on this, I seek to answer how the chosen techniques were applied in the short film and what results they produced.

Keywords (3)

1. short film
2. parallel narrative
3. *mise-en-scène*

1. THE SHORT FILM *WHISPERS OF THE FOREST*

The practical component of this thesis – the short film *Whispers of the Forest* (originally *Kus te olete?*) – is a 23-minute drama based on true events. The film tells the story of eight-year-old Mira, who escapes with her younger sister from an oppressive home to search for salvation in a forest from her dreams. Instead of a fantasy world, however, help arrives from an unlikely source – a lonely neighbour named Indrek, for whom helping the missing girls becomes a path to his own emotional healing.

The film explores childhood trauma from a child's perspective, where fantasy and reality intertwine as coping mechanisms. Visually, the film is built on contrast: harsh subject matter is expressed through a soft visual language. On a broader level, the film indirectly draws society's attention to abused children and encourages viewers to notice and, where necessary, to help. This issue knows no national borders and social classes.

The short film *Whispers of the Forest* is my directorial debut. As the author of the thesis, my primary role and goal was to work as the director, bringing to life a screenplay I wrote myself. Due to limited financial resources, it was also necessary to take on the role of producer, organise the casting process, find locations and costumes, assist the technical crew where necessary, and arrange on-site catering and props.

The true story on which the film is based is considerably more complex than what is presented in the short film, as it connects three important characters. This led to the first major problem: how to fit the intersecting stories of three main characters into the short film format. By following a classical simple linear structure, the format could barely accommodate one of them – the story of eight-year-old Mira – which alone was clearly not enough. Many films with similar stories have already been made, and the subject of abused children is not unique. Therefore, the decision was made to remove one character from the story entirely, while seeking ways in film theory ways to weave the second character's story together with Mira's so that the result would be a coherent and clear short film with two main characters.

2. *MISE-EN-SCÈNE* AS MULTILAYERED VISUAL COMPOSITION

In French, *mise-en-scène* means “putting into the scene” and originates from the art of theatrical staging. According to Bertolucci's classical understanding, *mise-en-scène* represents “the relationship between the camera, the bodies of the people in front of it, and the landscape” (Bertolucci 1989: 78, cited in Martin 2014: 4) – the interaction of body, space, and environment. Astruc described *mise-en-scène* as “a way of extending states of mind into movements of the body” (Astruc 1985: 267-268, cited in Martin 2014: 4), emphasising that every physical arrangement on screen carries emotional meaning.

Mise-en-scène includes those aspects of film that overlap with theatre: setting, shooting locations, lighting, costumes, and the behaviour of the characters. By controlling the *mise-en-scène*, the director stages the event for the camera. Multi-layered visual composition generally requires careful planning, although the director may also remain open to unplanned events (Bordwell & Thompson 2010: 112). In some cases, the director must adapt scenes to circumstances that cannot be controlled. In *Whispers of the Forest*, this occurred mainly when working with child actors whose reactions differed from the screenplay.

Every element of *mise-en-scène* simultaneously serves three functions: directing attention (where do we look?), creating curiosity and tension (what will happen?), and adding emotional dimension (what do we feel?) (Bordwell & Thompson 2010: 141). Due to limited time and resources, planning this combination is especially important in a short film – no element should be neutral or accidental. As Astruc notes, *mise-en-scène* is “the art of arranging, choreographing and displaying” actors within a specific environment – every spatial and physical decision carries expressive meaning in itself (Astruc 1985: 267-268, cited in Martin 2014: 46).

When discussing the planning and evaluation of multi-layered visual composition from the perspective of realism, an important aspect of *Whispers of the Forest* is its time period – the 1990s. This required careful attention to period-appropriate details such as locations, interiors, clothing, hairstyles, and props. Because many viewers still remember the 1990s, inaccuracies within the frame become more noticeable.

To better understand the composition of *mise-en-scène* and how its different components function both in classical cinema and in the short film *Whispers of the Forest*, the following elements will now be examined in greater detail.

2.1 Setting

Setting is the framework of action that helps to tell the story presented in a film. In a short film, carefully designed locations and environments help to convey meaning to the viewer immediately: a cramped, dark room versus an open, light-filled space tells the audience something even before a single word is spoken. In the opening scene of *Whispers of the Forest*, the camera moves from a sunny yard into a dim kitchen with a worn interior – immediately establishing the tone of the film, revealing the personalities of the characters and their relationships, and referring clearly to the genre (drama).

One component of the setting is props, which can become especially powerful as motifs – recurring objects that accumulate meaning (Bordwell & Thompson 2010: 117 – 118). A well-known example from classical cinema is the shower curtain in *Psycho* (1960), directed by Alfred Hitchcock, which became a symbol of a trap. Within the film, the shower curtain symbolises vulnerability, isolation, and violence, demonstrating how repeated objects can gain deeper meaning.

In *Whispers of the Forest*, this type of motif is represented by food, which simultaneously symbolises goodness and safety, but also fear and violence. In the opening scene, the father eats steaming fresh soup, while in front of Mira is a plate of partially mouldy potatoes. In the fairy-tale scene, however, Mira eats strawberries with milk – a favourite treat for many children of the 1990s.

The way environments and spaces function as storytellers can be clearly seen in *Citizen Kane* by Orson Welles. Large empty spaces and high ceilings emphasise Kane's emotional state: the protagonist appears small, oppressed, and lonely. At the end of *Whispers of the Forest*, Indrek is seen sitting in a dark corner, hidden from the sunlight – a place where he seems to be waiting for his missing son. It is in this dark corner, reflecting his emotional condition, that Mira gives him the fairy doll, prompting Indrek to smile for the first time – an emotional breakthrough in his story.

A distinction is often made between found locations (real-life places) and constructed sets. Even when real locations are used, the filmmaker simplifies and shapes the space –

distracting elements are removed, colours are harmonised, and the camera's field of view is carefully controlled (Bordwell & Thompson 2010: 115–116). Filming *Whispers of the Forest*, which is set in the 1990s, required careful attention to any element within the frame that did not correspond to the period or fit the characters' backgrounds. It also required careful location scouting in order to create a clear visual difference between Mira's and Indrek's living environments. Mira comes from a poor family, which is why her home is unrenovated, worn down, and filled with old and damaged objects – despite children living there, toys are practically absent. In contrast, Indrek's home is in significantly better condition, reflecting a more comfortable, emotionally warmer, and more stable living environment.

2.2 Costume and Makeup

Costumes can reveal character, mark turning points, and create visual parallels between characters without the use of dialogue. The coordination of colours between costume and environment is especially important: whether a character stands out from the surroundings or blends into them is, in both cases, a deliberate choice (Bordwell & Thompson 2010: 121–122). The girl in the red coat in *Schindler's List* by Steven Spielberg is the only coloured element in the otherwise black-and-white film. She embodies the innocent victims of the Holocaust and marks a turning point in Oskar Schindler's moral development (McCormick, Walters & Trujillo 2024).

In a short film, where there is little time to develop a character through multiple scenes, what they wear when first introduced to the audience can communicate a great deal. Indrek, who repairs his car in sweaty and dirty clothes and galoshes, dresses neatly when visiting his son's grave at the cemetery: he wears a dress shirt, proper trousers, and shoes. This visit is important to him, and he has prepared for it. Despite the warm summer weather, Kaja searches for a thick sweater, recalling the night her own son disappeared.

2.3 Lighting

The contrast between high-key lighting (bright light, low contrast – characteristic of comedies and adventure films) and low-key lighting (dark, high contrast, *chiaroscuro* – characteristic of *film noir*, horror, and drama) is a practical and useful tool in short filmmaking, as it establishes the tone of the story immediately and inexpensively

(Bordwell & Thompson 2010: 129–130). Lighting consists of several properties – quality, direction, source, colour, and intensity – each of which can significantly contribute to the story.

The quality of light plays an important role in shaping mood and texture within a film. Hard lighting creates sharp shadows and clear textures, producing a tense and dramatic feeling, whereas soft lighting diffuses and softens the image, creating a warmer and more natural atmosphere (Bordwell & Thompson 2010: 115–116). Murch argues that what an audience finally remembers is not the editing, the camerawork, or even the story, but rather how they felt (Murch, 2001: 18). This principle also guided the lighting choices in *Whispers of the Forest* to evoke a specific emotional response from the viewer.

The film's opening scene begins in a sunny yard where children are playing, after which the camera moves into a dim kitchen with a heavy emotional atmosphere. This contrast between light and darkness not only strengthens the emotional difference between the environments but also helps direct the viewer's attention and expectations.

The only slightly unnatural lighting in the film – warm, soft, yet relatively strong – appears at the beginning of the fairy-tale scene, with the clear purpose of emphasising that it belongs to a fantasy world. In contrast, the real forest scenes use natural and noticeably darker lighting, thereby strengthening the contrast between fantasy and reality.

The direction of light influences how subjects appear on screen and how viewers interpret a scene. Frontal lighting is flat and shadowless and suits lighter genres, while sidelighting helps to portray faces more dramatically. Backlighting creates silhouettes, lighting from below distorts the image and creates a threatening effect, and overhead lighting can add glamour or isolate the illuminated subject (Bordwell & Thompson 2010: 115–116).

In *Citizen Kane*, light often falls from unusual angles – such as from the side or below – creating unnatural shadows and a gloomy atmosphere. In *Whispers of the Forest*, the scene in which Mati asks Oskar to leave Indrek alone was filmed from a low-angle perspective for this same reason, where the cloudy sky created the required sense of gloom. Natural shadows and overcast skies are valuable low-budget tools for creating emotional impact.

In the fairy scene, however, the lighting is positioned behind the fairies so that they appear to bring light with them as a symbol of hope. In addition, this sequence is highly

vibrant, whereas the rest of the film uses a sepia-like palette and muted colours – creating a vital contrast between Mira’s fantasy world and reality.

Colour grading plays a very important role in *Whispers of the Forest*. No on-camera filters were used; instead, the colours were primarily established during editing. To some extent, the conscious selection of costumes also contributed – specifically through the use of neutral tones and the avoidance of strong contrasts in clothing. This helped create the atmosphere of the film, supporting both the 1990s setting and the dramatic genre, while the muted colours reflect the dark tone and emotional heaviness of the story.

2.4 Staging and acting

The way characters are positioned and move within the frame determines where the viewer looks and what they feel. Frontal positioning makes facial expressions more readable and helps direct attention toward a character’s inner state, while turning away from the camera or avoiding eye contact can emphasise uncertainty and tension (Bordwell & Thompson 2010: 139–144). Acting style also changes depending on camera distance: close-ups require small and restrained gestures, whereas long shots demand broader physical expression because facial details are barely visible (Bordwell & Thompson 2010: 139–141).

For example, in the drone shot where Mira runs toward the camera while searching for the fairies, she raises her hands while calling out to them to heighten the emotional weight of the moment. Although her face is not clearly visible, her body language and cries communicate desperation. Greta playing in the background makes Mira’s search for the fairies explicitly clear.

As noted earlier, the director may also remain open to unplanned events on set. This aspect becomes especially important when working with children and animals, whose behaviour does not always follow strict instructions. Film theory emphasises that non-professional or inexperienced performers – such as children – can bring spontaneity and authenticity to a scene, however, they also require flexibility from the director and the ability to adapt the staging according to the situation (Bordwell & Thompson 2010: 193–196).

Beginning filmmakers are often advised not to work with children or animals because of the unpredictability they bring to production. Nevertheless, I chose to ignore this advice,

believing that children's spontaneous reactions would more effectively support the parallel narrative, allowing the relationships and emotions between the characters to develop more naturally in front of the camera.

2.4.1 Depth staging

Depth staging means that the action is arranged across several planes within the depth of the frame: the foreground, middle ground, and background. This is also referred to as a multi-plane composition. Positioning characters at different distances from the camera allows multiple events to occur simultaneously within a single shot. In certain cases, the positioning of actors and their actions – in other words, deliberate *mise-en-scène* – can itself become a form of parallel narrative, presenting a smaller story within the main story. In this sense, multi-plane *mise-en-scène* creates a perceived parallelism within a single frame.

In the concept of depth staging, multiple layers of action within one frame invite the viewer to observe and interpret several narrative relationships simultaneously (Bordwell & Thompson 2010: 160). Similarly, André Bazin's theory of deep focus and the long take argues that keeping multiple narrative elements within a single extended shot preserves spatial and temporal realism, allowing viewers to discover meaning across different layers of the image (Bazin 1971: 35–40). On the level of storytelling, this technique can create meaningful connections between two seemingly unrelated stories or worlds, forming a thematic structure with multiple simultaneous layers of meaning (Martin 2014: 26).

Although *Whispers of the Forest* does not make extensive use of deep-focus techniques – mainly due to technical limitations and the desire to avoid changing lenses in order to preserve a consistent cinematic style – the short film still demonstrates similar layered scene construction. During the dialogue between Indrek and Oskar, Kaja is seen through the window running toward Mati outside. Kaja gestures intensely, indicating to the viewer that something urgent is being discussed outdoors, even though the conversation itself cannot be heard. At the same time, the dialogue between Indrek and Oskar continues in the foreground and remains audible. In other words, the scene contains two simultaneous sub-narratives: outside, something urgent and emotional is unfolding while indoors, a tense conversation continues at the same time.

2.4.2 Blocking

The path characters take through space tells a story, and blocking – the planning of actors' movements and positioning within a space – is an inseparable part of the broader logic of *mise-en-scène*. Martin describes *mise-en-scène* as “the significant placement of actors within the setting so that the environment itself becomes an actor” – meaning that the way a character moves through space, as well as the space they occupy or are denied, becomes a form of storytelling in itself (Martin 2014: 17).

Blocking in the short film *Whispers of the Forest* is most clearly expressed through Mira, whose spoken role is minimal, yet whose body language, movement, and facial expressions must communicate a great deal. In contrast, her father Oskar's gestures emphasise dominance: a fist striking the table, a warning finger pointed toward Mira and Liisa. These are brief but decisive physical gestures that establish his authority within the space without the need for lengthy explanation.

Mira's gestures, on the other hand, are emotionally charged. Forcefully pushing the bowl onto the floor demonstrates how suppressed resistance transforms into action. In the forest scene set in reality, Mira touches a tree trunk and freezes for a moment, then suddenly begins walking forward with determination, leaving Greta behind. In other words, she reacts to recognition – it is the tree from her dream.

The most emotionally significant moment of blocking occurs in the final scene, where Mira lets go of her mother's hand, runs back to Indrek, takes the fairy doll from her pocket, and gives it to him. This sequence of movements forms a visual culmination, condensing the emotional meaning of the story into one brief physical action.

3. PARALLEL NARRATIVE

3.1 Parallelism as a Narrative Structure

Parallelism is a narrative technique that presents two or more story elements – characters, situations, settings, or temporalities – in a way that encourages the audience to compare them. Importantly, parallel narrative lines do not necessarily require a direct causal connection (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010: 75–76). In a short film, parallelism is an especially effective storytelling device because it allows multiple narrative layers to exist within a limited runtime, creating thematic and emotional complexity without requiring extensive plot development. Two characters pursuing different versions of the same goal, or experiencing contrasting versions of a similar life situation, can communicate a deeper thematic meaning than a single isolated storyline.

Linda Aronson divides parallel narratives into six categories. The first category includes films that generally avoid time shifts and present several equally important stories unfolding simultaneously within the same timeframe. These may employ tandem narratives (equally important stories occurring simultaneously), multiple protagonists with separate but interconnected storylines, or “double journeys,” in which protagonists move toward one another, or away from one another, or in parallel – physically, emotionally, or both.

The second category includes nonlinear narratives involving time shifts, such as flashbacks and flashforwards. These films present multiple stories – sometimes of unequal importance – across different temporal frameworks or in sequential order. Such structures may involve fragmented tandem narratives, in which parallel storylines are repeatedly interrupted through movement between different periods of time (Aronson, 2010: 172–176).

The original concept for *Whispers of the Forest* was to construct a nonlinear narrative with two parallel storylines. However, this approach was reconsidered early in development because the short film format would not have provided sufficient runtime for such a structure within the context of this particular story. Instead, Indrek’s backstory is never shown directly as a complete narrative line. The audience is required to reconstruct his past through parallel elements and visual clues: the framed photograph of a young boy, the cemetery, the gravestone, fragments of dialogue, and Indrek’s behaviour. The film

therefore relies on associative storytelling, allowing viewers to connect narrative fragments into a coherent emotional history. The presence of two protagonists – Mira and Indrek – strongly supports the use of parallel narrative structure.

Parallelism requires both similarity and difference. As Bordwell and Thompson note, moving between parallel narrative lines allows viewers to recognise recurring motifs while also observing meaningful variations and contrasts (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010: 67). A classic example appears in *Citizen Kane* (1941), where Kane's life story and Thompson's investigation function as parallel searches for "Rosebud," despite operating on different narrative levels.

3.2 Parallelism and short film format

In a short film, parallel narrative is one of the most efficient storytelling tools available, and in *Whispers of the Forest* it became essential for condensing thematic and emotional complexity into a limited runtime. Parallelism allows multiple narrative strands to coexist within a unified structure whose depth emerges through contrast, reflection, and repetition. At the same time, short-film dramaturgy depends heavily on condensation and concentration: narrative elements must be structured with maximum efficiency, as a limited duration requires high narrative density (Remsu 2010a).

First, parallel narrative enables two stories to coexist within the same film, where meaning emerges not only from each storyline individually but also from the relationship between them. An attentive viewer understands that Indrek and Oskar, sitting opposite one another at the kitchen table, essentially represent the same story unfolding at different points in time – one in Indrek's past and the other in Oskar's present. Indrek recognises himself in Oskar: an alcoholic father detached from responsibility. This mirroring reflects a classic form of parallel narrative in which two characters embody different stages or variations of the same situation, inviting comparison and interpretation (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010: 75–76).

Oskar is an alcoholic father who does not even realise that his own children have run away from home. When asked to help search for the missing girls, he shows little concern because he assumes they are "someone else's" children. Indrek, similarly, was once an alcoholic and emotionally negligent father. The loss of his son became a traumatic turning point that forced him to confront his past behaviour. Although he no longer drinks and

deeply mourns his son, traces of bitterness and emotional withdrawal remain. Initially, he refuses to help search for the girls because he is preoccupied with visiting his son's grave on the anniversary of his birth.

However, once Indrek arrives at the cemetery, he recognises the disturbing similarity between Oskar's situation and his own past. He realises that the girls may face the same fate as his son because hardly anyone knows where to search for them. In this sense, Indrek and Oskar evolve in opposite moral directions, similarly to *Schindler's List* (1993), where Oskar Schindler becomes increasingly compassionate after witnessing suffering, while Amon Goeth remains cruel and indifferent.

Beyond narrative parallels, the film also employs visual and symbolic parallels to connect Mira's fantasy world with reality. These include recurring locations, such as the forest and the same tree Mira touches both in her dream and in real life; repeated actions, such as Mira taking the fairy's hand in the dream world and later taking Indrek's hand in reality; and mirrored dialogue, where Mira asks "Where are you?" and Indrek replies, "We are here now." Similar emotional states, visual motifs, and musical themes further strengthen the connection between the two narrative worlds.

According to Olev Remsu, dramatic situations emerge when psychological, physical, or moral pressures exceed a character's ability to cope, forcing decisive action and often leading to irreversible consequences (Remsu 2010b). In *Whispers of the Forest*, this structure is clearly visible in Mira's storyline. Psychological pressure begins in the opening scene, where her father forces her to eat spoiled food while humiliating her emotionally. The tension culminates in the morning kitchen scene, when Oskar once again places the bowl in front of Mira before leaving with a threatening gesture. This moment exceeds Mira's emotional limits: she pushes the bowl to the floor and decides to leave home. Her departure functions as the narrative turning point from which there is no return.

Indrek experiences a similar emotional breaking point at the cemetery. Although determined to continue living in the past and isolate himself emotionally, he ultimately realises that he cannot allow another tragedy to occur. He understands that he has a second chance to prevent what once happened to his own son. Such moments are crucial for audience engagement because dramatic tension is sustained through obstacles, crises, and situations that appear emotionally inescapable (Remsu 2010b).

To reinforce the parallel narrative structure and emotional connection between Mira's fantasy world and the real forest, a specific musical theme was composed for the film. In the fairy scenes, the melody is light and dreamlike; in the forest scenes, it becomes more dramatic while retaining the same emotional undertone of hope. To emphasise the parallelism, the melody begins in both scenes precisely at the moment when Mira takes the hand of her "rescuer."

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined how parallel narrative and multi-layered visual composition work in a short film, analysing the short film *Whispers of the Forest* (originally *Kus te olete?*) created as a practical project. The main focus of the work was the question of how to fit the stories of the two main characters into the limited format of a short film so that the result would be holistic, emotionally impactful, and engaging for the viewer.

The theoretical part of the work deals with the various components of *mise-en-scène*, or multi-layered visual composition – staging space, costumes, lighting, blocking, and acting – and shows how these elements work as a unified whole in a short film. Examples from classical cinema in the films of Welles, Hitchcock, and Spielberg confirm that thoughtful visual and compositional design is a timeless tool that also works in modern short films. Its careful use is especially valuable under conditions of limited budgets and when seeking ways to stand out as a filmmaker.

Parallel narrative turned out to be the film's main solution to the problem. Since the real-life story was too extensive for a short film, a way had to be found to connect the story of the other main character, Indrek, with Mira's story without showing it directly. The solution was to allow the viewer understand Indrek's past through interpretation – with the help of props, dialogue, and environment, all presented as clearly as possible. Mira's and Indrek's stories mirror each other: both share similar circumstances, but they occupy different roles, and it is this reflection that gives the film a depth that neither story would achieve separately.

During the process, it became clear that theory, planning, and practice do not always coincide. A limited budget, working with children, and unplanned moments on set required constant adaptation. Careful pre-planning was necessary. At the same time, the experience confirmed that it is precisely the constraints of a short film that force more precise solutions – and that a parallel narrative combined with a well-thought-out multi-layered visual composition provides a highly effective set of tools for this.

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