

The Apocalypse Begins at Home: The Antichrist-as-Child Film

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Although the viewer is never given a clear visual of him, the eponymous child of Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) has the distinction of being the first cinematic antichrist. Eight years later, Hollywood offered a far more extensive portrayal of Satan's son in Richard Donner's 1976 film *The Omen*. Together, these two films formulated a sort of cinematic Urtext for the antichrist-as-child narrative, jointly establishing its standard narrative features in the cultural imaginary. The child antichrist we are familiar with, after all, does not have a biblical source: as Richard Fuller notes in his study *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession* (1995), "[t]he term Antichrist barely appears in scripture. Only two minor epistles, '1 John' and '2 John,' actually use the term, and its meaning even there is fairly obscure" (3).

Rosemary's Baby and *The Omen* appeared when a general fascination with evil children was flourishing: in addition to these two movies, the 1960s and 1970s ushered in such films as *Village of the Damned* (1960), based on John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957); *The Innocents* (1961), a cinematic version of Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* (1898); a 1963 adaptation of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954); and, perhaps most famously, *The Exorcist* (1973), based on William Peter Blatty's 1971 novel of the same name.¹ The sudden proliferation of texts about evil children has been attributed by some critics, such as Stephen O'Leary, to the "baby boomers' [...] ambivalence about parenting" (422), the likely result of intergenerational conflict with their liberal hippie offspring.² In addition, a sense of dismay about the moral quality of society led many to wonder if the antichrist were not about to make an appearance anyway: this period also witnessed, as Fuller and others have pointed out, the publication of

1. For a more comprehensive list of evil children texts and films from this era, see my introduction to *The 'Evil Child' in Literature, Film and Popular Culture*, especially pp. 1–5.
2. See also Dixon and Maynard.
3. The only daughters of Satan I have come across are the twin girls born in the movie *Blessed* (2004). In *The Reaping* (2007), a beautiful blond girl with a penchant for causing plagues appears to be the antichrist but in fact is revealed to be an angelic savior sent to destroy a community of Satanists. Similarly, in *Bless the Child* (2000), a girl with special powers is caught in a battle that will determine if she will become christ or antichrist. However, it is clear from the beginning that she is far more predisposed to good, for throughout the film, she uses her supernatural powers only to perform benign tasks like healing a bird that flies into a window, making a snow globe swirl without touching it, and turning away a would-be-attacker with a withering glance. Even Delia, Damien's daughter in *Omen IV*, is only a surrogate mother/sister to the next antichrist, her twin brother.
4. While not directly discussing genetics, both Tony Williams (discussing *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist*, and *The Omen*) and Robin Wood (discussing only *The Omen*) see the family as guiltless in these films. Williams claims that all three of the satanic films he examines “disavow relevant social factors by ascribing family circumstances to the aggressive return of an old native lying dormant since the Puritan witch trials. Satan, not problem families, was really responsible” (106). Wood describes *The Omen* as “old-fashioned, traditional, reactionary: the goodness of the family unit isn't questioned; horror is disowned by having the devil-child, a product of the Old World, unwittingly adopted into

Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* in 1970, a book that drew parallels between current events and scriptural apocalyptic prophecies and the 1972 work *The Beginning of the End* by Tim LaHaye, who would later go on to pen the hugely popular *Left Behind* series. Furthermore, as Antoinette Winstead has pointed out, belief in the devil actually increased during this time, much to the public's horror.

The burgeoning field of behavioral genetics also likely influenced these films; most historians date the field's official inception to the 1960 publication of *Behavior Genetics* by J.L. Fuller and W.R. Thompson (Hahn 397). Over the next decade, the discipline developed into a recognizable specialty, as is evident by the founding of the Behavior Genetics Association in 1970. What are *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Omen* if not renditions of the age-old nature versus nurture debate? But rather than simply staging the debate for our consideration, these films seem to decide for us which factor has the greatest impact upon childhood development, with DNA seeming to emerge as the obvious victor. Whether a woman becomes an unsuspecting vessel for the antichrist via rape by Satan himself (as in *Rosemary's Baby*) or the corrupted child is adopted into the family (as in *The Omen*), the implication is the same: genetic material, specifically patrilineal heritage for boys (and the antichrist is almost always a boy) is far more consequential than female genetic contributions or the influence of a respectable, loving family.³ These films seem to use supernatural elements to justify an argument for behavioral determinism: satanic DNA—a stand-in, perhaps, for any sort of dominant gene—naturally trumps less powerful human genetic contributions and determines a

behavioral trajectory that cannot be altered by environmental factors.

It would also seem, then, that the antichrist-as-child narrative largely exculpates the family for the devilish offspring they produce. After all, the narrative proposes that evil enters the family—at least, the white, upper-class, American family—when foreign DNA taints its gene pool, either genetically or through the process of adoption.⁴ Both films seem to further vindicate the family by demonstrating that the antichrist's development is aided and abetted by a corrupt society that delights in the degradation of the child—indeed, that directly benefits from it. In *Rosemary's Baby*, an entire coven of witches ensures the birth of the antichrist; in *The Omen*, a nefarious nanny acts as the antichrist's guardian. The suggestion is that the antichrist cannot come into being without the complicity of a wicked society, the corrupting influence of which the family alone is unable to combat.

However, as I will show, the antichrist-as-child narrative is far more complicated than it first appears. Beneath what seems like an obvious genetic argument lies a critique of parental failure to provide a proper amount of care: too much parental devotion means the child antichrist will go undetected and unpunished, while too little parental involvement leaves the antichrist's development unhindered. These films thus function as guides to proper parenting: the child antichrist represents the wayward and wicked youth who are the result of parental failure. The antichrist-as-child narrative has continued to perform equivalent cultural work in the twenty-first century, which has witnessed a boon of such films, though with new variants that play upon developments in genetic technologies and knowledge and that speak more clearly to anxieties about contemporary parenting ideologies and the problematic children they may yield. Though the antichrist-as-child narrative has received relatively little scholarly attention, I argue that it directly engages with issues plaguing parents today as well as some forty years ago.⁵

The Antichrist-as-Child Film, Then and Now

Rosemary's Baby and *The Omen* established several key conventions that later antichrist-as-child films have appropriated or adapted. The story told by Polanski's 1968 cinematic adaption of Ira Levin's best-selling novel *Rosemary's Baby* is likely familiar to most: Guy, an ambitious actor, makes a Faustian deal with a devil-worshipping coven. He offers up his wife, Rosemary, as an incubator for Satan's seed in exchange for the advancement of his career. The story focuses on Rosemary's experiences

the American family," yet believes that what viewers relish is the "systematic destruction of the bourgeois Establishment" (88). Broderick also argues that Antichrist films are fundamentally conservative, "serv[ing] to unproblematically reinforce traditional values of patriarchy, heterosexual monogamy, predeterminism, divine agency, might equating right, and simplistic binary ethical and moral oppositions devoid of gradation and nuance" (241).

5. Although several critics, like Broderick and Gerlach, have explored the antichrist narrative in some detail and others like Andrew Scahill have examined key texts within the subgenre, many (e.g., Dixon, Flesher and Torry, Fry, Williams, and Winstead) simply lump films like *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist* together under the category of "demonic film," forgetting, as Peter Malone points out in *Movie Christs and Antichrists*, that devils and antichrists are not equivalent figures.

6. *The Omen* series has proved enduring. *Damien: Omen II* followed two years later and charted Damien's continuing progress, albeit via a different avenue than that suggested by its cinematic predecessor. In the sequel, Damien, now an adolescent, has been adopted by his father's brother; by the end of the film, he has achieved top honors at the distinguished military school he attends and inherited the Thorn business by killing off all rival heirs. *Omen III: The Final Conflict* appeared three years later in 1981 and focused on the antichrist's exploits as an adult and supposedly his final defeat, but ten years later, a made-for-television fourth installment appeared. And in 2006, the original film was remade and Damien reborn.

7. 1991 was an especially productive year for antichrist-as-child films, during

as she suffers not only the physical pain caused by the demonic fetus she is carrying after being raped by the devil but also the psychological torment that ensues as she slowly begins to figure out the treacherous plot centered around her and her unborn child. The baby is born, and although we never see him, Rosemary's hysterical reaction after her first glimpse indicates that he likely takes after his demonic father. "What have you done to its eyes?"

Rosemary exclaims. "He has his father's eyes," a coven member responds. As appalled as she is, and certainly aware on some level that her son's survival will mean the end of all that is good in the world, Rosemary ultimately cannot resist her maternal urges and, in the final scene, willingly assumes her motherly role.

In the second foundational antichrist-as-child film, *The Omen*, wealthy diplomat Robert Thorn and his wife Katherine unwittingly adopt Damien, the son of Satan. Robert is slightly more witting than his wife since he willingly takes in the child when he discovers that his own son died during labor. Worried that his wife, who has had several miscarriages already, will be unable to psychologically handle the loss of another child, Robert agrees to substitute an orphaned infant in his son's place and opts to keep the swap a secret from his wife. We later discover that the Thorns' son was actually murdered in order to facilitate Damien's adoption into a family economically and politically well positioned to aid the antichrist's rise to power: in addition to coming from money, Robert is soon promoted to the prestigious rank of US ambassador to Great Britain, with the expectation that he will one day be a presidential candidate. By the end of the film, Robert, Katherine, and several others are dead, and at his father's funeral Damien is shown

holding the hand of the president, a close friend of the family who had once been Robert's college roommate, suggesting that his ascent is even more assured than when the film began.⁶

As much as these films seem to posit a genetic argument for "evil" children, they also indict flawed parenting. The antichrist is vulnerable while still a child; therefore, he needs a family that will aid rather than challenge his advancement. In different ways, both the Woodhouses and the Thorns offer a perfect situation in which the antichrist can flourish. Guy knows the true nature of his wife's fetus but benefits from its safe development, so the child need fear no interference from his side. And Rosemary is so submissive to male authority and her identity so dependent on motherhood that she will ultimately choose to raise the antichrist rather than vanquish him. In short, the parents become aware of the danger the child poses to society but refuse to do anything about it. What better metaphor for overindulgent parents? The Thorns in *The Omen* provide an equally bountiful childhood setting in which the antichrist can blossom: wealthy and ambitious, the Thorns seem to want a child simply to keep up appearances. Rather than care for Damien themselves, they employ a nanny to do so, who just happens to be a diabolical minion. The Thorns' lack of involvement in their son's life allows Damien to thrive. Only a "just right" measure of parental devotion, it seems, will keep a house free of evil children; too much or too little care can have dangerous consequences.

After the defeat of Damien in *Omen III*, interest in the child antichrist dwindled for a time. Certainly, a few films touched upon the subject, but it wasn't until the twenty-first century that the antichrist-as-child would again gain considerable cinematic attention. On the one hand, there is nothing very surprising about this renewed interest. For one, evil children narratives in general have multiplied rapidly over the past decade.⁸ Apocalyptic films have also proliferated, incited in part by a series of seemingly ominous calendrical events, including the simultaneous turn of the century and millennium and twelve unusual dates, the most relevant to this paper being June 6, 2006, the date strategically selected for the release of an *Omen* remake and a lesser-known mockbuster, *666: The Child*. Lower-budget films —such as *11/11/11* and *12-12-12*—have continued to capitalize on such seemingly portentous dates.

Contemporary films still tend to rely on one of the two narrative patterns established by *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Omen* in order to explain how the antichrist becomes part of a "normal" family. Some films, like *The Calling* (2000), *Born* (2007), and *The Reaping* (2007), emulate the

which Dean Koontz's 1988 novel *Servants of Twilight* was turned into a movie, a fourth installment in the *Omen* series, focusing on Damien's daughter Delia, was made for television, and *The Unborn* appeared in theaters.

8. At the time that I wrote "Evil Children in Film and Literature," I had identified 300 films featuring evil children, over half of which were made in the twenty-first century. As of March 18, 2013, the list stands at about 350 films, with almost 200 of them produced this century.

9. As the author of the blog *Horror Movie a Day* drily asserts, such films clearly fit into the "'If you don't make a kid the normal way it'll kill you' sub-genre" ("*The Unborn* [1991]"). Not all children who are not produced "the normal way" end up being the antichrist, but they certainly tend to be evil: see, for example, *The Unborn*, *The Unborn II*, and *Godsend*.

10. The term *intensive mothering* was coined by Sharon Hays in her 1996 text *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. The link between a mother's overly desperate need for a child and the arrival of the antichrist is apparent in *Blessed* and *I'm Not Jesus Mommy*. Antoinette F. Winstead argues that a similar claim could be made about the "outmoded [and] conservative" Rosemary (38). In other films, such as *It's Alive!* (1974), its 2008 remake, and *Grace* (2009), offspring produced by such mothers are not necessarily demonic but monstrous nonetheless.

11. Adoption has given evil "children" of all kinds an opportunity to invade the home; see, for example, *Mikey* (1992), *Ringu* (1998) and its American adaptation *The Ring* (2002), and more recently *Orphan* (2009) and *Case 39* (2009). It is not much of a stretch to assume that these narratives are partly critiquing the contemporary

narrative arc of *Rosemary's Baby* in that the antichrist is the result of some sort of rape.

However, a more technological plotline involving a genetically engineered antichrist has recently been fashioned to suit our post-genomic age; an opportunity to implant a designer baby Satan—a sort of medical equivalent of rape—arises when a couple seeks fertility assistance.⁹ A woman's visit to a fertility clinic in *Blessed*, for example, allows doctors to mix her husband's sperm with fluid from an ominous-looking vial, later revealed to contain Satan's blood. Similarly, in *I'm Not Jesus Mommy* (2010), a fertility specialist, herself infertile, impregnates herself in her own laboratory, not realizing that the embryo she has implanted is actually a clone of Jesus made from genetic material taken from the Shroud of Turin. His childhood brings on an apocalypse of the most religious sort, complete with bodies that disappear rapture-style. However, because the cloned Jesus was born without a soul, he ends up becoming antichrist rather than Christ. So much for humans trying to engineer a second coming.

The most overt criticism launched by these types of narratives is against the scientific community whose meddling with the building blocks of life is treated as dangerous and unethical; to be sure, it is not a new theme but one that dates back at least to *Frankenstein* (1818) and lies at the heart of recent films like *Jurassic Park* (1993) and the contemporary *Frankenstein* update *Splice* (2009). However, this plot convention also allows for a critique of contemporary parenting styles, in particular overinvolved and overindulgent guardians—the so-called helicopter parents of the millennial generation of trophy kids—adults who see success and happiness as dependent on parenthood. Since women in these films are the partners most desperate to

procreate, the films specifically indict the ideology of intensive mothering that feminist critics claim dominate maternal ideals in our current age.¹⁰ The female protagonists will give up everything to become mothers, but the films suggest that women whose identities rely so heavily on motherhood will not produce a study next generation of well-adjusted children. Rather, parents so completely devoted to their children will be blind to the evils of which their child is capable. Contemporary antichrist-as-child films critique a culture that fetishizes intensive parenthood as well as the adults who fall prey to these pressures and to the cult of the child.

Other films choose the plot structure of *The Omen*, calling upon adoption as the means by which the antichrist infiltrates an unsuspecting and well-meaning family.¹¹ But more noticeable in these films is the continuing presence of conspiring neighbors and especially nannies, who are now far less frequent components of middle-class life. Damien's nanny, Mrs. Baylock, made a reappearance in *The Omen* remake, this time coyly played by Mia Farrow: what better nanny for Damien than Rosemary, after all? Nannies also appear in *666: The Child* and *11/11/11*. In the latter film, nanny Denise not only protects the antichrist but schools him in juvenile delinquency, teaching him to burn butterflies by strategically focusing sunlight through the bottom of a glass bottle and encouraging him to knock mirrors off of cars. In *The Calling*, the mother is replaced not by a nanny but by a close friend of the family, who is also her husband's secret lover and accomplice in the satanic scheme. Together, they sacrificed their first son to ensure the birth of Dylan, the antichrist, and later perform a sort of inverted crucifixion to complete his conversion to the dark side. All this takes place while the mother is away taking care of professional duties. Likewise, the couple's child in *11/11/11* has not been genetically altered or adopted, nor is he the sire of rape or ritual. However, an entire society of Satanists are aware of his existence and eagerly work to ensure he assumes his satanic powers on his eleventh birthday on November 11, 2011. Many community members are also in on the antichrist conspiracy in *Blessed*, not only furthering the father's career as a writer (and ensuring his frequent absence) but also supplying the couple with choice real estate in the local community where they can keep a watchful eye on the mother. Neighbors, nannies, and other influential members of society all foster the antichrist's development in these films. Apparently, it really *does* take a village, and it would seem that the village rather than the parents are to blame for the antichrist's arrival.

trend of foreign adoption. In 666: *The Child*, a married couple adopts a child who is the sole survivor of a plane crash; the reason he survived, it turns out, is that he is the antichrist.

Tellingly, Booboo Stewart, the actor who plays the antichrist in the film, is of Asian descent, as is Lucy, his nanny, who is aware of his true nature and seems more like his “real” mother.

12. William Paul has made this argument about *The Omen* in his book *Laughing, Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy*: “The governess immediately becomes closer to Damien than either of his parents precisely because neither parent wishes to be especially close to him” (326).

13. Bendle, for example, sees apocalyptic films as expressing dissatisfaction with day-to-day life, which he claims is represented in film “as the deadening realm of unfreedom, conformity, alienation, tedium, repression and exploitation, based on superficial relationships, facile ideas and transient commitments” (35). Kim Newman similarly claims that lurking behind the appeal of end-of-the-world scenarios is a general feeling of malaise as well as a desire for a more vital life, “a half-wished for descent into dog-eat-dog barbarity and the extermination of all the boring people in the world” (19).

14. The punishment of those who value selfish desires over the good of the community is an especially common occurrence in zombie films. One need only think of the eventual comeuppance of Shane Walsh in television’s *The Walking Dead* (AMC 2010–) and, although it is implied that everyone dies in *Dawn of the Dead* (Snyder, 2004), the deaths we actually witness are mostly those of the guilty.

15. I discuss these issues in far more detail in “The Appeal of the Apocalypse.”

But the only reason these figures have access to the child in the first place is because one parent—or both—is largely absent, most frequently pursuing professional ambitions. Such parents, who are too busy to raise their own children, are implied by the films to desire offspring simply as symbolic capital, as markers of middle-class success, rather than out of any sincere interest in being parents.¹² In an era that expects parents to be intensely involved in their children’s lives, absence and disinterest seems all the more offensive and is punished in these films by the child’s exposure to evil influences that ensure his turn to darkness. At the same time, parents apparently cannot be too involved, for doing so will result in a dangerously spoiled and self-centered next generation.

Conclusion: What Kind of Apocalyptic Film is the Antichrist-as-Child Film?

Scholars who study representations of the apocalypse have noted that the implications of the term *apocalypse* shifted dramatically in the past century. In its original meaning, *apocalypse* refers to a very specific set of occurrences laid out in the Bible: a divinely ordained worldwide catastrophe that will result in a New Jerusalem for the faithful. As strange as it may seem, the apocalypse in its original context, even bound up as it is with doom and destruction, is ultimately a hopeful event, a divinely ordained annihilation of the unworthy to make way for a new kingdom for the righteous.

However, over the course of the twentieth century, *apocalypse* came to refer more frequently to merely a large-scale disaster of any kind. Often, the catastrophe is the tragic result of human error or corruption, such as the environmental cataclysm that brings the

world into another Ice Age in *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) or the cure for cancer in *I am Legend* (2007) that has the unfortunate side-effect of turning the majority of the world's population into vampires. Even when humans are not directly responsible for the disaster that decimates Earth, most films do not cast it as a divine act: the aliens that attack in *Independence Day* (1996) or *War of the Worlds* (2005) are not instruments of God nor are the heavenly bodies speeding toward earth in *Armageddon* (1998) and *Deep Impact* (1998) actually heaven-sent. Elizabeth Rosen refers to secular versions of apocalypses that chart disaster without offering the possibility of subsequent redemption as neo-apocalyptic. These neo-apocalyptic narratives, according to scholars like Daniel Wojcik, Mervyn Bendle, and Rosen, embody a far more despairing attitude about the fate of the world than their biblical counterparts, precisely because the apocalyptic event in these narratives is not divinely ordained. Critics also contend that the popularity of these neo-apocalyptic narratives is due to widespread discontent on viewers' parts.¹³

Elsewhere, however, I have argued that the secular apocalyptic narrative and its popularity need not represent a hopeless attitude. In fact, many neo-apocalyptic narratives are not really so different from religious versions, for in the aftermath of worldwide disaster, a new community is formed consisting of average folk who can survive if they are willing to place the needs of the group above their own. The selfish and self-serving might find temporary haven, but eventually, unless they reform, they will be killed off in seeming retribution for their wrongful behavior.¹⁴ Furthermore, in the aftermath of the apocalyptic event, previously estranged friends and family members make amends and begin anew, resentment wiped clean, much as apocalypse allows civilization a fresh start. Average Joes and Janes rise to prominence in the post-apocalyptic landscape, and the world is returned to the leadership of the truly worthy rather than the socially and economically powerful.¹⁵

Furthermore, as Conrad Oswald points out, the fact that humanity rather than a divine being is responsible for both the apocalyptic disaster and either its aversion or the building of a new society in its wake can also be read as an optimistic statement. As Oswald writes, "the modern apocalypse has replaced a sovereign God with a sovereign humanity, and instead of providing hope for an eschatological kingdom, the cinematic apocalypse attempts to provide hope for this world" ("Hollywood and Armageddon" 62). Elsewhere, Oswald makes a similar point, noting that "in Hollywood's apocalyptic drama the threat of human extinction breeds

harmony, not violence. The threat of the end tends to bring people together in a unified stand against annihilation” (*Secular Steeple* 173). Richard Walsh suggests that this tendency of the neo-apocalyptic film to locate the cause of and solution to cataclysm within humanity actually aligns the secular apocalyptic movie with the religious apocalyptic narrative: “the real horror of the apocalyptic film, like that of the Apocalypse, is [...] the hero’s (and community’s) weakness and/or failure” (20). Although it may seem as though secular neo-apocalyptic narratives lack the optimism of their religious counterparts, these films reach equivalently hopeful ends through different narrative devices.

Since the antichrist-as-child film has a patently religious framework, one might expect that it would have ultimately optimistic outcomes. After all, the rise of the antichrist, as horrifying as he may be, should be an ultimately hopeful event, at least for the saved, as it heralds the concurrent second “Coming of Christ”, who will defeat his age-old archenemy. However, the antichrist-as-child narrative is perhaps the least hopeful subtype of the apocalyptic genre. If the neo-apocalyptic narrative allows family rifts to be bridged and relationships repaired, the family selected by the antichrist finds itself divided and destroyed. Furthermore, rarely does a heavenly emissary appear to battle the son of Satan on behalf of humankind. Instead, it is left up to adults who have learned the secret of the boy’s true identity to dispatch him, and I have yet to see one example in which the adult is able to successfully perform the horrendous task of killing the child; the films usually end with all adversaries of the antichrist eliminated and the child poised to begin his evil reign. While we may not witness the actual devastation he causes, it lurks on the horizon. The antichrist-as-child narrative is thus rather uniquely positioned within the apocalyptic genre. While the inclusion of Satanic spawn establishes a religious framework for the narrative, redemption fails to materialize: God leaves the battle up to humankind, and humankind fails. Unlike the neo-apocalyptic narrative that allows survivors to reform, the religious apocalyptic narrative has always reserved hope for the faithful; once apocalypse arrives, it is too late to declare divine devotion. The same logic is at work in the antichrist-as-child narrative, the message being that the effects of bad parenting are difficult if not impossible to reverse.

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the antichrist-as-child film is a unique category of the apocalyptic genre that bridges both secular and religious narratives. While operating under an obvious religious framework, these movies are perhaps the least hopeful of all apocalyptic texts, revealing that corruption has struck the most sacred of all institutions: the family and the child. Examining two foundational texts from the 1970s, *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Omen*, as well as examples from the twenty-first century, this article concludes that contemporary versions operate as a far more vicious attack on what they portray as parental failings according to present ideologies.

BIOGRAPHY

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