trans atlantic cultures
Cultural Histories of the Atlantic World 18th–21st Centuries

ISSN 2739-6614
transatlantic-cultures.org



Hitchcock, an Englishman in Hollywood

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Alfred Hitchcock's entire career was transatlantic. After fulfilling his dream of accessing Hollywood's resources, he became one of the world's most famous directors—but his Britishness largely inspired his American work.

PUBLISHED	July 1, 2024
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE	French
AVAILABLE IN	English, French
COLLECTIONS	Americanization through the Arts
TOPICS	Cinema
SPACES AND PLACES	North Atlantic
PERIODS	The Consolidation of Mass Cultures
KEYWORDS	cinema, hollywood, propaganda
PERMANENT LINK	https://transatlantic-cultures.org/en/records/hitchcock-un-anglais-a-hollywood/

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Hitchcock and criticism

There is no denying that Alfred Hitchcock ranks among the leading figures of Hollywood's "Golden Age" (roughly 1930–1960); he has probably had and continues to have more written about him than any other director then or since. According to many polls, *Vertigo* (1958), which countless directors have admiringly referred to and quoted, is "the greatest film of all time". Hitchcock is also known as the "master of suspense", a filmmaker whose movies have stood the test of time. Forty-four years after his death, they are still popular with critics and the general public alike.

Born in London, Hitchcock directed 22 films in England before going to Hollywood. While they are certainly worth watching, he is only considered to have shown the full measure of his talent, or his genius, in the United States. The English films are viewed as a learning curve, an experimentation process, a prelude to the richer, more mature, accomplished and complex work he did in Hollywood.

French critics, especially those at the *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1950s – Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette and François Truffaut, all future New wave standard-bearers – considered Hitchcock's Hollywood work excellent and, despite its mass appeal, hailed him as a moralist "auteur", if not a theologian or metaphysician. This appraisal culminated with the publication of Truffaut's book *Hitchcock* in 1966 and has not wavered since.

Hitchcock, an English director

While neither iconoclastic nor revolutionary, my book, *Sir Alfred Hitchcock, cinéaste anglais*, strikes a different note and follows in the footsteps of Charles Barr's *English Hitchcock*. Its goal is twofold: first, to focus on the English work, which is little known, if at all. It is uneven, but includes several noteworthy films that seem more varied and experimental than those from the Hollywood period. Second, the book aims to show everything conspicuously, discretely or covertly "English" in Hitchcock's Hollywood work: pastiche films set in England, English subjects transposed to an American setting and the use of English actors in supporting as well as leading roles.

Rebecca (1940), *Suspicion* (1941) and *The Paradine Case* (1948) take place in England but were entirely shot on Hollywood sound stages. They are what I call "pastiche [English] films", a category that could also include *Foreign Correspondent* (1940) and *Dial "M" for Murder* (1954). Moreover, at least two Hollywood movies, *Stage Fright* (1950) and the 1956 remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, were entirely or partially shot in London. American critics have sometimes even described *Stage Fright* as an English film.



An English “pastiche”: Joan Fontaine and Judith Anderson in *Rebecca*, 1940



An English “pastiche”: Joan Fontaine, Billy Bevan and Cary Grant in *Suspicion*, 1941



An English "pastiche": Charles Laughton in *The Paradine Case*, 1948

Examples of "English" subjects, in other words English source-works whose plot and characters were transposed to an American setting, include *Rope* (1948), *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), *The Birds* (1963) and perhaps the oddest case, *Marnie* (1964), where a fox hunt, a narrative and visual motif that appeared in a silent English film by Hitchcock, *The Farmer's Wife* (1928), unexpectedly pops up in Virginia. A variant is *Spellbound* (1945), Hitchcock's Americanized adaptation of an English novel set in France with English characters.

The motivations for using English sources and the ways in which they are adapted to the screen seem very diverse. *Rope* and *Harry* take place in the United States, but the source-works are very different: Patrick Hamilton's hit play in the case of *Rope*, a short novel by an unknown author in the case of *Harry*. Hollywood studios often bought the rights to famous or promising literary works and loosely adapted them for the cinema. Examples include *Spellbound*, where a bizarre Satanist novel became a love story drenched in psychoanalysis. *The Birds* is so different from Daphne du Maurier's short story as to be almost an original work, which suggests that the main motivation was not just to adapt the source material, but also to capitalize on a best-selling novelist's fame. *Marnie* is similar to *Spellbound* in that it confirms Hitchcock's interest in psychoanalysis, but it also seems to demonstrate a personal choice on the part of the director, who enjoyed quoting one of his earliest English films, a reference that probably escaped the viewer of 1964, let alone of today. In addition, a distinction must be drawn between the films produced by the meddlesome David O. Selznick and those produced by Hitchcock (*Rope* and all the subsequent titles) without automatically drawing conclusions: Selznick, a passionate Anglophile, produced *Rebecca* and *The Paradine Case*. Relations between him and the director were often stormy, but in every case Hitchcock intervened on the script much more autonomously when he produced his own films.

Hitchcock felt a tight bond with Cary Grant who, like him, was born in England but became a U.S. citizen, and starred in four of the master's movies. He is English in *Suspicion*, a pastiche film; American in *Notorious* (1946) and *North by Northwest* (1959); and of unknown nationality in the suspenseful comedy *To Catch a Thief* (1955). That has been the subject of much speculation, which clearly reflects the actor's ability to muddy the waters (the heroine, an American played by Grace Kelly, points out that he is hardly credible as an American tourist fresh from Oregon). Other British actors who starred in Hitchcock's Hollywood films include Laurence Olivier in *Rebecca*, Brian Aherne as an English-speaking Canadian in *I Confess* (1953), Ray Milland in *Dial "M" for Murder* and James Mason in *North by Northwest*. Two stars Hitchcock directed during his English period reappear in a Hollywood film. Herbert Marshall, an actor-producer and amateur sleuth in *Murder!* (1930), a character based on Gerald du Maurier, is the English gentleman spying for Germany in *Foreign Correspondent*, while Charles Laughton plays the flamboyant justice of the peace and the head of the ship-wrecking gang in *Jamaica Inn* (1939), based on a novel by Daphne du Maurier (Gerald's daughter), and the heartless judge in *The Paradine Case*. The less famous Edmund Gwenn appeared in four Hitchcock films, two English and two American. He is remarkable in the little-known *The Skin Game* (1931), based on a Galsworthy play, and portrays Johann Strauss Senior in *Waltzes from Vienna* (1933), a minor Hitchcock. Gwenn has a small but memorable part as a killer masquerading as a bodyguard in *Foreign Correspondent* and a leading role, the captain, in *The Trouble with Harry*. British actors abound in supporting parts, notably Leo G. Carroll (English in *Rebecca*, *Suspicion* and *The Paradine Case*, American in *Spellbound*, *Strangers on a Train* [1951] and *North by Northwest*), John Williams (*Paradine, Dial "M" for Murder*, *To Catch a Thief* and several important roles in the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* television series) and Sir Cedric Hardwicke (*Suspicion*, *Rope*).

There is another point where the specificity of Hitchcock's choice must be nuanced. While much proverbial ink has been spilled about Europe's contributions to Hollywood, the main focus has been on germans and Scandinavians, including directors such as Lubitsch and Lang and actresses like Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. However, as Ian Scott pointed out, most of the European transplants in Hollywood, whether directors from the London stage (James Whale, Edmund Goulding), authors and screenwriters (Aldous Huxley, Elinor Glyn) or actors (Chaplin and many others), were British. Evelyn Waugh lampooned the expatriate community in *The Loved One: An Anglo-American Tragedy* (1948). Joan Fontaine, the heroine in *Rebecca*, talked about how the film's other actors, all members of the colony, snubbed her during the shooting even though she came from an aristocratic anglo-norman family. But Fontaine had the misfortune of having been born in Tokyo and grown up in Japan and California.

In his analysis of "imperial" or "colonial" cinema, a thriving Hollywood genre from the 1920s to the 1960s, Jeffrey Richards demonstrates the importance of british contributions, whether sources (Kipling, Francis Yeats-Brown), themes (the "civilizing" role the British army played in colonial India) or actors. First among the latter he mentions those he called "the Imperial actors." "They were the Hollywood British colony, flying the flag, taking tea at four, playing cricket, maintaining their British citizenship." In his view, the leading figures were Ronald Colman, followed closely by C. Aubrey Smith, founder and captain of the Hollywood cricket team, Clive Brook, David Niven and Herbert Marshall. Richards then lists many other names in descending hierarchical order of importance, including typically "British" character actors who occasionally played "imperial" roles (Hardwicke, for example). He mentions British-born actors, such as Grant and Milland, who adopted a mid-Atlantic accent allowing them to play a wide range of parts, including "imperial" ones. [1]



English stories in an American setting: Sean Connery and Alan Napier having tea in *Marnie*, 1964

While French critics did not overlook the English work (it is the focus of the first chapter, almost entirely written by Chabrol, of his and Rohmer's trailblazing 1957 book), they tended to play down the very high regard in which Hitchcock was held in the 1930s in Great Britain, the United States, Canada and Australia, where his melodramas and spy films were often considered superior to their hollywood counterparts. One example is *The 39 Steps* (1935). On September 14, 1935, *New York Times* critic Andre Sennwald wrote:

> *"A master of shock and suspense, of cold horror and slyly incongruous humor, he uses his camera the way a painter uses his brush, stylizing his story and giving it values which the scenarists could hardly have suspected. By comparison with the sinister delicacy and urbane understatement of The Thirty-nine Steps, the best of our melodramas seem crude and brawling."* [8]

The underestimation of Hitchcock's English work mirrors the attitude towards English cinema in general, including on the part of Hitchcock's champion, Truffaut: "In England, there is something indefinably but clearly anti-cinematographic." Invoking a wooly-headed theory of climates, Truffaut wrote that England had "many intellectuals, many great poets and very good novelists" but only "two directors whose work stands the test of time: Charlie Chaplin and Alfred Hitchcock", who, as it happens, did their most successful work on the other side of the Atlantic. [2] I will not dwell on the scandalous obfuscation of the subject by Truffaut, who left out Alexander Korda, Anthony Asquith, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, Carol Reed, the Ealing comedy directors, Alexander Mackendrick and David Lean.

The Hollywood dream

Hitchcock, like other European directors, such as Lubitsch, had an “American Dream” and eyed the bigger budgets, superior technical resources and star power Hollywood could offer him. To him, American actors seemed more versatile than their British counterparts. In a long interview the day before his 1939 departure for the United States, he discussed his eagerness to work with the likes of Clark Gable, Myrna Loy, William Powell and especially Gary Cooper, whom he compared to his idol, Sir Gerald Du Maurier. The director underscored their ability to keep audiences riveted to the screen with a minimalist, more natural acting style, an ability he found lacking in English stage actors (Hitchcock did not work with any of the Americans he mentioned). He also mentioned wanting to “humanize” Hollywood stars like Luise Rainer and Dietrich (whom he directed in *Stage Fright* without really achieving that goal). It is probably no coincidence that both were German-born stars famous more for their status as icons of Hollywood glamour rather than for their acting skills. He criticized British actresses, complaining about their lack of naturalness, but spoke highly of Carole Lombard, Claudette Colbert, Garbo and Katharine Hepburn, who could perform comedy and drama equally well, as Garbo had also just shown in *Camille* and *Ninotchka* (the only one Hitchcock directed was Lombard, in her usual comic vein, in the lackluster *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, 1941). [3] Later, on the other hand, Hitchcock (rightfully) regretted the casting of Gregory Peck in *The Paradine Case*, a “pastiche” English film. In his view, Peck’s accent, youth and physical appearance, which worked so well in *Spellbound*, detracted from his credibility as an Oxford graduate and lawyer who falls in love with his murderous client. He would have preferred an older English actor in the role, such as Laurence Olivier or Ronald Colman, he told Truffaut*. [4]

As early as the English period, Hitchcock manifested his awareness of the U.S. market’s importance in two ways. First, he cast American stars in two 1936 films (Robert Young in *Secret Agent*, after Somerset Maugham, and Sylvia Sidney in *Sabotage*, based on Joseph Conrad’s *secret Agent*). Second, he complied with the Hays Code in the first version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), *The 39 Steps* and, especially, *Jamaica Inn*. He made cuts, limited violent scenes and sexual innuendos and deleted “vulgar” words such as “toilets” before these films were released in the United States. Having learned from the experience, starting with *Secret Agent* Hitchcock submitted not the finished film but the script before shooting to the Production Code Administration to avoid having to make costly post-production changes. In *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Hitchcock responded to the Hollywood censors’ objections to the violence of the siege at the end, the high body count of policemen and details of the boy’s kidnapping (five minutes were cut from the film); and the sexual undertones when Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll are handcuffed to each other in *The 39 Steps*. In *Jamaica Inn*, two major changes were made to Daphne du Maurier’s source novel: the satanist, pagan albino pastor who leads the gang of ship-wreckers was “secularized” into a squire and a justice of the peace; and his death at the end of the film is explained, if not justified, by his supposed insanity, since the Hays Code banned the depiction of suicide. Hitchcock’s careful observance of the code shows that he was not just aiming for the domestic market, but prioritizing the American one.



Hitchcock was mindful of the reception his English films would receive in the United States: Sylvia Sidney in *Sabotage*, 1936



Hitchcock was mindful of the reception his English films would receive in the United States: Madeleine Carroll and Robert Donat handcuffed to each other in *The 39 Steps*, 1935



Hitchcock was mindful of the reception his English films would receive in the United States: Charles Laughton and Maureen O'Hara in *Jamaica Inn*, 1939

Transatlantic crossings

The first time Hitchcock went to New York was in 1937, to begin negotiating a possible contract with Selznick. In 1938, he returned to the United States and travelled to California. After moving more or less definitively to Hollywood in 1939, he crossed the Atlantic several times, including during the Second World War. The director was very worried about his mother, who had remained in England, but thought that the best way he could serve his country was by staying in California and directing anti-Nazi films. His political commitment had already become increasingly clear in the English spy films *The Man Who Knew Too Much, The 39 Steps* and *Sabotage*, where it is not hard to guess that the foreign power manipulating the terror-sowing anarchists in London is no longer the Czarist Russia of Conrad's novel but Nazi Germany. In the key aquarium scene, the foreign agent's handler points out a peculiar-looking fish "with a little moustache" to him: an obvious reference to Hitler. A scene in 1938's *The Lady Vanishes* cinematically criticizes the appeasement policy that had led to the munich agreement that year when the train's attackers immediately shoot dead the "pacifist" waving his handkerchief as a white flag.

Hitchcock's four anti-Nazi Hollywood movies alternated with others that had nothing to do with the international political situation, such as *Rebecca* and *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*. *Foreign Correspondent* was shot between those two films in spring 1940, a year and a half before the United States entered the war. Beyond a spy film's usual twists and turns, everything is allegorical. During the phony war, an editor-in-chief sends an american journalist, John Jones (Joel McCrea), to find out what is really going on in Europe despite, or rather precisely because of, the fact that he is completely in the dark about the international political situation. Jones exposes a ring of Nazi agents in England and the Netherlands posing as members

of a pacifist organization. The war breaks out as he is flying back to the United States. After a German warship shoots down his plane, an American vessel comes to the rescue and picks up the survivors. The United States being a neutral country, the captain vehemently insists that not a single line about the incident can get out to the press. However, Jones manages to surreptitiously give his editor most of the information by pretending to make a personal phone call to his uncle. After returning to Hollywood from a short trip to London in June 1940, Hitchcock asked screenwriter Ben Hecht to write the famous final scene in record time, adding it to the film at the last minute in July. Back in London after a year, during a live radio broadcast to the United States Jones describes German bombs raining down on the capital and stirringly urges Americans to "keep those lights burning! Cover them with steel! Build a canopy of bombing planes and battleships around them! America, hang on to your lights! They're the only lights left in the world!" *Saboteur* (1942) takes up a similar theme, with the lead character exposing a Nazi network in the United States. Next came *Lifeboat* (1944) and *Notorious* (1946), the third variation on the theme of disguised nazis, set in Brazil immediately after the war.

In the meantime, Hitchcock crossed the Atlantic several times, notably at the invitation of his old friend Sidney Bernstein, who operated a chain of 35 cinemas and joined the ministry of Information to produce anti-Nazi and pro-British films when the war broke out. Hitchcock edited two of the ministry's films for exhibition in the United States and made two propaganda shorts in French for liberated France, *Bon Voyage* (1943-44) and *Aventure malgache *(1944), but they were not distributed at the time. The director spent six weeks in London in June and July 1945, and that is when he worked on his most interesting project: *German Concentration Camps Factual Survey*, a documentary produced by Bernstein, unfinished and forgotten until five reels were found at the Imperial War Museum nearly 40 years later. Since then, the film, first renamed *Memory of the Camps*, has been shown, edited and often wrongly presented as having been directed by Hitchcock. Primarily made up of film shot by allied army cameramen as well as some rare German footage, *German Concentration Camps* is an exceptional and riveting document as much for its subject matter and date as for the reasons it was abandoned. While far from insignificant, Hitchcock's contribution was limited to serving as a "treatment advisor". He recommended using long takes and pans as well as showing Nazi higher-ups visiting the camps and piles of bodies in the same shot to ensure that no one could deny the film's veracity. The director also suggested editing techniques to feature piles of the victims' hair, wedding rings, shoes, toothbrushes and other personal belongings, a sort of prelude to Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1956), and to highlight the contrast between the camps' deadly atmosphere and the bucolic scenery around them to emphasize the indifference of the Germans who lived next door, and whose existence they must have been aware of. The film was intended to be shown to Germans as part of the denazification and "re-education" process to make them aware of their guilt, or at least willful blindness, but it was never completed–probably because the Cold War was looming on the horizon and the Allies' needed to enlist the West Germans' cooperation more than to make them feel guilty.

Transatlantic Pictures

After the war, Hitchcock and Bernstein continued their partnership by setting up an independent production venture tellingly named Transatlantic Pictures. They launched the project as Hitchcock was finishing *The Paradine Case*, the third and last film produced by Selznick (after *Rebecca* and *Spellbound*), from whose control the filmmaker was itching to escape. Transatlantic Pictures made only two movies, both of which Hitchcock directed. *Rope* is based on a play by Englishman Patrick Hamilton staged in 1929 whose story was updated and transposed to New York. It is known for its tawdry, gruesome subject matter–to prove their superiority, a male couple, whose homosexuality is suggested, commit a gratuitous

murder as if it were a refined work of art–but above all for Hitchcock's technical prowess. *Rope* was shot on a single set in long, unbroken takes, giving the impression that the action's duration is the same as the film's, in other words that it takes place in real time. Filmed entirely on a Hollywood sound stage, *Rope* is widely, and rightfully, considered an American movie. On the other hand, Transatlantic Pictures' second release, *Under Capricorn* (1949), adapted from a historical novel set in nineteenth-century Australia, is a more hybrid production. Shot mostly at the Elstree studios near London, it is usually considered a british film. Scottish playwright James Bridie wrote the script and the cinematographer was Englishman Jack Cardiff. While the cast featured many English and Irish actors and actresses, two Hollywood stars, Ingrid Bergman and Joseph Cotton, played the leading roles. *Rope* and, especially, *Under Capricorn*, were box-office flops that sank Transatlantic Pictures. Nevertheless, the young *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics, namely Rohmer, Rivette and especially Jean Domarchi, who wrote an article called "Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu" ("The Unknown Masterpiece"), praised the film, implying that neither audiences nor critics recognized its quality. The flattering reference to Balzac suggests that in Hollywood, Hitchcock, far from being just a technician, the "master of suspense", became an auteur, a moralist, if not a theologian and a metaphysician. [5]



Transatlantic Pictures: James Stewart, Constance Collier and Sir Cedric Hardwicke in *Rope*, 1948



Transatlantic Pictures: Cecil Parker and Michael Wilding in *Under Capricorn*, 1949

Back to his roots for the last time: *Frenzy*

In the 1950s, several Hitchcock movies, notably *Rear Window* (1954), the remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *Vertigo* and *North by Northwest*, were box-office hits on both sides of the Atlantic at the same time that the high status that *Cahiers* alone had conferred on the filmmaker was gradually accepted, climaxing with the publication of Truffaut's *Hitchcock* in 1966. Hitchcock had many occasions to cross the Atlantic for personal or professional reasons. Some of *Stage Fright*'s exteriors were shot in London and have a documentary feel; the aftermath of the Blitz is still clearly visible, especially in the area around Saint Paul's cathedral. The Royal Albert Hall appears in both the 1956 and 1934 versions of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* as well as in *The Ring* (1927), where it hosts a boxing match. At the same time, Hitchcock was producing and sometimes directing episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, the television series he always introduced, playing his pudgy, phlegmatic Englishman character with deadpan black humor, as he did in the trailers for *Psycho* (1960) and *The Birds*. Famous for making cameo appearances in his pictures, Hitchcock was himself a character–a "brand", in the words of Paul Lesch. [6]

Hitchcock made a much-ballyhooed trip to London for his penultimate film, *Frenzy *(1972), an English production returning to the theme of the wrongfully accused man that first appeared in what he considered the first expression of his personal vision, *The Lodger* (1926). *Frenzy *combines nostalgia and satire with the gruesome story of a perverse, scheming serial killer whose victims are all women. The stunning establishing shot, a long bird's-eye take that moves up the Thames, swoops under Tower Bridge and moves on to the London City Council, already seen in the 1929 English film *Blackmail*, is justifiably famous. It is accompanied by music that Hitchcock, rejecting Bernard Herrmann's pastiche scores, wanted to be "sparkling, early-morning music, woodwinds and glockenspiel" [7], in stark contrast with the sudden

discovery of a strangled woman's body floating in the river. *Frenzy *features two references to *The Lodger*. The opening scene is set on the south bank of the Thames across from the Embankment, where a body was found in the 1926 film, and the bright sunlight contrasts with the silent film's blueish night. Hitchcock, in a bowler hat, appears among the onlookers in this scene. The rest of *Frenzy* takes place for the most part in picturesque Covent Garden, the wholesale food market where the director's father had worked.



Returning regularly to London: Saint Paul's in the opening credits of *Stage Fright*, 1950



Returning regularly to London: the clash of cymbals in the Royal Albert Hall, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, 1956 version



Returning regularly to London: the opening credits of *Frenzy*, 1972

Conclusion

Hitchcock's entire career was transatlantic. Almost from the outset, the director had his eye on the U.S. market. He, like many European filmmakers, dreamed of the human and technical resources that Hollywood could offer him, and he succeeded there beyond all expectations, although at first his English films' admirers criticized their american counterparts for being less experimental and more commercial.

The English work, English subject matter and English actors continued to nurture his American films. But Hollywood also allowed Hitchcock to reach a truly global audience. Even after becoming a U.S. citizen in 1955, he cultivated his caricatural English persona and became "Sir" Alfred Hitchcock in 1979, the year before his death in Los Angeles. While Hitchcock is unique, he also fits into the broader and highly complex context of relations between British and Hollywood cinema, in which Hollywood was incontestably the dominant economic partner (the 1948 Anglo-American film agreement increased the British industry's dependence on American financing for a long time), a situation tempered by the persistence of a cultural value-added that the uniqueness of british playwrights, novelists, actors and directors all contributed to.

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3. "What I'd Do to the Stars: An Interview with J. Danvers Williams", *Film Weekly* (March 4, 1939), quoted in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 90-94.
4. Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 129.
5. Jean Domarchi, « Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu », *Cahiers du Cinéma* 39 (octobre 1954) : 33-38. *Under Capricorn* also won praise from Maurice Schérer [Rohmer] in « De trois films et d'une certaine école », *Cahiers du cinéma* 26

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