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Art as Cult: Bergman's *Riten* and *Backanterna*

It is well known that Ingmar Bergman, in interviews as well as in his published articles, often has discussed art in terms of cult and worship. In for instance “Det att göra film” from 1954, he wrote about his longing to be an anonymous craftsman among others:

I want to be one of the artists in the cathedral on the great plain. I want to carve a dragon's head, an angel, a devil or perhaps a saint out of stone. It does not matter which. Regardless of whether I believe or not, whether I am a Christian or not, I would play my part in the collective building of the cathedral.¹

Thus Bergman quite obviously set up an analogy between (Christian) religion and art as such: both are expressions of cult. This is expressed even clearer in a note written for the premiere of *Såsom i en spegel/Through a Glass Darkly* (1961): “The creative artist performs an action of cult, similar to the priest, and the stage or the podium is the

¹ This translation can (except for one minor change by the author) be found in Charles B. Ketcham, *The Influence of Existentialism on Ingmar Bergman*, 1986, p 54. Original in Ingmar Bergman, “Det att göra film”, 1954, p 9: “Jag vill vara en av konstnärerna i katedralen på den stora slätten. Jag vill vara sysselsatt med att ur stenen hugga fram ett drakhuvud, en ängel, eller kanske ett helgon, sak samma vilket. [...] Oavsett om jag tror eller inte, oavsett om jag är kristen eller hedning så arbetar jag i det gemensamma byggandet av katedralen därför att jag är konstnär och hantverkare”.

place of the cult.”²

However, this relation between art and religion is not unproblematic by any means, quite the contrary. As is well known, the act of cult for Bergman is seldom an expression of faith, clear and pure. More often than not it is performed with doubt and uncertainty; or at least in a context characterized by an oscillation between faith and unbelief, trust and doubt. Thus, already in the previously mentioned text from 1954 Bergman stressed that:

Regardless of my own faith or doubt [...] it is my opinion that art lost its basic creative drive the moment it was separated from worship. It severed an umbilical cord and now lives its own sterile life, generating and degenerating itself.³

Later, this sterility of art became the main theme in his speech “The Snakeskin”, written after having received the prestigious Erasmusprice in 1965. Here, again, the notion of faith vs doubt clearly encompassed art as well as religion: “religion and art”, Bergman wrote, “are kept alive out of purely sentimental reasons, out of a conventional politeness to the past.”⁴ In an interview from 1969 this was expressed in no uncertain terms:

When it comes to god [...] an immense feeling of hesitation has always announced itself. On that score, a sense of trust has never revealed itself. [...] Faith has always been parallell with faithlessness and devotion to mocking. And finally, with regard to art [...] I have

² Bergman, “*Såsom i en spegel*”, programme note for Svensk Filmindustri, 1961, u.p.

³ Translation in Ketcham, p 33. Original in “Det att göra film”, 1954, p 9: “Oavsett min egen tro eller mitt eget tvivel [...] är det min åsikt att konsten förlorade sin livgivande betydelse i det ögonblick den skilde sig från kulten. Den skar av navelsträngen och lever ett egendomligt sterilt andrahandsliv, avlande och degenererande sig själv.”

⁴ Bergman, “The Snakeskin”, 1972, p 14. For original, see “Ormskinnet”, 1965, p 11: “Religionen och konsten hålls vid liv av sentimentala skäl, som en konventionell hövlighet mot det förflutna”.

always hesitated [...], I have felt both inside of it and excluded from it.⁵

This notion of art as cult or extension and incomplete *Ersatz* for religion, is of course an important aspect not only of Bergman's theoretical declarations but of his films as well, especially those concerning themselves with the theme of art and the artist. In for instance *Ansiktet/The Magician* or *The Face* (1958), the film focusses on a kind of dual faith and doubt-theme, involving two opposing systems of faith: on the one hand the old-fashioned art of magic and sorcery, on the other a new and growing ideology of science. As Granny (Naima Wifstrand) in the film drily comments: "One sees what one sees and one knows what one knows". Thus she seems to acknowledge that seeing is not the same as believing, as the empirical-positivist scientist Vergéus, with his staunch belief in observation as the tool of truth, would have it. Granny on the other hand knows that sight is deceiving. As does of course Vogler the magician, whose entire career is based on the powers of visual illusion. With his Christlike make-up he is the very embodiment of the faith-versus-doubt theme in the film, conflating its religious aspects with the artistic, as Vogler's "magnetic theatre" is obviously also a metaphor of art (and film).⁶

In the mid-60s, after the so-called film trilogy, Bergman had, as he himself put it, dispensed with "that heavy religious superstructure".⁷ The pendulum faith-doubt now shifted from the domain of religion to the domain of art. This is perhaps best to be seen in *Persona* (1966) Bergman's most artistically (self-)reflexive film - where the actress

⁵ Strömstedt, *Expressen* (daily), 1969: "När det har gällt gud har [...] alltid en kolossal tveksamhet anmält sig. Där har aldrig en tillit uppenbarat sig [...] Tro har alltid varit helt parallell med otro och hängivelse med begabbelse. Och vad slutligen konsten anbelangar, så [...] har jag nog varit lite tveksam [...], jag har känt mig både inne i den och utanför."

⁶ This aspect of the film has been analyzed extensively. For an in depth analysis, see eg Livingston's chapter on the film in *Ingmar Bergman and the Rituals of Art*, 1982.

⁷ See eg Björkman *et al* (eds), *Bergman om Bergman*, 1970, p 237: "den tunga religiösa överbyggnaden".

Elisabet's relationship with and silence towards nurse Alma in certain aspects is reminiscent of the silence of that god the Knight prays to in *Det sjunde inseglet/The Seventh Seal* (1957). In either case one party is talking incessantly - confessing and asking questions - while the other remains aloof and silent. As Maria Bergom Larsson has pointed out, in Bergman's later work, art is as silent as God was in his earlier films.⁸

It is possible, then, to discern a developmental pattern in Bergman's films: questions concerning religious faith and doubt have simply been replaced by similar questions in the domain of art. In the latter case the questions concern the need for art and the role of art in a world that barely needs what the artist has to offer. Indeed, this pattern is characteristic of Bergman's entire *oeuvre*, seen as an intellectually probing attitude, constantly oscillating between opposites rather than attempting to secure a fixed position. It is for instance interesting to note how a similar pattern recurs when Bergman in the latter part of his career, in the early 70s, abandons the theme of art and artists and shifts his focus toward supposedly more ordinary people. Doubt or outright indifference with regard to art and artists is replaced by a - tentative - faith in everyday humanity.

To summarize: God and religious faith was banished from Bergman's films⁹ and so was eventually the theme of art - but Bergman's view of art as basically an act of cult remained. It became a ritual - an act of cult without a god. As he himself put it at the time: "The practice of art as sorcery, as ritual action, as prayer, as reciprocal gratification of needs - this I have always felt very strongly."¹⁰ This quote refers directly to Bergman's TV play *Riten/The Ritual* from 1969. This play about a small theatre group called "Les Riens", the members of which suddenly find themselves under scrutiny by the authorities,

⁸ Bergom Larsson, *Ingmar Bergman och den borgerliga ideologin*, 1976, p 123.

⁹ However, in *Fanny and Alexander* (1982-83) god was summarily and literally reduced to a puppet on strings, in the hands of an able magician.

¹⁰ Translation in Livingston, p 58, original statement in Björkman, Manns, and Sima, "Ingmar Bergman: 'Man kan ju göra vad som helst med film!'", 1968, p 45. "Konstutövningen som besvärjelse, som ritualhandling, som förbön, ömsesidig behovstillfredsställelse - det har jag alltid upplevt kolossalt starkt."

clearly illustrates the idea of art as a ritual occurring between opposites - or as Bergman has put it:

The rite is the game the artist plays with his audience, [and] between the artist and society - all this hodge-podge of mutual humiliation and mutual need for one another. That's the ritual element.¹¹

The key word here is obviously 'audience'. No doubt Bergman has always entertained a charged attitude to the audience. This is clear both from interviews and from his early essays, where he shifts from an, admittedly ironic, stance of humble worship to outright attack. It is also clear from his films, which more often than not are filled with situations - crystallized in e.g. the prevalent play-within-the-play motif - where the relationship between artists and audience, between those who look - and judge - and those who are looked at, is visualized.¹² Here, the audience takes many shapes and forms. It is portrayed as naive and gullible, as in the case of Anne in *Gycklarnas afton/Sandust and Tinsel* (1953) who, while standing in the wings of a theatre watching a rehearsal, becomes genuinely terrified as the hero theatrically sinks his dummy dagger into his chest. Anne belongs to those prepared to submit to the illusion. Similarly Mrs Egerman in *The Magician* falls in love with the magician's dark, mysterious looks, failing (or refusing) to see the cheap mask. The audience is treated as relatively easy to fool, even if it tries to resist illusion; even Vergéus, the scientist in *The Magician*, finally succumbs to the magician's mesmerizing power. Or it is openly challenged, as in *Persona* with its shocking fragmentary narrative and bold esthetic devices.

However, *The Ritual* is especially interesting in this regard when seen

¹¹ *Bergman on Bergman*, p 240. Original in *Bergman om Bergman*, 1970, p 265: "Riten är spelet mellan konstnären och hans publik och konstnären och samhället. Denna ömsesidiga blandning av förödmjukelse och behovsrelation. Det är det som är det rituella."

¹² See e.g. my *Spel och speglingar*, 1993, passim, especially chapter 3 "Spelet i spelet: En filmisk urscen" ("The Play-within-the-Play: A Cinematic Ur-stage").

in the context of *Vargtimmen/Hour of the Wolf* (1968), one of two films that immediately preceded it. For here, one finds a married couple named Merckens and a set of characters reminiscent of the Egermans in *The Magician*. In both films these people are the hosts of the party to which the artist finds himself - more or less unwillingly - recruited as a guest and as part of the entertainment, as it were. And in both cases the couple is played by the same actors (Erland Josephson and Gertrud Fridh). The Merckens thus represent a kind of ghosts from the past (which they indeed turn out to be) and, when compared to the relatively mild Egermans, a nightmarish version of the audience: projections of the artist's innermost fears. As such, they are part of his very blood, threatening to devour him, and thus literally demonized. The audience as vampyre! (Interestingly, this is a conversion of the situation of the 'normal' state of affairs in Bergman's films up till then, where the vampires - in e.g. the unfilmed script *Falskspelet/The Cheating Game*,¹³ *Through a Glass Darkly*, and *Persona* - are usually the artists, feeding, as it were, upon the rest of the world for the sake of their art).

Returning to *The Ritual* it is interesting to note that Bergman himself has pointed out its relationship to *The Magician*, be it in general terms: "Later, when I repeated themes from *The Face* in *The Ritual*, they took on a totally different and much more rancid note."¹⁴ The implicit, nodal point is once again the artist's relationship to the audience, and more specifically the gradual *degradation of the audience* in Bergman's films. Structurally as well, the situation in the play is similar to that of the previous films: the three nightclub or variety performers in "Les Riens" - Hans Winkelmann, his wife Thea Winkelmann and Sebastian Fischer -¹⁵ are summoned to an interrogation lead by a judge in charge of

¹³ Published in *Allers*, a weekly magazine, 1967.

¹⁴ *Images*, p 172. Original in *Bilder*, p 172; "När jag [...] upprepar motiven från Ansiktet i Riten är det i en helt annan och härsknare tonart."

¹⁵ Played by Gunnar Björnstrand, Ingrid Thulin and Anders Ek respectively. It may be of interest to know that Thea was supposed to have been played by Liv Ullmann and Fischer by Max von Sydow. Ullmann however did not like the script, in fact calling it "Dritten" (the shit), a untranslatable wordgame. Bergman in a telephone conversation with the author, November 1998.

examining their affairs, because one of their numbers has been considered to be obscene. The judge is obviously yet another version of the audience/critics, with the power to judge and undermine the very sustenance and existence of the artist. To what degree he is identified as such is clear already from the beginning of the play, where the relationship or the ritual between the artists and the audience is crystallized. Here, the very first shot consists of a towering close-up of the judge, who calmly and blankly looks right into the camera. After a while he takes off his glasses and raises a magnifying glass that covers half of his face, changing it into one huge cyclopic eye that coldly seems to scrutinize what is in front of it, shrinking the object of his glance, the audience itself, as it were, to mites. The following cut of course reveals that what he is scrutinizing so closely is a photograph of "Les Riens" in their costumes. But here inevitably the tone - rancid in Bergman's own words - is set, in such a way that the audience watching the play immediately become implicated and part of the rite which ensues, also diegetically.

More importantly, this happens in such a way that the exchangeability - the *reciprocity* of the ritual pointed out in the above quote by Bergman - is stressed. For at this point, the power over the audience is wielded by none other than the implicit narrator/artist. However, as the action unfolds, the power is wielded by the judge/critic/audience. This shifts once again at the end of the play where Thea in the very last shot - her face masked, her smile diabolically triumphant - turns to look straight into the camera, in a highly ironical conversion of the first shot.

To what degree the actual audience is implied in the very first shot of the play, becomes clear from the interview with Bergman that was aired moments before the TV premiere. It is clear not only from what he then said:

Then of course there are a lot of people who will rush to telephones and pens and the television complaint central. To those people I just like to point out that there are many fine cinemas, there are excellent films, and those who cannot go to the cinema

can always find a good book or a newspaper to read. This [performance] will last just a little more than an hour!¹⁶

Bergman chose to say this with a studied and, for its time, surprisingly direct look into the camera. This was obviously a very conscious deviation from the then, and still, existing codes of the TV interview as a genre, where the interviewee is expected to direct his look only toward the interviewer. Bergman's frontal look must in hindsight have functioned as a foreboding of sorts, paralleling the looks orchestrated in both the beginning and end of the play. In any case, Bergman clearly set the tone as if in a (non-fictional) prologue to be developed by the play proper, with the artist putting the audience into place, in effect directing them, wielding power.

As already pointed out, this explicit aggression towards the audience - both in the shape of the interrogator and the audience proper - comes to a crescendo in the ninth and last act, where a play-within-the-play is enacted, to enable the judge to, as he puts it, assess the case properly. This play - a rite based on the cult of Dionysos - turns out to be an extension of the ritual already set in motion. Not unexpectedly it turns into a bloody affair, as the roles once again shift. "Now you will be in charge and I will become an obedient spectator", the judge says, still seemingly in control. But soon he falters and is reduced to a pale, sweaty and helpless audience - or better, an unwilling participator in the ritual, to which he is forced to contribute with his own death. He is in effect executed, a victim of the masked gods.

Thus the ending of *The Ritual*, in a manner similar to the ending of *The Magician*, becomes an act of revenge against all those disbelieving Vergérous characters who previously tormented or did not *believe* enough in the artist and his godlike powers. However, there are degrees also in

¹⁶ Swedish TV , 1969: "Sen finns det ju en massa människor som kastar sig över telefoner och pennor och rusar till TV:s klagomur, till dem skulle jag vilja säga det, att det finns bra biografer, det finns utomordentliga filmer, och för dom som inte har tillfälle att gå på bio, dom kan ju ta en god bok eller tidning och läsa, det tar lite över en timme det här!"

hell. Interestingly, the judge is not altogether dislikeable,¹⁷ someone who could easily be dispensed with and slaughtered on the altar of art, in the name of self-righteous revenge. Rather, in the course of the play, he becomes less a representative of anonymous power, and more someone to be pitied, in any case someone who is *unable to defend himself*. He is a human sacrifice, a victim of the cult and the powers vested therein, whereas the artists, previously the victims of the powers invested in the judge, are turned into hangmen.

This is perhaps also hinted at in the fourth scene, in which the judge is seen confessing to a priest who at first remains invisible. Suddenly a cutaway reveals that the face behind the monk's garb is none other than Bergman's, a device not used by Bergman since his early films. It is clearly a diabolically ironic variation of the confessional scene in *The Seventh Seal*, although here the religious theme has been converted into an artistic one - and the one who dressed in the garb of Death, the great traitor, is the Artist.

As already mentioned, after *The Ritual*, Bergman abandoned the theme of art and the conflict between artists and their audience and shifted his focus to supposedly more ordinary people, to 'everyman'.

It comes as no surprise that the audience, when it pops up in Bergman's post-film work, has fared better. What better proof of this than the fact that in his last TV play, *Larmar och gör sig till* (lit. *Struts and Frets*; screened on Swedish television in 1997), Bergman manages not only to fuse film with theatre, i.e. the two main areas of his professional life. (The teleplay is about a bizarre premiere of "the world's first silent talking picture", which, due to electrical failure brought by a blizzard, turns into a play performance, a staged version of the film). He also draws on characters known from his previous fictional work - e.g. the schoolmistress Märta Lundberg, the widow Karin Persson, and the church warden Algot Frövik from *Nattvardsgästerna/Winter Light* (1963) - as well as 'characters' belonging to his autobiography: his uncle Carl, his maternal grandmother Anna Åkerblom, his mother Karin - even her

¹⁷ See *Bergman om Bergman*, p 265: "Jag har nog tagit ställning lite grann för domaren, mycket mer än jag ursprungligen tänkte."

two “little boys” are included. But more important is the role that is given to the audience that has challenged the winter storm to see an obscure silent film but then, when the failed screening is replaced by a stage performance – amounting to a play-within-the-play - themselves become the center of attention. For as is made abundantly clear, the play is *organized, staged and acted by the audience themselves*, by the mere fact that they are *there*: it is in their expectations drama is born, in their gaze turning in a certain direction. What we see here is nothing less than a profane communion, with the wine changed into hot coffee (lots of it). Or as Bergman himself has put it, when commenting on the fact that he consciously used the audience from *Winter Light*: “they were given a chance to take part in a more profane and concrete communion than stormy night in Grånäs.”¹⁸ What could be a better proof than this mingling of art and religion to reach a final reconciliation between the classic opposites in Bergman’s films: the band of artists and their former enemies, the local people? What could be a better proof of the idea of art as an act of cult - without a god?

Interestingly, this conflict has returned with a vengeance in Bergman’s work in the theatre; here expressed through those gods that were banished from his films. I am thinking here of Bergman’s production of *Backanterna/The Bacchae*, both the Opera production in 1991 and the theatre version at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in 1996, where that dialectical conflict - god vs man, religion vs art, faith vs scepticism – were once again acted out. These productions are interesting to compare with *The Ritual*. In fact, I would contend that the differences between *The Ritual* and the theater production of *The Bacchae* mirror how the relationship - the ritual - between the artist and his/her audience has shifted in Bergman’s work - through the central metaphor of cult.

In his review of the stage production, Leif Zern points out that,

¹⁸ “Det är självfallet medvetna plock från tidigare sammanhang, särskilt publiken från *Nattvardsgästerna* - att de skulle få vara med och begå en mer jordisk och konkret nattvardsgång den där stormiga natten i Grånäs.”, in Åhlund, “En TV-dåres bekännelse”, p 18.

when looking at Bergman's work as a whole, the *Bachae* represents an *Urtext*.¹⁹ The plays is indeed a kind of a source or fountain for those opposite poles around which not least Bergman's films have tended to revolve: art and society, extacy and rationality, god and man - in Euripides' play represented by Dionysos and Pentheus - all concentrated around the notion of cult and rite: art as religion, religion as art, faith and disbelief. In *The Bachae*, Pentheus, the man of (worldly) power, tries to stop the cult of Dionysos - just like Vergéus, the scientist, tries to stop Vogler, the artist, in *The Magician*, and the judge tries to do in *The Ritual*. But in *The Bachae* the same conflict is treated with a considerably higher degree of complexity than in both the film and the play. For whereas in the film the artist and the cult of art are victorious in a fairly uncomplicated fashion, also prevailing in the teleplay, in the *The Bachae* the participants of the cult may have remained triumphant but at a terrible cost; here it was made abundantly clear that they were also victims. For at the end of the play, Dionysos exacts a terrifying revenge, entering in a flash of blinding light, with his formerly feminine beauty wrapped in an entirely white, clownlike dress, clearly reminiscent of those white clowns in Bergman's films that he himself has characterized as "multiple, ambiguous [...]: they are beautiful, cruel, dangerous, balancing on the border between death and destructive sexuality."²⁰

In an interview concerning his staging of the Opera version of *The Bachae*, Bergman clarified his position: "This piece reveals something I would like to call 'the Holiness of Man';²¹ or as he put it in an unannotated note distributed with the press material to the same production: "In his drama, he [Euripides] makes a clean sweep with the gods of power and the power of gods. He posits man's holiness and helplessness against the shamelessness and bloodthirst of the Superior

¹⁹ In *Dagens Nyheter* (daily).

²⁰ *Images*, p 38. *Bilder*, p 35: "vackra, hårda, farliga, balanserande på gränsen mellan död och destruktiv sexualitet.

²¹ "Stycket blottlägger något som jag kallar 'människans helighet'", Carsson, *Dagens Nyheter*[På stan.

ones.” (I sitt drama gör han rent hus med maktens gudar och gudars makt. Han ställer människans helighet och utsatthet mot de Övres skändlighet och blodtörst.) Interestingly, Bergman has since returned to this notion of the Holiness of Man in his book *Enskilda samtal* (*Private Conversations*), where he puts the following words into the mouth of Uncle Jacob, the confessional father of the female protagonist, as he admonishes her:

Don't say the word "God"! Say "The Holy". The Holiness of Man. Everything else is attributes, costumes, manifestations, pranks, desperate acts, rituals, despairing cries out into the darkness and the silence.²²

Compare this to Vogler in *The Magician* who himself was allowed to represent both the (suffering) artist *and* (suffering) humanity, manifested especially in those scenes toward the end of the film where his mask is torn away, making him seem so naked that Mrs Egerman who had fallen in love with him - or rather his Christlike countenance - does not know him any more. In *The Ritual* the humanity of the judge was, as we have seen, allowed to grow towards the end of the play, to which should be added that the group *itself* is split between opposite forces in this respect: Winkelmann is the rational, reasonable and civilized force, Thea his absolute opposite, and Fisher located somewhere in between. This immediately made the outcome - the triumphant victory of the artists - more complicated: obviously by this time in Bergman's career the cards were already shuffled in the direction his films were to move from now on - and which was later to manifest itself in his post-film career. Thus, in *The Bacchae* it is the sceptical Vergérus character, in the shape of Pentheus, who is bestowed the status of humanity and who is victimized and literally torn into pieces.

Put in another way, what is stressed in *The Bacchae* is that Dionysos

²² “Säg inte ordet ‘Gud’! Säg ‘Det Heliga’. Människans Helighet. Allt annat är attribut, utklädslar, manifestationer, tilltag, desperationer, ritualer, förtvivalade rop i mörkret och tystnaden”. *Enskilda samtal*, p. 36.

and his followers turn out to be just as fundamentalist and therefore just as dangerous as pure reason. In that case, it is again clear to what extent Bergman's art remains true to itself, even when positions have changed. That is, to what extent the opposites that are set in motion are acted out not in a dualistic but rather a dialectical fashion, constantly mirroring each other rather than becoming fixed in static positions. Indeed, any fixed position in an *either-or* seems in Bergman's work to be the greatest of sins.

Put yet another way, given the state of things one is always on the losing end, but if there is a state of grace, be it momentary, it seems to reside in the movement itself, between opposites - for lack of a better word, in an act of becoming - in *conditionality* as such. This idea is perhaps best encompassed by that single word "om" - "if" - as expressed in the eloquent speech delivered by the parson in *Viskningar och rop/Chries and Whispers* (1973), as he stands beside Agnes' dead body. Filled with doubt, like so many characters in Bergman's films, he prays:

If it so that you have gathered our suffering in your poor body, if it is so that you have borne it with you through death, if it is so that you meet God over there in the other land, if it is so that He turns His face toward you, if it so that you can then speak the language that this god understands, if it is so that you can then speak to this God. If it is so, pray for us. [...] Ask him to free us at last from our anxiety, our weariness, and our deep doubt.²³

It may seem ironic that these words, just as in *Enskilda samtal*, are delivered by a man of the church, who *per definition* is on the side of those rituals, prayers, and incantations that threaten to cloud the holiness of man Bergman stands up for in his later work. On the other

²³ *Four Stories by Ingmar Bergman*, 1977, p 75. Original in film: "Om det är så att du samlat vårt lidande i din stackars kropp. Om det är så att du burit det med dig genom döden. Om det är så att du möter gud där borta i det andra landet. Om det är så att han vänder sitt ansikte mot dig. Om det är så att du kan tala det språk som denne gud fattar. Om det är så, bed för oss. [...] Bed honom äntligen befria oss ur vår ängslan, vår leda och vårt djupa tvivel."

hand, if these rituals - which include language itself - is all there is, use them. Redemption lies not in the finalized Word, but rather in an act directed towards it - in the act itself.

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