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# Post-literate Poetics

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c r i t i c s :

Ewa Paczoska, *Lekcje uważności.*

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“From one experience to another – man, an experiencing machine”

Jacek Dukaj, *After writing*<sup>1</sup>

“What can you do? Follow new trends and fads (...)  
Perhaps you will be the one who meets Aliens first”

Jacek Dukaj, *Black oceans*<sup>2</sup>

## How to read *After writing*?

Since Jacek Dukaj is first and foremost a science fiction writer, I would like to begin by commenting on this convention. In science fiction, there is some room for speculation in formulating quasi-scientific theories. Indeed, science fiction “by default” presents the reader with a certain vision of the future. After all, waiting for researchers to confirm certain hypotheses would put an end to science fiction. What is more, the speculative nature of discoveries, inventions, or theories which explain the workings of physical reality does not negate their effects, i.e. future conclusions. To put it simply, it can be said that science-fiction writers sometimes get lost on the way, but they still reach their final destination. A great example

<sup>1</sup> Jacek Dukaj, *Po piśmie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2019), 395. Quotes are marked in the main text with AW and page number. All quotes were translated into English by Małgorzata Olsza.

<sup>2</sup> Jacek Dukaj, *Czarne oceany*, II (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2008), 172–73. All quotes were translated into English by Małgorzata Olsza.

is the classic *Frankenstein*<sup>3</sup> – the novel asks questions about man’s creative possibilities and its consequences, especially as regards their ethical side. The fact that the successor of *homo sapiens* will not be made of resurrected corpses, but rather be constructed in the process of bioengineering or digitization, is not as important here.<sup>4</sup> Most of the questions that Mary Shelley formulated in the first half of the nineteenth century remain valid even today.

The essay is different. The literary essay is an associative, non-linear, digressive, and subjective narrative; it is a reflective and hybrid genre. On the other hand, there is also the scientific essay with its stylistic coherence, cause-and-effect logic, and careful documentation of sources and references.

I think we can read Jacek Dukaj’s *After writing* in two ways. In the first interpretation, the reader would have to follow Dukaj’s argument closely and criticize his selection and use of sources, certain generalizations, and some arbitrary conclusions. The problem is, however, that Dukaj uses different (scientific, journalistic) texts from a number of different fields (neurology, philosophy, linguistics), stating that

I do not discover any unknown facts here. I did not conduct sociological research that would provide new data. I stole every brick used to build this arch of theory from other people’s architectures of thought. I only organize (reorganize) them on my own (AW, pp. 233-234).

Michał Tabaczyński<sup>5</sup> engages in such a critical dialogue with Dukaj’s text. In his erudite and well-researched article, Tabaczyński points out the deficiencies in Dukaj’s methodology: “(...) Dukaj makes many simplifications, but the most important ones concern the social and the narrative structures.”<sup>6</sup> First of all, “for Dukaj, literature in the literate era is reduced to a narrative structure (...)”<sup>7</sup> Drawing on Roland Barthes, Jay David Bolter, and the history of literature, Tabaczyński proves that non-linear thinking characterized writing even back in its glory days. The same is true when it comes to Dukaj’s view of print; Tabaczyński accuses Dukaj of perpetuating the “Gutenbergian myth,” which looks at the aftermath of the invention of the printing press in terms of revolution, not evolution. In addition to the allegations of simplifications, also as regards the intermediate stages of the pre-literate – literate – post-literate evolution, Dukaj’s vision also raises concerns when it comes to ignoring remediation processes of the new media,<sup>8</sup> especially since the direct transfer of experiences would “effectively challenge the logic of the evolution of literacy.”<sup>9</sup> According to Tabaczyński,

<sup>3</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: Aerie Books LTD, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> I wrote about the latest science-fiction films which present different ways of creating the successor of *homo sapiens* in: Piotr Gorliński-Kucik, “Między Nadzieją a Paranoją. O Post-Człowieku w Filmach Science Fiction (Na Kilku Przykładach),” *Creatio Fantastica*, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Michał Tabaczyński, “Po huku, po szumie, po piśmie,” *Dwutygodnik.com*, accessed October 23, 2019, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/8315-po-huku-po-szumie-po-pismie.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Tabaczyński.

<sup>7</sup> Tabaczyński.

<sup>8</sup> Mirosław Filiciak and Alek Tarkowski, “ALFABET NOWEJ KULTURY: R jak Remediacja,” *Dwutygodnik.com*, accessed October 23, 2019, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/701-alfabet-nowej-kultury-r-jak-remediacja.html>. It is a process in which old and new media influence one another and their users (television has influenced the Internet, which is now “forcing” television to become similar to the Internet).

<sup>9</sup> Tabaczyński, “Po huku, po szumie, po piśmie.”

instead of following Dukaj's train of thought, we should rely on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the habitus, mainly because, apart from writing, we are influenced by "bodily, orientation, and kinesthetic experiences, unconscious symbolism of space"<sup>10</sup> as well as gender and social class divisions.

While I agree with some of Tabaczyński's points, I would argue with others. We know that not all literature is narrative, but what matters for Dukaj (and what he states directly) is the fact that the linear novel/story has exerted the strongest (and the most far-reaching) effect on literature, and eventually became its own nemesis. I would also like to point out that Dukaj, as the author of *The death of Axolotl*, does not ignore the phenomenon of remediation. He emphasizes the transitional nature of the current stage: Netflix series are embedded in the order of writing, but mediate towards experience modules, which means that we are dealing here with an evolution and not a revolution. The concept of "the literate mindstyle" points to the fact that the social conditions of the habitus are embedded in writing, and seen as an instrument of power, because they have been shaped by writing. Literary language, metaphors, poetical language, and creative word-formation are endowed with some added value. Dukaj did not write a scientific dissertation that is firmly rooted in a certain methodology. His intricate construction is speculative by design, which makes it so enchanting and, above all, so compelling. *After writing* was written by a futurist writer, and I think that it should be read in such a context – i.e. similarly to how we read Stanisław Lem's essays.<sup>11</sup>

That is why I propose to read *After writing* in a different manner: as a literary essay, or even literature, which, at times, follows the conventions of science fiction (I will come back to this point at the end of my article). I want to focus on reconstructing the reasoning behind the text, because it seems sound. To paraphrase Gombrowicz, Dukaj wished to "put something into language," but could not do it in prose (hence, I believe, why he failed in *Rekursja* [*Recursion*]). He made a new attempt in *After writing*, which is, as he admits, "a jam session of associations and hypotheses" (AW, p. 232). Indeed, Dukaj treats some elements of his earlier novels as signs of a new emerging concept.<sup>12</sup>

## Putting a concept into language (Dukaj on himself)

Although we may interpret many of Dukaj's earlier works *ex post facto* in the context of post-literacy (Dukaj openly suggests such a reading), more or less since 2012, we can clearly see in his works certain interesting concepts. "The Portrait of a Nontetic"<sup>13</sup> presents a world in which people possess the sixth sense. Due to a birth defect, Laura, the protagonist of the sto-

<sup>10</sup> Tabaczyński.

<sup>11</sup> See Stanisław Lem, *Summa technologiae*, IV (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Lubelskie, 1984). Lem was not always able to predict the intermediate stages of the evolution of certain technologies, and sometimes he was wrong. His essays are also interdisciplinary, and we find in them some generalizations and simplifications; yet, Lem's predictions proved to be relatively accurate.

<sup>12</sup> In the footnotes, I provide the most important references to Dukaj's novel. I discussed Dukaj's works in more detail in: Piotr Gorliński-Kucik, *TechGnoza, uchronia, science fiction: proza Jacka Dukaja* (Katowice: Wyd. Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Jacek Dukaj, "Portret nietoty," in *Zachcianki: dziesięć zmysłowych opowieści*; Chutnik, Dębski, Dukaj, Gretkowska, Kofta, Kuczok, Miłoszewski, Plebanek, Tulli, Twardoch, ed. Beata Kołodziejewska (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2012). All quotes were translated into English by Małgorzata Olsza.

ry, is deprived of the sixth sense: “(...) the diagnosis of tetologists was definite and hopeless: no tetic nerves, complete tetic neuropathy.”<sup>14</sup> What does to tet around, to tet away, or to tet up mean? Imagine asking a deaf person to identify F sharp major or a blind person to describe the color red. Laura constantly strives to translate her experiences using sensual associations: “This is how Laura’s life mission began, the impossible challenge, her quixotic quest and sensual katabasis: to translate the world of a tetic into the world of a nontetic.”<sup>15</sup> The world of the fictional sixth sense is rendered by means of neologisms and synesthesia:

The next day, she woke up believing that the opposite was true: the sky was cold blue, air was glassy; in the attic, through the open skylight, there chattered October city cherubs, the smell was one of wet umbrellas and windy heather (...).<sup>16</sup>

Laura’s partner is Gustaw Rak-Raczyński; he is a brilliant artist who creates works of art that are perceived with the help of tetic nerves. His great project is called “the archeology of the spirit;” its goal is to translate the tetic experiences of people from other eras. In the end, Laura becomes a part of his artistic installation.

I have already written about *The Old Axolotl*<sup>17</sup> in *Forum of Poetics*.<sup>18</sup> The book employs a remarkable metaphor of the human condition; analyzed in the perspective of transhumanism, man is conceived of as an immature larval form, which, however, thanks to the impulse “from an outside” civilization, can reproduce. The form of the book is also remarkable. Published in a digital format, it tries to test the poetics of the e-book novel thanks to hyperlinks, footnotes, and graphics,<sup>19</sup> exploring the possibilities of multimedia communication. My analysis led me to the conclusion that literature can do without the paper book, switching to other media (just like a human can change from its “natural” organic form to others). Literature will be coping with *After writing* for some time, and only the instinct to share experiences will survive (it may take the form of written literature from time to time).

Another experiment is the Polish translation of *Heart of darkness*.<sup>20</sup> Dukaj wished to translate the experimental fiction of Joseph Conrad, who transferred his experiences by means of low tech, into the Polish language of the twenty-first century.<sup>21</sup> Conrad originally assumed that “All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses,” and the task of the writer “which [he is] trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you

<sup>14</sup> Dukaj, 91.

<sup>15</sup> Dukaj, 69.

<sup>16</sup> Dukaj, 62.

<sup>17</sup> Jacek Dukaj, *Starość Aksalotla* (Allegro, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Piotr Gorliński-Kucik, “The Relocation of Literature,” *Forum of Poetics*, no. 5 (jesie 2016): 46–57.

<sup>19</sup> A similar trend can be found in: Jacek Dukaj, *Wroniec* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Serce ciemności = Heart of darkness*, trans. Jacek Dukaj (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2017). The text was translated in 2015, but the fascination with Conrad’s novel could already be seen in the story *Serce mroku* [Heart of darkness] from 1998, Jacek Dukaj, “Serce mroku,” in *Król Bólu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> To learn more about the method of sensory deprivation used by Conrad to build empathy and understand the (sometimes non-existent!) other see: Dukaj, *Po piśmie*, 159–62. Such an interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* becomes an important element of Dukaj’s theory.

feel — it is, before all, to make you see.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Dukaj’s contemporary translation cannot be judged with the use of standard translation criteria; it is an extremely domesticated translation, which takes into account the changes that have taken place in the minds of readers. Does the reader empathize with the narrator, who empathizes with Marlow, who empathizes with Kurtz more in Dukaj’s translation than in previous translations? We can notice the differences when we study selected fragments in English,<sup>23</sup> Magda Heydel’s Polish translation,<sup>24</sup> and Jacek Dukaj’s Polish translation.<sup>25</sup>

In the story “Vtrko,”<sup>26</sup> Daniel Massny travels to the fictional post-Soviet Republic of Trska to find out that he is one of many illegitimate children of the former dictator Milovoi Strkovski. In addition to a few fragments in which Dukaj employs stylistic experiments that are still rooted in writing to convey experiences, I find sections in which politics are discussed as something that does not involve politicians, but utilizes new media instead, particularly interesting:

(...) journalists and conmen who work in culture are the true politicians of the 21st century; MPs and ministers are only forging into laws and ordinances what has already been instilled in the voters’ minds. – The next Stalin Hitler Strvkovski will be born out of a Netflix series.<sup>27</sup>

It is a world in which big data knows more about us than we do. When Massny suffered from depression and suicidal thoughts:

Even Google provided him with search suggestions for *self-euthanasia methods*. Perhaps you never go to these dark cellars of the mind, but Amazons and Facebooks already have their detailed maps.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> J. Conrad, Preface to *The nigger of the ‘Narcissus’: A tale of the sea*, Project Gutenberg, online: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/17731/17731-h/17731-h.htm> [date of access: 16 August 2019]; see further: Dukaj, 155.

<sup>23</sup> The first description of Marlow reads as follows: “Marlow sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzenmast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and, with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an idol. (...) »Mind,« he began again, lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower (...)” – J. Conrad, *Heart of darkness*, Project Gutenberg, online: <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/526/pg526.txt> [date of access: 23 July 2019].

<sup>24</sup> Magda Heydel’s Polish translation of this fragment reads as follows: “Marlow siedział po turecku z prawej strony rufy, oparty o maszt. Policzki miał zapadłe, żółtawą cerę, proste plecy; sprawiał wrażenie ascety, a siedząc tak z opuszczonymi ramionami i otwartymi dłońmi, wyglądał niczym bożek (...) – A jednak – podjął po chwili, unosząc ku nam zgiętą w łokciu rękę z otwartą dłońią: siedział ze skrzyżowanymi nogami, wyglądał niczym nauczający Budda, w europejskim stroju i bez kwiatu lotosu – a jednak nikt z nas miałby dokładnie takich samych odczuć jak on” – Joseph Conrad, *Jądro ciemności*, trans. Magdalena Heydel (Kraków: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, 2011), 8, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Jacek Dukaj’s Polish translation of this fragment reads as follows: “Z prawej strony rufy, oparty o maszt, siedzi Marlow: zapadłe policzki, pożółkła cera, ręce wzdłuż ciała, otwarte dłonie – asceta, bożek, Budda (...) A Marlow – skrzyżowane nogi, jednak ręka otwarta dłońią do góry, ubiór Europejczyka, ale to Budda, Budda minus kwiat lotosu (...)” – Dukaj, “Serce mroku,” 7, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Jacek Dukaj, “Vtrko,” in *Ojciec: Opowiadania*, by Jacek Dukaj et al. (Warszawa: Ringier Axel Springer Polska Sp. z o.o., 2017). All quotes were translated into English by Małgorzata Olsza.

<sup>27</sup> Dukaj, 246.

<sup>28</sup> Dukaj, 247.

Perhaps the most interesting literary text in which Dukaj tries to depict both the concept of transferring experiences and the tool as a subject, is “The Empire of Clouds.”<sup>29</sup> This grand alternative story is based on the fantastic concept developed by Professor Geist in Bolesław Prus’s *Doll*,<sup>30</sup> namely a metal that is lighter than air. Stanisław Wokulski and Julian Ochocki, who are both from a Country that Does Not Exist (Poland), guard the secret. They share the formula of how to make the Iron of the Spirit with the Nihon Empire<sup>31</sup> (Japan) so that when war breaks out, Poland may be reborn, reclaiming its lands from the Russian Empire. Nihon (which in this reality is relatively democratized) builds Iron Spirit Ships, increases its military power, and becomes an empire. The Republic of Poland is reborn in Europe. Its international standing is dependent on light metal technology<sup>32</sup> and Wokulski is the president of Poland until the coup.<sup>33</sup>

However, what is most important in “The empire of clouds” is the “impersonal transmission of knowledge.” Kiyoko, who works with Ochocki, uses *kanji* characters to record speech; since this technique is too time-consuming, she starts using *soki*,<sup>34</sup> a graphic system that resembles painting. Then she “translates” *soki* into *kanji*, and although the sounds of speech are similar, the meanings of the two entries differ significantly. Kiyoko and Ochocki do not know why the two recordings differ; Ochocki states that “I cannot show step by step, thought by thought, why it works. But it works. We can see that it works.”<sup>35</sup> The Japanese try to discover the secret, but Kiyoko is helpless: “Thought does not need the thinker (...) It needs a hand and a pen.”<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, “We do not have to understand the path that has led us to this knowledge in order to make use of it.”<sup>37</sup> Although the metal that is lighter than air is studied at universities, facilitates technological progress and, as a result, changes the face of the world, if I understand it correctly, no one really knows how to produce it.<sup>38</sup> “The empire of clouds” is a story about the subtleties of writing and about the fact that when you translate one system into another, a surplus is generated of which man is not aware. This surplus, to paraphrase *After writing*, becomes a subject in its own right and henceforth treats man as a tool. “The arrow does not need the archer.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Jacek Dukaj, “Imperium chmur,” in *Inne światy: antologia inspirowana pracami Jakuba Różalskiego*, by Jacek Dukaj et al. (Kraków: Wydawnictwo SQN, 2018).

<sup>30</sup> See: the chapter “An apparition”: Bolesław Prus, *The Doll*, trans. David J Welsh (New York: New York Review Books, 2011), 371–83.

<sup>31</sup> Over time, its native residents adopt the customs of the “savages” from Europe.

<sup>32</sup> Dukaj, “Imperium chmur,” 591.

<sup>33</sup> Roman Dmowski’s and Józef Piłsudski’s (personified by the brothers Esau and Jacob Ochocki) notions of independence also play a role in the conflict. Dmowski, in consultation with Wokulski, was supposed to raise capital and “blackmail” Russia with “the possible uprising;” Piłsudski was a military leader, who did not shy away from military conflict. Dukaj, 531.

<sup>34</sup> Dukaj, 429–31. On post-literacy in Chinese culture and civilization see: Dukaj, *Po piśmie*, 249–52.

<sup>35</sup> Dukaj, “Imperium chmur,” 484.

<sup>36</sup> Dukaj, 507.

<sup>37</sup> Dukaj, 567.

<sup>38</sup> Dukaj, 565, 572–73.

<sup>39</sup> Dukaj, 595.



## After writing

Five shorter essays, published from 2013 to 2017, precede the titular one.<sup>40</sup> They prepare the reader for the discussion of postliteracy by looking at a wider perspective of (1) transhumanism, (2) decrease in human labor, (3) technology, (4) digitalization, and (5) knowledge transfer. In the perspective of (1) transhumanism, man and human environment evolve from the material to the non-material.<sup>41</sup> Our bodies become more and more virtual; we transform them freely. Since “playing the game subjectifies its rules,” it is possible that technology is using us to evolve.<sup>42</sup> Technological development results in a progressive (2) decrease in human labor. Dukaj believes in the power of the economy of abundance that will support millions of unemployed people.<sup>43</sup> If work is rewarding in and of itself, then we must create its artificial replacement. “Entertainment becomes our work; entertainment becomes the meaning of life” (AW, p. 76).<sup>44</sup> As a result, entertainment industry thrives, and big data analytics algorithms<sup>45</sup> offer the audiences texts that are better suited to personal, even unconscious, preferences. Importance and value will be engineered (AW, pp. 78-80).

Technology (3) eliminates dissatisfaction (hope)<sup>46</sup> by bridging the gap between “I want” and “I have.” YouTube, Netflix, and Amazon constantly offer us new texts of which we have never heard before. “Posthumanism may be summarized with the following words: ‘Knowledge about man is beyond man’ ” (AW, p. 100), Dukaj writes. In the digital age, everything is digitalized; everything is (4) devoid of “aura” (a reference to the concept of Walter Benjamin). Our art is the art of living, lifestyle; we live each other in social media. Art will soon be created by artificial intelligence; “(...) Logos alone (...) determines the shape of humanity that is devoid of ‘aura.’ Technology creates values” (AW, p. 141). However, the fact that man is no longer

<sup>40</sup> “Trzecia Wojna Światowa Ciała z Umysłem” [The third world war between body and mind] was published in *Znak* (2013). “Szczęśliwi uprawiacze nudy” [Happy practitioners of boredom] was published in *Przegląd Polityczny* (2019). “Do kresu nadziei” [To the end of hope] was originally delivered as a lecture during the TeKa Refleksji (2016) lectures. “Sztuka w czasach sztucznej inteligencji” [Art in times of artificial intelligence] was also originally delivered as a lecture at Forum Przyszłości Kultury and later published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* (2017). “Live me” was first published in the anthology *Conradology* and in *Książki* (2017); see: Dukaj, *Po piśmie*, 399–400.

<sup>41</sup> “The First World War between Body and Mind was a religious war. The Second World War between Body and Mind was a philosophical war. The Third World War between Body and Mind is a technological war.” (Dukaj, 27.).

<sup>42</sup> Dukaj first touches upon this problem in *Czarne oceany* [Black oceans] when he writes about “metaksokracja,” see: J. Dukaj, *Czarne oceany*, 2nd edition, Cracow 2008; see also: PP, p. 10. Dukaj writes about transhumanism in almost all of his texts. On the most advanced stage in the development of civilization, see: Jacek Dukaj, “Aguerre w świecie,” in *Król Bólu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2010); see also Jacek Dukaj, *Perfekcyjna niedoskonałość: pierwsza tercja progresu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Dukaj showed this in the most vivid way in “Crux.” In Poland in 2054, the unemployed and the poor rebel against the salariat, which, thanks to increased work efficiency and social programs, finances them, see: Jacek Dukaj, “Crux,” in *Król Bólu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> In “Linia oporu” [Line of resistance], characters exist in such a state, called *nolensum* – you can earn a living in a relatively short time. “Plaje” and “szlaje” provide entertainment for people who have no purpose in life. People also function in “constellations of friends,” and their relationships with others resemble relationships between social media users, see Jacek Dukaj, “Linia oporu,” in *Król Bólu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> Big data is collected mainly via the Internet. Social networks (e.g. Facebook and the entire Google ecosystem) constantly analyze what, when, and how we click, what content interests us more, where and when we go (GPS), and much more.

<sup>46</sup> Dukaj “bends” Polish; he writes about “nadziejowanie” [to hope] instead of “posiadanie nadziei” [to have hope], see: Dukaj, *Po piśmie*, 94 and ff.



a subject does not mean that he is no longer human. Experiences are (5) transferred in the following manner: words → figurative art → augmented reality → mind-machine interface (AW, p. 153). If experiences are transferred in such a way, the sender and the receiver do not have to code and decode experiences by means of signs.

These are the fundamentals of Dukaj's theory. Man is ruled by his instinct to manifest experiences, and therefore human history can be conceived of as the history of how the transfer of experiences has evolved from orality, through literacy, to direct transfer. These three orders generate three mindstyles (which are neither mentalities nor worldviews), which in turn generate three different humanities, shaping economy, aesthetics, ethics and politics.<sup>47</sup>

Let us return to the idea that "playing the game subjectifies its rules." Man has played many important games over the centuries and has "named (...) rules and erected statutes and altars dedicated to them" (AW, p. 192).<sup>48</sup> But perhaps we should look at this game differently: it is not us who play with signs and language; it is language that uses us. I think that a good example of such a novel approach is literature as a system: the "insiders," i.e. writers, critics, scholars, operate in the system of mutual references to texts, conventions, and poetics. They play a game of literature. Or, as Dukaj would say, literature is playing a game of us. "(...) What uses us here has no intellect, no intention, no will. It is; that is all that can be honestly said about it" (AW, p. 193).<sup>49</sup>

The oral mindstyle (based on redundant, totalizing and emphatic orality) was supplanted by the literate mindstyle when agrarian culture and urban organisms generated an economic surplus that had to be managed (and "recorded" first). The literate mindstyle taught us how to think logically, rely on symbols, ideas, abstractions, and analytical constructs, and express structural empathy (writing created humanity governed by the literate mindstyle). Both formations are similar, insofar as they both code experiences by means of symbols.

The next stage is to abandon coding/decoding altogether and focus on the experience itself. We will begin using technology that is more effective in transferring experiences – we will transfer experiences in themselves, instead of signs. In other words, the instinct to manifest experiences will lead us to abandon coding and decoding altogether (AW, p. 266). Direct transfer will replace natural environmental stimuli (AW, p. 272). Experiences will be transferred by

<sup>47</sup> Such a concept is in a way similar to the views of McLuhan. McLuhan assumes that experiences, thought patterns, and expression are shaped by the media, which are extensions of human senses. As a result, media shape man. If I understand it correctly, post-literacy will not only popularize the phenomenon of the "global village," but also generate extreme media that will turn humans into passive recipients who do not have to interpret the received message, see: Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge, 2001). Walter Ong wrote about writing as technology and described the differences in human mentality as influenced by orality and writing (see: Walter J Ong and John Hartley, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013)).

<sup>48</sup> Dukaj tried to express de-subjectification and subjectification in *Lód [Ice]* (see: Jacek Dukaj, *Lód* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007)). When Benedykt Gierosławski was under the power of frozen thought structures, the language structures used by the first-person narrator changed ("it did," "it went," "it laughed"). In *Inne pieśni* [Other songs], the characters struggled with forms that determined behavior (Jacek Dukaj, *Inne pieśni*, II (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2009)).

<sup>49</sup> In a way, D.L. Everett, to whom Dukaj refers, thinks in a similar way in the context of language: Daniel Leonard Everett, *Language: The Cultural Tool*, 2013.

means of Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality, and then directly to the mind; the senses will not play any role in this process<sup>50</sup> (if I understand it correctly, this would be the triumph of direct experience).

The pre-literate man thought in terms of verbs. The literate man thinks in terms of nouns. The post-literate man will think in terms of adjectives (AW, p. 210), because the quality of the transferred experiences, whose source man will not be able to verify personally, will be the most important. Thus, the direct transfer of experiences exceeds the boundaries of fiction and real life, collapsing the opposition between fiction and non-fiction. Experiences become “truths.”

Can we still go back to old mindstyles? Dukaj states that “if you have been brought up in the culture of writing, you probably think that post-literacy is the time of cultural Armageddon and the decline of a written culture” (AW, p. 187). As a “product of writing,” man has been influenced by traditional “hierarchies of prestige.” Although in the countries in which the direct transfer of experiences is the most developed, IQ scores are and have been falling for decades, the criterion itself is immersed in the logic of writing and soon a new indicator of intelligence will be devised. “Usually, you think that such changes are for the worse. However, what matters here are the changes in value systems, according to which we measure inferiority and superiority” (AW, p. 265).

Today, we read less, because reading takes too much time,<sup>51</sup> and we do not have to read in order to function in society, achieve professional and economic success (it no longer guarantees effective learning), or even be part of the community. Writing’s last “advantage” is its ability to format the brain so that it is able to focus on one activity for a long time. Although the number of (also written) texts is growing, the post-literary format of the book is becoming more popular, and bibliophilia is becoming a very popular alternative trend.<sup>52</sup> Audiovisual communication (interviews, lectures, podcasts, audiobooks) is becoming more and more popular, not only because it is advertised and developed by the entertainment industry (it is currently the best way of storytelling; it is part of everyday life). It is also very popular in the press, essay writing, school education and academic education, mainly in the form of multimedia presentations.

If Dukaj is right, then the end of literature is nigh. Apart from transferring experiences, the only remnant of literature is man himself. Agency, expressing ideas, formalism of language,

<sup>50</sup> “Mass media practitioners claim that technology that will enable transferring experiences in an extreme version, by bypassing sensory stimuli, will be available in the near future. It will allow experiences to travel from one brain to another without any intermediaries (...)” (Dukaj, *Po piśmie*, 277.).

<sup>51</sup> See: Jacek Dukaj, “Za długie, nie przeczytam...,” *Tygodnik Powszechny*, accessed October 23, 2019, <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/za-dlugie-nie-przeczytam-142865>.; see also: Jacek Dukaj, “Lament Miłośnika Cegieł,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, November 12, 2015.; see: Dukaj, *Po piśmie*, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Indeed, we should acknowledge how the manner in which we talk about literature has changed. In addition to literary criticism, there are numerous commentaries about books (notes, summaries, discussions) that can be found in online blogs. However, a specific form of alternative bibliophilia is also becoming more and more popular; it does not focus on the text but on the book itself. Instagram is a powerful platform – many users post colorful photos of books. The true scale of this phenomenon can be experienced, if you use the hashtag #bookstagram.

conjuring up “landscapes of the spirit” will also remain in the domain of literature. The literate man may find consolation in the fact that he will probably be the engineer responsible for transferring experiences directly (unless technology achieves autonomy first) or that cycles will alternate (literacy – post-literacy – literacy).

### Third humanity: The poetics of the post-literate mindstyle

The new era will be the time of post-religious spirituality. Empathy and non-subjective thinking will be governed by philosophical discourse – it will be modelled on “the art of being;” “whatever-being” or “being-such-as-it-is” will dominate social life.<sup>53</sup> In economy, money is already becoming an empty sign and transactions are becoming more and more virtualized.<sup>54</sup> Politics will be based on individuality, because in the world of individuals it will be impossible to reduce different experiences to simple components: “(...) society does not exist (...) There are only billions of identities (...) [so we play, PGK] with transferring these identities” (AW, p. 353). In addition, we can live in every and any narrative which we “enter” (we live in post-fiction, so we should not find post-truth and fake news that exciting). Democracy will turn into pathocracy and it will be governed by the fourth, symbolic, estate (man will not control it).

The post-literate man will be a biological experiencing machine. He will be de-subjectified by infinite recursiveness (AW, pp. 384-386). Since identity (I am what I have experienced) is transferable (we stream experiences and emotions), we will sail on the rivers of experiences in which everyone lives everyone else: “The hermeneutic circle of Facebook looks as follows: John lives Frank who lives Pierre who lives Svetlana who lives Mariko who lives Li who lives John” (AW, p. 172). Everything is content; experiences (they are authentic because we experience them) give rise to universal passive experiencing machines that believe in the fiction of their personal freedom. We live in a state of (in Burke’s understanding) sublime flow in which “I” is turned off and “pure experience” is turned on. The processes of *de-subjectification* of man and *subjectification* of experiences are logical consequences of transferring experiences directly. “Life lives beyond us” (AW, p. 393), because “Being is experiencing” (AW, p. 393).

What will post-literate poetics be like? We do not know exactly; it is unthinkable, because we could not possibly imagine it as people immersed in the writing mindstyle (just as we could not possibly imagine how to communicate with aliens whose thinking would be defined by other biologies, cultures, or physics). Pornography, which is always in the technological

<sup>53</sup> Dukaj comments on the views of Agamben (see: Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: London University of Minnesota Press, 2013).): “Agamben needs such thought tools [which he borrows from the history of philosophy, PGK] to delineate the possibilities of a community of ‘people without properties.’ Individuals will not be defined by identity or differences between them (...) Only by being – every one separately” (Dukaj, *Po piśmie*, 340.). The Italian philosopher also writes about the “antinomy between the value of individuality and generality” found in language, changes in communication, and the processes of *de-subjectification* of the “whatever-being”/the experiencing machine. However, Dukaj also points out differences, especially when it comes to politics. Dukaj thus in some respects draws on Agamben, whom he considers and important thinker (see Dukaj, 339–43.).

<sup>54</sup> For example, meta-stock exchange and dematerialized money in *Czarne oceany* [Black oceans] see: Dukaj, *Czarne oceany*.

avant-garde in order to effectively satisfy the “inborn hunger for naked libidial experiences” (AW, p. 217), often by means of virtual reality, may give us a clue. Experiencing porn is context-free, timeless, and adjectival (only the quality of the personal experience matters), and therefore, as such, it is beyond truth and falsehood.

We will probably find ourselves in a post-fictional or even post-linear order; probabilistic editing will govern the connections between various micro-texts, experience maps, or interactions (AW, p. 338). Cause-and-effect logic will be replaced by a multidirectional and associative narrative, governed by the logic of “associating experiences” (AW, p. 276).

We will make our way through texts just as we make our way through YouTube’s videos or Netflix series (which are still governed by the logic of writing). The difference will be that SI algorithms will make more accurate suggestions (based on biometric data) before we even realize that we want to see a given clip or series. “And thus we realize that the reality we are experiencing, at home, on the street, at work, in the public sphere, is falling apart, fragmented and chaotic. That it is more like Instagram, more like a Facebook wall, and endless links” (AW, p. 303).

Post-literate poetics is evolutionarily linked to the poetics of writing in its final years: “(...) the culture of mash-ups and patchworks, sampling and covering, DJ’s mentality that no longer applies to club music, but to life in general. Such developments have already signaled the rise of post-literate and post-linear mindstyle” (AW, p. 275). I think that “the exhaustion of modernism,” with its formal experiments (Leopold Buczkowski’s non-linear narratives, Witold Gombrowicz’s diarist poetics, the diarist poetics of the novel in general, Tadeusz Konwicki’s fabulations, or Jerzy Limon’s experimental writing), also exemplifies this new approach to writing. It demonstrates the fact that the linear narrative has reached its “breaking point.” Fiction no longer relies on descriptions, behaviorism is no longer the dominant language, and the poetics of the fragment becomes dominant. Other postmodern concepts could be listed here as well.

Indeed, there are many examples of this process. However, we should instead focus on describing respective poetics accurately, because not only do they sit on the border between the literate and post-literate mindstyles, but they are also transmedial. I think that one of the best examples is the vlog, whose genealogy could be traced from the written journal, through the internet journal (blog), to the video journal (vlog). Of course, each genre has changed over time in itself and has taken many different forms. The intimate notebook of a nineteenth-century governess is different from the diary of a twentieth-century writer who wishes to publish his work. The blog is published on the Internet, but the author can either share it with a group of close friends, or, for example, with the general public.

Let me give the example of Krzysztof Gonciarz’s YouTube channel.<sup>55</sup> Gonciarz is Polish, but he lives in Tokyo. On the one hand, his channel draws on the generic traditions of the diary

<sup>55</sup> Krzysztof Gonciarz, YouTube, accessed November 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/user/wybuchajacebeczki>.

and thus exemplifies the literate mindstyle (it is characterized by linear narration; the author subjectively describes his travels, business ventures, and artistic activities). On the other hand, Gonciarz relies on the audiovisual medium, drawing on internet and filmic conventions. Long shots of landscapes, carefully composed frames, carefully selected color palette, and existential first-person narration intertwine with shaky camera sequences, interviews (or Q&As), and the chaos of everyday life. It is a generic cross-over,<sup>56</sup> only on a much wider scale (varieties, genres, media cross over) and at a much faster pace than before.

Krzysztof Gonciarz is *the* story here. What do I do every evening? I live Krzysztof Gonciarz, as Dukaj would say. I walk around Yoyogi Park, run a marathon in London, visit Scotland. I feel Gonciarz's emotions: sadness (when he destroys his drone), pride (when he opens his exhibition at the Manggha Museum in Cracow), fatigue (when he goes home from the gym).

Instastories,<sup>57</sup> short "stories" in a video format, are the newest form of vlogs. We live celebrities through (their?) experiences and lifestyles: three one-minute micro-forms from the gym, then two memes, one photo of a healthy meal, three more minutes of reflections. Literally millions live them: Cristiano Ronaldo<sup>58</sup> (one of the best football players in the world) has 177 million followers, Lewis Hamilton<sup>59</sup> (five-time Formula 1 world champion) has over 12 million followers, and Stephen King<sup>60</sup> (one of the most popular authors of horror novels in the world) has 1.2 million followers.

In order to describe the next stages of the evolution of post-literate poetics, we must carefully follow new developments and trends in the new media sector (will Snapchat become more popular than Instagram?). They will give rise to new types of communication and new poetics. As Dukaj points out, "What can you do? Follow new trends and fads (...) Perhaps you will be the one who meets Aliens first."<sup>61</sup> The post-literate man will differ from the literate man. Perhaps we will identify him by the poetics of his texts/experiences.

<sup>56</sup> See: Ireneusz Opacki, "Krzyżowanie się postaci gatunkowych jako wyznacznik ewolucji poezji," *Pamiętnik Literacki*, no. 4 (1963): 349–89. Opacki analyzes Romana Zmorski's *Dziwy*, Leopolda Staff's *Królestwo*, and Franciszek Karpiński's *Podróżny i strumień* and concludes that "the genre has no constant, unchanging, permanent features. First of all, due to 'transformations' which have taken place during its evolution. Secondly, and more importantly, because individual structural features have been assigned different importance, depending on the literary context of the era or a given literary trend" (Opacki, 387). "We can, however, speak about (...) generic multiformity, insofar as it is possible to trace the presence of older generic characteristics, which at a given stage of development have already lost their generic value, as defined by the literary conventions of the era in which a given characteristic was first conceived (...)" (Opacki, 389). I think that if we upgrade the language of this text and its textual focus, Opacki's observations remain valid. Of course, it applies to the process of re-medialization.

<sup>57</sup> O. Jenczek, "Kompletny poradnik jak relacjonować wydarzenia na Instastories", online: <https://sektor3-0.pl/blog/kompletny-poradnik-jak-relacjonowac-wydarzenia-na-instastories/> [date of access: 28 July 2019]. This is one of the many guides we can find on the Internet. The functions of platforms such as Instagram change very often, so the guides are regularly updated. Most often their target audience comprises influencers or commercial entities that use social media platforms for advertisement.

<sup>58</sup> Online: <https://www.instagram.com/cristiano/> [date of access: 28 July 2019].

<sup>59</sup> Online: <https://www.instagram.com/lewishamilton/> [date of access: 28 July 2019].

<sup>60</sup> Online: <https://www.instagram.com/stephenking/> [date of access: 28 July 2019].

<sup>61</sup> Dukaj, *Czarne oceany*, 172–73.

## Grand narratives (Dukaj on others)

How does Dukaj rank in relation to similar narratives of recent decades?<sup>62</sup> Francis Fukuyama in *Our posthuman future*<sup>63</sup> warns in a moderately apocalyptic tone against bioengineering that will change human nature, causing social divisions and endangering human rights. Only liberal democracy and the human rights that it guarantees may stop such a scenario. According to Dukaj, Fukuyama created “The last historiosophic futurology with global resonance” (AW, p. 379). Today, we read Yuval Noah Harari’s books.<sup>64</sup> What makes them so interesting for millions of readers? Why did Harari become a “star” of human sciences?

I think that the answer may lie in the wide variety of topics discussed by Harari and the scale of his narrative. Harari writes about the cognitive, Neolithic, scientific, and the second (future) cognitive revolution. He writes about the effects of global civilization, the end of traditional conflicts, and fake news (as he rightly observes, *homo sapiens* has always lived in the age of post-truth). Two new religions will rule the near future. Techno-humanism (transhumanism) preaches that bioengineering, cyborgization, and new forms of inorganic life will help *homo sapiens* (who has reached the evolutionary breaking point) transform into *homo deus*. It will be the second cognitive revolution. However, Harari is concerned about the deepening of social divisions and predicts that an elite class of privileged superhumans will be formed in the future. Dataism, in turn, is based on the assumption that everything is an algorithm (biological life as well); big data should be processed wisely (ideally, in a dispersed, and not centralized, manner). Biometric data will make it possible for SI algorithms to know man better than he himself does. Soon, art (texts of culture) will be created outside of man, who, as a result of delaborization, will be bored and willing to consume it. Harari also predicts the end of democracy and the emergence of post-liberalism.

Harari’s narrative is accessible; it is a story that is meant to interest the widest possible group of readers, full of colorful metaphors and subtle humor. Harari’s popularity was determined by his adopted strategy of “discovering the truth.” The Israeli historian eloquently builds connections between known facts, which is appreciated by the reader. He is rational and scientific, praising secularism, capitalism, and liberal democracy (he is aware of its flaws, but he believes that it is the only system that can respond to with global challenges of the 21st century).

And while Harari and Dukaj touch on similar topics, the Israeli historian never imposes an interpretation on the vision of the future he describes; he never lets his imagination roam free and never hypothesizes. He evaluates reality, but is not tempted to assess (uncertain) future developments. Dukaj also writes about the past and future history of man, but his narrative

<sup>62</sup> Dukaj lists the following works: Clinton Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)., Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017); Yuval N Harari, *Homo Deus: a brief history of tomorrow*, First Harper Perennial (New York, 2018); Jeremy R. Lent, *The Patterning Instinct: A Cultural History of Humanity’s Search for Meaning* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2017); Parag Khanna, *Connectography: le mappe del futuro ordine mondiale* (Roma: Fazi, 2016).

<sup>63</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Picador - Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

<sup>64</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Vintage, 2019); Harari, *Homo Deus*; Yuval N Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2019).

has a clear focus (evolving forms of manifesting experiences). Dukaj's narrative is convoluted, speculative, and quasi-literary; thus, it may appear to be less convincing (and it certainly will be less popular), but it is more inspiring and intriguing. It is exemplified by the style of both writers. This is how Harari writes about terrorism and 9/11:

Hence terrorists resemble a fly that tries to destroy a china shop. The fly is so weak that it cannot move even a single teacup. So how does a fly destroy a china shop? It finds a bull, gets inside its ear, and starts buzzing. The bull goes wild with fear and anger, and destroys the china shop. This is what happened after 9/11, as Islamic fundamentalists incited the American bull to destroy the Middle Eastern china shop. Now they flourish in the wreckage. And there is no shortage of short-tempered bulls in the world.<sup>65</sup>

This is how Dukaj writes about Conrad's *Heart of darkness*:

I do not care for postcolonial discourse and phantom pain of amputated empires. Not my pride, not my burden. Other symmetries of horror interest me in this reliquary of outdated fiction. Nietzsche prophesied and diagnosed existential convulsions after the death of God and Conrad in *Heart of darkness* projected Kurtz's shadow on post-Europe and its future. (AW, s. 176).

Harari uses a simple, yet striking, metaphor to explain how terrorists act. If he were to comment on the issues raised by Dukaj in one paragraph, it would take him a whole chapter. The aesthetic value and the intended readers of both texts differ (one is a popular scientific essay, while the other is a literary essay).

## Compelling necessity

In my reading, *After writing* is a literary essay written by a futurist writer who presents his narrative of man's past and future in the context of "(...) language and writing as unnecessary and transient carriers of humanity; and man deprived of subjectivity" (AW, p. 8). The writer also relies on his trademark style (captivating and convincing language, innovations in language, traces of the sublime).

I think Dukaj is right on some level. We can think of humans as those who have the instinct to tell about their experiences and are looking for the best way to express them (experiences are looking for the best way to be expressed). Undoubtedly, the pre-literate man, the literate man, and the post-literate man must be different. And it cannot be denied that our children (born in the first decades of the 21st century) will be completely different from us, because they will not be able to read at the age of four (which happened at the beginning of the 20th century<sup>66</sup>), but they will be able to use the Internet. Indeed, our children will experience others online in the form of audiovisual micro-texts that will be recommended to them by algorithms which will no longer rely on the logic of linear narration (or only rely on it in its liminal stage).

<sup>65</sup>Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, 193.

<sup>66</sup>Born in 1908, Teodor Parnicki recalls: "I first appeared in public as one who could read at my father's birthday and ever since I was four years old, I was someone who could read" – Teodor Parnicki, *Historia w literaturę przeżywaną* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1980), 45–46.



And what about the subjectification of the tool? If life is the object of biological evolution, what is its subject? What does life convey? It is the same force that transmits information in the process of technological evolution, and experiences, as forms of transferring experiences evolve. “What uses us here has no intellect, no intention, no will. It is; that is all that can be honestly said about it” (AW, p. 193). Technology is a tool; it is thus a narrative of emancipation of “tools which mediate between the subject and the object” (AW, pp. 9-10).

I think that, to a large extent, Dukaj’s vision is more or less consistent with his other novels. He is still an evolutionist, but not necessarily a progressive one; he is still a nostalgic conservative, but he is no longer such an elitist. Although Dukaj is subjective and speculative (and very convincing; at first, we do not even know how to argue with him), he is also quasi-objective in his vision of future developments; he does not think about the move from literacy to post-literacy in terms of regression. It is progress, insofar as it is a kind of evolutionary necessity, resulting from the technological development of transferring experiences. *After writing* is not the lamentation of a bookworm, nor a eulogy of an Internet user. It is simply a “logical conclusion;” this is how the transfer of information/experiences will evolve. Writing cannot compete with other forms of transfer, just like a paper map cannot compete with a GPS-based system.

Naturally, such a narrative comes at a cost and Dukaj’s text is no different. Indeed, it relies too much on totality in its treatment of metaphysics, synthetic trinity, and the tool itself – the now subjectified evolution. At this point, I have to agree with Dukaj’s interpretation of Dukaj: his version of transhumanism has never been anthropocentric; it has always been governed by certain necessities. Now, we are reduced/elevated to a figure of the “universal experiencing machine” – it has “no face. No gender. Almost no body. It abandons and assumes identities in stroboscopic spasms” (AW, p. 393).

I wonder. To some extent, *After writing* may be classified as “imaginative literature,”<sup>67</sup> but perhaps we can find still other labels? While it is immersed in writing (it is obvious), maybe (unconsciously?) it simulates (to the extent it is possible) a post-literate text? Perhaps that is why it relies on a non-linear narrative and moves from one concept to another, following the logic of associations and limiting itself to the books subjectively chosen by Dukaj (did Amazon recommend them)? If that were the case, then *After writing* should not be read (analyzed interpreted), but experienced. The quality of experience would determine its truthfulness.

So, is this a good book? Yes, because even if Dukaj is wrong, the reader may still enjoy “a jam session of associations and hypotheses” (AW, p. 232). And if Dukaj is right, if his ideas are proven correct, it will mean that *After writing* is indeed a great book.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

<sup>67</sup> Dukaj refers to “the linguistic turn” in philosophy and Richard Rorty’s writings (see: Dukaj, *Po piśmie*, 310–11., see also: Richard Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises,” *Telos: Revista de Estudios Interdisciplinarios En Ciencias Sociales*, no. 3 (2001): 243–63.). It constitutes another important element of his theory.

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# KEYWORDS

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## TRANSHUMANISM

### ABSTRACT:

In his latest collection of essays *Po piśmie* [After writing], Jacek Dukaj conceives of human history as an evolution of forms in which man manifests experiences; its final stage is the direct transfer of experiences. The second most important question is the subjectification of the tool. I review earlier realizations of this concept in Dukaj's writings and compare his observations with other contemporary narratives which address the history and future of *homo sapiens* (mainly by Yuval Noah Harari).

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