

Conference Paper

Retromania as the Symptom of Trauma: The Past and Present in Sergei Loznitsa's *Schast'e Moe*

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Abstract

The article discusses Sergei Loznitsa's film *Schast'e moe* (*My Joy*, 2010) as the most radical critique of the retromaniac glorification of the profound connections between the present-day Russia and its heroic history, especially the Great Patriotic War. Loznitsa presents this connection as a circular narrative that is driven by recurring patterns of violence, which in turn manifest unresolved societal traumas. The patterns of recurrent violence and the circularity of its cycle can be described through Freudian definition of trauma. Loznitsa treats retromania as an objective condition of contemporary Russian society – the one that mythologizes reproduction of these violence-based power relations, not only vertically but also horizontally. This logic is deeply embedded in the film's structure and the system of recurring motifs, which eventually constitute a surreal picture in which the borders between the past and present are blurred by the permanence of violence in the fabric of society.

Keywords: Sergei Loznitsa, violence, historical memory, trauma

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1. Introduction

A first feature film of the famed documentary director Sergei Loznitsa *Schast'e moe* (*My Joy*, 2010), was a co-production of Germany, Netherlands and Ukraine (after the Russian Ministry of Culture refused to finance the project). It received the Best Director Prize and the prize of the Film Critics' Guild at the Kinotavr festival and became the first Ukrainian film included into the Cannes festival program. Based on Loznitsa's original script and filmed by the camera of Oleg Mutu, who shot *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, among other headliners of Romanian 'new wave' cinema, *Schast'e moe* was praised for the sophisticated film texture in *The New York Times* and other western media.

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2. Materials and Methods

In Russia, it has predictably caused the split of opinions: some placed this film among top achievements of the new Russian cinema for its attention to the dark side of the post-Soviet world [1-5]. The others like Karen Shakhnazarov, head of Mosfilm and in 2010 chair of the Kinotavr jury, has defined *Schast'e moe* as an openly anti-Russian film and summarized its message as the following: “one should shoot our everybody living in Russia” [6]. Shakhnazarov’s anger seconded infamous Elena lampolskaya, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Kul'tura* and an ardent fighter against everything that does not fit the current version of the Orthodoxy–Autocracy–Folksiness triad. She has accused Loznitsa of nothing short of political treason: “Considering the fact that the film is sponsored predominantly by Germans, it is amazingly harmonious. For the complete picture, Loznitsa would have to be delivered to Moscow premiere of his film by a sealed train coach. Unfortunately, there will be no Moscow premiere” [7].

Probably, *My Joy* angered the officials by its treatment of the historical past. Indeed, Loznitsa’s film establishes direct connections between today’s culture of violence and the memory (as well as traces) of the Great Patriotic War. However, as Justin Wilmes aptly noted: “In stark contrast to recent Russian blockbusters, which revive various patriotic myths and construct a usable past – such as *Brest Fortress* (*Brestkaia krepost'*, Alkesandr Kott, 2010), *Stalingrad* (Fedor Bondarchuk, 2013), and *Panfilov 28 Men* (*Dvadtsat' vosem' panfilovtsev*, Kim Druzhinin, 2016) – the film portrays Russia’s past as “a total nullifying negative experience”, from which “no meaning can be recovered” [8]. In the following analysis, I will argue that Loznitsa’s film offers not only a radical critique of Soviet/post-Soviet culture of violence, but also of contemporary retromania as a discourse that solidifies the permanent presence of violence in Russian social fabrics and, moreover, justifies and lionizes it as the ‘essential’ feature of national history and culture.

3. Results

The film follows the truck driver Georgii (Viktor Nemets) who passes through provincial area (the film was shot in Chernigov region of Ukraine), and encounters various characters. First come corrupt road cops and an old man, who lives in hiding since 1945 (his story constitutes a first wartime episode). Then Georgii meets an underage prostitute, whom he tries to help but faces her aggression instead, and finally village thugs, who

try to steal his cargo and clunk him on the head with a log. By the way, his truck turns out to be loaded with flour, which thugs find useless and leave untouched.

After another wartime episode, defined by the director as the film's turning point, in Loznitsa's words, 'the film's structure changes: in the film's first half we have one day and the corresponding temporality. In the second half, the time moves with a different pace – we have fragments with long intervals between them' [9]. In the second part of the film, a different Georgii appears – hardly recognizable, bearded, looking twenty years older, mute and probably amnesiac, he lives with a Gypsy woman and her son. Apparently, a significant time period has passed since the tragic encounter with thugs, as the setting changed from the summertime to winter. Tellingly, in the second half the direction of Georgii's movement changes as well. If the first part, the camera reproduced Georgii's gaze with road unfolding in front of him; in the second part, Georgii's eyes are either closed or he is driven with his back towards the direction of the movement. Eventually, his trajectory comes to a full circle returning to one of the first settings in the film narrative – the road police station.

In the second part, the Roma woman uses Georgii's as a senseless body for sex and sells his truck's cargo at the market. Eventually, pressed by police, she sells Georgii's truck and disappears, abandoning him. First arrested at the market and later left to freeze by the road, Georgii is saved by the old man from the first part of the movie. In the next scene, two soldiers trying in vain to deliver a serviceman's corpse to his mother, find the old man's hut somewhere deep in the woods. A following conversation between the old man and a soldier is built on the misunderstanding; the soldier asks whether the old man would sign papers confirming that the dead body was delivered to the destination, while the old man apparently (we can only guess) thinks that they came to arrest him for the murder he committed in 1945. After this strange encounter, Georgii finds the old man covered with blood and dead yet with a pistol in his hands. Having taken the gun, Georgii goes to the highway, stops a truck and arrives with it to the same road police station which featured in the beginning of the movie. There, cops are beating a cuffed driver, who turned out to be a police major from Moscow and who refused to cope with their harassment. Dragged to the station as a supposed witness of the major's 'resistance to authorities', Georgii first shoots cops, then the major and his wife, and finally the truck driver. After this, he disappears in the dark.

4. Discussion

Certainly, this rough plot summary does not give a justice to the film's complicated narrative design, which, as I will try to demonstrate, is essential for the adequate understanding of *Schast'e moe*. In the second part of the film, Georgii performs a personification of trauma, but with each next episode, the viewer understands that his trauma is much broader than a result of assault by roadside thugs – rather, it raises to symbolize the only available connection with Russian history. Georgii's trauma opens up the space around him for memoires and ghosts of the past, mainly associated with the Great Patriotic War, which appears as to be just *one of* many pages in the never-ending Civil War that goes on in Russia since 1917. When the writer Igor' Vishnevetskii asks Loznitsa whether *My Joy* is about the continuing civil war in Russian society, the director responds: "This was one of implied interpretations of the film..." [5].

Even on a superficial level, the film's plot and its quasi-documentary stylistics resonate with contemporary New Russian drama, a hyper-naturalist movement in playwriting and theatre emerging in the late 1990s-early 2000s. Represented by such playwrights as Evgeny Grishkovets, Vasily Sigarev, Ivan Vyrypaev, the Presnyakov Brothers, among others, this movement has also generated a new wave in Russian cinema as epitomized by the films of Kirill Serebrennikov, Boris Khlebnikov, Aleksei Popogrebskii, same Vyrypaev and Sigarev. In our book *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (Intellect, 2008), Birgit Beumers and I had argued that the central discovery of New Drama was associated with the focus on various forms of social violence that in the post-Soviet period assumed the role of a social meta-language, which has eventually replaced all other, insufficient and disintegrated languages inherited by the post-Soviet society from the Soviet period. In lieu with this vision, Loznitsa creates a cinematic version of the Bildungsroman, in the process of which Georgii is supposed to learn the language of violence, while each episode can be read as a lesson in this subject. Bakhtin in his analysis of the Bildungsroman argued that this genre while placing on the forestage the figure of the changing, becoming, person, at the same time, radically departed from the cyclical representation of time, which was typical for the pre-modern depiction of the human growth and transformation [10]. However, Loznitsa in his filmic narrative paradoxically connects the logic of the Bildungsroman with the emphatically cyclical model of time. One may even argue that the time becomes cyclical as the result of the protagonist's *successful* education in the life school of violence.

Schast'e moe is shot in a quasi-documentary manner with numerous unprofessional extras (especially impressive is the scene at the village marketplace where Georgii, in the *New York Times* reviewer's words, is "almost engulfed in a sea of coarse faces and bodies" [11]). The film overwhelms the viewer with various languages of violence, including obscenities eagerly used by thugs, old ladies, and youngsters; ubiquitous criminal songs, *chanson*, reproducing the prison subculture as normative; and of course, constant beatings and rapes (both figurative and literal), constituting the 'communication' both between authorities (cops) and public, as well as between ordinary people alike. Notably, the film begins with an 'epigraph' where a half-naked body of the man in a prison uniform is dragged by two other prisoners into a pit and then covered with cement. References to Andrey Platonov's *The Foundation Pit* aside, the prison-style normalized violence appears as the cemented foundation of the current condition. No wonder, that Georgii's journey begins from the site of the first, 'foundational', murder.

Apparently, the change in the filmic structure, mentioned above, reflects the switch of the genre. In the second part, the road transforms into a metaphor of the protagonist's internal journey: a topographical travel, taking a circular trajectory, directly echoes a philosophical, psychological and historical itinerary stitching together Georgii and other characters, the present and the historical past. However, the main driving force in both planes of this symbolic travelogue belongs to violence. The accumulation of violence logically culminates in the catastrophic finale where Georgii, indiscriminately kills both sadistic cops and their victims. This scene raises as the ironic result of Georgii's 'education' in the process of his journey. If in the beginning of his journey he appears as a friendly and generous person, who never uses obscenities, tries to help an underage prostitute, and trusts cunning thugs, in the second part, we see a broken old man, a former subject, who has been stripped of his memory, identity and speech by the intimate encounter with the normalized violence. The reformed Georgii can express his agency and his connections to others only through violence: for the protagonist crippled by violence and simultaneously infused by it, the shooting stands both for his protest against the cops' terror and solidarity with its victims. In the director's words, "I intentionally supercharge the situation in order to reach the finale with a very simple message: the society designed in such way, is doomed to self-destruction." [9].

Obviously, for Loznitsa, much like for New Drama authors, violence functions as the foundation of social fabrics, thus providing a meta-language. Yet, for Loznitsa, this meta-language rather isolates than connects, rather oppresses than expresses, thus becoming an *anti-language*. It is noteworthy that after the life-changing attack of the thugs, Georgii becomes mute for the rest of the film. Significantly, Georgii is not alone:

another mute victim of social violence is one of thugs, who apparently has lost his speech in childhood when his father was killed.

This connection is very significant as it reflects the aspect of *Schast'e moe* that places it beyond the context of New Drama. For the New Drama playwrights, the raise of violence to the status of the universal meta-language results from the collapse of Soviet metanarratives and social norms. In other words, for them the language of violence exclusively belongs to the post-Soviet realm, manifesting both the source and the effect of the historical trauma caused by the downfall of the Soviet social order. On the contrary, Loznitsa does not associate the rise of violence to the status of universal meta-language (anti-language); he inserts into his filmic narrative two *historical* episodes that present the contemporary normalization of violence as a direct outcome of the entire Soviet history. In other words, for him the social communication through violence is not the post-Soviet phenomenon but the product of the Soviet history, which was concealed by Soviet ideological 'screens' and had become obvious when these screens collapsed.

The first of such inserted episodes is situated right after Georgii's first encounter with corrupt cops. An old man appearing in his cab from nowhere (and afterwards vanishing in thin air), tells the driver about an episode that has changed his life. When he, as a young lieutenant was returning from Germany in 1945, a military patrol officer cunningly robbed him of his modest 'trophy' consisting of a red dress for his bride and Leika photo camera for his future career. In response, the lieutenant shot the officer and died socially, having forgotten his name and living a life of a ghost since then. At the first sight, this scene only superficially connects with the present – the greedy patrol officer in 1945 appears as a prototype for today's corrupt cops; much like him they are eager to rob passing drivers, taking anything from money to sex and never hesitating to use violence in order to make their request irrefutable. Certainly, this representation of the victorious days of 1945 strikes as demythologizing in relation to dominating cultural and ideological rhetorics depicting the Soviet victory in World War II as the highest point of Russia's history and fullest justification of the nation's greatness. By emphasizing connections between today's violence coming from the state officials and the war traumas, Loznitsa turns this mythology upside down – literary, presenting its negative version.

At the same time, this episode, in a greater filmic context, appears as the manifestation of the important life strategy: one may resist the social violence by violent means, only if s/he agrees to pay for this choice by the loss of one's personal identity. Paradoxically, as it goes, in the condition of normalized violence, personal dignity can be defended only on the basis of personal anonymity. Furthermore, Loznitsa himself interprets this

episode as foreshadowing of the protagonist's future: Georgii will also lose his name and identity. However, in comparison with 'reformed' Georgii as he appears in the second half of the film, the old man obviously looks like a winner: until his very end, he stays in control of the situation and keeps his humanity. Noteworthy, he is the only one who saves helpless Georgii when the others either cynically use or aggressively shun him.

Yet, even the old man eventually fails to avoid violent death. The uncertainly surrounding his death – it remains unclear whether he has killed himself or was killed by the soldiers – is essential for Loznitsa's vision of history. In the second half of the movie, the filmic time not only becomes fragmented, but also incorporates surreal elements. First, a lieutenant accompanying the dead soldier's body, sees a hangman on a tall tree in the woods; apparently, this is hallucination as his subaltern can find nothing of likes. Later, same lieutenant falls into delirium and recognizes in the old man the hangman he saw on a tree. Even earlier in the movie, appears an aged wanderer who aggressively hits the military tuck with a stick, mumbling that he had killed them all, put all those bitches in one grave, and fulfilled the general's order.

Both the hangman and the wandering madman can be interpreted as two future scenarios for Georgii after his shooting spray. A symbolic logic revealed by these episodes, provide a deconstruction of contemporary retromania – it offers the temporal confusion of cause and effect, of events preceding and following the action, which becomes an important characteristic of the today's vision of history. In Loznitsa's interpretation, this approach to history drags the society into the surreal state of disorientation – best of all manifested by Georgii himself – thus amplifying, rather than resolving past traumas.

The personages appearing in this part of the film, also function as ghosts of the past who, in accordance with Alexander Etkind's concept of 'magic historicism', manifest the unrecognized and repressed historical traumas. Etkind writes: "In melancholic visions of Sharov, Sorokin, and their colleagues, the past is perceived not just as 'another country' but as an exotic and unexplored one, still pregnant with unborn alternatives and imminent miracles. Arguably, the expanded use of the subjunctive tense characterizes postrevolutionary periods. The feeling of loss opens up questions of what might have been. Possessed by the ghostly past and unable to withdraw from its repetitive contemplation, post-Soviet writers find themselves trapped in a state of melancholia". [12] (A parallel between Loznitsa's film and Etkind's concept is also discussed by Wilmes [8, p. 168])

However, if in Etkind's concept, the trauma of normalized violence is mainly associated with Stalinist terror, Loznitsa represents it through imagery of the Great Patriotic War. Although the Great Patriotic War in late Soviet and post-Soviet culture is glorified as the

central heroic event of Russian history, in Loznitsa's understanding (also informing his subsequent film, *V tumane* (2013) based on Vasil' Bykov's novella), this very glorification solidifies and obfuscates the normalization of violence.

From this perspective, it becomes clear why the old man confuses contemporary soldiers transporting the corpse, with agents of the state terror seeking to persecute him for the murder that happened sixty-five years ago. He mistakes them for ghosts of the past, and the entire movie's atmosphere justifies his mistake. Furthermore, his mistake is absolutely logical, as it follows both from his own ghost-like existence and a ghost-like condition, into which Georgii is thrown by the present-day violence. Yet, the inevitability of this mistake undermines the old man's strategy: to defend his dignity by losing his identity. He might have succeeded if his ghost-like existence would be exceptional, but it is not. In the surreal historical time whereas traumatic past fuses with equally traumatic present, and where cause and effect become indistinguishable, everyday violence *normally* turns people into ghosts, which makes the old man's position vulnerable and unstable.

The position of the former lieutenant, now the old man, is counterweighted, by an equally, if not more, vulnerable position of the Teacher in the second wartime episode. In this episode two retreating soldiers find a shelter in the house of the Teacher and his little son. The Teacher feeds them and lets them spend the night under his roof. During the dinner, the teacher admits that he works as a teacher under Germans as he worked under Soviets, and that he does not perceive Soviet regime as advantageous in comparison with German occupation, calling Germans a 'civilized nation' (*tsivilisovannaya natsiya*). Most importantly, the teacher says: "I can't teach killing. I can teach love only". His guests perceive this confession as the proof of his treason, which explains why in the morning they drag the sleeping teacher from the bed, which he shares with his little son, to a shed where they execute him. Then they rob the house and depart, leaving a scared child in a white night shirt standing alone in silence on the house's steps.

In one of his interviews Loznitsa openly interprets this episode as the film's turning point, explaining its meaning as following:

Beginning with the secondary school, since classes of military training they prepare us to see an enemy in others. Whereas a border is drawn, the others exist. Whereas the others exist, supposedly enemies reside, and you shouldn't treat them as good guys. [...] We are branded by this perception since our childhood. Therefore, when in the film we see such a situation [the episode with the teacher and soldiers] – according to the laws of the genre we

are feeling the need to identify with either this side, or the opposite, although this is not necessary. In the process of watching, we are forced to switch the sides, leaving the side of a hospitable host and taking the side of soldiers – people who are offended by their compatriot's waiting for the enemy. We always identify with 'ours'. However, there were quite many people waiting for Germans to come. 'Ours' (Soviet) regime had become so intolerable, that during the first days of the war, many (Soviet soldiers) surrendered hoping that 'there' will be no worse than 'here', and maybe even better. People had this illusion, although in reality they were caught between two horrible evils, between two devils. But this knowledge had to come later, at the moment (depicted by the episode) it was not available yet. In the film, one character feeds on this illusion, another – on his anger. Both can be understood, but neither can be accepted. When the viewer is watching this scene, it works as a lancer that separates the human features from those inserted into our heads by the ideology. The side of the soldiers – criminals, murderers – can't be accepted, but the camera mercilessly places the viewer into their position. The camera could have been located elsewhere, but it adopts their perspective, and this is why this episode is so provocative [13].

This episode is tangibly connected with the present-day characters: we may guess that the traumatized child will become the mute thug, a third member of the gang that attempted to rob and mauled Georgii, which also suggests the connection with mangled and muted Georgii. More importantly, the position of the teacher appears to be the most radical response to the normalization of violence as presented in *Schast'e moe*: he chooses love over violence and by this, ultimately, dooms himself for the inevitable victimization. The Christian overtones of this position are obvious – hence, the Teacher. However, even most Orthodox-crazed critics, like aforementioned Elena Iampol'skaya, have overlooked this parallel, being blinded by the Teacher's reference to Germans as a 'civilized nation'. The critic writes about this episode: '...a treacherous pacifist does not cease being a traitor. In general, to maintain that paralyzed pacifism is better than crazed aggression is the same as to declare the advantages of an impotent before sexual maniac. The impotent is harmless, but he is also deprived of any perspective'. [7]. She obviously has failed the test set by Loznitsa: the phrase about Germans as a civilized nation implies a direct reference to numerous Soviet films and books where it served as the unquestionable justification for labeling one as a traitor who deserves violence or death. By this means, those viewers, whose reaction to this phrase is dictated

by a cultural reflex, are unnoticeably dragged into the space of the film becoming accomplices to the killing of the Teacher.

Loznitsa seems to maintain by this episode: if you are ready to justify the murder of a person who does not want to kill because his thoughts do not fit into the Soviet, – i.e., historical, apparently belonging to the past – stereotype of a positive character, then you are also responsible for the normalization of violence in the past and present alike. Alternatively, you are as traumatized as the film's characters, albeit, much like them, do not recognize your trauma.

This artistic provocation emphasizes the theme of responsibility for violence that permeates the entire composition of *Schast'e moe*. Between two radical responses to the societal violence as represented by the old man and the teacher, Loznitsa places several variations on the theme of non-interference into situations where others are violated, as the means of self-protection. As he emphasizes in his interview, “Do not interfere’ (*ne lez*) – it’s not just a defense, it’s a contemporary ideology, a widespread concept of the world order”. [9]. However, the film’s dialogic structure establishes direct motif correlations between the episodes in the first and second halves of the movie (see Figure 1). These connections aim at methodical undermining of the faith into a protective power of non-interference. Basically, the episodes of the first part present the ‘lessons’ of non-interference, while the episodes of the second part ironically subvert these lessons by mirroring the situation and turning the ‘didactic’ message into its opposite.

For instance, in the first episode, Georgii takes his papers and leaves the police station unnoticed. Yet in the ninth episode, the police major, protected by his rank, tries to do the same but this does not save him from becoming a victim of his colleagues’ violence. In the third episode, Georgii gets a lesson of non-interference from the underage prostitute who is appalled by his attempt to help her. But in the sixth episode, he himself basically becomes a prostitute for his hostess. A different relation is established between the fourth and the seventh episodes. If in the fourth episode, Georgii’s life is broken because he happens to be trustful to criminals; however, in the seventh episode, a thug similar to those who have crippled Georgii, releases him from prison. This dialogic principle is represented in the most concentrated form in the final episode, which begins with the truck driver’s preaching about the imperative of non-interference and ends with same truck driver’s desperate attempt to help the cuffed major, his fight with cops, and eventual death from Georgii’s bullet.

Loznitsa obviously repels didacticism as another, intellectual, form of violence. This is why a carefully balanced construction of the filmic narrative in *Schast'e moe* (no wonder that Loznitsa is a mathematician by training) is emphatically anti-didactic. As

one can see, it intentionally undermines any attempt to extract a clear-cut moral lesson from the film, to stabilize a binary opposition of any kind. At the same time, the film's structure functions as a circular narrative, in which the murder of the teacher echoes the murder of a prisoner in the film's epigraph, and the latter may also be read as one of possible finales of Georgii's life. From this perspective, even an enigmatic episode in the beginning of the film, depicting Georgii's departure for his fateful journey, while his wife (?) seems to be in mourning and does not notice his presence, retroactively, could be interpreted as a proof of his ghost-like existence.

Thus, the road transforms into a circular stream of historical cum everyday violence. This circular movement incorporates Soviet past and post-Soviet present, 'lessons' of non-interference and their demonstrative deconstructions. From this standpoint, *Schast'e moe* could be interpreted as a reproduction of a typical New Drama discourse on violence, yet on a meta-level, as a self-mythologizing and self-reflexive narrative.

However, what contradicts this statement is the fact that Loznitsa does not show directly the circularity of the narrative in *Schast'e moe*. Why does he prefer presenting it only potentially, through the film's structure? He could have easily return to the opening episode making us to recognize Georgii in a poor prisoner's body. Thus, he would have openly validated his narrative as a myth unifying Soviet and post-Soviet violence. However, he has chosen a different strategy. In my view, this happens exactly because *Schast'e moe* not only presents a concentrated version of New Drama but also aspires to transcend its limits and its symbolic tautologies, achieving this by a *structural* rather than representational effect of the narrative.

While producing the sensation of a self-repetitive and self-reflexive circular movement without actually representing it, the film attempts to implant this whirlwind of social self-destruction into the viewer's imagination. If this effect is indeed achieved by *Schast'e moe*, it would inevitably generate the viewer's acute emotional desire to get out of this circular road movie and to seek alternatives to the life force founded on violence and feeding on non-interference into others' violent business. Apparently, this emotional outcome is more important for Loznitsa than a straightforward mythologization of violence.

5. Conclusion

The circular narrative based on the continuity of violence enhanced rather than blocked or prevented by the characters' ethics of non-interference offers the logic behind mirroring of the heroic past and abdominal present. Retromania is one of possible names

for this mirroring. Instead of treating the retro-orientation of contemporary society and culture and society as a shared delusion, Loznitsa treats it seriously, as the objective condition, which is deeply embedded in the social fabric and mythologizes the incessant reproduction of the same violence-based power relations, not only vertically but also horizontally. These reenactments of violence/interference circularity, indeed, fall into Freud's definition of trauma as the 'repetition compulsion': a traumatized patient "feels obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of... remembering it as something belonging to the past" [14]. Thus, retromania, i.e., the tendency to replace present by the past or to build today's power on the past glory appears to be nothing else but a symptom of the trauma.

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