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Between adaptation, intermediality and cultural series: the example of the photonovel*

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Abstract

This article first addresses some general claims concerning the notions of intermediality and transmediality, which are examined from the viewpoint of medium-specificity and constrained writing. It suggests that medium migration is inevitable but not unlimited, and that one has to take into account the complex interplay of threats and opportunities that are produced by the dynamics of an open media system. Second, it studies the less well-known genre of the photonovel to display some of these handicaps and possibilities, with a strong emphasis on the socio-cultural and historical context of the works, the form and function of which varies in often very surprising ways. It also includes a theoretical debate with other analyses of the photonovel, such as the 'double face-out' theory developed by Rosalind Krauss (and later appropriated by Diarmuid Costello) in her reading of the post-photonovel installation art of James Coleman.

Keywords

intermediality, (Rosalind) Krauss, transmediality, photonovel, romance

Entre la adaptación, la intermedialidad y las series culturales: el ejemplo de la fotonovela

Resumen

Este artículo se ocupa, en primer lugar, de varias afirmaciones generales sobre las nociones de intermedialidad y transmedialidad, que se examinan desde el punto de vista de la especificidad del medio y de la escritura limitada. Se sugiere que la migración de medio es inevitable pero no

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ilimitada y que hay que tener en cuenta la interacción compleja entre amenazas y oportunidades que se producen por la dinámica de un sistema de medios abiertos. En segundo lugar, estudia el género menos conocido de la fotonovela para mostrar algunos de esos impedimentos y posibilidades, con un claro énfasis en el contexto sociocultural e histórico de las obras, cuya forma y función varía de formas en ocasiones muy sorprendentes. También incluye un debate teórico con otros análisis de la fotonovela, como la teoría de double face-out desarrollada por Rosalind Krauss (que más tarde haría suya Diarmuid Costello) en su lectura del arte de la instalación post-fotonovela de James Coleman.

Palabras clave

intermedialidad, (Rosalind) Krauss, transmedialidad, fotonovela, romance

Transmediality and how to cope with it

All media, as we know, are intermedial, and this intermediality is now being made dynamic through various types of transmediality. The notion of transmediality, which cannot be separated from other related concepts, such as multimodality, adaptation, intertextuality etc., will be understood here as first, the active migration of a work (and possibly also a genre or a format) from one medium to another; and second, the immediate or eventual co-presence of this work (and possibly also this genre or this format) on various media platforms. In transmedial studies, the key word is definitely 'migration', and it involves three major claims:

(1) *Anything can migrate.* There is no (theoretical) limit to the possibility of migrating a work to another medium. *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995) may be light-years away from *Emma*, but it cannot be denied that this film is a transmedialisation of the novel by Jane Austen; René Magritte's 1937 painting *The Pleasure Principle* has no direct link with Freud, but it will inevitably be seen as a transmedialisation of one of his major psychoanalytical concepts). A possible yet plausible consequence of this first statement is that, since anything goes, transmedial studies does not have to ask ontological questions, but instead focus on the contextual embedding of transmedial phenomena.

(2) *Everything must migrate.* Since the integration of cultural creation in the broader framework of the *creative or cultural industries* (not to be confused with Adorno and Horkheimer's infamous *culture industry*), all works, regardless of the medium in which they are realised, must obey the combination of three fundamental mechanisms (Kalifa, 2001): (a) novelty (in order to distinguish oneself, it is better to do something new than to enhance that already existing); (b) serialisation (in order to get a return on investment, the new 'pilot' that one has developed should be capable of multiple reproduction, and the various forms of serialisation may give an efficient answer to this problem); (c) adaptation or transmedialisation (which to a certain extent happens to offer the best of both worlds, since it combines novelty and serialisation).

(3) *But not all things can fully migrate.* The fact that works can move from one medium to another or, more radically, that ideas can be materialised immediately in various media does not imply that medium differences are only superficial if not irrelevant. Many scholars, critics, artists and technicians have a strong awareness that medium-specificity does exist, even if the ontological and essentialist interpretation of any medium whatsoever is no longer accepted today (Costello, 2008 and 2012, provides a good overview of the current debates on this topic), and they also know that this medium-specificity is something that actively resists adaptation and transmedialisation. This resistance does not make transmediality impossible since, as we have seen, anything can migrate, and the difficulties in doing so are often viewed as thrilling challenges. Nor does it condemn adaptation to being considered as second rate; after all, everything must migrate, and it would be absurd to cling to the idea that the original is always the best. In fact, the absence of adaptations and transmedialisations tends to ossify a work, as demonstrated by the discussions on the afterlife of *Fantômas* or *Tintin* (Apostolidès, 2010; Artiaga and Letourneux, 2013). However, medium-specificity invites us to consider transmediality in terms of customisation, i.e. the specification of an idea, a work, a format, a genre etc., according to the properties of each medium. In other words, medium-specificity is a *constraint*, an obstacle as well as a challenge. Even those scholars who reject the very idea of medium-specificity as a fetish still accept it as a historical given, the very presence or absence of which can make sense in the critical debate. For instance, Noel Carroll's analysis (1996) rejects medium-specificity as a false ontological issue but emphasises its symptomatic value as something that hints to the idea of medium change and the reshaping of the medial ecology of a historical moment.

Transmedial studies have, of course, an important technical and formal dimension, and it is always good to keep this dimension in mind. Yet, what is even more crucial is the cultural and historical analysis of transmedialisation. The questions of others then emerge,

such as: why does transmedialisation occur in this or that context? Why does it become a success or a failure? Which are the models or rules that are followed or broken and why? Is it limited to certain types of works or promoted as a general policy in line with a certain *Zeitgeist*?, and so on. In this regard, two essential general mechanisms can already be stressed.

(1) Transmedialisation always has a strong *temporal* dimension. It is less an *event* than a *process*. As argued by scholars in various fields, the emergence of new media entails a long process of trial and error, which means that media do not happen 'once', but several times (and the same can be said of their 'death'). The "second birth" theory, coined by André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion (2000) and diversely nuanced in recent publications by the same authors (2013), is a good example of such a process that may fruitfully be expanded to the domain of transmedial studies.

(2) Moreover, transmedialisation also has a strong 'networked' *comparative* dimension. It is less concerned with the shift from one medium to another (this is, perhaps, the specific angle of adaptation studies?) than the result of a wide and variegated range of relationships within a much larger network of related media, which all play a role in the process of transmedialisation. Although not easy to implement, as with all perspectives based on the links between works and contexts, the notion of a 'cultural series', also coined by André Gaudreault (Dulac and Gaudreault, 2004), may offer useful insights for a better understanding of the fact that transmedial phenomena are also dependent on the interaction with other media than on those directly (or seemingly directly) involved by adaptation.

The modest but interesting example of the photonovel will, I hope, help illustrate some of these mechanisms, while adding a set of examples and concerns that are not necessarily taken into account in transmedial studies.¹

The Photonovel: a study in transmediality

Rather than starting with some observations on how the photonovel was introduced in 1947, let us follow a different path and have a look at the following images:

(1) Fragment from *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRNsVH58z_g

(2) Fragment from *Catene* (Raffaele Matarazzo, 1949): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgNcctpejJ4&feature=endscreen&NR=1>

(3) Fragment from *Catene* (Bolero-Film, 1947) (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. "Catene", in *Bolero-Film*, 1947

I show this sequence here in reverse order, for this is in many cases how an audience appropriates transmediality: not by making ripples from centre to periphery but by crawling its way in all kind of directions (in this case back in time, which of course is not possible in most of the cases). At first sight, it is a nice example of multiple remediation. A photonovel is turned into a film, and when this film is totally forgotten it is quoted within a new one that makes it available and, despite its old-fashioned melodramatic tone, acceptable to a contemporary audience. The smooth, chain-like linearity of this series is, however, an illusion.

On the one hand, because there is no way to stop going back in time, and very rapidly the chronology becomes blurred, if not besides the point. Photonovels, as we know, are derived from so-called 'drawn novels' (see fig. 2), i.e. comic strips that present themselves as comics that rival in a particular way the well-established, but formally heterogeneous, genre of the film-novel, a genre that is itself indebted to illustrated novelisations or illustrated synopses and, of course, to the movies themselves. Yet these films never claimed to be original:

1. The scholarly literature is mostly in French and Italian. The most relevant publications in book form are Curiel (2001), Saint-Michel (1979), Chirollet (1983), Baetens and Gonzalez (1996), Giet (1998), Bravo (2003), Morreale (2007 and 2011), Baetens (2010), Derrida and Plissart (2010), Faber, Minuit and Takodjerad (2012) and Baetens (2013).

they were transmedialisations of the rich heritage of melodrama, romance and other forms of serialised popular literature that were close to extinction in late 19th century literature and theatre, but saved, updated and rejuvenated by the movie industry.



Fig. 2. "Anime Incatenate", in *Grand Hotel*, 1946 (F.M. Macciò, based on a novel by M. Dukey and W.J. Symes)

On the other hand, there is also a complex and, perhaps, endless synchronic cultural series that shapes the shift from (adapted) film to photonovel and back: the aesthetics of the film poster, the many faces (in literal as well as metaphorical terms) of star photography, the long-lasting influence of iconographic models, such as in religious paintings, mass media images and, more generally, the visual language of 'modern life', as displayed in the advertisements printed next to photonovels in the specialised romance magazines that were the first host medium to the new format. Yet, just like in the case of the diachronic analysis of the photonovel, the synchronic reading of this material generates a lively confusion that is both exhilarating and disappointing. For if one succeeds very easily in establishing transmedial relationships between all kinds of objects and practices, the very profusion of these materials stretches the notion of context to such an extent that one no longer knows where to start or where to end. One may therefore feel the need to go back to basics.

Photonovels and medium studies

Any sound methodology in the field of transmedial studies must adhere to or develop a certain idea of medium. A very useful and still widely debated approach is the one defended by Stanley Cavell (1979). He defines a medium in terms of automatism and, more

specifically, in terms of an automatic link between all the aspects that a mediated work comprises: the signs it uses, the content matter it displays, the host medium or channel upon which it relies. This approach, which does leave room for change (after all, a medium's automatism does not reflect a medium's transhistorical essence, it designates the way we imagine this essence at a certain moment in time and place), helps to construct a definition, but at the same time it also provides the tools for a reality check by looking at the definition through the lens of concrete examples. Indeed, in Cavell's work on medium and medium transformations, the status of the concrete work is anything but a detail, since it is only through the achievements and failures of concrete occurrences that the general structure of a medium is capable of coming to existence as well as leading to change.

Let us take as our starting point the brief but illuminating notes on photonovels by Rosalind Krauss (1999; for further discussion, see Baetens, 2014, and Costello, 2014). Her approach to the photonovel foregrounds two elements, one textual and one intertextual: first, the *automatism*, which she frames as "investing that materiality with expressiveness" (Krauss, 1999, p. 300); and second, the systematic reference to *comics*, which determine the whole reading of the medium.

For Krauss, the photonovel is, in terms of medium-specificity, mainly structured by the technique of the "double face-out":

A particular kind of setup that one finds in scene after scene of the story (whether in the photonovel or, nonphotographically, the comic book), especially in the dramatic confrontation between two characters. A film would treat such an exchange through point-of-view editing, with the camera turning from one interlocutor to another, interweaving statement and reaction. But a book of stills can afford no such luxury and must sacrifice naturalism to efficiency, since the multiplication of shots necessary to cut back and forth from one character to another would dilate the progress of the story endlessly. Therefore, the reaction shot is conflated with the action that has instigated it, such that both characters appear together, the instigator somewhat in the background looking at the reactor who tends to fill the foreground, but, back turned to the other, is also facing forward out of the frame. Now with both shot and reaction shot projected with a single frame, what we find in both photonovel and comic strip is that the highest pitches of emotional intensity, the double face-out presents us with the mannerism of a dialogue in which one of the two participants is not looking at the other. (Krauss, 1999, p. 300)

As far as the comparison with comics is concerned, the whole analysis relies heavily on the ideas of Roland Barthes, who made in a footnote some very brief but often quoted observations on the photonovel and its "touching and traumatizing stupidity" (Barthes, 1982, p. 59-60). Barthes does not just highlight the utterly low status of the medium itself, he insists on the similarity between photonovels and comics.

In her analysis, Krauss expands on Barthes's comparison, to the point of paraphrasing the photonovel as: "comic books for adults" (Krauss 1999, p. 300). Comics are for kids, photonovels are for adults.

It is more interesting here not to examine what might be wrong in these readings of the photonovel – for there are certainly issues that are misread (suffice it to say that in photonovels the characters do look at each other as often as they don't, and that the shot/reverse shot technique is not at all absent in this medium) – but to understand *why* Krauss is putting such an emphasis on the idea of the double face-out, on the one hand, and the comparison with comics, on the other. The reasoning behind her analysis is, I think, transmedial or, more precisely, *strategically transmedial*. The fact that Krauss is not really paying attention to the photonovel as such is perfectly understandable. After all, this cultural practice is largely ignored in the Anglo-Saxon world, as demonstrated by its absence in the excellent and culturally diverse overview of photography in book form by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, *The Photo-Book: A History* (2004). What Krauss is actually interested in is the work of Irish artist James Coleman who, among other things, explored and accomplished a transmedialisation of the photonovel in the 1980s. In the works discussed by Krauss, Coleman reworks or reinvents the commercial slide show, an outworn medium, merging it with the model of the equally commercial (and equally outworn) photonovel in order to establish the basis of a new, transmedialised form of installation art. While the modified form of *the slide show with synced sound* provides the technical basis for the new medium, the modified form of the photonovel provides the style and content for the projected images.

Coleman is not very explicit about how the style and content of the photonovel images have been reshaped, and he actually stresses the conventionality of the actors' poses and the banal and melodramatic character of the types of stories. Both aspects are, once again, open to debate (the artificiality of poses and the unconvincing storylines are, for example, far from being universal stains of the medium), but what is more striking than the, after all not unsurprising, reference to the photonovel's assumed stereotypes and theatricality is the huge creative distance that Coleman manages to establish between his creations and their initial model (see fig. 3). From this perspective, it is easy to understand why, for those defending Coleman's work, the photonovel becomes an interesting opponent or punching bag. The 'lower' the cultural prestige of Coleman's starting point, the 'higher' the merits of his artistic output, since the artist manages to do something that the non-artistic photonovel was incapable of achieving. One may here find echoes of the idea of the 'second birth': without Coleman's artistic intervention, the potentialities of the double face-out would either have remained unnoticed or simply been considered as one of the photonovel's many stupidities). But there are no stronger echoes to other medium theories: in Coleman, the photonovelistic universe is converted into the *content* of a new material support (that of the slide show as installation art).



Fig. 3. James Coleman, *Seeing for Oneself* (1987–88). Projected images with synchronised audio narration.

The scope of Coleman's transmedialisation is considerable. His slide shows are certainly no longer photonovels. First of all, the shift from the typical photonovel lay-out, based on the variations of a basic grid with three rows containing two or three images per row, to the typical sequential ordering of the slide show projection (which, of course, does not exclude dissolves and similar operations), is also the shift from a model of spatial *simultaneity* to a model of temporal *vectorisation*. Both forms are sequentially organised, but the former illustrates a sequence arranged in *space* (to speak with Lessing), whereas the second illustrates a sequence arranged in *time*, i.e. according to a logic that no longer sees the page as a multi-panel *tableau* but rather as a string or chain, like a kind of *film strip* (composed with the help of non-moving images). Second, Coleman also changes the content of the photographic *subject matter*. He dramatically diversifies the traditional photonovel's emphasis on basic melodrama, while transforming, yet not necessarily increasing, the medium's *intermediality*. In Coleman's installations, text and image are no longer co-present on the same page as they are in the photonovel (the only place that text and image continue to share is in the gallery or museum room, since the captions and balloons that complete the visual information of the pictures are replaced by a double-channel communication that combines projection and audiotape). This shift also has a dramatic impact on the status and nature of the photographs, which, in the case of the photonovel, are made in such a way that certain visual zones are left (semantically) empty in order to leave space for textual insertions. In a photonovel, the photographer takes his or her image in such a way that certain zones of the picture will remain 'empty', capable of being 'covered' by verbal explanations. In installation art photography like that of Coleman, the internal composition of the image is not bothered by this kind of medium-specific consideration (which the Irish artist replaces, of course, with other kinds of medium specificity).

As noted above, Krauss's reading is not limited to the issue of the double face-out as exemplification of the typical automatism of the medium. It is no less focused on medium-comparative elements, particularly the relationship between photonovels and comics. Her thinking here is much in line with Roland Barthes's statements on the medium, which it is useful to present in more detail. Indeed, Barthes's ambivalent, yet very critical, attitude towards the photonovel can be analysed according to similar lines of *strategic transmediality*. In this, he simply follows a number of cultural clichés that were ubiquitous at the time. The photonovel is both compared with and opposed to the comics, as if it were enough to replace the panels of a comic with photographic images to obtain a photonovel. As with all comparisons, this one is not unbiased, and it generally tends to insinuate that a photonovel is even worse than a comic because of, for example, its poor content (formulaic stories, reactionary ideology) and the unacceptable quality of its visual style (stiff characters, poor images, bad printing etc.). A photonovel is a comic with pictures, but of inferior quality.



Fig. 4 "Les Secrets de la presse du cœur", *Regards*, 1952

Here, too, it would be possible to criticise or adjust this type of argumentation, but that in itself is not very appealing. It is more interesting to examine Barthes's juxtaposition of the two media in light of some of the historical and ideological reasons underlying this comparison. Barthes's first remarks on the photonovel hark back to a period in which the political fight against both comics and photonovels was raging – a fight in which the French Communist Party teamed up with the conservative voices of the Roman Catholic establishment in an effort to ban what was viewed as the capitalist attempt to "demoralise" the French people. A fascinating document in this regard is the special issue of the Communist magazine *Regards* (August 1952, No. 352) that contains a violent debunking of the photonovel's dream factory (fig. 4).

The fact that, at exactly the same time, the Italian Communist Party, just like other political parties in the country, was actively using the photonovel medium for its electoral propaganda (fig. 5),² clearly suggests the cultural bias of Barthes's thinking or, more generally speaking, the rather different attitudes toward melodrama (and perhaps 'female culture'?) in France and Italy.

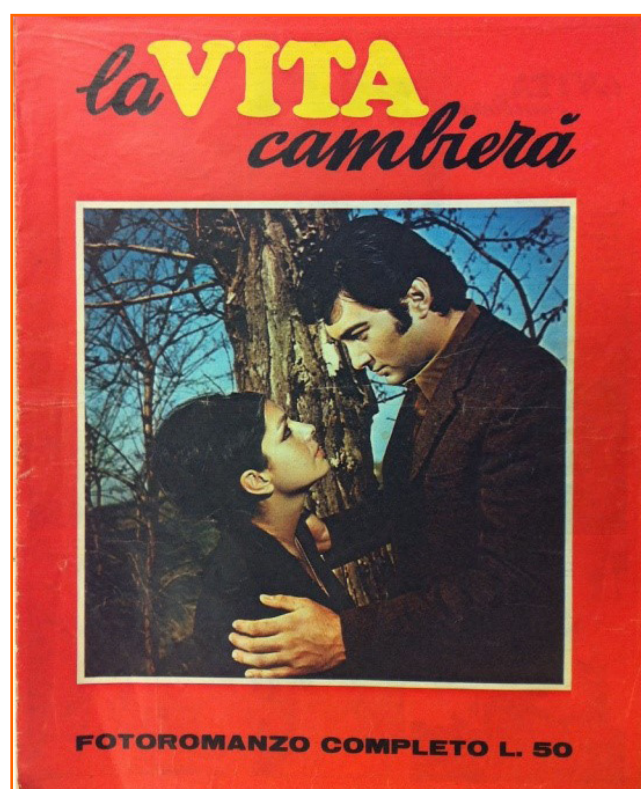


Fig. 5 "La vita cambierà" (n.d., but probably late 1950s)

2. The Fondazione Gramsci has digitised a large collection of these photonovels: <http://www.fondazionegramsci.org/4_biblioteca/biblioteca_digitale/biblioteca_digitale_03_b.html>.

Transmedial studies as medium studies

The fact that readings of the photonovel should be explained by aspects beyond the formal aspects of the medium in many regards does not imply, however, that a medium-theoretical reading is no longer possible or useful.

A good example would be the problem of the *pose*, i.e. the stiffness and artificiality of the characters' gestures and attitudes, a key aspect in both Krauss's and Barthes's rejection of the photonovel's cultural status. Krauss quotes Coleman's emphasis on the artificiality of his Italian models, which he transmediatises in an artistically correct way. Barthes's approach to the image, photographic as well as non-photographic, is always deeply concerned with the dialectics of the fixed and the moving image. Once again, what matters here is not the question of whether the photonovel's characters are really stiff and artificial, or whether this is a positive or negative aspect of the medium. What we should try to understand is the very status of the pose in the debate and its relationship with transmedial considerations. If the pose appears to be such a problem, this is because the pictures of a photonovel

are compared, implicitly or explicitly but always with negative undertones, to those in other media, mainly film and comics, and eventually disregarded as being less dynamic than comic panels (famously known for their ability to suggest movement and action) and more artificial than film stills (allegedly representing slices of action, not posed portraits).

In such a transmedial perspective, a certain idea of the photonovel is put forward. What is being stressed, then, is the idea that the series of images of a photonovel must be read in a *sequential* manner, so that each image corresponds with a fragment of a continuous (yet photographically segmented) movement. This interpretation seems self-evident but, in fact, is utterly deceiving. Of course, it is always possible to make such an interpretation, and to read the series A-B-C as the visual counterpart of moment A + moment B + moment C. But in many photonovels, this is not really the case, as suggested, for instance, in the following example (figs. 6a-6b).

What this double spread actually shows is less about the dancing of the girl (and the striptease that perhaps goes along with it), and more about a number of variations on the same body. Although the visual representation of the female body is permanently moving, so



Fig. 6a-6b "Ma vie n'est qu'à toi", in *Marielle* (1970)

to speak, it is almost impossible to link the successive presentation of this body in terms of temporal progress (dancing, stripping, seducing etc.). What this example demonstrates is that it is a persistent misunderstanding to believe that the visual string of a photonovel shows the successive parts of an action unfolding in time. What the images are doing here is not narrating a story, but illustrating a certain idea of the body (a female dancer in a nightclub). Even if photonovels do tell real and sometimes quite sophisticated stories, they are no less concerned with the portrayal of the characters, more particularly the character's body, which functions as the locus of the reader's identification, a major feature of photonovel reading.

This observation also helps make sense of other singularities of the medium, such as the special combination of text and image. Here, too, the sequential way of reading that we all know from comics or, in a different way, from cinema and television, where synced sound is the dominating and completely naturalised norm, is not necessarily the best one for understanding what is happening in a photonovel. Obviously, the photonovel does not break the rules of convergence between text and image (the speech and thought balloons do refer to things that are being said or thought in the panel in which they appear), but this does not really do justice to the photonovel's specificity. What happens in photonovels is that the text is either ignored or read separately: in the former case, because the story is so well known that it would be a waste of time to read what one can easily imagine without the help of any balloon or caption; in the latter case, because one can easily look at the images first without spoiling one's narrative pleasure (since the images display the characters' bodies rather than telling a story with purely visual means). The very medium-specific consequence of this singular way of combining, in both a narrow and loose way, the verbal and the visual is that the very role and status of the words in the photonovel are very different from what one finds in comics or cinema. In the case of the photonovel, words do not only display narrative or background information, they also tend to modify the visual structure of the page itself. The textual fragments are, then, not only used to 'fill in' visual gaps (which, paradoxically, they first create for themselves, since it is well known in the photonovel business that photographers are always aware of the necessity to keep 'blanks' in their images to help the layout artist to dispatch the verbal elements as smoothly as possible), but also to contribute to the visual rhythm of the page. Thus, even the most traditional or even 'dull' photonovel can play with a certain pulse or beat, generated by the permanently shifting relationships between the visual structure of the layout, the visual pattern of the pictures' content, and the visual outline of balloons and captions.

To conclude: the photonovel may be a culturally 'low' genre, but it is an excellent testing ground for the study of medium-specificity and, thus, a good counterweight to some of today's overgeneralising claims of transmedia studies, which do not always do justice to internal and contextual dimensions of a given cultural practice.

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