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115. VAI[VAMOS] COM DEUS.
Go with God.
116. VIAJO PORQUE PRECISO/VOLTO PORQUE EU QUERO.
I travel because I have to, I return because I want to.
117. VOANDO BAIXINHO.
Flying low.
118. VOCE JA ABRAÇOU SEU FILHO HOJE?
Did you hug your son today?
119. VOCE MEU PARAISO.
You are my paradise.
120. VOCE PODE FAZER EU ESQUECER O MUNDO/MAS O MUNDO JAMAIS
CONSEGUIRA FAZER EU ESQUECER VOCE.
You can make me forget the world, but the world can never make
me forget you.

My thanks to my wife Maria Lúcia, to my mother-in-law Dona Henny, and to the drivers who helped me spot, transcribe and interpret mottoes.

Peter Burke, Emmanuel College, Cambridge, UK.

“I Remember It Well”: Paul Bern, Jean Harlow, and the Negotiation of Information

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As the heroine in a bad pulp novel from the early 1930s said: “Romance and madness have their place in this world and in ourselves. But this can’t last forever, not in anyone’s life” (qtd. in Marx and Vanderveen 141). So it must have seemed to Jean Harlow, author of that particularly bad text, the fateful Labor Day weekend of 1932 that saw the death of her husband, film producer Paul Bern.

This article will explore how the events of that weekend came to be understood by various individuals in differing ways. The death of Paul Bern, Hollywood producer and newly married husband to film star Jean Harlow, was actively negotiated by both participants and spectators. Toward this end, this article will analyze a variety of texts as material culture, texts that provide “a masking ideology, hiding or misrepresenting the internal contradictions” (Hodder 62). The positioning of this essay, of necessity, rejects any consideration of what “really” happened to Paul Bern. For though the writers of the various texts discussed could easily have examined police and other records, their chief interest lay in reinforcing an image of Bern and the events surrounding his death that best suited their ideological constraints.

David Lowenthal has argued that the past is a fundamental part of the sense of self: “to know what we were confirms that we are” (197). Though the self-reflective nature of memory in reconstructing the past makes it simultaneously both assured and dubious, (Lowenthal 200) memories nevertheless are a very satisfying way of writing history. After all, the individual was an eye-witness! But memory does not always carry just the burden of the past; often it serves to “enrich and manipulate the present” (Lowenthal 210). The circumstances recounted in this paper are distant memories for the participants, most of whom

penned their memoirs decades after that infamous Labor Day weekend. The analysis of these accounts in this paper, then, is not on the plane of accuracy, but in the way meaning was embedded into their recollections. Though some only refer to the events vaguely, others chose to dramatize their own part, enhance their involvement, and permeate the events with a theme of dissipated sexuality.

This article, then, begins from the premise that autobiographies are fictive. This is not to say that they are false. Rather, they are both fashioned and determined by their authors. This is similar to anthropologist James Clifford's understanding of the fictive nature of ethnography:

To call ethnographies fictions may raise empiricist hackles. But the word as commonly used in recent textual theory has lost its connotation of falsehood, of something merely opposed to truth. It suggests the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive. (6)

Since "knowing the past means producing it in the present" (Shanks and Tilley 25), an interpretation or an account of the past (such as the memories of a scandalous suicide) means that taking "sides is a necessity, accepting responsibility for a decision as to why and how to write the past, and for whom" (Shanks and Tilley 27).

Consequently, the recollections of who Paul Bern was and how and why he died are distinct for each person who penned his or her memoirs. Memories of any incident are, of course, always unique, but Paul Bern's life and death left a contrast not just of remembered facts (which could easily have been verified), but much more importantly, of meaning. This is so, in part, because after his death Bern came to mean something to Hollywood's public image of itself that he never had in life.

Material culture has been used here to signify the tangible products of human behavior. This analysis has not been limited to physical objects, because, as philosopher Michel Foucault has noted, textual analysis shows that:

the materiality of the statement is not defined by the space occupied or the date of its formulation; but rather by its status as a thing or object. A status that is never definitive, but modifiable, relative, and always susceptible of being questioned. (102)

And just as archaeologists will infer a multiplicity of meanings in an object, the manifold nature of material culture can be extended to the idea of information as well. Simply put: "that's the way it was" is always

a mediated presentation. Social scientists have long understood that the past is about the present and this article hopes to contribute to this discussion with an analysis of how the past serves a series of contending and competing interests, in this case the death of Paul Bern:

Instead of being something said once and for all...the statement, as it emerges in its materiality, appears with a status, enters various networks and various fields of use, is subjected to transferences or modifications, is integrated into operations and strategies in which its identity is maintained or effaced. Thus the statement circulates, is used, disappears, allows or prevents the realization of a desire, serves or resists various interests.... (Foucault 105)

Paul Bern was a top-level film producer and Hollywood "insider" but he is best remembered as the husband of actress Jean Harlow, even though they had only been married two months at the time of his death. Harlow's platinum blonde hair, penciled-in eyebrows, and brassiere-less curves were icons in the 1930s and set a new, if temporary, standard for female beauty and sexuality. In a career that lasted less than a decade, Harlow made approximately thirty-six films. In films such as *Hell's Angels* (1930), *Public Enemy* (1931) and *Platinum Blonde* (1931) Harlow established a character type for her entire career—the tough-talking dame who does not hide her sexuality. Even when playing a wealthy socialite, as in *Libeled Lady* (1936), she came across with the subtlety of a gun moll.

Harlow's first marriage, as a teenager, was brief and did not survive her early film career. Once again single, she made the rounds with a variety of beaux, then began a serious romance with Paul Bern, the film producer who had been instrumental in gaining her the lead role in *Red-Headed Woman* (1932). This film made Harlow one of MGM's major stars, which she remained until her death from kidney disease in 1937 at the age of twenty-six.

Paul Bern was an important and influential figure in Hollywood in the early 1930s as a member of producer Irving Thalberg's MGM coterie. Prior to his MGM stint, he had been writer and director, involved in such films as *Head Over Heels*, *Open All Night*, and *Worldly Goods*. In 1925 he became a producer at the MGM lot under Thalberg and went on to become the producer of many of Greta Garbo's films (at that time MGM's biggest star and, arguably, the biggest star in the world), including *Grand Hotel*, which won, after his death, the Academy Award for best film of 1932.

Following the successful release of *Red Headed Woman*, Paul Bern and Jean Harlow were married on July 2, 1932, in a small ceremony. A reception was held the following day at Bern's home and was attended

by the *bon ton* of Hollywood. On Labor Day weekend, just two months after the Bern-Harlow wedding, his nude body was found in their Benedict Canyon home, a fatal gunshot wound to the head. A cryptic note, presumed to be a suicide note, was also found with the following message:

Dearest Dear:

Unfortunately this is the only way to make good the frightful wrong I have done to you and to wipe out my abject humiliation. I love you.

Paul

You understand that last night was only a comedy.

Harlow was not present at the house when the body was found; she had spent the night with her mother and was unaware until the next morning that her husband was dead.

Harlow was the reigning sex queen of Hollywood and the lurid death of her husband—not surprisingly—resulted in nation-wide headlines and sent a shock wave through the film community. Both *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* played the Bern death as lurid page-one material: the mysterious suicide of Jean Harlow's husband. Early newspaper reports stressed Bern's reputation as the "Father Confessor" of Hollywood and his personal popularity. Accounts in subsequent days revealed the existence of a common-law wife in Bern's New York past. This "wife," the mentally ill Dorothy Millette, had recently arrived in California from New York City. Her presence was thought to have contributed to Bern's depression.

However, as the story progressed, the supposedly "real" cause of Bern's despair was revealed. The press intimated that Bern had suffered from sexual inadequacy. This was suggested through a variety of euphemisms such as this one reported in *Time*: "For several days the strongest evidence of suicide-motive was his personal physician's statement that the autopsy showed Paul Bern had suffered a 'physical handicap that would have prevented a happy marriage'" ("Death"). MGM worked to ensure that this story was accepted as fact in the film community and beyond. America's biggest sexpot had been married to an impotent man!

Though nobody at the time suggested that Bern's death was anything but a suicide, many were quick to endow Bern's death with a meaning and a message about Hollywood and its overarching ambition. Film actor Conrad Nagel eulogized at Bern's funeral: "Hollywood is cruel and brutalizing to those seeking success. Its cardinal and most devitalizing sin is insincerity. But Paul Bern was sincere. And he was naive as a

child; he was like a little child wandering around in a naughty world of grown-ups" (Los Angeles Times).

Hollywood in 1932

Only a few months after the great Stock Market Crash of 1929, Hollywood conceded to pressure to impose censorship on itself, obviously operating under the belief that self-regulated censorship was better than government intervention. The rules imposed attempted to control sexual themes as well as profanity, crime and violence, and other provocative issues. That it was not successful is evidenced by Jean Harlow's own film, *Red Headed Woman*, (1932) where Harlow's character successfully and happily sleeps her way to the top. Reaction to this and other such films was outrage about the lax standards of Hollywood. Pressure mounted in the film industry by 1934 when the Roman Catholic Church formed the "Legion of Decency" to screen and rate films and helped push the Hays Office that same year towards a more stringent code of ethics—"expressed with the certitude of papal decrees" (Gardner xv)—which was to remain the dominant form of censorship until the late 1960s when the present rating system was imposed. The Depression no doubt encouraged the public's desire for more pictures with tales of sin and even the outraged response to the same. In the year 1932, America had reached rock bottom in the Depression: unemployment ranged across the country from 25-35%, banks suffered steep declines in deposits, and businesses were failing in every region of the nation as consumer demand dwindled. Depression-era social problems such as widespread unemployment, hunger, homelessness, and crime were very visible and Hollywood's unique social burden—rampant sexuality—was very much on the mind of filmmakers and their critics. Simply put, Paul Bern, husband of America's most famous sexual persona, picked an inappropriate time to die.

Hollywood Memories

The jolt this Labor Day weekend scandal caused is evident in the autobiographies of movie stars from that period. Since many of the autobiographies that touch upon the Bern/Harlow affair were written after publication of Irving Shulman's *Harlow: an Intimate Biography* in 1964, it is first necessary to discuss this work. Indeed, many of the later autobiographies by those who knew Bern or Harlow are, consciously or unconsciously, a response to Shulman and his version of events.

Shulman, a novelist, bases his lurid account of Harlow's short life on the memories of Arthur Landau who was for a time the actress's agent. Her marriage to Bern, though it lasted only a few months, is the focus of

this “intimate biography.” Shulman writes that the wedding night proved disastrous for the couple. Incapable of performing sexually, Bern exercised his frustration by beating his new bride. Shulman dramatically describes Harlow’s rescue by agent Landau the next morning. Harlow cries: “The little bastard’s a maniac! A dirty, rotten, Goddamned sex fiend!” (30). Bern, awakening from his drunken stupor the next morning pleads for understanding: “Every man...every man I know gets an...erection....Just by talking about her, other men get them. Arthur [Landau], didn’t I have the right to think Jean could help me at least that much?” (42).

In Shulman’s view, Bern is not only guilty of assaulting Harlow, but of actually murdering her. Although she did not die of a kidney ailment until June 7, 1937, nearly five years after Bern’s own demise, Shulman claims it was her wedding night beating that was the ultimate cause of Harlow’s premature death.

[T]he knowledge of what had happened almost five years before, on July 2, 1932, could not be dismissed. Paul Bern had beaten Jean with a cane across the back, had struck her over the kidneys...Jean...had complained intermittently, sometimes in pain, that she was being bothered by her kidneys....Bern’s blows had damaged Jean’s kidneys, made them weak, and subsequent infections had been predisposed to settle in the kidneys, to make for increasing and progressive damage until this day had come.

If Jean died, a dead man might have succeeded in murdering her years after his own suicide. (379-80)

Shulman’s account, despite some glaring inaccuracies and hyperbolic tone, remains the primary source for much of Harlow’s legend and perpetuates the idea of Bern as a “German whacko.”

Later accounts contributed to the ongoing discussion of the meaning of Paul Bern’s death with either praise or damnation of Harlow or Bern. In her 1967 autobiography, actress Mary Astor remembers only “bits and pieces” of the making of *Red Dust* (the film Harlow was working on when Bern died) but still she feels compelled to add that she does recall Bern as “a gentle person who had filled [Harlow]’s dressing room daily with flowers and little presents like hand-embroidered handkerchiefs” (Astor 95).

Other accounts flagrantly scoffed at Shulman’s histrionic episodes. Actress Colleen Moore was a major star in the silent film era until her career stalled with the advent of talkies; even then, she remained a friend of many in the industry and was at the Harlow-Bern reception the day

after the wedding. In her 1968 autobiography, Moore contends that it is much more believable that the athletic Harlow would have pummeled the diminutive Bern rather than vice versa. Also, Moore helped dress the bride before the reception and claims that she saw absolutely no evidence of beatings on Harlow’s body the day after the supposedly violent wedding night. Of Harlow’s behavior at the reception, Moore says: “If she was anything other than her usual self, she was happier” (26). And to what cause, then, does Moore attribute Bern’s suicide? She sums it up this way:

I’ve always thought he did it to protect Jean. Before he came to Hollywood, Paul had a common law wife who became unbalanced...But then some shyster lawyers got hold of her, and she threatened to make a big scandal in the newspapers claiming she was the legal wife, not Jean.

In any case, Paul provoked a fight with Jean—such a fight that she went to spend the night with her mother. Then he wrote a note of apology to her and killed himself (127).

One of the few Hollywood figures who responded to Shulman’s book with essential agreement is screenwriter Anita Loos. In Loos’s 1974 memoir, she describes Bern as “a German psycho” (160) and assessed their relationship as sexless. Though she admits Bern was infatuated with Harlow, she contends that the actress, who was portrayed as continually oversexed on screen was, in reality, uninterested in any relationship other than companionship. Loos contends, however, that this platonic relationship began to unravel and, à la Shulman, Bern reverted to perversion. Indeed, Shulman could learn something from Loos’s vivid imagination:

As time went on, the poor man tried to assuage his guilt by practices which Jean was too normal to accept. But she understood; didn’t blame her husband; assured him how little sex meant to her. Jean’s tolerance went even further; “Just do anything you like, sweetheart,” she said, “but count me out of those sessions. Find yourself someone else. I won’t object; I’ll understand.”

Still putting up a bluff at manhood, Bern agreed. And then one evening, to bolster his pretenses, he told Jean of a rendezvous he’d made. When he was leaving for his date she kissed him tolerantly and wished him goodnight.

Next morning Jean found a note under her bedroom door. It said, in essence, “I hope you’ll understand that last night was a farce. Now I’m yours forever. Paul.” (162)

Loos's dubious account is contradicted by the known evidence as well as by the stories of others. Indeed, Harlow was not even in the house the night her husband died.

To what end does Loos make this interpretation that is clearly contradictory to known "facts?" To answer this we must return to the "sexuality out of control" theme. Loos had written a number of sexually frank screenplays (including, significantly, Harlow's *Red Headed Woman*) with central female characters who control their own sexual destinies. In the end, perhaps, sexuality is the downfall of Bern, but ironically it is not his own sexuality but Harlow's. Straight out of one of her own screenplays, Loos describes a woman who knows exactly what she wants and is fully in control.

In 1983, a good friend of Bern's, Irene Mayer Selznick, wife of producer David O. Selznick and daughter of MGM chief Louis B. Mayer, remembered the events of 1932 clearly, but sees Jean (and her sexually aggressive persona) less innocently. Selznick describes a dinner party at her house that, early in their relationship, Bern and Harlow attended as a couple:

She [Harlow] and Paul were an illogical couple. Neither David nor I realized that they were a twosome; it seemed even less likely as the evening wore on. David got me aside and said, "Help, help! This dame keeps dragging me into the bushes. What's the matter with Paul? Keep your eyes open, you may have to rescue me." (77)

Later, Selznick describes their wedding reception:

When I went to take an early leave, [Bern] was not to be found. I learned he was tired and had gone upstairs for a brief nap, a strange thing for the guest of honor to do. When he came down, I was in the entry looking back into the living room, where C.V. Whitney...was playing the piano; Jean, in a skin-colored satin dress, was standing nestled in the curve of the piano, singing to him and moving her body in a most provocative way. I was embarrassed that Paul had found me watching this scene. He gripped me roughly by the arms, this gentle man, spun me around, shook me, and said, "Look at her, look at her! She is an angel from heaven. I want you to remember and never forget it. No matter what happens you are to remember that she is an angel from heaven." (178-79)
Still, when news arrived of Bern's demise Irene Selznick screamed "I will kill her!" (Selznick 179), presumably referring to La Belle Harlow.

Actress Myrna Loy, a close friend of Harlow's, paints a much different picture. Loy, in her 1987 autobiography, takes the position that

while "beautiful [Jean was]...far from the raucous sexpot of her films" (Kotsilibas-Davis and Loy). Loy also plays down the sexual angle in her portrayal of the Bern marriage:

She talked about Paul Bern, the Metro executive who killed himself during their marriage. That was still very much on her mind after four years. She told me how terrible that had been, because she loved him. She became involved with him because he treated her like a lady, not a sex symbol....She didn't tell me in so many words that he couldn't consummate the marriage. Now, how do you say things like that? I assumed that was his problem, though, intensified no doubt by her sexy image, because I sensed some guilt in her reaction—there's bound to be in a situation like that. But mostly there was love, affection and admiration, an implicit acceptance of his deficiency. (Kotsilibas-Davis and Loy 143)

Loy's version is equal parts presumption and interpretation (though no less probable than any other), and rather less heavy-handed commentary on the personal price of the sex-symbol persona, a topic close to Loy's own thoughts. She comments: "Being a sexpot is no fun, I can tell you that....When you think what this country does to those women—look at Marilyn Monroe!...[T]hank god I wasn't a sexpot. All the sexpots are dead or about to be" (Kotsilibas-Davis and Loy 143).

Returning to the anti-Harlow view, in 1988 matinee idol Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. recalled the night fifty-six years earlier on which Harlow and Bern announced their engagement:

as we chatted, something was happening that made whatever Paul was going to say less important by the minute. The glamorous Jean was playing very active "footsie" with me under the table.... As her foot pressed mine, I responded, timidly at first in case her pressure was not intended. But then, to my surprise, I felt her hand on my knee!

...Paul suddenly beamed and said...Jean has promised to marry me! ME! ...

At that, Jean pulled her hand away and put it on top of the table to show me [the ring]. (193)

Fairbanks was at the time married to Joan Crawford and, as he was offended by Harlow's behavior, he kept his distance from the couple. When Bern died, Fairbanks appears to have accepted the official story of Bern's impotence and "abject humiliation."

Silent star Louise "Lulu" Brooks knew Bern from his days at Paramount studios. She vehemently denies the picture painted of Bern as

a sexless-wonder: "All men trusted their wives and girlfriends to sweet little Paul. But he got into more beds with his 'culture' than any wolf in Hollywood. Joan Crawford, Clara Bow, Jean Harlow..." (Paris 363). Brooks's explanation for her friend's demise is bigamy:

He married Jean while he was married to this other woman, and she turned up. And he was a very sensitive little man.... He had to tell her that his real wife had turned up. And this would ruin her career at MGM.... I was amazed at Paul doing a thing like that. I was so fond of Paul. (Paris 363)

That Brooks's account coincides with Colleen Moore's view of this infamous event seems to suggest that a sex-related suicide was better for Harlow's career than a simple case of common-law bigamy. The manifest belief in "sexuality-out-of-control" continued to play an important part in the telling of the Bern-Harlow fable. Importantly, this was not limited to interpretations stressing Harlow's public persona as accounts of deviant sexuality by Bern were also pervasive. Screenwriter Frances Marion, like Loos, recalls a discussion with Bern about a scene in an up-coming film that was to involve a public flogging:

He read it very intently, then put the script down.

"The whip," [Bern] said, "do you see it motivated by masochism or sadism?"

"Neither," I said. "I know it's nonsense..."

"Not at all," [Bern] broke in. "You're a clever woman, Frances. You assume naiveté, but it's obvious that you're a student of the psychology of sex, as I am." (Marx and Vanderveen 194)

Even accounts that attempted to place the Bern-Harlow relationship on a platonic rather than sexual level, were guilty of sins of omission. Samuel Marx, a story editor and producer at MGM studios, Thalberg insider, and close friend of Paul Bern, wrote his first version of the Bern marriage and death in his 1975 book *Mayer and Thalberg: The Make-Believe Saints* (Random House, 1975). Marx argued that anguish over the reemergence of his common-law wife had led to the suicide of his good friend, Paul Bern.

By 1991, Samuel Marx, as the last of the early-30s MGM insiders, came out with a book that contradicted his 1975 version of the Bern/Harlow affair. In the new book, the provocatively titled *Deadly Illusions*, Marx dismisses out of hand the impotence argument, claiming

that this rationalization was dreamed up by L.B. Mayer in an effort to keep his studio's reputation as clean as possible and as MGM's classy image was important for business. Indeed, the mogul had never been comfortable with having such a blatant sexpot as Jean Harlow on his roster. It was Thalberg who had signed her on and Mayer tolerated the actress because she was indisputably good business at the box office. The impotence story, though itself lurid and sexually connected, would offer a quick explanation and get Harlow's name off the front pages. Marx describes a group conversation in the MGM offices where the impotence argument was laid in place:

"Ask L.B.," [Thalberg] said. "He'll tell you. He's got it all figured out."

His evasion brought forth a chorus of shouts demanding an answer.

"Impotence," [Mayer] said finally. "Paul couldn't make it with Jean, he was embarrassed, humiliated, frustrated...so, he had a gun handy and that ended all his worries about it." (194)

When doubts were presented to L.B. Mayer his response was to defend his studio first, his tacky but popular star Harlow's career second, Bern's reputation last. Mayer replied: "This is the most terrible moment in the history of our company. If you don't stand by me now you will destroy MGM and yourselves with it.... Tell them in the name of God there is only one answer to all of this and you know it as well as I do" (Marx and Vanderveen 53).

Believing that the impotence argument was merely a face-saving measure taken by the studio, in his 1991 book, Marx explores the "real" reasons for Bern's apparent suicide. Again and again, the clues led back to the common-law wife, Dorothy Millette. In the final analysis, Marx argues that the evidence conclusively shows that Millette was in the Bern household that evening, and her own quiet suicide two days later makes sense if she had, indeed, pulled the trigger on Bern in a heated moment.

Marx's 1991 account is one that seeks to clean up the image of Paul Bern, Marx's good friend, but also attempts to remove the single largest stain remaining on the Thalberg legend, a legend in which both Bern and Marx were central players. It was following the trauma of the Bern "suicide," after all, that Thalberg went on sabbatical, only to return to MGM a year later with a great deal of his power now in L.B. Mayer's hands. As Marx noted: "After Paul died, studio life had never seemed quite the same..." (77). As Marx viewed the incidents of 1932 nearly

sixty years later in 1991, the Bern affair marked the beginning of the end for MGM as Marx, Thalberg, and Paul Bern, had known it. The crude and harsh presentation of L.B. Mayer by Marx is hardly surprising in light of the later antagonism between the Thalberg and Mayer camps.

In his efforts to portray the Bern marriage as normal, and not subject to any peculiar sexual tensions, Marx describes Harlow as essentially innocent—"demure" (18)—and that "[s]he had none of the guile she conveyed on the screen, she didn't hide how she felt..." (200). Yet in his earlier 1975 book, Marx had painted an ironic picture of the "grieving widow's" one-night stand with literary figure Thomas Wolfe, shortly after Bern's demise. This striking alteration in Marx's portrayals of Harlow's character is not so much a simple change of mind, but, instead, a change in the meaning of a seminal event in early '30s Hollywood.

In the five years she survived him, Harlow never publicly commented on the episode except to insist to the police that she had had a happy marriage and that she had no understanding of why her husband had committed this act. To Adela Rogers St. Johns, to whom she gave the lone interview, she simply wept: "Isn't this too terrible! But I mustn't talk about it—I can't—I can't" (Marx and Vanderveen 81).

Conclusion

What really happened to Paul Bern? It is easy to conclude from the recollections explored in this paper that in death Paul Bern was the casualty of a society where sexuality had violated the boundaries of decency. Clearly, Paul Bern as crime statistic was less portentous than Paul Bern as icon of Hollywood's Depression-era social problems. For when the specter of sexuality was cast over the tragedy of his death, his life came to be interpreted as either his inability to participate in Harlow's world of frank sexuality (and her subsequent guilt), or his depraved bestiality in the face of her innate innocence. In sum, Paul Bern came to mean something in death that he never had in life.

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