

## Flaneuse, Viewership, Cinematic Spaces

### The Site/Sight of Theatres, Engendered Structures and Alternative Art Projects

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*I entered into darkness, but suddenly, before my eyes  
On a curtain of white, came pictures and I stared in mute  
surprise, Pictures of that world! In wonderment I quite forgot  
my pain.*

Hattie M. Loble, 1912<sup>1</sup>

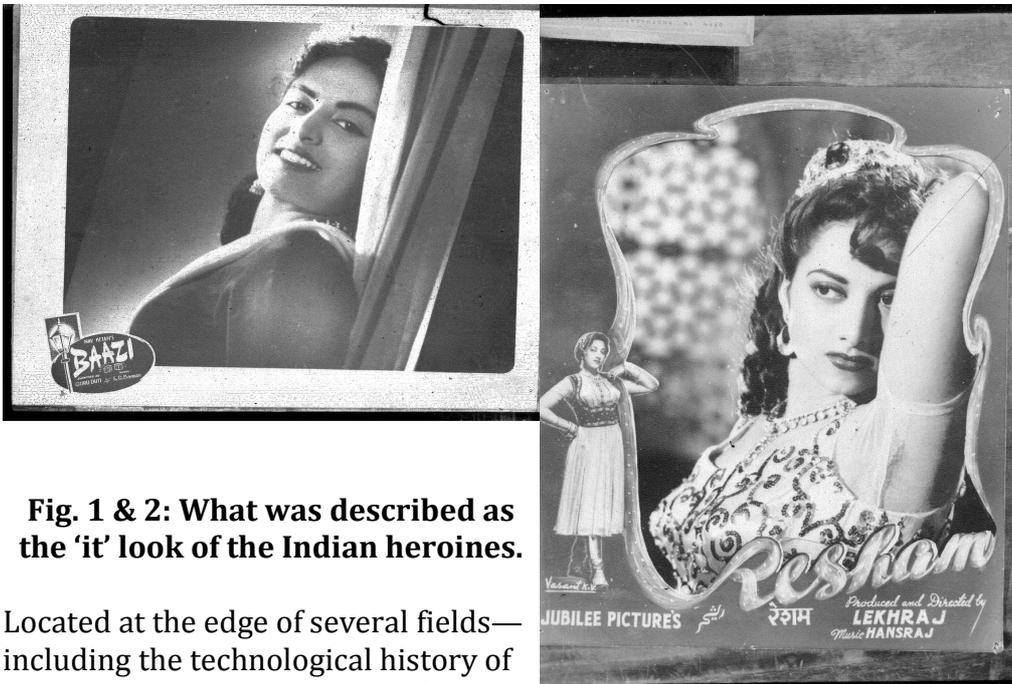
#### Historical Ventures: Research and Alternative Approaches

My research to retrieve glass-plate negatives began in 2004.<sup>2</sup> The initial process was to recover a bulk of material, or what seemed like black and white abstract paintings etched on small and fragile pieces of glass, found through collectors based in Kolkata, India.<sup>3</sup> The project involved methodical scanning of the negatives; afterwards, it involved turning these digital scans into positives and consequently identifying the material. A comprehensive catalogue was produced for emergent archives. What initially appeared as unclear blotches later appeared as images of more than a thousand lobby cards of films, stills and posters for theatrical display, as well as blueprints of posters and working stills of Indian cinema from the 1940s until the 1960s. Furthermore, a large number of advertisement slides of consumer items used for theatrical

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projections also came forth, highlighting the fact that cinema shares its boundaries with various other cultural domains. Beyond this, there emerged a range of mysterious images which could not be dated, situated within particular contexts, nor identified in terms of year, place, author/actor, and production. Notably, the material did not comprise big street posters, but rather pictures and teasers for theatrical exposition.

Presently, I argue that these materials should be studied as objects that call to mind memories of certain spaces and places, as well as specific sights and sites, which are connected to personal memories, urban histories, architectures, and the mobility of women. In short, there is a spatial meaning to this material.<sup>4</sup> With reference to the images and patterns in which the female body is positioned, or the ways in which the face of the star addressed an imaginary male viewer, questions of gender vis-à-vis masculine domains and public spaces (such as theatres) become crucial. The repetitiveness of the gestures becomes noteworthy along with the uses of highlighting, the demure 'look at me' expression, the visibility of three-quarters of the face, the arm raised to attract the viewer, and so on.<sup>5</sup>



**Fig. 1 & 2: What was described as the 'it' look of the Indian heroines.**

Located at the edge of several fields—including the technological history of glass plate cameras and uses of glass negatives, the study of film distribution-exhibition, the architecture of cinemas, the history of labour, star studies, and art history—this material evidently demands a new approach.<sup>6</sup> In effect, this discrete interface

between fragile glasses, negative images, fragmented pictures, unfinished texts, and the narratives of abandoned single theatres becomes imperative.

My project builds upon the theoretical approaches of cultural theory, visual anthropology, urban histories, and methods of writing the social histories of evolving technologies, gender, and reception; I also draw upon contemporary debates on experimental video and new media art.<sup>7</sup> I explore the porous edges of multiple histories in order to enter into a dialogue with muted stories, which appear to be gendered. Indeed, volumes like the *Red Velvet Seat* illustrate the significance of women as workers, actors, and viewers. To use Christine Gledhill's words: "Broadening the conception of the public sphere, [such investigation] opens up the social history of cinema as it circulates through women's networks. . .and memory construction."<sup>8</sup>



**Fig. 3, 4, 5, 6. The materiality of history: publicity material without the names of the films or actors.**



The aesthetics of such art works pose unmarked challenges as well, since the varied categories of the lobby cards demand extended research in the field of publicity material.<sup>9</sup> Questions of genre, gender, femininity, romance, and affect are significant as an interface between the female stars and the ways in which female viewer negotiate cinema. Here, the subject of desire is central. The tactile quality of the material and its dominant aesthetics is also of critical importance. Thus, the “Unsettling Cinema” issue of *Seminar* seems to be an important reference point, as it problematizes certain primary theoretical models of Indian film studies, including its excessive stress on textual analysis.<sup>10</sup> And, to reframe Laura Marks’ expression, the purpose of my work is to consider “histories in its gaps, or to force a gap in the archive so that they have a space in which to speak”.<sup>11</sup>

### **Intimate Adventures: Engendered Spaces and Art Environments**

These realizations led me to create a set of media installations that attempted to produce an environment that is playful and provocative, and an abstraction of the ways in which women remember cinema.<sup>12</sup> My installations evoked intimate memories of specific spaces (for instance, the dark room of the cinemas, the mirror shining in the theatre lobbies, the cinematic stairways, the chandeliers) and certain unresolved

conditions, which were transported into art spaces through fragmentary images, lights, objects, and sounds. The installations attempted to re-create the notion of cinema as a public phenomenon and underscored the conspicuous presence of women within it.



**Fig. 7. The site of installation.**

## **Experimentation 1**

*Theatres of Spectacle* and the video titled *Flaneuse* was installed at Nandan Art Gallery, Kala Bhavan, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, India, during February 2011. This installation, which included video projection through multiple screens, art works, vinyl-print, mirror-finish acrylic, celluloid strips, drawings, writings, wooden objects, and sound bytes, was about ‘women and/in cinema.’ I focused on the ways in which women in Asian countries encounter melodramatic films. *Theatres of Spectacle* was an abstraction of the intimate environment of the theatres and the processes through which women interact with such locations. Indeed, while cinematic spaces on one hand are inundated by the big close-ups of attractive female stars, on the other hand, women from different walks of life have somewhat limited access to such theatrical spaces. Therefore, the milieu of the theaters—the winding stairways, the big mirrors, the echo of voices, the half-public, half private dark hall, the toilet—was recrafted to illustrate the edges of feminine longings and social spaces.<sup>13</sup>



**Fig. 8, 9 . Women, memory, longing, and cinema.**

Walking through the gallery space, visitors came across luminous images of the “shining stars” in LED lit boxes, hanging against the dark walls. These were placed at disparate horizontal and vertical planes, which ideally forced the viewer to wander through the pictures, participate in the process of image making, and become a “participant-observer.” On the left, the audio-visual *Flaneuse* remarked upon issues of gender, sexuality,

freedom, and modes of film viewing through the use of film clips, poems, and theoretical excerpts.

(Visit: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2meAgtsB1Q&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2meAgtsB1Q&feature=player_embedded))

The video invoked popular Hindi films, as well as *Singin' in the Rain* (dir. Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, US, 1952), *Elevator to the Gallows* (dir. Louis Malle, France, 1958), *Shirin* (dir. Abbas Kiarostami, Iran, 2008), *I'll Be Seeing Her* (dir. Kim Soyung, South Korea, 2003) and others. It culminated in Gitanjali Rao's *Printed Rainbow* (India, 2006), thereby accentuating the erotic and animated drives of women. The video was divided into three broad sections illustrating the melodramatic mode, issues of gender, viewership and the theatrical sites, and finally, questions of liminal identities, fantasy, and the notion of "walking the city."

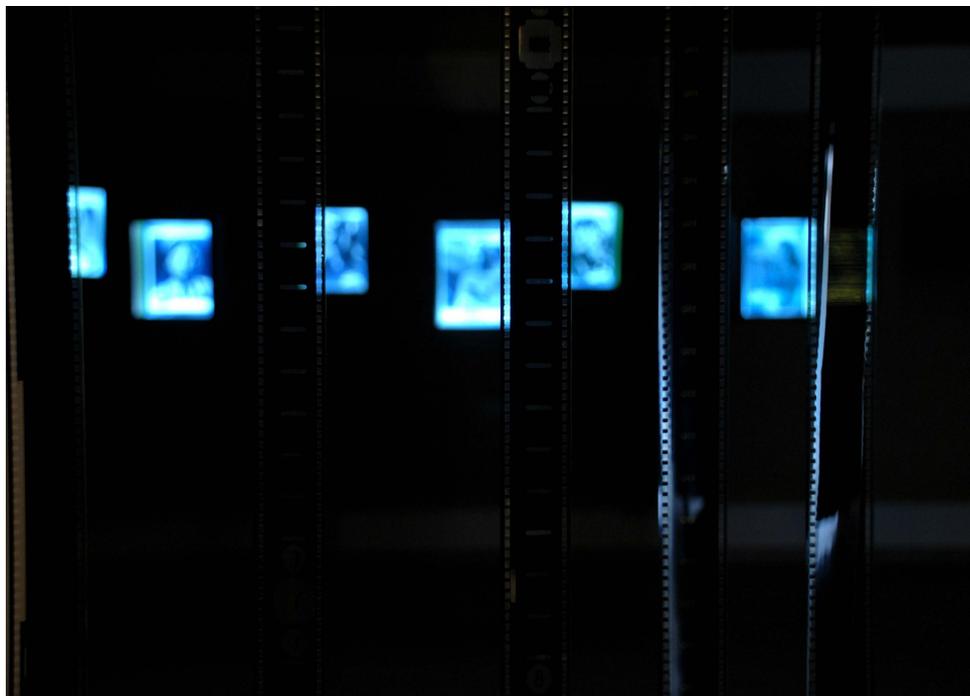


**Fig. 10. The floor design. A collage created out of various images of stairways.**



**Fig. 11. Distortion through acrylic mirrors.**

On the right, huge mirror-shine acrylic sheets hanging opposite the boxes and video screens presented distorted reflections of the onlookers and the entire studio space, thereby disturbing the veil of perspective.<sup>14</sup> The floor was covered with a huge collage (12x12 feet vinyl-print), created from images of film sets and photographs of cinema interiors. On the floor, scribbles and red arrows commented upon different memories of film viewing. Filmstrips swinging mysteriously at the center space, and a solitary door of a ladies' toilet (shut from inside, located far-left) told a host of untold stories.<sup>15</sup>



**Fig. 12, 13. A door signifying the personal and the private, alongside enigmatic celluloid strips.**

Off-center towards the right, there was an empty zone that staged hushed voices and whispers, recorded personally in the theaters during the screening of a film about a gay folk-theatre actor, Chapal Bhaduri.<sup>16</sup> *Theatres of Spectacle* used spotlights to produce the sense of spectacle and to highlight the details of such liminal belongings. One of the major concerns of the installation was to revisit the notion of the city, the cinemas, and the “invisible” *flaneuse*. As suggested by Janet Wolff:

The *flaneur*'s freedom to wander at will through the city is essentially a masculine freedom. Thus, the very idea of the flaneur reveals it to be a gendered concept. . . . There could never be a female *flaneur*: the *flaneuse* was invisible.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, my installation displayed how at the turn of the twentieth century, cinema transformed urban tastes and explored the routes through which the theater (like the salons and the café) could become a half-private, half-public space, where women could possibly sit with a smile or tears. One may argue that all this was for pleasure, yet such leisurely meetings offered the enjoyment of looking, bonding, or simply walking around. Perhaps, in the theaters, a woman could become a flaneur, and she too could join one of the most popular urban mass cultures of the century.<sup>18</sup>

## Experimentation 2

*Interiority* ran at Studio 21 in Kolkata during April 2011, and this installation was meant to stage a close encounter with the affection-image.<sup>19</sup> *Interiority* was about a labyrinth of desires, (dark) spaces, (secret) memories, and (unrequited) love. It was about romance and cinema and the manner in which a woman might recollect her personal experiences. While conducting my research, certain types of stills—such as portraits of men and women, couples embracing each other, spectacular dance poses, and obscure interiors—featured repeatedly. Furthermore, the theater as a dark room with the flickering lights, the glow emanating from the screen, and the hushed sounds, remained a significant point of reference. The public memory of cinema and forgetfulness was recreated within the studio.



**Fig. 14.** The backdrop, drawings on unidentified interior, vinyl print (16x9 feet).



**Fig. 15.** *Interiority* and artefacts.

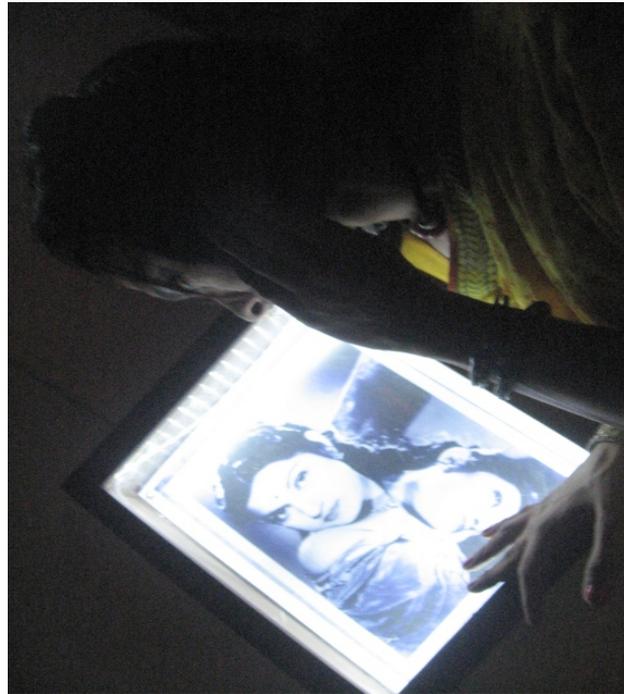
Three unidentified images (of a gloomy, sinister indoor space and two unknown female actors) were chosen for display. Drawings and other objects shaped like bottles were attached to the huge vinyl print that was glued to the wall. In effect, the nameless fragile objects looked somewhat “uncanny” and underlined the various trajectories of film history, which remain undefined; they also underscored the meaning of individual memories. The video showed the cinematic yearnings by quoting landmark Indian films like *Barsaat* (dir. Raj Kapoor, 1949). In addition, at the video’s heart lay the story of separation. The actor Meena Kumari Naz’s forgotten poem “The Moon is Lonely,” which was scribbled onto the surface, highlighted this theme. Both the content as well as the form of the video were thick with multiple connotations, addressing questions of history, memory, forgetting, and the significance of women workers (including stars) within the film industry.<sup>20</sup> The video was dense with layers of cryptic images of disparate interiors, faces, and figures which seemed to present the darkness and the ambiguity of film history. In order to highlight the continuities and the breaks, *Interiority* was installed from corner to corner, wall to wall, from ceiling to floor, and beyond. Finally, *Interiority* captured a sense of slippage; lines moved out of frames, and the video overlapped with the vinyl print, shining discreetly on the floor.



**Fig. 16. The installation site and video projection.**



**Fig. 17.** Frame grab, *Interiority* video.



**Fig. 18.** Artist Syed Taufik Riaz performing the female actor, April 2011.

Furthermore, Syed Taufik Riaz's performance within the installation, and in women's attire, emphasized the liminality of public spaces and the ways in which women encounter such en-gendered places.



**Fig. 19. *Fragments of Cinema* and *Crumbled Papers* at Rotterdam.**

### Experimentation 3

*Fragments of Cinema* and the video *Crumbled Papers* was hosted by the International Film Festival Rotterdam, at the Nieuwe Oogst foundation, in January and February of 2012. Here, the attempt was to bring back the idea of the romance of the cinema. *Fragments of Cinema* reconstructed the experiential nature of cinema and the notion of cinema as an event. The abstract milieu of the theaters was recreated by bringing together several faces sitting in the dark and by layering it with the voice of Meena Kumari Naz (inspired by the *Interiority* video).<sup>21</sup> *Crumbled Papers* quoted *Shirin*; however, projected in the context of the installation, it presented *Shirin*, now re-constructed, watching *Shirin*—the original film that was previously quoted in the video *Flaneuse*.<sup>22</sup> The strategic placements of the three videos looking back at each other produced a dense environment of self-reflexivity. By creating a mediated milieu, these installations speculated about cinema as an interface between women and the public sphere and explored a dark domain that invokes women's personal memories. My theoretical and artistic conjectures sought to underscore

this intense conflict between material, history, historiography, and the question of gender.<sup>23</sup>



**Fig. 20. Video 3. “Shirin” reframed, looking at Shirin.**

## Conclusion

It may be argued that these art installations, growing out of historically significant material that could not be documented or archived, display the problems of constructing definitive historical projects. The series of women’s faces and poses show the function and specificity of gender within cinema and public cultures. *Theatres of Spectacle*, *Interiority*, and *Fragments of Cinema* also highlight women’s personal recollections and the manner in which they interact with cinematic spaces. Clearly, these constitute broader and longer projects which intend to demonstrate the intense relationship between women—both as actors and viewers—and cinema. More importantly, these audio-visual installations produce their own contexts for new art projects and deliberations; they do not merely exhibit archival material. These installations are part of larger art (ad)ventures which propose to recreate cinematic material (images and objects) and produce such intimate interfaces (and the affection-image),<sup>24</sup> in order to make the flaneuse “visible.” These projects repeatedly indicate the import of personal memories, yearnings, and intricate understandings of the everyday, while also bringing back lost narratives within the realm of new discourses.

*I would like to thank Sanjeet Chowdhury and Avik Mukhopadhyay for their help throughout this process.*

## Notes

- 1 In A. Lant and I. Periz, ed. *Red Velvet Seat: Women's Writings on the First fifty Years of Cinema* (London: Verso, 2008), 90.
- 2 I was fortunate enough to do this work through the help of the Sarai Independent Research Fellowship in 2004 and the Jadavpur University Research Grant from 2008–2011.
- 3 Courtesy of Sanjeet Chowdhury, Kolkata.
- 4 I have long worked on the historical shifts of Kolkata cinemas such as *Cchabighar, Regal, Park Show House*, and more. See Madhuja Mukherjee, "House of Images, Sealdah: A Photo-Essay on Chhabighar Cinema," *Global South SEPHIS e-Magazine*, 9 no. 2 (April 2013): 68–81 (accessed on 3 July 2013) [http://sephisemagazine.org/issues/volume\\_9\\_2.pdf](http://sephisemagazine.org/issues/volume_9_2.pdf).
- 5 One needs to recall John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972) in this context. Also see Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in Amelia Jones, ed. *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 60–71, for a radical view on how women negotiate gendered representations.
- 6 See Madhuja Mukherjee, "Cinemas outside Texts: The Mise-en-Scène in Publicity Images and Theatres of Spectacle," *South Asian Popular Culture* 9 no.3 (October 2011): 327–334.
- 7 Sean Cubitt, *Videography: Video Media as Art and Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993); Sean Cubitt, *Digital Aesthetics, Theory, Culture & Society* (New York: Sage, 1998); the crucial theorization by Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp, ed., *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative* (London: BFI, 2002).
- 8 Christine Gledhill, "Introduction: Transnationalizing Women's Film History," *Framework* 51 no. 2 (2010): 278.
- 9 See Patricia Uberoi, "From Goddess to Pin-up: Feminine Icons in Indian Calendar Art," *Art Asia Pacific* 14 (1997): 62–67, as well as Ranjani Majumdar, "The Bombay Film Poster," *Seminar* 525 (2003), (accessed on 14 September 2012). <http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/525/525%20ranjani%20majumdar.html>
- 10 "Unsettling Cinema: a Symposium on the Place of Cinema in India," May 2003, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/525.htm>.
- 11 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press: 2000), 5.

- 12 Lev Manovich and Andreas Kratley, ed., *Soft Cinema, Navigating the Database* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005).
- 13 W. Brooker and J. Deborah J., ed., *Audience Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).
- 14 I am particularly considering Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," *Vision and Visuality 2* (1988): 3–38.
- 15 We followed up on this presentation on an actual staircase on the International Women's Day in 2011 at Jadavpur University. One of the crucial changes in this installation was the carving of a 'peep-hole' into the door, and attaching a mirror inside it. Therefore, when the participant-observers looked through the peep-hole of the toilet door, they viewed the reflection/close-up of their own eyes.
- 16 Chapal Bhaduri was a folk theater artist who mostly played the role of "Goddess."
- 17 Elizabeth Wilson, "The Invisible Flaneur" in Chris Jenks, ed., *Urban Culture, Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge (2004): 63–85.
- 18 During a 2011 conversation, my grandmother Parul Bala Mukherjee narrated her experiences of viewing films, including Chaplin's silent comedies and P.C. Barua's Bengali film *Debdas* (1935) during 1930s, in an open-air theatre in suburban Bengal.
- 19 See Chandreyee Ghose, "Candle Burns for Nostalgia," *The Telegraph* 29 May 2011, [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110529/jsp/calcutta/story\\_14039152.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110529/jsp/calcutta/story_14039152.jsp).
- 20 Madhuja Mukherjee, ed., *Voices and Verses of the Talking Stars* (Stree: Kolkata, Forthcoming 2014). This collection brings together interviews, articles, poems, and scripts written by female actors on their roles in the Indian film industry.
- 21 See Manoj Tiwari, "Meena Kumari-Chand Tanha He Aasma Tanha I Write, I Recite Music Khayyam," YouTube 5 April 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RY1LzUIw9yM>.
- 22 See M. J. Y. Kenari and M. Mostafa, "Kiarostami's Unfinished Cinema and its Postmodern Reflections," *International Journal of the Humanities* 17 no. 2 (2010): 23–37, for discussions on Abbas Kiarostami's work.
- 23 I thank Indraneel Lahiri and the students in my department for their collaborations.
- 24 I am also thinking of Gilles Deleuze's marvellous suggestion: "As for the face itself, we will not say that the close-up deals with [*traite*] it or subjects it to some kind of treatment: there is no close-up of the face, the face is in itself close-up, the close-up is by itself face and are affect,

affection-image." *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (New York and London: Continuum: 2005), 90.

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