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DOI: 10.35765/pk.2024.4502.22

## Contemporary Reimaginings of *Heart of Darkness*

### ABSTRACT

In contemporary visual culture, we may observe various transformations of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Artists adapt the classic tale to various media. The novella appears in a theatrical form on the Bulgarian and British stages (a performance by Museum Theatre directed by Valeriya Valcheva in Sofia and the production by the *imitating the dog* theatre company in London). In film, there is a sand-on-glass animation directed by Gerald Conn and the anime-influenced Brazilian/French animated feature *Heart of Darkness* by Rogério Nunes. Additionally, there are video games (*Spec Ops, Far Cry 2*) based on its plot as well as numerous comics and graphic novels depicting the story, starting with the famous version by C. Anyango and D. Mairowitz through T. Tirabosco and Ch. Perrissin's (Adamowicz-Pośpiech, 2024) and P. Kuper's adaptations. On top of that, we have latest Instagram videos by Sascha Ciezata. In this paper, I argue that contemporary interpretations of *Heart of Darkness* to resonate with present-day audiences must inevitably modernize the novella formally and/or ideologically. I will substantiate this claim through an examination of two instances of the novella's adaptation in distinct media: specifically, on Instagram and within the theatrical realm.

**KEYWORDS:** adaptation, social media, theatre, Conrad, Heart of Darkness

### STRESZCZENIE

Współczesne transformacje *Jądra ciemności*

We współczesnej kulturze wizualnej możemy zaobserwować różne transformacje noweli *Jądro ciemności* Josepha Conrada. Artyści adaptują tę klasyczną opowieść dla odmiennych mediów: nowela w formie teatralnej pojawia się na scenach bułgarskich i brytyjskich teatrów, w formie animacji piaskiem na szkle w reżyserii Geralda Conna lub brazylijsko-francuskiego filmu animowanego *Heart of Darkness* autorstwa Rogério Nunesa. Oprócz tego istnieją gry wideo (*Spec Ops, Far Cry 2*) oparte na jej fabule, a także liczne komiksy i powieści graficzne przedstawiające tę historię, począwszy od słynnej wersji C. Anyango

i D. Mairowitza, poprzez T. Tirabosco i Ch. Perrissina i P. Kupera, a kończą na najnowszych klipach na Instagramie autorstwa Saschy Ciezaty. W niniejszym artykule moim celem jest udowodnienie, że współczesne realizacje *Jądra ciemności*, które dążą do przekazania tekstu współczesnej publiczności, modernizują go formalnie i/lub ideologicznie. Tę tezę poprę analizą dwóch najnowszych przypadków adaptacji noweli w różnych mediach, a mianowicie na Instagramie i w teatrze.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: adaptacja, media społecznościowe, teatr, Conrad,  
*Jądro ciemności*

Conrad's novella has been transformed through time. We may well say that it all started with Coppola's cinematic interpretation *Apocalypse Now* (1979) in which Conrad is uncredited. In the last two decades, we may observe various transformations of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Artists adapt the well-known story to various media. The novella appears in a theatrical form on the Bulgarian and British stages (a performance by Museum Theatre directed by Valeriya Valcheva in Sofia and the production by the *imitating the dog* theatre company in London). It was adapted into a sand animated film directed by Gerald Conn, or the anime-influenced Brazilian/French animated feature *Heart of Darkness* by Rogério Nunes. Additionally, there are video games (*Spec Ops, Far Cry 2*) based on its plot as well as numerous comics and graphic novels depicting the story, starting with the famous version by C. Anyango and D. Mairowitz (Adamowicz-Pośpiech, 2024b) through T. Tirabosco and Ch. Perrissin's *Kongo*, Stephane Miquel and Loic Godart's *Au Coeur des ténèbres. Librement adapté du roman de J. Conrad* (Adamowicz-Pośpiech, 2024a) and Peter Kuper's adaptations (Adamowicz-Pośpiech, 2022). There are also the latest Instagram videos by Sascha Ciezata. In this paper, my objective is to demonstrate that contemporary interpretations must make concerted efforts to resonate with present-day audiences, inevitably involving formal and/or ideological modernization of the text. I intend to substantiate this claim through an examination of two instances of the novella's adaptation in distinct media: specifically, on Instagram and within the theatrical realm.

### *Heart of Darkness on Instagram*

The first transmedia version of *Heart of Darkness* was produced by animator Sascha Ciezata who first released a multimedia graphic novel with daily episodes on Instagram and later published a graphic novel on the

basis of this animation (Ciezata 2015).<sup>1</sup> Sascha Ciezata is an independent Los Angeles-based animator and filmmaker. His first animated short was *When Lynch Met Lucas* which turned out to be an online success. Also, he did an animation for a documentary called *The Sheik*. Conrad's novella was his first attempt to turn a classic book to a graphic novel which he called "a challenge" (Animation Insider). The 15-second clips (chapters) were posted through his Instagram account in daily episodes on from 14 February 2015. This social media-based graphic novel retold the adventures of Marley, a rodent cartographer modelled after Marlow. The story takes place amid the stormy New York during Hurricane Sandy,<sup>2</sup> throwing little Marley into the dark tunnels below the city's streets. Marley the rat undertakes the task to find the Rat King, Kurtz, on behalf of the New York City Trade Company. He journeys along the fast-flowing river in flooded subway tunnels. Ciezata explains how he came up with the idea of transforming the novella into an animation:

*Heart of Darkness* was something I first conceived three years ago when I was living in New York ... I was doing animation there for a documentary and riding the subways to work. I always wanted to adapt the story to NYC<sup>3</sup> but couldn't figure out how to make it work live action. Everything came together when Hurricane Sandy struck Manhattan, in 2012, and the city literally went dark for a week. Telling the story with subway rats became the inspiration after reading a few articles about how the storm affected the city's rat population. Sandy was literally "the perfect storm," narratively speaking (Wolfe).

Ciezata believes that "The episodic nature of *Heart of Darkness* makes Instagram the perfect distribution platform with daily 'episodes,' turning it into a kind of social media graphic novel," and hopes that "one day [he can] turn it into an animated feature film" (Wolfe).

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1 Unfortunately, Ciezata's Instagram account @darkheartnyc where he posted the videos is unavailable but his *Heart of Darkness* Official Trailer can be viewed on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/118775686>).

2 New York City was severely affected by Hurricane Sandy on 29–30 October, 2012 when its subway system as well as all road tunnels were flooded (CNN).

3 New York City.

Fig. 1. A frame from Sascha Ciezata social media graphic novel



(S. Ciezata, *Heart of Darkness*, Instagram, 14 Feb. 2015).

Interestingly, *signum temporis*, in 2017 Ciezata decided to post his animation of *Heart of Darkness* in instalments on Instagram, while Conrad also serialized his novella in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899 (Finkelstein 2009). The instalments were quasi-realistic and in each clip the animation was enhanced with real photographic imagery of New York City and its subway. Finally, all of it was set to a recording of Union Square's drummers<sup>4</sup> and a snippet of Henry Mancini number.<sup>5</sup> Ciezata elaborates the technicalities of the animation production:

[I] do all of my animation on an iPad Air using the Animation Creator HD app and Sketchbook Pro ... I thumbnail and storyboard everything on paper first. In order to achieve the kind of grimy realism I wanted a lot of the backgrounds are actual photographs I took throughout the city, which I then edited in Photoshop. I then incorporated the animation to interact with these photos in layout (Wolfe).

Ciezata employs still images and short animated Instagram videos which abound in hash tags.

4 Henry Mancini (born Enrico Mancini; Italian; 1924–1994) was an American composer, conductor, and pianist. Often regarded as one of the greatest film composers (SONY).

5 New York Union Square's drummers play on the streets and subway stations for free. Some of their performances are recorded and can be viewed on YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YjD4IHNCNw8>).

Fig. 2. A frame from Sascha Ciezata social media graphic novel



(S. Ciezata, *Heart of Darkñess*, Instagram, 14 Feb. 2015).

In the first clip we could hear the “frame narrator” introducing the story:

Far below these bustling streets another world exists. The vast network of subway lines serve as our trade routes. All the detritus of the Worlds Metropolis serves as our currency. And in a city populated with some 8 million people, business is always booming... (A video posted by Heart Of Darkness (@darkheartnyc) on Feb 14, 2015 at 7:07pm PST).

The protagonist introduced himself in the following way:

They call me MARLEY. I'm a navigator and cartographer for the Trade Company. I go places other Rats wouldn't dare, mapping abandoned tunnels and the like. It's a hazardous profession, but I have a nose for adventure... (Be sure to check back here tomorrow and watch Marley's adventure continue) (A video posted by Heart Of Darkness (@darkheartnyc) on Feb 14, 2015 at 7:11pm PST).

Each clip ended with some type of cliff-hanger: “This particular #NYC #urbanlegend is very real, I assure you! Lucky for me I'm quick witted and nimble on my feet. This came as quite a shock to my pursuer. Of course, I didn't make it completely unscathed. When I came too I discovered my fur had turned completely white! #tobecontinued” (A video posted by Heart Of Darkness (@darkheartnyc) on Feb 15, 2015 at 6:58pm PST).<sup>6</sup> The suspenseful episode endings remotely echo the cuts Conrad introduced in his serialized version of *Heart of Darkñess*. Obviously, the new medium required different creative decisions.

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6 Sami Emory, ‘Heart of Darkness’ Gets an Animated Update on Instagram, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qkww7p/heart-of-darkness-gets-an-animated-update-on-instagram>.

## *Heart of Darkness* on stage

The second type of transformation which I wish to focus on is a theatrical performance *Heart of Darkness* created by *imitating the dog* company and co-produced by Marche Teatro.<sup>7</sup> The producers accentuated the contemporaneity of Conrad's fiction "a tale of lies and brutal greed and of the dark heart which beats within us all."<sup>8</sup> In the short blurb they inform the viewers that the 19th century story was "re-sited in a timeless Europe, in a forsaken landscape lost to the destructive lust for power, it emerges as a tale absolutely for our time" (*imitating the dog*). While acknowledging that it is a Conrad's story, they appropriate it as their own to produce a continuation "exposing the dehumanisation that paved the way for the horrors of the 20th century, and countless horrors yet to come" (*imitating the dog*).<sup>9</sup>

The production combined live performance with digital technology. The actors are on the stage while above them, the audience can see from one to three screens with various films, clips, and photos projected onto them. Due to the hanging projection screens the performance resembles an animated cinemascope graphic novel. The digital component is an integral part of the play from the very beginning. The actors create a live film on stage using cameras and green-screen backdrops which, "when combined with backgrounds, overlays and images, creates a framed, graphic-novel style film" (Wainwright). Co-artistic director Simon Wainwright explains the company's unusual design process:

First and foremost, it is the way in which the design and technology is viewed by the company as the machine by which we tell the story. The apparatus we use on stage, be that flats and props or screens and projectors, is always incorporated right at the start of the process – at the same time we choose the text or think up the narrative concept. It is never applied after or thought of *around* the text. It *is* the text, it *is* the story, it *is* the meaning of the piece (Wainwright).

Wainwright observes that *Heart of Darkness* is regarded nowadays as "both outdated and un-presentable," hence the major issue for the director

7 The production was supported by Arts Council England, Lancaster Arts at Lancaster University and Theatre by the Lake. It was on UK tour in the 2018/2019 season (in Aberystwyth Arts Centre Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Cast, Doncaster, Tron Theatre, Glasgow, The Dukes Lancaster, Northern Stage, Newcastle, and York Theatre Royal, among others).

8 <https://www.imitatingthedog.co.uk/project/heart-of-darkness/>

9 Since each actor/actress plays many roles in this spectacle it is not possible to assign them to particular protagonists. The cast is as follows: Laura Atherton, Morgan Bailey, Keicha Greenidge, Morven Macbeth, Matt Prendergast.

and the actors was “how do we tell this story now, in 2019?” He claims that the video, sound and set design (along with the text and performance) are “the machine by which we negotiate these questions” (Wainwright).

Conrad’s story of the river journey is changed to a road journey and relocated from Africa to a devastated Europe; Kurtz is not in the Belgian Congo but in a bombed-out building on the edge of London and Marlow is not a sailor but a private detective from Kinshasa, and she is a black woman, not a man. As co-artistic director Andrew Quick clarifies “we are reversing or creating as parallel version based on Conrad’s original. We keep some of the plot and tone, but it is a radical re-imagining” (Pratt). And he adds that this story is a “condensed version of our actual process – our journey into our heart of darkness, if you like, – the heart of darkness of its making” (Pratt). Significantly, both artistic directors foreground that the play is about representation, about the process of its creation because in this way they unravel their contemporary struggle with the nineteenth century text.

This visually rich spectacle operates on three layers: the first one is based on the novella’s plot, the second portrays the rehearsals for the play and the third refers to German concentration camps and World War Two. In general, the planes are separated. The viewer knows that the action takes place in changed circumstances but in several cases these overlap creating a multi-layered amalgam of references and connotations, posing an immense challenge to the audience.

Let’s begin with the third layer because the play opens with it. The initial scene is that of an interrogation of a former German soldier, probably in a court room. The information about his deeds is projected on the screens above him. He sits on a chair placed on a table. On the stage beneath him stands a woman asking him questions. He does not show any emotions. Notably, the actor who plays the Nazi officer will also play Kurtz, and the black woman will play Marlow. In my view, this is an implementation of the creative premise that *Heart of Darkness* “emerges as a tale absolutely for our time.” During the interrogation scene we can see/read the information on the screen telling us that this is Gitta Sereny interviewing Franz Stangl, the former Commandant of the Treblinka Extermination Camp who was responsible for more than 900,000 deaths (*Heart of Darkness*, 01.01–04.05). Later we see his photo with the image of the actor overlapping it in the background. The woman asks him questions about his attitude towards the prisoners, e.g. “When do you think you began to see them as cargo?” (02.40). He is very open in his answers and admits that he never perceived them as human beings. It all started in Treblinka *Totenlager* when he stood over a pit with a mass of blue, rotten corpses and another German officer asked him what they shall do with this

garbage (03.10). The scene ends with the woman's question: "Couldn't you change that?" He swiftly responds that he couldn't "because this was the system, it worked and because it was the system it was irreversible" (03.58). (This comment will be repeated by Kurtz at the end of the play which I shall discuss below.) The scenario is based on Sereny's interview which she published in the book titled *Into That Darkness. From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder*.<sup>10</sup> The reason why they chose this fragment to open the play may be that in the book Serena writes that after 70 hours of the interrogations Stangl's attitude somehow changed and he recognized his guilt because he was talking about the atrocities for the first time. To my mind, this resembles the moment of Kurtz's insight when he recognized the crimes he committed in the presence of Marlow. The scene closes with the Christian hymn *Sanctus*:

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth.  
Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua. (Santus)<sup>11</sup>

which serves as an ironic commentary on the scene. During the entire scene in front of the stage there are two cameras recording the interrogation. They will remain there for the whole performance. This is one of the ways of breaking the theatricality of the play.

The next level subsumes the scenes of the rehearsals. All the actors are gathered on the stage, some sitting, some lying on the floor. The director is reading out *Heart of Darkness*. They fervently oppose him: "And we're doing that? ... I mean boats, a jungle, period costumes, severed heads?" (18.54). One of them starts reciting a fragment of Chinua Achebe's essay in which he classified *Heart of Darkness* as a racist novel:<sup>12</sup>

Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot (19.03; Achebe).

10 In the book she asked the very same questions (Sereny 1974).

11 Holy, holy, holy Lord, / God of pow'r and might, / heaven and earth are full / full of your glory (Hymnary).

12 Ch. Achebe, *An Image of Africa*.



Significantly, the actor is speaking an English dialect with a strong African accent which makes him almost incomprehensible. At the same time the viewers may see a photograph of Achebe and read information about his essay in which he argued that *Heart of Darkness* “continues to perpetuate the damaging stereotypes of black peoples by its inclusion in the literary canon of the modern Western world” (19.28) on the screen. This is one of several contextualizations of *Heart of Darkness* in contemporary culture. Another one can be traced in a different scene when the actors criticize Conrad’s story that nothing happens there at least at the first dozen of pages and juxtapose it with F.F. Coppola’s beginning of *Apocalypse Now*, in which he compresses one third of the novel. They start comparing Coppola’s and Nicolas Roeg’s versions, which points to the fact that they know various interpretations of the book and their artistic aim is to produce their own version of the story which audiences can relate to in 2018. During this scene the audience can watch Coppola’s interview in which he explained the premises of his film on three screens. The scenes of the rehearsals are crucial for the whole construction of the spectacle because one of its artistic goals was to show the process of its creation. One of the artistic directors reveals that

an important part of the project is also the representation of process, of our research and discussion... of the many, many hours of watching films, reading books and sitting around a table to get to the heart of the story. As such the sound and video allow us to create a patchwork documentary, to reference the materials we have used to make the work. This is often woven into the piece unnoticed by the audience, a layer which adds texture and value but is unspoken. We felt this time that the process *was* the piece. The struggle to make the work was what the piece was about (Wainwright).

Another important scene within this layer is the rehearsal when the actress (who will play Marlow) explicitly articulates her problem with the book: “It’s racist!” (33.44). The director tries to defend the book saying that it tried to expose the evils of colonialism. But the actress rejects that vehemently arguing that: “What colonialism destroyed was a whole population. What was lost was a way of life, what was devastated was a whole continent. That is the horror! And that’s what we’re still dealing today!” (34.50). During her speech we can read the information about Patrice Lumumba, an African politician who fought for the independence of Congo.<sup>13</sup> The viewers can read about his execution supervised by Belgian

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13 Patrice Lumumba (1925–1961) – African nationalist leader, the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He was forced out of office during a political crisis, and assassinated by Congolese national factions supported by the Belgian government (Britannica).

officers. At the end of this scene the actress asks the director how you can be critical of colonialism if you give no voice to the oppressed (36.37).

Fig. 3 A scene portraying the actress who articulates her problem with the book: "It's racist!" (33.44). On the screens the viewers can see portraits of the actress, an activist, and the information about Patrice Lumumba



Production photograph by Ed Waring, imitating the dog's *Heart of Darkness* 2018.

To sum up this level, it might be said that the rehearsals constitute a kind of trial over Conrad's book foregrounding its racist aspects. In the end the director and the actors agree that the story was not racist at the time of its publication but it is now and they can't do a straightforward dramatization of the text: "in 2019 we can't do a show about rape and pillage of Africa where all black voices are silent and the white man speaks the truth. It's not acceptable!" The actors decide to reverse Conrad's story: Marlow is sent from Africa (Kinshasa) to Europe (London).

The last layer to be discussed is that of Conrad's story. As was noted above the story is reversed: Marlow (a black female detective) is hired by some institution to find Kurtz and bring him back to Kinshasa. Similarly to Conrad's plot, not much is known: Marlow asks for more details but the commissioner is unwilling to tell her anything. Once Marlow (who prefers to be called Charlie) lands in Europe she will be met by her driver who would escort her to London. The journey is extremely tiring and dangerous. They travel through the devastated continent and the audience can watch rubble, ruins, barren land and marching soldiers on the screens. Europe is destroyed after the war. Only factories had been rebuilt. Charlie encounters armed soldiers, workers in striped uniforms who carry heavy lumps of stone and a marching column of prisoners of war, among others. She passes dead bodies and witnesses an execution.

Fig. 4. A scene portraying Charlie's journey with the driver. On the screens, the viewers can observe her frightened face and his focused one. In the middle we see tanks. On the photo, we can notice the cameras on the stage as if we were witnessing the production of the performance



Production photograph by Ed Waring, imitating the dog's *Heart of Darkness* 2018.

In England, she is taken captive by teenage soldiers in ragged uniforms and imprisoned. In the scenes in the bunker when she meets Kurtz, Marlow barely sits on a chair. She is lifeless and does not utter a word. Only Kurtz delivers his speech, boasting of his achievements:

At first, there were only death factories – such waste! I put a stop to it. No more enemies – just profit. Profit based on production at the lowest cost. That's the only thing worth giving up life for! (...) I got rid of the ideologues. They went up in smoke! (1.32.54–1.36.10).

He meticulously discusses his calculations about the minimum number of calories a human being needs to survive taking into consideration such factors as age, sex, health, type of work, etc. If parents did not comply, they became “expendable”: “their hands, feet, arms... A great incentive I found in child's hand” (1.36.33).<sup>14</sup> He closes his eyes and inhales deeply as if exhilarating in the memories of his atrocities. His utilitarian attitude towards the prisoners as workers producing maximum profit at a minimum cost resembles that of German Nazi officers supervising concentration camps. In the opening scene, Franz Stangl also mentions various uses the prisoners were put to in Treblinka extermination camp: barbers, tailors, shoemakers,

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14 This is an allusion to the Belgian custom of cutting of the Congolese right hand either as a punishment or as a proof that the cartridge they used was to kill that person (Cf. Hochschild).

carpenters (01.01).<sup>15</sup> Kurtz hands Charlie a document in which he recorded all his innovations and achievements in effective management of the labour camp. He praises the system he created: “A system unadorned by morality, by sentiment, by history, by any sensibility ... Can’t you see its beauty?” (1.38.36) Listening to Kurtz’s confession we can see Marlow’s face contorted with pain and her tears in a close-up. In these scenes, the roles are reversed: the actor who played the interrogated Franz Stangl now plays Kurtz while the woman who acted as the interrogator now plays Marlow. One may observe that nothing has changed since Conrad’s times: the murderer remains the murderer, only now he is proud of his deeds and the victims represented by Marlow are silent (as it was in the original novella).

The closing scene takes place back in Kinshasa in Marlow’s office. She talks to a government commissioner and denies meeting Kurtz and receiving any documents. This aspect echoes to some extent the original novella when Marlow lied about Kurtz to the Intended and falsified the document. At the end of the play, we can hear the hymn *Sanctus* again.

The spectacle is prodigious in cultural references and allusions to literature e.g. Raymond Chandler, T.S. Eliot, film (*Casablanca*, *Roeg’s Heart of Darkness*, F.F. Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*, *Mad Max*), figures of popular culture (Humphrey Bogart, Marlon Brando, Martin Sheen, John Malkovich, among others). One may ask what is the point of so many explicit references? To my mind, these elements were used to highlight the theatricality and lay bare the technicalities of producing the play, reminding the audience that this is just one more version of *Heart of Darkness*.

The analysed reimaginings of *Heart of Darkness* are radical in the methods applied due to the medium in which they were created. Hutchcon points to a double status of adaption which “can potentially be treated both as original texts in their own right and as adaptations” (2006, p. 6) and continues that “adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and then creating something new” (2006, p. 20). The cases of the social media graphic novel and the performance of *Heart of Darkness* are outstanding examples of this cultural process while at the same time they may be seen as part of a system of transmedia storytelling, “a system of building variation on sameness” (Freeman, 2016, p. 8). Ciezata and the theatre artists did not merely retell the well-known story but first and foremost adapted and reformulated it for the 21st century audience.

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15 One may also think of Walter Genewein, the chief Nazi accountant in the Łódź ghetto who not only turned the ghetto into a prosperous and well-organised company, but also painstakingly documented the ghetto’s daily life as a photographer. (Cf. The documentary by Jabłoński, *Fotomator* (Eng. *Photographer*) (1998).

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