

Psycho: Queering a classic.

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Abstract:

As the first staccato chords ominously resound and the viewer sees through broken horizontal bars the word "Psycho," it is clear that what lies beyond these frames is no ordinary story, and a strange feeling of anxiety begins to rise in the throat along with the pitch of the violins. Screenwriter Joseph Stefano adapted Robert Bloch's novel Psycho¹ into what would become one of Alfred Hitchcock's seminal works and one of the classic films of all time. On its surface, Psycho is a film about clandestine affairs, larceny, murder, secrets, and mental illness; however, between the shadows, there lies an exploration of the temptations of capitalism, sexual identity, gender roles, sexual expression, and a pedagogical message that demonstrates what horrible things can happen in the absence of "proper" development. Psycho reiterates to its viewers that people are not what or who they seem to be despite their appearances, and that evil acts may occur if a person has not resolved his or her sexual development and identity to a "normal" level. Interestingly, the story explored in Psycho has its roots in the queer events that unfolded in 1957 in the small town of Plainfield, Wisconsin.

Keywords:

Alfred Hitchcock | sexuality | gender studies | queer studies | movie analysis

Article:

Psycho

Queering Hitchcock's Classic

We have met the cross-dressing closeted maniac, and he is us

Introduction

As the first staccato chords ominously resound and the viewer sees through broken horizontal bars the word "Psycho," it is clear that what lies beyond these frames is no ordinary story, and a strange feeling of anxiety begins to rise in the throat along with the pitch of the violins. Screenwriter Joseph Stefano adapted Robert Bloch's novel Psycho¹ into what would become one of Alfred Hitchcock's seminal works and one of the classic films of all time. On its surface, Psycho is a film about clandestine affairs, larceny, murder, secrets, and mental illness; however,

between the shadows, there lies an exploration of the temptations of capitalism, sexual identity, gender roles, sexual expression, and a pedagogical message that demonstrates what horrible things can happen in the absence of "proper" development. Psycho reiterates to its viewers that people are not what or who they seem to be despite their appearances, and that evil acts may occur if a person has not resolved his or her sexual development and identity to a "normal" level. Interestingly, the story explored in Psycho has its roots in the queer events that unfolded in 1957 in the small town of Plainfield, Wisconsin.

Ed Gein (right) was described by locals as a reclusive man obsessed with anatomy and the sex-change operation of Christine Jorgensen (one of the first highly publicized transsexual cases).² On November 16, 1957 local law enforcement, acting on a tip, discovered in Gein's home a grisly scene complete with body parts, skulls, preserved skin from women's faces, and a vest made of women's skin complete with breasts. There was evidence of cannibalism and it was apparent that Gein, donning a garment constructed from the skins and body parts of women, would parade about his house. The people of Plainfield could hardly believe the reports emerging from the Gein farm. Gein was arrested and questioned, stating that he was, "in a daze" when he killed, and he reported experiencing amnesia for what appeared to be more than a dozen murders, all women.³ The trial was sensational and Gein was found criminally insane, spending the rest of his life at Central State Hospital in Wisconsin, dying in 1984. Plainfield's residents were left asking, how could this happen here? Most certainly, Gein's activities rent the fabric of the quiet, rural American life that so characterized the 1950s where everything was "normal" and no one deviated from what was expected. Sullivan,⁴ quoting Halperin, writes that "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant."⁵ and certainly the events of Plainfield, based on this interpretation, were queer. A local writer, Robert Bloch, was struck by the depth of disruption created by the Gein case and pursued writing a novel based on the story.

Bloch was interested in "abnormal psychology" and was familiar with the popular Freudian theories of the day, particularly regarding the development of sexual identity. He set his story in a rural location, and his murderer was Norman Bates. There were rumors about the Gein case that suggested Gein had an incestuous relationship with his mother and, in fact, many of the gravesites of his victims and their remains were found close to his own mother's grave. Gein had apparently kept his mother's room in pristine fashion, as did Norman in Bloch's novel. While Bloch did not overtly write about such taboo topics as incest and sexual identity confusion, he certainly suggested them in his novel. Norman seems to the reader to be a rather normal man, albeit eccentric, who has many secrets, representing a queer commentary on humanity. At its heart, the Bloch novel is about mental sickness that results from an unresolved developmental stage; sickness that can lead to unthinkable acts of destruction. Viewed queerly, perhaps what was and is held up as "normal" development (according to Freud) is not normal at all. From a queer perspective, sexual fantasy with multiple objects is one of the endless colors on the spectrum of sexual expression.

As Stefano and Hitchcock collaborated to bring Bloch's novel to the screen, they held fast to Freudian theories and, as I will explore, present obvious and cloaked references to "normal" development according to Freud. Based on accounts of both Stefano's writing and Hitchcock's direction of the film, it does not seem that they intended to make such a social and sexual commentary; however, as one reflects on the film today, there are many opportunities to view it through a queer lens, which, according to Hall,⁶ Sullivan,⁷ Britzman,⁸ and others, should involve the use of multiple viewpoints as the film is read as representative of, and existing within, a social/sexual paradigm.

Regardless of the intent, the film created a stark cinematic portrait of just how "damaged" one can become when seduced by greed, sexual desire, and the pressure to keep it all quietly disguised under the façade of normalcy. Additionally, on a personal and professional level, Hitchcock was very aware that he needed to take a new direction, breaking from his previous movie work, which had become mainstream, Technicolor, "A" movies cast with stars.⁹ In many ways, *Psycho* was a vehicle that queered what the public had come to expect from Hitchcock films, and, much like its real-life inspiration, it queered the notion that America was a place where "normal" was defined as quiet, safe, smalltown life, free from the darkness that lurks in modest roadside motels.

Context

Before examining the plot, performances, and technical aspects of *Psycho*, it is important to frame the film in the cultural context of the day. The 1950s is generally regarded as representing the height of achieving the American ideal with an emphasis on conformity.¹⁰ After the Great Depression and World War II, the 1950s became an era of prosperity, and middle-class America emerged and thrived as the market became flooded with goods. There were enough jobs to support the growing consumer appetite, and television brought the idealized image of the American family into many homes as *Ozzie and Harriet* and other shows demonstrated the pleasures of family life. In keeping with enduring Victorian values, sexuality was not discussed. Society, including public schooling, emphasized traditional masculine and feminine roles with men being the family breadwinners and women, even if they worked, being expected to keep their place in the home. Media at the time did not explore alternative sexualities, and even heterosexual married couples were not portrayed as acting sexually. For example, despite being married, Lucy and Desi Arnaz had separate beds on the *I Love Lucy* show, and we never see *Ozzie and Harriet* or *June and Ward Cleaver* in the bedroom at all. Sex was off limits except for underground and back-alley publications of "girly" magazines and pulp fiction novels. A clean, proper image became paramount, with men in suits and women dressed smartly in skirts and blouses, hair coiffed and pearls at the neck. Diversity was not embraced, as homogeneity was viewed as making society stronger.¹¹ There were certainly rebels who challenged the zeitgeist of repression and conformity, from Beat novelists like Jack Kerouac to provocative rock and rollers like Elvis Presley. However, these and other such figures were seen as deviant and their work viewed as contributions to the "corruption" that led to 1960s counterculture.

Through the 1950s, Hitchcock had carved out a film career that, despite some racy themes, played well to the mainstream. Most of his work prior to *Psycho* centered on suspense and tension that developed between characters and situations. His films were often shot in color and, with a few exceptions like *Shadow of a Doubt* and *Strangers on a Train*, did not explore deviance as a major narrative element. Hitchcock himself was a rather queer character in Hollywood at the time, with a reputation as a perfectionist, a womanizer, and an autocrat on the set.¹² It is interesting that on the cusp of the '60s, Hitchcock, through *Psycho*, chose to recreate himself as a director just as society was also beginning to radically reinvent itself. With *Psycho*, Hitchcock, abetted by Stefano's script, would shock audiences with sexual innuendo, apparent nudity coupled with a sadistic stabbing scene. Perhaps most shocking of all, he would leave audiences wondering what might lie below the surface of family, friends, neighbors, and even themselves.

Plot: Analysis and Critique

Central to the plot of *Psycho* is the idea that an ordinary person can harbor many secrets, making his or her appearance seem theatrical. Hall¹³ refers to Butler's concept of identity as performance and, while Hitchcock predates Butler, this notion is very evident in how he directed the development of the central Bloch/Stefano characters in *Psycho*. Even as the film ends and the murderer is exposed, private conversations within his/her mind conceal what appears to be a disturbed but calm "victim" of faulty psychological development. The opening montage sets the scene for the dark things that take place inside ordinary towns and inside the minds of ordinary people.

As the opening credits roll, stark lines enter and exit the screen, bringing in the next title. The film is black-and-white — a departure from the popular color films of the day. The audience is taken to Phoenix, Arizona, and a time appears in the frame, giving a documentary quality to the opening scene, establishing the importance of time as central to the story. Interestingly, time seems to evaporate as the film progresses, and by the end, time seems to have reversed for the main character, Norman Bates, as he spirals into madness. The message seems to be clear — you are about to witness what really goes on while you live your life as if all is well in the world. Wood (1965), as quoted in Kolker¹⁴, says of the opening sequence, "we are to be taken forwards and downwards into the darkness of ourselves." Indeed, the film encourages us throughout to turn our gaze at the self.

The camera takes us to an ordinary building, and the viewer is shown a window, blinds closed but not completely lowered to the bottom. We enter the room and there on the bed lies Marion Crane (Janet Leigh, right, with John Gavin) in her bra and slip, which is white. Later, she changes to black underwear and eventually, Norman, her murderer, will see her in the black bra and slip — a visual reminder of her deviance. Standing by the bed is Sam Loomis (Gavin), who is drying the sweat off his chest with a towel. It is clear that these two have just finished an afternoon sexual encounter, and not their first. They begin to dress and we learn that they are indeed having a secret affair. As they restore their clothing, they transform from seedy, half-

dressed ne'er-do-wells to polished, respectable-looking citizens. They talk about wanting to be "legitimately" together, but Sam says he does not have the money to settle his divorce. Frustrated, they leave their secret place and return to their ordinary lives, he in California as a hardware store owner and she as a secretary to a real estate broker. From the beginning, the stereotypical moral image of the 1950s is disrupted by what is obviously a less than respectable coupling of two perfectly nice, heterosexual people. They seem to want to conform to the standard of the day, namely, that one establishes a monogamous, heterosexual relationship only when one has severed all ties in other relationships. However, they cannot afford to purchase that standard. Hitchcock queers the image of sexual purity but reinforces naturalized heterosexuality as the film progresses. A contemporary queer read of this aspect of the film demands a challenge to the emphasis on heterosexuality, particularly as Hitchcock utilizes the Freudian explanation of homosexual development in his explanation of Norman's development as a psychopathic killer despite Norman's apparent heterosexual orientation. In any case, the narrative next takes us into the deviant acts of Marion Crane as we see her steal a large sum of money from a rich investor who is doing business with her employer. Here, the film sets us up to see that greed can only lead to trouble and, through a queer lens, Marion's decision to commit larceny illustrates just how powerful capitalist ideals can be — gaining means and wealth must be done at any cost.

Feigning a headache, Marion and the money begin a journey to meet Sam, presumably to run off together so they can freely engage in a socially acceptable relationship with financial comfort. During her drive, we are introduced to the mirror motif, which recurs throughout the film, representing how important it is to reflect on one's self and one's actions, measuring them against what is "normal." Read queerly, this self-reflection should serve the purpose of examining one's own construction of identity (or identities) rather than measuring it (them) against a culturally constructed norm. During this section, Bernard Herrmann's score provides tension and suspense and foreshadows the price Marion will pay for deviating from the norm. The film's use of rain visually hints at the trouble to come, in particular what will happen in the shower. Losing her way literally and figuratively, Marion comes upon a small motel and, in the pouring rain, meets a young man who will kill her.

Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) is a thin but attractive figure who is courteous and kind as he assists Marion with an overdue break from her trip. We discover that he lives with his mother in an ominously large Victorian mansion and that he spends his time caring for the motel that has become all but deserted due to the opening of a new highway. Norman invites Marion to the house to eat, and as she is settling into her room, she hears what seems to be a confrontation between Norman and his mother at the house. Mother is lambasting Norman for inviting a girl into the house and accuses him of violating sexual mores by doing so. In a few moments, Norman appears with a tray of sandwiches, visibly shaken from the run-in with Mother. Marion follows him into the motel's parlor and, sitting among a sinister collection of stuffed raptors, offers an empathetic ear. It is here in the shadows that we and the birds of prey bear witness to a conversation about internal psychological turmoil, with Marion realizing that she has made a

mistake, announcing her return to Phoenix to right her wrong. Norman, however, lets us know that he has been developmentally derailed and that he feels trapped and angry. He says, "We're all in our private traps. Clamped in them. We scratch and claw, but only at the air, only at each other, and for all of it we never budge an inch." Reading queerly, Norman is making a statement about the impact of cultural expectations on identity. More particularly, he is expressing what Sullivan¹⁵ refers to when discussing Cohen's observation that multiple systems of oppression collide to, "regulate the lives of most people."¹⁶ Norman's life has been regulated. He is trapped (like the stuffed birds in the parlor) in a world where he appears to have freedom; however, because of oppressive systems including his own self-regulation, he is anything but free.

At one point in the scene, Marion asks Norman if he has friends, and Norman replies, "A boy's best friend is his mother." Also, Norman tells Marion that, "A son is a poor substitute for a lover." If, as the film would seem to have us do, we followed Freud, we would understand that Norman's development was arrested in the phallic stage, more particularly, during the Oedipal complex because his powerful and dominating mother was so strong that unconscious castration anxiety, normally created by the presence of the father, did not occur. Thus Norman identified with his mother and, according to Freud, would probably become homosexual in his orientation (following the sexual desires of his mother). Interestingly, Hitchcock skews Freud by giving Norman what appears to be a sexual appetite for females rather than males. Perhaps even Hitchcock was not brave enough to portray Norman not only as a cross-dressing killer but as a homosexual cross-dressing killer. Presumably many viewers at the time of the film's release assumed that Norman was a closeted homosexual once they learned he was dressing in women's clothes, since cross-dressing behavior was stereotypically associated with homosexuals; however, Hitchcock goes to great lengths to make it clear that Norman is attracted to women despite his taste in couture.

Hitchcock's casting of Anthony Perkins in this coded queer role further shades the character. Perkins, according to Winecoff,¹⁷ professed his identity as a bisexual and was known to have had relationships with several popular male stars of the day including Rock Hudson and Tab Hunter. Perkins died from complications of AIDS in 1992 after having been married and fathering two children. His performance in *Psycho* subtly displays traits associated with traditional "feminine" behavior, hinting that, in fact, Norman is repressing his true desire for a same-sex partner. Perkins does not play Norman as a "manly man;" rather, we see him succumb to Mother's demands, even her demands to kill. Queerly, we are all subject to the pressures of the world we live in and our own internal pressures; this is how we construct our identities. Perhaps one dimension of the "private trap" Norman professes to be in involves his sexual identity, and having homosexual desire has been, in modern Western culture, one of the greatest transgressions. If Norman had been able to embrace a queer point of view, he may have opened the door of his trap, stretching his wings and flying to freedom. Instead, he remains locked in his disturbed world and, as the film progresses, becomes murderously mad.

Following the interaction in the parlor, Marion retires to her room, and as she undresses, we see Norman remove a painting — a nude woman apparently being attacked by a dark male figure — from the parlor wall in order to spy on her. For a moment, we are looking through Norman's eyes at Marion, now in a black bra and slip, getting ready for a shower. Obviously, Norman is sexually aroused and presumably, to avoid moral transgression, he makes his way up to the house. The entire scene is filled with shadows and is accompanied with pensive music, giving us a pressing sense of foreboding. Hitchcock used a 50 millimeter camera to achieve the closest visual image to the human eye for this scene.¹⁸ He clearly wanted the viewer to see things as Norman saw them. Norman enters the house and we see for the first time the obvious Victorian décor, which, read queerly, indicates what Foucault¹⁹ calls, in reference to "We 'Other Victorians,'" the "image of the imperial prude."²⁰ The Bates house, and its Victorian styling, from a queer perspective, emblemize the strictures of Victorian sexual norms, namely, that sex is confined to the bedroom of married, heterosexual couples and is never discussed. Norman appears to be trying suppress his sexual desires by entering the structured environment of the house. Mother is in the house and Norman knows that she will help him stop the "dirty" thoughts he is having about Marion. Both Norman and Marion at this point convey a sense of impurity. Indeed, the next scene is Marion in the shower figuratively and literally cleansing her body and self.

The bathroom scene is remarkable in that it is believed to be the first time a toilet was shown in a mainstream American film, and the first time that an apparently nude woman was shown bathing.²¹ Marion seems to be revitalized in the shower, and we see her literally "coming clean" there. Then we see in silhouette, through the shower curtain, the door creep open and the figure of an older woman raises a large knife. As the curtain is flung open, the music shrieks, replacing all sounds from the characters, and Marion is stabbed repeatedly. In agony, she slumps into the tub as the killer runs out, and we see her reach toward us one final time as if to say, "do something" just before she grabs the shower curtain and, pulling it off its rings, falls to the floor in death. We see blood and water spiraling down the drain, and the camera takes us into the drain, the motif symbolizing the spiral of madness that lurks beneath the civilized surface. The drain is replaced with an eye, obviously dead, and as the camera pans away, we see the body of Marion as she lays half in and half out of the tub, her plans for repentance thwarted. We are taken by the camera to the folded newspaper where she hid the money she had stolen as if to reiterate that she has no chance of righting her wrongs. We hear Norman's voice at the house, seemingly upset after seeing Mother covered in blood. As Norman rushes in to discover the scene, he is clearly horrified, covering his mouth with his hand, which is followed by an emblem of Marion's death as a picture of a songbird falls to the floor. Norman quickly takes action to clean up Mother's mess, and we are left with the impression that Norman is accustomed to cleaning up Mother's messes, perhaps at the expense of being able to address his own mess. In the safety of shadows, Norman disposes of Marion's body, her personal belongings, and her car in a nearby swamp, including the stolen money which he does not realize is in the newspaper he tosses into the trunk at the last minute. Norman returns to the motel to assume his performance as

an ordinary guy in an ordinary place anywhere in America. At this point, the plot shifts to Marion's sister, Lila (Vera Miles), Sam, and a private detective, Milton Arbogast (Martin Balsam), who has been hired by Marion's employer to track her down in order to give her the chance to return the stolen money.

Arbogast discovers the Bates Motel in his search for Marion and becomes suspicious at Norman's mounting anxiety during questioning. Norman, trying hard to "play it straight," contradicts himself, and it is clear that he is not forthcoming. Seen through a queer lens, Norman is failing at performing the role of a "normal" guy, increasing the viewer's sense that he's a closet case. As Arbogast gets closer to the truth — queerly, as Norman is about to be "outed" — Norman/Mother kills the detective and thus continues to conceal his/her secrets. What Norman does not know is that Arbogast has told Lila and Sam about his suspicions, and they venture to the motel to continue to search for answers. Beyond the narrative quest to find Marion, Lila and Sam's confrontation of Norman reads as a heterosexual reaction to the suspicion of someone's homosexuality. Indeed, Norman panics as the pair come closer to ascertaining what has happened at the Bates Motel and, in a desperate attempt to keep his deepest secret, he moves Mother to the basement. Now we see just how handy Norman has been with his taxidermy hobby. He has preserved Mother, who has obviously been dead for quite some time. In the final climactic moments of the film, Norman, in a dress and wig, comes up behind Lila, who has just discovered Mother in the basement. As Norman raises his arm to stab Lila, Sam appears at the last possible second and, acting as a heterosexual *deus ex machina*, tackles Norman. Norman crumples in Sam's arms (above), mouth agape, wig askew, his secrets violently revealed. From a queer perspective, Norman's collapse into Sam's arms signifies briefly allowing himself to touch that part of himself that desires a same-sex encounter. The expression on his face, a queer mix of pain and pleasure, certainly suggests more than simply being stopped from committing another murder.

In the last sequence at the police station, we witness a psychiatrist reviewing Norman's pathology, reflecting the then current belief that sexual difference is illness rather than alternative expression. We discover that Norman killed his mother and her boyfriend because of his jealousy — confirming his sexual desires for Mother. Norman could not separate from Mother, so he stole her body prior to burial and kept it in the house. He assumed her identity in an effort to comfort himself and fulfill his unconscious sexual urges. The final scene has Norman, who has now completely become Mother, draped in a blanket staring wildly at the camera as he thinks, in Mother's voice, about how he/she will demonstrate his/her harmlessness. He has blended his gender and, presumably, he has expunged, or at least resolved, his deviant sexual desires. As the final credits roll, we see Marion's car being pulled from the swamp to expose its secrets. The message is clear that, despite the most extreme efforts to conceal them, in the end all things hidden or unspoken will be revealed.

Conclusion

If, as we have been considering, queer refers to a process of disturbing the norm, then it seems that *Psycho* is, at its heart, a queer film. Not only does it disturb the ordinary, it also uses broad cultural definitions of "normal" in 1950s America to question what is defined as "abnormal," while exposing the presence of darkness and "madness" in all of us — "We all go a little mad sometimes." Hitchcock and his collaborators have set out to make a film that capitalizes on fear (at many levels) to draw the audience into an uneasy space where human potential can include heinous acts.

Hitchcock was a perfectionist when it came to the technical aspects of his films, and *Psycho* was no exception despite the fact that, in some respects, the style was new for him. Several accounts of the making of *Psycho*, including those written by the actors, indicate that the director could be grueling in his demands for just the right angle or an exact tone or shade of light in a scene. As an example, the infamous shower scene took at least seven days to film by most accounts, and the final cut was forty-five seconds from beginning to end. Hitchcock queered conventional filmmaking by insisting on continuous dolly shots that were nearly impossible to design. For instance, the shot of Marion's dead eye was a continuous shot requiring the actor to lay motionless, not breathing or blinking, for several minutes at a time as the camera panned back and then across the floor into the bedroom. The smallest detail, such as the placement of a drop of water on Janet Leigh's face, consumed him. In this regard, as Hall²² points out, Hitchcock was acting queerly as he explored details, contexts, and nuances while reading and evaluating his own work. *Psycho* took many risks, and most of them appear intentional. The film is itself about risks, their consequences, and their rewards.

Psycho posits that identity is multidimensional and shifts within and beyond the contexts where it is constructed and reconstructed, in any space where one defines one's self. Our image of what is wholesome and pure is disrupted as Marion and Norman reveal their secrets to us; secrets that rattle and shock us not only because of what Norman and Marion do, but because we are made to look unblinkingly into who they are, and now we know that we may also be capable of doing — and being — the same things.

Notes

1. Robert Bloch, *Psycho* (New York: River City Press, 1959). In an April 4, 2009 email correspondence with the editor, Stefano's widow shines some light on the pivotal part her husband, who was also noted as the creator of the brilliant *Outer Limits* TV series, played in shaping the film: "[T]he whole first one-third of the film . . . was not in Bloch's novel. [Joseph Stefano] laid out the opening for Hitch in his first meeting, & Hitch leaned forward & said: "We could get a star!" . . . [Stefano] worked with Hitch for over 12 weeks on developing & getting all the details right, so that Saul Bass could storyboard & then Hitch could direct his actors to make one of the most unforgettable films ever made."

2. Stephen Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho* (New York: Debnar Books, 1990).
3. *Ibid*, p. 4.
4. Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York Press, 2003).
5. *Ibid*, p. 43.
6. Donald Hall, *Queer Theories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
7. Sullivan.
8. Deborah Britzman, "Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight", *Educational Theories*, 45(2), 151-165.
9. Rebello, 1990.
10. U.S. Department of State (n.d.), *The Culture of the 1950s*. (Accessed September 11, 2007)
11. *Ibid*.
12. Raymond Durnat, *A Long Hard Look at Psycho* (Trowbridge: Cromwell Press).
13. Hall, 2003.
14. Wood, 1965 quoted in Robert Kolker, *Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 75.
15. Sullivan, 2003.
16. *Ibid*, p. 49.
17. Charles Winecoff, *Split image: The Life of Anthony Perkins* (Boston: Dutton Publishers, 1996).
18. Robello, 1990.
19. Foucault, 1978.
20. *Ibid*, p. 3.
21. Robello, 1990.
22. Hall, 2003.

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