

The Body as Design Project in an 'Order of Pure Decision'

Transformable Bodies in Makeover Shows and Steven Meisel's Fashion Photography

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In a brief but suggestive article about risk and morality from 1993, French political scientist Francois Ewald coins what he somewhat catchy, but also illuminatingly, calls a contemporary *order of pure decision*, an order in which “the nature we are confronting today and that we have chosen as our partner is nothing other than our own double” (Ewald 1993: 225). ‘Nature’ is no longer a sacred objectivity we can refer to. The order of pure decision “can nourish itself only on its own values, and cannot rely on an objectivity that supposedly transcends it” (ibid.). Australian cultural studies scholar Jane Goodall (2000), in her elaboration on Ewald’s term, reasons that, evidently, ethics “comes to the fore as the only means by which we can steer a course through this order of pure decision” (Goodall 2000: 150). Everything, including the body, is transformable and negotiable, and each act – each act on the body – involves judgements and negotiations of a social and ethical nature. Goodall continues that in an order of pure decision

the convention of equating freedom with choice breaks down in a situation where there is no freedom *from* choice. As advances in medical technology are continuously expanding the domain of human decision-making, choice itself becomes an *inescapable obligation* in areas from which it was previously excluded (Goodall 2000: 150-151 – my italics).

Choice-making is inevitable in all areas of life; it is not only the means of individual control (over the body and a whole way of life), but also a burden, an individual obligation with social ramifications and no escape. Therefore, acting in an order of pure decision is profoundly ethical in nature.

Not least the body as human form and biology (physically and physiologically) has become a contested area within this order of pure decision. The body is radically negotiable, increasingly designable and ontologically conceptualized as an ongoing design project, as well in scientific as in mediated and non-mediated social and cultural discourses. It is at the same time regarded as the embodiment of new aesthetic and technological possibilities, new challenges and new risks, a utopian tribute to techno-

logy and individualization and the epitome of a dystopian collapse of boundaries post postmodernism. Thus the material body itself has become an ethical project, and the discussion of the contemporary body is most often discursively inscribed in a vocabulary with references to an idea of the body natural.

In a paradoxical way, the occupation with *body modifications* (Featherstone 2000), *plastic bodies* (Davis 1995), *technical bodies* (Craik 1993) and *customized bodies* (Pitts 2003) and the challenges to the body posed by new technologies (cf. for example Balling 2002) has caused a rhetorical re-invention of the notion of ‘the natural body’. The discussion of and public debates on the modifiable body in contemporary culture are embedded in a discursive revitalization of a nature-culture, or nature-technology, or natural body vs. artificial body dichotomy in order to conceptualize and understand these new ideas about and possibilities for working on the body through new technology. For example, in much of the criticism of cosmetic surgery practices, the body is, surgically constituted as *artificial*, operated on *against nature’s will* as the sacred protector of the soul (cf. Pitts-Taylor 2007), whereas to proponents of the same practices, the “notion of Nature-as-the-ultimate-constraint is replaced by nature-as-something-to-be improved upon” (Davis 1995: 18). Featherstone claims that “[c]ommon to many of the accounts of body modification is the sense of taking control over one’s body, of making a gesture against *the body natural*” (Featherstone 2000: 2 – my italics). Even Goodall, in her discussion of the designable body, uses a phrase like “the will of nature” (Goodall 2000: 149). The same applies to the articles in Balling (2002).

In the visual culture of the past decades, the body has been the object of a range of different experiments with and discussions about transcending the boundaries and constraints of ‘the natural body’ and improving its ‘natural’ capabilities by technological means, put forward theoretically in the 1980s, of course, by Donna Haraway’s seminal postmodern cyborg essay (Haraway 1991 [1985]) and by cyber culture fantasies in the 1990s about a *posthuman condition* and *posthuman bodies* (for example Hayles 1999 and Halberstam & Livingston 1995), but also more recently by a range of scholarly works about body culture, bodily transformations and new (surgical) technology (Featherstone 2000, Pitts 2003, Pitts-Taylor 2007, Fortunati, Katz & Riccini 2003, Balling 2002, Baling & Lippert-Rasmussen 2006). In the media entertainment narratives of the past decade, the camera has penetrated the skin and has produced popular cultural visual imageries of transcended bodily boundaries. Close-ups of the materiality of the inner body, its fluids, tissue and fat abounds in medical shows and cosmetic surgery makeover programmes, which are, on the other hand, mostly about the surgical efforts to diminish its volume or control its anarchic growth. On the one hand, the two different TV genres expose the materiality of the body as chaotic and unformed biology. On the other hand, the shows are about the technological means to surgically control the inner fluid and make it fit into a new and – aesthetically or otherwise – improved design for the individual body.

The whole idea of working on the body as a plastic material and regarding it as a technology that has become *obsolete, not functional or inadequate for the current situation*, as famous body artists like Australian Stelarc and French Orlan (besides a range of scholars within the humanities and computer sciences) have coined it, and that must therefore be subjected to technological modifications, presumes for its radicalism to work a logic of a ‘natural’ or ‘non-artificial’ and finite biological body. A body has now,

under the current conditions, become dysfunctional, obsolete, a burden. For example Stelarc, in relation to his on-going high-tech biology *Extra Ear* project, which he is working on after the virtual *Third Arm* project (a metallic prosthesis) states that

I have always been intrigued about engineering a soft prosthesis using my own skin as a permanent modification of the body architecture. The assumption being that if the body was altered it might mean adjusting its awareness. Engineering an alternate anatomical architecture, one that also performs telematically. (<http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/earonarm/index.html>) (cf. also Farnell 2000)

Even though he declares on his website's front page that human beings have always been prosthetic bodies connected to technology, cyborgs and zombies at one and the same time, the point is that, in this experiment, he takes the idea of the body as cyborg one step further operating as well imaginatively as in reality with organic prostheses instead of metallic. In *The Extra Ear* project, he works with human tissue – his own tissue. In order to improve the material body and enhance its communicative capacities, he is experimenting with the cultivation of a permanent third ear on his arm. He wants at once to improve one of the body's senses and expand on its functionality by transforming it into a techno-organic transmitter, a wireless Internet service immediately connecting him to the wider world. Thus his artistic aim is in a sense to construct an updated, wired 'natural' body where technology and biology have merged organically and provide us with a prototype of a modern idea of the body with new organs:

This project has been about replicating a bodily structure, relocating it and now re-wiring it for alternate functions. It manifests both a desire to deconstruct our evolutionary architecture and to integrate microminiaturized electronics inside the body. We have evolved soft internal organs to better operate and interact with the world. Now we can engineer additional and external organs to better function in the technological and media terrain we now inhabit. (cf. also for a discussion of similar scientific examples Emmeche 2002)

Along a similar vein, performance artist Orlan (b. 1947), who has worked artistically on her own body in surgical body performances since the beginning of the 1990s, constructs on her website a virtual "I" that is also a "me" by means of her invitation to "discover my face" and "click on me" (www.orlan.net). On the front page's large close up of the artist, one can choose to click on the two famous bumps she added to her forehead in the 1990s, on her pupils under the glasses or on her lips. By clicking one alters the colour of the lips and iris or transforms the bumps into multi-coloured glittering skin protrusions. Hence, the artist's face functions at once as a traditional identity sign ('this is Orlan' or 'I am Orlan') and an illustration of who this website belongs to ('this website is mine, Orlan's'). However, at the same time, she voluntarily relinquishes the face as a signifier of individuality and leaves it to the modifying operations of others, transforming the face into a very literal interface. Finally, the large close-up of the face also functions as a strange *index* of the artist as she understands herself; a digital and, hence, designable, transformable identity, at once technological, virtual, and material, real. At once a "self colonized by technological invasion" (Clarke 2000: 190), both surgically aestheticized and computerized, and an ongoing construction site in social interchange and collaboration with visitors.

The Technological Body

Cyber theorist Alluquère Roseanne Stone (1993), in an article written a couple of years before Ewald's, argues that the category of 'nature'

has become nothing more (or less) than an ordering factor – a construct by means of which we attempt to keep technology visible as something separate from our “natural” selves and our everyday lives. In other words, the category “nature”, rather than referring to any object or category in the world, is a strategy for maintaining boundaries for political and economic ends, and thus a way of making meaning (Stone 1991: 102).

Stone emphasizes that the concept of a natural body partakes in a rhetorical operation in contemporary culture more than it actually refers to common, agreed upon bodily characteristics or social and cultural realities. Referring to a 'natural body' as a finite and unchangeable standard rooted in Romanticism (Klausen 2006) is an easy and often ideological or politically justified way of pathologizing the individual decision to optimize the body by means of new technology. On the one hand, it seems that the only way of discussing the optional, transformable design body and conceptualizing differently a new body ontology is through the discursive construction of an opposition between a natural body, on the one hand, and technology, on the other. But the valorization of the poles and their conceptualization as either dichotomies or tensions differ. In some scientific discourses, both within the humanities and the natural sciences, 'nature' is primarily a heuristic term, although with some references to a grounded, agreed upon idea of what 'natural' might refer to. In the technology sceptical discourse, on the other hand, the natural body is always the given, untouched body, whereas the technological body is the artificial, commodified, even freakish body constructed by an unhealthy and perverse culture obsessed with fashion, youth and the stopping of time. These parameters seem to be the ethical point of departure for passing moral judgements on, for example, cosmetic surgery practices. However, like Stone reminded us about a little less than 20 years ago, the prominence of references to 'nature' or the 'natural body' in cosmetic surgery debates may – even though we know that it is an inadequate and simplistic but also highly complex term with a complicated history in science (Klausen 2006) – signal that the many new technological means of affecting and altering the human body and, no less, the decisions to make use of these design possibilities are no easy task. They are embedded in and raise difficult moral and social questions for each individual.

But from a media studies point of view, it should not be forgotten that much of the past few decades' discussions about the possibilities and limitations, the naturalness or artificiality of the transformable design body in popular media culture and the arts is indebted to McLuhan's (2009 [1964]) classical and sophisticated understanding of *the body itself as technology*. In his discussion about the relationship between the body, the media and technology, McLuhan started by dismantling the culturally pervasive nature/culture/technology dichotomy: on one of the first pages of *Understanding Media*, he implied that technology should be regarded as extensions of our bodies or, conversely, that contemporary bodies are by definition technologically enhanced organisms:

During the mechanical age we have extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous

system itself in a global embrace [...] Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extension of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media (McLuhan 2009 [1964]: 3-4).

In Brügger's (1998) excellent reading of the discussion of an ontology of the body that merges technology and bodies in the works of Marcel Mauss, Marshall McLuhan and Paul Virilio, the Danish media researcher emphasizes that, to these three thinkers, media and technology have always, although in different ways, functioned as kinds of bodily prostheses and not as separate and oppositional entities.

But whereas Mauss, in Brügger's reading of the French sociologist and anthropologist's article "Les techniques du corps" from the mid-1930s, uses the word techniques to basically name the social and cultural coding of the body, McLuhan, 30 years later, regards both media and other technological, mechanical devices as well as everyday technical aids – such as shoes (which may make us walk better and quicker than on bare feet) and clothing (which function as extensions of the skin) – as technological extensions of the body's 'natural' capacities. The development of each new media both changes and enhances our sensory capacities.

In the most contemporary thinker, Paul Virilio's works on technology, body and speed, Virilio is occupied with understanding a technological development in which technology gradually becomes incorporated *into* the inner body as visual or otherwise sensory prostheses in order for the body to expand *outwards* and penetrate new spaces. "Vision machines" (Virilio 1994) invalidate the 'natural' perceptual capacity to judge distance and dimension and replace it with the ability to visually penetrate perceptually unknown territory (what Virilio calls the *aesthetics of disappearance*). Thus new technology constitutes the human body as both virtual and real. Just like in Stelarc's artwork, Virilio theorizes about bodies that will increasingly be filled with "*technical organs* which are swallowed or surgically inserted" (Brügger 1998: 19 – my translation and italics) in order to become 'natural' parts of the human body.

The body as design project is a fitting way of conceptualizing and imagining the body in an order of pure decision – an aesthetic and functional artefact, which it is possible to change with the changing of time and fashion. The *design* metaphor is suitable for encompassing the paradoxes of a situation where there is individual freedom to choose (your bodily appearance or your body's functional capacities) – at least if you have the money – but where there is also "no freedom from choice" as Jane Goodall put it. One might object that making the body one's own decision and project and regarding it as a transformable design is nothing new – the body has always functioned culturally as a fashionable object, shaped by fashion as much as shaping fashion (Entwistle 2000). And the idea of the body as machine is not new either (Balling 2002). And yet, an important shift or development has taken place with the advancement of the technological means to alter parts of the body. First in the sense that the body itself has become an ethical project, and second, in the sense that it is increasingly and ever more radically regarded as consisting of separate and interchangeable parts. Impression management through strategic transformations seems in contemporary culture to be at once a solution and a moral obligation, not an option. In this sense and just like Orlan illustrated, the body is both one's own in a radical sense and does not belong to oneself at all.

The Body as Morph

In the second part of this article, I wish to go into two examples of mediated constructions of the body as design. First, I will briefly discuss the construction of the body in cosmetic surgery makeover television from the first half of the decade (shows like *Extreme Makeover* and *The Swan*), which I have been working on for the past few years (cf. for example Jerslev 2008). My second example is American fashion photographer Steven Meisel's significant fashion spreads of female design bodies for *Italian Vogue* from recent years.

In cosmetic surgery makeover programmes, the body is divided into parts and scrutinized under the surgical gaze for its aesthetic deficiencies. Not least the idea of *the body as morph* (Sobchack 2000, Sobchack 2000a, Duckett 2000) functions as a strong and structuring fantasy in the programmes, where the body is constituted as a material form that can quickly and easily be re-modelled in accordance with any wishes. Each new surgical procedure functions as an improvement of an earlier morph and the programmes' staging of the bodily changes as *quick-changes* eliminates any traces of the previous morph. Makeover programmes construct an ideal of a smooth bodily surface without wrinkles or signs of the traces of everyday living in a particular social environment. In addition, the programmes show no scars after surgery – hence the suggestiveness of the computer graphic metaphor, which also encompasses the cosmetic surgical logic that the bodily changes are made independent of time and biology.

The irreversibility of time, and hence, of time's imprint on the body, is countered by a fantasy of infinite, 'morphic' reversibility, smooth and quick transformations. In makeover programmes, the cosmetic morph is not monstrous, as the programmes, just as insistently as they display the body as re-designable morph, finish it off in a sculptural and useful form. The whole point of cosmetic surgery makeover programmes is to argue that the bodily transformations are a means to another end, the production of a self-governing empowered subject, which is now able to overcome the constraints of class and psychological deficits. The improved body is the individual's new social capital, which may lead to a more successful and happy life. It is in that sense that cosmetic surgery is ethically justified in cosmetic surgery makeover programmes.

Regarding the body as design project turns it into a contested geography. In a sense, the contemporary body is in a permanent state of crisis or permanently under stress because it is always under the obligation to be scrutinized for possible updating and re-designs. A body caught in the tension between freedom of choice and no freedom from choice. However, makeover programmes optimistically constitute the body as the means for the remodelling and improvement of the whole life – the gateway to The Good Life. The activity of re-fashioning the body is constituted as identity work and, hence, as both a social obligation and an individual right, the right to work on feeling at home in your body. The programmes constitute identities, which have the right to choose their own bodies and to define themselves not only by their bodies but also by their capacity to decide to work on themselves. This unity of the right body and the good life is of course pushed to its unambiguous extremes in cosmetic surgery makeover programmes, but the same logic is at work in style/beauty makeover programmes such as the famous BBC programme *What Not to Wear*, where the hosts Trinny and Susannah explicitly situate the makeover as a cultural technology for empowering women to empower themselves – as Laurie Ouellette and James Hay (2009) put it – to make it successfully in society. Technology,

the big and small fixes, here constitutes a healthy and efficiently communicating body, healthy because it's efficient, one might say. In the *order of pure decision*, one needs guidance because not only is each individual choice always moral, but the decision to work on oneself is also a moral obligation. This is the logic of makeover shows.

In the August 2005 issue of *Italian Vogue*, American fashion photographer Steven Meisel made an ironic tribute to cosmetic surgery in a fashion editorial narrative called *Makeover Madness* (Jerslev 2007). On more than 40 pages, he used cosmetic surgery scenarios as the backdrop for showing high fashion. In the last photo the model posed as a triumphant, self-confident and powerful *post-op'ed* and totally recovered, totally healthy businesswoman completely inhabiting her new and preciously made over body and parading her bandaged, presumably lifted face like just one more expensive accessory adding value to her bag and sunglasses. Despite the irony and the luxurious, upper-class scenarios, the series constructed makeover processes in much the same manner as the television makeover shows do. Meisel's fashion photographs staged the body as a site of *quick-changes* and *marvellous transformation* (Sobchack 2000, Sobchack 2000a) in the form of fashionable female morphs. The female models were not only posing as women captured in the act of (re)designing their bodies in the most fashionable way they could possibly choose, but they were also made to pose in order to convey a story about their activity as the most *natural* thing in the world. The ironic and critical twist to the *Italian Vogue* fashion narrative was that, in many of the spreads, the models were photographed and styled to look more or less alike, thus forming what Anne Balsamo (1996) so eloquently has coined *assembly line beauty*. In *Makeover Madness*, the designed body is exactly a fashionable body. It is contemporary and new but not unique, the result of deliberate choice and yet the choice of the same.

In many of Meisel's narrative fashion spreads for *Italian Vogue* for the past half decade, Meisel has constructed the fashionable female body as larger-than-life cyborg-like appearances. In his stylized photographs, the designed body, flawless and generalized, is staged as frozen technologized morph, not the result of but the very embodiment of digital image manipulation processes. Like the models in the *Killer Vogue* editorial for *Italian Vogue* September 2005 or the uncannily similar mannequins in his *Red Alert* series (*Italian Vogue* August 2004), Meisel's fashioned female bodies are often situated in a field between living and dead, between animate and inanimate, between model and mannequin, real and virtual at the same time. In Meisel's photographic body fantasies, the body is at once acted upon and transformed into a computer-manipulated female appearance that bears only a vague resemblance to its owner or may easily be doubled into an uncanny likeness to its same.

The visual style in the *Killer Vogue* series points self-consciously to the digitized image production process and it constructs the fashionable designer items – the clothes and the model's body – as identical digitized wonders. As such, the bodies are no more human than their virtual surroundings. Meisel had the models styled and made up as dolls or mannequins and pose in front of a green screen. In the digital postproduction process, the design firm *EyeBallNYC* combined the photographs with the company's own digitally produced backdrops assembled from different photographs of New York to form suggestive noir scenarios. The *Killer Vogue* spreads show fantasies of spectacular and wasted bodies, beautiful and corps-like at the same time, tossed eloquently or posing triumphantly on piles of urban decay and decomposition.

A master of using a wide array of popular cultural body imageries and narratives for his commercial fashion photographs, Meisel has – like other contemporary fashion photographers, characterized as *master manipulators* by Jopling (2002) – again and again constituted the ideal body as the technological body: a digitally manipulated, impenetrable, smooth and shiny female hard-body with extremely long and slender proportions, which duplicates the shiny and extremely sharp hyper-real image surfaces of the Master Manipulators' photographs. However, after the *Makeover Madness* editorial, Meisel has in a strange way turned to a more pessimistic vision of the contemporary body in crisis. In a range of editorials for *Italian Vogue* and American magazines *W* and *V* since 2005, he has created fashionable scenarios involving situations of sickness, death, imprisonment and transgressive exposure. Since 2005, his fashionable design bodies seem more the object of and trapped in the visual regime of an order of pure decision than the triumphant agent of its multiple possibilities for (re)design. Meisel at once creates visual scenarios that touch upon the flip side of the condition of the body in an order of pure decision and pursues the commercially successful aim of contemporary non-mainstream fashion photography: provocative spectacles rather than beauty.

Like the *Makeover Madness* editorial, Meisel's photographic narratives add a critical comment to the fashion world's obsession with the designer body, at the same time as they are situated firmly within the field of commercial, 'edgy' fashion aesthetics and promote expensive designer items. In *Supermods Enter Rehab* (*Vogue Italia* July 2007), he works through a fantasy of the addicted, vulnerable and imprisoned (model) who has lost control over her body; in *State of Emergency* (*Vogue Italia* September 2006), we find the violated body. In the spreads, Meisel places his usual morphed hard bodies in humiliating scenarios, posing as if submitted to the harsh scrutiny of airport security guards or situations of deprivation of individual freedom by police officers clad in riot gear. However, in the series' last photographs, the model has taken up shooting lessons, seemingly in order to master self-defence. The series thus mimics popular cultural narratives about humiliated individuals who take the law into their own hands.

The *Silent* editorial (*Vogue Italia* August 2008) pays homage to the late Yves Saint Laurent. The spreads stage melodramatic and dramatic situations from a funeral and show the mourning, crying body out of control in a series of black-and-white shoots. Male models console female models and grieving females cling hysterically to graves, crying their eyes out, even pose picturesque, dead-like on a grave. In *Live on the Web* (*Vogue Italia* January 2007), the theme is the monitored body. Not least by means of the photographs' grainy video surface aesthetic and the construction of the frames like webcam interfaces, the spreads mimic males and females posing for their private webcams in intimate situations. Some are having a good time, whereas others seem to be involuntarily trapped in the gaze of the camera they have apparently set up themselves. *Law and Order* (*W* magazine August 2009) shows the imprisoned body in a series of photographs mimicking mug shots, shots from a women's prison and snapshots from the trashy life of young female juvenile delinquents. In some of the spreads, the styling shows models clad according to a British lower class style, whereas in others the models flash the expensive dresses in photographs taken of the models behind prison bars, on trashy toilets, in a prison courtyard taken from the other side of the fence, in a prison's visitors room, and so on.

Finally, in the series *Dogging* in *V Magazine* (November/December 2008), the naked body poses as if it were captured off guard. In the series, which was originally meant for

Italian Vogue but refused because of its audacity and then sold to American *V Magazine*, Meisel seemingly used night vision cameras to stage an impression of voyeuristically capturing real scenes of sexual activity. On the first page of the series, he explains that *Dogging* is a

British expression for participating in sexual acts in a semi-public place (usually a secluded car park or a forest preserve) or watching others do so. Often there are more than two participants. As watching is encouraged, voyeurism and exhibitionism are heavily associated with dogging. The people taking part often meet either randomly or arrange to meet up beforehand on the Internet.

The models pose as if they were not posing in the photographs, which borrow a contemporary trendy snapshot aesthetic. The pale-green colour grading provided by the night vision camera makes the half-naked bodies appear vulnerable, thin and unnaturally pale, caught in forbidden acts. The ambiguous semi-pornographic mock-realist scenarios constitute the body as being captured by an uninvited visitor's gaze.

In all these examples, the vision is not of up-dated designer bodies, but fantasies of fragile disempowered bodies more or less exposed to different media technologies, the webcam, the voyeuristic night vision camera, the camera inside the otherwise closed institution, deprived of their freedom to choose.

Concluding Remarks

Fashion photography is of course, by definition, the very epitome of designed bodies, just like computerized, airbrushed, modifications of bodies are used everywhere in fashion magazines. But even though the genre, no matter what, constitutes 'off guard' as yet another pose and an image aesthetics, the narratives in some of the more edgy fashion editorials like Meisel's may show that, at least when it comes to the fashioned body, choice and bodily self-mastery are perhaps not really an option or not an easy option in an order of pure decision. They may also make us repeat that the mediated body is also a moral arena, which may easily be subjected to conventionalized, stereotypically gendered and increasingly commercialized ideas of design.

James Hay and Laurie Ouellette (2008) argue that (style/beauty) makeover shows convey a "can-do philosophy that everyone can make small improvements by sticking to shopping regimens designed to conceal deficiencies and highlight "assets"" (Hay & Ouellette 2008: 116). Pathologizing the surgical body or the bodily morph does not take into consideration that aesthetic self-mastery is no unimportant thing in contemporary society, that it may procure valuable strategic capital. But one could also argue that the makeover programmes are symptoms of a *must-do* logic. They are not about what you *could* do to yourself but what you *should* do to yourself, what you are obliged to do to yourself – within a rather narrow aesthetic normative framework, that is. Makeover shows argue that a beautiful body is a functional body, whether surgically modified or re-fashioned by other means. Meisel's photographs at once constitute and pay tribute to an aesthetic version of the technologized design body. His latest editorials, on the other hand, may remind us that bodily agency might not be a choice at all.

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