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Uma entrevista com Claudia Gorbman

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Resumo

Entrevista com Claudia Gorbman, professora da Universidade de Tacoma, em Washington (EUA), e autora de um dos mais importantes estudos sobre o uso da música no cinema, o livro *Unheard Melodies*, baseado em sua tese de Doutorado e publicado originalmente em 1987. Entre outros assuntos, Gorbman comenta o estado atual das pesquisas nos campos da música e do som de filmes e fala sobre tendências importantes de usos de música, voz e efeitos sonoros nos filmes contemporâneos.

Palavras-chave: Entrevista; Claudia Gorbman; Som de filme; Música de filme.

Abstract

An interview with Claudia Gorbman, professor at Tacoma University, in Washington, and author of *Unheard Melodies*, published in 1987. Among other issues, Gorbman comments on the current state of research in film music and film sound, and talks about new trends of music, voice and sound effects use in contemporary films.

Keywords: Interview; Claudia Gorbman; Film sound; Film music.

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Entre conhecedores de música e som no cinema, o nome de Claudia Gorbman praticamente dispensa apresentações. Uma das mais destacadas integrantes da primeira geração de teóricos a gerar pesquisadores especialistas na área, em meados dos anos 1970, Gorbman tornou-se conhecida por ser autora de um dos mais importantes estudos sobre o uso da música no cinema. O livro *Unheard Melodies*, baseado em sua tese de Doutorado e publicado originalmente em 1987, deu origem a uma das primeiras teorias consistentes sobre o tema e rendeu inúmeros desdobramentos e debates. Professora da Universidade de Tacoma, em Washington (EUA), Gorbman estudou Francês e cursou Mestrado e Doutorado em Literatura, antes de dedicar-se integralmente ao estudo da música no cinema.

O prestigiado livro de 1987, que ainda não recebeu uma segunda edição e chega a ser vendido por mais de 200 dólares em lojas de livros usados, está longe de ser o único feito acadêmico da autora. Ao longo de uma carreira de quatro décadas, Gorbman já publicou mais de 60 artigos e ensaios, sempre tratando dos usos da música em filmes. O conhecimento profundo da língua francesa e a intimidade com a área do *film sound* lhe fizeram, também, criar uma relação de trabalho bem sucedida com o compositor e teórico francês Michel Chion, outro craque no tema. Gorbman traduziu para o inglês quatro dos livros escritos pelo professor da Universidade de Paris 3, e ao longo dos anos os dois desenvolveram uma amizade genuína.

Pouco traduzida no Brasil (em língua portuguesa há um único ensaio escrito por ela, sobre o canto amador presente em filmes contemporâneos, disponível no livro "Som + Imagem", lançado em 2012 pela editora 7 Letras), Gorbman se mostrou prontamente disponível quando abordada com o pedido de entrevista. Já que não poderíamos estar juntos pessoalmente para a conversa, ela mesma sugeriu que o bate-papo fosse conduzido por e-mail, a partir de uma primeira rodada de perguntas, que poderia ser sucedida por tantas rodadas sucessivas quanto achássemos necessário. A atenção que dedicou a cada resposta somente foi igualada pela disposição de colaborar com a rapidez do processo de troca de e-mails e edição do texto, que durou pouco mais de três semanas.

Nas páginas a seguir, Claudia Gorbman comenta o estado atual das pesquisas

nos campos da música e do som de filmes, sugere novos autores e pesquisas, e fala sobre tendências importantes de usos da música nos filmes contemporâneos, como a utilização constante de canções e o desaparecimento de fronteiras rígidas entre a produção de música e efeitos sonoros. Além disso, explica como a relação profissional com Chion evoluiu para os estágios de amizade e admiração, e desvenda o motivo pelo qual seu livro tão importante não foi ainda reeditado em 30 anos – sem deixar de sublinhar que, apesar de lisonjeada, acha absurdo o preço cobrado por ele nos sebos dos Estados Unidos.

REBECA: You are part of the first generation of film researchers that gave us experts in film sound and film music. Until then, though many classical film theorists had written generally on sound (Sergei Eisenstein and Siegfried Kracauer, for instance), none of them had developed a consistent body of work. Why do you think that film sound and film music took so long to receive prominent attention? And why did that happen in the 1970s, and not in another period?

CG: Film studies as an academic discipline in the US was born in the mid-1960s. Many university film curricula arose in literature departments and studied films much as literature courses study novels. But very early on, the new approach was to emphasize cinema as a visual art, separate and distinct from theater or the novel; film studies passionately discovered the cinema-specific arts of mise-en-scene, editing, and camerawork. Film courses focused primarily on the films of the auteurs around whom Andrew Sarris in the US, and many critics in France, were organizing film history; the excitement of studying films was rooted in understanding film style—visual style as a major aspect of the "content" of movies.

Not until the early 1970s did film studies turn to semiotics, structuralism, psychoanalysis, and most enduringly important, the study of ideology—the social meanings of movies and the way they embody and transmit these meanings and values. So the 1960s and 70s witnessed revolutions in approaches to studying and learning from cinema—auteurism, semiotics, structuralism, Marxism, feminism.

The study of film sound and music awaited its turn until the later 1970s for a number of reasons. One major factor is that film scholars intent on examining the "big picture" of how films convey meaning, were "deaf" to cinema's sounds because of their own training in this "visual" médium, and their lack of sonic and musical ears. Film music really did consist of "unheard melodies," for critics as well as normal audiences! The great film semiotician Christian Metz analyzed a musical sequence in Jacques Rozier's film *Adieu Philippine* without mentioning the music. And the editors of the journal *Screen* examined the political and social values embedded in and conveyed by John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) through a close reading of the film—but with the glaring omission of music, which is one of the movie's most obviously ideologically laden elements. To study film music or sound requires familiarity with disciplines that were peripheral to the interests of film scholars until a kind of normalization of the field, and a deepening of scholarly investigations, in the 1980s.

REBECA: One of the first attempts to create a taxonomy of film sounds came from an article of yours, "Teaching the Soundtrack," published in 1976. That text divided film sounds into three categories: diegetic sound, metadiegetic sound and nondiegetic sound. Since then, categories were expanded and problematized by many researchers such as Robyn Stilwell and Michel Chion. Do you consider it is possible nowadays to create and articulate globally an efficient taxonomy in our field of study?

CG: This is an interesting question. One reads countless essays that make a case for this or that new term to describe a given phenomenon of film sound or a previously unnoticed distinction. All these terms are worthy, because they all teach us something about the way sound works in the movies. Rick Altman's pioneering work on the history of sound in film established a number of terms and ideas that are very valuable. Michel Chion is perhaps the wildest poet of new terms for film sound, coming up with new metaphors, inventing portmanteau words, and imaginatively adapting terms from ancient languages to make us aware of

audiovisual phenomena we have not consciously noticed before. He has terms to distinguish the difference in timbre between a voice whose speaker is facing you and a voice whose source is someone facing away from you; he invents a term for characters unseen on screen but whose offscreen voices exert a power over the film's action and other characters; and so forth. I am not sure how many of his terms will be adopted on a permanent basis, but the words are available now, waiting for whoever wants them!

In the US at least, the clearest and most widely accepted taxonomy for film sound is now to be found in the chapter on sound in David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's textbook, *Film Art: An Introduction* (currently in its 11th edition); this chapter does a great service for film students by summarizing important work in the field and making it coherent and useful.

REBECA: Since the study of film sound is relatively young and strongly interdisciplinary, researchers might refer sometimes to the same phenomenon using different terms. Do you believe that a unified vocabulary would make the dialogue easier among researchers from different disciplines? What could consolidate a grammar for the field of film sound? And do you believe this would be really useful, or actually diversity is more beneficial than harmful?

CG: I personally don't think it is necessary to try unify the vocabulary. We all understand one another eventually. Those in a shared community of interest (in this case, people studying sound in audiovisual settings) develop a shared language.

For example, the term *diegetic* has been of very good use to scholars since the 1970s. Debates regarding diegetic vs. nondiegetic music and sounds continue to be crucial. Some people argue that since music crosses the line between diegetic and nondiegetic so often, especially in current filmmaking/media, the distinction is no longer a useful one. Others have agreed that music frequently crosses this narrative border, but that the distinction between the two narrative levels is thereby

all the more interesting. It matters to me whether the beautiful orchestral waltz heard at the beginning of Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) is "coming from nowhere" (nondiegetic) and is the film's comment on the elegant couple preparing to go out for the evening, or whether the young doctor is playing it on his own stereo system (diegetically) and the music is *his* choice. The second case turns out to be true… although Kubrick makes a kind of joke of it, since the music's sound quality, even in rooms far from his stereo, is too magnificent for diegetic music!

I am straying from the point a little here, but I want to say that the terms "source music" and "commentary" or "atmosphere" music, used by people in the industry, are not as precise for my purposes as "diegetic" and "nondiegetic." "Source" and "commentary" confuse the music's *position in narrative space* with its *function*, while "diegetic" and "nondiegetic" refer strictly to space. This is why the community of scholars has used the latter words. Other words are very useful, but whether you say "internal sound" or "subjective sound" to describe a sound that is apparently inside a character's head, and not in the objective film space, does not seem as important, does it?

Language is a tool of its community of users to name things and concepts. As the study of film and media sound evolves, different things and concepts will be identified and named. The effort to impose one vocabulary on an exciting and varied conversation seems authoritarian to me. Even the Academie Francaise, which has been legislating the purity of the French language's vocabulary and grammar since 1635, can't control thousands of words like "picnic" and "computer" which have crept into French: language belongs to those who use it.

REBECA: Some researchers, particularly Rick Altman, have been trying for some time to create some kind of film sound notation system that could enable the development of visual and more accurate methods of analysing the soundtracks. Coming from a field of study where notations are so useful, how do you feel such a method could contribute to film sound studies?

CG: There is a point at which deciphering a notation system becomes far more

complicated than simply watching a film segment. I have touched on this problem on two occasions. Many years ago, regarding music, I wrote an article about Maurice Jaubert's music in Jean Vigo's *Zéro de conduite* (1933). In that essay (which became chapter 6 of *Unheard Melodies*) I "notated" a sequence by means of a reduced score juxtaposed with still shots from the film (this has been done now by many people), but I also noted the inadequacies of this solution. I wrote, "What is relevant to the description of a scene and its music [and sounds]—short of another screening of the scene itself?" I referred to the "dilemma of notation," since any aspect of music, sounds, or the image might be pertinent to the analysis being done, and music notation is so inadequate to what might be really going on in the scene.

Second, just last year, in an analysis of Philip Seymour Hoffman's voice in Paul Thomas Anderson's *The Master* (2012), I discussed the difficulty of notating a speaking voice, with all its inflections, its rhythms and pitches and timbres, the words it speaks, the accent in which the words are spoken, the changing expressions on the face that emits it, the visual editing of the scene, and so forth. In the *Master* article, I concluded that any notation system would be cumbersome indeed—and unnecessary, since we can now extract video segments from films so easily. Readers of scholarly discussions and analyses don't need to grapple with a new and complicated notation system when they can simply watch the real thing. The "notation" can now be the reproduction itself—accompanied by clear, evocative writing that deepens our understanding through argument. At least, this is how I see the issue right now.

REBECA: Recently, I heard an experienced sound designer say, in a lecture in Brazil, that he has never used or heard academic expressions like "diegesis" be pronounced during a job in a post production facility. He was using that as an example for what he sees as a chasm between professional sound crews and film sound researchers, and he considered the work of theoretical researchers as hardly useful for anyone who creates sound films.

That approach has been endorsed by many students in our classroom. What do you think about it?

CG: I have not experienced this divide except at the most superficial level. It is true that scholars use the term "diegetic music" instead of "source music" (the most common term among movie composers and soundmen in the US), and sound designers might want to talk about the PS4 Audio Mastering Suite and the degrees to which MIDI mock-up recordings can emulate the sound of a live orchestra. But aside from their differing vocabularies, scholars and composers have much to say to one another—we scholars, especially, learn from the practitioners, since they are the magicians!

For example, personally speaking, I had the good fortune to attend annual meetings of the Film Music Society in the 1980s in Los Angeles, which featured memorable presentations, performances, and discussions between scholars and notable Hollywood composers including David Raksin and Elmer Bernstein. A conference I attended in Vienna in the 1990s blended film music scholars Kathryn Kalinak, Caryll Flinn, and me with composer Leonard Rosenman and soundman Francois Musy, and the ensuing dialogues were so illuminating. For a few years Philip Brophy in Melbourne hosted spectacular conferences that freely mixed practitioners and scholars. The great sound designer Walter Murch was very happy to write the introduction to the English translation of Chion's *Audio-Vision*. A book I co-edited with John Richardson, *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (2013), included valuable and well-informed contributions by composers and sound people from film, TV, and gaming, including the composer Carter Burwell. In London, the annual "School of Sound" is a very well-attended conference whose presenters always include a mix of practitioners, critics, and academics. I only hope your students can experience the enthusiasm and mutual discovery that can take place when scholars and practitioners get together, ignore the artificial boundaries of terminology, and share ideas.

REBECA: You wrote one of the most influential books on film music. It was

released in 1987 and has influenced a whole theory about the uses of music in classical Hollywood movies. However, the book went out of print and has never been reissued, reaching cost up to $200 in used book stores. We have two questions about it: (1) Why hasn't the book had a second edition? Have you considered the idea? (2) The notion of 'unheard melodies' can be applied to the music used in films outside Hollywood? And to what extent is this theory valid for the use of music in contemporary cinema?

CG: *Unheard Melodies* has been a useful work for the study of film music because it is short and clear. (But it is not worth $200 per copy!) It began as my PhD thesis. Back in 1978, the people who were going to be judging my thesis for my doctorate were two professors of literature (English and French) and one professor of music (who found the idea of studying film music amusing and novel). I began by summing up everything that had been thought or written about music for films until that point, and then attempted to lay out some ideas of how film music works and what it can do. Later, for the book, I focused on classical Hollywood movies because film scholars in the 1970s had articulated the parameters of the classical Hollywood model and it seemed important to show how music scoring fit in with that model. Since *Unheard Melodies*' publication in 1987, many incisive, historically-informed, detail-rich studies of specific composers, films, genres, periods, national cinemas, and directors have shown how diverse, nuanced, and even full of contradictions this classical scoring actually is. All the same, it seems to me that the book's account of the classical model still provides a very good starting point for studying film music.

But the dominant system has itself changed enormously since the 1930s-50s era. While classical scoring practices are still very much in evidence (John Williams being a major practitioner), many other approaches to film music composition, mixing, and editing have emerged, so that virtually any imaginable use of music can now be found in movies. Some of the major revolutions in film scoring practices caused by technological change (multitrack, Dolby, composition using synthesizers and MIDI, interactive music for games, etc.) and changes in taste and

audience (popular song recordings, ethnic musics, electronic dance music, etc.) have profoundly changed the possibilities of music in film. Perhaps most notably—and not foreseen in the 20th-century book *Unheard Melodies*—have been the prominence of song scoring, atmospheric music, and the often blurred distinction between music and electronic sound effects.

A new, second edition of *Unheard Melodies* is indeed in progress—thank you for asking! While I will preserve the historical integrity of the main original text, the second part of the new edition will eliminate the old analysis chapters, update the field a little bit, and introduce sample analyses of films more relevant to the 21st century. I devote considerable attention to the many uses of songs.

REBECA: The use of songs is indeed a large factor in the contemporary use of music in films. This use seems to be seen now even as an authorial stamp of some directors, the most famous of them probably Quentin Tarantino. Do you believe this notion of the director as author of the soundtrack of the film may be a passing trend?

CG: Not at all. Filmmakers and (in the US at least) the makers of television series as well can use songs in remarkable ways. Tarantino might be one of the flashier directors in his deployment of songs: In *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), a movie set in World War II, we suddenly hear David Bowie on the soundtrack; in *Django Unchained* (2012), set in the Slavery-era American South, it's James Brown and 2pac; and a scene to which Tarantino applies Stealer's Wheel's "Stuck in the Middle with You" in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) is one of the most outrageous and famous moments in cinema. This mark of the auteur through the deployment of songs was first prominent with Kubrick, I would say, but became more widespread when new music technologies made music more portable—e.g., the cassette tape, the CD, the iPod, and beyond. In the new world where people could carry around their music, where music became separable from the concert hall, arena, and living room, it seems to have occurred to more filmmakers to carry their own music into their films too. The nondiegetic song on movie soundtracks became very popular

in the 1980s in movies for younger audiences, and remember that by 1986, *Top Gun,* the biggest movie of the year, had that soundtrack with Kenny Loggins' "Danger Zone." The really creative use of songs took off in this period: Kubrick still of course, Scorsese, Ridley Scott's*Thelma and Louise*-- and as you say, many of the next generation of auteur directors really took songs as a special resource with which to be creative—Paul Thomas Anderson, Spike Lee, the Coen brothers, and many more. And let's not forget others in other countries: Varda, Kaurismaki, Wenders… I do not see this trend slowing down.

REBECA: Your groundbreaking book has encouraged dialogues with scholars not necessarily linked to Film Studies, for example, Nicholas Cook (Musicology) and Annabel Cohen (Cognitive Psychology). However, although Film Music has increased as a specific research field, authors such as David Neumeyer and James Buhler point out that "film music remains at the periphery of its parent disciplines" (Film Studies and Musicology) due to its irreducible interdisciplinarity. What do you think about that?

CG: I agree with Neumeyer and Buhler on this point. The obstacle of this irreducible interdisciplinarity is a bit less daunting than it was, say, twenty years ago. Many younger film music scholars, coming mostly from music or musicology departments (and this includes former students of David Neumeyer himself), are much better attuned to the vocabulary and concepts of film studies as a discipline. And on the other side, a good number of film and communications scholars who have passions for music, and extensive knowledge of it, have contributed enormously to film music study. Senior scholars who have bridged this gap particularly well are Martin Marks and Robynn Stilwell from the musicology side, and Rick Altman and Jeff Smith from the film studies side. At present, younger scholars are making great strides with theoretically-informed historical research. Musicologist Hannah Lewis and communications scholar Jennifer Fleeger, for example, are among those who are doing brilliant work on early sound film in the US and France, on intermediality, and on the singing voice and perceptions of

gender (incidentally, please forgive the America-centricity of these comments. The field is now extensive in a global sense too, with active film music research being done at universities in east and South Asia, Scandinavian countries, France, Italy, Portugal, the UK, and Germany, Australia and New Zealand, Brazil and Argentina, in a new journal in Russia, and so many other centers around the world.)

REBECA: Do you think that nowadays, in a scenario where - in addition to your constant theoretical contribution - there are many other authors (e.g. Robynn Stilwell, Daniel Goldmark, Caryl Flinn, Kathryn Kalinak, Anahid Kassabian, Sergio Miceli, Ronald Rodman, Kevin J. Donnelly and aforementioned David Neumeyer and Jim Buhler) we can think about a History of Film Music Theory?

CG: Yes. The work of all these scholars and many more calls for assembling such a history. And since film music itself evolves quickly, as do the modes of listening (or not) to it, theorizing it is necessarily a constantly moving target. In ten years, what will film itself look like? Will it substantially differ from the cable television series we can stream now, and don't many of us watch most of our movies on our televisions or other screens? These major shifts in demographics, technologies, viewing habits, and industrial contexts are only beginning to be discussed in a systematic way. And tomorrow's "audiovisual composers", influenced by video games and all other media, will surely introduce radically new material for our eyes and ears. How about interactivity? This already exists in many music videos, and many DVDs of silent films now give a choice of two or more musical scores. What do these new resources mean for theorizing music in audiovisual narrative? (A new book edited by Kevin Donnelly and Ann-Kristin Wallengren, *Today's Sounds for Yesterday's Films*, makes an excellent start in considering multiple scoring for silent film.)

REBECA: On the other hand, we can notice that many theoretical approaches were developed to analyze classical Hollywood film music.

Gradually, issues about the use of pre-existing music in movies, pop and modern film scores, filmed music in musicals and/or documentaries are emerging. In your opinion, which subjects about music in films need further investigation?

CG: Any film music scholar should be interested in all of these aspects of music in films. I have said that the very lowest and simplest music in a film can be significant, and David Neumeyer's recent work has also affirmed that all music in a film is film music.

Fortunately, the issue of pre-existing music has been well explored and continues to be—by Anahid Kassabian and others regarding popular music, by Jeongwon Joe and others regarding opera, and by Robynn Stilwell and others regarding genres, cycles, and specific works. Recently I myself have been writing about the moments when characters in dramatic fiction films simply start singing the way we do in life (with no big orchestra coming in, as in musicals). I've argued that these humble moments—for example, Bill Murray at the end of the recent movie *St. Vincent* (2014) sings tunelessly along with Bob Dylan's "Shelter from the Storm", and Annette Bening and Mark Ruffalo in *The Kids Are Alright* (2010) amateurishly sing the Joni Mitchell song "All I Want" around a dining table—can be *the semiotically richest kind of film music that exists*: these song performances occur in a realistic dramatic context, they evoke the cultural moment and artist that originated them and bring those associations into the present story, and they usually comment on or complicate the dramatic scene. And this is just one case of the overlooked complexities of film music. As I've already mentioned, the historical work now being done, involving intensive use of archives and new theoretical models, is enriching our understanding of film music by leaps and bounds.

REBECA: Since your brilliant article "Artless Singing" was translated to Portuguese, students and researchers (including us) are using it a lot. In your opinion, is it possible to think about 'artless singing' in documentaries or this idea was exclusively developed to be considered in fiction films?

CG: It would be interesting to see how this idea is applied to documentaries. My original idea has to do with characters in fiction films: the trope of artless singing is used to various narrative purposes—to convey aspects of character, to advance the story, to create irony, etc. – but let us see what you come up with as people in documentaries sing!

REBECA: When did you get in contact with Michel Chion´s work? To what extent does his phenomenologically oriented approach dialogue with yours?

CG: I encountered Michel Chion's work in the early 1990s and translated the first of five of his books in 1994 (*Audio-Vision*). I was impressed by the richness of his imagination and insights: here was a rare film critic whose ideas would be seized upon by academics. Chion spent many years developing his craft as a critic—for *Cahiers du cinéma* and other journals in France, and also through many years of university teaching in Paris—and he is a restless intellectual who's deeply read in literary classics, science fiction, philosophy, psychoanalysis… He brought fresh, original, profound ideas to his many writings, and I was so pleased to be able to translate some of his vast work for Anglophone readers. (I love the process of translating, especially when Michel is the author—we have developed an extensive correspondence over each project and we have become close friends over the years.)

I am sure that his work has influenced my own. It is difficult not to see and hear films differently, more richly, when you read his observations, even if you do not agree with everything he observes. Another effect of reading Chion is that I am no longer interested in demonstrating my academic credentials by using complex language; like him, I like to make ideas as transparent as possible.

In developing an analysis or article, I tend to begin with the *experience* of given films, what this experience feels like and why, and to extrapolate from this level of experience that is sensual, intuitive, often irrational. I am not certain if this emphasis has come from Chion, or from the normal process of becoming older and wishing to plumb the mysteries of the film experience. (At a roundtable of

famous literary theorists at Indiana University around 1980, a surprising question came from the audience: “Why did you choose to study literature?” The greatest scholars, caught off guard, paused and spoke as if they were small children, able to evoke the magical delights of discovering literature…) This lack of the usual academic blinders is something I most admire in Chion’s work.

REBECA: Since the 1970s, the use of sound effects in movies has expanded and sophisticated intensely. Did this trend affect the art of scoring and/or the place of music within the films?

CG: Absolutely. Especially in popular films, the mix of sound effects and music has become very prominent in film scoring, such that it’s impossible to tell if the composer or the sound effects department is responsible for the sounds we hear. Low rumblings in the rear surrounds, rhythmically repeated effects, electronic tones, whooshes, percussive sounds and reverb, and above all, sampled sounds have been enabled by digital means in the creation of soundtracks. Not all film composers and flimmakers are interested in the newly expanded music soundtrack, but it’s a highly interesting and widespread development that has already significantly changed the sonic landscape of film.
The advent of digital publishing has occurred just in time, too: it would be very difficult for scholars interested in this new mode of scoring to reproduce such soundtracks in musical notation, so scholarly articles can now include video excerpts to illustrate the arguments being made about specific films and their sounds. This is an exciting time for the study of expanded musical soundtracks.

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