Tracing women's agency in Swedish film history and beyond

An introduction

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This anthology recovers forgotten aspects of women's work and memory, tracing women's film work through the lens of Swedish film history, with a few forays into international film ventures. Using a variety of methods and approaches, including careful study of previously neglected archival material, lived experiences, interviews, and theoretical reflections on feminist historiography, the book explores themes of women's agency and (lack of) visibility in a cultural context very different to Hollywood, thus providing readers with a healthy counterweight to the dominance of Anglo-American material in film scholarship published in English.

In Sweden, as in most small European film-producing nations, film-making is subsidized by the state. Since its inauguration in 1964, the Swedish Film Institute (Svenska filminstitutet) has distributed public funding to Swedish film production. This government-funded foundation also serves as the main custodian of Swedish cinema heritage through its archive, where all films that have been shown in Swedish cinemas are deposited and preserved. It is thus an institution of paramount importance for anyone keen to understand Swedish film culture. In recent years, the Swedish Film Institute has managed to generate significant international interest in Swedish film culture in terms of gender and representation because of the gender equality measures implemented by the foundation's current CEO, Anna Serner.[1] By making frequent appearances at international film

festivals, Serner has communicated the Swedish Film Institute's aim to make key film professions (director, producer, and screenwriter) less dominated by one gender, coining catchy phrases like '50/50 by 2020'. The widespread revelations of discrimination and sexual harassment by the #MeToo movement has boosted international interest in film industry policy strategies for gender equality, and thus in Swedish film.[2] Serner's '50/50 by 2020' mantra has been particularly successful; it has been adopted as the title for the European support fund Eurimages' gender equality strategy for the period 2018–2020,[3] and is used in web campaigns demanding change in Hollywood as well as in French cinema.[4] While Serner's outspoken support for and implementation of gender equality measures are significant, it is misleading to suggest—as did the headline of a 2017 newspaper article, 'Anna Serner: The woman who changed a film industry'—that the increasing number of women directing Swedish films in the 2010s is Serner's individual achievement.[5] As early as 2000, the government charged the Swedish Film Institute with a mission to promote equality, and since 2006 the institution has officially worked to achieve an equal share of women and men in specific production roles (director, scriptwriter, and producer). In their introduction to *Making Change: Nordic Examples of Working Towards Gender Equality in the Media*, a 2014 publication designed to provide an overview of information on gender equality in Nordic media, the editors observe that being at the forefront of gender equality internationally forms part of the official self-image of the Nordic nation-states.[6] Furthermore, the reason that gender equality in the film industry is a political question at all has historical roots in the women's movement of the 1970s, when Swedish film workers organized to demand change.[7] Even though this collection of essays deals with films made before gender equality became a key objective in Swedish film funding, the book is thus of interest to international readers curious about Swedish film culture following #MeToo and '50/50 by 2020', since its second part is focused specifically on the legacy of the 1970s women's movement. Furthermore, the contemporary association

between Swedish film and feminism makes Swedish film history a compelling case study for expanding the horizon of Anglophone scholarly research on women's agency in a film industrial context beyond the dominant Anglo-American focus.

The original impetus for publishing these essays was an international symposium entitled *Making the Invisible Visible in a Digital Age* that Tytti Soila and I co-organized with Jannike Åhlund and Kajsa Hedström of the Swedish Film Institute in Stockholm in November 2014. At this event, scholars interested in feminism and film historiography convened to discuss the Swedish Film Institute's web portal *Nordic Women in Film*, a unique knowledge bank for researchers and general audiences featuring research and information on women working in the Nordic film industries. Representatives from Nordic research institutions, archives, film schools, and organizations such as Women in Film and Television (Wift) met with internationally renowned film scholars for a series of presentations, screenings, and discussions. Less than a year before the event, the *Women Film Pioneers Project* had been launched as a collaborative digital research resource on women active in the period of silent cinema around the world, and authors who had contributed to that project, including one of its founding editors, Jane Gaines, presented their research at the Stockholm symposium.[8] The launch of two new important initiatives for providing digital access to research shaped by feminist strategies and perspectives made for interesting debates, and at the end of the symposium the organizers concluded that the important themes raised in discussion would benefit from being developed in greater depth in writing. And this essay collection is the outcome.

In the years immediately following the 2014 symposium, the *Nordic Women in Film* website was launched as a Swedish language project focusing primarily on film workers in Sweden.[9] By the end of 2017, an updated, more Nordic version of the site—albeit still coordinated by the Swedish Film Institute—was introduced, featuring information about Danish and Norwegian women. Although this book is closely connected with my background as a mediator

between academic and film heritage perspectives when the *Nordic Women in Film* site was created, it is not intended as a companion to the portal. The majority of the content on *Nordic Women in Film* is published in Swedish, Norwegian or Danish, and only a few texts have so far been translated into English. For international readers interested in *Nordic Women in Film*, whether as an example of archival access work, as a way of communicating research beyond scholarly journals, or because of an interest in individual film workers or issues presented on the site, this book will provide insights into the venture, but until funding for translating material into English is obtained, the site will remain a Nordic resource, despite its Anglophone title. For readers familiar with Nordic languages, the new perspectives on archival methodology and Scandinavian film history offered in this anthology should prove useful by framing *Nordic Women in Film* in an international context of feminist approaches to film.

The impact of digitization has informed this book, and the essays by Hanssen, Stigsdotter, and Brunow in particular engage with issues relating to digital access. Because the anthology deals primarily with traces of film culture from the previous century, and since digital technology is not the focus of all the case studies, the 'digital age' part of the original symposium title—*Making the Invisible Visible in a Digital Age*—has been dropped from the book. However, all of the authors of course share the experience of carrying out research in an era of extremely rapid developments in digital film technology and culture, and the essays were after all collected partly at the behest of a film heritage institution that wishes to disseminate film history on a digital platform. The digitization of contemporary film production, exhibition, and distribution has profound effects on film archival work, and as a result on film historiography. Because, as Bregt Lameris (referencing Paul Ricoeur) points out in *The Film Museum Practice and Film Historiography:*

> the interpretation of history does not begin with the historian but with the archivist. The decisions made by archivists on what should

> and should not be included in a collection are the first step in the process of interpreting historical facts; all the succeeding choices the historian makes depend on the composition and structure of the archive. As a consequence, the archive is not only the 'starting point' of historical research, it is also part of the historiographical discourse.[10]

From a different but related perspective, Catherine Russell states that the film archive 'is no longer simply a place where films are preserved and stored, but has been transformed, expanded, and rethought as an "image bank" from which collective memories can be retrieved'.[11] Russell's focus is the reuse and appropriation of archival footage in contemporary film-making, rather than researchers using archival material to write history, but she studies how distribution and access across new digital platforms affect 'archiveological' practices.[12] As Russell points out, the term 'archiveology' has not only been used to describe the recycling of archival materials, but also the study of archives, in for example the work of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.[13]

This anthology can be understood as part of an archival turn in contemporary Film Studies,[14] through its inclusion of novel approaches to a wide range of previously neglected archival materials, ranging from collections at the National Library of Norway (Nasjonalbiblioteket) to the archives of the Swedish Musicians' Union (Svenska musikerförbundet) in Gothenburg, digitized census collections at the National Archives of Sweden (Riksarkivet), the private archive of a senior academic and feminist activist in Sweden, the archival material held at the Lesbian Home Movie Project (LHMP) in Maine, US and the bildwechsel in Hamburg, Germany, and finally, various archival collections held at the Swedish Film Institute.

According to the library and information science scholar Jeannette A. Bastian, who has surveyed literature about the archival turn across various disciplines, the term is used in contemporary humanities and social science research to signal a recognition of

the archive (whether digital or analogue) as 'a knowledge space to be approached, constructed and even confronted in numerous ways and from many perspectives'.[15] As Bastian rightly notes, the current archival turn is actually a 're-turn', one of several turns, the first occurring in European history studies in the early nineteenth century.[16] However, contemporary concerns with the archive in film research—as well as in many other disciplines—are intimately tied to the digitization of cultural production and consumption.[17] Symptomatically, Giovanna Fossati's *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition* (2009), one of the more influential books in the archival turn of Film Studies, addresses digitization in its very title.

Rereading the introduction to *From Grain to Pixel* in 2019, one is struck by the fact that when Fossati's book was published, projection was 'still almost all analog', and few feature films were shot using only digital cameras, whereas digital technology today dominates not only editing but production as well as exhibition.[18] Fossati was of course well aware that the practices she described were in the process of dramatic change, and suggested that this 'transitional moment' provided an exceptional (albeit also 'uniquely limited') perspective for critical reflection.[19] Indeed, in the past decade several scholars have taken on the challenge of analysing film archives and archival methods for preserving and providing access to film and film-related materials.[20] And when we consider the impact of digitization, the significance of databases—where born-digital and digitized archival materials are stored—and search engines used to retrieve data within such systems should not be overlooked, since information kept in digital systems becomes literally useless without efficient search functions.[21]

As Caroline Frick notes in her study of the politics and practices of film preservation, considering the power archives have to shape film history, it is important that media scholars approach archives not only as resources for researching specific topics, but as institutions worthy of critical investigation in themselves.[22] The archival turn is arguably intertwined with an institutional turn, as

researchers pay increasing attention to heritage institutions and the values that shape their practices.[23]

Russell cites Paul Flaig's image of the 'masculine archivist and the feminine body of the archive'[24] to highlight the risk that archive users end up perpetuating 'the gendered structure of the media archive itself'.[25] In her account, the archival users are filmmakers, but the metaphor is relevant also in relation to research, because as several of the essays in this book highlight, scholars searching for women's agency in archives are often faced with highly unsatisfying records.

The women's history pioneer Gerda Lerner pointed out that feminist historians attempting to create women's history started out using two strategies that were grounded in traditional history methodology, which she called 'the history of "women worthies" or "compensatory history", and "contribution history"'.[26] More than forty years after Lerner published her article, this book provides an interesting opportunity to revisit her arguments and consider to what extent women's *film* history—to which this anthology is a contribution—has employed or still employs these strategies today. 'Compensatory history', according to Lerner, asks questions about notable women who are missing from the history books and their achievements. Within feminist film history, this is perhaps best exemplified by the (re-)discovery and celebration of neglected or forgotten women directors and their films. To give the director the artistic credit for the making of a film, despite most films being the result of collaborative efforts, is a tradition known in film theory as auteurism, and since the concept of the *auteur* director has been strongly associated with male creative genius, and many feminist film historians reject the idea that one individual should be thought to control the film, this is a conflicted area of feminist research.[27] The sustained interest in the history of women filmmakers among feminists is however not surprising, since there are feminists among women filmmakers as well as among theorists. In addition, in the early years of feminist film theory there was a very close connection between theory and film practice.[28]

Lerner insisted that 'notable women' were 'exceptional, even deviant'

in order to highlight that traditional history has focused on the ruling classes. Within the context of film, her reference to class distinctions serves to remind us about the professional hierarchies within film culture, where roles that are considered prestigious are associated with agency and power, and thus more likely to be documented and leaving traces in the archive. *Making the Invisible Visible* attempts to expand the field of enquiry, and by doing so make women's work more visible.

'Contribution history' is in Lerner's words a focus on women's 'contribution to, their status in and their oppression by a male-defined society'.[29] According to Lerner, when we discuss women's 'contribution to' something—in her example, a particular political movement—then 'the contribution is judged first of all with respect to its effect on that movement and secondly by standards appropriate to men'.[30] What Lerner found lacking in contribution history was the significance of the work of women in relation to other women. Contribution history also tends to focus on women's oppression and the struggle for women's rights,[31] an important and necessary part of women's history, but Lerner argued that this approach tends to end up describing 'what men in the past told women to do and what men in the past thought women should be'.[32]

While feminist film history still deals with women's discrimination and oppression—whether in terms of sexist industry practices, or of objectifying representations on screen—it does more than just account for male-dominated practices and patriarchal ideology. Research on the history of gendered work practices presents a challenge to established ideas about which aspects of film culture are worthy of analysis. And as Erin Hill writes in her study of women's work in American media production, 'Examining the types of work women could and did do in the wake of sex segregation reveals their agency—both in their own careers and in their industry's history.'[33]

While methods for 'doing women's film history'—to paraphrase the title of Christine Gledhill's and Julia Knight's anthology (2015) and the related *Doing Women's Film and Television History* conferences—are multifarious, tentative and experimental, and researchers

informed by feminism are heterogeneous in their perspectives, contemporary film scholars investigating women and film defy norms and structures defined by earlier generations of film historians, whose work was uninformed by gender perspectives. In a review published in *Cinema Journal* in 2009, Adrienne L. McLean described feminist film historians in the twenty-first century as characterized by fearlessness and a refusal to be hindered by the absence of material:[34]

> If one is seeking information about women as historical subjects and still plagued by a paucity of material, of evidence of agency in the usual sense, then use what material there is, and redefine agency in a way that it can be shown always to have been there, in however conditional, contingent, or fragile a form.[35]

Another way of putting this, which similarly resonates with my experience editing this collection, is Shelley Stamp's suggestion that feminist film historians 'must trace the shapes defined by women's absence'.[36]

The first part of the book, 'Archival interventions: Locating women's agency in the archive' contains essays that concentrate on methodological issues, and research that reclaims the archive in the spirit of Vicki Callahan's *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History.* The essays cover neglected dimensions of silent film culture in Sweden and Norway, reflections on archives and access, and the use of archival film as cultural memory in documentary work from various time periods.

In 'Visible absence, invisible presence: Feminist film history, the database, and the archive', Eirik Frisvold Hanssen explores two sets of coexisting binaries that he argues inform ventures such as the *Women Film Pioneers Project* and *Nordic Women in Film*: the invisibility–visibility binary, which concerns who is mentioned and who is left out in the writing of film history, and why; and the absence–presence binary, which concerns the lack of women in certain professional functions in the film industry and is related

to the fact that some kinds of work—and some types of film—are considered more important than others. The essay explores how these two sets of binaries can be treated together, particularly in film historical research, revealing a striking absence of women in certain key functions in the film industry, and yet a significant, continual, often invisible or unseen presence throughout film history. Hanssen engages with recent contributions to feminist film historiography, including publications by Jane Gaines, Vicki Callahan and Shelley Stamp, and concludes by connecting with a specific case, the private archive of the Norwegian set designer Grethe Hejer, donated to the National Library of Norway in 2014.

Christopher Natzén investigates a specific period in early Swedish cinema history in 'Female cinema musicians in Sweden, 1905–1915', considering the role played by musicians in shaping cinema culture. By analysing cinema programmes and contextualizing this using contemporary press materials that commented on musical practices in Swedish cinemas as well as documentation from the Swedish musicians' union in the same period, Natzén shows how previously unused archival materials document the important part played by female musicians in establishing cinema music practice in Sweden in the silent era. At the same time, he outlines a range of difficulties facing the researcher wishing to explore women's work in cinema music, and provides glimpses into the lives of women who have not previously been included in Swedish film historical accounts. In that respect, as well as in terms of its focus on the silent era, his research ties in with the subsequent essay, 'Women film exhibition pioneers in Sweden: Agency, invisibility and first wave feminism', in which Ingrid Stigsdotter looks at the role played by women in Swedish film exhibition from the silent era and into the early sound era. Although the minutes of film exhibitors' meetings and reports in film journals show that the professions of cinema owner and film exhibitor were male-dominated in early twentieth-century Sweden, Stigsdotter's archival research suggests that a large number of women were involved in running cinemas in the silent era, and some continued to own and run cinemas for several decades,

crossing into the sound era. Citing Erin Hill and Miranda Banks, she points to similarities between the status in scholarly research of 'below-the-line' professions and work in film exhibition. Detailing some of the methodological difficulties of researching these often unknown women and their contribution to Swedish film culture, Stigsdotter highlights the need to investigate the links between first-wave feminism and film cultural pioneers, as well as the development of cinema culture in the provinces.

The final essay in the first part of the book does not discuss Swedish films, institutions, or filmmakers; rather, in 'Queering the archive: Amateur films and LGBT+ memory', Dagmar Brunow singles out the hidden narratives in heritage institutions and the need to excavate the forgotten audio-visual LGBT+ heritage in the archives, thus highlighting methodological issues relevant to film historians who use archival material from national contexts in their work. Brunow shows how curated access to digitized amateur film can contribute to an intervention into heteronormative historiography. Drawing on archive theory (Derrida, Foucault, and Stoler), she uses a perspective that merges theorizations of the archive as a power structure with media-archaeological approaches that accent the materiality of the archive. Her approach links the feminist film history project with cultural memory studies, and presents amateur films as a source for LGBT+ memories. Brunow looks at practices of collecting, cataloguing, and curating access as tools for the remediation and recontextualization of archival footage. She argues that archivists need to reflect on their practices, which run the risk of either unqueering LGBT+ lives or adding to their vulnerability.

The second part of the book, 'Women, Film and Agency in the 1970s and 1980s', revisits the decades when feminism and women's liberation became mainstream and began to impact seriously on both practical film-making and film theory. The three essays in this section deal with various aspects of Swedish film culture of the 1970s and 1980s, ranging from feminist debates in Swedish film criticism to women's film-making.

Despite a chronological shift from Brunow's essay, with its focus

on lived experience and memory work, those concerns are still highly relevant in Tytti Soila's essay, 'Activism, ideals and film criticism in 1970s Sweden'. Her contribution is a personal reflection on activism and ideals in the 1970s, remembering the film critical tendencies in feminist interest groups such as the Swedish Women's Film Association (Svenska Kvinnors Filmförbund, SKFF), of which Soila was a member. She outlines the debate about representation prompted by a number of Swedish films released between 1974 and 1977, with particular focus on a hearing organized in November 1976. At this hearing, the topic of sexism in contemporary film and in film critical reviews was discussed by a panel made up of the leading film critics in Sweden, and the actress Ann Zacharias, the 'object' of the male critics' supposedly voyeuristic gaze, came forward in their defence. This essay portrays a moment of feminist activism in the cinema culture of 1970s' Stockholm, placing the event in its cultural context. In addition, Soila discusses the relationship between filmic authorship—associated with male *auteurs*—and the idea of making one's voice heard, so important to the feminist movement.

Just as the on-screen representation of women was central to the debates outlined in Soila's essay, it plays an important role in Elisabet Björklund's essay, 'Freedom to choose: Reproduction and women's agency in three Swedish films of the 1980s'. The focus here, however, is on three specific fictional films made in the 1980s by women directors (Gunnel Lindblom, Marianne Ahrne, and Ann Zacharias), in which unwanted pregnancy and abortion play key roles in the storylines. This period saw a rise in the number of Swedish films directed by women, and film narratives increasingly reflected questions closely related to the women's movement, such as the possibility of combining motherhood and a professional career, or the right to abortion on demand. Combining a careful textual analysis with a discussion of the films' reception, Björklund pays particular attention to the gendering of the filmmakers and their films in the critical discourse when the films were released. She also considers how the filmic narratives represent the changes

in women's freedom that had taken place in the 1970s and 1980s, and ultimately explores two kinds of agency: the agency of women filmmakers of the 1980s in representing reproductive issues; and representations of women's agency when making reproductive choices.

Similarly, the last essay explores films that have been neglected in film historical writings. Ingrid Ryberg, in 'An elevated feminist ahead of her time? Mai Zetterling's non-fiction shorts in the 1970s and 1980s' addresses probably the most internationally renowned individual portrayed in this anthology. As a 1950s film star turned filmmaker, known as the only female auteur director in Sweden's 1960s art cinema, Mai Zetterling has received a great deal of attention, but thus far scholars have concentrated on her career up to the critical failure of her film *The Girls* (*Flickorna*, 1968). Ryberg deals with the 'bad timing' of that film, for only a few years later *The Girls* would epitomize the exact moment of the new women's film culture, and opened numerous film festivals around the world. Ryberg shows how Zetterling herself played a crucial role in this film culture, not just as an icon, but as a spokesperson, and considers her little-known non-fiction short film production from the 1970s and onwards, including *Mai Zetterling's Stockholm* (1978) and the infomercial *Concrete Granny* (*Betongmormor*, 1986). Women's liberation was gaining considerable political currency in these decades, and Sweden's image as a forerunner in gender equality was beginning to form, but as Ryberg points out, the economic and material preconditions for women's film-making remained difficult in Sweden, and in Zetterling's case practically impossible. Contesting the often-repeated idea that Zetterling was 'ahead of her time', Ryberg suggests that this notion has counterproductively contributed to obscuring not only her production of non-fiction shorts in the 1970s and 1980s, but also the crucial role that Zetterling played in the transnational feminist film culture in this era.

Although some of the essays in this book deal with the silent era, thus contributing to the same field of research as the *Women Film Pioneers Project*, the majority also extend their attention into the

1930s and beyond, making visible much of what is absent from traditional film histories, and contributing to a reclaiming of women's agency in an expanded understanding of the field of film history.

The book addresses methodological issues in feminist film history and includes queer perspectives on both amateur and professional film-making. It contains original research on careers and professions that have been considered marginal in traditional accounts of film history and film archival practices in relation to LGBT+ memory, as well as new perspectives on women's film-making, film feminism, reception, and criticism.

Some readers may come to this book motivated by an interest in contemporary Swedish film culture fuelled by #MeToo and the Swedish Film Institute's current strategies for achieving gender equality in film production. Although the essays in this collection do not explain or directly comment on these issues, their variety of themes and approaches make a compelling case for a women's film history that encompasses critical approaches to film heritage institutions, and considers the exhibition, reception, and distribution of film, as well as production contexts. Visibility, invisibility, and agency are key issues to take into account when approaching the topic of women and film, whether in the past or in the present. To understand the complex issue of women's agency in film today we also need to understand the past. Each of the seven case studies in this book makes a telling contribution to that aim.

Notes

1 See, for example, Heyman 2015; Maddox 2017.
2 For more on #MeToo and its impact on scholarly media research, see the special section in Loist & Verhoeven 2019.
3 https://site.5050by2020.com/home and http://www.5050x2020.fr/. Accessed 17 June 2019.
4 Eurimages 2017; https://site.5050by2020.com/home; http://www.5050x2020.fr/.
5 Maddox 2017.
6 Edström et al. 2014, 9.
7 See Jansson & Wallenberg, in press.

8 https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/. Eirik Frisvold Hanssen discusses *The Women Film Pioneers Project* elsewhere in this volume in 'Visible absence, invisible presence: Feminist film history, the database, and the archive'.
9 http://www.nordicwomeninfilm.com/. Nordic Women in Film was launched in April 2016.
10 Lameris 2017, 31.
11 Russell 2018, 1.
12 Ibid. 12.
13 Derrida 1996; Foucault 1972; see also Ebeling & Günzel 2009.
14 See Smoodin 2014, 96 ff.
15 Bastian 2016, 3.
16 Ibid. 7.
17 For a brief critical overview of contemporary approaches to 'the archive' and the notion of 'heritage' in cultural theory, see Frick 2011, 11–20.
18 Fossati 2009, 12–13.
19 Ibid. 13.
20 A further important work is Jones 2012; for alternative video collectives and issues with access in European archives, see Brunow 2017, 98–110 and Brunow 2012, 171–82; for Scandinavian archives, see Brunow & Stigsdotter 2017.
21 See Anderson 2014, 100–14.
22 Frick 2011, 7.
23 See, for example, Jansson 2016, 18–231; Snickars 2015, 63–7.
24 Flaig 2015, cited in Russell 2018, 185.
25 Russell 2018, 185.
26 Lerner 1975, 15.
27 Elsewhere in this volume in 'Activism, ideals and film criticism in 1970s Sweden', Tytti Soila discusses authorship and women filmmakers within the context of Swedish film culture in the 1970s, and Ingrid Ryberg considers the problem of highlighting individual 'pioneering' achievements in 'An elevated feminist ahead of her time? Mai Zetterling's non-fiction shorts in the 1970s and 1980s'. For a useful discussion of authorship which argues in favour of feminist engagement with the work of female directors, see Tasker 2010, 213–30.
28 For a lucid discussion of the historical relationship between feminist theory, feminist filmmaking, and 'women's cinema'—whether understood as films made by women or films addressing women by way of genre or theme—see White 2015, 1–27.
29 Lerner 1975, 16.
30 Ibid. 16.
31 Ibid. 17.
32 Ibid. 19.
33 Hill 2016, 6.
34 The publications reviewed were Lant 2006, Hastie 2007, and Parreñas Shimizu 2007.

35 McLean 2009, 144–5.
36 Stamp 2015, discussed by Eirik Frisvold Hanssen elsewhere in this volume in 'Visible absence, invisible presence: Feminist film history, the database, and the archive'.

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