

An industry in turmoil

Yugoslavian cinema in the '80s

BY PAULE LA ROCHE

Yugoslavia, the small non-aligned country which Josip Broz Tito ruled for nearly 40 years, is presently going through one of the worst economic and social crises of its history. In the cafés, on the streets, in the homes, at all levels, the economic situation is the main topic of conversation. Concern over material problems has far surpassed all other matters, intellectual or artistic.

This concern is justified. In the past two years the dinar has fallen dramatically: in 1978 one Canadian dollar could buy 17 dinars, in 1986 the same amount bought 300. Today the Canadian tourist arriving in this beautiful country of sun and sea quickly becomes a millionaire, receiving more than 2,200 dinars for each of his Canadian dollars. Foreigners have a good life in Yugoslavia, but for the Yugoslavs it's another story. How can you make ends meet with a monthly salary of \$100.00 when inflation can rise 300 per cent in a month?

The socialist system is cracking and the situation is catastrophic on all fronts. People make do, having their own little tricks for escaping the misery around them. Among the ruling class, scandal and corruption have reached new highs. Canadian and the international press have heard about the big corruption scandals which have shaken Yugoslavia, for instance that of "Agrokomerc."

A record year

But despite the apparent anarchy and the gravity of the situation, the Yugoslavian film industry has been able to pull through as never before. During the Yugoslavian Film Festival in Pula, which this year celebrated its 35th anniversary, the participants were able to view some 37 films produced during the 1987-88 season. This is a record unmatched since 1967, the golden age of Yugoslavian cinema, the era of the "film noir" during which Aleksandar Petrović won the Palme d'Or at Cannes for his film *The Feather Collectors*, the era which also enabled us to discover Dušan Makavejev with *Man Is Not a Bird* as well as Puriša Djordjović who produced his most beautiful revolutionary poems, *The Girl*,

The Dream, and *The Morning* at that time.

Unfortunately, the number of films produced does not guarantee quality. The well-respected Yugoslavian film critic, Branko Manutić, to whom the directors of the Pula Film Festival entrusted the writing of the introduction to its programme, does not hesitate to say that "There have never been so many films, nor such mediocrity!"

This, however, has not stopped Danièle Cauchard, vice-president of the Montreal World Film Festival, from choosing about a dozen extremely interesting, if not excellent, Yugoslavian feature films for the 1987 and 1988 MWWF. Montreal audiences will have the opportunity to discover today's Yugoslavian cinema through its best recent films, including those of Srđjan Karanović *The Film Without a Name*, and Krsto Papić's *My Uncle's Legacy*, both in this year's official competition.

Papić's legacy

Papić is already known to the Montreal public. His film *Village Performance of Hamlet* was presented in the early days of the Montreal Film Festival. *My Uncle's Legacy* has just won all the honours of the Pula competition: the Jury's Grand Prix, the Audience Prize, and the Critics' Prize. Such unanimity has rarely been seen at the Pula Festival, which this year was once again rife with disputes and conflicting ideas. The triumph of Papić's film is that it represents a victory over conformity and the establishment.

In order to understand the importance of the three prizes Papić won, one must first know something of the struggle he had getting the film into production: Before *My Uncle's Legacy* was shown to some 12,000 at the Vespasian Arena, the producer had to fight the Yugoslavian political and judiciary systems. It was only after numerous legal proceedings—he went up to the equivalent of our Supreme Court—that Papić was finally able to win his case against the Veterans' Association, which had tried to prevent him from shooting the film. Luckily, he had the backing of Jadran Film, the largest Yugoslavian film company, located in Zagreb, Croatia. He was also supported by the ministry of culture of that republic: SIJZ. One cannot help but be reminded of the troubles the National Film Board had with its film about Billy Bishop, a subject of similar controversy as a result of pressure from Canadian veterans' associations.

In the film, *My Uncle's Legacy*, it is not a war hero who is under fire, but rather an entire system, a socialist system which characterized



Djordje Milojevic, director of Centar Film with Svetlana Banovčanen, vice-president of the same company



Director Veljko Gulajic on the set of his film *The Collector*



Gojko Kastranović and Bronko Galetić, of Avala Film, producers of *The Film Without a Name*, in competition at the Montreal Festival



Film and TV critic Mira Boglić with Ivan Saličić, film theorist and publicist

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Mustafa Nadarević and Anica Dobra in *Reflections*, directed by Goran Marković

itself in the past by obscurantism: first in the '50s, as depicted in Papić's film, then again in the early '70s, when filmmakers such as Sasa Petrović, Makavojev, and others, were forced to find refuge outside Yugoslavia in order to carry on freely with their profession. In rewarding Papić's film, the Pula Festival acknowledged freedom of speech and the end of the blind censorship which nearly sounded the death knell for the Yugoslavian film industry 15 years ago. Yugoslavian cinema is still searching for an identity, a new direction, as indeed is the country itself.

To fully understand the problems that face the government, at all levels, one has to be aware of the complex geographical and historical background of the country.

The Yugoslavian mosaic

Yugoslavia is a socialist federation comprised of six republics and two autonomous provinces. The country has three official languages, two alphabets, and dozens of ethnic groups, with each group wanting to protect its culture and rights. Compared with this situation, our own linguistic and bicultural issues seem less critical.

Under this mosaic of cultures and peoples lie thousands of years of history: The Turks ruled the Balkans for 500 years; later came domination by the Austro-Hungarian Empire which lasted until the end of WWI in 1918. Yugoslavia, ("country of the southern Slavs"), was first a monarchy, becoming a federation of socialist states in 1946. In 1953 it completely broke away from the Communist bloc.

This country of ancient roots is nevertheless a young modern state. Yugoslavia today can be compared with a volcano about to erupt, a bubbling cauldron of a thousand-and-one trends, a thousand-and-one leanings. In this country of sun, sea, fig trees, intoxicating odours, Mediterranean languidness, how does

one get things moving? How does one change the situation? In the south, people shrug their shoulders, in Belgrade (the capital), despite the heat, large numbers of workers demonstrate in the streets. Socialism is wavering. When can one expect true democracy, leadership chosen and elected by the people?

U. S. imperialism at the movies

And what of the film industry? The tentacles of American imperialism are everywhere in Yugoslavia, as can be seen in the movie theatres as well as in the international coproductions: the first American film shot in Yugoslavia was Normand Jewison's *Fiddler on the Roof*. Most of the producers and directors whom I met did not appear overly worried about this situation. A case in point is Jadran Film of Zagreb, which is the largest film company in Yugoslavia but not the largest producer of Yugoslavian films. They produce about 10 hours of domestic films each year as compared with 30 hours of coproductions, and other international services, as well as commercials and short films. It was at Jadran that some of the shooting of *Sophie's Choice* took place. *High Road to China* is a coproduction of Jadran as are *The Winds of War* and *The Race to the Bomb*, the latter being a Yugoslavian, Canadian, and French coproduction. At present, Jadran is involved with ABC in the production of a 33-hour series entitled, *War and Remembrance*.

Mihajlec Zdravko, the administrative director of Jadran Film, explains: "We finance our domestic production by offering various services to foreign countries and by participating in international coproductions." He admits that the young people are addicted to American films and he deplors the fact that films have become a distraction, "a circus, a cabaret." "Fortunately for the Yugoslavian film industry," he adds, "we are lucky to have a lot of illiterate people... it's difficult for them to read subtitles! No doubt that



A man and a woman — take two. From Dejan Sorak's *The Officer with a Rose*

is why the older generation still prefer Yugoslavian films." Mikajlec's comments are obviously cynical. One need only take a look at the statistics and the Yugoslavian cinema's summer programme to appreciate the strength of the American hold over the Yugoslavian film industry.

From Dubrovnik to Rijeka, there are nothing but American films on the bill, with the exception of a few Italian "B" films and some old Yugoslavian war films. The titles: *Footloose*, *Friday the 13th*, *Lethal Weapon*, and *Amadeus*.

Cinema history taught at school

Despite this, young Yugoslavians know their local film industry well, most especially in Serbia where the cult of Yugoslavian film stars abounds. Each young person I asked to talk about the Yugoslavian cinema, no matter his educational background, was able to list an impressive number of titles of Yugoslavian films he had seen, as well as the stars involved. This is not surprising, since the legacy of the film industry is protected by teaching the subject in high school. Predrag Golubović, director of the Film Institute in Belgrade says, "Yugoslavia is one of the rare countries in the world, and certainly the first, to have included the history of cinema in the compulsory school curriculum."

The same cannot be said about Canada. For example, studies carried out by the Association des Cinémas Parallèles in Québec showed the flagrant ignorance of young Quebecers, not to mention the indifference they showed toward their native cinema.

But Yugoslavian youth know the American film industry as well as they know their own. Why should this be the case? Yugoslavia's population is the same as Canada's — 25 million. In 1986, 45.7 per cent (96 full-length films) of the films shown in the 1,271 Yugoslavian movie theatres were American.

Since 1944, Yugoslavia has imported 2,341 films from the United States and during the same period the United States bought only 117 Yugoslavian films. This is very little considering that Yugoslavia produced 607 full-length films during the 1945-1978 period.

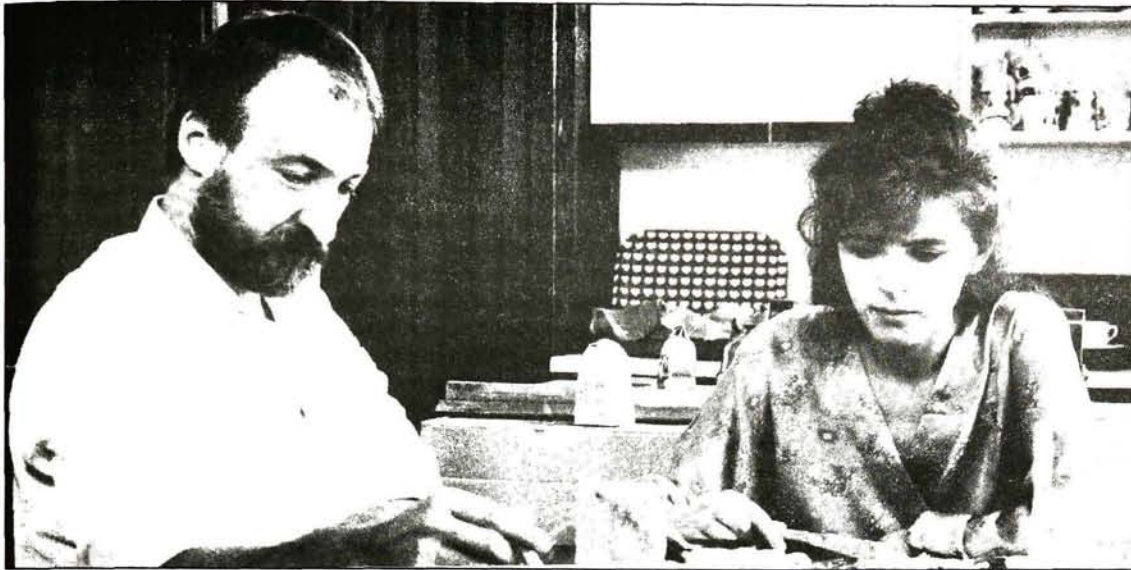
On the other hand, only 37 Canadian films have been shown in Yugoslavia over the past 40 years, while during the same period Canada has imported 147 Yugoslavian films. The selection of Canadian films in Yugoslavia is heterogeneous. For the most part, those films shown have been very commercial: *Porky's*, *Meatballs*, *Visiting Hours*. However, on television there has been a better sampling of our cinema: *Who has seen the Wind?*, *One Man*, *La vraie nature de Bernadette*, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Réjeanne Padovani*.

Svetlana Banovčanin, artistic director responsible for import-export at Centar Film in Belgrade, insists that the company is buying more and more Canadian films. "We are the best distributor of Canadian films," she says, mentioning a few of the more recent additions to their catalogue: *Joshua Then and Now*, *Le déclin de l'empire américain*, *Equinoxe*, *Pouvoir Intime*, *Atlantic City* and *Les Plouffe*.

Inflation and production costs

The devaluation of the dinar has greatly complicated the lives of film distribution companies. With its network reaching some 92 towns, Centar Film has good buying power. Out of 1,271 movie theatres in Yugoslavia, they are associated with between 400 and 500 of them. Their annual presentations include four or five domestic films and between 12 and 25 foreign films.

Svetlana Banovčanin says, "The most popular films are American. We cannot survive exclusively by showing artistic films! But at present the cost of films is so high and the dinar



Couple #3: Meto Jovanovski and Mira Furlan in *The Film Without a Name* directed by Srdjan Karanović

so low that we have been forced to redirect our buying policy... The Americans don't understand this problem. We used to buy some 200 films but now, due to currency problems we find ourselves obliged to buy more French and Italian as well as other films. The public is spoiled by American films... If we distribute them, it is to get money which in turn enables us to produce our own domestic films".

Coproduction: a solution?

Centar Film has produced three feature films this year. Srdjan Karanović's *Film without a Name* is one of these, and it will be shown in competition in Montreal. Like most of the Yugoslavian film companies (there are about 25 of them), Centar Film is trying to circumvent the present crisis through involvement in coproductions. Djortje Mihajlović, director general of Centar Films explains: "Now, more than ever, we are searching for pure coproduction. In fact, over the past five years, we have been working on a Canadian-Yugoslavian agreement for coproduction. What we are looking for now is the ideal script and director to enable us to make this step forward."

The Canadian-Yugoslavian coproduction agreement has been in effect since February of this year. Zagreb Film and Quebec's Cinégroupé are already working on a coproduction entitled *The Flying Bears*. This is a series of animated cartoons which we will probably see on our screens in September 1989.

Even the world-renowned Zagreb Institute for Animated Cartoons has not escaped the economic problems which are endemic in Yugoslavia today. The Zagreb school put Yugoslavia on the international film map in the '50s and in 1961 Dušan Vukotić received an Oscar for Zagreb Film with *Ersatz*.

Bruno Gamulin, production director at Zagreb Film for the past five years, tells us: "We have

had to turn towards international coproduction. Now, it is our "B" studio, our commercial studio, which is financing our research studio, studio "A", and yet it was this same studio "A" that gave birth to studio "B"!"

The state's role

And where does the government figure in all of this? Its role varies considerably from one republic to another. Of the six republics it is Slovenia, bordering on Austria, which offers the best subsidies to the industry. Before the slump of the dinar, government aid could make up to 100 per cent of a film's budget. In Bosnia, in central Yugoslavia, the state finances up to 50 per cent of a film's costs. In Croatia, it varies between 40 and 80 per cent according to available information. In Serbia, the companies consider themselves lucky to get 20 per cent financial backing. In other words, there are as many types of subsidies as there are republics and provinces.

Since 1962 there has been no central, federal organization looking after the film industry. It has been replaced by a self-management system. Resources have multiplied. The filmmaking companies have had to show themselves to be more dynamic and imaginative; hence the need for international and domestic coproductions.

Insofar as providing services is concerned, the large companies are the ones who benefit. This is because they are the only ones with adequate technical equipment. This is the case of Jadran Film in Zagreb and Avala Film in Belgrade, the two main film-producing centres.

A young assistant producer whom I met on the outskirts of Zagreb and who preferred to remain anonymous said, "It's not fair, the big companies were able to equip themselves through public funds. Now they are making money and it is neither our film industry nor our

stars who are benefitting the most."

This statement was confirmed by the producer of Urania Films, Nikola Babić, one of the many cooperative film companies to be found in Yugoslavia. "The large companies don't want to admit that they have a monopoly, and yet they do. Years ago, the state provided them with buildings, labs, studios and offices... which allowed them to produce our local films. They gradually isolated themselves and today these large companies no longer belong to the republic... but to the 350 employees who work there."

Fortunately, Nikola Babić and Urania Films were able to associate themselves with Avala Films in Belgrade as well as with Ben Stassen, a young Los Angeles producer, who coproduced Krsto Papic's film *My Uncle's Legacy*. At a time when nationalism in some republics is high, it is good to see that Croates and Serbs (Urania is Croatian company, Avala a Serbian one) are able to produce together a film which unveils an aspect of the sometimes dark history of Yugoslavia. This association is a good example of the opening of ideas and is perhaps a sign of the times.

Nostalgia for the '60s

However, the future is not equally rosy for all the members of the Yugoslavian film profession. Despite his international success, Saša Petrović, director of *The Feather Collectors* and of *Maestro and Marguerita*, has some serious words to say concerning the producers and the bureaucracy. "Corruption has managed to infiltrate even the world of cinema. The profession no longer has passion, nor social, political or ethical commitment." In alluding to these failures, Petrović says: "The big producers are killing the Yugoslavian film industry. The industry is looking for an identity and is trying to establish a continuity with its golden age, which existed

Some facts

Yugoslavia is one of the rare countries in the world, as well as the first, to have included the cinema as part of the curriculum in secondary schools.

Despite the catastrophic economic situation, in 1987-88, 36 full-length films were produced. This broke all the records in the history of the Yugoslavian film industry.

The sale of videos on the black market flourishes in Yugoslavia. A film such as *The Last Emperor* is already being seen in the country's living rooms before it has even been purchased by a distributor. The regulations and laws pertaining to the sale of videocassettes are practically nonexistent; there are 400 video clubs in Yugoslavia.

When *Father was Away on Business* was seen in Yugoslavian cinemas by as many people as *Top Gun* - almost half a million.

The cost of producing a full-length film in Yugoslavia varies between \$300,000 and \$500,000. Kusturica's latest film cost a fortune; \$1.1 million dollars for a full-length film and seven hours of television film.

Some figures

Yugoslavia had 1,000 movie theatres in 1950, 1,638 in 1968, 1,385 in 1977. The most recent statistic (1986) is 1,271 movie theatres in the country.

Except for in Macedonia and Montenegro, there has been a decrease in the number of theatres over the past few years.

Canada, with the same population, had 1,007 theatres in 1986. In 1986, Yugoslavia registered 87 million entries in its theatres. This was an increase of 10 million over 1977 and six million over 1982. In Canada, there were 80.6 million entries in 1986, representing a 20 per cent decrease over 1980-81.

There were 9.5 million entries in Yugoslavia for domestic films as opposed to 68.538 million for foreign films. From 1944 to 1986, Yugoslavia imported 2,341 American films while, during the same period, the U.S.A. bought 117 Yugoslavian features. During the same time-frame, Yugoslavia presented 905 French features while, in France, 117 Yugoslavian features were on the bill.

Between 1944 and 1986, Yugoslavia imported 57 East German films while East Germany bought 339 Yugoslavian films! Over the same period, Yugoslavians saw 310 West German films while that country bought 292 Yugoslavian films. During the same period, the U.S.S.R. exported 936 features to Yugoslavia while importing 205 feature films to the U.S.S.R.

The most popular films in Yugoslavia are the American and Italian films, followed by the French and British films.

between '61 and '72. It is not easy. Things have been in a rut since 1976. Yugoslavian cinema lacks passion. The bureaucrats, the leaders, are often people of no culture, peasants. They have left the cinema to the producers, and it is the producers who pull the strings. The bureaucrats do not like producers who make films that criticize the social situation, that question the system. Political opportunists don't like that! Therefore they allow the production of light commercial films. On television things are even worse. Luckily from time to time there are patrons who allow the artists to express themselves freely."

Following the political tightening-up in 1972, Petrović found refuge outside the country. He has since worked on several coproductions, but this is the first time he has returned to Yugoslavia. He is currently directing a production based on the novel *Migrations* by the Serbian author Crnjanski, who received the Nobel Prize for Literature. Produced by the television companies of Belgrade and Novi Sad, as well as a French company, this series stars, among others, Dragan Nikolić, Isabelle Huppert, Richard Berry, Afandil Maharaze, Mirjam Karanovic, Anica Dobra, Bernard Belier,

Erland Joseffon. "I consider myself to be a European filmmaker," says Petrović. "I do not believe that national film industries should become ghettos. However, this does not mean that the film industry of a small country should be taken over by a foreign country! In order for my opinion as an author to be respected, I had to stand firm, otherwise I would never have succeeded."

Are the rising young directors ready to speak out as does this respected veteran?

Karanović and Kusturica (*When Father Was Away on Business*), better known as the directors of the Prague school (FAMU), give the Yugoslavian cinema a breath of the fresh air of which Petrović speaks.

But such directors are few and far between, and the bureaucracy prefers by far to bolster academism than to support anti-establishment projects even if official censorship no longer exists.

Too many graduates

Young people graduating from school in the different republics seem to have a new view of their society. Nikola Batušić, director of the School for Dramatic Arts in Zagreb, is of the

same opinion. "The young people are more individualistic, less politicized. All the same, short films produced by our students show them to be preoccupied by social and economic issues, although from time to time they produce films based on light fiction and love stories." "I was able to see some of the student films and found this to be true: unemployment, family life, abortion, or religion are the popular subjects and they are broached with striking technical ease and a surprising depth."

But what lies in the future for these young people does not appear to be promising. A lot of the graduates will be absorbed by the television industry. Their best hope of getting into the industry is through smaller companies. "But there are definitely, now more than ever, too many graduates for the size of the industry," says Batušić.

Jelena Silajdzic, of Forum Film, a small company in Sarajevo, whose first film *When Father Was Away on Business*, directed by Emir Kusturica, put Yugoslavia back on today's film map, holds a similar opinion. "With the present rate of inflation, when the SIZ allocates its subsidies to the film only at the post-production stage, a 50 per cent subsidy is really only worth

5 to 20 per cent... Under these conditions, companies such as ours, which in the past made seven or eight feature films, now manage two or three if not only one (per year).

"The present situation is destroying the quality of the films and the system of subsidies by project is destroying the existing talent. How does one explain that Kusturica, despite his international reputation, has taken three years to begin shooting his new film? In order to produce *Gypsy's Caravan*, which will be out this September, it was necessary to resort to foreign capital. Columbia Pictures provided this by buying the distribution rights... We only get 30 per cent of the profits... This is the price to be paid in order that the film be made. The cost was enormous - \$1.1 million for the feature film and seven hours of television film."

The normal cost of producing a feature film in Yugoslavia at present varies between \$300,000 and \$500,000. "The main reason for the ruin of the Yugoslavian cinema is money," concludes Saša Petrović. "The cinema has become a tool serving the personal interests of a few individuals." This problem appears to be omnipresent in the turmoil of Yugoslavian society today. Translated from the French by Sheila Cimpaye. ●

"Cinema Canada is an indispensable part of the cultural life of the nation, and should continue to be, as long as the nation has an indispensable cultural life..."

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ENTERTAINMENT

A passionate voice for Canadian film

BY JAY SCOTT
The Globe and Mail

IN THE MUTED, mainly melodic chorus that makes up Canadian cinema's commentary, the 15th issue of *Cinema Canada* is the loudest, loudest. It stands there, its March issue, and to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the journal, it has decided to do a special issue. The level by which it contests alone makes it the most notable issue of the journal, and should certainly be read by anyone who has any interest in Canadian cultural life (and independent cultural life) in a condition. *Cinema Canada* is a condition (it is a journal) that is certainly a good one. (The contents tables)

Connie Tadros (left): 15th issue of *Cinema Canada* (right) follows fearlessly nationalistic course set over magazine's 16 years.

CINEMA

able to conduct a post-mortem of the Sirois affair in her anniversary issue, she would've doubtless have zeroed in on the problem that other coverage of his demise overlooked. Daily Journalism in Ottawa treated Sirois' departure as the fall of a high-ranking bureaucrat, which it treated. But Sirois' expense accounts were not the issue. Although they were certainly excessive, Telefilm has always spent money to promote Canadian movies at festivals. The main reason for the ruin of the Yugoslavian cinema is money, concludes Saša Petrović. "The cinema has become a tool serving the personal interests of a few individuals." This problem appears to be omnipresent in the turmoil of Yugoslavian society today. Translated from the French by Sheila Cimpaye. ●

The "mess" at Telefilm, by no means created single-handedly by Sirois, prompted *Cinema Canada* to publish highly critical, confidential reports commissioned by the Government and Telefilm documents that no one in their right mind would touch. "Tadros laughed. "We print them out because we pick up more readers, but it's important that they be some place. Looking back through history, we perceive ourselves as a publication of record."

The perception is accurate, if free trade does not, hopefully, marginalize the Canadian component of the film industry, as Tadros expects it to. *Cinema Canada* will persist in its work of recording the quest for Canadian cinematic expression. And if free trade does destroy what's left of the industry, committed to indigenous expression (the current Government has already done its best to dismantle it), while its best to taking credit for its success), *Cinema Canada* will be on hand to record the last rites.

Tadros was right. Had she been

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