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Travelling Through Troubled Landscapes

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Travelling Through Troubled Landscapes

by Monique Motut-Firth



About the Artist

Monique Motut-Firth (moniquemotutfirth.com) uses collage to explore pop culture by playfully recombining familiar images mirroring the complexity and multiplicity of our current ecological moment. Selected exhibitions include: Two Rivers Gallery in Prince George, SFU/VIVO Media Arts & Ryerson University. She has received funding from the Canada Council for the Arts (2021) and has been awarded a number of residencies including: “The Universe & Other Systems” at the Banff Centre. She has gained recognition for her animation shorts from the SFU Small File Media Festival and the Cairo Video Festival in collaboration with sound artist prOphecy sun. She holds a MFA and BFA from Emily Carr University of Art + Design; and a BA, 2003 from UBC.

Travelling Through Troubled Landscapes

Monique Motut-Firth

We have an ethical duty not to let signs and images vanish into the abyss of indifference or commercial oblivion, to find words to animate them as something other than products destined for financial speculation or mere amusement.

—Nicholas Bourriard

While some artists may look to the shrinking sea ice of the Arctic, may study weather patterns or changes in species migration to interrogate the global effects of climate change, I turn to image culture—in particular, pop-culture images for inspiration. As an archeologist might, I sift through the evidence of our recent past looking for clues of our shared future. I make paper collages or *scrap-systems* to experiment with new ways of understanding the seduction of image culture and its ties to mass consumer habits and effects. An image culture that is perpetuated by capitalist big business at the cost of depleting natural resources, burgeoning landfills, and plastic islands of pollution. How does the pressure of this visual noise feed our collective want, sustain anxiety, and constrict our view of the horizon?

What is it we can say about images, the pressure of pictures (Flusser 2011, 52)? I suggest that they lean in on us, they animate our desires, and they desire things from us as well. As W.J.T. Mitchell articulates: “[i]mages matter . . . they make a difference, are important, and make demands” (1994, 108). Never has our culture been so immersed. The physicality of images struck me one afternoon while sidwinding through tightly cramped paths in an East Vancouver warehouse packed to the rooftop with magazines (see Fig. 1). I see this paper hoard¹ as a landscape made from the collective memory of capitalist desire piling high above me.

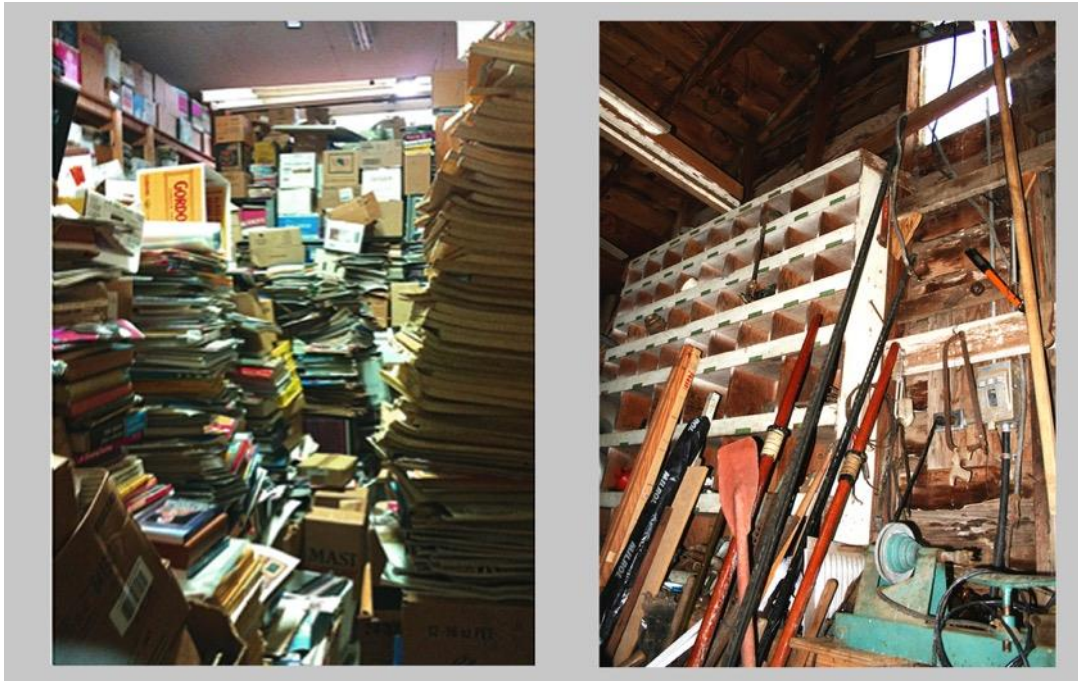


Figure 1. East Vancouver Warehouse; My grandparent's shed, 2011.

Spurred by a strong curiosity forged in the basement of my grandparent's home, layered with six decades of sedimented belongings, I set out to dig. Amongst my grandmother's hoard was a collection of decades of local household catalogues. The sheer mass of these magazines was astounding. After her death in 2011, I decided to investigate the correlation between the images in these magazines and her cultural assimilation into Canadian culture. My grandmother, Polly Vishloff (née Verigin), was born to a pacifist Doukhobor family—including Peter “the Lordly” Verigin (her uncle), who were granted religious asylum in the Canadian Prairies and West Kootenay region in the 1930s (Wilkinson and Sutherland 2012).² As an adult, she separated from her communal life and decided to raise her young family in the city of Mission in British Columbia. To create *Polly's Paper Dolls* (2015) (see Fig. 2), I cut apart a small portion of her extensive catalogue collection and pasted together a doll chain that maps sixty years. Canadian catalogue culture offered post-war families a “capitalist solution” (Belisle 2011, 79) to construct a common nationalist identity. Polly's stylish paper dolls join hands and stream like community, or data, across the gallery wall.

And so, the complexity of one woman's collection is explored/revealed here, but, what of a culture's collective memory? Our daily decisions, consumer choices, spurred by image culture, have a real and lasting impact on the future of our collective ecosystem. The sheer pervasiveness of image sources is inexhaustible.



Figure 2. Motut-Firth, Monique. *Polly's Paper Dolls*, 2015. 400 linear foot double-sided paper doll chain comprised of Canadian catalogues, paper and mixed media. Installation view, agent C gallery, Surrey BC. Amanda Arcuri photo.

In, *5lbs cod fillet* (2019) (see Fig. 3), using Canadian Franklin Carmichael's painted hills as inspiration hundreds of pictures were cut from magazines and grouped together based on advertising eras. The rusty reds and oranges of supermarket products of the '60s and '70s overlap tiny black and white illustrations from older (circa the 1950s) Canadian catalogues; large glossy overly saturated photographs from contemporary magazines tumble in to dominate the foreground of the composition. These images serve as an archive of human behavior. Implicating consumer images in our daily global consumption and their critical power to change the geography of our physical landscape.

The importance of images is often overlooked. As Norman Bryson writes in response to four essays on still life painting: "Production, production! Of new flowers, of knowledge, where nature is commodified by market forces, along with human work" is complex (Bryson 1990, 110). Images are organic like "cabinets of natural curiosities" (Bryson 1990, 107), where the floral still life presents the complex matrix of economic labor and social prestige. In *Tipping Point* (2021) (see Fig. 4), I weave the history of European still life with the visual story telling of Canadian Indigenous artists, commercial illustrators, wallpaper patterns, and consumer products together in a bursting bouquet. Building on Bryson's ideas, I explore contemporary possibilities for

still life. For instance, the temperature-sensitive delicacies from tropical climates, once prized, now zip around the world overnight collapsing time and space. Flora and fauna twist in between glossy consumer products: guitars, tires, and buildings. Collectively the images tip, close to collapse. What happens when we also reach an ecological tipping point?

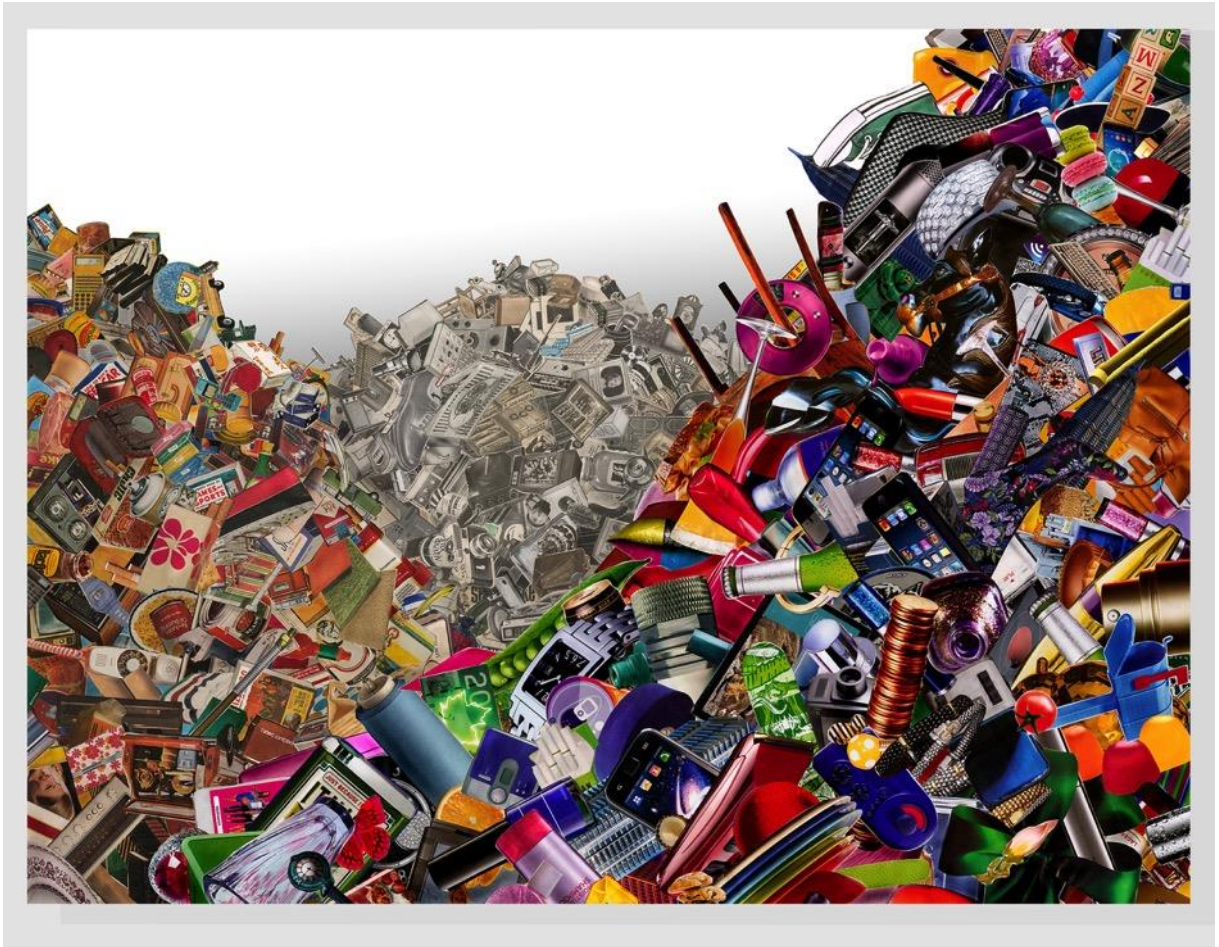


Figure 3. Motut-Firth, Monique. *5lbs cod fillet wagons imported chocolate menthol ultra natural phones*, 2019. Inkjet print mounted on aluminum, 30" x 40".



Figure 4. Motut-Firth, Monique. *Tipping Point: vase, flower, tire, bird*, 2019. Inkjet print dibond mount on aluminum, 24" x 30" x ¼". Exhibited at *Tip of the Iceberg*, Two Rivers Gallery, Prince George, 2021, and *Authentic Self*, Headline Gallery, Vancouver, 2021.

How is human industry intertwined with the way we define the idea of nature? *Fine rolling dandelion* (2019) (See Fig. 5), again uses found imagery to visually trace commodities. The live tree becomes products, tree as lumber, tree as branch, and tree as

seed/sprout. Carpet and wood laminates curl and twist like roots, fish swim through the composition; glass fishing lures, static and frozen, become products used to lure fish into the commodity chain. The unfurling of ferns in spring: not unlike the winding painted highways of American painter Wayne Thiebaud—or, reminiscent of artist Andrea Zittel's *Prototypes for Billboards* (2007) that presents images of tangled painted lines, like shoelaces, untied, about to cause chaos. What results in my work is a complex web of reintegrated imagery, or *scrap-system*, echoing other moments, places, and lexicons, rebalanced as a reflection of clunky movement and confusion. The equilibrium of the system teeters on the unicycle wheel, moving forward and a little bit back, idling.

Collectively, these compositions run from one image to the next, one colour to another; they travel, mirroring the incredible pace of information flow and Internet scrolling. And what of the digital image? Collapsing the hand-cut collage into a digital composition acts as a catalyst in a number of different ways. First, there is a type of compilation of the chaos of the hoard; the clean precision of the final image distills the visual information. Second, the transformation of paper to digital code infinitely increases the pliability of the image (Hansen 2004, 72–73). All physical components are reduced to fluid lines of digital code. Surely these strings of data will save us from the physicality and environmental impact of paper? Unfortunately, an impressive amount of energy is required to store, cool, and stream data. In fact, streaming digital media has a dramatic carbon footprint, estimated at near 1 percent of the global greenhouse gas emissions (Marks et al. 2020). This impact is only increasing as the world pandemic has forced many people on-line. Author and professor Laura U. Marks makes the argument for promoting and streaming *small files* to lessen this environmental impact (“Resources” 2021).

In 2020, during the pandemic lock downs, I wanted to further explore the pliability of my paper images and to improvise digitally using my digital paper archive. Scanned images were animated in a stop motion-like fashion. Building on Marks' ideas, the files were created with small formats for use on social media platforms and cellphone viewing. A call and response type of collaboration was also formed between myself and multi-disciplinary artist prOphecy sun, who responded to the animations by improvising her recorded sounds and music into layered soundscapes. Together, we produced several animation shorts in small format, called *Pocket Theatre* (see Fig. 6), intended for small viewing spaces (cell phones or online) with an emphasis on improvisation. Working in a small file format allowed for more rough experimentation, layering, and sampling that were then collapsed for quick and easy distribution. Living

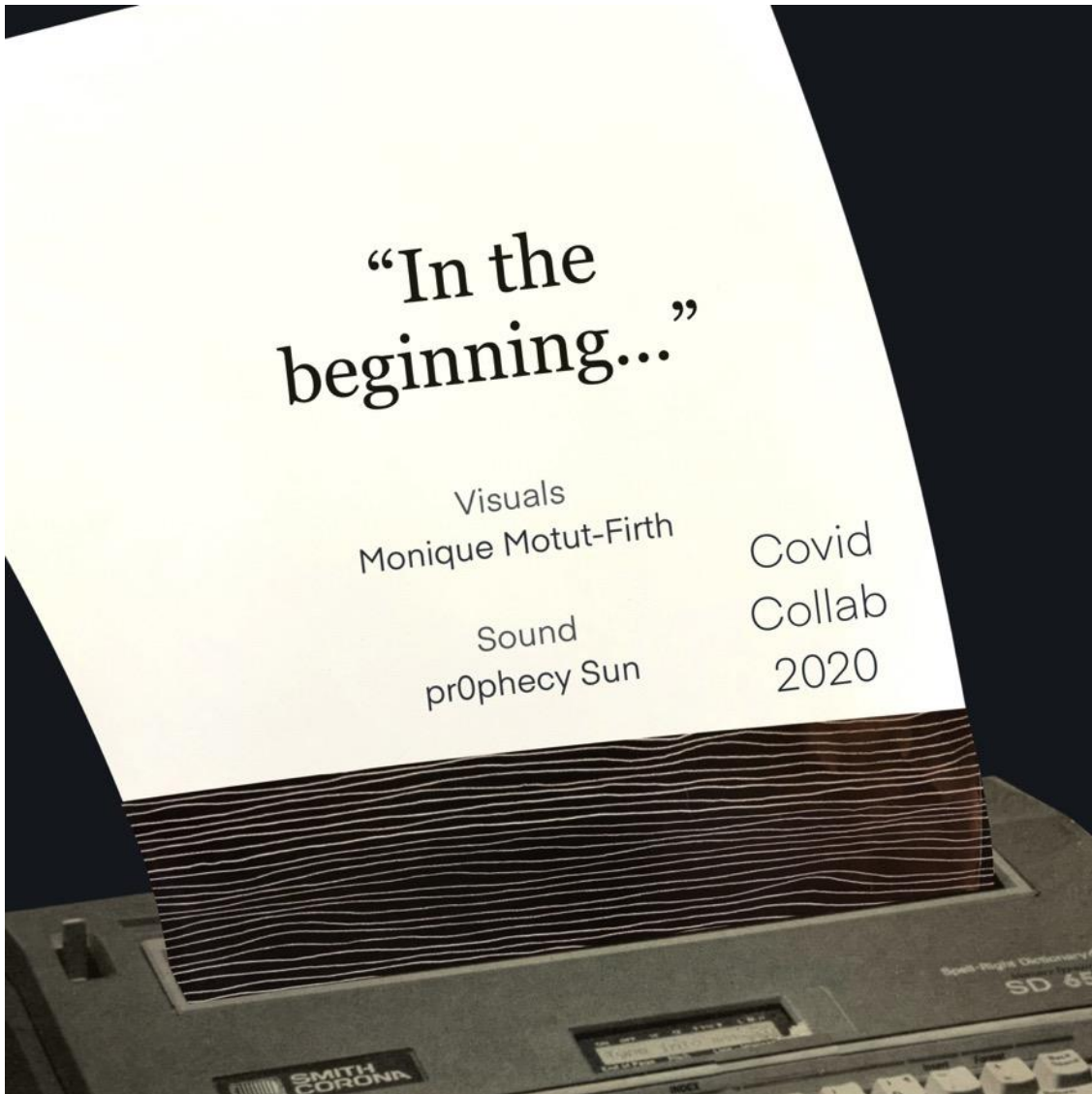


Figure 6. Motut-Firth, Monique, and prOphecy sun. *Pocket Theatre: In the Beginning*, 2020. Animation short, Covid collaboration. Shown at the Simon Fraser University Small File Media Festival, 2020, and the Cairo Video Festival, 2021.

And yet, even in the face of dire environmental consequences, I feel a cautious optimism emerging. And so what if the machine parts buckle? Or, if the combustion engine is retired? As I travel through the winding park trails by my home in South Vancouver, I walk through one of the city’s largest historic garbage dumps, which is now a park (Campbell 2017).³ Layered thick with bark mulch, and blackberries, winding paths cover the now defunct landfill. Every so often the suburban footsteps wear down certain areas and the decade’s worth of discarded items are revealed to the walker, a happenstance archeological dig; a shoe from the ’50s, a bottle from the ’70s. The consumer choices of the past are still being enacted on us. The garbage is still intact, hidden under the city’s beautification project. But it awes me, the shoots of small

plants curling up through the debris, the tenacity of invasive morning glory refusing to be swept under—fighting for every inch of stolen land. In *Rebirth* (2020) (see Fig. 7), decades of discarded machinery slow and collect like junkyards of progress and speed. Here engines, axels, and chains rust, become shelters for insects, worms, and seedpods. Thriving in the Anthropocene wasteland, the lichens, plants, and snakes weave through their unconventional homelands, finding shelter and reprieve.

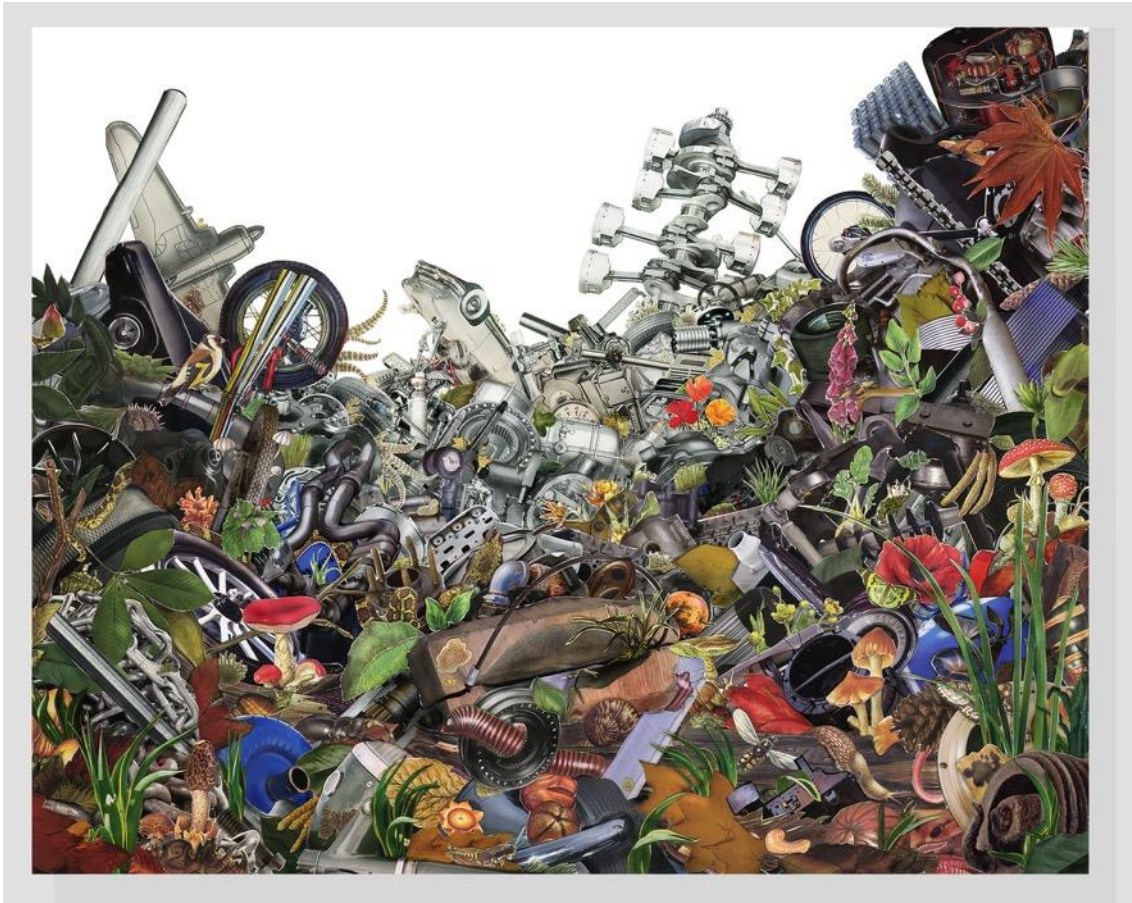


Figure 7. Motut-Firth, Monique. *Rebirth: plane, tore, axel, leaves, grass, insects*, 2020. Inkjet print, 30" x 40" x ¼".

Notes

Pocket Theatre: In the Beginning, 2020: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/515599632>.

¹ In this text, I will refer to the hoard as a metaphor for the overwhelming volume of cultural imagery at large, as well as a specific collection of print imagery that I see as physical symptom of the pressure of image culture.

² The Doukhobors or spirit wrestlers were a utopian Christian sect seeking to immigrate from Russia and granted refuge by the Canadian government in 1899. The agricultural brotherhood eventually purchased land near the Columbia River—settling, farming, and displacing the fishing, hunting and gathering of the Indigenous Sinixt peoples of the East Kootenay region. The displacement was far reaching but also felt by a family named Christian in the kp'itl'els

/Brilliant area in 1912. The federal government of Canada declared the indigenous people from the Arrow Lakes Band region extinct in 1956. Since this declaration, the Sinixt peoples have taken the Canadian Government to task stating that they indeed are not extinct and have served a lawsuit claiming the right to hunt and live in their ancestral territories. See more about the Sinixt at <https://sinixtnation.org/content/about-us>.

³ Everett Crowley Park is found within the unceded territories of the Musquem, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh nations, ancestors of the Tskhlehuith people, who lived in the region for the last 8000 years. Settlers began farming, logging, and dumping garbage in this area as early as the 1870s. The landfill was decommissioned between 1967–73 by the City of Vancouver. In 1987, the area was designated as Everett Crowley Park and underwent a revitalization plan (Campbell 2017).

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