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and four 'lies' of data**

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# After *What Matters?* A reflection on the value of arts and culture and four 'lies' of data

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To recast our public conversation seems to me the only realistic way to bring about change. If we do not talk differently, we shall not think differently. (Tony Judt, *III Fares the Land*)

## Abstract

In this article, we consider some of the issues arising from the recent publication of our book *What Matters? Talking Value in Australian Culture*, co-authored with Robert Phiddian. We briefly describe the book's main arguments, especially the critical stance taken towards the use of metrics and numerical proxies in the evaluation of arts and culture. We reflect on its media reception, and its attempted intervening in an on-going debate about the role and meaning of cultural activities in Australian life today. We then identify four 'lies' of data - four disingenuous applications of quantitative method that substitute for the search for a more effective understanding of the problem of value as it appears in the cultural domain and related fields. The article concludes with consideration of an alternative approach to the evaluation of arts and culture that resuscitates the notion of their 'public good', following political historian Tony Judt's call for "a language of ends not means".

## Keywords

Arts, Australian culture, culture, data, Laboratory Adelaide, measurement, metrics, reporting, value



# WHAT MATTERS?

## TALKING VALUE IN AUSTRALIAN CULTURE

JULIAN MEYRICK, ROBERT PHIDDIAN AND TULLY BARNETT

“When did culture become a number? When did the books, paintings, poems, plays, songs, films, games, art installations, clothes, and the objects that fill our daily lives become a matter of statistical measurement? When did experience become data?”

“This book intervenes in an important debate about the public value of culture that has become stranded between the hard heads (where the arts are just another industry) and the soft hearts (for whom they are too precious to bear dispassionate analysis).”

### Introduction

*What Matters? Talking Value in Australian Culture* (Meyrick et al., 2018a) is a book framing the contentious problem of the public value of arts and culture in Australia. It argues for the return of the problem to the humanities disciplines, subsequent to a need to avoid collapsing evaluation into measurement, outcomes into outputs. Culture’s qualitative dimensions are underemphasised in current assessment processes, which often fail to articulate the experiential dimensions of artistic and cultural activities (Belfiore, 2018).

The problem impacts across a range of areas. It is a problem for policy-makers, having to decide on the allocation of scarce resources (O’Brien, 2013). It is a problem for creative artists and cultural workers, competing for public assistance (Walmsley, 2012; Radbourne, Glow & Johanson, 2010). And it is a problem for academic researchers, seeking to inform debate around cultural activities and how these accrue value (Throsby, 2010). This extension throws up issues to do with the definition, measurement and reporting of culture that operationalise differently. How culture is defined is a matter separate from how it is measured, which in turn is different from which indices are reported on (Meyrick, 2016). The relationship

between the three issues - definition, measurement, and reporting, that are in effect three aspects of the problem of value - is neither neutral nor straightforward. It is a political relationship, and has to be understood in political, not methodological, terms (Meyrick & Barnett, 2017).

*What Matters?* draws on examples from South Australia, where the three authors are based, and which is the locale for the research project Laboratory Adelaide: The Value of Culture (Meyrick et al., 2018b). The cultural ecology of Adelaide - the diverse and robust set of interlocking organisations and events the city embodies - is both unique and representative. The long history of some flagship cultural organisations, virtually coterminous with the beginnings of South Australia, and the prominence given to cultural events in Australia's 'Festival State', provide rich empirical material for in-depth examination of the accrual of culture's value *in situ*. Adelaide provides an ideal petri dish for researchers trying to identify the best of current assessment processes while addressing the dimensions they ignore. Through a case study approach, we consider the ways abstract evaluation methods capture - whether well or badly - the actual experience of arts and culture.

A number of important analytical points emerge in the book. A main one concerns the crucial role of context in the reporting of cultural data. Both definitions of culture and the measurement of select indices (proxies of value) draw their meaning from specific social locales and accompanying "background understanding" (Searle, 1958). In reporting, this is best communicated through narrative. The role of narrative in making a locale visible in assessment processes is vital not only for basic coherence, because 'stories' provide an empathetic means of understanding for distant readers, but because narrative acts as a ground for the meaningful interpretation of quantitative data, ensuring this does not dissolve in a "transcontextual commensurability of reference" (Pusey, 1991, p. 11). The measurement of culture is thus dependent on our *sense* of culture. In the reporting domain, the two can be brought together in meaningful assessment - but only if culture's contextual features are incorporated.

The latter chapters of the book discuss Sustainability Reporting (GRI) and Integrated Reporting (<IR>), two alternative reporting frameworks used in the corporate sector to capture a broader sense of value (Eccles & Krzus, 2010). These frameworks enable firms to include costs and benefits not reflected directly in monetary streams, but which are clearly significant. This is true, for example, of environmental 'externalities'. If environmentally-friendly behaviour can find a place on company balance sheets in positive ways, then it can support actions that accrue this intangible value. <IR> uses a 'six capitals' schema to broaden the notion of value beyond the traditional ones of financial and manufacturing, and we ask whether culture can be situated within this as a 'seventh capital'. <IR> is less a paradigm than a set of informing principles for the best-practice reporting of value,

so we provide a set of hypothetical reporting principles for arts and culture by way of illustration.

The core argument of *What Matters?* is that governments, the cultural sector and researchers need more talk of meaning and purpose in discussions about the public value of culture, to balance the contemporary obsession with benchmarking, rankings and metrics (see also Phiddian et al., 2017a; Phiddian et al., 2017b). This is not to discount the importance of accountability and transparency in public funding but to argue that numerical data alone is often obfuscating and encourages hyper-focus only on those dimensions that can be easily quantified. What matters cannot always be scaled, or captured in the categorical language of policy-making. Yet measurement and abstraction - the search for the perfect algorithm and the perfect buzzword - dominate the way arts and culture are discussed, and in ways that belie and betray our human experience of them. If we cannot register the reality of culture because we cannot enumerate it, then public debate is impoverished and error prone. We do not need another evaluative methodology, however ingenious. We need an entirely different way of approaching the problem of value. It is the humanities disciplines that have the outlook and critical tools to generate the needed insights into the complex, layered and ever-changing lifeworld of arts and culture.

#### **Authors' reflection: the response to the book**

In the weeks after the launch of *What Matters?* we gave a number of interviews, on radio and television, and wrote a number of summary articles, to discuss the book's message.<sup>1</sup> It was, in many ways, a frustrating experience. We found ourselves wondering, after yet another dispiriting failure to speedily articulate the problem of value in the media realm, *how do we argue for a change of heart?* It is not a question of this or that KPI, this or that index, metric, model, paradigm or tracking tool. The core of the problem does not involve numbers at all - although in the book we do spend time criticising what might be called 'false quantification'. Numbers always tell us something, even if it's only how untrustworthy the people using them are. It is what they don't tell us that is the problem.

In *The Great Crash*, the economist J.K. Galbraith examines the history of the 1929 stock market crash. It is an interesting case study from a quantitative data point of view, because in the months before that catastrophic September, the numbers were all positive. Stocks kept going up and up and up. Looking at the figures alone, one

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<sup>1</sup> " Julian Meyrick on why numbers and culture don't add up" *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 August 2018 <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/julian-meyrick-on-why-numbers-and-culture-dont-add-up-20180819-h145y6.html>; Robert Phiddian " Numbers don't add up when calculating value of art" *The Australian* 5 September 2018. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/numbers-dont-add-up-when-it-comes-to-calculating-value-of-art/news-story/dc5d152b2e4d59395ac78b154bcf7273>

might not have concluded - and no-one did conclude - that the worst depression in economic history was about to occur.

Between human beings there is a type of intercourse which proceeds not from knowledge, or even lack of knowledge, but from failure to know what isn't known. This was true of much discourse on the market [in 1929] ... Wisdom ... is often an abstraction associated not with fact or reality but with the man who asserts it and the manner of its assertion. (Galbraith, 2009, pp. 99-100)

Galbraith's point is that it is what we don't know that confounds us, and makes us realise later that our assumptions are just that, assumptions, even when we hide them behind banks of statistics arranged like the serried trenches of World War I. An exhibition of paintings that attracts over 1 million people in 6 weeks sounds like a good number. It is the visitor count for the hugely successful Degenerate Art Exhibition the German Nazi party organised in Munich in 1937 (Levi, 1998). So perhaps not so good. Or what about the most popular book written, as judged by print run? *The Quotations of Chairman Mao* (Cook, 2014). Maybe that number, some 6 billion, reflects something more - or less - than an expression of free consumer choice.

What about the value of an individual cultural experience? Here's a narrative, a 'parable of value' as we say in the book. One of our authors grew up in London. One Monday, he was waiting for a friend in the Tate Gallery. At this time the UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher was forcing collections institutions to charge for entry, so he was standing in the lobby, unwilling to pay £5 to go in. His friend was late, and there was just one painting to look at, *RA 2* by Bridget Riley. He thought it a very uninspiring work; basically, just a glorified colour chart. He leant against the wall looking at the painting for twenty minutes. Then the lines of colour appeared to move. They oscillated in an almost musical way. It changed his opinion about Riley. We might say, he valued her paintings more as the result of this personally transformative experience. But the implications were broader. Because at the same moment, he realised that if he had been wrong in his assessment of Riley, then he might be wrong about other painters as well. The moment at the Tate was "world-disclosing" in the Heideggerian sense (Heidegger, 2010). *RA 2* was more than an addition to his existing information about contemporary painting practice, more than an acquisition of consumption skills. It was a fundamental change in his understanding of the relationship between life and art. His experience was meaningful and because of that meaningfulness, and only because of it, was Riley's painting valuable. Otherwise, being told, "*RA 2* is worth \$200,000" would not have prompted a viable response. There are many things priced at \$200,000 that we might not value, and would regard anyone paying that kind of money for as foolish or worse.

We could go on, with example after example, showing how current standardized measures, particularly monetary measures, at best foreshorten and misrepresent, and at worst betray, the value of culture, both when we love what we get, and when we hate it.

Evaluating cultural experiences is challenging. That is because we know what we want now (present needs) and can remember, just, what we wanted in the past (past preferences), but we have little idea of what we will want in the future (potential wants). What music will we listen to in five years' time? If we knew, for certain, we might take steps to ensure that the composers, orchestras, singers and bands who can meet our demands stand a chance of making a living from what they do. If they don't, they will what economists call 'exit the market'. The market will have made its choice before we get to make our choice, and there will be little that is 'free' about it. It will reflect a short-term equilibrium because that is all markets ever reflect, supply and demand, marginal rates of production and substitution.

Evaluating arts and culture is similar to evaluating other intangible goods and services, and these are a significant part of our lives now, as we increasingly realise that the natural world around us is not a replaceable asset on a balance sheet, but has a value outside any conception of monetary exchange whatsoever (Gleeson-White, 2014). Many of the ideas in *What Matters?* were inspired by, or took courage from, similar ideas in the environmental movement, and the passion that infuses activists in that all-important domain is the same that motivates us, as Laboratory Adelaide researchers, in our relationship to culture. To value, say, a beautiful poem, or a perfectly made ceramic, or an episode of Sophie Hyde's brilliant TV drama *Fucking Adelaide*, disporting oneself like a third-rate scientist with a digital thermometer is a waste of time. We have to find a connection of feeling with the cultural artefact or event, a love of what it offers, or could offer (Meyrick, 2015). With this relationship, it is possible to make a judgement both meaningful and effective. Without it, every scrap of so-called 'evidence' is just a rationalisation of congealed prejudice and blithe presumption.

To be clear: the target of censure in *What Matters?* is not evaluation *per se*, or even our obsession with evaluation, which is eating us alive as a society (Beer, 2016; Muller, 2018). That's a problem, but it's not Laboratory Adelaide's problem. Our problem is that the evaluation of arts and culture in Australian policy-making today is reductive, decontextualized, blankly sceptical, and focused on short-term goals. What we *should* be doing is building up a bank of expertise and assessment proficiencies to support and add to the initiatives and institutions bequeathed to us by the regimes of the past. Instead, successive federal governments have used the Australia Council for the Arts as a political football, interfered with the mission of the ABC every chance they have got, and engaged in an aggressive pursuit of budget savings that has disproportionately affected a bottom-line that, in the words of the

ex-Director of Arts Queensland Leigh Tabrett, was little more than a rounding error to begin with (Tabrett, 2013). For the last six years, the federal Liberal government has not had a national cultural policy. Prior to 2013, the then Labor government delayed the launch of *Creative Australia* so long it only had one for its last six months in office. The cultural infrastructure laboriously built-up under Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke, and Keating - not only the bricks and mortar, but the human capital, the skills sets, the programs, projects and priorities - has been dribbled away by their successors, while the cultural sector squabbles amongst itself, unwilling to admit, or perhaps comprehend, the chronic under-investment in the area that has been compounding for twenty years. Thus, current evaluation techniques - often no more than faintly-disguised measures of commercial success - are not only invidious, they undermine the agency of cultural practitioners, turning outcomes into outputs, a world of creative things done, into columns of KPIs and fatuous management blather. It is not new methods that we need now, but a circuit-breaker, a stepping off the evaluation treadmill, and a reconsideration, collectively, of what we are really doing and why we are really doing it.

Imagine this hypothetical situation: no artist or cultural organisation submits a formal request for three years. Not one report. If an artist wants a grant, they call up an arts agency, and talk to someone. Then they come in, and have an assessment meeting. They get the grant or they don't. If they get it, they do the work, call up the agency again, and tell them what they have done. At the end of three years, would the cultural sector have gone to hell in a handbasket? Would chaos reign? Would artists go berserk and use the money to take rides at taxpayers' expense to holiday destinations? Last time we looked, the only people doing this were politicians (Bagshaw et al., 2017).

And if the reply to this is, 'that is not a realistic proposal', then imagine only the reporting that is strictly necessary, only the crucial evaluation. And suppose these processes have to attract two-thirds majority support from the cultural sector itself, as appropriate, feasible and meaningful. What kind of assessment would take place then? It is doubtful that decisions about the distribution of scarce public resources would be any easier. But we would certainly be talking about support for art and culture in a completely different way.

If *What Matters?* has one key point to make it is this: that neither the results nor the methods of evaluation are politically neutral, and this is not a disaster, but a reality. What we might call the rhetoric of data ignores or at least under-emphasises this fact, and the rest of this article briefly reflect on four presumptions - which in a rhetorical flourish of our own, we will call 'lies' - that distort the way we gather, process and disseminate information in the cultural domain today.



## Four lie(s) of data

*Lie No.1: The lie of the neutrality of data and, alongside this, the lie that all we need, as individuals and a society, is more data to make better decisions.*

In saying this, we are not arguing for ignorance, or for ceasing to collect information on matters for which it is useful for information to be collected. But that is not an infinite list. And even for those things on the list, it is possible to pursue data collection beyond the point of reason and engage the law of diminishing returns. The sheer volume of information collected collapses in on itself, creating the epistemological equivalent of thermal inversion, where effective decision making is crushed because we fail to recognise - either through lack of insight or lack of courage - that what we need is something other than data: a different moral and political outlook; or greater collective honesty; or the capacity to look beyond the data - which only ever reflects what's there - and imagine what is yet to be; to imagine what comes next. The best example of this is Anthropocene climate change. There is a great deal of data on this phenomenon, and more coming in every day. And yet the social response that arises from it is weak, sporadic and sharply resisted (Beer 2016; de Andrade Júnior, 2018; Giddens 2009). We know informationally that if we do not act to halt global warming we jeopardise the future of the planet and ourselves as a species. Yet we do little about it. Perhaps we need to change our idea of what "knowledge" means, and admit that data is a necessary but not sufficient basis for genuine understanding of the wicked problems we face as a society today.

*Lie No.2: The lie of comprehensiveness of data, and alongside this, the unfounded belief that important issues will prompt someone - who? - to seek data about them which will become public at some stage.*

Data is only ever selectively sought and even more selectively shared. Some people and organisations are on a hamster-wheel of generating more and more information about themselves, to rest from doing things only to endlessly account for the things they do. Others are not. In arts and culture, we have had some egregious examples of this - in George Brandis's ill-fated attempt to establish a National Programme for Excellence in the Arts with money taken willy-nilly from the Australia Council (Eltham 2016) - an arm's length statutory authority - and more recently, in the decision by NSW Minister for the Arts, Don Harwin, to peremptorily give two thirds of the state's Arts and Development budget to the Sydney Symphony Orchestra (Boland & Timms, 2018). A similar lack of data collection and disclosure can be seen in the \$440m awarded to the Great Barrier Reef Fund which was handed over by Malcolm Turnbull in the course of an afternoon via a network of personal connections (Cox, 2018). These are just the cases we know about, the decisions that have come to light *ex post facto*. There are many areas which we do not investigate until the consequences become so dire they can no longer be kept out of the public eye. This

has happened in turn to sport, banking, and care of the elderly. Before media exposure, the data on cheating, bank fraud and elder abuse either wasn't kept or wasn't revealed.

*Lie No.3: The lie of the benevolence of data, and alongside this, the view that having more information in the public domain will, in and of itself, lead to a more open, efficient and fairer society.*

Of all the assumptions made about data this is the one destined to fade first. The recent scandals around Facebook data misuse and breaches (Bogost, 2018; Madrigal 2018), and the regular hacking raids made on all kinds of medical and financial databases (Patterson, 2018), point up the value of our privacy, of *not* gathering data about certain things, or at least gathering it under strict conditions. More broadly, they bring into focus the dangers of a data-fied society if data falls into the wrong hands, not just criminal hands, but political ones. We are once again in an era of so-called democracy deficit and the rise of authoritarian governments. Greed, insensitivity, lack of inclusiveness, and the addictive allure of extreme opinions, are undermining the operation of open societies with the result that we see a tack back towards repressive or populist regimes. Into the hands of these dubious polities, we are placing instruments of great power and control when we hand over our data. For it is as Plato observed: once a thing is known, it cannot be unknown. The fate of our data is then subject to whatever these darkening forces make of it. Unlike real estate and physical possessions, we cannot take our information back.

*Lie No.4: The lie of the consistency of data, the belief that the data points gathered are an adequate representation of the reality for which they stand proxy.*

It is astonishing, given historians' sophisticated awareness of the contested status of 'matters of fact' that no such awareness seems to apply to the numbers that are data's idealised form. The complex relationship between historical evidence and the act of historical interpretation has exercised scholarly minds for over a century. Yet the proselytizers of data occupy a naïve empiricism that allows little room for the insights of these debates, and ignores the caveats they carry. Here is a hypothetical example of what we mean. Take the statement, "It's got three stars" made by three individuals: an astronomer, an electrician and a film reviewer. It is the changed professional context that lexically supplies the same statement with different meanings. For the astronomer, talking about a quadrant of the night sky, "it's got three stars" is an arithmetical conclusion, a description of observable quantity. Qualitative assessment comes into the statement only minimally, if at all. For the electrician, talking about the energy rating of a whitegood, the context is more fluid. There are benchmarks, industry standards and public expectations, but these may not align, or leave room for some discretion. We might imagine a *range* of outcomes that conform to the statement "it's got three stars", each defensible

up to a point. Finally, the film reviewer responding to the latest Hollywood blockbuster or new Australian film offers a personal insight, a quantified expression of what is, and can only ever be, qualitative judgement. This might be knowledgeable and discerning to the point of genius. But it cannot be a literal truth. The statement “it’s got three stars” is a metaphor, and a parasitic one at that, drawing on the rhetorical reality that judgements today seem more authoritative when they are glossed pseudo-scientifically, which usually means metrically. The danger is obvious. In moving from the literal to the defensible to the metaphorical, we ignore the differences in relation between quantitative and qualitative phenomena, and occupy instead a whirligig of inconsistent numbers, each with a different origin and professional context behind them, and therefore different styles and degrees of meaningful application.

### **Conclusion: the opposite of data is experience**

When we were writing *What Matters?* we agreed, as authors, that we wanted to start a conversation, not finish one. The problem of value in arts and culture, as we see it, is one that has got stuck in methodological fetishism, losing sight of the broader issues that append human experience in the cultural realm. These issues are necessarily open-ended and cannot be captured by distanced, quantitative indicators alone. When putting our view, we often hear the protest ‘but we still have to evaluate’, as if we weren’t saying exactly that. We *do* need to evaluate the culture that comes our way, now more than ever. The difficulty is that our sense of value is inextricably bound up with social assumptions that hide behind the data rather than being highlighted by them, and lend credence to some positions rather than others: “spreadsheets of power”, as economist Richard Denniss memorably calls them (Denniss, 2015). This is well understood not only by cultural practitioners, but by university researchers, given that the higher education sector is subject to the same deracinating forces. Many people have expressed support for the arguments in our book, but not everyone, and some criticisms have been sharp. There is a lot at stake. For if we begin to doubt the efficacy of current methods of valuing our culture, that scepticism could infect other policy realms, and before long a general questioning of political assumptions might ensue, and who knows what changes this could prompt? The abstract concept of value is not separable from the lived reality of our values. To investigate the first is to address the second, and it is important to say that we did not go looking for this bigger battle; it was there beyond the frozenness of the measurement debate, an emergent grappling of confused, confusing, and conflicted beliefs and opinions. The problem of the value of arts and culture is an Alice-through-the-Looking-Glass passage into an angry argument about where we should be headed as a nation, and as a world. Our short book - a book we feared would be shrugged off as soon as published - appears at a moment when that argument is getting louder, daily.

To the gathering storm *What Matters?* has many positive things to contribute. The tone of the book is resolutely cheerful. The constant danger of methodological fetishism is that evaluation becomes an end in itself, that targets and tracking replace real-world goals and purpose, and there is a coarsening of civic dialogue and expectations as a result. It cannot be said often enough: if we cannot measure what we value, we will come to value what we measure. Quantitative indicators will pop their groove of useful application, and public trust will disappear as stakeholders learn to game the metrics *in lieu* of a more honest and meaningful discussion about the value of what they do. In Judith White's brilliant book, *The Culture Heist* (2018), about the travails of the State Gallery of New South Wales - travails self-inflicted by the blankness and blindness of its own senior managers - she argues that Australian Treasury departments believe that cultural institutions should either be commercially successful or not exist. The hyper-marketized view of society, one in which every interaction is reduced to monetary exchange, has a raft of pernicious effects, not least of which is political reaction. Australia is not immune from this. It may be the lucky country, but luck, like the environment, is not an infinite resource. How can we find a way forward, then, not only for the evaluation of culture, but for the problem of value itself? How can we resuscitate a richer, realer more efficacious idea of value in the face of the current dysphoria?

In the last series of lectures he gave before he died, *Ill Fares the Land* (2010), the political historian Tony Judt offered an alternative perspective to the market thinking that abstracts, distorts and pollutes so many spheres of social action today. It is one built around a renovated concept of 'public value'. We do not explore this in detail in *What Matters?* It would be hard to know where to start - with policy, economics, social theory, legal theory, ethics? Each of these disciplines has its own definition of the term, and what it entails by way of rights and obligations. For Judt,

It is the gap between the inherently ethical nature of public decision-making and the utilitarian quality of contemporary political debate that accounts for the lack of trust felt towards politics and politicians ... Even if we concede that there is no higher purpose to life, we need to ascribe meaning to our actions in a way that transcends them. Merely asserting that something is or is not in our material interest will not satisfy most of us most of the time. To convince *others* that something is right or wrong we need a language of ends, not means. We don't have to know that our objectives are poised to succeed. We do need to be able to believe in them. (Judt, 2010, p. 180)

To the signal quest for a language of ends not means, arts and culture are more than cup-bearers, more than simply the recipient of ideas hammered out in other realms. Cultural practices, and their natural correlates, the humanities disciplines are nothing if not concerned with higher purpose, and how human beings allot

significance to what they say and do. The meaning is the use, quipped Wittgenstein, in discussing how language works. We might say, sometimes the use is the meaning - in the fact of something *being* meaningful in the first place. Judt argues that it is not possible to bring back the grand religious and political narratives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that we must seek “incremental improvements upon unsatisfactory circumstances”. This is too pessimistic, to our minds, especially where culture is concerned. Arts and culture are, above all, joyous. The articulation of the public value they represent is not a transliteration into a dour and data-fied vocabulary of social and economic gain. It is a celebration of our fun, wonder, and growth when we encounter something that speaks directly to us as a singular cultural experience.

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