

When The Wall Talks: A Semiotics Analysis of *Graffiti* Tagged by “*Act Move*”

A Journal Paper

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Abstract: In Indonesia Graffiti phenomenon has become a popular culture. Graffiti exists around us; in public space, wall, and toilet. Its existence sometime lasts just a few days then being erased, but some other exists for a long time. Some people think graffiti is a kind of *vandalism*, some other think it is a piece of art. That makes the graffiti interesting to me. The author believe there must be a purpose and meaning in creating graffiti. Bandung city is popular as the place of creative people; there are many communities of *Bomber*, graffiti creator called. The author choose some graffiti tagged by *Act Move* around Bandung as the sample for my analysis. Different with other graffiti, *Act Move* more applies more the words form rather than pictures. In this paper the author would like to analyze five graffiti tagged by *Act Move* around Bandung city through the Roland Barthes framework. Barthes' Frame work is applied to find out the meaning of graffiti. After doing descriptive analysis of the graffiti the author also do an interview with the *Bomber* of *Act Move* to enrich the data and make the clear understanding of this study. The finding of this study is the meaning of denotation, connotation and myth or ideology of the graffiti. The author expect this study can give the exploration and interpretation the meaning beyond and surface of graffiti. So, people will not only see and realize the graffiti. When the wall talks, we have to listen it then do some responses.

Keyword: Linguistics, Semiotics, Culture, Graffiti, Propaganda, Vandalism, Street Art, Public Space, Wall, Bomber, *Act Move*, Bandung, West Java, Indonesia.

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Graffiti phenomenon has become a culture in our life. They exist around us; in city space, wall, public transportation, and public toilet. It may be propaganda, politic, finding identity, art or just a popular trend. In this paper, the author would like to discuss about graffiti phenomenon to make the understanding about its history, development, meaning and purpose before the author go deeper to the analysis. The author found some journals which researched about graffiti; “Graffiti di Indonesia: Sebuah Politik Identitas ataukah Tren?” by Obed Bima Wicandra (2006), “Iranian Graffiti during Political Transformation” by Syahryar (2011) and “Truck Graffiti” by Yazid Bastomi (2007). Wicandra seen graffiti in an artistic form of visual communication, Syahryar compared the graffiti before and after political transformation in Iran, while Bastomi seen graffiti on truck in Malang, Indonesia as a literary work. The author has not found the research about the political graffiti on public space seen as the sign and analyze it through semiotic framework to find out the denotative, connotative and myth or ideology. So, the author thinks it would be interesting to do it.

Literally, as Oxford dictionary states that Graffiti is word or drawing, especially humorous, rude or political, on walls, door, etc. in public places. But originally, the term ‘graffiti’ is derived from Italian language and is the plural form of the word ‘graffito’ which means drawing or inscription. In English, the word ‘graffiti’ has undergone changes in meaning and relates specifically to writings in public spaces which are generally unexpected. Actually, human was writing graffiti since the prehistoric era, they wrote and drew the prayer, story or event on the surface of the caves. And since the down of civilization they were making graffiti on walls of ancient structured.

As Wicandra (2006) stated that Graffiti in Indonesia began its popularity in colonialism era. They make graffiti to express or imply code; it became the best way to create propaganda. Indonesian people who read the graffiti will feel more strength and much more spirit in war with Dutch. At that time, Affandi, the fine artist was made graffiti tagged as “BOENG AJOBOENG!”.



Image 1.
The Colonialism Era

http://www.banyaknama.com/2011/12/liputan-perjuangan-kemerdekaan_12.html



Image 2.
Poster BoengAjoBoeng

http://www.banyaknama.com/2011/12/liputan-perjuangan-kemerdekaan_12.html

The graffiti was jarring Indonesian people hearts. This graffiti belonged to public, it was tagged on city space, poster, walls, even public train by everyone who wanted to. Besides, there was also some graffiti that popular in Indonesia such as; “Freedom Indonesia!”, “We are free people”, “MerdekaatauMati”, “Better go to hell than to be colonized again”.



Image 3.
Graffiti on Public Train

http://www.banyaknama.com/2011/12/liputan-perjuangan-kemerdekaan_12.html



Image 4.
Graffiti on Public wall

http://www.banyaknama.com/2011/12/liputan-perjuangan-kemerdekaan_12.html

Based on HAI magazine No. 36/XXX/4 September-10 September 2006, the graffiti development in Indonesia began in year 1970s as tagging or writing of the name of person, school, community and gang. Jakarta was filled by spray paint that waseasy to get from stores, whoever the buyer. Jakarta city space was tagged by some community or gang to make a territorial sign. Some words that werepopular at that time are; “RASELA” (Rajawali Selatan) around GunungSahari, “T2R” around Tomang-Slipi-Bogor, “LAPENDOS” (Laki-

lakiPenuhDosa) around KebayoranBaru, “LEGOS” and “COKREM” (cowokrempeng) on South Jakarat/JAKARTA, and also “Mondroid” the Car Community. Bandung city space was also tagged by a popular gang at that time, named “OREXAS” (Organisasi Sex Bebas). The interesting thing, this word was adapted from the novel written by Remysilado.

In year 1980s the gang graffiti weredecreasing their popularity, and school name graffiti began to replace it. The unique was, they tagged the school name in graffiti such as; “Mahakam Six”, “Brigade 70”, “Dos-Q”, “Kapin” dan “Kapal 616”. 616 was referred to the number of public transportation that they usually use. This graffiti phenomenon became theinspirationfor Ian Antono to make a song, and popular as Nicky Astria as the singer at that time. This song was also purposed to the anti-graffiti movement, because in the middle of year eighties graffiti was totally seen as vandal and pollutant.

The development of graffiti in year 1990s haddecreased. There were still tagging or writing about the name of gang, but was not made the big response as the older era. RomoMangun, senior artist, wanted to change the bad images of graffiti to be more positive. He designed and drew the dirty by graffiti and mural, and it was successful. Because of the modern technology (internet, tv cable, international magazine), in year 2000s, the information about the world development became so easy to access. Many Indonesian people saw American culture as the central of the modern trend or style. Indonesia has their new style, artistic graffiti. The artistic graffiti waspopularized by the art university student in Jakarta, Bandung and Jogjakarta. At this time some graffiti tagged in some places intentionally on purpose to decorate and gaive more artistic value, as example; Kali Code riverside Jogjakarta, Siliwangi street Bandung.



Image 5.
Graffiti at KaliCode

<http://www.antaraneews.com/foto/1786/10332/mural-sungai-code>



Image 6.
Graffiti at Siliwangi

<http://spectrumpaint-indonesia.blogspot.com/2012/08/apa-itu-mural.html>

“In year 2006 graffiti is more purpose to present the personal or community identity than to make propaganda or write the social politics message.” Wicandra (2006). At that time modern break dance was became popular with the habit of tagging artistic graffiti of their community to show the identity, the graffiti maker then called Bomber. Artistic graffiti was hard to read.



Image 7.
Artistic Graffiti

<http://spectrumpaint-indonesia.blogspot.com/2012/08/apa-itu-mural.html>

After discussing a brief history of graffiti above, the author would like to come up with the graffiti phenomenon tagged by “Act Move” in Bandung 2013.

Graffiti and Act Move



Image 8.
Graffiti Act Move at Balaikota
(Personal collection)



Image 9.
Graffiti Act Move at Dago
(Personal collection)



Image 10.
Graffiti Act Move at Cipaganti
(Personal collection)

Gadsby (1995), tried to make classifications of graffiti; she categorized graffiti into six main classifications: 1) latrinalia, 2) public, 3) tags, 4) historical, 5) folk epigraphy, and 6) humorous.

1. Latrinalia emerged for the first time as it was used by Dundes to refer to graffiti found in toilets (Gadsby, 1995; Emmison& Smith, 2000). Latrinalia is one type of graffiti which has been extensively researched. It goes on par with the notion that the dirtiest, yet, the most widely disclosed place in the U.S. is toilet.
2. Public refers to graffiti which are written on public spaces and sites, such as outside walls of buildings, trains and subways, and other public spaces available. Public is so called due to this nature; that is, it is for public and obtainable in public spaces. Tags might also be public, but, not always so.
3. Tags might occupy public spaces just like the graffiti categorized as public; however, tags have their own specific characteristics, that is, the messages they convey are addressed to those within the social boundary of the people writing the tags. Tags tend to be unique and representing an individual. Tags might be names of individuals, but the very characteristic of tags is their individualist expression. In other words, tags are as individual as fingerprints. Tags tend to employ the attributes of the writer: name, initial, address, specific symbols of certain values, and so forth.
4. Historical signifies graffiti which are explored by those whose life spans long after the graffiti were produced.
5. Folk epigraphy suggests inscriptions made by ordinary people on walls, rocks, woods, and etcetera.

6. Humorous seems to be elusive to define. But, basically, any graffiti collected for entertaining purposes fall into this category.

Beside the graffiti classifications, the author also take some styles of graffiti from <http://weburbanist.com> (2009), they are: Tag, throw-up, stencil, sticker (slaps), wildstyle, piece, blockbuster, heaven.

1. Tagging is the simplest type of graffiti, consisting of the writer's street name in one color. Tags are basically the graffiti writer's signature; if they're associated with a crew, they might also contain the crew's name or initials. Tags can be seen everywhere and are done in spray paint, markers or pens. A throw-up is a little more complicated than a tag, usually having two or three colors, but not nearly as elaborate as a piece.
2. A throw-up is something that can be done quickly and repeatedly, while still identifying the writer. They're usually done in bubble letters, often in one color with a differently-colored outline. When a graffiti writer goes out bombing, they're usually either putting up tags or throw-ups all over their area.
3. Stencil is the type of graffiti that was made popular by the likes of Blek le Rat and Banksy and has now taken hold with graffiti writers everywhere. By holding the stencil against the wall and spraying, you can get a much more detailed picture than you would be able to with just a spray can.
4. Sticker is just as likely to see elaborate, professional-looking printed stickers with a message or image plastered all over. Graffiti artists like stickers because they can take their time on the art in private, then quickly slap them up wherever.
5. Wildstyle is a particular style of writing that was developed and popularized by graffiti artists like Tracy 168, Stay High 149 and Zephyr in New York City. It's a complicated and extremely stylized form of writing that, to the untrained eye, is not easy to read. Wildstyle writing features arrows, spikes, curves and other elements that non-graffiti artists may have a hard time understanding. Wildstyle pieces are often 3D and considered to be one of the most complicated forms of graffiti.
6. A piece (short for masterpiece) is a graffiti painting, much more complex than a tag and having at least three colors. Pieces are hard to do illegally because of the time and

- effort involve, so a good piece will gain a lot of respect for that particular graffiti artist. As graffiti has gotten more respect as a legitimate art form, a lot of pieces have been commissioned – or at least the artists given permission to put them up.
7. A blockbuster is used to cover maximum area in a minimal amount of time. Often consisting of large block letters, the blockbuster can be accomplished with paint rollers and two or three colors of paint. Usually a blockbuster is put up to cover up other work or block other writers from putting anything up on the same area.
 8. A heaven is a piece that's put up in a very hard-to-reach location, often near or on the tops of tall buildings or on freeway signs. Because they're so dangerous and difficult to reach, graffiti artists who manage to get a piece up in such a spot will usually gain some added respect from their peers.

Bandung city is popular as the place of creative people; there are many communities of Bomber, name for graffiti creator. The author has collected some pictures of the *Act Move* graffiti around Bandung in year 2013. Then the author chooses five graffiti tagged by Act Move around Bandung as the sample for the data analysis, they are; “ACT MOVE”, “MENCARI SUAKA DI TANAH SENDIRI. ACT MOVE” which is in English means “SOUGHT ASYLUM IN (our) OWN LAND. ACT MOVE”, “KRIMINALITAS YANG DILEGALKAN”, in English means “THE LEGALIZED CRIME”, “Wisata Kemiskinan. Act Move” in English means “The Tour of Poverty. Act Move”, “GLOBAL ISSUE LOCAL SOLUTION. ACT MOVE”. The author believes that Tags by “*Act Move*” has a message. Different with other graffiti, Act Move more applies the words form rather than pictures.

Semiotics approach and Method

As Sudjiman and Zoest (1996) stated that Semiotics term was from Greece “Semeion” means sign, so semiotics is the study of sign. Semiology, in Barthes term, basically is the study of how humanity to signify things (Suwardi Endaswara: 2013). Like the other writing text or picture, there are signs in graffiti. The author would like to signify the graffiti tagged by Act Move as a visual sign; the graffiti text and the place where it was written. So, to analyze the deep meaning in graffiti, the author apply Roland Barthes' framework in signifying the sign.

Sunardi (2002) stated that there are two orders of significant in Barthes' framework the denotation (first order) and connotation (second order) which are helpful to find out the ideology or myth. In first order, denotation, there are signifier and signified, in second order, connotation, the denotation becomes the signifier then relates to contextual signified, while there are ideology or myth that become the signification as naturalization.

As Suwardi (2013) stated that Barthes tries to remove denotation as the oppressive literally meaning, Barthes stated that literal is natural meaning. While connotation not only presents the additional meaning of the sign, but also contains both parts of denotative sign as the basic.

Sunardi (2002) made a little modification on the scheme of signification of Barthes:

1. Sign	2. Signified		
3. Sign (Meaning)			
<i>I. Signifier</i>		<i>II. Signified</i>	
FORM		CONCEPT	
Expression		Content	
Form	Substance	Form	Substance
<i>III. Sign</i>			
SIGNIFICATION			

Table 1.
Signification Order Scheme by Barthes
(Sunardi, ST: 2002: 122).

Myth as the second order in semiotics consists of SIGNIFICATION, FORM, and CONCEPT. Myth is also the semiotics system, so we can describe the scheme: III. Sign, I. Signifier (Expression), and II. Signified (Content). "I added Expression and Content in this scheme for us to know the characteristic of FORM (Signifier) and CONCEPT (Signified)" (Sunardi, ST: 2002: 122).

To do the qualitative analysis, the author makes the descriptive interpretation and explanation on five objects as the sample. Based on Barthes' framework, to find out the myth or ideology of the graffiti tagged by Act Move, the author has to analyze and describe the

denotation meaning as the first order and connotation meaning as the second order of signification.

Finding and Discussion

In this section the author would like to present the finding and discussion after analyzing five models graffiti tagged by *Act Move*. The results are:

1. The first model of *Act Move* graffiti is “ACT MOVE” itself. This sign is usually tagged in almost the graffiti as the personal identity, but sometimes this tagging was just written as it. As Barthes’s first order of signification (denotative), the graffiti consists of two word; ACT



Image 11.
Graffiti Act Move at Taman Sari
(Personal collection)

and MOVE. Based on Cambridge dictionary, Act means to do something for a particular purpose, or to behave in the stated way. And move means to (cause to) change position. While as Barthes’ second order of signification (connotative), those two words have a same pattern, doing something; do an activity and do a changing. The characteristic of those two words are dynamic, not static. Their moods also seem like giving the spirit and energy, because it was written in capital, big and clear form. The writing was not neat, the paint was dropped, and it can be symbol of the character of blood. So, this graffiti talks and commands to do something different than before with spirit of motivation. The place of the graffiti is in public wall, side the main street, so the target audiences are everyone who is passing that place. The myth of this graffiti is ‘there is people or situation that need to do something new or change something, different from before.’ And this graffiti gives the spirit to them.



Image 12.
Graffiti Act Move at Setiabudhi
(Personal collection)

2. The second model graffiti is “MENCARI SUAKA DI TANAH SENDIRI. ACT MOVE” which is in English means “SEEK AFTER ASYLUM IN (our) OWNLAND. ACT MOVE”. Based on the Cambridge dictionary, sought means to try to find or get something, especially something which is not a physical object. Asylum means protection or safety, especially

something that was given by a government to foreigners who have been forced to leave their own countries for political reasons. That becomes the first order of signification meaning (denotation). And the second order of signification meaning (connotation) is, the graffiti aims to make parody of “seek after asylum in other country”. It becomes satire when the word used to be after “seek after asylum” was “in other country” replaced by “in (our) own land”. The phrase “seek after asylum in other country “ is usually used to express the emergency situation when there is disaster in own country, but it replaced by “in (our) own land” so, it creates the nationalism spirit. The font was written in capital and big size, it was implying the urgent situation and the distinct statement. Advertisement billboard was used as the media; it aims to present the graffiti like the product advertisement that was easy to see by people. Based on the descriptions above, the ideology (myth) of the graffiti appears from the bomber of the graffiti who believes that today is the urgent situation; when people are faced the hard time or disaster, because of the nationalism spirit, they do not want to seek after asylum to other country but still want to seek the protection in their ownland. In other words, the attention of the government was not being spread evenly to whole land. And this critique was ended by the tag “ACT MOVE”.

3. The third model of graffiti is “KRIMINALITAS YANG DILEGALKAN”, in English means “THE LEGALIZED CRIME”. Based on Cambridge dictionary, legalized means allowed something by law. And crime means illegal activities. That is the first order of signification meaning (denotation).



Image 13.
Graffiti Act Move at Siliwangi
(Personal collection)

When those two words were reunited, there is a paradox. Those two words are impossible and difficult to understand because have two opposite characteristic of words. The first one is “Legalized” and the second is “Crime”; crime is absolutely the illegal activity and people in the world are not allowed to do it, even the police or government can arrest and punish the people who do crime. But in this phrase (graffiti), crime is legal and allowed by law; police and government. The graffiti was tagged on Siliwangi, which at that time becomes social problem because of the building of apartment project. Siliwangi is one of the protected forests in Bandung city, the location is near the Bandung Zoo. This city forest has many good functions and always gives benefits to us and our city; but in the beginning of 2013 Siliwangi was legalized to develop and manage by businessman. In that business Siliwangi the city forest would build apartment project. The second order of significance (connotation) can be the impossible thing was happening in that place. From the analysis of the first and second signification, the author found the myth of this graffiti; the bomber of this graffiti believes that is the government stands up for the businessman (some part of people). This is also becomes critique that the power can do anything and buy anything, even change the protected forest becomes luxurious apartment. Again, the tagged was ended by “ACT MOVE”.

4. The next model of graffiti is “Wisata Kemiskinan. Act Move” in English means “The Tour of Poverty. Act Move”. Based on Cambridge dictionary, tour means a visit to a place or area, especially one during which you look around the place or area and learn about it. And poverty means the condition of being



Image 14.
Graffiti Act Move at Cihampelas
(Personal collection)

extremely poor. After that first order meaning of signification (denotation), the second order meaning of signification (connotation) appears from construction of the form and concept. The graffiti “The Tour of Poverty” becomes satire. Actually, the poverty needs help of food and money. This word is contrasted by “Tour” word. Tour is the activity that is usually done by rich people. Behind the artistic and calm font that was used, Tour of Poverty also presents a tragic and apprehensive situation; the poverty is not the place for tourist to visit and enjoy around the area, but poverty needs help from the rich people. This word also could mean the critique to the government or candidate who only visits, looks around and learns about it with no solution. This graffiti was tagged on the wall in Narrow Street around Cihampelas Street. Cihampelas has been the most favorite place for tourist to go shopping and enjoy the culinary. There is one of the largest malls in Bandung city; there are also factory outlets and restaurant along the main street. Cihampelas street always visited by local, national and international tourist especially on holiday. Not many people know that there is a settlement backside Cihampelas street. So, the myth of this graffiti is the belief of the unbalance and the contrast of poverty and hedonism.

5.



Image 15.
Graffiti Act Move at Wastukencana
(Personal collection)

The last model of graffiti is “GLOBAL ISSUE LOCAL SOLUTION. ACT MOVE”.

The first order of signification (denotation);

Based on Cambridge dictionary, global means relating to the whole world, issue means a subject or

problem which people are thinking and talking about(environmental/ethical/personal issues), local means from, existing in, serving, or responsible for a small area, especially of a country and solution means the answer to a problem. The second order of signification (connotative); the answer of problem which people are thinking and talking about is existing in, serving, or responsible for small area. The letter was written in capital and big form, means the urgent situation and has the spirit. The paint drop also can symbolize the blood as the hold of the bag and full of spirit. So, the myth of the graffiti is the whole world problem can be solved by each of us. If only some people or some group of people who struggle for global issue, the problem will never be solved.

Based on the classification by Gadsby, the author categorized “*Act Move*” Graffiti is a Tag, because Tags might occupy public spaces just like the graffiti categorized as public and tags have their own specific characteristics, that is, the messages they convey are addressed to those within the social boundary of the people writing the tags. *Act Move* uses any style of graffiti such as; tag, stencil, sticker, blockbuster and heaven. *Act Move* tags, blockbuster and stencil are written on city space wall, fly over, billboard while stickers and poles with stencil are embed on garden city.

The author think the graffiti tagged by *Act Move* has a same characteristic with the Tags at Indonesian colonialism era. Being out from the trend, this graffiti do not show the artistic value as visual picture or color, but it has wild words. The graffiti is not just expressing the protest or

judging in negative way. The first model (“ACT MOVE”) as the tagging identity, exactly gives the motivation and spirit to the reader. While the second, third and fourth model of graffiti: “MENCARI SUAKA DI TANAH SENDIRI. ACT MOVE” which is in English means “SEEK AFTER ASYLUM IN (our) OWN LAND. ACT MOVE”, “KRIMINALITAS YANG DILEGALKAN”, in English means “THE LEGALIZED CRIME”, “Wisata Kemiskinan. Act Move” in English means “The Tour of Poverty. Act Move”, Those graffiti words are satire. And the fifth model of graffiti (“GLOBAL ISSUE LOCAL SOLUTION. ACT MOVE”) was presenting the simple but clear statement for the reader to think and make introspection. Every graffiti tagged by “ACT MOVE” sign has purposed to create the identity and as the meaning of “ACT MOVE” in first model, the spirit to do something new and change something better. So, the author believes that the graffiti tagged by *Act Move* is not just an ordinary graffiti or writing.

Conclusion and Suggestion

Finally, the author would like to end this study about the graffiti tagged by *Act Move* seen from semiotics framework by my conclusion, suggestion for further research and for reader and the last the author would like to report the interview with the Bomber of *Act Move* as closing.

The author conclude the graffiti tagged by *Act Move* is propaganda. *Act Move* was not randomly bombed any wall by graffiti. The messages of the graffiti are broadcasted, published and spread in the extreme way but in suitable place. *Act Move* does not hide, he always claimed his act, he even publish bulletin named “Owah. Bulletin seputaraksi” in English means “Owah. The bulletin about action” there are contact person, Facebook account and website. The purpose is to give introspection to all people who read it. In other side, graffiti also has a positive value. The myths of the graffiti are; “There are people or situations that need something new or change something, different from before”, “The attention of the government was not spread evenly to whole land”, “The unbalance and the contrast of poverty and hedonism”, “The whole world problem can be solved by each of us”. There is a main pattern from the theme of the messages; the critique of social life and politic today and the hunger of new condition better.

The further research may be able to give the analysis of the graffiti impact to the people as audience or reader. Because the messages will not create the meaning if there are no people who read or appreciate. And as the reader, we may have to be more critical to see the culture and social phenomenon. We have to pay more attention to the social problem. As we can see, the wall is talking to everyone who sees them.

The interview report:

The author : How was Act Move born?

Act Move : Act Move was born from the unsatisfied of the unfair things.

The author : What are they?

Act Move : Social, economy, democracy, politic system, etc.

The author : Why did you chose tagging graffiti on public area?

Act Move : Because the word is sharper than mouth or picture

The author : Who are the members of Act Move?

Act Move : I and one friend of mine.

The author : You two make all graffiti around Bandung?

Act Move : Sometime. Almost all graffiti made by me. My friend more focuses on demonstration.

The author : How many graffiti that you have tagged?

Act Move : I'm not sure. Oftentimes, there are graffiti and tagged as Act Move that actually wasn't made by me or my friend.

The author : Don't you be angry?

Act Move : That becomes interesting when Act Move spread widely. Just let it belong to public.

The author : The word that you usually wrote?

Act Move : Global Issue, Local Solution. Mencari Suaka di Tanah Sendiri. Antipati=Kriminal. Wisata Kemiskinan. And many more. Based on the place.

The author : What's your inspiration?

Act Move : The problem that have to be spoken.

The author : What is your goal?

Act Move : New Vision, new concept from people; the reader, government.

The author : What if people judge you as Vandalism?

Act Move : Never mind. The advertisement of product, company, institution or even campaign poster or banner are also Vandalism for me. They are even worst.

The author : Have you ever been arrested?

Act Move : Twice. But the rules are not even clear. The police always let me go (laughing).

(An interview with "Act Move" at Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, Dago, Bandung on December 16, 2013)

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