MANIFEST

Our Call to Faithful Creativity

Edited by Nathan Brown and Joanna Darby

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OUR CALL TO FAITHFUL CREATIVITY

Foreword

It's a message Christian artists, entertainers and record companies needed to hear. At a time when they were developing what the late Bob Briner called a dangerously entrenched posture, he asked in his book *Roaring Lambs*: "In light of Christ's call to be salt and light in the culture around us, why do we want to keep all this talent huddled behind church walls?"[1]

Too often, faithful creativity has been missing from our culture—at the same time, it has only had limited or narrow acceptance within the church itself. At times, it seems the choice has been to be faithful (in the church) or to be creative (in the world). In many respects, we have not done well at embracing and encouraging faithful creativity . . . anywhere.

One reason for this is we are not sure what to do with culture. Christians typically appropriate, condemn or consume culture, says William Romanowski, author of *Pop Culture Wars*.[2] Our true calling, he says: to *transform* culture. And I'll add: from the inside—inside our churches *and* inside our broader culture. The influence of the mass media on popular culture means artists are best placed to meet this challenge.

Manifest Creative Arts Festival explores, encourages and celebrates faithful creativity, particularly through the arts. It began with the first of what is now an annual arts festival in 2011 after Avondale College of Higher Education and Signs Publishing Company had collaborated over six years on book launches and writing seminars. Inspiration for the festival also came in part from the Adventist Church-sponsored SONscreen Film Festival. Manifest is also a producer (of creative worship services) and a publisher (of a blog, an e-newsletter and a Facebook page—and now a book). The Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Pacific coordinates Manifest through Adventist Media Network and Avondale.

Most importantly, Manifest seeks to create a community of artists. *Manifest: Our Call to Faithful Creativity* is an example of this community—a number of the writers are Manifest alumni. It is an expression of a common belief: churches need to foster creativity and become centres for creativity and creative influence in our communities.

We recognise a common belief is meaningless, though, unless it influences behaviour. In *Flickering Pixels*, Shane Hipps writes about how technology shapes your faith. He also asks: "How does your faith actually manifest in this world to bring about justice, altruism, compassion, and peace?"[3]

So *Manifest: Our Call to Faithful Creativity* is also an acknowledgment of the fallenness of our world and the brokenness of our lives. Wisdom calls us to seek redemption, to act justly and to love mercy. Faithfulness calls us to share these truths in partnership with our Creator and Re-Creator.

This book will help you better appreciate creativity and perhaps challenge some of your perceptions and attitudes. It will inspire you, but it will not act for you. Our call to faithful creativity is also your call and we must each respond faithfully.

Manifest welcomes you to our community. Join us in print, in person or online.

Brenton Stacey

Co-convenor
Manifest Creative Arts Festival

1. Bob Briner, *Roaring Lambs: A Gentle Plan to Radically Change Your World*, Zondervan, 1993.
2. William Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life*, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006.
3. Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*, Zondervan, 2009.

A STORY OF A CONVERSATION THAT BECAME A BOOK WITH A PAINTING ON ITS COVER

Introduction

Of course, like many good stories, it is hard to pinpoint where this really began. Many conversations had led to this one.

It was a sunny autumnal morning. The kind that you see pictured on a child's seasons chart—blue skies, trees dappled with the warmest hues, and just a friendly dancing breeze. It's also the kind that generates confused ensembles of scarves and sandals, cardigans and shorts.

Seated on stools in the corner of Café Rejuve, on the campus of Avondale College, were two writers nursing warm drinks and thumbing last week's edition of the student newspaper. The gentle sounds and aromas of the cafe eddied around us.

The first conversations—more than 18 months earlier—had looked similar to this one and had occurred in this same place, sparked by mutual friends suggesting we should talk to each other about making books. Except, rather than sitting in the warmth of spring, we were now inside, looking out across the lawn at students coming and going in their confused autumnal attire.

We paused for a few moments after a meeting reviewing the recent Manifest Creative Arts Festival. It was a moment of relief, celebration and more planning for the next festival. After catching our breaths, hands wrapped around warm paper cups, we reported on the respective church camps we had contributed to over the Easter weekend just passed, and a few upcoming speaking and writing opportunities.

We continued to sip our cooling drinks and watch the various scarf and sandal combos walking past. Then the conversation turned to "Other Projects." Since that first conversation, we had found ourselves with a growing list of collaborative projects. Our friends' suggestion to work together turned out to be a good one, albeit a suggestion that has made us both much busier.

Some items on the “Other Projects” list had real deadlines, like a fascinatingly creative youth rally about transformation entitled “tragic/beauty/true” and a joint workshop for an upcoming youth congress on the topic of “Living Justice.” But other items were more of the “dreaming about changing the world” kind, like a common burden to do more with our opportunities to speak and write to the church about “re-creativity”—a term that was becoming our shorthand for talking about how justice, beauty and faithful creativity were inherent in our understanding of the gospel and the mission of the church in the world today. Let’s be honest, if two writers are going to sit in a cafe sipping hot drinks and talking about books and ideas, the picture wouldn’t be complete unless it included some philosophical discussion about God and changing the world.

We continued the conversation over the sounds of the ever-clinking café and the rowdy arrival of some exuberant students who had just finished a presentation and had “totally smashed it, man!” So now with empty cups in hand, we focused on a number of potential book projects, ideas we had talked about before and new ones that turned up only that morning and haven’t been heard from since. Our ideas were running in many different directions. Tangents abounded. That’s how good conversations go. The best kinds are rambling but energetic creations with pieces flying off along the way—sometimes forgotten, sometimes collected later—but usually circling back to the things that seem most important or engaging or imaginative.

From those initial conversations and many more that have followed, there is a collection of projects still percolating (that “Other Projects” list isn’t getting any shorter!) but this is the one that got our attention that day, perhaps for two primary reasons. First, it gave us the opportunity to invite others to join this conversation and to broaden the conversation in our church. Second, Nathan suggested that Jo’s painting “After the Flood” would make a wonderful cover for such a book, both artistically and philosophically. And, well, when you’ve already got a cover, you’ve already started. The book had begun.

Many conversations had led to that conversation in the cafe. And even more led to this conversation, the book you now hold. We formulated an initial list of people we had worked with in various ways or who otherwise might be interested in such a project. We personally invited them to write on an

aspect of creativity that seemed to fit with their expertise, experience and passion. Some of the contributions to this book came from presentations at the Manifest Creative Arts Festival in past years.

But then there were more conversations as we worked on some of those "Other Projects" along the way. The book was growing. Conversations at a speaking appointment on the Gold Coast led to another contribution; a conversation while walking in downtown Chattanooga, Tennessee, sparked an additional chapter; a conversation at a staff Christmas party prompted a Christmas-holiday writing assignment and yet another chapter. And we soon had a collection of articles, essays and stories from 30 other writers, artists, academics, pastors, church leaders and friends.

We were inspired by many of these chapters and awed by the years of creative practice, education and life experience that has created such a breadth of thought and insight. As the contributions rolled in, we were humbled to realise that many of these might not have been written without the prompting of our invitation or conversations. This book did not have to exist but somehow we have been given the opportunity to create it. This is a privilege and one that we have been honoured to share with so many others.

This volume still has many of the hallmarks of conversation—incompleteness, obvious gaps, worthwhile disagreements between some participants, overlapping ideas and some general messiness. And of course, there are other ways to arrange these contributions and other ways to present them. But creativity requires choices and to experiment with all available possibilities is often less useful than getting on and making something, as deficient and incomplete as it might be. In addition to careful planning, the organic, fluid and surprising dynamics of community have significantly shaped the final collection. We have been reminded that none of us creates alone—and that creativity requires flexibility.

Shaping these disparate pieces into what we hope is a coherent collection has been the subject of many more conversations. Almost as valuable as the conversations themselves are the countless wonderful "conversational diversions"—often adding even more items to the "Other Projects" list and occasionally drawing in our spouses when they could not help but overhear our enthusiastically shared ideas or frustrated questions.

So thank you to the many conversation partners who have contributed to this book in unpublished ways, especially to our families who listened to our talking about it and helped us create it in so many ways.

Of course, we are also grateful to all our conversation partners who are published contributors to this book. Thank you for sharing so much of yourselves, your creative experiences and passion, your faith-focused thinking about creativity, your time in just sitting down to write it out and your patience with our editorial vagaries. Thanks also to Brenton Stacey and his support of this project as an outgrowth of the Manifest Creative Arts Festival. Thanks to Daniel Reynaud for reading over the draft pages of the book and to Signs Publishing and Adventist Media Network for their support of the project.

And now we extend the invitation to you to join these conversations. While we acknowledge the incompleteness of this collection, it becomes more complete as soon as you engage with it. We believe this is an important conversation for the good of the church, for the better understanding of the gospel and what it means to live as members of the kingdom of God today. It is crucial for the spiritual health of so many people who have not felt that their passionate and faithful creativity has a place within the church, and for the good of the world and the opportunities we have to be agents of beauty and justice in a world that needs both. Sadly, we have not often been good at this conversation—or practice. That's why we need you, your faithfulness and your creativity.

This is our call to faithful creativity. Please join the conversation.

Nathan Brown and Joanna Darby

A CHRISTIAN AESTHETIC FOR THE ARTS

Creativity and Theology

Daniel Reynaud

The Christian legacy in the arts is unrivalled. The soaring architecture of the medieval cathedrals, most of whose designers and builders are anonymous, are testaments to the highest levels of artistic taste devoted to the glory of God. It is Western society, mostly in the context of the church, that developed polyphony and created the richest musical tradition in the world. Christianity patronised painters, who developed perspective and realist representation, both of which were significant advances in visual representation. Sculpture, drama, poetry and prose literature, though in some cases inherited and revived from Greek and Roman traditions, have been cultivated by Christianity. In a largely illiterate medieval society, church mystery and morality plays, festivals, paintings and stained glass windows communicated the stories of the Bible.

However, in the modern era, artistic innovation has been taken over by secular culture, and many Christians ignore or even fear the arts. We are often suspicious of them and critical of their pernicious influence. Adventists inherited from their spiritual forebears—particularly the Methodists—a prejudice against novels and other forms of fiction, stage drama, movies (especially when shown in theatres), television (which we roundly condemn while we regularly watch), pop and rock music (also roundly condemned but widely listened to), modern art (which often strikes us as bizarre and incomprehensible), and even of architecture (reflected in the lack of taste in the design of so many of our churches). While there is plenty to complain about in the arts, a poverty not only of aesthetic value but also of moral worth, to discard all arts on the basis that much of it is valueless and corrupt is a mistake: let us aim to retain the baby even as we drain out the bathwater.

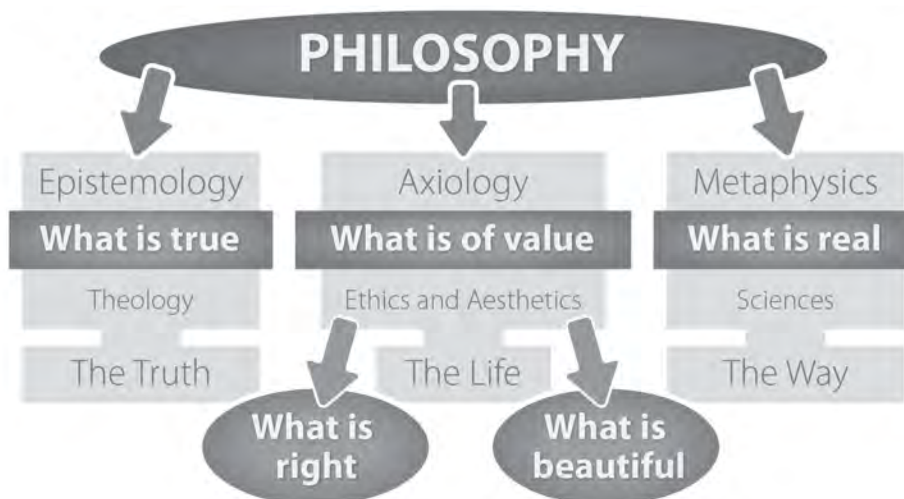
The sad history of this began with the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s and continued through the increasingly strict Puritan tradition, which has

left its mark on many modern Protestant denominations, especially those with their roots in the non-Conformist faiths, such as Seventh-day Adventism. It began with some Reformers who rejected everything that smacked of Catholicism, even throwing out church organs and singing in harmony as being evil practices. As champions of the Word, Protestants struggled to understand the role of non-verbal arts and destroyed images in churches as distracting idols, holding up the simple word of God. It didn't help that England's King Charles I combined outstanding artistic taste with a Catholic-leaning religious inclination. His Puritan opponents came to associate the arts with his Catholic outlook—and condemned both. The English Civil War hardened opinion and ensured that English non-conformist Protestants would carry a deep suspicion of the arts as being spiritually dangerous. They argued that only the plain and unadorned represented pure and untarnished religion, and enforced it in all matters from the decoration of churches to personal dress codes. There are elements of truth in this, but at an extreme it becomes its own form of idolatry, and it robs faith of the God-given gift of the creative arts. Christianity needs to reclaim this gift that speaks richly of God's character.

Part of the difficulty that Adventism has had in dealing with the arts has been a lack of understanding where art fits into the overall scheme of things. Perhaps the only art form welcomed by early Adventists was music, again as a legacy of their Methodist forebears, where the hymn-writing Wesley brothers raised music in the artistic repertoire of Evangelical Christianity. But early Adventism's passion for theology was all-consuming, leaving little room for anything else. The Seventh-day Adventist Church began as a movement compelled by the imperative of an imminent Second Coming. In the light of that and the exciting discovery of new truth such as the Sabbath and the investigative judgment, it seemed a waste of time and energy—a mere distraction at best and an evil at worst—to encourage what was seen as "frivolous" creativity. Why paint beautiful pictures if they were all soon to be destroyed in an apocalyptic conflagration? Instead, Adventist energies were devoted to discovering truth and saving souls.

Consequently, "The Truth" is something close to the Adventist heart. The branch of philosophical activity that studies truth is called epistemology. The major discipline devoted to epistemology is theology. As Christians, we note

that the ultimate Truth is not a set of doctrines, but a Person. Yet Jesus proclaimed Himself to be more than just Truth. He said He was also the Way and the Life (see John 14:6). Metaphysics—the study of reality (the domain of the sciences)—might well be equated to the Way, and axiology—the study of value—might be equated to the Life.



Axiology has two parts: ethics, the study of right and wrong, and aesthetics, the study of what is beautiful. Adventists have a well-developed biblical theology, and take a strongly biblical approach to the sciences and to ethics. However, when it comes to aesthetics, we tend to respond to the arts not from a biblical aesthetic but rather from a biblical epistemology.

However, while theology, the sciences and even ethics deal largely with binary opposites—right and wrong, black and white—aesthetics does not follow the same process. We need to approach each discipline according to its own principles. For example, neither the existence of God nor His character can be proved—or disproved—by science. Not because believing in God is unscientific, but because He is bigger than the scientific method. The scientific method is based on testing evidence by subjecting it to standardised tests. For something to be strictly scientific, it must be a repeatable event, producing the same results when tested under the same conditions. However, "science" is often used quite loosely, often meaning that there is evidence rather than proof. There is scientific *evidence* for evolution—and for creation, for that matter—and even for God, but none of these can be *proven* by the scientific method. When working on a larger canvas in the sciences, scholars look for weight of evidence, rather than

absolute proof. But the strictly rational methods of science are imperfect tools for exploring truth. Christian author and apologist G K Chesterton noted that, "You can only find truth with logic if you have already found truth without it."[1]

To find the truth about God, we must use the methods of theology. To find reality, we use the scientific method. If we want to know about gravity, we ask a scientific rather than a theological question. Medieval theologians made the mistake of applying misinterpreted scripture to the scientific realm, insisting that the world was flat with corners (repeating a mistake of their scientific colleagues, it might be added). Modern Christians have no trouble with the science of a round Earth, because we recognise that the shape of the Earth is a scientific rather than a theological issue. We must avoid making the same mistake by applying the rules of theology to the study of beauty. We cannot judge beauty by the rules for determining truth. We must use aesthetic principles to judge aesthetic concerns.

C S Kilby writes, "Our excuse for our aesthetic failure has often been that we must be about the Lord's business, the assumption being that the Lord's business is never aesthetic."[2] By contrast, as has been noted by a number of commentators,[3] the first biblical mention of the gift of the Holy Spirit is in endowing Bezalel with artistic skill (see Exodus 31:2, 3). Creation is also linked to the Holy Spirit (see Genesis 1:2). It seems creativity is an inherently spiritual activity.

The first biblical principle of aesthetics is that **to be creative is to reflect the image of God**. When God said "Let us make human beings in our own image" (Genesis 1:26), He was Himself undertaking His most creative task that we know of. To be in His image must therefore mean that we too are creative. John Oswalt writes, "We are most fully human, most fully experiencing our uniqueness, when we are being most creative."[4] To be creative is to make a statement about the character of God, one that is different from those that theology or science make about Him.

The second biblical principle is the **wholeness of humanity—mind, body and soul**. One of Adventism's great strengths is the health message—that God wishes to restore our whole being, not just the "spiritual" parts. Creativity is also a God-given quality that needs restoring.

The Bible also promotes a **variety of art forms**. While the First Commandment forbids images, the tabernacle and temple were full of them, from cherubim and carvings to oxen holding up the laver. In 2 Chronicles 3:6, we read, “And [Solomon] garnished the house with precious stones for beauty” (KJV). Jesus used parables, including the fictional story of Lazarus and Abraham (see Luke 16:19–31). Poetry, dance and music are all recorded in the Bible, used both positively and negatively, showing that art forms and instruments are not inherently moral, but it is how they are used that matters.

Biblical art suggests that **art should have an artistic end**, not just an epistemological one. Some psalms for example describe God as uncaring, sentiments that are theologically inaccurate. Psalm 137 blesses those who in vengeance dash Babylonian babies against the rocks. Psalm 88 is a lament that offers no hope of rescue or salvation. The function of these psalms isn’t to hold up a pure theology but to accurately represent our limited human perspectives. God so approves of this kind of honesty that He inspired their composition and then preserved them in His divine songbook.

Similarly, the sensual language of Song of Songs is an artistic celebration of Love. It does not describe love theologically, as perhaps 1 Corinthians 13 or 1 John might, or scientifically (say in terms of hormonal activities), but its artistic description reveals love experientially and emotionally, which are such vital dimensions of Love. By allowing its aesthetic to speak, we are led back to truth as we enter the beauty of Love, and therefore of God.

Of course, there may be cross-over: 1 Corinthians 13 is a masterpiece of language and a profound theological statement, and much of the Bible is literary art. The best art often carries powerful statements on truth and reality—but it doesn’t have to. Solomon placed precious stones on the temple walls, not for their religious symbolism but for their beauty. That made its own statement about a beautiful God.

Approaching art from a theological perspective leads to confusion. Should Christian artists only make religious art? What of other professions: should Christian builders only build churches or Christian mechanics only repair the pastor’s car?

Our confusion stems from seeing Christian art as purely evangelistic—that is,

epistemologically, for spreading truth. But it is the task of preachers to preach truth; artists testify to the wonder and beauty of God. However, art often leads us to truth and reality. In doing so, they may in fact "preach" as powerfully as any evangelist, but through a different avenue. As Ellen White notes about music, artistic expression "is one of the most effective means of impressing the heart with spiritual truth."[5]

Because art involves taste, it creates a problem for binary theological or scientific thinking. We should learn to *appreciate* art as much as possible, that is to understand and value the quality of form and content, but we need only *like* what we like. Liking or not liking is not a matter of good and bad: it is entirely acceptable not to like a piece of good art, but we should learn as best we can to appreciate. For example, I don't particularly like Charles Dickens' books, but I can appreciate the qualities that made him a good writer.

Perhaps one of the key reasons for a Christian suspicion of the arts is that they have all-too-often been used for evil. For example, popular entertainment often contains values that contradict Christian truth, as does some classical literature, art and music. How do we respond to this? How do we respond to the depiction of evil in art? Firstly, we recognise that not every representation of evil is morally deficient. The point is whether the art speaks truthfully about evil. For example, popular film often presents situations where law-breaking violence by the hero is justifiable and casual sexual relationships have no repercussions. Neither of these represents the truth.

But take a biblical example of the representation of evil: the concluding three chapters of Judges. They document in cold-blooded tones crimes such as rape, murder, betrayal, genocide and mass abduction. But they do so in the context of the moral judgment: "In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25). In other words, Judges documents carefully that evil behaviour has evil consequences. Thus, while the emphasis is on evil, its true results are clearly demonstrated. This is the context in which the portrayal of evil should be judged in art: does it tell the truth about good and evil?

Art that does not tell the truth can be interesting at an aesthetic level.

However, by turning to other aspects of philosophy, we can engage it at an ethical and theological level and draw conclusions about its worth, deciding that while it is aesthetically valuable, it is morally defective, and therefore not appropriate for the Christian.

The best way to illustrate the difference between an aesthetic approach and that of theology or science is by example. So let's take Joanna Darby's painting "After the Flood"—reproduced on the cover of this book. When I first saw it, I did not know its title, so I had no clues as to its subject. It was merely a piece of abstract art to me.

So, if I was to approach it theologically, I would ask, "What truth does it tell me?" And the answer would be: "Not much." I can see a white bird in the top left, which could be a dove, and there appears to be the outline of a twig in the centre. I might connect these to biblical symbols of the Holy Spirit, and perhaps an olive branch, symbolising peace—but the rest of the painting is pretty confusing.

So let's take a reality approach. It is rather much the same: one somewhat-stylised bird and one outline of a twig. There is not really much else that looks real. My conclusion could be now that this is a "useless" painting.

But let me approach it aesthetically. First, I look at its composition: lines, colours, textures, shapes. I see three main features: the brilliant "sky," the pinkish hill, and the busy rectangle below the horizontal line. That rectangle is full of shapes—mostly round or oval—and colours. A tip I have learned to help access art that appears difficult at first is to ask: "How does it make me feel or how do sections of it make me feel?" Then ask: "What elements in the work make me feel that way?" The rectangle is very busy, noisy even. Emotionally, it feels a bit like my week, chock-full of "things" crammed together and apparently trapped under a ruled line. The line is the only rigidly straight thing in the painting. It feels forced, man-made, while all the other shapes have more natural lines. It feels like a human world, busy, rigid, perhaps even repetitive.

Above the line is what appears to be a hill. It has a number of the shapes from below the line repeated, but much less densely. However, it also has a strong suggestion of "bleeding" with red, pink and brown paint allowed to run down the canvas. The feeling is of a costly effort, as if these shapes have

escaped the ruled line and climbed the mountain, but have had to bleed to do so.

Then there is the sky. To the right, it has pinkish hues, but that is eclipsed by the left and centre, with their luminous gold tones. In these, I can distinguish the bird and the twig. It looks like a brilliant dawn, the bird a well-recognised symbol of peace, as is an olive branch. (By the way, did you notice that the tone of my language changed when I shifted from the truth and reality approaches—which are more cognitive and less personal—to the aesthetic which uses highly subjective, emotional language?)

Put it all together and my initial decoding comes up with this: out of the busyness and trapped life that I live, there is the possibility of escape. But escape to the top of the mountain requires sacrifice, but then a golden dawn breaks, promising peace.

Now, interesting things happen from here. Taking the aesthetic approach from the start actually opens up the worlds of truth and reality. I have found truth and reality in the painting, which I couldn't find when I used truth and reality as my primary approach. But someone might argue that Joanna might have meant something quite different in the painting—and, seeing her title, that is probably true.

Nevertheless, I would argue that part of the beauty of creativity is that it isn't a one-answer-is-right-therefore-all-others-are-wrong system. My interpretation of the painting is valid, because it rests on the actual features of the painting. Someone might offer a *better* interpretation, drawing conclusions that make richer and more unified use of the painting's features, but that wouldn't entirely negate my understanding. And, after all of this, I don't relate strongly to this painting. Visually it doesn't appeal to me. But I do appreciate it, because I can see a value in it. On the other hand, other Darby paintings really appeal, so much so that I have purchased two of them that now hang on my wall at home.

Jesus is the Way (reality), the Truth (doctrine) and the Life (beauty). As we respect each of these avenues to understanding God, our love and knowledge of Him will grow. Theology testifies to His truth, science to the realities He made, and aesthetics to His awe, beauty and wonder.

—Daniel Reynaud grew up in a home where both faith and art were deeply valued. Painting, sculpture,

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