BILL HENSON: early work from the MGA collection
HOW TO USE THIS EDUCATION RESOURCE

This resource is intended to be used as a starting point for teachers and senior students to explore the exhibition. The questions and activities have been designed to address a broad range of study design and curricula. It is suggested that teachers use this resource as a basis for their own exhibition response worksheets or as a launching pad for further investigation.

MAJOR THEMES

As this exhibition is touring nationally it is suggested teachers adapt these themes and ideas to work within their state’s curriculum.

• Suburbia  • Adolescence  • Landscape
• Portraiture • The human body  • Evolution of an artist’s style

PRE-VISIT PLANNING

Before visiting BILL HENSON: early work from the MGA collection it is suggested that you contact gallery staff to determine the following:

• Suitability of exhibition content for the year level you wish to bring
• Whether staff members are available for guided tours or introductory talks
• Opening hours, admission fees, tour charges, parking arrangements
• Additional in-house guidelines for education/group tours

VICTORIAN CURRICULUM LINKS

• **VCE Art**  
  Unit 1 Art & Meaning; Unit 2 Art & Culture; Unit 3 Interpreting Art; Unit 4 Discussing & Debating Art

• **VCE Studio Arts**  
  Unit 1 Interpretation of art ideas and use of materials and techniques; Unit 2 Ideas and styles in artworks; Unit 3 Professional art practices and styles; Unit 4 Art Industry Contexts

• **VCE Philosophy**  
  Unit 2 Other great questions in philosophy: Aesthetics; Unit 3 The Good Life: Iris Murdoch *The sovereignty of good*

• **VELS**  
  The Arts – Level Six – Creating & Making; Exploring & Responding Thinking Processes – Level Six – Creativity – Creative & Critical Thinking
MONASH GALLERY OF ART
MGA is recognised as one of Australia’s key public galleries promoting excellence, access and education within the visual arts. Specialising in Australian photography, MGA produces exhibitions, programs and publications that enable audiences to access and engage with photography.

THE COLLECTION
MGA’s collection of Australian photography is one of the finest in the nation. It traces the early development of Australian photography and includes examples by many of the country’s most important twentieth-century photographers, including Max Dupain, David Moore and Olive Cotton. MGA’s collection of contemporary photography is equally strong. It is broad in its scope and includes substantial holdings of work by individual photographers such as Tracey Moffatt and Anne Zahalka. Together, the more than 1600 photographs in the collection tell the complex story of Australian photography and provide a rich cultural asset for the people of Australia.

MONASH GALLERY OF ART & EXHIBITION SPONSORS

BILL HENSON: early work from the MGA collection
The development of this exhibition was assisted through NETS Victoria’s Exhibition Development Fund (EDF), supported by the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria and the Community Support Fund.
Bill Henson  *Untitled sequence 1977* from a series of 16
gelatin silver print
Monash Gallery of Art, City of Monash Collection
Donated by James Mollison AO through the
Australian Government’s Cultural Gifts Program 2008
2008.014
EXHIBITION INTRODUCTION

BILL HENSON: early work from the MGA collection draws on work from the Monash Gallery of Art, City of Monash Collection. MGA holds one of the largest collections of Bill Henson’s photography. With its concentration of work from 1977–92, the collection provides a significant survey of Henson’s early career.

Bill Henson is one of Australia’s best-known artists. Many of us have heard his name. Some of us may also be familiar with his photographs. For many, the experience of Henson’s extraordinary work has probably been through reproduction of it in the media. However, it is important to view Henson’s actual photographs. This offers a much richer visual experience, and a deeper appreciation of his art.

Henson printed all of the work in this exhibition in the darkroom by hand, using chemicals and carefully chosen paper stock. The uneven surfaces of the early black-and-white photographs are a result of this wet-printing process, and give the photographs a mysterious, almost alchemic quality. The larger colour photographs display a richness of tone and palette that is an artifact of the artist’s meticulous approach to the printing process. These material properties are not evident in reproductions of Henson’s images.

The other aspect that is lost in reproduction is the physical difficulty of seeing Henson’s pictures clearly. The darkness of Henson’s photographs appeals to the artist’s romantic sensibility. He tends to let shadows obscure visual detail so that enigmas lurk at the threshold of perception. Publishers like to override this quality of Henson’s work by adjusting the contrast and brightness of the images for print. Viewers of this exhibition will find themselves drawn into an inscrutable visual space of shadows and deep, reflective blacks.
BILL HENSON: early work from the MGA collection

installation view

© Monash Gallery of Art

Photo: Katie Tremschnig
WHO IS BILL HENSON & WHY IS HIS EARLY WORK IMPORTANT?

Born in 1955, Bill Henson grew up in Glen Waverley, a burgeoning suburb of Melbourne. From the 1950s to the 1970s the area swelled beyond the termination of the Glen Waverley train line, urged on by the relative affordability, ease and comfort of car travel. Self-serve petrol stations appeared at major intersections, their brightly coloured signage adding their glow to the landscape.

The influence of expanding American suburbia on Australia continued with Glen Waverley becoming home to the first McDonalds restaurant in Victoria (1971). The 1980s saw an expansion of large international chains that offered ‘drive-thru’ services (from fast food to alcohol) favouring prominent roadside locations and large signage to stamp their corporate identities on the landscape.

It is from within this ever changing and expanding landscape, between the end of the train line and country, that Henson’s vision was founded; a place where listless youth claim the vacant lots and preservations between estates as their own private worlds, lost in the evening shadows.

The youth that populate Henson’s images take on a strange, almost hollow look, their eyes becoming dark holes in their ghostly facades. Light and shadow compete to pull their bodies from one plane to the other, Henson seeks to capture this moment, the hovering between child and adult.

These liminal zones, the “intervals in the landscape”¹ provided a backdrop for the developing artist. Bill Henson’s early work is undeniably – and perhaps unintentionally – a discussion of the changing landscape of suburbia and in turn the influence of international trends on what it meant to be growing up in Australia at that time. Henson’s early work is significant in Australian photography because of its depiction of this change in both this suburban landscape and the human condition.
SUGGESTED QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

• Does where you live affect the way you view the world?

• Are you influenced by your surroundings?

• Can you find inspiration in your surroundings?

RESEARCH OTHER ARTISTS THAT EXPLORE AUSTRALIAN SUBURBIA

What are the similarities and differences between their work and that of Bill Henson? Are they documenting the landscape or taking inspiration from it?

Some suggested starting points:

HOWARD ARKLEY, Australian painter, who lived and worked in Oakleigh (also a suburb in the City of Monash).

CLARICE BECKETT, Australian painter who lived and worked in Beaumauris. Find *Beach Road after the rain (Street scene)* c. 1927 in the NGV Collection online: <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/collection/pub/itemDetail?artworkID=51765>
Further examples can be found in the Art Gallery of South Australia’s Collection: <http://www.artgallery.sa.gov.au/agsa/home/Collection/Australian/Paintings>


COMPARE & CONTRAST
Analyse & interpret the works of Bill Henson & Mark Kimber below:

Bill HENSON *Untitled 1985-86*
from a series of 154
chromogenic print
Monash Gallery of Art, City of Monash Collection
Girt of the artist 1989
1989.16

Mark KIMBER *Suburban Nights 5 2002*
chromogenic print
Monash Gallery of Art, City of Monash Collection
2004.05

DESCRIBE THE PHOTOGRAPHS
What can you see?

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WHICH FORMAL ELEMENTS HAS EACH ARTIST EMPLOYED?
Look at each artist’s use of line, colour, tone and shape. How do these qualities contribute to the meanings and messages of the work?

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COMPARE & CONTRAST CONT’D

LIGHT & SHADOW
Compare the use of light and shadow in the two works. How do the different techniques change the mood of the image?

WHAT WAS THE PHOTOGRAPHER’S INTENTION?
Consider the medium and the subject matter. What message do you think the artists are trying to convey? Do you feel they are successful? Give reasons for your answer.

THE VIEWER
How might your experience and background affect the way you interpret the images?
JUXTAPOSITION & THE CREATION OF A NARRATIVE

Bill Henson’s early work utilises a combination of locations: from inside bedrooms and houses, to the city streets and landscapes. Not limited to Melbourne and Glen Waverley, Henson travelled overseas to capture the crumbling architecture of Germany and Egypt. Henson juxtaposes these locations (placing seemingly unrelated scenes next to one another), creating a narrative for the viewer to discover. Henson also leaves his series untitled so as not to influence the viewer’s interpretation.

PLAN AND SHOOT A SERIES OF IMAGES ON LOCATION

Decide on your theme, if you need models or props and choose your location. Don’t forget to document your ideas and plans in your visual diary. You could even take some ‘behind the scenes’ photos on the day of the shoot. When planning your series it is important to consider your story or narrative but also:

Your style

What elements will you utilise to tie your images together? Will it be a certain colour, mood or figure? Look carefully at Henson’s images – what is it that makes each group of images work together as a series?

The time of day

Henson lights many of his scenes in Untitled 1985–86 with the setting sun, adding to the sense of drama and darkness. This evening light also adds an impression of warmth to the images, whilst casting deep shadows. How might an early morning shoot change the mood of an image? Do you need the street lights and signage of your location to be illuminated? Or do you need strong sunlight to stream through the bedroom window? Make the time of day work for the image you want to create.

The equipment you need

If you are using an analogue camera, explore the different film speeds available to you: How will the larger grain of a 400 speed film affect the mood of your images? Will the use of a lower sensitivity film (100 or 200 ISO) in low light conditions affect the way you direct your models? Will it slow down the process? What clothing and make-up do your models require? Do you need a reflector to help fill the shadows with light? Don’t forget to take your plans, visual diary & a pen with you!
FROM INSPIRATION TO PRODUCTION

We can see in Bill Henson’s early work that he is not acting as a photojournalist, simply documenting the landscape and people around him. From the location, time of day and poses of his models through to the physical printing and display of the resulting images, Henson is in control, directing and constructing his scenes.

In Paris Opera project 1990–91 Henson took inspiration from what he saw and experienced at the Paris Opera and re-created it in his studio. This allowed him to direct the scene and in this way blur the line between reality and fiction.

PLAN AND SHOOT A SERIES OF IMAGES IN A STUDIO

Think about your theme, what materials or props you will need and what you might use as a background. Don’t forget to document your ideas and plans in your visual diary. You could even take some ‘behind the scenes’ photos on the day of the shoot. When planning your series consider experimenting with different styles of lighting:

High key lighting (See example lighting diagram & information on page 20)

High key lighting is often used in advertising to make a scene or product appear bright, clean or even clinical (think toothbrushes and washing powder) and project an upbeat or fun mood to the viewer. It is also widely used in portraiture as it has the effect of softening features and reducing the appearance of wrinkles and lines.

Consider how you might use high key lighting to project a different mood, could it also produce a feeling of being in a dream-like state in the same way that Henson’s images do?

Low key lighting (See example lighting diagram & information on page 21)

Low key lighting is the style of lighting used most frequently by Bill Henson. Low key lighting increases the contrast in a scene, by using one or two light sources, to produce areas of bright illumination contrasted with areas of deep shadow. It is the areas of penumbra, or partial eclipse of an object into blackness, that is characteristic of Henson’s work, which also causes viewers to draw similarities between Henson’s work and that of Renaissance painting.

Can you emulate the chiaroscuro, the interaction between light and shadows, of Henson’s work in your own images?
CAPTURING YOUTH & ADOLESCENCE

Caught between the innocent world of a child and the harsh, unforgiving world of an adult, adolescence is a time of transition and growth. Bill Henson explores and attempts to capture this ‘in-between zone’ in his photographs. In many of Henson’s photographs it is as though the youth are emerging from or disappearing into the shadows, entangled on the cusp of light and dark.

• How successful do you feel the work of Bill Henson is at successfully capturing youth and adolescence? Explain your answer.

• Henson was just 22 years old when he photographed *Untitled sequence 1977*, by the time he photographed the *Untitled 1992–93* series he was almost 40. Do you feel an artist’s age can affect or change the way they view the world? How might Henson’s vision change as he ages and has more distance from his own experience of adolescence?

• Compare Henson’s early work on display in BILL HENSON: early work from the MGA collection with his more recent series, which also explore youth and adolescence. How has the artist developed his sense of style over time? What has changed and what has stayed consistent? <http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artists/18/Bill_Henson/>

• Henson has utilised portraiture, juxtaposed with landscapes to depict adolescence in many of his series. If you were given the task to capture youth, what would you photograph and why?

On the following page are three works from the MGA collection that also explore youth and adolescence. Compare these photographs to those of Bill Henson. How are they similar or different? Do you feel they are more or less successful in capturing this time period? Explain your answers.
Works from the MGA Collection that also explore being young and adolescence:

Janina GREEN *Zelda* 2000  
Sepia toned photographed, hand coloured  
Monash Gallery of Art, City of Monash Collection  
2001.17

Lyndal WALKER *Pat smells like teen spirit* 2005  
from the series *Stay young*  
chromogenic print  
Monash Gallery of Art, City of Monash Collection  
2008.200  
Further information can be found at <http://www.lyndalwalker.com/>  

Lisa TOMASETTI *Vanilla and Misfortune #15* 2005  
ink jet print  
Monash Gallery of Art, City of Monash Collection  
2005.09
VCE STUDIO ART UNIT 4: ART INDUSTRY CONTEXTS

Suggested questions to explore while visiting the exhibition – you may need to ask the Education Officer at the host venue for site-specific answers.

THE ROLE OF DIFFERENT ART SPACES & STAFF

• Monash Gallery of Art is a Public Gallery. What does this mean?
• What type of art space is the host venue?
• Explore the different staff roles at the venue, in particular the Curator.
• What extra jobs or changes to their role occur when an exhibition tours from another venue as opposed to being developed in-house?

CURATORIAL & EXHIBITION DESIGN

• Who curated this exhibition?
• Why would a gallery host an exhibition from another venue?

As the exhibition is displayed at different venues the layout and order of works may change
• Why is this?
  • Who decides the layout of the exhibition?
  • Whose role is it to hang the exhibition?

• When might the artist be involved in exhibition process?

CONSERVATION & PRESERVATION

• How did the works arrive at the host venue?
• How are the works stored whilst in transit from one venue to another?
• How long must works remain in their crates in a climate-controlled environment before they are opened? Why?
• What is the international standard maximum light level (lux) for photographic works?
• How does the host venue control the lighting and humidity in the exhibition space?
• How does MGA and the host venues keep track of any changes to the condition of the works whilst on tour?

There are two different ways works come into the Monash Gallery of Art Collection
• What are they?
• What is the difference between donated and acquired?
• Why would a person (artist or collector) want to donate works to a public institution?
Bill HENSON  *Untitled 1980–82* from a series of 220
gelatin silver print
Monash Gallery of Art, City of Monash Collection
1992.28
APPENDICES

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Example: Low key lighting studio setup 21

Wall Texts:

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  The abstract body (Untitled 1979-80) 23
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  Suburban dreaming (Untitled 1985-86) 25
  Photographing music (Paris Opera project 1990-91) 26
  Dystopic innocence (Untitled 1992-93) 27
GLOSSARY

Androgynous  Exhibiting both male and female characteristics

Chiaroscuro  A term used in art to describe the interaction of light and shadow with particular reference to Renaissance painting; Chiaroscuro is an Italian word combining chiaro (clear or light) and scuro (dark or obscured).

Chromogenic print  Also known as a Type C print or Lambda print, chromogenic prints are printed on paper that has at least three emulsion layers containing dyes and silver salts. Each emulsion layer is sensitive to a different primary colour (red, green or blue). This type of paper is commonly used to print from colour negatives or digital files to produce a full-colour image, but it can also be used to print black and white images. This process was developed in the 1940s and the prints are subject to fading.

Dystopia  The opposite of Utopia; usually an imaginary futuristic-vision of the world in the ‘worst case scenario’, grim or dire situation.

Fill  A secondary light source, also called a ‘fill light’, typically with less intensity than the key light. This light can be substituted for a reflector (fill reflector).

Gelatin silver print  A black-and-white photographic print that has been created using paper coated with an emulsion of gelatin and light-sensitive silver salts. After the paper is briefly exposed to light through a negative, a chemical developer renders the latent image as reduced silver, which is then fixed and washed. This technique was first introduced in the 1870s and is still used today.
GLOSSARY CONTINUED

High key lighting  A lighting set-up that reduces the lighting ratio of an image so that bright tones dominate; lighting that gives a soft, overall brightness to the scene.

Key light  The primary light source used in photography; the dominant light in a scene. Not limited to studio photography, sunlight could also be termed the key light.

Lighting ratio  In photography: the difference between the intensity of light produced by the key light and the fill light or reflector.

Low key lighting  In photography: a lighting set-up that increases the lighting ratio of an image so that dark tones dominate; lighting characterised by partial illumination of the scene with deep shadows and strong highlights.

Penumbra  A partial eclipse, an area partially obscured by shadow.

Reflector  In photography: an object used to redirect light at a scene, material can range from professional specialised equipment to improvised paper, card or metallic surfaces.
EXAMPLE: HIGH KEY LIGHTING STUDIO SETUP

LIGHT–COLOURED BACKGROUND

- Light your backdrop evenly: place two lights approx. 1 metre away from the background, each at a 45 degree angle
- Adjust the distance between the light & background to ensure it is at least 1 f-stop brighter than your subject (Use your in-camera light meter to check!*)

SUBJECT

FILL REFLECTOR

Keep the reflector low and close to bounce light upwards, filling the shadows under the eyes, nose and chin

KEY LIGHT

Usually the brightest light in a scene, the Key light takes on a ‘Fill’ role in this setup Place at a 45 degree angle to the subject

CAMERA

EQUIPMENT

- 3 x light sources and stands
- 1 x light-coloured background (start with white and experiment with different colours)
- 1 x reflector (Cheap car steering-wheel covers are great reflectors!)

HINTS & TIPS

- Experiment with different reflector colours – White fabric and cardboard will reflect a soft white light, a silver car steering-wheel cover will reflect a sharp cool-white light. Remember: warm tones reflect warm light, cool tones reflect cool light
- Create your own diffuser! You can hang opaque fabric, tracing paper or white acrylic between the light source and the subject to spread the light softly. The closer the diffuser is to the light source, the sharper the beam of light (and the hotter the item will get!).

* USING YOUR IN-CAMERA LIGHT METER TO CHECK THE F/STOP DIFFERENCE

- Set your camera to Manual, point at your subject and find the correct exposure e.g. 1/125 at f8
- Leaving the settings as they are, turn slightly from the exact same position and point your camera at the background, adjusting only the f-stop to find the correct exposure (leave the shutter speed at 1/125)
- Your background should be reading 1/125 at f11 this is 1 f/stop (or two times brighter) than the subject.
- This is the minimum difference to achieve a ‘blown out’ effect, where the background becomes a wall of light. Try moving the lights closer to the background to achieve f5.6 or even f4 and see the difference!

WARNING! Light globes can become very hot - think of them like candles and be careful not to place items too close. Don’t leave lights turned on when unattended.
EXAMPLE : LOW KEY LIGHTING STUDIO SETUP

**EQUIPMENT**
- 1 x light source and a stand
- 1 x dark background
- 1 x reflector (Use matte paper as a reflector to soften the light)

**HINTS & TIPS**
- Don’t forget the ‘key light’ can also be moved vertically. How does a high or low light source change the mood and the shadows of the scene?
- Dark does not always mean black! Consider dark tones of brown, grey, blue or green – how does this change the mood of your scene?
- If using a figure consider their clothing: warm, dark or skin tones will work best.
- Direct your model: ask your subject to turn very slowly, so that you can watch the light and shadows change. Try this with the light source placed in a low position, directly behind them. Can you capture the light as it creeps around the edge of their hand or face?

**WARNING!** Light globes can become very hot: think of them like candles and be careful not to place items too close. Don’t leave lights turned on when unattended.
BORDERLINE STATES

*Untitled 1977* is a series of black-and-white photographs that depict a naked adolescent male seemingly lost in a state of private reverie.

This early series highlights Henson’s interest in states of existence that are indeterminate or ambiguous, which has remained a central concern of his practice over the years. In this body of work, a slightly androgynous youth seems to float in and out of consciousness. In later work, Henson continues to explore borderline states between night and day, dream and reality, childhood and adulthood.

Henson’s interest in ambiguity is also apparent at a formal level, with his use of lighting. Shadows swallow the figure’s contours and highlights dissolve the details, giving the youth a ghostly quality.
THE ABSTRACT BODY

These three photographs are part of a larger sequence of images that work together to suggest a dark, psychological narrative. In the full series of photographs, partial shots of a young man’s face and naked body, such as those seen here, are juxtaposed with images of curious children and indifferent adults. They look on, or look away, while some kind of intense event grips the young man.

The close-up shots on display here are fine examples of Henson’s early interest in the expressive potential of human flesh. These severely cropped details transform the skin into a skeletal landscape. Instead of treating the body as a figure in space, it becomes an abstract surface that shivers with incommunicable feelings and sensations.
ADrift IN THE CROWD

These five works come from a series that includes a total of 220 photographs, which are printed at various sizes. When exhibiting the full series, Henson arranges the works into small groupings that create an overall effect of aberrant movement and fragmentation. From within these bustling clusters of images, individual faces emerge like spectres of humanity that will once again dissolve into the crowd.

Henson shot this series over several years in different cities around the world, capturing images of individuals, crowds and architectural details, all apparently adrift in the flow of urban life. The people in these images have an anonymity that allows them to represent universal human experiences of alienation, mortality and fatigue. The views of buildings, however, are more specific. They were photographed in Dresden and East Berlin in the 1970s, when Henson travelled to Germany specifically for the purpose of documenting these world-weary structures. Taken together, the images remind us of how tragically fleeting a sense of belonging can be.
SUBURBAN DREAMING

The series *Untitled 1985–86* is constructed of 154 photographs that explore the psychological space of Henson’s youth. Henson grew up in Glen Waverley, in Melbourne’s South-east, and he has often spoken about the importance of maintaining a connection with the suburban environment that shaped his sensibilities. This series includes a range of specific references to the streetscapes of the area, often shot at night or dusk, with fluorescent lights investing the darkness with a wistful glow.

Henson’s emphasis on nocturnal life alludes to his interest in treating real landscape as if it is a dreamscape, an idea that is underscored by the use of sleeping figures in this series. And, by juxtaposing suburbia with photographs of summertime girls and Egyptian temples, Henson takes us into the dreamy imaginings of an adolescent boy living on the outskirts of the city.
PHOTOGRAPHING MUSIC

In 1990 Henson was commissioned to produce a body of work responding to the world-renown Paris Opera. He decided to focus on the audience, photographing the faces of people while they sat enveloped in darkness, their features softly illuminated by the reflected glow of stage lighting. The photographs shot in Paris subsequently became Henson’s source material, as he restaged the portraits in his Melbourne studio to accentuate the mood and atmosphere of an evening at the opera.

When this series of fifty photographs was first exhibited in Melbourne during 1991, they were hung floor-to-ceiling as if to suggest an auditorium of spectators. With their far-away eyes, gazing off toward something that is not revealed in the photographs, these faces express the sublime sensuality of a musical experience. And the atmospheric cloudscapes that punctuate the series allude to the rich horizons being opened up in the imaginations of the audience.
DYSTOPIC INNOCENCE

Henson’s photographs have often been compared with paintings because of their highly considered compositions. In this work from 1992, a strong diagonal dominates the image, opening up a sense of depth behind the foreground figures. But Henson complicates this receding pictorial space by highlighting the arm of a background figure so that it creates a vertical line down the middle of the image. This flattens the composition, foreshortening the space in a way that adds to the dream-like claustrophobia of the scene.

The scene itself combines an arcadian sense of innocence with post-apocalyptic abandon. Adolescent punks indulge their desires in a feral wasteland, but the flattened composition and the dramatic tones make them look more like figures from an altarpiece.
ENDNOTES


COVER IMAGE

Bill HENSON
Untitled 1985–86 from a series of 154 chromogenic print
Monash Gallery of Art, City of Monash Collection 1988.22

MONASH GALLERY OF ART

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BILL HENSON: EARLY WORK FROM THE MGA COLLECTION
EDUCATION RESOURCE

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