

THE LIGHTHOUSE MOVIE: DOMINATION, SUBJUGATION, AND EXPLOITATION

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Abstract

Power relations is a compelling and complex social issue that has been present throughout human history. It is just as prominent in today's day and age as in every period of human life; it is also represented in movies. *The Lighthouse* movie, written and directed by Robert Eggers, depicts the life of two lighthouse keepers: a supervisor and his assistant. They got stranded on a remote island off the coast of New England in the 1890s when a massive storm hits the island. Left with only alcohol as their emergency food supply, the power balance between supervisor and assistant worsened. This article is a film study. The film was analyzed by examining the narrative and cinematography elements. The discussion consults Michel Foucault's theory (1982) regarding power relations, how power works, the forms they take, and how it is imposed. The finding shows that the supervisor exercises power through domination, subjugation, and exploitation of the assistant. As the setting of the place, *the lighthouse* has a symbolic meaning of power; as it navigates the ships on the sea, the lighthouse keeper rules what happens both inside and outside his house.

Keywords: domination, exploitation, Michel Foucault, power relations, subjugation

INTRODUCTION

Power and power relations have always been deeply rooted in the social nexus (Foucault, 1982, p.791); it implies that no society, civilization, culture, institution, or any human way exists with others that do not involve power and power relations. Thus, power has seeped into the finest fibers of human interaction, encompassing power relationships at an institutional level and subtly between individuals. The concept of power itself is not new and has been discussed by many philosophers like the Greek philosopher Aristotle who defines *power* as a source of change and rest (Saikh, 2019, p. 1). However, 20th-century French philosopher Michel Foucault has made significant contributions not only in the field of power and power relations but also in approaching it from different angles to gain a better understanding oriented around power and how it is involved in almost all manners of human interactions even when one cannot see it. Power regulates how

individuals behave and submits them to a particular way of behaving, or it dominates and objectifies them (Foucault, 1997, p. 225). In other words, *power* can be defined at its very core as making others do what one wants. This condition is called “*power over or domination*” (Haugaard, 2012, p. 33). Here, power works through coercion. Sayer (2012) explains that power is “ubiquitous” (p. 184); power exists because of causality and its acknowledgment of both parties, one that exercises power and one that is subject to it. Sayer argues that power is activated dependently through space and media limited to the relations between two entities (2012). Moreover, “to say that a certain institution or person is powerful, or has power, is just a shorthand for identifications of powers of concrete particulars such as forms of authority, availability of means of violence, or control of others and needed resources” (Sayer, 2012, p. 181). Therefore, power is relational.

To investigate power relations is not to pursue how power manifests but rather how it is exercised and what happens when an individual exerts power over others. According to Foucault (1982, pp. 786-787), there are three things to distinguish: first, objective capacities or what it is used for; second, power relation or the relationships between individuals or groups; and third, the relationship of communication or the transmission of information through language or signs. These three things overlap, support each other, and are neither uniform nor constant (Foucault, 1982, p. 787). Moreover, Foucault mentions five points to establish in order to analyze power relations which are: 1) a system that allows one to act on the actions of others; 2) objectives, or the goals that those in power want to reach which include: maintenance of privilege, accumulation of profit, and the exercise of statutory authority; 3) the instruments or the means of bringing power relations into being; 4) the forms of institutions; and 5) degrees of rationalization which means that the bringing into play of power relations is not always the same and requires all points to bring it together (1982, p. 792).

There are three concepts of power: “disciplinary power, sovereign power, and biopower” (Foucault, as cited in Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014, p. 108). The three concepts have the same objective: to organize the subjects of power. Lilja & Vinthagen (2014, p. 109) describe that in disciplinary power, the subjects are made equal by acting and thinking uniformly; being different is punishable. This concept of power is activated through the hierarchy between the individuals involved. Such a concept is in line with sovereign power, a power that is legalized by the sovereignty position (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014, p. 110). Biopower, then, refers to a mechanism of determining the life and death of specific populations (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014, p. 110). The three concepts of power are made possible through the interaction between the one who has access to power and the subject of power within space and time context. Again, power is relational.

Furthermore, Foucault thinks that if we get very specific about power relations, we can see its essence, which is: firstly, that power relations have at least two subjects, who are acknowledged as subjects but are not necessarily in the same position as each other, and it is actions on other actions rather than just a subject on the subject; and secondly, it is the possible fields of their actions or fields of possibility that power bears upon (1982,

pp. 788-790). Lastly, Foucault mentions that there are strategies beyond winning solutions that are connected and affect power relationships which are: 1) means and mechanisms or reproducing power over time, modes of actions on possible actions of others, or getting others to do what you want while anticipating their counter-response, and 2) confrontation strategies where it is an attempt make powerless agents or to reduce a subject into an object (1982, pp. 793-794). The issues of power relations can be found in movies. In this case, through cinematic and theatrical elements, social issues are presented more effectively in movies than in printed literature (Golden, 2015 & Keles, 2015). A study entitled "Representation of Power Relations in *Death Race*" by Mei Suciayati (2011) focuses on power relations and how it relates to prisoners in the movie *Death Race*. The study aims to analyze how this film's narrations and plots show the establishment of discipline that represents particular power relations. Her study aims to discover how *Death Race* represents particular power relations through establishing discipline in Terminal Island Penitentiary. This study uses the qualitative research method and applies Michel Foucault's power theory. The result of her study indicates that the establishment of discipline through the spatial organization of the prison and the exercise of particular disciplinary techniques makes the prisoners docile.

Another study about power relations represented in a fictional movie was conducted by Yashya Ghaida Nestiananta (2017), "The Portrayal of Power Relation in Film *Snowpiercer*: A Foucauldian Study," which focuses on the other aspect of power relations known as power resistance. The study investigates the power relation portrayed by two individuals from different places or social structures within the train: Wilford, the train's leader, and Curtis, the revolutionary leader. He aims to overthrow Wilford's authority. The study uses the qualitative method of narrative and non-narrative approach, and Michele Foucault's theory of power to show the power resistance the two characters portray towards each other.

This study discusses Robbert Eggars' film *The Lighthouse* (2019), a psychological thriller about two lighthouse keepers that get stranded on a remote island and slowly lose their minds due to isolation and alcohol abuse. The story starts with two men, Winslow and Wake, who get dropped off on a remote island to begin their month-long job as lighthouse keepers. At the end of Winslow's month-long tour, the island gets hit by a storm which strands them both there with nothing but alcohol in their emergency supply box. Then, a massive storm floods the lighthouse, and Winslow discovers Wake's logbook, which blames Winslow for everything that has happened, suggesting to the higher-ups not to pay him. Winslow and Wake's confrontation becomes violent as Winslow kills Wake and finally enters the lantern room in the lighthouse. The movie ends with Winslow on the beach being eaten alive by seagulls before fading to black. Hence, this study discusses the issue of power relations depicted in *The Lighthouse* (2019). The significance of this study, how this is different from the previous two, is that the discussion of cinematography in portraying the issue of power relations.

METHOD

This study is library research, interpreting social phenomena and their characteristics (Yilmaz, 2003). Since the object of the study is a movie, the data is in the form of scene pictures and dialogues, limited to the power relations conflicts. There are several steps to conducting this study, first, mapping the conflicts of power relations between the protagonist and the antagonist; second, capturing several essential scenes and listing the characters' lines; third, discussing the narrative and cinematography by consulting Michel Foucault's *Subject and Power* (1982).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In every line of work and establishment, there will always be people working in different positions. Some people with experience, knowledge, and time served have been employed in higher positions than newer, less experienced people. This condition creates a dynamic in power relations between them, such as the power relations between Wake, a lighthouse keeper supervisor, and Winslow, his assistant in the movie *The Lighthouse*. The power relations between the supervisor and the assistant can be examined through how power is exercised. Foucault (1892, p. 781) mentions that there are three types of struggles against power relations which are struggles against domination, exploitation, and subjugation. Based on the struggles against the exercise of power, one can identify the methods used to exercise it. *Domination* involves exercising power backed by force and imposing violence, threats, or both. *Exploitation* involves separating people from what they earn. *Subjugation* involves ties that the person has on themselves, which submits them to others, which implies that it is about separating a person's identity and giving it back to them. All of these are called "zero-sum power," that "one part gains at the expense of the other" (Haugaard, 2012, p. 35). It is essential to mention that these three methods of exercising power can either be isolated or mixed. When they are mixed, one usually comes out on top while the rest reinforces it. Selected essential scenes from the movie were discussed based on the three types of power relations.

Moreover, to approach the notion of how to analyze power relations between the supervisor and assistant in *The Lighthouse*, Foucault (1982, p. 792) introduces critical shifts to avoid analyzing institutions but instead focus on power relations between the characters, which are as follows:

1. Concerning power relations between the supervisor and assistant, it is evident that the supervisor is the one who gets to decide, and why it is mainly due to the differences in know-how competence between both characters.
2. The objective or the purpose of why the supervisor exercises power over the assistant and based on numerous observations of the film, the supervisor's objective can be boiled down to the maintenance of privilege and the exercise of statutory authority.

3. In instruments, the supervisor acts on the assistant's actions by using confrontation, threats, surveillance, and encouragement to show that the supervisor does not always exercise power in the same way.
4. The form of an institution is the lighthouse establishment.
5. The degree of rationalization or the complexity of bringing power relations into play includes factors like the certainty of results based on the effectiveness of the instruments used in proportion to the possible cost.

For the most part, the instruments used by the supervisor are effective in getting the assistant to do and act the way he wants. In addition, throughout the story, the supervisor uses various strategies to exercise power concerning power relations, including winning solutions, reproducing power over time to maintain power, exercising power on actions while anticipating a counter-response and responding to it, and using confrontation strategies.

The Exercise of Dominative Power

There are three events that display dominative power: first, Wake makes Winslow drink alcohol during the first dinner; second, Wake observes Winslow doing his job; and third, Wake orders Winslow to get back to work. The three events are discussed in order, both narrative and cinematography.



Figure 1. Wake (right) is holding a bottle of alcohol at the first dinner.
(From *The Lighthouse* [07:58], by Robbert Eggers (director), 2019)

The earliest display of the exercise of dominative power is discovered during the first dinner that Wake and Winslow have together (Figure 1). Wake, the supervisor, establishes power relations between them. At the dinner table, Wake, while pouring alcohol in both of their cups, says a sailor's version of a prayer and instigates a toast. Winslow, the assistant, rejects the offer of an alcoholic beverage, to which Wake states that it is bad luck to leave a toast unfinished. Winslow then states that according to the manual, drinking on duty is against regulation. In response to Winslow's rejection and the statement about the regulation on drinking on duty from the manual, Wake says, "Didn't picture you a reading man" (Eggars, 2019, 07:51-07:53). Winslow, who understands his position as his assistant, responds by saying, "Well, I ain't tryin' for trouble" (Eggars, 2019, 07:56-07:57). Immediately, Wake exercises power in the form of domination reinforced by subjectivity through a relationship of communication by saying, "Then you'll do as I say. That's in yer

book too" (Eggars, 2019, 07:58-08:02). Here, the exercise of dominative power comes in the form of a threat, *if you do not do what I say, there will be trouble*. While the subjective reinforcement comes from Wake using the manual against Winslow, which now ties Winslow himself to a new identity as an assistant lighthouse keeper who must obey his supervisor. The objective of Wake's exercise of power, in this case, is the maintenance of privilege, where he acts in response to make sure that Winslow knows his place. Furthermore, through their conversation, it is clear that Wake applies all three senses of power relation strategies which are means and mechanisms to get what he wants, modes of action on possible action of others by anticipating Winslow's counter-response, and the confrontational strategy, where Wake tries to fix the power relation due to Winslow's insubordination.

The scene uses a medium shot at eye level (Figure 1) to capture both characters from the knees up, revealing their body language as Winslow is seen with his head down, signifying consent, while Wake is looking directly at him, clearly showing both their positions in the establishment and who is in charge. Not only because Wake is older than Winslow but also because he is the boss. Moreover, besides capturing both characters, the medium shot used in this scene also captures their environment for context; however, the deliberate use of dim lighting in this scene is done not only to signify the time of day but also to keep the audience's focus on the two characters rather than the background. In addition, the juxtaposition between the darkness of this scene and the title of the film, *The Lighthouse*, is a bleak feature intended to build a claustrophobic atmosphere where both characters are stuck in a small, remote space together with nowhere to go, which intensifies the conflict.



Figure 2. Wake (left) is observing Winslow doing his job.
(From *The Lighthouse* [28:05], by Robbert Eggars (director), 2019)

The second display of the exercise of dominative power happens as Wake uses the confrontational strategy of surveillance to maintain power relations by watching Winslow work while writing in his logbook (Figure 2). Wake is also using the strategy of power relations in the second sense as a response to Winslow's earlier resistance. This particular case of exercising power is an example taken straight out of Foucault's essay (p. 794), where Wake now uses the strategy of power relations in the third sense, confrontation strategy, to do two things, first, the fixing of power relations as it has become unglued due to Winslow's resistance in order to get Winslow to become submissive again. Moreover, Wake is doing what Foucault calls coming up to the limits of power where Winslow's

freedom, insubordination, and stubbornness to resist are put to the bare minimum. The domination factor in this example is subtle and comes in the form of an indirect threat where Wake uses his logbook to threaten Winslow into working the way Wake wants him to.

The scene uses a medium-long eye-level shot (Figure 2) to capture the character's actions. Winslow is displayed in the foreground as his action is being observed, while Wake is displayed in the midground as an observer along with the audience. The distance between both characters or their positions in the scene and the absence of dialogue display positions of power and reveal the tension between them. There is just enough lighting to see what both Wake and Winslow are doing, and the medium-long shot provides us with information about where they are. Furthermore, due to Wake's position in the midground, the light does not cast as much on him as it does on Winslow, which creates a dominating and slightly menacing atmosphere.



Figure 3. Wake (out of frame) is ordering Winslow to get back to work
(From *The Lighthouse* [1:06:13], by Robbert Eggers (director), 2019)

The third display of the exercise of dominative power happens when Wake, sleeping on his bed in the living quarters, catches Winslow sneaking up to steal his keys and thinks about killing him by suddenly waking up to find Winslow hovering over him (Figure 3). At first, Wake's response is quite casual, which is due to Winslow's wittiness when he says, "just didn't wanna wake, you is all. It's a long night. And such" (Eggers, 2019, 1:05:55-1:06:02). Wake then rolls over and immediately exercises power in the form of domination by saying, "get back to ye're duties or I'll give you a real keelhauling" (Eggers, 2019, 1:06:16-1:06:17). This form of dominative power is done through both a relationship of communication and confrontational strategy, by directly threatening Winslow with punishment if he does not do as he has told. Foucault (1982, p. 781) mentions that the exercise of power in the form of domination implies that somebody imposes a threat of violence on another. Furthermore, this scene also shows how the forms of the exercise of power are not always mixed and reinforced, but they can also be isolated where only one form of the exercise of power is seen.

The scene uses a medium shot at eye level (Figure 3) to capture Winslow's body gestures, the positioning of the characters in the scene, and Winslow's initial reaction to the exercise of power. Winslow is seen hovering over Wake in a more dominant position;

however, the dialogue contrasts their positioning as it is made clear that even though Winslow is in a more dominant position in the scene, Wake plays the more dominant role as he is the one exercising power. With his hand behind his back, Winslow's body gesture certainly gives off a menacing vibe. However, his blank facial expression reveals a confused and defeated man who has realized that he has lost a good opportunity and is now regretting it. The lighting in the room is made clear to capture Winslow's blank look, and the background is intentionally blurred to focus attention on Winslow.

The Exercise of Subjective Power

Three events portray the exercise of subjective power: first, Wake restricts Winslow to access the lantern room; second, Wake accuses Winslow of not cleaning the floor properly; and third, Wake refers to Winslow as a lad.



Figure 4. Wake is restricting Winslow (out of frame) to access the lantern room.

(From *The Lighthouse* [09:45], by Robbert Eggers (director), 2019)

The first portrayal of the exercise of subjective power happens during their first night on the island, where Wake, the supervisor, explains Winslow's duties to him over dinner, telling him that he works, cleans, and mends various buildings on the island during the day while Wake works the light during the night. Winslow, also expecting to work the light, argues that the manual states that they are to alternate shifts (Figure 4). Wake responds by stating, "it is the midwatch. That's the dread, lad. My watch, night 'till morning. Some new junior man I'm fixed with. See to your duties, the light is mine" (Eggers, 2019, 09:38-09:51). The scene uses a medium shot at eye level (Figure 4) not only to capture Wake from the chest up but also his body gesture and his facial expression as he looks away from Winslow and down at his food while widening his eyes as though he is disappointed, downplaying both Winslow and his argument about expecting to work the light in the lantern room.

This scene (Figure 4) signifies two things. Firstly, Wake exercises power in this scene to maintain privilege in the sense that he intends to put Winslow in his place as an assistant while avoiding the labor-intensive work. Secondly, Wake is exercising statutory authority by claiming that the light and the night shift are his jobs as a supervisor and not the assistant. The subjective exercise of power comes in the form of calling Winslow a new junior man that Wake has to deal with, implying that Winslow, as a recruit, does not know

the unwritten rules of working a lighthouse, thus tying him to an identity that submits him to the authority of a more experienced supervising lighthouse keeper like Wake.



Figure 5. Wake (left) is accusing Winslow for not cleaning the floor properly.
(From *The Lighthouse* [27:28], by Robbert Eggers (director), 2019)

The second portrayal of the exercise of subjective power is Wake's aggressive strategy to criticize and belittle Winslow for not doing a good enough job cleaning, to his liking, the living quarters (Figure 5). Wake brings Winslow to the living quarters and shows him a small part of the floor that he claims has not been cleaned yet. Wake reinforces his subjective power with domination and exploitation by saying,

“And I say you did nothing of the sort. And I say you swab it again. And you swab it proper-like this time, and you’ll be swabbin’ it ten times over after that. And if I tells ye to pull apart every floorboard and clapboard of this here house and scour ‘em down with yer bear, bleedin’ knuckles, you’ll do it! And if I tells ye to yank out every single nail from every moulderin’ nail-hole and suck off every speck of rust ‘till all them nails sparkle like a whale’s pecker, and then carpenter the whole light station back together from scrap, and then do it all over again, you’ll do it. And by God and by golly, you’ll do it smilin’ lad, ‘cause you’ll like it. You’ll like it ‘cause I says you will! Contradict me again and I’ll dock yer wages. D’yer hear me, lad?” (Eggers, 2019, 26:43-27:40).

In this scene, Wake uses all three senses of power relations strategy: 1) being means and mechanism to get what he wants using Winslow as a resource, 2) actions on possible actions where he reacts to Winslow's counteraction in the form of resistance, and 3) confrontational strategy where he belittles Winslow and reinforces his authority to fix the balance of power.

Wake's exercise of subjective power by subjectifying Winslow to the identity of a bad worker, who needs to obey every command his supervisor gives him, in order to maintain the privilege by putting Winslow in his place while exercising statutory authority as it is his job to make sure Winslow does his job too. On top of that, it is not enough for Winslow to merely do what he is told; Wake wants Winslow to do it smiling because he says so. Furthermore, to reinforce power and make Winslow almost incapable of fighting back again, Wake reinforces his subjective power with a threat of docking Winslow's wages if he does not do it. The exercise of dominative power comes from the threat, while the exploitative reinforcements come from separating Winslow from his wages. Therefore, this scene (Figure 5) suggests that the exercise of power can be isolated or mixed, but when it is mixed, usually one kind prevails while the rest reinforces it (Foucault, 1982, p. 781).

The scene uses a close-up shot at an eye-level angle (Figure 5) to capture both characters from the chest up, and it functions to capture both character's facial expression and their body gestures. Wake is seen looking up authoritatively at Winslow, who looks like he is consenting out of fear of not getting paid, even though he does not agree with Wake. The position of their body gestures, despite their height differences, where Wake is looking up at Winslow and Winslow is looking down at Wake, clearly indicates who is in charge through their facial expression, which is ironic.



Figure 6. Wake (left) is referring Winslow as a lad.
(From *The Lighthouse* [31:03], by Robbert Eggers (director), 2019)

The third portrayal of the exercise of subjective power happens when Wake and Winslow are having dinner; Winslow pours Wake a glass of alcohol to drink with his food (Figure 6). In response to Winslow's action of pouring him a glass of alcohol, Wake says, "Thank ye, lad" (Eggers, 2019, 31:03). At first glance, one might think that what Wake is doing is simply thanking his assistant for doing something for him; however, Wake is exercising subjective power by calling Winslow a *lad*. Wake's action in response to Winslow's action is the power relations strategy of the second sense, where a counteraction is taken due to committed action to maintain privilege by making Winslow aware of his position. Furthermore, the word *lad* that Wake uses to call Winslow ties him to an identity of inferiority where he is considered an incapable child who does not know how to do anything and needs guidance from, say, a supervisor.

The scene uses a medium-long-shot at eye level (Figure 6) to focus on Winslow from the knees up and Wake from the chest up as he is sitting down; furthermore, the shot functions as a way to capture both characters' gestures while being close enough also to capture their emotions and reveal where they are, which in this case is the living quarters. Wake's body gestures and facial expressions do not reveal much, unlike his dialogue. Furthermore, the way the light is positioned, shining on his face, reveals that Wake does not have an ulterior motive. The subjective power he exercises over Winslow may be unintentional due to habit. On the other hand, Winslow's body gesture, which may appear helpful, actually hides an ulterior motive which can be seen from the dark shadow that covers his face, which implies that he is only being helpful because he wants something.

The Exercise of Exploitative Power

There is only one event which represents the exercise of exploitative power. The event is when Wake fires Winslow.



Figure 7. Wake (right) is firing Winslow for insulting and criticizing him.
(From *The Lighthouse* [1:29:53], by Robbert Eggers (director), 2019)

As soon as Winslow finishes insulting and criticizing Wake (Figure 7), he responds, “ye have a way with words, Tommy” (Eggers, 2019, 1:29:44-1:29:45). This implies that Wake is also criticizing Winslow for not choosing his words carefully which is a form a subjective reinforcement for what Wake is about to do. After Wake’s statement, he gets up and proceeds to fire Winslow by saying, “ye’re relieved of yer duties” (Eggers, 2019, 1:29:53), which is an exercise of power in the form of exploitation as Wake is now separating Winslow from what he has earned during his tour on the island. Wake exercises power through exploitation reinforced by subjectivity using aggressive strategies to fix the power balance, third sense of power relation strategy, and as a counter-response to Winslow’s Actions, the second sense of power relation strategy. Furthermore, Wake’s objective is the maintenance of privilege, firing Winslow to make sure he knows his place as an assistant who should not criticize his supervisor. However, this particular case does not close off the possibility that Wake has a hidden motive for working Winslow to a breaking point so that he will insult and criticize Wake in order to accumulate profit by firing him and taking his pay.

The scene uses a full shot at eye level (Figure 7) to capture both characters from head to toe while also capturing the background. The full shot at eye level captures the characters’ body gestures as Wake directly at Winslow with his head slightly raised, implying authority, and Winslow, who is looking away with his head down and his fist clenched in disapproval, implies that he is angry and defiant. The lighting and background are clear in this scene to mirror the character’s relationship. The living quarters are in shambles, as is their relationship, and the lighting is clear, which signifies that their real personalities are being revealed.

CONCLUSION

The exercise of power imposed on others in social interactions refer to power relations. The exercise of power over others has objectives and strategies to maintain a balance between those who exercise power and those whom power is exercised. In *The*

Lighthouse movie (2019), the conflict of power relations happens between the characters Wake and Winslow; the supervisor, Wake, exercises power towards his assistant, Winslow. Being the senior lighthouse keeper, both in terms of age and experience, Wake exercises all three forms of power towards Winslow: first, domination, where he uses threats; second, subjectivity, where he uses the identity to which the assistant is now tied; and third, exploitation, where he separates the assistant's earnings from him. The supervisor's objective in exercising power can be summed up mainly as maintaining privilege, even though there are occasions where he does it to exercise statutory authority. He uses all three senses of power relations strategies to exercise power: means and mechanisms, actions on possible actions, and confrontational strategies. The lighthouse that serves as the setting of the place represents the clash of power relations; as the lighthouse navigates the ships on the sea, the lighthouse keeper rules what happens inside and outside. Therefore, Wake's domination over Winslow is a strategy to show that he is the powerful one.

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All the images used as the data were taken from *The Lighthouse* movie directed by Robert Eggers, produced by A24, and released in 2019. This information has been cited accordingly and included in the references section.

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