

# RUTH ORKIN



## **The World in Focus** Photographs between 1940 and 1960

LUDWIGGALERIE  
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## **The World in Focus**

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edited by Nina Dunkmann, Kerrin Postert and Christine Vogt

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## Ruth Orkin – The World in Focus

Kerrin Postert

Born in 1921 in Boston, Massachusetts<sup>1</sup> and raised in Hollywood during the 1920s and 1930s, Ruth Orkin was exposed to the world of film from an early age, and this was the period in which her desire to become a filmmaker and director took root. Her parents were silent-film actress Mary Ruby and businessman Samuel Orkin. As a small child, Ruth's mother took her to premieres or behind the scenes on film sets. By the age of eight, she was already carrying out small photographic experiments using sunlight as well as photo sets bought from toy and sweet shops.<sup>2</sup> She received her first camera, a Univex S39, at the age of ten, initially taking photos of her friends or teachers at school. Two years later she learnt to develop her own photos and, even at that age, described herself as a photographer.<sup>3</sup> She collected autographs from famous actors and actresses in an album, but soon found it more interesting to photograph the stars than simply owning their signed pictures. Orkin continually expanded her knowledge of photography, for example by visiting libraries to look at photography books, and in doing so, she realised that she much preferred photographs taken with a 35mm camera. She decided to also use a camera of this type for her own works, but it was not until the age of 24 that this wish of hers became reality.<sup>4</sup>

Another grand dream of hers was to travel, to see the world and to attain independence. Orkin learnt of the possibility of affordable accommodation in youth hostels, and finally set off in 1939 on a remarkable journey that would prove to be a formative experience for the rest of her life. At just 17 years of age she cycled<sup>5</sup> over 3,200 km across America in a period of four months, visiting cities such as San Francisco, Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington D.C. and Boston, and finally reaching her ultimate destination, the World's Fair in New York. She captured her adventures on camera, and her first series *Bicycle Trip* came to life.<sup>6</sup> Many of the photographs in the series depict famous buildings, tourist attractions and squares seen together with her bicycle, for example the monumental obelisk in Washington D.C. With its reflection in the water, it appears to almost become an integral part of the bicycle. Several dozen images in the series depict the landscape in relation to her bicycle, which creates varying depths within the images or else frames the surroundings. In some shots she created a magnificent interplay of (back)light and shadow through the skilful positioning of the bicycle in the foreground of the scenes. Her talent for composing an image with different lines of sight, for distinguishing between foreground and background, and for playing with diagonals within an image by use of keen powers of observation is already evident on this journey. In Chicago she came into contact with students studying journalism – they then wrote about her tour and published reports in local

1 All information on the biography of Ruth Orkin is taken from the Ruth Orkin Photo Archive, managed by her daughter Mary Engel: [www.orkin-photo.com](http://www.orkin-photo.com). Further information is also available in the "Biography" section in: Morin 2023, n. pag.

2 She describes the details of this in her unpublished autobiography from 1984. Excerpts can be found in: Barth/Engel 2021, p. 230.

3 Cf. documentary film *Frames of Life* (1995) by Mary Engel, 04:25 min.

4 Ibid., 05:03 min.

5 For greater distances she took the train, bus or car as a hitchhiker.

6 Cf. Chéroux 2023, p. 92.

newspapers. Public interest was astonishingly high – she was invited to shows, received bicycle panniers and was even gifted a new three-speed bicycle. Upon her return she sequentially glued the photos into an album and labelled them with reminiscences taken from her travel diary.<sup>7</sup> Given her keen interest in film production, this can also be seen as an initial sketch for a ‘storyboard’.<sup>8</sup>

She gained a deeper insight into the world of film in 1941 as the first female messenger girl at the legendary Metro Goldwyn Mayer Studios. In a male-dominated environment, this was her only way of learning more about working in a film studio. At that time women were not permitted to study film, so during her daily errands she learnt how to operate cameras and edit scenes, was allowed to read scripts, and was also present during filming.<sup>9</sup> In 1942 she joined the *Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps* (WAAC) of the US Army in the hope of receiving training in filmmaking. However, this did not materialise and she subsequently left the service on medical grounds.<sup>10</sup>

In 1943 she moved to New York and worked as a baby photographer by day, while capturing the colourful goings-on in bars and clubs during the nocturnal hours. This is how she earned the money for the camera she had set her heart on, a 35mm Kodak Retina. In the following years she roamed the streets with a keen eye. She photographed the city’s inhabitants during the sweltering summer, travellers at *Penn Station*, and children playing cards – the children being so immersed in their game that they were clearly oblivious to the photographer’s presence. In 1955 the series *Card Players* became part of Edward Steichen’s legendary exhibition *The Family of*

*Man* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She also photographed the *Tanglewood Music Festival* in Lenox, Massachusetts in 1949 from the perspective of a silent observer. These were people having a good time, enjoying each other’s company, resting and reading in meadows, listening to music or cooling off by a lake (Fig. 1). Hardly any of those pictured regard the photographer, giving rise to highly spontaneous and authentic images.<sup>11</sup>

Since 1943 Ruth Orkin worked as a freelance photographer for various highly regarded magazines and newspapers such as *Life*, *Look* and *The New York Times*. She documented city life, took portraits of stage actors, captured women having their hair and make-up done in beauty salons, and took humorous shots at dog shows. The photograph of the young housewife Geraldine Dent in front of a market stall, which appeared on the cover of the women’s magazine *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1949, revolutionised the classical magazine photography that had, until then, been shot in studios. This new perspective caused circulation figures to skyrocket.<sup>12</sup> The image looks effortless and natural, even though Dent’s beret, lipstick and a thin scarf are perfectly colour-coordinated with her shopping (Fig. 2). In contrast to the glossy photographs of famous actresses that came before, readers could now more easily identify with the women on the covers.<sup>13</sup>

In 1951, *Life* magazine sent Orkin on a six-month press tour to Israel to accompany the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. In Tel Aviv

11 It is her utmost concern to be barely perceived, if at all, by the people around her during her work. “I prefer it if my subjects don’t know I’m there, or else are too busy to be aware of my presence.” Barth/Engel 2021, p. 237.

12 Cf. Barth/Mouratidi 2023, p. 8.

13 Cf. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/jul/18/the-big-picture-ruth-orkin-modern-woman-in-new-york-1949>, accessed: 06.08.2026.

7 The Foundation Henri Cartier-Bresson published the album in 2023 on the occasion of an exhibition there.

8 Cf. Morin 2023, n. pag.

9 Cf. Barth/Engel 2021, p. 233.

10 Cf. Barth/Mouratidi 2023, p. 8.

she also photographed an emotional series, capturing the renewed hope of the Jewish population in the wake of the atrocities of World War II. One photograph for example portrays a young mother with a concentration camp prisoner number tattooed on her arm: it is on that very arm that she is now holding her baby. Other images in the

American art student, Ninalee Craig, known as Jinx. The two women got along well immediately and discussed their experiences as solo travellers in Europe. Orkin came up with the idea of portraying Jinx in various moods and moments that a woman might experience while travelling. The series *American Girl in Italy* was created, becoming one of the most



series depict a small child playing carefree in a washroom, looking at itself in the mirror, or else climbing between washbasins (Fig. 3).

Orkin spent the time that followed in Europe. She travelled to Italy – Rome, Florence and Venice – as well as to Lucerne, Paris and London. In the corridor of a hotel in Florence she made the acquaintance of a young

significant and successful in the photographer's career. She captured Jinx in seemingly helpless yet carefully staged situations such as when she struggles to read a street map. A policeman then shows her the right direction to cycle. However, it also depicts her laughing happily while riding in the back seat of an Innocenti Lambretta (Fig. 4) or marvelling at the city's art



attractions. The best-known and most iconic photograph in the series shows Jinx as the focal point of the shot, striding down a street as the only woman in sight (Fig. 5). Surrounding her are fifteen Italian males of various ages who look at her, stare at her, and in some cases smile and flirt with her. To this day, women all over the world can readily identify with this image. Although the scene was staged in collaboration with the participants, it is based on the everyday experiences of a woman travelling alone, and combines documentary observations with purposeful staging. The image has since become a veritable icon of street photography and can be interpreted both as a symbol of female independence and as a starting point for discussions about the female and male gaze, gender roles, and public spaces. The series was published in 1952 alongside an article with the title *When You Travel Alone* in the September issue of *Cosmopolitan*.

Having returned to New York, Ruth Orkin married the photographer and filmmaker Morris Engel whom she had met in the 1940s at the *Photo League*.<sup>14</sup> She was now finally able to fulfil her longstanding and most heartfelt wish: together with her husband and the screenwriter Ray Ashley she shot the film *Little Fugitive* on the streets of New York in 1952. The film is about a young boy who believes he has accidentally shot his brother. Terrified, he flees alone towards the popular amusement district of Coney Island in New York, where he finds distraction and spends an adventurous day until the misunderstanding is cleared up. The film won the *Silver Lion* at the Venice Film Festival that same year, as well as a nomination for Best Original Story at the *Oscars* the following year, and had a profound influence

<sup>14</sup> The group was founded in 1936 in New York by politically active street photographers who were committed to documentary photography.

on the next generation of filmmakers.<sup>15</sup> Three years later they collaborated on their second film, *Lovers and Lollipops*.

In 1955, Engel and Orkin took up residence in an apartment on Central Park West. They had a son, Andy, and a daughter, Mary, in 1959 and 1961. Over the following decades Orkin captured the hustle and bustle of life outside from a window in their flat overlooking Central Park. She photographed the famous *New*

and in the late 1970s and early 1980s Orkin accepted various teaching posts, for example at the *International Center of Photography* in New York. After a long battle with cancer, she passed away in her apartment in January 1985.

Ruth Orkin's work impressively demonstrates just how closely photography and film can be intertwined. Whilst Henri Cartier-Bresson sought to capture the decisive moment through photography, Orkin focuses on a

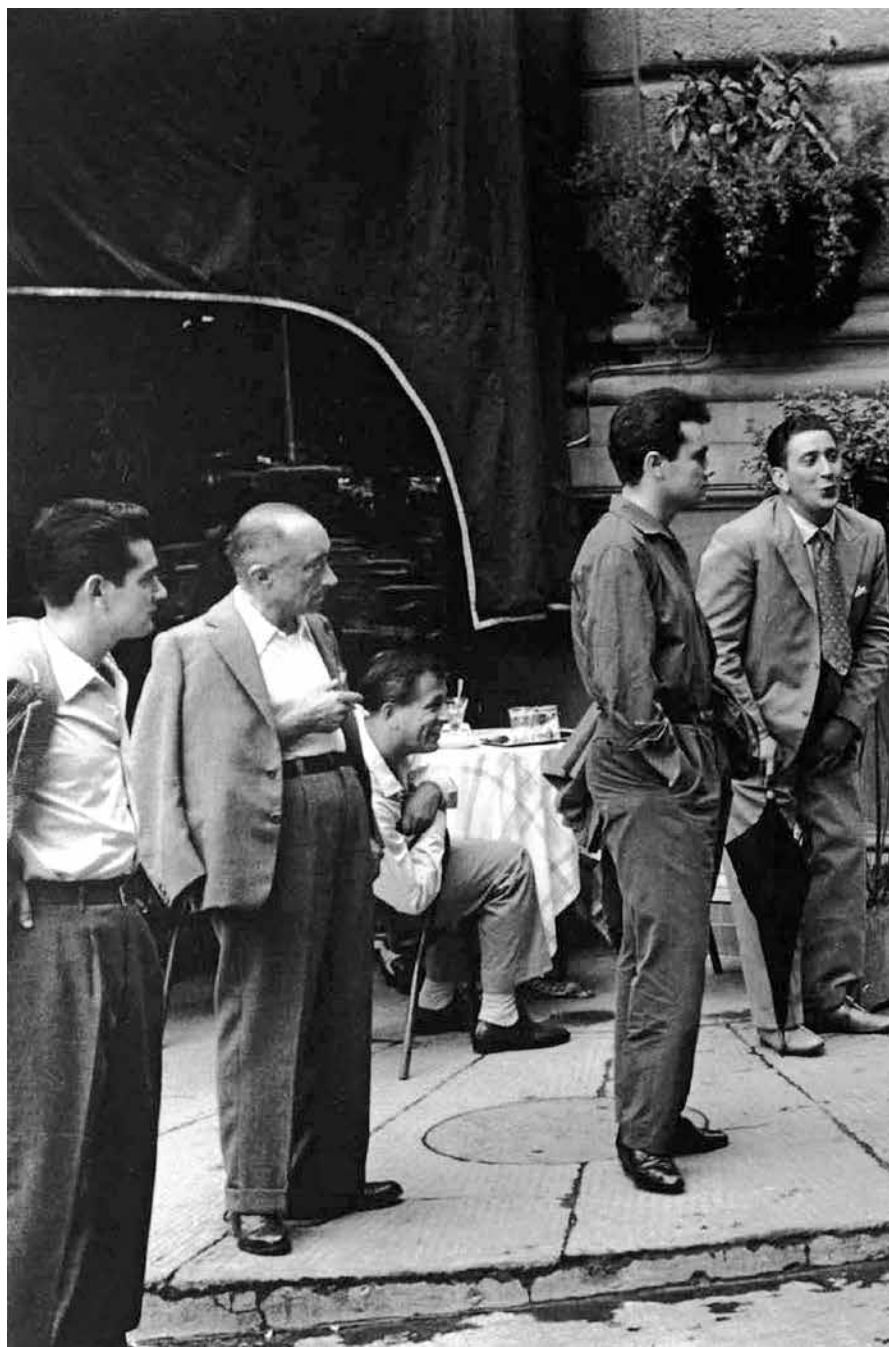


*York Marathon*, various parades, concerts and rallies, and the changing of the seasons. The photographs were subsequently published in two books by her.<sup>16</sup> In 1974, *Nikon House*, a well-known exhibition space and meeting place for the American photography scene, staged the first major retrospective of her photographs,

cinematic visual language within her serial works. The themes of her images centre on her personal interest in travel, the film industry, as well as female independence and self-determination within a male-dominated world. With her keen powers of observation, she created authentic images that appear as individual frames taken from a larger narrative context. They tell stories without fully resolving them, inviting viewers to continue these narratives in their own minds.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Morin 2023, n. pag.

<sup>16</sup> *A World Through My Window* 1978 and *More Pictures From My Window* 1983.







## Who Works Harder?

Nina Dunkmann

In 1949, Ruth Orkin embarked on a photo essay – presumably without a commission – which she later titled “*Who Works Harder?*”. Over the course of several days she accompanied Joan Guckfin, working woman, and Nancy Barnhardt, housewife and mother, as they went about their daily lives, documenting their activities with her camera.

What had already originated during the war as a form of ‘perverted empowerment’ – for example, through the *Rosie the Riveter* campaign<sup>17</sup> – led, in the immediate post-war period, to the recruitment of women into the workforce. As early as 1945, debates arose as to which occupation was more desirable for women: being a housewife and mother or pursuing a career.<sup>18</sup> Long before the 1960s, feminist viewpoints began to emerge that ran counter to those of women who would today be described as *tradwives*.<sup>19</sup> Gender roles and self-determination were hotly debated, and the number of independent

women increased.<sup>20</sup> Magazines such as *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* featured articles on practical clothing for the working day, ready meals, fridges (for storing pre-cooked meals) and involving the family in housework.<sup>21</sup>

In her series, Orkin does not pass judgement; she does not take sides with either position, but rather documents both sides of everyday life with care and precision. Orkin is all too familiar with life as a young, working woman – as well as being a freelancer – in a male-dominated industry. Even though she had only published her first photograph in *Star* (the staff magazine of *Macy’s*) four years earlier<sup>22</sup>, she knew precisely what prejudices and resistance she would have to contend with. She demonstrated her self-reliance and independence (either from men, or from her own family) as early as the age of 17 when she cycled 3,200 km across the USA on her own. At this point, motherhood was still a foreign concept to her; her first child, Andy, was not born until 10 years later. Even at that time however, she devised highly creative ways of balancing family and career.<sup>23</sup>

In the case of Nancy Barnhardt, she depicted a mother of two as she cooks, cleans, cares for her husband and acts as an evening hostess.

17 The 1942 poster with the slogan “We Can Do It!” alludes to the previously published propaganda film *Rosie the Riveter* with the goal of motivating women to work in the war industry. The poster has been reproduced millions of times on various merchandising products since the 1980s.

18 Cf. Barth/Mouratidi 2023, p. 8. Cf. Efron, Edith: Career Woman or Housewife? Here is the case for the woman who contends that she can rationalize home husband and children with an office job. *New York Times*, 04.03.1945. Cf. Maulsby, Ann: Housewife or Career Woman? Here is the case for the housewife, who holds that her way of life is better, her husband and children happier. *New York Times*, 11.03.1945.

19 This refers to a movement on social media which has been reemphasising the conservative values of a traditional housewife since 2020 in Germany and even earlier in the U.S.

20 In 1939 women made up 25% of the workforce, which at the end of the war was already 35%. In the 1950s the number stagnated at 36.4% to rise again in the 1960s up to 42.9 %. Cf. Barth/Mouratidi 2023, p. 8.

21 Cf. *ibid.*

22 Cf. Kristen Gresh in: Barth/Engel 2021, p. 10.

23 She regularly photographed out of the window of her New York flat and (much later) published two photo books with these works.



Joan Guckfins was the working woman, which means she had to balance work with household duties, for it was still a long time until a husband's involvement in such daily chores could be taken for granted. It is not known which relationship Orkin had with her two subjects or how and why she chose these two women in particular. The intimacy of the depictions suggests that she knew them well. One of Ruth Orkin's outstanding qualities, however, was her ability to quickly establish a working relationship that permitted such closeness. The images often appear to be snapshots, yet are frequently very deliberately composed. As part of the process, Ruth Orkin did not stage scenes but rather observe and pick up on things, emphasising or repeating them. She acted in a kind of complicity with the women. Anne Morin put it aptly: "[She] allows the humanity and charisma of her subjects to

shine through."<sup>24</sup> The camera was her constant companion but remained unobtrusive<sup>25</sup>, enabling her to capture such natural, at times almost intimate, images of these two women.

We see for example Nancy Barnhardt with her children in the car; the older boy clambered about on the seats while Orkin took photographs through the open door (Fig. 6). She deliberately incorporated movement and even blurring into the image, thereby creating a sense of vitality. The visual detail of the mother taking note of this delay calmly, with a hint of a smile, is perhaps the most telling aspect of the photograph.

In another photograph from the series, the baby is being bottle-fed in the living room while the older child is sitting on his mother's

<sup>24</sup> Morin 2023, text on cover.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Engel on her mother, cf. Barth/Engel 2021, p. 6.

feet – which surely cannot be comfortable for Nancy Barnhardt (Fig. 7). She and her son are watching something that is not in the picture. Viewers find themselves wondering what might have caught their attention. However, those viewed never look directly at the camera or strike a pose. Ruth Orkin seemed simply to be there, observing.

In the evening, after putting her children to bed, Nancy Barnhardt assumed the role of hostess. A couple (are they friends?) is visiting and everyone is gathered in the living room as part of a relaxed and convivial atmosphere. Once again, the armchair is reserved for the man while the women sit smoking on the sofa. In this series the men are merely background figures, the focus is on the women's expressions – it is their faces we see. The size and furnishings of the living room suggest a middle-class family, with the fir wreath hinting at the Advent season.

Joan Guckfin is dressed elegantly but modestly. We see her leaning over her desk to answer a phone call (Fig. 8). The choice of this image reveals the photojournalist's trained eye and it introduces the subject perfectly: the earrings hint at a consistently well-groomed appearance, the desk cluttered with fashion magazines indicates an interest in current trends and the pose suggests she is hard at work on a busy day. Once again, Orkin used the blurred foreground to place the focus entirely on the subject. However, viewers are not told what Joan Guckfin's job entails. It appears to be a desk-based role, though whether she is a secretary or holds a managerial position remains unclear. Eight of the ten photographs of working women in this exhibition also show them in their private lives. This could be an indication of Orkin's true interest: she did not wish to depict a profession, but rather presents us with a woman in all of her facets.



In her apartment the photographer captured her putting on washing-up gloves to do the dishes. This is a seemingly casual moment that reveals so much about Joan Guckfin: her gesture conveys discipline and determination, and the photographic composition takes on an almost sculptural dynamism through the strong horizontal upward movement. In a rather spartan kitchen the woman naturally takes charge of the washing-up. With gloves and apron, her hands and clothes remain neat and tidy. Orkin even followed Joan Guckfin into the bathroom as she hung up her negligees. Great importance is attached to looking after her clothes. Perhaps her professional career enables her to afford a little luxury. This photograph also documents Orkin's talent for composing an image in a matter of seconds. Guckfin's face appears framed and illuminated by the mirror on the bathroom cabinet and the lamp mounted above it. Another mirror in the room reveals Orkin herself at the left-hand edge of the frame: a rare exception.

The 'photo-story' was a new narrative form that emerged in the 1940s, and this series of images can also easily be envisaged as a combination of text and pictures. Ruth Orkin viewed her subjects through a rather cinematic lens – her work does not come across as a single, isolated image but finds its narrative within a sequence. She persistently stuck to something to create her stories. She photographed not only in the office but also at the breakfast table or in the evenings while relaxing or taking a quick nap. Over the course of several days we are able to return to the characters, recognise and follow them, and fill in any gaps and omissions with our own imagination.<sup>26</sup>

The following year Ruth Orkin photographed Lauren Bacall (title image), who, as the mother of her recently born son Stephen, was already

back at work full-time and – of course – still fitted into her usual dress size. Ruth Orkin seemed to identify strongly with her self-assured nonchalance.<sup>27</sup> This duality remained a fascinating photographic subject for Ruth Orkin throughout her life. However, she did this less out of a desire to make a political statement; rather, she was motivated by a passion for portraying people – particularly women – in the circumstances they had chosen for themselves. Whether the subject was a famous personality, an influential woman or a loving mother was irrelevant to her photographic approach – all were captured with the same empathetic sincerity.

Ruth Orkin herself said of the series: "The young mother or the office worker – WHO WORKS HARDER. Great to teach a young woman how many hours it takes to be a mother and houseworker, but they ran the pictures so small it could hardly make any impact."<sup>28</sup>

*Glamour* magazine published some of the photographs from the series, but Orkin was dissatisfied. This also highlights the fact that, as a photojournalist, one often has no say in what happens to the images. At that time, it was not even customary to mention the photographer by name.

Ruth Orkin explored the issue of balancing family and career as early as 1949 – a topic that, in present times, could not be more relevant.

27 Cf. Barth/Mouratidi 2023, p. 8.

28 Quoted by *ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

26 Cf. Morin 2023, n. pag.



## Literature

Barth / Engel 2021

Barth, Nadine / Engel, Mary (Hrsg.): Ruth Orkin.

A Photo Spirit, Berlin 2021

Barth / Mouratidi 2023

Barth, Nadine / Mouratidi, Katharina (Hrsg.):

Ruth Orkin. Women, Berlin 2023

Chéroux 2023

Chéroux, Clément: Ruth Orkin, Bike Trip., USA, 1939,

Milan 2023

Morin 2023

Morin, Anne: Ruth Orkin (Photofile), London 2023

Ruth Orkin Photo Archive: [www.orkinphoto.com](http://www.orkinphoto.com)

10 **Victory Day** Times Square, New York City, 1945



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**Photographs between 1940 and 1960**

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An exhibition in the LUDWIGGALERIE Schloss Oberhausen  
in cooperation with f3- freiraum für fotografie, Berlin and Orkin/Engel Film and Photo Archive

**LUDWIGGALERIE**  
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**Cover:** Lauren Bacall, St. Regis Hotel, New York City, 1950 **Cover page 2:** Boy Jumping into Hudson River, Gansevoort Pier, New York City, 1948

**Back cover:** Alfred Eisenstaedt: Ruth Orkin, London, 1951 © The Estate of Alfred Eisenstaedt

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