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Guy<sup>16</sup>S

Television and  
Masculinities in  
the 21st Century

AMANDA D. LOTZ

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CABLE GUYS

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# Cable Guys

*Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-First Century*

Amanda D. Lotz



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*To Robert, Nick, Wes, and Sayre, who have taught me much and offered even more to think about.*

*In solidarity with the men, particularly those of my generation, who have discarded the patriarchal legacies they were offered. Though your struggles are rarely acknowledged, they are an important contribution to changing gender norms for all.*

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## Introduction

Depending on what channel you tuned to on a Monday night in January 2010, US television offered very different versions of masculinity. Broadcast stalwart CBS alone provided a menagerie of contradictions. Its prime-time program lineup began with *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–2014), a comedy that depicted six urban professionals negotiating their twenties' transition from college to marriage and family life—the 2000s take on *Friends*. The series offered a solid ensemble of characters, but Neil Patrick Harris, in the role of Barney Stinson, often stole the show. Barney was renowned for his sexual conquests and love of finely tailored suits, but was more a caricature of a suave and debonair ladies' man than a sincere manifestation. The series contrasted Barney with male friends Ted (Josh Radnor)—who narrated the series, telling his children the ongoing story of his search for his wife—and Marshall (Jason Segal), the contentedly coupled man of the group. Harris's over-the-top depiction of Stinson was imbued with added contradictory meaning given the audience's probable extratextual knowledge of Harris as an out gay man, and the series' storylines and laugh-track organization made clear that Barney's masculinity was not to be emulated or idealized. Rare moments exposed Barney's playboy masculinity as performance to the audience, although his surface identity was rarely revealed as false to his friends. This allowed Barney to operate as a mechanism for voicing an embodiment of masculinity that the series often mocked; Barney's promiscuity, objectification of women, and performance of a masculinity unreformed by feminism was laughed at in comparison with Ted's and Marshall's pursuits of heterosexual partnership and respectful treatment of women.

But at 9:00 on that Monday night in 2010, CBS offered a very different gender script. The extremely popular *Two and a Half Men* (2003–)

depicted two brothers raising their son/nephew. At the time, Charlie Sheen dominated this top-rated series in the role of Charlie Harper, a quintessential playboy made rich from his success writing advertising jingles. Charlie lived alone in a plush Malibu beach house until his nebbish brother, Alan (Jon Cryer), and nephew, Jake (Angus T. Jones), move in after Alan and his wife divorce. Hilarity ensues as Charlie offers the wrong life lessons to Jake, despite the fact that the show decidedly supports Charlie's skirt-chasing masculinity over Alan's caricatured depiction as effeminate, with many jokes being based on the suggestion that Alan is gay. Charlie's portrayal too was imbued with extratextual meaning even in 2010—a year before Sheen's public meltdown and firing from the show—as a result of his notoriety before the series as an alleged patron of Hollywood madam Heidi Fleiss, publicly acrimonious divorce from actress Denise Richards, and arrests for domestic abuse, substance abuse, and other bad acts involving drugs and prostitutes. Unlike in *How I Met Your Mother*, Charlie's womanizing and the other boorish characteristics of patriarchal masculinity he displays are never revealed as performance, and the text commonly sides with Charlie to support, rather than critique, his masculinity. Despite similar characterizations, *How I Met Your Mother* and *Two and a Half Men* offered very different assessments of the twenty-first-century cad.<sup>1</sup>

The study in contrasting masculinities offered on CBS was then followed by *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–), a comedy from the same creative team behind *Two and a Half Men* that lampoons the social awkwardness of four geeky but brilliant young PhD physicists and the attractive, blonde aspiring actress who lives next door. The four men all embody the same science-nerd masculinity, and most of the series' humor is based on laughing at them. The series does not feature a contrasting masculinity—as exists between Charlie and Alan—which encourages audiences to view the characters less as caricatured outsiders than as men performing masculinities particular to their subculture.

The contradictory comedies of CBS were far from the only stories on offer in 2010. Opposite *How I Met Your Mother*, FOX aired the medical drama *House, MD* (2004–12), built around the spectacular diagnostic skills of its damaged and eponymous lead. Dr. Gregory House was too complicated to be a traditional leading man. Tortured, both physically and psychologically, he was not a man to identify with, nor was he offered

as a desirable partner. His diagnostic skills may have positioned him as a hero, but his inability to relate with people and tendency even to show cruelty toward suffering patients made him seem a misanthrope. Season after season chronicled the mind games and abuse he heaped on coworkers and friends; and though some kernel of care may have lain at his core, unless a character was dying of a rare and mysterious disease, a relationship with House always seemed far more trouble than it was worth.

The 9:00 hour then offered the contrasts of two modern hero narratives, FOX's *24* (2001–10) and NBC's *Heroes* (2006–10). The eight seasons of *24* elevated Jack Bauer to the status of a worldwide cultural icon, known even to those who never watched the series.<sup>2</sup> The long-suffering of Bauer as an agent of the US Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU) who sacrifices all aspects of his personal life in service to country might be viewed as the progeny of the 1980s action film hero, as his capacity for suffering and improbable endurance readily recalled Bruce Willis's John McClane from the *Die Hard* franchises. Yet although Bauer consistently and improbably prevailed, he was a reluctant and put-upon hero who lacked the bravado and much of the swagger—although not the self-assuredness—of blockbuster heroes past. Bauer was not depicted as emotionally removed and could be overcome and tearful in response to the situations he endured and their consequences for others. Despite right-wing pundits' hero worship of Bauer, others argued that each act of torture made him less heroic, a reading affirmed by the series conclusion, in which Bauer was expelled from the country as a nonromanticized outlaw.<sup>3</sup>

Summarizing *Heroes*' take on masculinity is made impossible by its broad ensemble cast that unpredictably shifted sides and drew heavily from a comic book aesthetic with epic tales of good and evil. At a minimum—and consistent with its 2010 lead-in, *Chuck*—the series deviated from the notion of the exceptionalism of unerring heroes such as Superman in its original construction of characters who were “ordinary” people who came to know they had powers. The male characters of *Heroes* and *24* were thus afforded the most improbable opportunities to save the world, consistent with patriarchal, savior masculinities common to the most popular versions of superheroes.

A final entry of note to the Monday night schedule had just debuted, TNT's *Men of a Certain Age* (2009–11), which starred Ray Romano as

one of three friends facing middle age. As was the case with his long-running, popular domestic situation comedy, *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996–2005), Romano co-created this series, which explored the anxieties of three men who had been friends since childhood as they realized that the life ahead of them was fleeting and struggled with the outcome of the way they had handled their lives. Here, perhaps owing largely to the age of the characters, audiences were offered men who lacked the certitude that the world was their idiomatic oyster. The three friends didn't yet know what they wanted from life, and most certainly didn't know how to achieve it.

Of course, hundreds of other shows were also available on television in these few hours on this one night, yet few others offered original scripted narratives. With a flip of the channel to cable's USA, audiences could find *WWE Monday RAW Wrestling*, while male-targeted Spike offered its mixed-martial-arts series *UFC Unleashed*, and ESPN scheduled the more traditional sports programming of college basketball. On one level these sports contests provided little deviation from the depictions of masculinity characteristic of sports television, which for the previous sixty years had emphasized men's physical prowess and the importance of winning. However, by the early 2000s, I suspect close analysis of the narratives and storylines imposed on the contests through commentary and promotion might reveal that a broader range of priorities and concerns for the male athletes is emerging and becoming part of common sports discourse.

Certainly by 2010, it was archaic to think only of what was "on" television at a particular hour. DVRs were nearing a reach of 50 percent of the population and allowed easy reordering and rescheduling of viewing, while computers and mobile screen devices enabled selective downloading and streaming of programs, films, and amateur videos that further multiplied the possible masculinities "television" offered. And were I to consider other nights or other hours of the day, I could easily fill this book with yet other cursory summaries of the men and masculinities produced for the television screen.

The point is that an arbitrarily chosen Monday night in January 2010 offers only a chance and partial snapshot to illustrate the range of stories about men and embodiments of masculinity available on television, and few of these stories about men introduced thus far even

receive further mention here. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it was impossible to assert any singular argument about “men on television”—and in truth, television had always offered a range of men and masculinities. Even in the 1950s era of fathers who knew best and assorted cowboys and lawmen, the breadth of television’s fictional offerings made it difficult to sustain any general claim about its male characters—to say nothing of the real men, such as news anchors, sports figures, and politicians, who also figure prominently in television programming.

Of the vast range of foci a book about men and television could offer, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-First Century* explores the stories told about men in a multiplicity of scripted series—nearly exclusively on cable—that delved into the psyches and inner lives of their male characters. These series depict male characters’ feelings and relationships in stories that probe the trials and complexities of contemporary manhood in a manner previously uncommon—if not entirely lacking—for this storytelling medium. *Cable Guys* consequently explores emergent and varied depictions of men—particularly of straight white men—negotiating contemporary gender roles and embodiments of masculinity in their one-on-one friendships with other men in *Boston Legal*, *Scrubs*, *Psych*, and *Nip/Tuck*; in the homosocial enclave of the male group as depicted in *Entourage*, *Rescue Me*, *The League*, and *Men of a Certain Age*; and the struggle to know how to and to be “a man” in series that address the whole life of male characters—what I term “male-centered serials”—such as *The Sopranos*, *The Shield*, *Californication*, *Rescue Me*, *Breaking Bad*, *Hung*, *Dexter*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *Men of a Certain Age*. This book’s analysis seeks to understand an array of questions about the construction of masculinity in these shows, including the following: What characteristics do these series that meditate on the contemporary condition of being a man attribute to “good” men? What is at stake in storytelling that reveals men to be unsatisfied with and uncertain about contemporary life? How might same-sex friendships and intimacy with other men now be subtly, but meaningfully, supported in popular television? Why does misogynistic and homophobic talk dominate depictions of men’s interactions in all-male spaces that are simultaneously clearly changed by feminism? And generally, how might audiences make sense of emergent gender dynamics

relative to the contradictions of a cultural medium that remains full of characters that offer up old patriarchal norms? *Cable Guys* contextualizes this analysis amidst a matrix of broader narrative trends, industrial shifts, and social and cultural adjustments that enable the particular storytelling of these series.

Despite the intentionality that might be signaled by its title, this book is not deliberately focused on cable series. I did not choose early-twenty-first-century original cable series as my object of analysis and then endeavor to analyze the negotiation of masculinity evident in such series. Rather, the origins of the project date to the early 2000s as my casual viewing of such cable series as *The Shield*, *Rescue Me*, and *Nip/Tuck*, as well as the network series *Boston Legal* and *Scrubs*, left me with a sense that there was “something going on” with the male characters and depictions of masculinity across the series. These shows were followed by several more that also seemed to speak explicitly to the condition of contemporary men, and, after nearly a decade of contemplation, this book identifies connections and disjunctures among the characterizations and narrative tropes and analyzes why they emerge and what challenges contemporary male characters face.

When I began to organize the series that most explicitly and deeply attended to male characters’ struggles with identity, I found they nearly exclusively appeared on cable channels. As I address further in chapter 1, the institutional specificity of cable is important to explaining why so many series with conflicted, morally ambiguous male characters emerged. Cable channels are funded by both commercial advertising dollars and viewer subscription payments that enable narrowcasting strategies such as developing unconventional protagonists and exploring ideas somewhat outside the mainstream. Although I examine such industrial factors in chapter 1, this book is foremost about the stories and characters US television offered about men struggling to find their place in the early twenty-first century, not television’s varied industrial contexts. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the male-centered serial, which, to date, is a form that has only succeeded on cable. Chapter 4 assesses male characters’ interactions in the homosocial enclave—a narrative context that also, to date, can only be found in cable series. Chapter 5 examines the depiction of male friendship, and in this case, two of the most significant depictions of the intimacy and relationship

maintenance characteristic of such friendships originated from broadcast networks. This chapter consequently bridges broadcast and cable storytelling because the topical focus demands it. Other chapters would have considered broadcast shows as well if similar exemplars existed. There are many other books one could write about men on television in the early twenty-first century; the framing provided by my title and the particular acknowledgment of the preponderance of cable channels as the originators of these series are meant to specify that by several measures, this book is more precisely about “cable” than “television” broadly.

### What Do We Know about Men on Television?

It is revealing that so little has been written about men on television. Men have embodied such an undeniable presence and composed a significant percentage of the actors upon the small screen—be they real or fictional—since the dawn of this central cultural medium and yet rarely have been considered as a particularly gendered group. In some ways a parallel exists with the situation of men in history that Michael Kimmel notes in his cultural history, *Manhood in America*.<sup>4</sup> Kimmel opens his book by noting that “American men have no history” because although the dominant and widely known version of American history is full of men, it never considers the key figures *as men*.<sup>5</sup> Similarly to Kimmel’s assertion, then, we can claim that we have no history of men, masculinity, and manhood on television—or at best, a very limited one—despite the fact that male characters have been central in all aspects of the sixty-some years of US television history. It is the peculiar situation that nearly all assessments of gender and television have examined the place and nature of women, femininity, and feminism on television while we have no typologies of archetypes or thematic analyses of stories about men or masculinities.

For much of television studies’ brief history, this attention to women made considerable sense given prevailing frameworks for understanding the significance of gender representation in the media. Analyses of women on television largely emerged out of concern about women’s historical absence in central roles and the lack of diversity in their portrayals. Exhaustive surveys of characters revealed that women were

underrepresented on television relative to their composition of the general populace and that those onscreen tended to be relegated to roles as wives, love interests, or sex objects.<sup>6</sup> In many cases, this analysis was linked with the feminist project of illustrating how television contributed to the social construction of beliefs about gender roles and abilities, and given the considerable gender-based inequity onscreen and off, attention to the situation of men seemed less pressing. As a result, far less research has considered representations of men on television and the norms or changes in the stories the medium has told about being a man.

Transitioning the frameworks used for analyzing women on television is not as simple as changing the focus of which characters or series one examines. Analyzing men and masculinity also requires a different theoretical framework, as the task of the analysis is not a matter of identifying underrepresentation or problematic stereotypes in the manner that has dominated considerations of female characters. The historic diversity of stories about and depictions of straight white men has seemed to prevent the development of “stereotypes” that have plagued depictions of women and has lessened the perceived need to interrogate straight white men’s depictions and the stories predominantly told about their lives.<sup>7</sup> Any single story about a straight white man has seemed insignificant relative to the many others circulating simultaneously, so no one worried that the populace would begin to assume all men were babbling incompetents when Darrin bumbled through episodes of *Bewitched*, that all men were bigoted louts because of Archie Bunker, or even that all men were conflicted yet homicidal thugs in the wake of Tony Soprano. Further, given men’s dominance in society, concern about their representation lacked the activist motivation compelling the study of women that tied women’s subordinated place in society to the way they appeared—or didn’t appear—in popular media.

So why explore men now? First, it was arguably shortsighted to ignore analysis of men and changing patterns in the dominant masculinities offered by television to the degree that has occurred. Images of and stories about straight white men have been just as important in fostering perceptions of gender roles, but they have done their work by prioritizing some attributes of masculinity—supported some ways of being a man—more than others. Although men’s roles might not have been limited to the narrow opportunities available to women for much

of television history, characteristics consistent with a preferred masculinity have pervaded—always specific to the era of production—that might generally be described as the attributes consistent with what is meant when a male is told to “be a man.” In the past, traits such as the stoicism and controlled emotionality of not being moved to tears, of proving oneself capable of physical feats, and of aggressive leadership in the workplace and home have been common. Men’s roles have been more varied than women’s, but television storytelling has nevertheless performed significant ideological work by consistently supporting some behaviors, traits, and beliefs among the male characters it constructs as heroic or admirable, while denigrating others. So although television series may have displayed a range of men and masculinities, they also circumscribed a “preferred” or “best” masculinity through attributes that were consistently idealized.

The lack of comprehensive attention to men in any era of television’s sixty-some-year history makes the task of beginning difficult because there are so few historical benchmarks or established histories or typologies against which newer developments can be gauged. Perhaps few have considered the history of male portrayal because so many characteristics seemed unexceptional due to their consistency with expectations and because no activist movement has pushed a societal reexamination of men’s gender identity in the manner that occurred for women as a component of second-wave feminism. Male characters performed their identity in expected ways that were perceived as “natural” and drew little attention, indicating the strength of these constructs. Indeed, television’s network-era operational norms of seeking broad, heterogeneous audiences of men and women, young and old, led to representations that were fairly mundane and unlikely to shock or challenge audience expectations of gender roles.

One notable aspect of men’s depictions has been the manner through which narratives have defined them primarily as workers in public spaces *or* through roles as fathers or husbands—even though most male characters have been afforded access to both spaces. A key distinction between the general characterizations of men versus women has been that shows in which men functioned primarily as fathers (*Father Knows Best*, *The Cosby Show*) also allowed for them to leave the domestic sphere and have professional duties that were part of their central

identity—even if actually performing these duties was rarely given significant screen time. So in addition to being fathers and husbands, with few exceptions, television's men also have been workers.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the performance of professional duties has primarily defined the roles of another set of male characters, as for much of television history, stories about doctors, lawyers, and detectives were necessarily stories about male doctors, lawyers, and detectives. Such shows may have noted the familial status of these men but rarely have incorporated family life or issues into storytelling in a regular or consistent manner.

This split probably occurs primarily for reasons of storytelling convention rather than any concerted effort to fragment men's identity. I belabor this point here because a gradual breakdown in this separate-spheres approach occurs in many dramatic depictions of men beginning in the 1980s and becomes common enough to characterize a subgenre by the twenty-first century. Whether allowing a male character an inner life that is revealed through first-person voice-over—as in series such as *Magnum, P.I.*, *Dexter*, or *Hung*—or gradually connecting men's private and professional lives even when the narrative primarily depicts only one of these spheres—as in *Hill Street Blues* or *ER*—such cases in which the whole lives of men contribute to characterization can be seen as antecedents to the narratives that emphasize the multifaceted approach to male characters that occurs in the male-centered serial in the early 2000s. Though these series offer intricately drawn and complex protagonists, their narrative framing does not propose them as “role models” or as men who have figured out the challenges of contemporary life. The series and their characters provide not so much a blueprint of how to be a man in contemporary society as a constellation of case studies exposing, but not resolving, the challenges faced.

The scholarly inattention to men on television is oddly somewhat particular to the study of television. The field of film studies features a fairly extensive range of scholarship attending to changing patterns of men's portrayals and masculinities. While these accounts are fascinating, the specificity of film as a medium very different from television in its storytelling norms (a two-hour contained story as opposed to television's prevailing use of continuing characters over years of narrative), industrial characteristics (the economic model of film was built on audiences paying for a one-time engagement with the story while

television relies on advertisers that seek a mass audience on an ongoing basis), and reception environment (one chooses to go out and see films as opposed to television's flow into the home) prevent these studies of men on film to tell us much about men on television. Further, gender studies and sociology have developed extensive theories of masculinity and have been more equitable in extending beyond the study of women. Although theories developed in these fields provide a crucial starting point—such as breaking open the simple binary of masculinity and femininity to provide a language of masculinities—it is the case that the world of television does not mirror the “real world” and that the tools useful for exploring how societies police gender performance aren't always the most helpful for analyzing fictional narratives. Sociological concepts about men aid assessments of men and masculinity on television, but it is clearly the case that the particularities of television's dominant cultural, industrial, and textual features require focused and specific examination.

### Why *Cable Guys*?

One of the motivations that instigated my 2006 book *Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era* was frustration with how increasingly outdated frameworks for understanding the political significance of emerging gender representations were inspiring mis-, or at least incomplete, readings of shows and characters that indicated a rupture from previous norms. Tools established to make sense of a milieu lacking central female protagonists disregarded key contextual adjustments—such as the gradual incorporation of aspects of second-wave feminism into many aspects of public and private life—and were inadequate in a society profoundly different from that of the late 1960s. For example, it seemed that some aspects of gender scripts had changed enough to make the old models outdated, or that there was something more to *Ally McBeal* than the length of her skirts, her visions of dancing babies, and her longing for lost love that had led to scorn and dismissal from those applying conventional feminist analytics. Given generational and sociohistorical transitions apparent by the mid-1990s, it seemed that this series and its stories might be trying to voice and engage with adjustments in gender politics rather than be the same old

effort to contain women through domesticity and conventional femininity, as was frequently asserted.

I'm struck with a similar impulse in reflecting on how stories about men, their lives, and their relationships have become increasingly complicated in the fictional narratives of the last decade. Indeed, this evolution in depictions of male identities has not received the kind of attention levied on the arrival of the sexy, career-driven singles of *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal* or the physically empowered tough women of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Assessments of men in popular culture, and particularly television, haven't been plentiful in the last decade. Most of the discussion of men on television merely acknowledges new trends in depiction—whether they be the sensitivity and everymanness of broadcast characters or the dastardly antiheroism of cable protagonists, as I detail in chapter 2. Such trend pieces have offered little deeper engagement with the cultural and industrial features contributing to these shifts or analysis of what their consequences might be for the cultures consuming them.<sup>9</sup>

While these curiosities might motivate any scholar, I suspect the motivations of a female feminist scholar embarking on an analysis of men and masculinity also deserve some explanation. In addition to curiosity about shifting depictions and stories on my television screen, for well over a decade I've also had the sense that "something is going on" with men of the post-Baby Boomer generation, who, like me, were born into a world already responding to the critiques and activism of second-wave feminism. Yet nothing I've read has adequately captured the perplexing negotiations I've observed. For example, on a sunny Tuesday morning just after the end of winter semester classes, I took a weekday to enjoy the arrival of spring with my toddler. We found ourselves in the sandpit at the neighborhood park, and shared it that day with two sisters—one a bit older, the other a bit younger than my nearly two-year-old son—who were being watched over by their father. He was about my age and was similarly clad in the parental uniform of exercise pants and a fleece jacket. With some curiosity I unobtrusively watched him interact with his daughters. Dads providing childcare aren't uncommon in my neighborhood—overrun as it is with academics and medical professionals with odd hours that allow for unconventional childcare arrangements—but something in his demeanor, his willingness to

go all in to the tea party of sandcakes his oldest was engaging him with, grabbed my attention for its play with gender roles. It reminded me of the many male friends with whom I share a history back to our teen years who have similarly transformed into engaged and involved dads; they've seemingly eradicated much of the juvenile, but also sexist, perspectives they once presented, and also have become men very different from their fathers. Then his phone rang. Immediately, his body language and intonation shifted as he became a much more conventional "guy." Was it a brother? It was definitely another man. An entirely different performance overtook his speech and demeanor as he strolled away from the sandpit, yet, suggesting that all was not reversed, he proceeded to discuss attending a baby shower, whether he and his wife would get a sitter, and the etiquette of gift giving for second babies. When the call ended he shifted back to the self I had first observed.

Watching this made me reflect on how the gender-based complaints I might register regarding balancing work and family—such as the exhausting demands, the still-tricky negotiations of relationships that cross the working mom/stay-at-home mom divide, and the ever-ratcheting demands to be the Best Mom Ever while maintaining pre-mom employment productivity—have been well documented by others and are problems *with* a name. My male peers, in contrast, must feel out to sea with no land or comrades in sight. Esteemed gender historian Stephanie Coontz has gone so far as to propose the term and reality of a "masculine mystique" as an important component of contemporary gender issues.<sup>10</sup>

This wasn't the first time I'd been left thinking about the contradictory messages offered to men these days. The uncertain embodiment of contemporary manhood appears in many places. For years now I've wondered, even worried, about the men in my classes. In general, they seem to decrease in number each year, perhaps being eaten by the ball caps pulled ever lower on their foreheads. As a hopefully enlightened feminist scholar, I try to stay attuned to the gender dynamics of my classroom—but what I've commonly found was not at all what I was prepared for or expected. Consistent with the *Atlantic* cover story in the summer of 2010 that declared "The End of Men" and touted that women had become the majority of the workforce, that the majority of managers were women, and that three women earned college degrees

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