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Forms of Dissidence: *Celestino antes del alba* and *El mundo alucinante* by Reinaldo Arenas

▲ Joey Whitfield

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Abstract: This article analyses the formal properties of Reinaldo Arenas's first two novels *Celestino antes del alba* (1967) and *El mundo alucinante* (1968) in light of his statement that all of his work is related to the revolution whether he wanted it to be or not. Drawing on other critics who have examined the parallels between Arenas's persecution for his sexuality and his persecution as a writer, I look at how the formal innovations of these novels depend on the revolution. Unlike his subsequent novels, *Celestino* and *El mundo* were written before Arenas became a pariah and were intended for publication in Cuba. I argue therefore that although their engagement with the revolution is oppositional, Arenas is still able to ethically derive certain formal pleasures within this antagonistic power relation.

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‘Mi obra quiéralo yo o no, propóngamelo o no está relacionada con la Revolución. Es lo que conozco mejor.’

[My work, whether I want it to or not, whether I intend it to or not, is related to the Revolution. It is what I know best.]¹

(Reinaldo Arenas, qtd. in Arencibia Rodriguez 119)

During the 1960s the cultural life of the Cuban revolution took on a vibrant and diverse character as a result of efforts to educate the population and to prove the island’s cultural sophistication to the world. Literary production increased and writers such as José Lezama Lima, who were not particularly sympathetic to the revolution’s aims, were published. In “El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba”, Ernesto “Che” Guevara complained, however, that writers from before the revolution were inevitably tainted by the “pecado original” [original sin] of not being revolutionary, as they had been formed in a non-revolutionary society, and he looked forward to the day when there would be a new generation who had evolved in properly revolutionary conditions, “[y]a vendrán los revolucionarios que entonen el canto del hombre nuevo con la auténtica voz del pueblo” (56) [“Revolutionaries will come to sing [the] song of the new man with the authentic

¹ Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

voice of the people”; Guevara, “Man and Socialism”]. There was a time when it seemed that Reinaldo Arenas (1943--90) was to be such a writer. Young, precociously talented, lifted out of abject provincial poverty and educated and employed by the revolution, he seemed to have been produced in precisely the right conditions to contribute to the construction of new revolutionary art forms and consciousness.

Reinaldo Arenas did initially join the revolution and did aim to create a radically different literature that would achieve the kind of break with the pre-revolutionary literary tradition for which Guevara hoped. Yet his sexuality meant he was no *hombre nuevo* [new man]. On the contrary, he was a proudly gay man. In the politically charged atmosphere of 1960s and 70s Cuba, few aspects of life were too private to escape politicisation and submission to public scrutiny. Seen as “social parasites”, homosexuals were energetically persecuted, subject to police harassment and, for a period, set to work in the infamous UMAP work camps where forced labour would supposedly “cure” them (see Ocasio 78--98). The homophobia of the revolution was justified by the view held by some Marxists that homosexuality was part of the “disease” of prostitution---a product of class difference and of the middle-aged bourgeoisie’s corruption of the innocent working class youth. But these attitudes also revealed the extent to which revolutionary discourse, for all its claims to offer a radical break with past social conditions and attitudes, had failed to effect a true rupture with some of the more conservative underpinnings of pre-revolutionary Cuban society, that were principally Catholic and reactionary (Foster 67).

Arenas’s autobiography *Antes que anochezca* documents how this situation led him into conflict with the authorities and transformed him into a public enemy. As the cover-

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blurb proclaims, “Arenas, en efecto, reunía los tres requisitos más idóneos para convertirse en uno de los muchos parias engendrados por el infierno castrista: ser escritor, homosexual y disidente” [Arenas, in effect, brought together the three most ideal characteristics to become one of the many parias engendered by the Castroist hell: being a writer, a homosexual and a dissident]. This sensationalistic description underlines that Arenas’s dissidence is *engendered* by his situation. A point expanded on by David Vilaseca who cites Slavoj Žižek’s description of a blind-spot in dialectical thinking:

In the monster of the “Party”, the negative force of “dissidence” must recognise an entity on which hangs its own ontological consistency, an entity that confers meaning upon its activity---in other words, its essence. (351)

Dissidence is then structurally dependent on “dominant ideology”. The weary tone of the epigraph that begins this article shows that Arenas was aware of this blind spot and accepted its inevitability.

He aspired, nonetheless, to be one of those rare authors who, to appropriate a phrase of Roland Barthes, “combat both ideological repression and libidinal repression” (35). He would devote his life to opposing a repressive dominant ideology first through literature and unusually excessive amounts of “deviant” sexual activity, then later, after escaping the island, through political activism. Inevitably, however, he found himself dependent on the forces against which he positioned himself for his own “ontological consistency”.

The challenge for Arenas as a dissident writer who pursued freedom through literature and fantasy when he was denied it in life, was to create literature that breaks the

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bind outlined by Žižek, for to rely on one's opponent for one's "ontological consistency" can surely provide no true freedom. Perhaps to create oppositional literature that "transcends" that which it opposes is impossible, but it is a question this article will examine. I focus on Arenas's first novels *Celestino antes del alba* (*Singing from the Well*) and *El mundo alucinante* (*Hallucinations*) and also refer to his last work, the autobiography *Antes que anochezca* (*Before Night Falls*). The two novels are particularly interesting because they were written in the period described by María Encarnación López as "penumbra", which was characterised by Arenas's partial visibility on the cultural scene before he fell from favour and was systematically invisibilised (70). López's own meticulous work on Arenas is also concerned with the precise relationship between repression and artistic expression. She argues that "censorship and invisibility [...] acted as a powerful spur" to his creative and political activities (10). While López focusses on autobiographical detail and assessment of Arenas's personality, my interest is (more modestly) with close reading of his early literary output. The important thing about this period, and what differentiates the first of these texts from the others, is that both were written for publication within revolutionary Cuba. They are more ambiguous in their engagement with the revolution than his polemical later works.

The relationship between ideology and sexuality is explored by Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, who writes that "ideological formation, like sexuality, depends on a retroactive change in the labelling of the subject" (15). The terms *ideology* and *sexuality* correspond in Arenas's work, to "dissident" and "homosexual". The aim of this article is also, therefore, "retroactive" because it will consider Arenas first and foremost as the

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“*homosexual dissident author*” that he later became when, in fact, during the composition of *Celestino* and *El mundo*, he was an author who happened also to be homosexual.

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By looking at the cultural politics of the revolution I will trace how his two early novels interact with some of the sanctioned ideas on culture and literature and investigate how they attempt to combat ideological and sexual repression. In so doing, I aim to recuperate aspects of revolutionary discourse in Arenas’s work that have been shrouded by engagement with his marginal status and attempt to address the sexual and textual politics of his writing in a manner that transcends the simple association of sexual dissidence with dissidence *tout court*. A lot of criticism simply addresses Arenas’s texts on the basis of the dissident *content* of his later work, particularly *Antes que anochezca*, but as I will show, the negotiation of forms is also quite explicit and allows him to explore the revolution’s claims to historical progress and transformation. I will consider where the novels are situated on the axis between a sort of apolitical literature that is predicated on historically relativist, political “neutrality”, and a more socially committed literature of the left. Key to this is the relationship between form and content. I will examine how Arenas unmasks the revolution’s misappropriation of the term *revolutionary* while comparing him to its sometime ally Alejo Carpentier. The article will conclude by questioning the subversive quality of Arenas’s works in terms of the dynamic they introduce between erotic and revolutionary bodily economies.

1. *Celestino antes del alba*: forms of dissidence

Elsewhere in “El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba” Guevara confronts the question of literary form. He dismisses socialist realism as consisting of “formas congeladas” [frozen forms], an outgrowth of a nineteenth-century realism he considers “puramente capitalista” (55) [purely capitalist]. Fidel Castro also recognised the failure of socialist realism in the address *Palabras a los intelectuales* of 1961, in which he laid out the attitude of the new revolutionary government towards the Cuban intellectuals and their output. The famous slogan repeated in the speech is “...dentro de la revolución, todo; contra la revolución, nada” (12) [...within the Revolution, everything goes; against the Revolution, nothing]. Castro explains that the revolution must find ways to accommodate everything within it such that nobody should find himself or herself “contra”. It was interpreted by some as an assurance of the openness of the revolution towards academic and artistic production, and by others as a warning that implied precisely the contrary. After assuring the intellectuals that the revolution would not asphyxiate them artistically and stating that they would be given complete “libertad formal” [formal freedom], Castro left an ominous question mark over whether or not they should be able to count on “libertad de contenido” (8) [freedom of content].

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In assuming that form and content can be easily separated and that only content is of political consequence Castro expressed what Terry Eagleton terms the “vulgar Marxist” notion that “artistic form is merely an artifice, externally imposed on the turbulent content of history itself” (20). Castro does not view form as ideological. As Eagleton points out, this assumption was contradicted by Georg Lukács who stated that, “the truly social element in literature is the form” (qtd. in Eagleton 20). Karl Marx

himself famously wrote, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (4). If we equate Lukács’s *social* here with Marx’s idea of *social being*, it is form that determines ideology because it is fundamental in its creation. For Louis Althusser, art is inevitably held within the dominant ideology of its time but is also distanced from it to the extent that we are able to “see it” (qtd. in Eagleton 19). *Seeing* as a component of *social being* therefore determines consciousness/ideology and it is the mechanism of the form that permits us to see. Eagleton sums up: “the true bearers of ideology in art are the very forms rather than the abstractable content of the work itself” (24). The question of whether this is, to borrow a phrase from Neil Larsen, because “the ideological consciousness of history is spontaneously crystallised in a new aesthetic or literary form” (122), or, as Marx’s statement would suggest, due to the subject’s ability to choose form as a reaction to repressiveness, raises issues of authorial agency to which Arenas’s “quíeralo yo o no, propóngamelo o no” [whether I want it to or not, whether I intend it to or not] also points.

In *Celestino antes del alba* dissidence and protest against the dominant revolutionary ideology are most clearly found in the *form* of the novel, the content of which appears, superficially, to tow the party line. *Celestino antes del alba* is Arenas’s only novel to date to be published in Cuba. It won second prize in an UNEAC literature competition and was praised by such prominent revolutionary figures as Miguel Barnet and Eliseo Diego. It seemed to fit into the grand narrative of the revolutionary version of history as what Seymour M. [Seymour Menton calls a “social protest novel”](#) ([The Cuban](#)

Novel 99, ~~enton calls a “socialist protest novel” (The Cuban Novel 99)~~. Diego stated in 1967 that there are few Cuban books in which “las viejas angustias del hombre del campo nos acerquen tan conmovedoramente, haciendo así de su simple exposición una denuncia más terrible que cualquier protesta deliberada” (165) [the old agonies of rural man approach us so movingly, thereby making of its simple exposition a more terrible denunciation than any deliberate protestation]. As a nightmarish vision of a repressive childhood beset by poverty, ignorance and violence, it was easily interpreted as a fierce indictment of the material and educational inadequacies of life under dictator Fulgencio Batista.

On closer inspection, however, the text does not fit so comfortably into the category of a socialist protest novel. It is set in and around the unnamed child narrator’s rural home, which is inhabited by his extended family of abandoned aunts, his grandparents and his mother. The family treat each other ~~with alarming brutality~~brutally, mitigated by acts of tenderness. The narrator’s only comfort is his (probably) imaginary poet cousin Celestino, who scribbles his unintelligible verses on the trunks of the surrounding plants and with whom he shares an intimacy bordering on the erotic. The narrator makes no distinction between reality and his own ~~terrifyingly violent~~ violent fantasies ~~in which he and~~ ~~He and~~ his family members morph into animals or inflict ~~violent gruesome~~ deaths upon each other from which they are always resurrected. The narrative is sporadically interrupted by ~~pages bearing only short literary quotations, from~~ ~~Some are by figures~~ ~~writers of such as~~ ~~Sthe international literary pantheon such as Shakespeare, Lorca, Wilde and Borges: “Amanecerá en mis párpados apretados” (4) [“Dawn will break on my tight-~~

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squeezed eyelids"]. Some of pages bear ~~Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde (not insignificantly),~~ and more mundane ~~domestic~~ quotations attributed to family members: *“Fuimos a recoger caimitos y lo único que encontramos fue unas guayabas verdes – Mi abuela”* (12) [*We went to gather abiu [a sweet fruit] but all we found were some green guava – My [Grandmother] members.* While mundane in content, insertions like this are not without with their own poetic qualities and, ~~th~~ ~~us~~ their juxtaposition alongside the literary greats is an iconoclastic ~~refusalsing to maintain of any an elitist~~ distinction between high literature and ~~the the~~ everyday *utterances of the rural working class.*

The family’s extreme poverty and hunger are not the principal reason for their ~~vappallingly~~ violent treatment of each other, which seems to be without rational motivation. Any Marxist notion that such violence would be alleviated by economic revolution is thus subtly undermined. The grandfather is moved by irrational fear of an art he cannot understand, crying *“¿Cómo que no la [la mata de higuillo] tumbe! ¡Si el muy condenado la ha llenado de palabras raras!”* (38) [*“What do you mean, don’t cut it [the fig tree] down! That goddamned young jackass has covered it with all these peculiar words”* 21] while manically chopping down another of the trees on which Celestino has carved his poems, in a frenzy of symbolic castration. *Episodes like this mean that* ~~The novel,~~ although ostensibly apolitical, ~~the novel is often read as has been read convincingly as~~ cry for artistic freedom in the face of oppressive ignorance (*see Soto*). ~~albeit not in~~ *It makes its rebellious cause, while avoiding any terms that suggest an explicit critique of post-revolutionary politics,* as its acceptance by Barnet and Diego attests.

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~~The~~The novel has an experimental fluid form ~~that of the novel~~ would seem to take full advantage of Castro's offer of *libertad formal*; yet its style and structure strain to challenge the leader's assumption that form cannot be a dissident property. There are no chapters, the prose is divided into small sections that vary in length from one line to several pages. Sometimes the episodes described follow on from each other, but frequently they are unrelated or continue storylines from several pages before. On page 192 the prose abruptly assumes the form of a play complete with stage directions that continues until page 221. The volatility of plot and genre threatens the integrity of the identity of the text itself.

The narratorial voice is likewise surrounded with ambiguity; it refuses to demarcate reality from fantasy, rejects chronological markers and constantly undermines traces of textual coherence with contradictory versions of events. The pronouns often change from first to second person but unlike the systematic use of yo/tú/él in novels such as Carlos Fuentes's *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962), it is never clear ~~whether why~~ these switches ~~signify a change of narrative point of view or a change of narrative perspective take place as they do on the same narrative subject~~. The confusion of perspectives points to a fragmented narrative subject who is other to himself, the lack of ~~systemisations~~systemisation deepening the confusion surrounding Celestino's identity.

The novel contains three randomly placed endings, none of which follow a narrative conclusion; ~~“FIN”~~“FIN”, ~~“SEGUNDO FINAL”~~“SEGUNDO FINAL” and ~~“ULTIMO FINAL”~~“ULTIMO FINAL” are placed at the end of paragraphs before the narrative begins again on the following page (74, 96, 141). This constitutes Arenas's first means of denying chronological progression.

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The second can be found in his negation of death. Time and again his protagonists suffer violent deaths at each other's hands but are always magically resurrected to face further torments. Unlike his sex-soaked later novels, *Celestino* contains no explicit references to sexual acts apart from one in which the narrator fucks a shit-covered doll, for which he is punished and made to feel shame. In *Celestino* sexual acts seem subsumed by something akin to the death drive; a destructive urge towards Barthes's *jouissance*, a pleasure that is in excess of order and happiness. It is beyond good and evil, *la petite morte*, a little death that shatters predominating symbolic orders. Arenas told Miguel Barnet that the way the characters in *Celestino* are always restored to life is part of his attempt to negate time; *“he tratado de que el tiempo quede deformado de tal manera que llegue a desaparecer”* (12) [I have attempted to deform time in such a way that it comes to disappear]. Arenas's world of temporal limbo subverts the eschatology that revolutionary rhetoric relies on—the constant promise of progress and advancement. Freud wrote of the death drive as *“an urge inherent in all organic life to restore an earlier state of things”* (36); by setting the novel before the triumph of the revolution Arenas attempts to deny the march of history and refuse its arrival.

Arenas confirms the antagonistic nature of the novel's wilful ambiguity in his essay *“Celestino y yo”*, published in defence of the novel in 1967. In a clear reference to its less than enthusiastic reception *in-s-by* some sectors of the Cuban intelligentsia, he laments the attitude of *“los superficiales, a quienes hay que dárselo todo molido y masticado”* (119) [the superficial people, for whom everything has to be given milled

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and chewed]. He defends the fluid ambiguity of the textual body, which refuses to submit to easy interpretation or assimilation to political discourse.

By setting *Celestino* before the triumph of the revolution, Arenas refuses the injunction for writers to create a literature of the present, but this is by no means the only way in which he refuses that movement's demands. In his closing comments to the *Primer congreso nacional de educación y cultura* [in 1971](#), Castro again tackled the “problem” of literature such as Arenas's stating:

Nuestra valoración tiene que ser política. No puede haber valor estético contra el hombre. No puede haber valor estético contra la justicia, contra el bienestar, contra la liberación, contra la felicidad del hombre. ¡No puede haberlo! (28)

[Our evaluation must be political. There can be no aesthetic value against mankind. There can be no aesthetic values against justice, against liberation, against the happiness of mankind. There cannot be!]

While *Celestino* is not demonstrably *against* any of these concepts it certainly privileges aesthetic value over political content and refuses actively to promote the ideas Castro cites in terms recognisable to the revolution. Although it could be argued easily that the ~~terrible~~ lack of justice, contentment and liberation it portrays constitutes a powerful demonstration of their value and importance, such an ostensibly negative vision was not what Castro demanded. There are no “good” or exemplary characters in *Celestino*, and the novel offers little hope or resolution to the characters' problems. Even death provides no escape.

One fundamental way in which *Celestino* comes into conflict with revolutionary discourse is its presentation of truth as multiple and subjective. Such multiplicity upsets overt efforts to produce a homogeneous political subject. In ‘*Celestino y yo*’, Arenas

states: “no creo que exista una sola realidad, sino que la realidad es múltiple, es infinita, y además varía de acuerdo con la interpretación que queramos darle” (119) [I don’t believe that a single reality exists but rather that reality is multiple, infinite and, what is more, it varies according to the interpretation we give it]. He confirms his intention to provoke active readings of his texts in a manner that prefigures Barthes’s definition of texts of *jouissance*. For Barthes such texts exhibit an ambivalence that makes them not immoral but amoral, they pursue a “pleasure” beyond good and evil. Such a goal would, needless to say, be antagonistic to the revolutionary logic according to which an apolitical or amoral stance is also an immoral one.

The extent to which the concept of a multiple reality threatened revolutionary discourse can be seen in the vehemence with which the Stalinist soon-to-be head of the *Consejo Nacional de Cultura*, Luis Pavón, writing as Leopoldo Ávila, famously attacked Heberto Padilla for being “ajeno y enemigo de la realidad revolucionaria” (18) [alien to and enemy of the revolutionary reality]. A single, definable reality is not only important to the populist requirement of a government with a self-declared “necesidad de mantener la unidad monolítica ideológica” (Partido Comunista 11) [need to maintain monolithic ideological unity] but is also related to forms of unimaginative Marxist thinking. As Jean Franco discusses in *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City*, there had emerged a split in the literary treatment of “reality” along Cold War political boundaries, crystallised in Latin America in the differences between *Casa de las Américas* and *Mundo Nuevo*; between writers who believed in the need to relate the subject to sociopolitical realities and others who denied the possibility and indeed the necessity of

relating art to a comprehensible material reality. But while Arenas's vision of multiple realities might easily be subsumed within the apolitical discourse of historical relativism, in the context of Cuba at the time, such a stance actually constituted a radical political position. The protean forms of *Celestino* are a long way from Lukács's ideal of the great historical novel which captures and reveals the epic struggle characteristic of its epoch through realism. They do, however, both capture and reveal Arenas's own struggle through their combative interaction with the ideology of the revolution.

2. *El mundo alucinante*: revolutionary realities

Nowhere are such tensions more conspicuous than in Arenas's second major work, *El mundo alucinante*. The manuscript was entered into an UNEAC competition in 1966 and awarded first honourable mention even though the judges, ~~who included one of whom~~ was Alejo Carpentier, awarded no first prize. It was never published in Cuba but Arenas managed to have a version published illegally in France in 1969. The novel is a retelling of the life of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier (1763-1827), the revolutionary priest and hero of the Mexican War of Independence. He gave a blasphemous sermon in which he argued that the Virgin of Guadalupe had appeared in Mexico before the arrival of the Spaniards and invoked the wrath of the Inquisition by undermining the religious legitimisation of the conquest of the New World. He spent the rest of his life on the run from his political and religious enemies, spending long periods incarcerated in a series of prisons across Europe and the New World (including El Morro in Havana where Arenas would later be imprisoned himself). In Arenas's fantastical, fictionalised version of

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events the priest encounters many influential figures, some historical, although often anachronistic, and some literary such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. In the end he manages to return to Mexico to take part in the successful War of Independence but becomes disillusioned that power is still in the hands of the same privileged minority and feels that Mexico itself has become a giant prison.

In *Latin America's New Historical Novel* Menton identifies *El mundo alucinante* as one of only two such novels before 1974 that was not written by Carpentier. Arenas's palimpsest of Fray Servando's own *Apología* and *Memorias* is not only a precursor of the genre but also one of its finest examples. All of the six characteristics that Menton uses to define the New Historical Novel: ~~the ideas of Borges~~ ideas on literature, the conscious distortion of history, the use of famous historical figures as protagonists, metafiction, intertextuality, and Bakhtinian notions (such as the carnivalesque and heteroglossia), ~~concepts~~, are foregrounded in *El mundo* to the extent that the text reads like an ideal type of the genre (20-25).

El mundo alucinante is sometimes compared with *El siglo de las luces*; indeed according to Sabine Schlickers, Carpentier's novel constitutes the "hipotexto contra el cual Arenas concibe *El mundo alucinante*" (116) [the hypotext against which Arenas conceives *Hallucinations*]. The action of both novels unfolds during the same epoch, just after the French revolution, both use historical revolutionaries as their protagonists. *El mundo* parodies the baroque stylings of Carpentier, who makes an appearance as a pedantic writer carrying a bag bearing the inscription "El saco de las lozas" (224) ["The Chinaware Sack" (232)]. But while Carpentier attempts to trace accurately the

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rise and descent into corruption of the revolutionary governments in France and the Caribbean by structuring his novel around the scarcely documented life of Víctor Hugues, Arenas undertakes to deliberately fictionalise the well-documented life of Servando de Mier. *El mundo* pays literary tribute to Fray Servando in ways that unashamedly references Arenas's own subjective position and projected desires—not so much blurring the line between history and fiction but asking whether history is ever, to recall Michel Foucault's dictum, anything other than the history of the present (“The Body” 178). Like *Celestino*, the novel is also radical in its presentation of the body as the site of historical action and its celebration of an unspecific sexuality reminiscent of Freud's “polymorphous perversity”.

In *Antes que anochezca* Arenas expresses his admiration for *El siglo de las luces* but dismisses everything Carpentier published thereafter as worthless (116). Unlike Arenas, Carpentier always remained politically loyal to the Cuban revolution and insisted that *El siglo* should not be read as a criticism of it but rather as an illustration of how the ideas of the early phases of the French revolution “seguían creciendo y fructificando en América y [...] Cuba” (qtd. in Pagni 143) [continued growing and blossoming in America and Cuba]. He defended his baroque language by aligning it to the embryonic post-colonial movement, famously stating “Nuestro mundo es barroco [...] la descripción de un mundo barroco ha de ser necesariamente barroca” (qtd in Pagni 145) [Our world is baroque [...] the description of a baroque world must necessarily be baroque]. With *El mundo* Arenas makes it clear that no such consensus exists. In contrast to Carpentier's use of a single narrative voice, he again opts for dialogism and

intertextuality. The epigraph contains the following: “Esta es la vida de fray Servando Teresa de Mier, tal como fue, tal como pudo haber sido, tal como a mí me hubiese gustado que hubiera sido.” [“This is the life of Friar Servando Teresa de Mier. Such as it was, and could have been; such as I should have liked it to have been” 9]. This launches the reader into a narrative that initially seems to correspond systematically to these three perspectives, reminding us that the writing of history is never unmediated, and that it is always filtered through the desire of (a) the author and; (b) the present.

There follow three chapters titled “1”, then three titled “2”. Initially this structure appears to evince a system: in a playful appeal to the picaresque the first chapter “1” is subtitled “De cómo transcurre mi infancia en Monterrey junto con otras cosas que también ~~transcurren~~ transcurren” (ref) 13 [“How my childhood is spent in Monterrey together with other things which also happen” (13)] and is told in the first person; the second chapter “1” is subtitled “De tu infancia en Monterrey junto con otras cosas que también ocurren” (16) (ref) [“Of your childhood in Monterrey together with other things which also happen” (16)] and is narrated in the second person; ~~and~~ the third bears the heading “De cómo pasó su infancia en Monterrey junto con otras cosas que también pasaron” (18) (ref) [“How his childhood was spent in Monterrey together with other things which also happened” (20) (ADD PAGE NUMBER)] and is narrated in the third person. The first chapter “2” is then narrated in the first person, the second in the second and so on. However, by the end of the third chapter “2” (that is the sixth ^{6th} chapter in total) the third person has taken over and tends to dominate throughout the novel although Arenas frequently switches to the second or first person. He likewise

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plays with different tenses, which initially seem to correspond to certain narrative perspectives but are also subject to erratic change. Often the purpose of the different chapters and voices is to offer contradictory accounts of the same events. Critical attempts to unscramble and classify the uses of different tenses and persons are confounded by Arenas's refusal to privilege any clear voice, version or indeed system.

A typical example of the way the text playfully interacts with itself and with the original accounts by Servando is found in "18 Francia". The first person has just recounted the fraile's friar's journey from Madrid through the Pyrenees in passages that include three lengthy citations from Fray Servando's *Apología*. The second person, distanced and apparently from a position of greater authority, takes issue with the fría re's words:

Jamás has estado en Madrid. Jamás has atravesado los Pirineos. Ni has pasado por todos esos lugares que mencionas y criticas. Bien sabes que el Puente levadizo te lanzó de un golpe por los aires [...]. Tú mismo, oh fraile, dices bien claro que cruzaste por sobre los Alpes, pero no entre ellos. Así fue. (126)

[You've never been to Madrid. You've never crossed the Pyrenees. Nor did you go through all those other places you talk so uncharitably about [...]. You yourself, oh friar, say quite clearly that you passed over the top of the Alps and not through them. 123]

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The A footnote reads, “10. “Cruzamos por sobre los Alpes.” Fray Servando, *Apología*.” [We crossed over the alps. Fray Servando, *Apología*] Arenas uses the citation to acknowledge his historical sources. Yet through fantastical extrapolation and wilful misreading, he changes the function of a device that normally grants verisimilitude into something that foregrounds the subjectivity of interpretation. He thereby casts doubt on the reliability of historical sources and on authors, such as Carpentier, who draw on them, as is the case with the latter’s explanatory endnote “Acerca la historicidad de Víctor Hugues” (*El siglo* 333) [“The Victor Hugues of History” (250)].

Carpentier’s eagerness to deny relating *El siglo* to the present is ironic in itself if we consider that he otherwise embraced the cultural and political movement that was calling on novelists to create literature that was an “expression of a radical new reality” (Echevarría 112). Part of the new reality of the revolutionary project was the marriage of high and low culture. The revolution simultaneously celebrated working class culture while bringing high culture (theatre, literature etc.) to the masses through literacy programmes and heavy subsidisation of the arts. Arenas’s use of language in *El mundo* might be interpreted as responding to this ideal. The multiplicity of voices and perspectives is matched by a heterogeneity of registers. The body of the narrative is related in a colloquial style that has many oral qualities; the chapter headings recall Golden Age tales of chivalry; literary high register, baroque language is included during the encounters with José María Heredia and Virginia Woolf’s Orlando; and the novel also contains the extracts from Servando’s own memoirs. Through such *polifonía*, the novel

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would thus appear to simulate the Bakhtinian carnival with its associations of freedom, democracy, and the inversion of power structures.

By contrast, Carpentier's attempt to create a new language to describe the reality of the Caribbean is more contradictory. ~~Neil~~ Larsen argues that a constant impression of dissonance is created in *El siglo de las luces* in its yoking of 'modernist' aesthetic techniques, associated by Lukács with a loss of social referentiality, and aspects of the text that correspond to the 'epic' ideal of the great realist novel. Larsen contends that modernism, in the guise of that "neo-baroque profusion of sumptuous detail", inhabits the text as a "species of ideology in the second degree" (Roberto Schwartz's term) that "never quite succeeds in diverting the reader from the more 'conventional' dimension of the plot", but that it unwittingly parallels the "misplacement" of the European revolutionary ideas to the Caribbean (124). Despite Carpentier's efforts to enthrall his readers with his language their interest is sustained by the fact that *El siglo* offers a connection to a "mass experience of history" through the fates of its three protagonists and still reflects "a truth of fundamental relevance to the post-colonial world" (123). On reading Arenas it is worth noting that this process of "misplacement", central to Carpentier's opus, can equally well be seen at work in the Cuban revolution.

Alfredo Cachejero, who makes a case for a Marxist Arenas, cautions against reading the privileging of language over history in *El mundo alucinante* "in terms of historical relativism", and attacks critics who claim that "any sense of engagement in the novel with social historical, and political issues is an illusion" (763). In fact, for Cachejero, Fray Servando's lack of success in escaping from prisons and transforming

Mexican society are the result of his inability to think outside the terms of his dominant ideology—the mediator between the subject (Servando) and the totality which is the “social reality that is produced and reproduced by him” (764). Fray Servando is persecuted not for overturning the religious ideology of the Catholic Church, but for trying to prevent its political appropriation from within. Recalling the most often cited phrase from the novel’s introduction, Arenas’s statement that, during the writing process, “Lo más útil fue descubrir que tú [Servando] y yo somos la misma persona” (11) [“It was far more use to discover that you and I are the same person” (7)], Cacheiro concludes that an important underlying theme of the novel is “an existential dilemma faced by the bourgeois subject in Cuba: how to break completely with pre-revolutionary social conditions, property relations, production relations, and ideas and create a truly revolutionary consciousness” (769). He thus sees Arenas as a “true revolutionary”, as implied by his identification with the *fraile*. It is significant that Arenas says he realised this *through* writing the novel, again it seems that *being* determines *consciousness*.

Arenas’s use of a *truly* revolutionary protagonist unmasks how in Cuba the term “*revolutionary*” has come to mean precisely its opposite. To be “*revolutionary*” in the eyes of the state it to conform to all of its pre- and proscriptions while Fray Servando’s critical posture towards the French revolution under Napoleon is just one indication of his status as a true revolutionary. Arenas himself lauded Guillermo Cabrera Infante as a “*verdadero revolucionario*” [true revolutionary] who founded a literary magazine, a cinema club and wrote a novel condemning Batista and was then forced to abandon Cuba “*precisamente por su condición revolucionaria, es decir, experimental, rebelde y*

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crítico²²⁷ (*Necesidad* 235) [precisely because of his revolutionary condition, that is to say, his experimental, rebellious and critical nature]. He thus defines a true revolutionary as one who adopts fidelity to a revolutionary cause, but also has both an untameable spirit of rebellion and an active ability to critique the causes in which he is involved. Arenas undermines the myth of an ongoing Cuban revolution by showing that true revolutionary thinking will always be in excess of attempts to institutionalise it. His definition of and evident admiration for the figure of the ‘true revolutionary’ is to be found not only in the figure of Fray Servando, but also in himself; after all, according to Arenas, they are one and same.

El mundo is therefore a revolutionary text as it strongly endorses radical social change, but protests against its realisation in Cuba in the 60s. Arenas’s own sentiments could well be expressed in a moment when Fray Servando finds himself in Paris at the time of Napoleon’s second entry into the city and relates his initial attraction to the great leader, “...me sentí muy entusiasmado y me identifiqué en seguida con el sistema, que me parecía muy conveniente. Y mis méritos fueron reconocidos por el mismo Napoleón, que me obligó a tomar sitio eminente en El Instituto Nacional” (135) [“And my merits were recognised by Napoleon himself, who pressed me to accept an eminent position at the Institute” (138)]. Servando retains a critical attitude, however, and realises that the people: “no había logrado más que cambiar la tiranía” (135) [“had in fact only changed tyrants” (144)]. What is more, he sees: “con miedo, que las mismas personas que antes de la revolución, los que se aprovecharon de ella, volvían a ocupar grandes cargos [...] como ascendía toda la basura, aprovechando de que el río estaba otra vez revuelto [...]”

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que todo es fraude en el mundo polítoco” (135-6) [“with misgiving that the people who held high positions before the revolution, and those who had used it to their advantage, were being reinstated [...] the dregs coming back up to the surface [...] that everything is a fraud in the world of politics” (144-5)]. The novel underlines the subjectivity of historical writing and rewriting, but on an allegorical level it clearly corresponds to a “truth” of Cuban revolutionary history as experienced by Arenas, who simultaneously decries the grand narrative of the emancipation of the working class, and aims to give voice to the oppressed of history.

3. Interpenetrations: sexuality and the body politic

In “Celestino y yo” Arenas states that he is against the use of literature as a political tool (117). But even as he sought to avoid open political confrontation in his writings, his sexuality forced him to assume a political position. When, in a personal interview with Arenas’s friend Tomás Fernández Robaina (who appears in *Antes que anochezca* and *El color del verano* as Tomasita la Goyesca), I asked about the repression of homosexuals in Cuba during the first decades of the revolution, he replied that homosexual men were seen as “contrarrevolucionarios” *tout court*. He also said that it was Arenas’s specific celebration of sexual libido that brought him into open conflict with the censors. In a sequence from the chapter, it is easy to assume that *El mundo* was censored because of its thinly veiled political content but Fernández Robaina said that it was Arenas’s refusal to

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~~cut the homoerotic passages from the chapter “De la visita del fraile a los jardines del rey” [“Of the friar’s visit to the gardens of the king”], that was the real problem.² In this sequence, Fray Servando is led through a series of different “tierras de amor”;³ the first contains hoards of men and women having sex in a giant lake of semen, the second a desert of women, “revolcándose en la arena y prodigándose caricias inenarrables hasta llegar al paroxismo” (99) [“writhing around on the sand, caressing each other with liberal accuracy until their orgasm came” (11196)], and the third contains exclusively men where Servando concludes that “el placer no conoce el pecado y que el sexo nada tiene que ver con la moral” (100) [“pleasure is divorced from sin and sex has nothing to do with ethics” (11297)]. It is concluded that the men are having the best time. While it is easy to assume that *El mundo* was censored because of its thinly veiled political content, Fernández Robaina insisted that it was Arenas’s refusal to cut the homoerotic depictions and his favouring of sex between men that ended his career in Cuba.³~~According to Tomás Fernández Robaina, it was Arenas’s refusal to excise this depiction and his favouring of sex between men that ended his career in Cuba.~~~~

Antes que anochezca documents how following this, homosexuality became ever more strongly the essence of Arenas’s “ontological consistency” as an oppositional

² ~~Fernández Robaina made these claims in an interview the author conducted in Havana on 23 May 2008. I thank him for his time and for his permission to reproduce his points here.~~

³ Fernández Robaina made these claims in an interview the author conducted in Havana on 23 May 2008. I thank him for his time and for his permission to reproduce his points here.

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‘... conflict with the censors. In a sequence from the chapter ‘*De la visita del fraile* [etc.]’, Fray Servando is led... [...]. While it is easy to assume that *El mundo* was censored [etc.], Fernández Robaina insisted that it was Arenas’s refusal to excise this homoerotic depiction and his favouring of sex between men that ended his career in Cuba. [END OF PARAGRAPH]

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writer; it set him on a direct collision course with the cultural authorities and eventually led to his imprisonment. Under conditions of censorship he began to write works characterised by ever more explicit sex scenes. In his analysis of *Antes que anochezca*, Vilaseca identifies the precise moment [in the text in *Antes*](#), when the child Reinaldo is constituted as a homosexual subject, when dubbed a “[pájaro](#)” —slang for homosexual. This act of interpellation “[implies a performative retroaction](#)” (352). There are parallels here with the censoring of *El mundo*, whose illegal publication in France led to a second moment of interpellation for Arenas as a *dissident homosexual author*. I have so far been concerned with identifying (retroactively) the dissident formal and political qualities of those novels and shall now look at sexuality and the body, drawing also on *Antes que anochezca*. Arenas’s conception of the body sheds light on the central preoccupation of this article: the way in which Arenas’s subversiveness owes its ontological consistency to the Cuban revolution.

In the 1960s and early 70s, when Arenas was composing *Celestino* and *El mundo*, the political control of bodies in Cuba was at its most brutal and homophobic. Foucault’s work on the “[body politic](#)” traces the rise of bodily control in the [eighteenth–19th](#) century as analogous to the rise of capitalism with its accompanying institutions, industries and medical discourses, all of which also demanded the creation of docile bodily subjects. While Foucault’s vision of the capitalist body politic is a “[capillary](#)” and “[inductive](#)” one, the Marxist conception of a deductive, top-down body politic inherited from political thought based on the model of sovereignty, translated into something equally repressive in the early decades of socialist Cuba. In Cuba, state institutions educate, employ, inform,

treat medically, train militarily, and police the entire population; the Cuban subject is more directly subsumed by a monolithic body politic than almost any other.

In the 1960s and 70s measures were taken to ensure that the revolutionary body politic was not infected by homosexuality. Its anatomy demanded that individual bodies be marshalled in order to maintain monolithic and ideological unity (Partido Comunista 11). It was to be composed of obedient and strictly separate cells that only penetrated each other's "façades/surfaces" in prescribed ways, namely those defined by hypocritical machismo. At the now infamous *Primer congreso nacional de educación y cultura* in 1971, homosexuality—euphemistically referred to as "extravagance"—was defined as a "patología social" [social pathology] (Partido Comunista 13). The conference saw the ratification of policies that shaped the Stalinist policies of the "quinquenio gris" [five grey years] (or *pavonato* [peacockery—a play on the name of minister for culture Luis Pavón]) that demanded that homosexuals in positions of influence over others (teachers, managers, writers etc.) find themselves alternative occupations to prevent their "condition" from spreading. The Cuban intellectual Ambrosio Fornet voiced the contemporary official line on the policies of the UMAP and the *pavonato*, which is to blame them on failures to recognise the strength of "la moral judeo-cristiana y la ignorancia" (8) [Judeo-Christian morality and ignorance]. Judith Butler tells us, however, that "every formative movement requires and institutes its exclusions" (my emphasis) (22), thereby introducing a whiff of bad faith into such arguments. Indeed, despite such an appeal to historical determinism, there is a stronger sense that the founding myth of brotherly solidarity upon which the homosocial

revolution was built required the aberrant, useless homosexual “other” against which to position its idealised male figure: *el hombre nuevo*. As the revolution strove to produce this New Man with his short hair, loose fitting clothes and of a practical, self-sacrificing nature, it constructed his antagonist in the figure of the selfish, socially parasitic, wasteful homosexual.

As Brad Epps has elaborated, Fidel Castro, his tall athletic frame clad in its habitual olive-green uniform, was the idealised personification of the Cuban revolutionary body politic. As Arenas recognised in *El color del verano*, “Fidel Castro es, en cierta medida, nosotros mismos” (206) [“Fidel Castro is, to a certain degree, ourselves” *The Color* 227]. His “finished” body has proved the impenetrability of its façade by resisting a reported 613 attempts by the US government to destroy or sabotage it. Such efforts reinforce the importance of the constancy of its “surface” for the revolutionary project in the abortive attempt to make his beard fall out by placing thallium salts in his shoes (Escalante Font 30). At the opposite end of the spectrum is the grotesque body identified by Bakhtin. Of the mouth, the bowels, and the sexual organs Bakhtin states that, “all of these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic, it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the bodies and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an orientation” (qtd. in Dunne 11). Michael Dunne, in his application of Bakhtin to Manuel Puig’s *El beso de la mujer araña*, recalls that his discussion of the graphically physical is philosophically dialogical in presenting the converse of the grotesque body. This is the monological assumption of “an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body. All orifices are closed. The basis of the image is the individual,

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strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade²³ that corresponds to authoritarian thinking (Bakhtin 320).

We have seen how Arenas dismantles closed *textual* bodies through his formal experimentation in *Celestino* and *El mundo*. The episodes in “Los jardines del rey²³” mix bodily fluids (semen, urine etc.) into the already structurally fluid text. For Arenas, human bodies, especially the friar’ fraile’s own body, also possess protean qualities that directly combat their repression. For him the body is a volatile symbol, capable of withstanding and inflicting extreme violence, penetrated, penetrating, consuming and consumed, excreting and excreted. Servando’s body is repeatedly confined in a series of prisons from which it escapes by the most fantastic means. In one of the most hyperbolic carnivalesque incidents, eight pages are devoted to describing the way he is constrained by chains that enclose his entire body from his genitalia to his eyelashes to the extent that he cannot blink. Soup that is poured onto the bundle of metal on Monday afternoon does not reach his face until Saturday morning. He copes with the problem by shrinking his bones until he is left with enough space to breathe but remains imprisoned until the ball of chains becomes so heavy that it breaks open the prison and rolls away across the Spanish countryside (173). Such treatments would naturally lead one to posit the oppositionality of power to sex, sexuality and the body.

Thus far, it has been clear that in a climate where “Las relaciones sexuales [eran] consideradas como actos políticos con graves consecuencias²³” (Arenas, *Otra vez* 259) [“Sexual relations [were] considered political acts with serious consequences²³” *Farewell* 281], and gay men were considered counterrevolutionary, sex between men was a

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transgressive counterrevolutionary act. In line with this, Arenas began to write extremely graphic sex scenes and made private bodily acts part of his literary political rebellion. However, the versions of sexuality that he depicts in later works of the *Pentagonía* and in *Antes* are heavily marked by the dominant social and political attitudes of the time. For Arenas sex is frequently associated with guilt, danger and death, as seen in the narrator's penetration of the doll in *Celestino*.

Such negativity and guilt to an extent evidence a condemnation of intolerant attitudes and conditions in Cuban society, but in *Antes* Arenas makes it startlingly clear that he prefers the relations brought about by such conditions. For him the essential paradox and, indeed, the pleasure of being a *maricón* or *loca* (the “passive” participant) in the so-called “Mediterranean model” of homosexuality, was that one sought out one's opposite, a “real man”, with whom to have relations. For Arenas and [Fernández Robaina](#) (as the latter confirmed) these opposites, these “real men” were often policemen or soldiers—day-to-day representatives of the monolithic body politic—who faced no stigmatization for their “active” roles. Epps and Vilaseca analyse passages in *Antes* in which Arenas reminisces nostalgically about sex with such “real men” back in Cuba and laments the dreariness of the New York gay scene where “es muy difícil para un homosexual encontrar un hombre” (132) [“it's very difficult for a homosexual to find a man” (107)]. For these critics, Arenas's apparent dependence on transgression and “oppositional sex” for his satisfaction indicates his reliance on the conditions that the revolution brought about and clearly suggests that, in spite of his apparent hostility to the revolution, he at times reproduces its celebration of conventional

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views on masculinity. Vilaseca contends, along the lines of Butler and Žižek, that “dissidence and dominant ideology are structurally dependent on each other for their mutual existence” (352), and in *Antes* Arenas seems to prove that he, as a Cuban homosexual, was dependent on the *hombre nuevo*.

His reminiscences of sexual adventures under the repressive regime led to Cabrera Infante’s disconcerting conclusion that, “the harsher the persecution of homosexuals in Cuba became, the more enjoyment (that is the word) it gave homosexuals” (qtd. in Epps, 270). This suggests, in a Foucauldian vein, that pleasure maintains a much closer relation to power than metaphors and models of *repression* might lead us to believe. Arenas, describing the wild sex life he enjoyed in the 60^s, states, “Creo que si una cosa desarrolló la represión sexual en Cuba fue, precisamente, la liberación sexual” (132) [“I think the sexual revolution in Cuba actually came about as a result of the existing sexual repression” (95)], thereby underscoring the sense that every discourse produces ~~the~~ its own counter-discourse. *Antes* disconcerts because of the extent to which Arenas’s “sexual liberation” is so heavily marked by the terms of that original discourse and, furthermore, that his literal and literary sexual transgressions are not only dependent on the political anatomy of the revolution for their consummation but also for their *pleasure*.

It is here that sexuality can be conflated with aesthetic and political textual qualities for, as we have seen, Arenas is also reliant on the ideology of the revolution for stimulation in those areas. The issue of “reliance” raises again the question of authorial agency and intention: whether Arenas determines his own ideological content or whether he somehow assimilates it unconsciously. However “constructionist” one’s views on the

origins of different expressions of sexuality might be, there is no question that the sexual subject cannot simply choose his or her sexual orientation. The political subject, however, is generally thought to wield powers of choice and agency. In Arenas's case, in the context of the highly politicised revolutionary Cuba, the lines begin to blur. There is a sense that the very formal and aesthetic qualities through which he expresses political dissidence proceed from the revolution's thinking. Epps muses that "what he celebrates as the self-scripting of the body is contingent on the scripted" because the supposedly "homosexual" qualities that were anathema to the revolution, "[e]xcess, extravagance, fantasy, ornamentation and so on, all signs of a sexual scripted, are what Arenas incorporates into his own scripting" (245).

To conclude, Arenas is indeed caught in the double bind outlined by Žižek, both as a gay man and an author. The essence of his texts lies in formal and aesthetic qualities, which, whilst borrowing heavily from revolutionary narrative, invert those narratives to produce works of fiction that are politically antagonistic to the dogmas of the dominant revolutionary ideology. We are reminded again of Foucault's notion of "spirals of power and pleasure" (*History of Sexuality* 45), which implies that wherever there is power there is pleasure. Reinaldo the *loca* of *Antes* enjoyed oppositional sex with the "real men" who represented the oppressive body politic, and much of the pleasure of Arenas's texts depend on an analogous interaction with revolutionary dogma. This paradox has the troubling potential to legitimise power for the sake of pleasure, just as Cabrera Infante's comments demonstrate, and the analogy means we might also question the celebration of formal textual pleasure if it depends on power. Rather than concluding that power

necessarily leads to pleasure, the formal pleasures of Arenas's works demonstrate the subversive potential of taking pleasure in *and in spite of* power. Just as Reinaldo takes pleasure in his ^{sub}ordinate role in sexual relations, so too do Arenas's novels exploit the revolution by taking formal pleasure in its defiance.

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