

# INTRODUCTION TO 'THE (DIGITAL) CULTURE INDUSTRY'

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- + The interaction between culture and economy was famously explored by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer by the term 'Kulturindustrie' (The Culture Industry) to describe the production of mass culture and power relations between capitalist producers and mass consumers (1997 [1947]). Their account is a bleak one, but one that appears to hold continuing relevance, despite being written in 1944. Today, the pervasiveness of network technologies has contributed to the further erosion of the rigid boundaries between high art, mass culture and the economy, resulting in new kinds of cultural production charged with contradictions. On the one hand, the culture industry appears to allow for resistant strategies using digital technologies, but on the other it operates in the service of capital in ever more complex ways. This publication, the first in the *DATA browser* series,<sup>1</sup> uses the concept of the culture industry as a point of departure, and tests its currency under new conditions.

It has become an orthodoxy to think of culture and economy as operating together in a very general sense - blatantly expressed in arts & business funding opportunities for cultural activity, as well as in so-called 'enterprise culture'. There is perhaps a confusion here over the use of the term 'culture industry' and its relationship to other contemporary definitions, like the 'creative industries' of neo-liberal cultural policy - in which culture is linked to a cynical regeneration of capital through cultural populism, cultural policy and management, enacted by 'culturepreneurs'. The way in which Adorno and Horkheimer use the term

is explained in Adorno's subsequent essay 'The Culture Industry Reconsidered' (1991 [1967]):

'In our drafts we spoke of "mass culture". We replaced that expression with "culture industry" in order to exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art. From the latter the culture industry must be distinguished in the extreme.' (Adorno 1991: 85)

The problem with the term mass culture was simply that it was not democratic enough, and technology contributed to this effect. They explain:

'Interested parties explain the culture industry in technological terms. It is alleged that because millions participate in it, certain reproduction processes are necessary that inevitably require identical needs in innumerable places to be satisfied with identical goods. The technical contrast between the few production centres and the large number of widely dispersed consumption points is said to demand organization and planning by management. Furthermore, it is claimed that standards were based in the first place on consumer's needs, and for that reason were accepted with so little resistance. The result is the circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows ever stronger. No mention is made of the fact that the basis on which technology acquires power over society is the power of those whose economic hold over society is the greatest. A technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself.' (1997: 121)

A capitalist deployment of technology serves mass deception. Is it simply that digital technology extends what Adorno and Horkheimer call a 'rationale of dominance'? To them, domination was expressed in forms other than simply economic ones, and might be traced back to the early development of science and technology. Thus, even Marxism was cast in the Enlightenment tradition and a legitimate target for critical theory. The issue for the Frankfurt School was that tendencies in the Enlightenment had influenced the rise of instrumental,

subjective reason - and with this, had produced its own myth. Other more dynamic, contradictory explanations were largely dismissed as unscientific and mythic. They proposed that instrumental reason, tied to technological domination, be replaced with 'cynical reason'.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of technological change, Adorno and Benjamin famously disagreed on the consequences of the destruction of 'aura' of the artwork in this respect. Whilst Benjamin expressed the positive aspects of this shift, Adorno expressed more negatively that standardisation and pseudo-individuality would ensue. 'The Culture Industry' essay expressed this tendency in more detail, reflecting their associated worries of the integrative power and levelling tendencies of mass culture. However, and importantly, this was no defence of high culture as such, nor a reactionary attack of popular culture but a recognition of the breakdown of the distinction, and a means to reveal material conditions and social contradictions - somewhat demonstrating Adorno and Horkheimer's disdain for populism.

What do we mean by the 'culture industry' now? This book presents a collection of essays and practices that tackle these issues under current conditions with respect to a number of contradictory relationships: between culture and the political economy, between producers and consumers, and between standardised objects and subjects. The book aims to highlight these contradictions, and in this way suggest that critical activities might further reveal unresolved tensions through a number of tactics: from negation to de-realisation to tactical media. The question remains as to the effectiveness of these strategies and to the ways in which cultural practices that utilise the techniques and networked technologies of dominance, and indeed culture in general, are further recuperated. The term itself, 'The Culture Industry' remains a contradiction in terms with the cultural aspects of economics and the economics of culture ever more entangled. In this collection of essays, we point to some of these productive contradictions.

### **Economising Culture and Politics**

The Frankfurt School brand of critical theory is important in re-engaging thinking about culture in connection to the political economy and ideological critique. Critical theory therefore rejects the derivative nature of culture as simply responding to the economy as indicated in classical Marxism. In 'The Mood of Networking Culture' herein, Jeremy Valentine responds to the rhetoric of 'funky business', placing it firmly in the tradition of administrative domination that Adorno and Horkheimer introduced. He claims that rather than oppose or respond to this antagonistically, the culture industry that was once subject to the political economy is now central to it: in other words, that 'administration has become culture'. This would make contemporary cultural practices that parody business, or that is overtly administrative, entirely expected and dubiously critical. Indeed, how does a critical practice respond to these new condition where cultural activity is economised? His reference to networking culture alludes to the work of Paolo Virno (2004), in which the traditional distinctions between work, action and thinking are eroded, making leisure, 'idleness' and 'refusal' to work central to contemporary production. If this is bad news for critical theory as Valentine insists, then action needs to be upgraded to respond to these developments through new tactics.

Social struggles increasingly revolve around payment and the satisfaction of desire. It is the issue of debt that becomes a key reference for Marysia Lewandowska and Neil Cummings's project *Capital*, and their contribution to this book. Clearly any critique based on the political economy requires an upgrade in which the concepts of value and debt are central, and new forms of symbolic exchange materialise that are not based entirely on labour value - in other words, the ways in which the uneconomic is economised. In 'An Economy of Love', drawing upon the work of Jean Baudrillard and Marcel Mauss, they describe the thinking behind their project to make a gift of art - as one way to resist the (deathly) commodity exchange of cultural production. They do this against a backdrop of the parallel histories of the Tate Gallery and The Bank of England and their symbolic economies - interestingly both founded on the

dematerialisation of value and the idea of debt/gift. An economy of love, in their terms, is one based on a gift economy and the principle of the commons. As they point out, this is in keeping with networked economies, and engages with immateriality and the symbolic value of the open source movement in general. Evidently, it is possible to disrupt the market values afforded to art and banking. They maintain: 'the gift has the potential to contest the economising of culture, the reduction of all exchange to financial calculation' - through the radicality of love.

Taking this further, Esther Leslie unequivocally states, in 'Globalica: Communism, Culture and the Commodity', that 'private property is the mainstay of capitalism' and we should continue to attend to this central issue. Private property is derived from the division of labour, and artistic production is not exempt from these conditions of production both as a form of intellectual and manual labour - and this is where critical power resides. She sees contemporary arts practice as 'marred by commodification', thoroughly entwined with the marketplace and 'deformed' accordingly, as standardised capitalist cultural forms. Like poor quality food stuffs (and there are visual prompts in the essay), they interpolate us through slogans but are bad for our general health and well-being; ultimately as the commodification of industry and culture extends to all aspects of life, turning us into what we eat or consume in front of the television (a veritable couch potato). Adorno and Horkheimer put it this way:

'The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises.... [T]he promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu.' (1997: 139)

But how can dissatisfaction with this diet be registered? To Leslie, the tactics of Dada-ist 'anti-art' seem outmoded to respond to such a complex situation. She proposes a more specific tactic of 'anti-culture'; one in which corporate power is registered and that works on the 'level of the sign' through today's 'anti-logos, anti-branding, and subvertisements'. The works of art-activists (or

rather culture-activists or hacktivists), operate through high-tech and low-tech forms and networks. To be effective, for Leslie, this practice needs to remain dialectical and one rooted in Benjamin's - not Hardt and Negri's - understanding of 'barbarism' (clearly she is drawing upon a different kind of communism in this respect).<sup>3</sup> Leslie's sense of barbarism provokes a challenge to property relations at its core through negation - and cultural production (even art) holds the potential to reveal contradictions in this respect.

In examining how individuals can reclaim a sense of autonomy from the forces of commerce and politics, Michel de Certeau asserts that users operate opposing established rules in the most ordinary of circumstances (1984). The concern is the mode of operation, not human subjects as such but their actions, that together form a culture wherein models of action are characterised by users in ways that resist the idea of passive usage or consumption. The Gameboyzz Orchestra reconfigures the use of the Gameboy console as a musical instrument, changing it into a productive tool of expression. In de Certeau's terms, consumers negotiate discipline and power exerted on them by tactical forms and makeshift creativity, through what he calls 'antidiscipline' (1984: xv).

The tension here is between the common use and prescribed use of technology; or rather, the relations between consumers and the mechanism of production are made complex and contradictory. Mass culture, then, holds the potential to contain ways of making in which social relations are reconstituted or hacked. Thus, there is self-evidently a political dimension to everyday practices. Everyday practices, such as shopping or cooking, are potentially 'tactical' in character offering new and strategic ways of operating. Hacking might be usefully described in these terms, as a tactical form of re-coding supplied materials and structures (code and rules), transforming one person's property into another's. In a satire inspired by Priceline.com with visual reference to Walmart.com, *Re-code.com* is a social hack exposing the software structures which dominate our lives and economy. In their words, the project points to 'the absurdity of a system that allows corporate theft to go unpunished while deeply criminilising

petty consumer theft'. The Re-code website allowed consumers control over prices in an extreme manner through 'tactical shopping'. The site stayed online for ten days before being taken down in response to threats from Wal-Mart. They use the figure of the 'trickster' to characterise their challenge to 'theft' as part of a more general challenge to property relations in a way that positions them as 'anti-capitalists', despite their claim that they prefer the flexibility of a term like 'critical deviant practice' (they are thinking of shoplifting). But anti-capitalist mockery of the commodity is not immune to recuperation, as Esther Leslie suggests.

### **Prosumption**

Production and consumption have integrated in new ways. A renewed interest in the work of the Frankfurt School coincides with these developments. The culture industry, then, can be seen to be a means of mass deception even on the level of encouraging consumers to think of themselves as producers - or what have become known as 'prosumers'. From Adorno and Horkheimer's view of standardisation, Brian Holmes outlines how 'custom objects or personalised services' now give the impression of consumer choice. In such a scenario, the 'prosumer' appears to repossess their former alienation - what he calls 'the gratifying self-possession and self-management of the networker' that further erodes some of the more positive aspects of the organisation of the State (such as the welfare state) perfectly justified by the ideology of better individualism. The concept of alienation has been effectively recuperated.

Despite any worries associated with the neo-liberal rhetoric around technology, some lingering hope remains in the DIY culture of free networks. In Julian Priest and James Stevens's contribution, wireless free networks and peer to peer file sharing reconfigure power relations in ways that challenge corporate interests and existing social relations - perhaps challenging the idea that technology serves dominance. The slogan 'trip the loop, make your switch, consume the net' encapsulates the working principles of the free networking movement in this respect: establishing local mesh networks that are controlled by users rather

than commercial interests, sharing data and working on the basis of collective utility and the optimisation of resources undermining the business model of mainstream network providers. This represents a shift in activity from a hacker pastime and internet utopianism to something 'real, useful and manageable'. Their contribution (substantially an edited version of a longer report on 'The State of Wireless London') contains many practical insights and arguments for the development of locally controlled networks, but also a word of warning: that 'autonomous media' activity prefigures each wave of technological development before recuperation kicks in, and so caution is recommended: 'The existence of the network has rather than reversed the balance between 'consumer' and producer in favour of the consumer, perhaps allowed new spaces for the market driven media to inhabit'. How do users maintain these developments as open and participatory, build independent network infrastructures, and maintain them as part of the commons?

These organising principles of the 'network commons' lead Armin Medosch to describe society in terms of an 'ad-hoc mode'. In this, he is drawing upon the work of Cornelius Castoriadis and his ideas on self-organisation and autonomy or self-determination, insofar as it contributes to an overall dynamic and 'radical social imaginary'. Medosch is concerned to characterise social progress without falling into techno-determinism, yet at the same time considers technical innovation as potentially liberatory if developed outside the determining conditions of capitalism. The network commons here is predicated on the fact that protocols can be free and open, protected by general public licences (GPL) to ensure further distribution proceeds on the same basis, leading to the proliferation of free software such as the GNU/Linux operating system, through which the network can be accessed for public utility. For Medosch, this challenges the traditional distinction between producers and consumers, offering new possibilities of activity over free networks, challenging property relations and extending the commons. Yet these developments are far from guaranteed, and the mobile telephone networks stand in sharp contrast to the idealism of the network commons - representing the contrast between open and



closed systems, as well as decentralised and centralised organisational models. The mobile phone encapsulates these contradictions and the social relations it engenders. Ad-hoc, decentralised, self-organising and mobile networks both describe the patterns of global capital and its antithesis.

Rather than negation, it is the psychoanalytical concept 'de-realisation' that protects us from recognition of the true horror of capitalism, according to Marina Grzinic. Art institutions and the art market are complicit in this, using a protective shield against differences and radical cultural practices such as activism. When alternatives are posed (Grzinic is referring to the work of Tanja Ostojic), their use is often misunderstood by the art world that hardly even recognises, or protects itself from, its own disavowals. Citing Slavoj Žižek, Grzinic claims they might be better understood through 'over-identification with the power edifice'; in what she calls the 'act of traversing the fundamental fantasy' (such as in the case of Laibach, who make all too visible the 'hidden fantasmatic scenario of the socialist totalitarian ritual', or indeed Ostojic's gender politics). For the most part, actions serve to hide the fantasy of absolute power and the ways that capitalism is required to extend its limits (aka globalisation, or Hardt and Negri's *Empire*). It is this unsatiable process of flexible accumulation, extended to the internet, that she likens to identity politics. In what she calls 'flexible colonisation', power is flexible and expansive, expressed not simply through economics but through 'biopower' - exemplified in 'hypercapitalistic market entertainment apparatuses' and the figures of Lara Croft and other 'monsters'.

This tactic of an 'over-identification' with power is one way of approaching the 'pranksterism' of The Yes Men; or more worryingly, is it the reduction of politics to the realm of entertainment (what has elsewhere been characterised as satire meets 'jack-ass TV')? Brian Holmes also suggests the absurd parody of The Yes Men, in which consent is taken to its logical extreme, is a useful example of contemporary protest action. The Yes Men's 'Yes Bush Can' campaign, in which supporters signed patriot pledge petitions that endorse tax cuts favouring the elite and the giving up of constitutional rights to support the war against

terrorism comes to mind, as does its failure. The Yes Men, in a move they call 'identity correction', wear second-hand business suits and use mock websites to create hoaxes of the WTO, right wing think tanks, or other corporate entities. They insert themselves into situations giving presentations, press conferences, and speeches in which they have used two methods of provocation: firstly, by taking right wing ideologies to their logical undemocratic conclusions in satirical speeches (scarcily rarely taken as satire) to illucidate the criminal activities of those whose identities they correct; and secondly, by trying to imagine a new and ethical power structure - for instance, imagining a WTO which actually worked for fair trade and against exploitation. Most recently, they 'corrected' Dow Chemicals by taking full responsibility for the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, announcing \$12bn in compensation to victims - and wiping \$2bn off the companies shares.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it is the expression of contradiction that remains productive. User modification or hacking appears as an interesting case study in this respect. In 'Homework', Mirko Tobias Schäfer outlines the contradictions of user modifications, in as much as they undermine the intended consumer and producer distinction. User communities share information based on open source principles. In the case study of Aibopet, initial disapproval from Sony in the form of lawsuits, turned into acceptance as a result of consumer action. However, this also represents a very clear example of recuperation at work in the way Sony, for example, have since adapted to what has become a cheap research and development opportunity. On the other hand, the cultural realm is extended through an ethos that cuts against the grain of corporate interests in open standards, transparent and shared working processes in the public domain.

It is the level at which consumers can become producers that is in question, as is the speed of recuperation. That is not to say that the relationship between consumers and producers has entirely broken down necessarily - think of the production and consumption of oil and its recent violent consequences. Despite the inevitable worries of recuperation, particularly in the games and

entertainment industries, 'total conversion' remains for Margarete Jahrmann a potentially critical activity too. She outlines the thinking behind *Nybble-Engine-Toolz* in which the shooter game engine is modified or re-engineered to 'shoot' anti-war emails to 'president@whitehouse.com'. Its highly-stylised (almost baroque) form merges with text data to create an aggressive visual assault on the conventions of the shooter-game genre. The alarming parallel of war games on mass release to American foreign policies is actualised in anti-war protest. The allusion to the futurist aesthetics of war comes to mind, as does Benjamin's statement that the aesthetics of politics will lead to one thing: war (in contrast to the politics of aesthetics, in the artwork essay of 1936).

### **Standardising subjectivities**

Consumers, in effect, consume ideology. This is something Hardt and Negri stress, in that industrial powers do not simply produce commodities but also subjectivities: 'In the biopolitical sphere, life is made to work for production and production is made to work for life' (2000: 32) - in a range of complex, interlinking, interactive relationships. They introduce the concept of 'biopolitics' as no longer administratively separated from life but a fully integrated and networked 'lifestyle'.

Partly in response to this way of thinking, Brian Holmes calls for a new cultural critique that builds upon the successes of the critique of capitalist globalisation and turns its attention not only to economics but to culture. This is a critique that takes into account the lessons of the tired 'cultural studies' movement that in itself requires a 'renewal of the negative, of ideology critique'.<sup>4</sup> The critical theory of the Frankfurt School stands in sharp contrast to what Žižek would call the failed politics of identity, in which culture became a site of the affirmation of different identities and these were in turn commodified. Holmes too polemically charts how contingency and negotiated readings unwittingly became a justification for transnational consumerist ideology. His concern is to forge a cultural critique that is effective - based around the figure of the 'flexible personality'. This is a strategy that is in keeping with the current flexibility of the economic system and

draws upon the work of the Frankfurt School and particularly its understanding of subjectivity. He explains some of the background to an intellectual development of a 'counter-culture' that questioned forms of authority and that 'turned against capitalist productivism in its effects on both culture and subjectivity'. The historical interest is the way in which critique has been recuperated.

Increasingly, it can be seen how critical forms have been recuperated through flexible forms of capital organisation itself; arranged in networks, fluid and mobile. The computer lies at the centre of a new form of discipline, masked by ideology, that makes everything appear uncontrolled - reminiscent of Hardt and Negri's contradictory phrase 'government without governance'. Holmes refers to this as the 'ambivalence of the networked computer' and stresses its metonymic role in the redeployment of capital. Holmes's emergent figure of the 'flexible personality' owes its character to the increasing 'autonomous status of labour' (such as expressed in the work of Lazzarato, Negri, and Virno). It is closely associated with the 'immaterial labourer' as a subjectivity 'channeled' by contemporary capitalism in the global market place. It is in this connection that Holmes remains optimistic in calling for 'artistic critique' to 'rejoin the refusal of exploitation' as part of the shared and distributed knowledge of immaterial labour. There is simply no alternative to his way of thinking.

Clearly, the standardisation of culture has become global, and in many ways the world has become standardised too - or that certainly seems to be the intended outcome of US foreign policy in tune with capitalist expansionism. Holmes too, refers to the strategies that transnational corporations employ, backed by military and legal power, to exert economic governance of the world. This ensures not only consumer demand but cheap production in free-trade zones and the like, resulting in grotesque labour conditions. Over the last thirty years or so, labour markets have become increasingly globalised with the migration of cheap foreign labour and the weakening of trade union movements. In 'Sightings', Raqs Media Collective deliver a geography lesson for the misery of 'not-quite citizens' with 'not-yet passports' and not-there addresses'. This is the reality of

a global economy in which some people have little value, goods are pirated, and migrant labour extorted. Profit comes before people in such a scenario.

'The Culture Industry Redefined' opens with the statement: 'The entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms' (Adorno 1991). Raqs Media Collective outline an alternative reality in which Argentinian workers, faced with a failed money economy, developed a new parallel economy based on self-regulation and free exchange 'outside the circuit desired by capital'. Perhaps there is hope.

Less optimistically, Adam Chmielewski concentrates on the reality of the situation in which we find ourselves now - the unfolding 'Third World War'. Part of the issue is our acceptance of, and submission to, American intellectual domination and the superficial discourse around 'terrorism'. To Chmielewski, the perceived enemy has shifted from an ideology based on an alternative economic structure to one based on Islamic terrorism, that threatened the foundations of Western culture. The 'voluntary servitude' of voters simply expresses the 'interpassivity' of Western democracy, avoiding interdependent thinking altogether. This 'crisis of representation' is alluded to in Jordan Crandall's poetic essay 'On Warfare and Representation', in which intentionally blurred images of war (possibly from streamed news) make easy interpretations impossible. As Crandall states, 'to a large extent the degree to which we assign truth to an image is dependent upon the degree of our alignment with the ideological system that supports it'. Perceived accuracy 'emerges from technical development' and what he calls 'transmission verité' to point to the technology employed, rather than the image represented.

Such techniques to Chmielewski, emphasise that Western civilisation remains a myth, behind which it constructs enemies to justify its 'aggressive expansionist and exclusivist' policies and capitalist ideology performed by 'occidental militarists' with grotesque defence expenditure. The costs are clear. Chmielewski claims this is a Third World War, with a script that we have written ourselves

and in which we play our roles obediently. Clearly its engine needs hacking and modifying for more peaceful ends.

Critical theory remains theory linked to action, and herein lies the intention of this book. Under such conditions of authority, the tension between what used to be called the 'intellectual' and the 'proletariat' is 'necessary in order to combat the proletariat's conformist tendencies' (Jay 1996: 84, quoting Horkheimer). That intellectuals (at least those found in the academy) are firmly part of what is now described as the knowledge economy, makes the point more unsettling in thoroughly tying together knowledge and political interests. That critical work and knowledge, and tactics of resistance - such as those contained in this book - is subject to commodification, is a case in point. Hence the contributions to this book are released under a creative commons license agreement - with some rights reserved. Consumers of this book may copy and distribute the copyrighted work, and derivative works based upon it, but only if they give due credit, and further distribute it under a licence identical to the one that governs the work. In this spirit of cultural practices in the public domain (or commons), share it by all means but most importantly act on it.

## 5

*Many of the ideas for this book, and indeed some of the contributions, have been informed by two previous conferences organised by the editors: 'Hybrid Discourse' (University of Plymouth, 2002) and '[Anti-]Globalica: Artistic and Conceptual Tensions in The New World Disorder' (WRO biennale, Wroclaw, Poland, 2003).*

**NOTES:**

1. In this context, the term 'browser' is useful in pointing to the framing device through which most data is now delivered over information networks. A conventional understanding of 'browsing' may suggest surface readings and the passive consumption of material. In contrast, the *DATA browser* series celebrates the potential of browsing for dynamic interpretation and 'detournement'; the rearrangement of existing material into new configurations.

2. Peter Sloterdijk explains cynical reason as 'enlightened false consciousness' (1987: 5-6).

3. The reference to barbarism is further extended by paraphrasing the way Martin Jay ends his book: the negative critical impulse allows the future possibility of writing poetry that would no longer be an act of barbarism. This, in turn, is a response to the famous Adorno quote from *Prisms*: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Jay 1996: 298). Here, barbarism takes on a different sense again than in the case of Leslie or Negri.

4. Many of the victims were extremely disappointed to find this was a hoax. One of the 'Frequently Asked Questions' on The Yes Men site <<http://www.theyesmen.org/faq/>>, reads: 'Speaking of Bhopal - didn't you raise some false hopes in Bhopal with your latest Dow stunt?' They reply: 'All hopes are false until they are realized. And the only reason the hopes of the Bhopalis are false is because Dow has decided it won't do anything. And this is exactly what we tried to highlight: this problem could easily be solved - for Dow it would be a cinch. All questions about false hopes for justice in Bhopal should be directed to Dow Chemical. In any case, the two hours of false hope - next to twenty years of unrealized ones, for those who are still alive - might be balanced by the fact that for the first time in memory, news about Bhopal and Dow was front and center in the US media, making many front pages, getting on TV, etc. Often the anniversary goes completely unnoticed...'

5. In a similar way, Esther Leslie says that in cultural studies: 'culture is misconceived as politics by other means' (herein).

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