

Lost Dimensions of the Aesthetic

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Nennst Du es Freiheit – diese Vergewaltigung deiner selbst? (H. Sedlmayr)
[Do you call this self-violation freedom?]

Aesthetic practice in contemporary society points out the consequences of a complicated historical process through which art—as a part of human praxis—has been fundamentally changed while also participating in the changing of the world. The meaning of the modifications, which continue to take place at a very fast pace, cannot be correctly determined or interpreted unless we try, without prejudice, to define the characteristics of current aesthetic practice, and to see what causes—of a specific or allogenetic nature—explain these modifications. The difficulty in finding out what contemporary literature, painting, music, theatre, etc. have in common, and in also evaluating the newer forms of aesthetic expression (from cinematography to electronic media), and in defining the aesthetics of everyday life (the effect of aesthetic practice on life and on the environment) does not lie so much in the variety of forms as in the determination of the extent to which they fulfill a proper aesthetic in action, and from which point this function becomes secondary, as in the case of the aesthetics of reproduction, design architecture, and leisure.

We speak here from a somewhat negative angle, discussing the lost dimensions of the aesthetic rather than some of its newer traits. The common element of the contemporary aesthetic phenomenon is frequently one of absence, not presence. The new means and media assimilated or in the process of being assimilated—which have nourished the optimism of some aestheticians and cultural philosophers—have not brought with them that renewal which would have in turn brought about that high point in aesthetic practice that might justify the latter in its necessity. Moreover, this practice has rather placed itself under a question mark and has actually integrated into its context doubt in respect to its reason for being, its ends and means, and its future. In contrast to almost every other form of human practice, aesthetic practice—which have always included a doubt component—tends towards forms of self-negation or even self-destruction, the meaning of which eludes us whenever we work on one example or another, and for the understanding of which we must, in a necessary methodological phase, place ourselves at the level of the general.

The first general characteristic to be pointed out is emphasis on the integrated nature of aesthetic practice. The principal effect of this process is the progressive loss of the relative independence of the aesthetic in relation to the immediate factors of human existence. The ever-more intense subordination of aesthetic practice to non-aesthetic factors—from the material components of the work of art to the technique of elaboration and to the expanded exchange of goods in the economic context of the market—together with manipulation in forms that not infrequently reach the extreme, are also consequences of this process. Therefore, both levels (material and spiritual) of aesthetic practice are simultaneously affected by this accentuated integration, the causes of

which it would be simplistic to look for only in the general process of the evolution of contemporary society, as some mechanically minded philosophers continue to do.

In this process, which places science and technology at the forefront, a paradoxical phenomenon arises. On the one hand, aesthetic practice loses its dimension of sacredness, a concept that to some might suggest theological aesthetics and to others the concept of aura (in the sense defined by Walter Benjamin, although we are far from both of these perspectives (as should become evident)). The products of contemporary aesthetic practice tend more and more towards integration into techno-scientific culture, the spirit of which they reflect. On the other hand, aesthetic practice displays an elitism, an implicit snobbism. Its products are frequently marked by that spirit of fetishism that characterize all the merchandise participating in the reality of the market. It would be worthwhile to dwell on this paradoxical phenomenon, which can be expressed as desecration-fetishization.

No matter what type of culture we refer to, and independent of the type of mytho-magical (later religious) representations we are acquainted with, sacredness is present and corresponds to that fundamental cause of aesthetic practice—that is, humankind's desire to transcend time. The theological viewpoint on sacredness is so well known that we need not dwell on it here. The source of sacredness lies in the ideal universe of the sacred (as known from the history of religions). Walter Benjamin (*Des Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit /The Work of Art in the Epoch of Its Technical Reproducibility*), proceeding from the perspective of Marx's philosophy, observed that the oldest works of art came to being through service in ritual (magical, in the beginning, then religious, then anti-religious), and considered that reproducibility frees art from parasitic participation in ritual. *Aura* is the uniqueness of a work, the expression of its integration in the structure of tradition. Consequently Benjamin's view—at the moment when the authenticity of artistic production is placed in doubt through reproducibility—art's foundation in ritual yields to its foundation in politics. This viewpoint has lately become rather commonplace, even though its very logic and truth have not been considered as carefully as it should be.

A first assumption: The process through which aesthetic practice is integrated into general practice has the primary effect of the individuality of the artistic act. It becomes *technologized* and even, as is the case in many areas of today's aesthetic practice, technology.

The second characteristic to be pointed out is that reproducibility has diminished the significance of such components of aesthetic practice as spontaneity, participation, mystery, the oracular, etc., or has caused them to disappear completely. Consequently, elaboration, the impersonal, lucidity, and concreteness impose themselves. This process, which the whole of human practice has basically experienced, has very special effects the aesthetic component in civilization. Thus, the symbolic dimensions of the aesthetic are obviously in continuous decline: the desecrated symbol becomes the object, and as object *per se* it is reified. The most conclusive example is, in this respect, the degradation into pornography and violence, a tendency which, in the context of contemporary art, has assumed forms impossible to ignore.

While Benjamin's assumptions are not the exclusive object of these reflections, it would be unfair not to point out possible intersections with his ideas or with the ideas of Hans Sedlmayr,

Mikel Dufrenne, and Stefan Morawski, to name only a few. Benjamin was, due to those circumstances which led to his tragic death, forced to make some interpretations that are no longer so easily acceptable. In the first place, noticing the *aesthetization* of politics under fascism (quoting those terrible lines from Marinetti's Manifesto that described the colonial war in Ethiopia, "The war is beautiful . . ."), he warned against keeping art at a symbolic level and expressed the conviction that aura is preserved only by those serving the above-mentioned ideology. The main mistake he made was in thinking that conditions imposed (by fascistic or other totalitarian ideologies) on aesthetic practice automatically lend worth to the products of this practice. The so-called art of the Third Reich, as well as other products belonging to the same *famille d'esprit*, is, as we shall show, only apparently auratic, or integrated into tradition. Reproducibility as such does not change the nature of the artwork or the sources (national, mystic, or mythic, etc.) of authenticity.

A second assumption: The degradation of aura takes place also in the context of its being over-evaluated or absolutized. It would be simplistic to interpret the contradictory evolution mentioned above as the sole consequence of the desanctification of the aesthetic, seen here as practice, as *the product of this practice*, as *the object of perception and evaluation*.

A third assumption is necessary: Aesthetic practice participates in the same process and tendency towards demythification that activity in modern life has programmatically appropriated to itself. Accepting that the myth is a trans-historical, cognitive model, we observe that demythification compromises both of the model's dimensions (trans-historicity and cognition) in their unity. Moreover, part of the specific sacredness of the aesthetic gesture corresponds to that functioning of the myth as a magic means towards achieving an end. Brancusi—one example out of very few others—appears to be a late exotic, believing that his sculpture could have a magical effect. Today, the high priests of modern art are seduced by sophisticated technologies or by rational-formalistic procedures, which they make known through books or through university courses, and which they apply in order to be more productive. (Vasarely is the first example that comes to mind.)

Cosmogony is no longer of interest to them. interests them. All that interests them is the marketability of the product or performance. Each tends to produce or invent his own universe—as strictly logical as possible (sometimes carried to the point of mere calculation)—and as remote as possible from the mythic, or at least from tradition. Even when an artist rediscovers and utilizes African sculpture and masks, or Far Eastern art, the myth to which they pertain is brutally demythified, negated at its source and used merely as a pre-text. Desanctification is not necessarily secular in its essence. It can affect only exterior aspects (ritual, symbolism, ceremonial, etc.), and frequently that is what happens. Atheism and aesthetic iconoclasm are not at all identical. The mythic motive cut off from its ontological context leads either only to the renovation of forms or to a facile mode of irony, a mode that reflects a certain weariness, exhaustion, or impotence. No longer creating models, or no longer wanting to create them, contemporary aesthetic practice (in particular, aesthetic theory) is no longer trans-historical, even when it tries, in various ways, to free itself of history. If it succeeds in abstract forms, aesthetic activity becomes a spiritual type of technology and proposes a rather univocal semiotic system of codification that stands in contrast to the perennial ambiguity of the aesthetic.

To what extent such a system can turn into a myth is relatively difficult to determine. Certain is only the tendency towards extension from the specific aesthetic level to that of existence, a tendency that architecture, design, and environmental art—forms integrated into contemporary aesthetic practice – have brought to expression. This tendency is the third characteristic of the process analyzed here. It explains why we can notice, among other effects, a flagrant monotony, coldness, and lack of personality peculiar to the greater part of functional urban architecture, product design, or environmental art (Land-Art, Flux). The first two terms seem to dominate the unity *Physis-Techne-Poiesis*, and even annihilate the third (the mythical). Human creativity is thus subordinated to those factors that embody human alienation. Ideologies that tend to impose models of sacredness or new myths ignore that these can be only organic to humankind's condition. They cannot simply be stated as aims. And if stated, they do not automatically become real. The so-called monumental architecture, which was and still is produced in societies inventing ideological gods, relies on an empty sacredness. This architecture produced temples (metaphorically speaking) in a society where belief is impossible.

It is inevitable that the tendency towards integration—on the basis of desanctification and demythification—produce such effects. The continuous dehumanization of aesthetic practice likewise contributes to the attenuation of specific inherent characteristics (national, cultural, ethnic, etc.). It would be useful to point out that fascism—to dwell on the most familiar example—was only apparently national while in fact being cosmopolitan: it tended to impose its system of norms and values on the whole world. Essentially, fascist architecture also proliferated in non-fascistic countries (the United States and the Soviet Union and, more recently, the Third World). The gap between what is proclaimed (the myth of authenticity) and what is actually accomplished (anti-human architecture and demagogical monumentality) was and is sometimes so great that the intended or the proclaimed sublime degenerates into the grotesque. In this respect, the monuments erected under Hitler's rule (sometimes under his direct supervision) displayed the same lack of sacredness that the concentration camp crematoria did. Or, in Benjamin's terms, they had the same aura (if "aura" can be used in such context).

The myth, as an image of the reality of a society at a given moment of its evolution, first declines into fiction (Greek mythology or the German saga, for example), then into a motive; finally it loses its expressive force. Myths cannot be proclaimed. They are the ultimate, synthetic, concentrated expression of a society's identity, reflecting its contradictions, its questions, and its doubts. This is a fourth assumption we make. In the contemporary world, new myths have either not been produced or have only reinforced the process of demythification (i.e., the process of negating myths, negation in general). Thus the myth of "infinite progress" (which originated in the last century and eventually extended itself to aesthetic activity), associated or not to the utopian myth of a perfect society (and not only Marxism contains such a utopian, messianic element), has contaminated the aesthetic process. But it is not inherent in this process. In our days, myths come to being through the material to which they are applied and through the technique they utilize, or even through new types of artistic messianism.

This has assumed several forms, some frankly bizarre (*anonymification*, exacerbation of aesthetic actions *per se*, to the detriment of the aim of this action, and sometimes allogenetic in nature). One example is the *ideologizing* of forms: This begins with the assimilation of political ideals in the artwork and ends with the destruction of art itself, considered by some extreme

rightist or leftist groups and anarchistic movements as either too liberal or too conservative or reactionary in general.

Such processes should be interpreted as a reflex of the global crisis of values and a symptom of the crisis of contemporary humankind. This is the fourth characteristic in our enumeration of the aesthetic. On the one hand, utopianism has been able to set tremendous forces and resources into motion. On the other, it has progressively lost control of itself and of the internal forces influencing it. In the end it revealed its inability to offer an alternative to the human need for sacredness. Thus the aesthetic practice it stimulated either confirms ideology or the human's *sui generis* experiment as this aesthetics continuously loses its transcendence and settles for immanence. New forms of ritual have been sought and imposed, but no organic ritual has developed from such utopianism. The criterion of success at any price, or at no matter what price, has been set up, contrary to the idealistic spirit proclaimed, in the place of the spiritual effectiveness that the myth, as an algorithm of action (in all forms of human practice), exercised on an existential level. The model involved in utopian philosophies has not proved its fruitfulness in reality and has turned out to be a deep disappointment.

Considering the gigantic production of the counterfeit works deriving from such false philosophies as a component of the aesthetic practice of the era of technical reproducibility, we can better understand the way in which demythification is accompanied by the myth of outward success, and in which value disappears. In a broader sense, axiologic nihilism replaces the trans-historicity of value, imposing hypersensitivity on the directly perceived form of time, to the instant in which self-reflection: a sort of narcissism that leads art itself to become the object of art, the meta-level to become a meta-meta-, and so on. This is another characteristic (a fifth) to consider.

The loss of the general philosophical dimension of art in favor of narrow specialization—corroborated by the general crisis in philosophy—is only partially explained by this hypertrophy of the present and of the spatially immediate. The deeper cause is the abandonment of cosmogony—the relation between the human world and the world in which each individual world exists—to the realm of science. The results of this are sometimes paraphrased in the aesthetic work or become components of contemporary subculture. The universe of the infinite is almost abandoned; the micro-infinite, too, and not necessarily because it was demythified by science and human technical achievements (such as the exploration of outer space or the ever-deeper knowledge of the structure of matter.) Aesthetic practice tends to take place on the level of the physics, not of metaphysics.

Aesthetic action (happening, Land-Art, Flux, etc.) deprives the object of a name, *desemiotizes* it, and reintroduces it into the precultural order of things. Reification was brought up in this respect. The borderline between art and life is erased; everything is potentially an aesthetic object, or at least can be proclaimed as such. Aesthetic practice restricts itself to the mere selection and defining of contexts. Aim or responsibility is understood outside the aesthetic. Human beings themselves are desanctified through progressively ruder social relationships; hence the aesthetic ends up by cultivating desanctification, or sanctifies demythification, pornography, and violence. As inflation begins to take over every form of temporal context-sensitive human practice, aesthetics itself becomes inflationary, abandoning its function and pride of being value-creative.

(Aesthetic values are trans-historical by definition.) The examples that can be given are continuously increasing. It is not sufficient to pick some out from among so many. In order to understand and explain the process—and to eventually venture opinions about future developments and the way we can influence them—we have to consider such examples in the very general spatial-temporal context of contemporary aesthetic practice.

It would be simplistic to believe that this practice is unitary or that it lacks contradiction. And it would be naive to believe that the characteristics enunciated above exhaust the real phenomenon. In fact, the main tendencies in the aesthetic (but not only aesthetic) theoretically proclaim the need for a new type (or several new types) of sacredness, the need for myth, and for a new coherent system of values. The aesthetic movements of the 20th-century avantgarde have tried without exception to define this new sacredness, as well as the new condition of myth and value. But they have not succeeded in the transition from the symbolic system of their aesthetic ideology to the semiotic system of aesthetic itself, i.e., from programs to the reality of the work as such. The once revolutionary art that proclaimed a new secularized aesthetic era quickly became traditionalistic. When condemning the past, it seemed to have some solidarity; looking towards the future, it starts to segregate.

In view of this, it makes sense to proceed to the definition of the sources of sacredness in the same way aesthetic practice does: from the general condition of human existence to the specific determination of the aesthetic itself. Accordingly, the sacredness of the aesthetic can be only the reflex of a new type of relation between the human being and the cosmos, the general environment. It follows that the myth cannot proclaim itself. It is constituted in human praxis (which includes the aesthetic) and, as a result of this condition, displays its exemplary function, trans-historic nature. Finally, values correspond to the real dialectic of the ideal and the necessary, aesthetic values being part of the general system of human values and a reference point pertaining to the transcendence of the practice through which they are born. No willful gesture can reconfer the status of special (*Besonderheit*) upon art. The latter can derive only from the general self-conscious evolution of humankind, restating those causes that produce the dissolution of the aesthetic. Art has always been a social partisan. It should become a partisan for its own cause, too.

Attempts at recovering ritual ceremony, mystery, etc. have been made in certain areas of aesthetic practice. In theater, incantation belonging to cultures that have preserved them were revitalized. Poetry tends to rediscover the expressive force of rhythm or of the segmented word. Painting, sculpture, and music also tend to compensate the assimilated rational component with irrational forms or structures, such as the ones belonging to civilizations remote in space and time, or even to magical practices.

Even in such functional products as those of design or architecture, components revealing a rather trans-functional goal can be discovered. Gaudi's architecture is the extreme example one can give; but others can be provided from the series of new cosmopolitan constructions (be they skyscrapers, automobiles, or the clothes that become the new fashion of a season or a year). The propensity of new forms of the esoteric, manifested in literature as well as in the arts related to the newer media, and the appeal to the creative spontaneity of children (the aesthetics of the infantile), or of culturally uncontaminated persons/groups (e.g., naive art) all express the

contradictory situation of today's aesthetic practice. On the one hand, the term artificial art—stemming from an extension of the concept of artificial intelligence—has imposed itself and consecrates technologizing and integration, desanctification and demythification, and fixation on the zone of utilitarian values and change. On the other hand, it continuously researches the resources of subjectivity and gives expression to the relation between human as subject and the world in its objectivity.

Aesthetic representation has become extremely diversified. Consequently, aesthetic theory should re-elaborate the concept of representation. It is obvious that the imperative of a unique mode of aesthetic practice (particularly, a unique mode of representation) has been irreversibly outdistanced. But nonetheless obvious is the fact that this practice tends to concentrate on its own product. Representation tends towards re-re-re...representation to the extent that it becomes self-sustaining and self-perpetuating. Fiction is written about fiction or about art. New paintings are merely renditions of older ones. Constructions are built according to the model of constructions already standing, and even rendered in texts and pictures (computer technology allows for every kind of collage). Gnoseological interest is oriented not towards the world and society in their objectivity, but towards knowledge itself. Representations have not only been rationalized, but also conventionalized to the extent of introducing an arbitrary sign system. Their rules of functioning can no longer be intuited but must be learned; their degree of necessity is no longer determined in relation to the quality of representation (from likeness to extreme symbolism), but to the consistence of the aesthetic object (possibly expressed in logical form). Language, or sign system, instead of remaining a mean, becomes a goal. Poetry is written in invented languages; painting imposes autarchic sign systems; in music too, formal (scientific) languages are sometimes used in aesthetic expression.

There is an understandable fear of manipulation, which explains such attempts but does not justify them. Art has never been independent of calculation, but never until now has it been pure calculation (as it tends to be in some of its domains). Sometimes scientific aura (because science itself has an aura) is not only lost in the aesthetic, but also leads to triviality or to merely apparent aesthetic products. The fact that computer graphics are multiplied through means belonging to classical graphic technique, signed, and numbered does not lead to uniqueness, specialness, or sacredness in art. It also shows us that such qualities cannot be mass-produced. Computer portraits—just as much a product as pictures reproduced through photography—can be bought in department stores. While photography becomes an aesthetic practice at the moment it evinces new sources of aesthetic expression obtained through a specific medium, no medium is itself sacred. Cinematography has already convinced us of this. Sacredness and myth rely on the creative aspect of aesthetic practice, on its general perspective, and on its philosophy.

The role of the aesthetician

In direct relation to all of what has been stated here—which should not be misunderstood as the expression of some sort of fatalism or resignation or even blanket condemnation of all that is produced in our age—the question of the role of the aesthetician naturally arises. The observations made here take into account the aesthetician's activity in its distinct form: starting with theory (meant here as contemplation) and continuing with his/her concrete work and activity, regardless of whether he/she exercises it in the domain of historical or philosophical

research; in instruction; as a theoretician or as promoter of aesthetic practice through art criticism, in the systems of libraries, museums, film archives or galleries, or directly in the market system (as an auctioneer, for example). The aesthetician's activity transcends the display of erudition *per se* and cannot be assumed only out of interest in history or methodology. Just as in reality there exist a level of culture and one of subculture, there also exist two levels of the aesthetician's activity. Disc-jockeys, hucksters, certain types of gallery owners, fashion houses, etc. operate on the level of subculture. But it should not be concluded that the terms *sacredness* and *myth* are excluded from this level; they are, however, sometimes abused in order to draw attention from genuine value, and to draw it instead to attributes usually connected to tradition or investment strategy. The act of ordering a picture over the telephone [and now via Internet] belongs to subculture. To create pictures, as Moholy-Nagy did, with an open, polemical content, raising them to the level of the aesthetic and divorcing them from the manner in which they were ordered, means to overcome the subcultural level and to integrate an object into cultural values that seemed condemned to aesthetic death. This involves an interpretive moment based on critical perspective, without which no practice in general—and no aesthetic practice in particular—is possible. To negate aesthetically does not mean to negate sacredness or myth, but to oppose compromised, exhausted, anachronistic, or opportunistic forms of sacredness through new forms of myth, mystery, etc. that derive from new realities, new constraints, new needs, and new aesthetic means.

We find ourselves here confronted with spiritual positions, some successive, others quasi-repetitive, turned into material in the effort to look for meaning (in the outer world as well as in our own). Just as art, aesthetics itself has become, in some of its areas, technology. No one deciphers the meaning of hyperrealism by invoking magic chants or searching for miraculous formulas. This would also be a part of subculture, because the ostentation of the past generates subculture, too. Quite to the contrary, meaning is perceived with lucidity and in the lucid spirit of the object analyzed. Reason, including historical reason, is formalized. Modalities of deduction or synthesis that belong to the most up-to-date technology are utilized. The demythification of the aesthetician's role is not just the reflex of the demythification of aesthetics as a whole, but also the expression of a stage of this practice's evolution, impossible to comprehend except within the concept of human praxis in the broadest sense of the word (including, whether we like it or not, destructiveness ranging from simple gratuitous negation to the abomination of war and the extermination of people). The division of praxis and its continuous specialization not only produces the "one-dimensional man" discussed in neo-Marxist philosophy and aesthetics, but also explains the integrated nature of the aesthetician's activity and the ever-more narrow perspective that the latter manifests as a reflex of this specialization.

To explain does not automatically mean to justify or accept. Living in a world that is going through one of its deepest crises—and this crisis is universal—aestheticians cannot avoid reflecting on this condition. But it is not enough to discuss the decline of Western culture (a rather hackneyed theme), or to perceive signs of the apocalypse in the aesthetic phenomena that an aesthetician does not understand or has not yet become acquainted with, just as utopian optimism is no excuse for him/her to avoid responsibility. No one asks the aesthetician or the artist to be the alchemist of this epoch. But if artists and aestheticians cannot apply themselves to a cosmogony or cannot identify themselves through a philosophical option or options of another fundamental nature, aesthetic practice will prove to be plainly impossible. To navigate on the

ocean of this storm and tumult without the compass of a deep conviction is an act of spiritual suicide. If indeed some of the external and internal sources of the sacred, of the authentic, of the myth are today exhausted (at least for some), then the source of faith for the future is the fact that each answer humankind has given to the great questions faced was actually multiplied into a series of questions resulting from this.

To remove doubt from human beings means to deprive them of transcendence. Aesthetics is human transcendence in sensible form. The great miracle of humankind's nature is that while continuously acquiring higher practical certitude, it simultaneously produces new doubts and reproduces its doubting nature. Until now, in this universe, only humans have proven capable of questioning.

Notes and references

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- Op.cit. "Die Einzigkeit des Kunstwerks ist identisch mit seinem Eingebettetsein in den Zusammenhang der Tradition." p. 19.
- Op.cit. "...war ihre Einzigkeit, mit anderem Wort: ihre Aura," p.19.
- Op. cit. "Der Film antwortet auf das Einschrumpfen der Aura mit einem künstlichen Aufbau der personality außerhalb des Ateliers." p.32.
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- Op. cit. "Frenesie de nouveautés, dont les motivations sont multiples, les considerations de rentabilité ou de prestige au soucie d'éluder la récupération. En tout cas la pratique artistique recuse maintenant les modeles: elle invente et refuse de se laisser contraindre par une certaine idée dogmatique de la perfection qui consacre le chef d'oeuvre." p.75.
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- Op. cit. "Folgende Tendenzen lassen sich feststellen:
1. Aussonderung & Mac226; reiner' Sphären (Purismus, Isolation);
 2. Auseinandertreiben der Gegensätze (Polarisation);
 3. Neigung zum Anorganischen;
 4. Loslösung vom Boden, Labilität;
 5. Zug zum Unteren;
 6. Herabsetzung des Menschen;
 7. Aufhebung des Unterschieds von 'Oben' und 'Unten'. p. 114.
- "Die Zusammenschau dieser Symptomgruppen ergibt die Diagnose: Verlust der Mitte." (See also *Abstract of an Artist. The New Vision*. New York, 1949, p.79.)
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