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Bengali Art House Cinema, Women's Subjectivity, and History: Satyajit Ray's Use of Silence in *Charulata* (1964) and *Devi* (1960)

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Abstract

Unmediated representations of women's everyday subjective experiences of historical events are difficult to find in discourses about masculinity and femininity. Discussions often centre on normative expressions of sexual difference, explaining the ways in which patriarchy was reconstituted rather than focusing on women's experiences. Late nineteenth century strands of nationalist thought in the Bengal relied on gendered ideas about the nation, self, and society in their representations of womanhood, which served as a symbol of the nation. Various historians have explored the idealised versions of women that these discourses presented, but often these studies fail to examine portrayals of the subjective experiences of women who might have confronted these gendered ideological standpoints. This paper suggests that using film as an archive to explore depictions of female subjectivity can be useful, especially to feminist and gender researchers who are searching for new ways of conceptualising the everyday experience of women in the past. It raises questions about how, if ever, experience can be used as evidence in history, how portrayals of articulations of difference and resistance are helpful for writing gender history, and why film is a fruitful archive in which to imagine how women might have experienced and expressed their dissatisfaction with gender-normative roles within the patriarchal family setting. It discusses ideas about speaking and articulation in scholarship on women in the past, to posit that film is a useful place to imagine women's articulations of difference from the Other that patriarchal discourses would cast them as.

Keywords: subjectivity, film, feminism

Introduction

> "Are you made of clay? Then why don't you speak?"
>
> -Uma, *Devi* (Ray, 1960)

The director Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) uses silence and sparse dialogue to make complex statements to viewers of his films; these messages interact with feminist ideas related to speaking, voice, and silence in discourses about representations of women in the past. Satyajit Ray was an Indian filmmaker from the Bengal (Malcolm, 1982). This paper uses his arthouse cinema from the 1960s to pose questions about how representations of women in the past can influence feminist thought today. Cinema's utility as a historical source is a point of contention among historians

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(Rosenstone, 1995), and those who defend the validity of film as a historical discourse in its own right also query the basis on which historical knowledge is founded. This agenda is similar to that of post-structuralist feminist perspectives that question the nature of historical understanding (White, 1988; Scott, 1986). This paper attempts to synthesise a feminist perspective with arguments about the usefulness of film as a primary source in historical-writing to discuss the use of *silence* in two of Satyajit Ray's films. In this analysis, *silence* denotes the space opened up within Ray's films for representation of female subjectivity without the use of language. It will argue for the increased opportunity film provides for portraying emotions and subjective perceptions outside the act of speaking itself; in gesture, facial expression, body language and movement, as well as narration through music and sound effect. In the *silence* of Ray's films, women are shown articulating their difference and resisting dominant discourses about feminine behaviour. *Charulata* 'The Lonely Wife' (1964) and *Devi* 'The Goddess' (1960), portray the inner turmoil of young women in the second half of the nineteenth century, in wealthy families in rural Bengal. Ray portrays the constrictions placed upon their lives by normative notions of femininity, which became particularly prominent as nationalist sentiment rose in the nineteenth century amongst educated upper-class Bengali men (Chatterjee, 1993). The constructions of gender placed upon the women in the films are specific to their Indian-Bengali context. However, this line of enquiry is useful more broadly in feminist research which considers the ways in which women's experiences in the past are represented. Film can be used to explore women's subjective reactions to hegemonic ideological imaginings of an essential 'femininity'. *Silence* in the films can be used to open up discussion about women's subjective experiences, and discuss non-verbal expressions that counter reproductions of the gender binary.

Contemporary feminist writing about women in the historical past requires a clear assessment of the way subjectivity functions as a category of analysis, and so this is where the paper starts its discussion. It then asks questions about the complications that layers of narration and the male gaze produce in the presentation of female subjectivity in *Charulata* and *Devi*. It then contextualises the paper by considering films as valuable primary sources within the historiography already written on the period, focusing on the drawbacks of histories which are written from only colonial perspectives. The analysis subsequently turns its focus to the gendered ideas of the Bengali elites, which affect the women in both films. Of primary importance here is the function of the male gaze in patriarchal imaginings of what constitutes femininity, and consequent value-based judgements on acceptable behaviour for women, which are then contested in the portrayal of female subjectivity within the space of *silence* in the films. The writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) serves as a useful example in this part of the discussion. The paper discusses two main phenomenon related to discourses about gender in the period: the portrayal of the main character Charu in *Charulata* as a product of cultural 'emancipation,' and the roots of *Devi's* protagonist Daya's incarnation in the ideology of the 'Mother-Goddess.' These two ideas were often central tropes in the patriarchal proto-nationalist thought developing in the Bengal at this time (Banerjee, 1989; Sarkar, 2001). Within the *silence* of the films, the stultifying effect of the idealisation and idolisation of women is emphasised. The analysis examines how films go beyond written sources which discuss these themes, because of their use of *silence* to portray female subjectivity. It will demonstrate how these ideas are potentially useful in the wider context of feminist theory. The idea of utilising the *silent* space in the medium of film for the representation of subjective experiences, that are either impossible or extremely difficult to access otherwise, could enrich the historical record and open up an alternative mode of inquiry for feminists seeking to analyse representations of subjective experiences of historical gendered realities. Film is a

creative space in which women's subjectivity can be portrayed, opening up discussion and dialogue about the interior existences of women in the past, and articulating their difference from dominant modes of patriarchal discourse.

Experience, narrative, difference

A desire to account for the subjective experiences that might have occurred in the past encounters the difficulties that come with defining subjectivity, a highly dynamic and historically contingent concept. Subjectivity is not easily quantifiable as its history depends on the interrogation of a series of consistently dynamic present moments, perceptions that are unavailable for direct analysis because they are internal. The search for ways to analyse the history of female subjectivity in feminist writing reflects the desire to illuminate experiences that are unrecorded in language, to analyse subjectivities that might provide a different perspective from dominant portrayals of women. However, as Joan Scott (1991) writes, claiming direct access to experience or using 'experience' as evidence contributes to a foundationalist historical inquiry that assumes academics have unmediated access to events in the past. This perpetuates an ahistorical approach by seeking to use 'experience' as the origin of our explanation for historical events. 'Experience' should be, rather, "that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced" (1991, p.780).

In the *silence* in Ray's films he presents a possible subjective reality that opens up discussion about experience, not direct and unmediated access to experiences in the past. Historians have interrogated various sources to try to uncover women's subjectivity, including memoir, autobiography, songs, and written literature (Burton, 2003; Banerjee, 1989). All of these forms open up dialogue about subjective experience as portrayed in art. Film is unique in that it can portray a real time expression of the range of emotions, feelings, and experiences of women without using written language. Ray's cinema is a useful example of how representations of women's subjectivity in the medium of film can enrich the historical record by providing an arena in which historians can assess how women might have been able to resist and articulate their difference or dissatisfaction with the dominant patriarchal discourse on femininity in *silence*.

The opportunity for the representation of experiences that are outside of expression in language demonstrate a subjective experience different from that usually accessed by historians. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", first published in 1985, poses complex questions about the ways in which subjects from the past are represented in historical narratives. Spivak states that scholarship should welcome attempts at "information retrieval" in "silenced areas;" however, she cautions that sustaining such work is often "the assumption and construction of a consciousness or subject" which eventually coheres with "the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilisation", rendering the subaltern woman "mute" in the sense that she is essentialised by the discourse which assumes it can represent her consciousness (2010, p.266). This influential and rich essay cannot be fully explored in this paper; however, Spivak's arguments about the problems of subjectivity and agency in historical narratives are important to the argument made here. Spivak complicates the notion that historical subjects are able to communicate and be directly represented in historical narratives. Whilst acknowledging that historians should never claim to access a consciousness or subjectivity directly, in the spirit that "the most one can sense is the immense heterogeneity breaking through" in depictions of women in the past, films can be used to explore how the subaltern (if the subaltern is taken as female) *could* have spoken, without

recourse to language and instead in the discourse of cinema (2010, p.270). Rosalind Morris describes Spivak's ideas as "a deconstructionism that does not negate the utility of what it deconstructs" (2010, p.11). Therefore, it is imperative to query assumptions of direct access to subjectivity, and to deconstruct the historically specific meanings imbued within historical narratives, but this does not undermine the importance and utility of exploring what female subjectivity and consciousness might have looked like, or how it may have been experienced. Morris suggests that if "Can the Subaltern Speak? answered its own question in the negative, its corollary question, How can we learn to listen? is left radically open for inquiry" (2010, p.16). The use of film as a method of recovery of emotional memory or of subjective experience is an attempt to open up the discussion into the boundless heterogeneous subjective reactions women may have had to their historical situation.

Film has been considered as a separate discourse to written sources in theoretical discussion of historical practice; it can be a way of depicting subjective emotional processes without language, and can portray situations and experiences that are beyond the remit of written sources (Carnes, 1996). Hayden White uses the term 'historiophoty' to describe this discourse, which he posits presents a challenge to "the criteria of truth and accuracy presumed to govern the professional practice of historiography" (1988, p. 1193). Theorists of this position have countered resistance to the inclusion of film in serious historical inquiry by asking "don't images carry ideas and information that cannot be handled by the word?" (Rosenstone, 1995, p.13). Both these arguments for film as a historical discourse and feminist inquiry problematise the notion of historical knowledge; they rethink "historiography as a whole," deconstructing the language of writing history and searching "for a method of getting at these moving artefacts that always seem to escape our words, that overflow with more meaning than our discourse can contain" (Rosenstone, 1995, p.5). Feminist critiques influenced by post-structuralism posit that because of the limits within language and the impossibility of expression outside of language structured around binary oppositions, all expressions must be critically examined to expose the socially constructed and context-specific meaning imbued within them (Scott, 1986). In Ray's use of *silence,* film both challenges and goes beyond the limits of written sources, suggesting that "some things . . . can be better represented on film . . .than in any merely verbal account" (White, 1988, p.1194). *Charulata* and *Devi* are able to escape the confines of language in a form that represents women's subjectivity that is not possible if only written documents are used.

The emotional processes shown in the *silences* of Ray's films represent a specific subjectivity formed within and against the Bengali *bhadralok* ('gentlefolk') community of the late nineteenth century. The subjectivities of the protagonists of *Devi* and *Charulata* are constructed within the domestic environment in which they are portrayed, representing a specifically Bengali experience. The categorisations that the women are affected by and exercise resistance against, (the 'Mother-Goddess', and the *bhadramahila*) in the films, are contingent upon the Hindu-Bengali setting. There are several narrative layers through which historians using these particular films have to navigate before they receive the final representation of women's subjectivity in *silence*. Ray adapts the film from two prominent Bengali authors writing within the colonial period. *Charulata* is adapted from the novella *Nastanirh* by Rabindranath Tagore, and *Devi* from short story of the same title by Provatkumar Mukhopadhyay's. Awareness that the viewer receives this subjectivity though layers of male narration, layers of different time-periods, and the postcolonial lens of Ray's camera is crucial in assessing the extent to which the discourse created by the insistent male gaze is contradicted or endorsed by the *silence* represented in Satyajit Ray's films.

Thinking about the different male authors that have contributed to Ray's presentation of female experience in *Devi* and *Charulata* in the portrayal of female subjectivity on-screen raises questions about the role of what Laura Mulvey termed the "male gaze" (1975). She critiqued the voyeurism and sexualisation often conveyed in depictions of women on-screen. Audiences of films, Mulvey wrote, have to view the women on-screen from the viewpoint of the male, with the women far more likely to be the object, rather than the possessor, of the gaze (1975). Though Mulvey's formulation is a useful starting point, rather than using Mulvey's specific psychoanalytic theory, "male gaze" refers here more generally to the hegemonic conceptualisations of women that the protagonists of Ray's films are portrayed as reacting against and existing within. In Ray's films, the male gaze is certainly represented. However, it is provided alongside the depiction of the women protagonists subjective reaction to the circumstances of this male gaze. Rather than complicity in the role of the male-voyeur, films here provide valuable social critiques of the gendered constrictions placed upon the women characters' lives. Nevertheless, cinema as an art form raises the question of the relationship of spectatorship to representations of women (Kuhn, 1985). The male gaze as portrayed by Ray objectifies and idealises women in essentialising discourses which deny women difference from each other (Chandler, 2011). This analysis follows feminists who have articulated theories of difference, which emphasise a deconstructionist critique of the binary oppositions (male/female) language produces; highlighting most importantly differences *within* and not only between sexual categories, and the fluid and ultimately changeable meanings of language systems (Scott, 2008). Rosi Braidotti conceptualises the feminist relationship with difference as a commitment to asserting diversity and difference as a positive and alternative value, "so as to express the other of the Other" (2003, p.44). In instances when there are few sources, looking to representations of what might have happened facilitates an analysis of experiences for which records might not exist and artistic recovery is the only option. The way women's subjectivity is portrayed in *silence* is an example of artistic recovery of alternative interior lives, placing its emphasis on difference rather than sameness to the status quo of gender relations.

The Bengali *bhadralok* and femininity

The portrayals of subjective processes of women in Ray's films transcend the limited scope of some historical accounts of India in the nineteenth century. Scholarship has focused on women in Britain, who often imagined Indian women's suffering around issues such as child marriage and the treatment of widows for their own ends, with a view to ratify their own claims on the imperial state. With a focus on the 'women's question' in British India, their ideas were inseparable from imperial rhetoric and ideologies in this period and thus were complicit in the colonial project of oppression (Burton, 1994). These studies often reproduce a version of history from a white, colonial perspective, examining non-Indian voices and casting a layer of obscurity over historical depictions of actual Indian women. *Charulata* and *Devi* provide an antidote to accounts which have a narrow focus on sources written from colonial perspectives, relocating the centre of interest to the colonised rather than the coloniser. As sources, Ray's films contribute to the historical discourse about the Bengal at this time by engaging in a conversation which attempts to reposition Bengali women as agents, not objects, of history (Ray, 1964, 1960; Mohanty, 1990). The use of *silence* in film to portray subjective emotional processes provides a tool to express how Bengali women may have encountered hegemonic masculine culture developing alongside nationalism in India.

In representing Indian women's subjectivity in *Charulata* and *Devi,* Ray makes a strident critique of the *bhadralok* ('gentlefolk') centre of Bengali society, and their attitudes to women. The *bhadralok* belonged to a distinct elite social class in nineteenth century Bengal; they were wealthy, high-caste and upper-class. They often comprised of well-educated members of the intelligentsia who were heavily involved in the rise of nationalist thought and ideological exchange in the nineteenth century (Chatterjee, 1993). In the second half of the nineteenth century many *bhadralok* were undergoing renegotiations with regards to their concepts of self and their relationship to their country, particularly after the 1857 uprising which brought about intensification of British rule and the creation of the British Raj in 1858. An ideological movement within *bhadralok* intellectual circles termed "cultural nationalism" had particular implications for the women of this class because of the patriarchal structure of *bhadralok* society (Banerjee, 1989). The connections between women's lives and the gendered constructs within nationalist ideologies in the latter half of the nineteenth century are explicit in the ideas and writings of *bhadralok* men. The symbolism and imagery of this writing was mired in an essentialised, universalised idea of "perfect spiritual women," whose virtues included self-sacrifice, domesticity and modesty (Chakravarty, 1989). The expression of normative gender roles has been linked to dichotomies within Indian philosophy between the material and spiritual realms. Partha Chatterjee argues convincingly that nationalist thinkers in the second half of the nineteenth century reconfigured this dichotomy and extended it to express further oppositions between world/home; crucially, they entrenched the patriarchal separation typical of masculine/feminine gender characteristics. This cohered with nationalism because it stressed the superiority of Indians in the spiritual realm, in which British lives were criticised as lacking (1989). The reification of women into the domestic role became a central tenet of the nationalist movement, showcased in *Charulata* and *Devi,* which depict the subjugation of Bengali middle-class women's activity to the spiritual, domestic realm. The protagonists Charu and Daya are never shown leaving this space in the film; Charu and Daya's miserable isolation is contrasted with Bhibuti and Uma's freedom. Their husbands are able to move about the space of the film; depicted in public in the city, watching comedy at the theatre, riding in carriages and meeting friends. Ray's films - which use *silence* to represent the articulations of difference and statements of resistance or protest - provide a critique of the nationalist idealisation of women and the impact of the male gaze, emphasising instead the competing viewpoint of the female subjective experience of this objectification.

The impact of this constricting gaze is expressed in two central motifs of cultural nationalism's gendered project. In *Charulata,* Ray portrays an effort by the *bhadralok* towards what Sumanta Banerjee calls the "cultural emancipation" of their women (1989, p.131). This was the attempt to create a class of women which have been referred to as *bhadramahila:* the educated wives and daughters of the *bhadralok,* expected to exhibit the virtues of refinement, modesty and purity within the domestic arena (Banerjee, 1989). Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, an influential nineteenth century proponent of many of the female archetypes queried in Ray's films, becomes an important focus of discussion in *Charulata*. Charu sings 'Bankim, Bankim' in the opening sequence of the film; later on Charu declares that Bankim is her favourite author and has a discussion with Amal about the idea of the "traditional" versus "modern" woman, a theme for which Bankim took up his pen (Ray, 1964). The origin of the idealisation of Indian women can be traced to many such written sources. Beyond contemporary literature, in several cases colonial and Bengali men looked back to a notion of a 'golden age' of women rooted in the Hindu Vedic tradition, especially in historical studies, which often used scripture as its source. In response to a perceived crisis in the condition of women's lives, writers looked to the past in an attempt to rescue

the image of Indian women. Descriptions often focused on scriptural Sanskrit texts and descriptions of women as Deities (Chakravarti, 1989). Ray enters the discussion about the idealised woman in his portrayal of the character of Charu, the "perfect" *bhadramahila*, and his view of the debate becomes more nuanced when the plot of the film and the portrayal of Charu's subjectivity is considered. On paper, Charu is the perfect *bhadramahila:* educated, well-read, musical, and accomplished at household occupations such as embroidery and music. However, as soon as the film starts, the audience's attention is drawn to the monotony and loneliness of her confined existence. The sound of a man outside her house beating an endless rhythm and the ticking of the clock are Charu's only company. She is unhappy in her marriage, and the love affair alluded to between herself and her cousin-in-law undermines the solidly defended sanctity of Bengali marriage, central in dominant Bengali writing on nationalism (Ray, 1964; Sarkar, 2001). In this example, film has allowed space for Charu to articulate her difference from the idealised versions of womanhood produced by patriarchal Hindu-nationalist thought in the Bengal. Film provides an outlet in *silence* for the portrayal of resistance to dominant representations of women in the past, rather than reproducing these images.

In *Devi,* Ray makes a similar engagement to the nationalist idolisation of woman as Mother-Goddess, both portraying the male gaze and his female protagonist's subjective reaction to their situation under this gaze. Bamkim in particular made reference to Durga in his *Vande Mantaram* (Salutation to the Mother; Sarkar, 2001, p.163, 176). It became a hymn to the Indian Motherland, and described the transformation of Durga, which underlined an iconography that had a sustained role in the following century and various strands of nationalist struggle (Karlekar, 2003). Ray pushes to the extreme this iconography of nationalism when his protagonist, Daya, is literally deified and worshipped as an incarnation of Goddess Durga by her insane father-in-law. The belief that Daya is an avatar of the Goddess Durga is such that her father-in-law and his followers eschew medicine in the belief that Daya has the power to cure illness, and this results in the death of his young grandson. On his return, her husband pronounces to his father "you killed him with your superstition, and by accusing my wife of godliness, you've crushed her heart" (Ray, 1960). Daya's existence as a human being in her own right is entirely subsumed by characterisations that essentialise her as Goddess. Ray's film makes a cutting criticism of this tendency and exposes the perils of the paradigms of a dichotomous world, while simultaneously representing the subjective experience of women. In this way the films provide a visual critique of the essentialised notion of the perfect woman as articulated by writings of both colonial British historians and proto-nationalist writers of the Bengal literati (Chakravarti, 1989).The films express not only the sinister results of what might happen if women were truly treated as the Goddess nationalist iconography would dictate, but also attempts to illustrate how Daya might have understood, resisted, and articulated her difference during the process. Representing a female experience enables the historian to access a part of history that is otherwise rarely represented in historical research. It represents a perspective that articulates its difference from, and displays its resistance to, dominant discourses about women, motherhood, and godliness, and portrays how women may have experienced these discourses.

A central motif of the film is the viewpoint the audience is given through Charu's opera glasses, which she uses as binoculars. Through the technique of framing his shots with the outline of the glasses, the audience gets a unique insight into Charu's thoughts and feelings, and Satyajit Ray manipulates the film form to highlight her loneliness and individual thought processes. Her isolation from the outside world is emphasised when she views it from the windows of her house; her unhappiness is expressed when she looks at her inattentive husband through them; her

forbidden desire for her brother-in-law is expressed when she turns her intense focus upon him. All of these emotions are conveyed without words, and are accentuated not only by the perspective Ray provides through Charu's binoculars, but also in her worried looks and forlorn gestures (Ray, 1964).Similarly, in *Devi,* Ray provides his audience with many instances in which his protagonist Daya expresses her subjective interior life in *silence*. A striking example of this comes at the point that she is first labelled by her father-in-law as Goddess, after he is told about her incarnation through a dream. When her father and brother-in-law fall at her feet exclaiming "Mother! Mother!", Ray uses a shot of Daya's toes curling as they kneel before her, to signal her fear and disgust. Ray then cuts to a shot of Daya's covered head facing away: her anguish overflows the scene, especially in the feeling of entrapment she conveys by making scratches down the wall. This scene exemplifies what film is able to convey that written historical sources cannot. Subsequently, Daya's utter despair is communicated by the silent tears constantly streaming down her face (Ray, 1960). In *Devi*, when Uma asks his young bride Daya "Are you made of clay? Then why don't you speak?"*,* perhaps an answer could lie in the fact that within the constraints of the language she has available to her, she is unable to express herself with words (Ray, 1960). The escape from the verbal into the filmic allows the women characters to communicate through the silence of written history in representing their experience as different to that of the dominant discourse articulated in the male gaze. Arguably this re-invests the imagined women subjects portrayed in Ray's films with agency. The film form and Ray's commitment to documenting the human lives of the subjected enables this by allowing the audience to be privy to the subjectivity of the women portrayed.

Conclusion

Examining the potential cinema has for opening up the dialogue between representations of women in the past and the way history is written in the present could benefit feminist scholarship. Ray's films portray a colonial setting in which he uses his retrospective perspective to engage with the colonial past and its treatment of women. The film-maker's choice to look back raises questions not only about colonial life in the Bengal, but consciously raises questions about the relationship of contemporary India to the past. Ray creates a dialogue between the competing discourses of the dominant representation of women in the colonial context, and an alternative discourse in *silence*. Ray makes a contemporary statement about the treatment and objectification of women as archetypes of femininity.

Despite their colonial setting, his films also encourage dialogue and draw attention to his contemporary India and the continuing legacy of these colonial objectifications. Furthermore, using film as a historical artefact allows feminist discourse to open up a dialogue about where to look to discover representations of women who might have lived different subjective experiences to that expressed in dominant discourses about masculinity and femininity. Historiography on the second half of the nineteenth century has effectively underscored the essentialised version of womanhood nationalism produced, with references to sources written at the time. These accounts stop short at actually examining what the perspectives of women who were affected by these gender paradigms might have been like. Widening the scope of research into the past by including representations of the subjective lives of women raises questions about how historical knowledge is constructed, and why certain types of sources are chosen as evidence. Joan Scott writes that "theory is intimately related to practice, academic feminism is political, and feminists address and attempt to change the normative meanings of gender in their societies" (1990, p.859). By

questioning and finding new processes by which knowledge is produced, studies like this can go some way towards opening up discussion about subjective experiences in the past. By focusing on an unofficial site as an archive this paper has demonstrated that it is possible to assess a representation that does not rely upon dominant modes of patriarchal discourse, which sometimes has the effect of reproducing the gendered ideologies it critiques. Relocating the centre of interest onto subjective emotional processes in feminist writing can refuse the notion of a fixed version of womanhood (Scott, 1990). Contemplating the past of subjective experiences requires listening to silent spaces in order to attempt to imagine and discuss what the interior lives of women might have been like, especially when direct and unmediated evidence of their experience is unavailable.

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