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AMERICA'S LOST INNOCENCE AND CINEMA

Patrycja Włodek
Pedagogical University, Kraków, Poland

Abstract: **In my paper America's Lost Innocence I intend to focus on American cinema of the '50s, part of '60s, and contemporary throwbacks to those decades. The '50s have been called "the last decade of American innocence", "the happiest decade in America's history – when things were going on – that everybody misses" (by Jean Baudrillard). That era symbolically ceased on 22 November 1963; however, many scholars and publicists undermine the belief in its very existence. Michael Wood calls the '50s a time of "self-deception"; therefore, the question raised is – has America ever been innocent? By concentrating on the message conveyed by mostly genre (e.g. drama, melodrama, musical, romantic comedy) and mainstream movies made in the '50s and early '60s (e.g. *A Place In the Sun, Cat on the Hot, Tin Roof, Home From the Hill*), I intend to analyze the portrait of American society of that time, it's rules and expectations towards individuals and system as a whole. In the second part of my paper I will focus on contemporary throwbacks to those times depicted mostly in movies made in the 21st century, although not exclusively (e.g. *Far From Heaven, The Hours, Revolutionary Road*, the TV series *Mad Men* [2007–], *Pleasantville*). Using those and other movies as examples, I intend to prove the thesis that the phenomenon of retro and contemporary retromania are not always and not by definition conservative, and can serve as a means to a critical approach towards society.**

Keywords: **American cinema, genre, The '50s, American society, retro, nostalgia, contemporary throwbacks, retromania**

In his famous book *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Frederic Jameson coined the term "nostalgia film":

> "Nostalgia films restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation [...] [T]he nostalgia film was never a matter of some old-fashioned 'representation' of historical content, but instead approached the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image, and '1930s-ness' or '1950s-ness' by the attributes of fashion" (Jameson, 1991: 18).

Crucially, Jameson also believed that "nostalgia film" and "retro mode" are interchangeable. He didn't pay much attention to this issue, referring casually to "the 'nostalgia film' (what the French neatly call *la mode rétro* – retrospective styling)" (Jameson, 1991:

18). Equating the two terms was more than justified by the American movies that he analyzed and that lead him to recognize what was then a new and fascinating category.

What interests me is the shift between the time when the terms "retro" and "nostalgia film" were mostly synonymous – the 1970s and (especially) the 1980s – and the present day, when critical retro is dominating American cinema and television. Therefore it is necessary to give a precise definition of both terms. Nostalgia is an emotion: thus, "nostalgia film" means a film in which the past is shown in a sentimental way – as a simpler and better place that's worth longing for, with a strong notion of paradise lost. Retro, on the other hand, is a style:

> "The word 'retro' has a quite specific meaning: it refers to a self-conscious fetish for period stylisation (in music, clothes, design) expressed creatively through pastiche and citation. Retro in its strict sense tends to be the preserve of aesthetes, connoisseurs and collectors, people who possess a near-scholarly depth of knowledge combined with a sharp sense of irony. But the word has come to be used in a much more vague way to describe pretty much anything that relates to the relatively recent past of popular culture. Following this looser common usage of the word, Retromania investigates the entire range of contemporary uses and abuses of the pop past." (Reynolds, 2011: XII)

If the late decades of the 20th century equated emotion with aesthetic, the early 21st century tends to set them against each other.

I. Retro in American Cinema

In the 1991 edition of his book Jameson still found the term "nostalgia film" indispensable. And, if we look at American cinema of the late '60s, '70s and '80s, we'll notice that in those decades nostalgia and retro-fashion were indeed prevalent. There was an increased interest in the past, as much in events and periods like the Great Depression or the Prohibition as in American movies from those times. Thus, pop culture redefined history, which was seen through popular genres like gangster movies of the 1930s and film noir of the 1940s. The cinematic version of the past consisted of events and characters somewhat different from those presented in history books: they were much more appealing to the collective imagination, romanticized and sentimentalized in a way that turned them into something heroic, larger than life. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), the first two parts of *The Godfather* (1972, 1974), and *The Sting* (1973) are all examples of such movies, even if they are very different from each other. *The Sting* was pure entertainment, a real treat for retro seekers (then and now), while *Bonnie and Clyde,* a movie set during the Great Depression, was perceived by the audience through the social upheavals of the 1960s. However, both movies were elegiac and recalled the past in a retro aesthetic combined with a nostalgic emotional tone.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the fascination with the past continued, as well as the aesthetic tampering with it. Especially important were the highly popular neo-noir subgenre and the fantasy/science fiction cycle initiated by *Star Wars* (1977) and *Close Encounters of*

the Third Kind (1977). The latter genre was successfully extended into the 1990s and the first decades of the 21st century with blockbusters such as the Indiana Jones series. It is also important because, as Jameson notes, movies like *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters* didn't refer to any kind of actual past. Nevertheless, they are both retro and nostalgic, as Jameson argues:

> "One of the most important cultural experiences of the generations that grew up from the '30s to the '50s was the Saturday afternoon serial of the *Buck Rogers* type – alien villains, true American heroes, heroines in distress, the death ray or the doomsday box, and the cliffhanger at the end whose miraculous resolution was to be witnessed next Saturday afternoon. *Star Wars* reinvents this experience in the form of a pastiche". (Jameson, 1982)

II. "WHEN THINGS WERE GOING ON"

Certain experiences, feelings and emotions appear to be as important as the reality and events that actually took place. This observation gains special meaning when what is remembered about the facts is dependent on emotions. This is what makes cinematic throwbacks to the 1950s so interesting. They became enormously beloved in the 1980s, the first decade after the upheavals of the counterculture, defined by a right-wing backlash and in many ways similar to the 1950s. There were several reasons for that popularity. First, the 1950s were next in line after the 1930s and 1940s, which had already been exploited by filmmakers. It was only logical that they would reach out for the subsequent decade. Secondly, many of those who turned the 1950s into a "thing" did so out of pure nostalgia. They simply recalled the times when they were children or teenagers. Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, who initiated the fantasy and science fiction cycle of the 1980s, have admitted many times that they just wanted to make movies similar to the ones they saw and loved in their childhood. With *American Graffiti,* George Lucas went back to the suburbs of his high school years in the late '50s and early '60s, which were also explored by Francis Ford Coppola in *Rumble Fish* (1983) and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986) and Robert Zemeckis in *Back to the Future* (1985).

Still, this doesn't sufficiently explain the importance that the 1950s gained over the years. Jean Baudrillard wrote that "[t]he fifties were the real high spot for the US ('when things were going on'), and you can still feel the nostalgia for those years, for the ecstasy of power, when power held power" (Baudrillard, 1988: 123). The symbolic end to that last era of "American innocence" came on 22 November 1963, when President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas.

What was so special about the 1950s, then? More than any other decade in American history, the 1950s was a social, economical and political project, epitomized in slogans like *the American way of life* and *Pax Americana* (the relative peace in the Western world guaranteed after World War II by the United States). The former slogan referred to a suburban, middleclass lifestyle (symbolized by Levittown, the first suburbs built in 1947) based on corporate mentality, capitalism and prosperity. The phrase "Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" was coined in Sloan Wilson's

1955 novel of the same name (made into a film in 1956 by Nunnally Johnson) to describe the perfect (male) inhabitant of the 1950s. Conservative ideology permeated every aspect of public and private life and shaped the pattern of socially approved lifestyle and family life. In other words, it was all that was to be rejected and criticized by the counterculture of the '60s and '70s and brought back to glory in the '80s.

III. Backlash

Thus, in the national mythology (at least in its conservative part) the 1950s became a conservative paradise lost due to ensuing social upheavals. The decade became crucial in the 1980s, which were famous for a conservative backlash visible in certain cinematic trends. These trends are sometimes called "Reaganism" or "Reaganoretro", names that have a double meaning. They refer not only to Ronald Reagan's presidency, but also to his acting career in Hollywood. Reagan had been a minor movie star from the late '30s until the early '60s, and therefore always believed in movies and their influence on society and the common imagination ("evil empire", the term he used to describe the Soviet Union, was inspired by *Star Wars*). Among the examples of Reaganism we can name the cycle of war movies that's sometimes called "New Patriotism" (e.g. *First Blood*, 1982; *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, 1985) and the much softer nostalgia for the rock'n'roll era.

Politically the 1980s were Ronald Reagan's decade. He introduced and advocated yet another conservative project, in many ways similar to that of the "Eisenhower era". It was dominated by republicanism, conservatism, hyper-capitalism, escalation of Cold War fears, and its ideological and cultural backup was provided by the throwbacks to the 1950s. The latter was the very last decade when the abovementioned things and issues dominated social praxis and weren't criticised or undermined, or even discussed. They were times before multiple movements for civil rights, second-wave feminism among them (*The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan was published in 1963).

Of course this is not to say that the American cinema of the 1980s was homogenous. Several Oscars given to the left-wing filmmaker Oliver Stone are sufficient proof that it wasn't.

"The 1980s are often thought of as the time when Hollywood consolidated its hold on world markets while paradoxically becoming an overtly 'nationalistic', reactionary cinema. This view, as this section suggests, is only partly accurate, and demonstrates that when looked at in more detail, the 1980s was a decade of considerable instability, profound change and challenging films" (Williams, Hammond, 2006: 223).

Still, Hollywood did answer to the yearning to idealize the 1950s and bring back memories and atmosphere of that time. That was what sold tickets and brought money:

> "The 1980s boasted numerous auteurs whose work is very different from the Spielberg- Lucas style of blockbusters. Critics, however, who take their work as a template for the decade often connect it to another of the master paradigms used to explain and interpret the 1980s. This paradigm is what we might simply call Reaganism, referring to the political, cultural, and ideological influence of the Reagan administration during its two terms of office" (Prince, 2007: 11).

That template appears to be accurate not only because of the "Spielberg-Lucas style of blockbusters", but also due to movies like *American Graffiti*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Grease*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *Back to the Future* and others, in which retro became an aesthetic category as well as an emotional one. In these movies the past was indeed shown as simpler and better, a true paradise lost. What is crucial here is that these films were lacking a sense of history, any kind of social background or context. To put it another way, they transformed history into a collective mythology. What was missing from that vision was any self-reflective notion that it was an exclusively white, middle-class, WASP and conservative vision, lacking the social reality of racial segregation, racism, sexism and discrimination of any minorities and groups that didn't fit into the socially approved pattern. With devices such as nostalgic view, stylization and selective memory that vision turned a multidimensional decade into an "All American" one, an ideal and innocent phenomenon that never really existed, except in the movies. And not so much in the movies that were actually made in the 1950s, since in those times Hollywood tended to be very critical towards the American way of life. As shown by the significant number of highly popular family melodramas, Hollywood could provide "an image of an America darkly disturbed by its own cynical loss of innocence, an America prey to fears more pervasive and intense than anything admitted to during the war years" (Dowdy, 1973: 62–63).

The 1980s gave back this innocence to the 1950s by undermining the importance of many issues that defined that time, familiarizing and adjusting them to social norms. Among those issues was the unjust paternalism between races and sexes, as well as the youth rebellion that challenged the norms of the "grown-up", suburban, capitalist and traditional society founded on inequality.

According to Jonathan Rosenbaum and J. Hoberman, it was the "teen-culture" of the 1950s that forecast the counterculture that was to be so important for the subsequent decades (Rosenbaum, Hoberman, 1991). Youth culture was defined by elements feared and rejected by the dominant culture, perceived as threatening to social order and sometimes even anti-American: rock'n'roll, violent and satirical comic books (e.g. *Tales From the Crypt*, *MAD*), subcultures (like bikers or greasers), and a rebel figure that can be traced back to youth gangs and was epitomized in movies by idols such as James Dean, Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift. However, their status in the cinema of the 1950s was ambivalent. On one hand filmmakers challenged this new phenomenon in a way that would appeal to the teenage audience: hence young stars like Dean or Brando and topics like teen identity, rebellion against a suburban system of values, juvenile delinquency and car/motorbike races depicted in movies like *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *The Wild One* (1953) or *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955). On the other hand, in the very same movies the filmmakers tried (to some degree) to explain youth culture to adult viewers. This is why they did their best to familiarize it by numerous devices (such as conservative narrative patterns and endings). Nevertheless, "reading against the grain" (Lev, 2003: 244) was possible. It was the 1980s, which were especially interested in the youth culture, that turned its progressive potential into empty clichés deprived of any meaning, and showed the institutions

(such as school) and lifestyles they were rebelling against as cosy, safe and unproblematic.

IV. False Rebels and Idyllic Suburbs

Strategies to familiarize potentially subversive matters were different in the 1980s. While the 1950s acknowledged youth culture in its many aspects and recognized its contexts even while dealing with it from an "adult" perspective, in the Reagan era everything except for the nostalgic view was gone. Different strategies of accustoming youth culture are given by movies such as *Grease*, *Back to the Future*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *Footloose*, *Dirty Dancing* and *American Graffiti*.

Grease, starring Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta, took as its subject teen gangs in a 1950s high school. Its main characters, Sandy and Danny, are in love but cannot be together because they belong to different subcultures. Sandy is a "clean teen" who is compared to Sandra Dee, Universal's star of the '50s and early '60s, while Danny is a rebellious biker. However, in the final scenes these identities turn out to be interchangeable. Sandy changes into a biker girl and Danny into a good school boy, the male version of a "clean teen". Therefore their statuses among their peers are not integral to their personalities and certainly not tantamount to any beliefs or values (including youth rebellion). They are mere temporary fashions, costumes easy to take off and put on. Hence their revolutionary potential is diminished. It is worth mentioning that exactly the same thing happened to the male rebel figure (an imitation of Dean, Clift and Brando) that was a very common pop culture icon in the 1950s, almost obligatory in all teen movies of that time. In the 1980s all the reasons that caused this figure to appear in the first place and made it so popular among teenagers, its social and historical context, are omitted. As Caroline Levine states in regard to AMC's *Mad Men* (2007–2015), "[s]ince the Reagan years it has been commonplace in the United States to show contempt – if not outright hostility – for the movements of the later 1960s" (Levine, 2013), and in the cinematic version of Reaganism it included diminishing the precedents of the counterculture as well.

This can also be noticed in two hit movies of the 1980s: *Footloose* and *Dirty Dancing*. Both show young rebels (easy to recognize by the clothes they wear: jeans, t-shirts, dark glasses), Johnny (Patrick Swayze) and Ren (Kevin Bacon), stuck in a suburban or provincial environment. *Dirty Dancing* is set in the summer of 1963, before Kennedy's assassination took "American innocence" away; *Footloose* is more contemporary but it shows the setting in a way that makes all small American towns seem timeless. Yet, both characters' rebellion is dubious because it doesn't extend beyond music and dancing. Johnny, a dance instructor in a summer recreation centre, is forbidden from performing "dirty dancing" and anything that isn't condoned by tradition. Ren moves from the big city to a small town where dancing and modern music are forbidden. At the end of both movies, when the rebels are allowed to dance the way they want, their revolt is over and they turn out to be good boys aspiring to a middle class lifestyle. The false nature of their rebellion is epitomized in *Footloose* in a pair of red cowboy boots that, ironically, serve as a symbol of resistance against conservative grownups. Also crucial here is the fact that, unlike in the 1950s, music is neither a mean to another end nor a symbol

of a bigger movement or cultural identity. It is actually the end that every other means leads to.

A different approach is used in *Back to the Future* and *Peggy Sue Got Married*, where characters travel back in time to the suburban 1950s. Here the decade is shown as an idyllic time, utterly untroubled by either youth culture or social injustice. What is especially important, the 1950s are also depicted as the last decade when everything could still go right instead of wrong – Peggy Sue's (Kathleen Turner) marriage and Marty's (Michael J. Fox) family's fortune. It is consistent with the Reagan-era tendency to vilify the 1960s "as the source of a range of contemporary ills" (Levine, 2013). In *Back to the Future*, Marty's father George, whose teenage version Marty meets in 1955, is the one who undergoes a conservative transformation that improves his life. From a nerdy teen boy fascinated with comic books and science-fiction he turns into a "man in a gray flannel suit" who capitalizes on his teen passions and turns them into a profitable business (a bit like Lucas, Spielberg and Zemeckis did).

American Graffiti, George Lucas's second film, was a forerunner of all these strategies, especially in its opening credit sequence. The title music is easily recognizable: it is the famous hit *Rock Around the Clock* performed by Bill Haley and His Comets. This is no accident, since *Rock Around the Clock* was the very first rock'n'roll song ever to appear in a Hollywood movie. It was used (also accompanying the opening credits) in one of the most famous films of the 1950s, *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) by Richard Brooks, starring Glenn Ford and Sidney Poitier. The movie, which became a box-office hit, was supposed to represent United States at the Venice Film Festival, but "it was pulled out at the last minute at the urging of U.S. ambassador and the State Department" (Lewis, 2005: 149). It was argued that *Blackboard Jungle* was scandalous and "un-American" because it dealt with juvenile delinquency, showed an integrated high school (Poitier's character) and used a rock'n'roll song. In 1955 *Rock Around the Clock* showed the edginess, separateness and cockiness of youth culture and played an important part in defining that subculture. Moreover, Richard Brooks achieved that without easy judgements or solutions while acknowledging the dangers of criminality. His movie showed the true potential of youth music that was fully exposed when rock'n'roll evolved into rock in the subsequent decades.

In *American Graffiti* the same song introduces a completely different, even opposing statement by showing a cosy, nostalgic suburban drive-in. Using *Rock Around the Clock* and other icons of the 1950s – like the obligatory rebel figure, big cars and "chicken race" – in a true "nostalgia film", Lucas in fact created a love letter to the middle-class, white, safe suburbs that preceded the big, more complex and integrated towns.

V. CRITICAL RETRO

American cinema of the late '60s, '70s and especially the '80s fully justified the synonymic use of the terms "nostalgia" and "retro". However, this interchangeability has become impossible in the early 21st century. A significant number of contemporary American movies and TV shows proves that not only retro doesn't necessarily have to be conservative, but also that "retro" and "nostalgia" can be set against each other. Of course, retro movies with a more complex attitude towards the past than *American Graffiti* or *Grease* were also made earlier, but they

were exceptions. However, one of them worth a closer examination here. *Chinatown* (1974) by Roman Polanski is ostensibly a retro-noir, a very faithful throwback to the 1940s (the movie takes place in the 1930s but follows the rules of film noir, initiated in 1941 by *The Maltese Falcon*). In his essay Jameson even sees it as a pure "nostalgia film":

> "Other generational periods open up for aesthetic colonization: as witness the stylistic recuperation of the American and the Italian 1930s, in Polanski's *Chinatown* and Bertolucci's *Il Conformista*, respectively" (Jameson, 1991: 18).

In one respect Jameson is right. An "aesthetic colonization" is easy to notice in the detailed stylization that makes the movie true to period design, clothes, fashions, etc. Among other retro-noirs and gangster movies like *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975), it turns reality into a cinematic imagination and replaces history with the style. Or does it? Carefully made as it is, it anticipates films and TV shows like *Pleasantville* (1998), *Far From Heaven* (2002), *The Hours* (2002), *Revolutionary Road* (2008), *Mad Men* and *Masters of Sex* (2013–). They all use "active construction that bespeaks twenty-first century representation of the 1960s" (and the 1950s), but they do not represent "the current desire for collective memories of the past" (Goodlad, Kaganovsky, Rushing, 2013). At least not the way it happened in the 1980s. All movies that belong to the critical retro cycle "use seeming familiarity of a widespread convention to subversive ends" (Polan, 2013). In *Chinatown*'s case it is film noir (one of the idioms of American culture), and its shocking finale is the best proof of its critical aim. In the other films it was family melodrama, highly popular in the 1950s and early 1960s. Already in the Eisenhower era these were very critical films, some of them "among the most socially self-conscious and covertly 'Anti-American' films ever produced by the Hollywood studios" (Schatz, 1981: 224-225).

Such productions use retro fashion and devices, such as stylization that is extreme and excessive in its perfection, classical acting and familiar narrative patterns (melodrama). At the same time, what they offer in terms of story and character is highly subversive, because the filmmakers have chosen to reveal all the dirty secrets that America had to hide before the counterculture and human rights movements. Therefore they openly address matters of racism, sexism, homophobia, conformism, narrow ways of thinking, etc. These issues were either omitted or ignored in the previous years, especially in the 1980s, when filmmakers chose the 1950s as their subject but dealt with it only half-way (and had no intention of doing otherwise).

What is more, contemporary filmmakers not only criticize that allegedly perfect and innocent decade, but also choose a self-referential strategy to show the constraints that directors, producers and screenwriters of those years had to face due to social pressure and the Hays Code. Thus they do justice to some movies made earlier on, like those by Douglas Sirk, especially *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), a seminal melodrama remade by Todd Haynes in 2002.

> "What viewers and critics loved about *Far from Heaven* were not only its period details and capturing of Sirk's visual richness, but also its filling in of the gaps left in his narratives. In a literal return of the repressed, homosexuality and

interracial romance are visible, while vices like cigarettes are hidden. Subtext becomes text as Haynes brings to the surface what Sirk circled around and disavowed" (Goodlad, Kaganovsky, Rushing, 2013).

Another strategy is to look at the '50s and the '60s from a contemporary perspective that includes events, characters and ideas that came later. The important thing is that these shows "put us squarely on the side of woman at work" (Levine, 2013), while in the 1950s such women were discouraged by many means. Another example is the "problem that has no name" described by Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* and epitomized by characters such as Laura Brown (Julianne Moore, *The Hours*), Libby Masters (Caitlin Fitzgerald, *Masters of Sex*) and – above all – Betty Draper (January Jones, *Mad Men*), who's treated by her husband (Jon Hamm) "like a mere accessory at home" (Barkman, 2010: 208).

All these heroines "present a vision of exactly what post-war American women were encouraged to regard as the perfect life" (Shriver, 2010: 133): a successful husband fulfilling corporate ambitions of thriving capitalism, a suburban house and a bunch of children to take care of. In spite of this, all of them are unhappy and unable to name their problem – what could be wrong if everything is so perfect? Domesticity forced by the society, the wife-and-mother role that turned out to be a comfortable trap, the disregard for education (many women dropped out of colleges and universities the very moment they got engaged) and professional careers caused widespread depression and malfunctions instead of eternal happiness. Described by Friedan in a book based on a questionnaire sent out to female graduates of her university, women like Betty or Laura appeared on screen in the early 21st century. Their problems are here recognised in a way that undermines the traditional model of family that was promoted in the 1950s and gladly welcomed in the 1980s.

This is why the contemporary demystification of the 1950s serves as a kind of mirror that reflects the dangers of easy and manipulative nostalgia. All devices – the stories movies tell, the world they depict and the manner in which they do it, the flawless stylization taking form of "almost fetishistically accurate sets and costumes" (Harris, 2013) – show just how artificial this creation was, in movies and in reality. It could be argued that careful stylisation "covers" and dominates everything else, any other message conveyed by such shows. Especially *Mad Men* and its creators found themselves under strong criticism for depicting a glamorous, smooth and ostensibly appealing vision of the pre-counterculture society. However, it is important to notice in what way such devices as costumes, hairstyles, design and sets are used. "The show's proclaimed historicity is then distinguished from the vague and nostalgic 'past-ness' of movies like *American Graffiti* and television shows like *The Wonder Years* (1988–1993)" (Rosenheck, 2013).

The project called "American innocence" is therefore being approached in two ways. Critical retro shows the substance of the Eisenhower era and the exclusiveness of this pattern of happiness – even for those who were its essential part (middle class, white housewives). But at the same time, through stylization, they show just how golden this cage was – especially in the prism of the culture that made it look so seductive. What critical retro shows is that there never

was such a thing as American innocence. That notion was always nothing more than "a peak of self-deception […] a world wiped entirely clean" (Wood, 1989: 72).

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