

Form and Function in the Social Perception and Appreciation of Web Sites

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In traditional aesthetic theory the forms and shapes of an object are paramount to its aesthetic appreciation. However, here it is argued that the aesthetic assessment of a Web site challenges traditional theory and remakes reality as it is a combination of an Internet site's form and function that produces aesthetic satisfaction. Specifically, the article deals with the various elements involved in considering Web sites as works of art and the issues surrounding their aesthetic appraisal as such by taking into account key philosophical notions on the definition of art and aesthetic theory as they pertain to the usage and viewing of electronic sites. Aesthetic dualism, or the aesthetic approach in which both form and function play equally important roles in the appreciation of an object, is presented as the optimal standpoint to aesthetically assess a Web site.

Presently, institutions and corporations allocate much effort and financial resources to the development, and reinvention in some cases, of their official Web site. Consumers or online users nowadays are able to carry out a number of functions via the official Web site of a given institution or corporation. For example, by going online consumers are able to track shipments, enroll in classes, order various products and services, etc. Web sites constitute an important point of contact with the consumer or user for any ambitious institution or corporation. But it is not only a point of contact; it also constitutes an entire experience, an experience which is intended to be an enjoyable one by the proprietor of the site. In Aesthetics and Web Design, Tarasewich points out the importance of viewing the usage of a Web site as an experience and in considering the ties that such an experience would have to aesthetics. Specifically, he mentions that:

In light of the range of benefits that can be provided via Web technology, it can clearly be argued that a Web site is a product...It can be argued then that a substantial portion of the benefits delivered by a Web site for many people are experiential in nature, making Web sites, to varying degrees, experiential

products. It would seem that the aesthetics of a Web site could contribute substantially to the overall consumption experience with it. This could, in turn, influence user loyalty, recommendations, usage time, and other important consumer behaviors while visiting the respective site and thereafter.

(68-69)

Thus, according to Tarasewich, a site can be considered an experiential product whose experience possesses aesthetic properties. But could we go so far as to consider a Web site an example of a work of art or as part of the art-world? What kind of elements would be involved in making aesthetic judgments about Web sites? These questions will be addressed by taking into consideration key philosophical notions on the definition of art as they pertain to the usage and viewing of a Web site and by outlining some issues regarding the aesthetic appreciation of it. In traditional aesthetic theory the forms and shapes of an object are paramount to its aesthetic appraisal. However, here it is argued that the aesthetic assessment of a Web site challenges traditional theory and remakes reality as Web sites may be considered artistic objects whose forms and functionality play an equally important role in their aesthetic appreciation.

The first issue to tackle is whether or not a Web site may be considered as part of the art-world. In order to address this question we shall look upon the definitions of art proposed by influential scholars like Clive Bell, Monroe Beardsley and George Dickie, and how they pertain to the realm of emitting aesthetic judgments about a Web site. In his book Art, Bell claims that there must be essentials that conform a work of art. The indispensable constituent that Bell attributes to a work of art is something he names "significant form." For Bell, significant form is: "Lines and colors combined in a particular way" and "certain forms and relations of forms that educe the production of the aesthetic emotion" (113). The aesthetic emotion is to be disassociated from other forms of emotion, such as a picture of a friend;

rather it is a response to the interplay of forms and colors of the artistic object. Thus, Bell concludes that: "The objects that provoke this emotion [the aesthetic emotion] we call works of art" (113).

Bell also centers his definition of a work of art on objects which are artifacts, that is, human made or shaped objects. Thus natural objects, like mountains, can be beautiful but they do not possess significant form as this pertains only to artifacts. Furthermore, Bell argues for the autonomy of art. By this, he means that the aesthetic emotion is independent of political or social relations; it is even independent of that which the work of art represents. "Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation [...] it lifts us above the stream of life to a world with emotions of its own [...] into ecstasy" (115-16).

Web sites can certainly be considered artifacts, as they are imaginatively, and more often than not, meticulously designed. It is also quite evident that sites possess certain forms and traces of graphic design that may be pleasing to the eye. But it seems unrealistic and perhaps even unfeasible to detach the formalistic elements of the site, from the social, communicational or even functional context in which they appear, as Bell suggests. For example, on a given site the menu buttons or links may be creatively designed, making use of elegant shapes and colors, but it appears improbable that a user could simply ignore that those links or buttons on the menu will lead him to a different page. Nor could he or she easily disassociate them from their context within the site as the menu informs and guides the user while navigating through it. Thus, it would seem that Bell's approach to art is excessively formalistic to incorporate all the dimensions involved in the aesthetic appreciation of a site.

Dickie, like Bell, argues that it is an artifact, and not natural beauty, that can be identified and appreciated as a work of art. Nonetheless, Dickie gives more of an institutional definition of art in comparison to Bell's formalistic approach. Specifically, Dickie states that: "A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an art-world public" (53). Dickie's definition may seem attractive because of its simplicity as it circumvents the thorny issues found when centering a definition of art on the subjective appreciation of forms.

After examining Dickie's definition an obvious question may come to mind: To what or to whom does Dickie refer when he talks about the "art-world public?" Whom does it include? In relation to this, Dickie states that: "What is primary is the understanding shared by all involved that they are engaged in an established activity or practice within which there is a variety of roles: artist roles, public roles, critic roles, director roles, curator roles, and so on. Our art-world consists of the totality of such roles with the roles of artist and public at its core" (52). Thus, Dickie's definition would imply a role of creator or individual interested in proposing a candidate artifact into the art-world and a public possessing sensitivity and discernment to receive and average it.

Dickie's approach to art is appealing because of its simplicity and because it is useful as it allows artifacts which are not traditionally considered works of art to gain such status upon their presentation to the art-world. But in the case of a Web site, who is it presented to and how? One of the key elements of Dickie's definition is the notion that the artifact is a candidate for appreciation and judgment upon its presentation to the art-world public. In that sense, once a Web site is placed on the World Wide Web then it is also displayed as an aspirant to be aesthetically averaged by those who visit it.

An objection which may arise from the notion of taking a Web site as a work of art simply because it is placed on the World Wide Web is that, as Dickie mentions, the public which receives the art-work must be in some way prepared to judge it. In that sense, certainly

not everyone who visits Web sites is a graphic designer or programmer. Yet arguably, most Internet users have experience in viewing different types of sites. By collecting data from Nielsen/NetRatings and the International Telecommunications Union, among others, Internet World Stats (<http://www.internetworldstats.com>) affirms that by the end of 2006 there were slightly over one billion Internet users worldwide and about 207 million users in the United States (“World Internet usage and population statistics ”). In conjunction to this, Nielsen/NetRatings reports that in November of 2006 a Web user in the United States visits on average 64 domains and over one thousand Web pages per month (“Internet Audience Metrics”). While not all Internet users may be experts in Web design, these statistical reports indicate that the common Web user would have enough aesthetic elements to compare to, from previous experience, while examining a newly visited site.

On the other hand, Beardsley rejects grounding a definition of art within an institutional framework, arguing that an object may be a work of art much before it is accepted by the institutions of the art-world (56). Like Bell and Dickie, Beardsley also agrees that a work of art is something that is produced, an artifact. Yet Beardsley introduces something interesting in his definition of an artwork, that is, the matter of intentionality. He argues that: “An artwork is something produced with the intention of giving it the capacity to satisfy the aesthetic interest” (58).

Considering his definition, it is important to take into account what Beardsley means by aesthetic interest. While he admittedly has a difficult time in identifying the nature of aesthetic interest, he concludes the following:

Sometimes in this receptive interaction we find that our
experience [including perceptions, feelings, emotions,

impulses, desires, beliefs, thoughts] is lifted in a certain way that is hard to describe and especially to summarize: it takes on a sense of freedom from concern about matters outside the thing received, an intense affect that is nevertheless detached from practical ends, the exhilarating sense of exercising powers of discovery, integration of the self and its experiences. (58)

While the matter of intentionality of the artist is a highly controversial and problematic notion in the field of aesthetics, Beardsley's definition may be quite pertinent to Web sites and Web design in general. A Web site can arguably be considered a production which is, at least in some form, designed to produce aesthetic interest. That is to say, there normally is an effort on behalf of the Web-designer or Web-developer to make a site pleasant to view by choosing and balancing the right colors, designing elegant pictures and forms, and organizing the text, links and menus. Yet if we are to consider a Web site as a work of art, then under which framework could we approach the aesthetic appreciation of it? This question shall be addressed in the remaining part of this article.

What would be missing from Beardsley's definition is that Web sites are not simply designed to produce an aesthetic interest. There is more to them, as they are also designed to display pertinent information, to do online shopping, check emails, etc. They thus also serve a very concrete function not pertaining to the traditional aesthetic interest envisioned by Beardsley.

Sven Ove Hansson presents an approach to judging an object by taking into account its practical function and its appearance as well. He terms this approach aesthetic dualism, which rejects both, the notion that aesthetic appraisal is only based on form or that it could be solely based on its practical functionality. Specifically, Hansson argues that:

[...] aesthetic dualism is defended. By this, I mean that some aesthetic judgments that can legitimately be made about an object refer to it under descriptions of its practical function, whereas others refer to it, for instance, under descriptions of its physical appearance. Since valuations of the former type are in most cases positively correlated with satisfaction of functional requirements, this amounts to a defense of a radically weakened version of aesthetic functionalism. (“Abstract”)

By taking into account both Beardsley’s and Dickie’s definition of art, and Hansson’s notion of aesthetic dualism, we are able to argue that a Web site can be viewed as a work of art that sparks aesthetic interest through its forms and its practical functionality while being presented to a relatively Web-experienced public through the World wide Web. Nonetheless, although electronic sites may be tentatively incorporated into the art-world according to this definition, it is important to note they clearly lack the established institutionalism and historical presence which other traditional art forms like paintings, literature, or visual arts possess. This may change, however, as Web design becomes further integrated into academic art programs, conferences, institutions and displays.

After considering how Web sites could be incorporated into the art-world, it is also noteworthy to take into account the nature of the aesthetic valuations relevant to them. In analyzing judgments about the beauty of an electronic site, it would seem helpful to consider which elements are said to constitute an aesthetic judgment. In relation to this, we can refer to Kant’s The Critique of Judgment. In his text, Kant attempts to identify what is different or special about the judgments of beauty versus perhaps other types of judgments, such as, for example, ethical ones.

One of the most influential propositions of Kant in regards to beauty judgments is that they must be *disinterested*. By this, Kant says that a judgment of taste cannot come from a bond between a subject (person viewing the work of art) and the object itself (the work of art). In order to have a disinterested aesthetic judgment, according to Kant, one must not have a personal or emotional attachment to the object itself. That is to say, that one must not be interested in a given object in any other way other than its contemplation. Thus, it is not the relationship between the subject and the object that brings forth the judgment of beauty but rather the linkage between the subject and his or her perceived representation of the object. With regard to this, Gardner mentions that: “An interested judgment involves the thought of oneself as having a real 'bond' with the object. Judgments of taste are merely contemplative...and do not relate their objects to desires. [Kant's] *first moment* thus asserts that in a judgment of taste the object is judged beautiful on the basis of a disinterested feeling of pleasure” (6).

We may apply Kant's disinterested principle to the aesthetics of a Web site as we could with other artistic objects. If there exists an emotional relationship between an individual and the site itself then the judgment of taste could be partial or defective. For example, if one were to design a Web site, and if he or she would feel a certain attachment to it, then his or her aesthetic judgments would not be completely “pure” or free from emotional attachment.

An even better illustration regarding the interested bond between subject and Web site in the process of making aesthetic judgments could be exemplified by the use of a Web site to play videogames. Through the use of Web sites, such as <http://www.gamezone.com> or <http://www.gamehouse.com>, users can play videogames while within a specific site. So if an individual who really likes videogames were to make an aesthetic judgment on a site that he or she frequently visits to play, and if the bond to video games were strong enough to

influence his or her evaluation, then such a judgment would not be completely pure in Kant's terms.

Another element which Kant mentions as vital for a judgment of beauty is that the object being evaluated can have *purposiveness* without purpose. With this statement, among other things, Kant argues that one must separate the practical or every-day utility which the object may have from the aesthetic appreciation of it. Again, if the judgment about the object's beauty were to include elements of its usability then the aesthetic judgment would not be pure, as it would include other elements outside of the representation the object evokes.

Yet separating the purpose from the aesthetic appreciation, as Kant would suggest, can seem perhaps quite difficult in terms of judging the beauty of a site. One of the reasons as to why this separation appears difficult is that Web sites are typically made with a purpose in mind. The purpose of the site of most institutions or corporations, for example, is mainly to provide information or to sell products online. In addition to this, many specific pages within a Web site can have even more elaborate functions such as paying bills online, processing credit card payments, registering for classes, etc. Because of the importance that utility has for any Web site, as it is perhaps one of the main reasons for its creation and existence, it would seem that the purpose or functionality of a given site forms an inherent part of it. Thus it would be difficult to separate the utility aspect from any kind of evaluation of it, that is, including an aesthetic evaluation.

Another component that Kant places as part of an aesthetic judgment is the claim to universality. Contrary to statements grounded in the interest of the subject such as: "I like ice-cream," judgments of taste have an expectation or notion of being valid for everyone. According to Kant, if the subject is aware that his liking of an object does not rest on any interest, "then he cannot help judging that it must contain a basis for being liked [that holds]

for everyone”, and so he “must believe that he is justified in requiring a similar liking from everyone” (211). According to this claim Kant contends that once an individual has performed a disinterested judgment of beauty, then he or she will perceive that his or her evaluation is valid for everyone else who appraises the object.

There is no apparent contradiction in terms of the appreciation of Web sites and Kant’s claim to universality. While an individual may disinterestedly enjoy the design and the combination of colors and shapes embedded in a site, he or she may feel like their aesthetic evaluation may hold for others who view the same site.

At any rate, it appears then that the only element about appreciating Web sites that would not merge well into Kant’s appraisal of aesthetic judgments is the disregard for purpose while making an aesthetic evaluation. But is Kant accurate in restricting judgments of taste simply to the form of the object? Crawford answers this question by stating that when we assume a purpose in an object we also perceive what it ought to be like, and thus it cannot be a pure or free judgment of taste. Kant labels a judgment of an object that has a purpose as a judgment based on dependent beauty, because there is a presupposition of what standards of perfection it must adhere to (56).

Kant’s particular point of view regarding the way in which aesthetic judgments are made exemplifies what Hansson terms in Aesthetic Functionalism as the *independent thesis*. Specifically he argues that: “According to this standpoint, aesthetic and practical values are completely independent of each other [...] since aesthetic formalism requires the exclusion of practical value from aesthetic considerations, it implies the independence thesis” (“The independence thesis”).

Yet because an object may presuppose the Kantian notion of dependent beauty versus free beauty due to its possession of purpose does not mean that one may not have an aesthetic experience by viewing or experiencing it. In Xenophon’s Symposium we appreciate how

Critoboulus affirms that he is able to have an aesthetic experience linked to the degree to which an object fulfills its purpose.

Critoboulus: I know, at any rate, that a shield is beautiful, as well as a sword and a spear.

Socrates: And how is that, although none of these is similar to the other, they are all beautiful?

Critoboulus: If, by Zeus, they've all been wrought with a view to the tasks for which we acquire them, or if they've been well adapted by nature with a view to the things we need, then these are beautiful. (158)

While there may be an element of an object's functionality or purpose intertwined in its aesthetic appreciation along with its forms, textures and tones, Hansson also warns about taking the functionalist view too far. The following quote from Herbert Read exemplifies this:

We have produced a chair which is strong and comfortable, but is it a work of art? "The answer, according to my philosophy of art, is Yes. If an object is made of appropriate materials to an appropriate design and perfectly fulfils its function, then we need not worry anymore about its aesthetic value: it is *automatically* a work of art. Fitness for function is the modern definition of the eternal quality we call beauty, and this fitness for function is the inevitable result of an economy directed to use and not to profit. (Read 18)

Even while taking into account the great and many technological advantages and functions which Web sites embody in contemporary life, one cannot possibly reduce aesthetic appreciation of it, or any object, to its fitness for function.

Picture 1: Yahoo Web site in in 1994
Taken from: http://brand.yahoo.com/newyahoo/do_you.html



Even though the functionality of a site may be incorporated into its overall aesthetic appreciation, we cannot downplay its formal elements. The evolution of the *Yahoo* site certainly exemplifies the importance of form and design. *Yahoo* began as a Web directory in 1994 along with the birth of wide spread Internet use. Its first site included a main page that

simply had links and text in a very plain format as can be seen in Picture 1. As observed, it was a very simple site in relation to today's standard. There are, however, many reasons as to why the initial page of the *Yahoo* site was so simple. To begin with at that time, *Yahoo* was a very small organization whose page was destined to serve as a web directory and search engine. Secondly, during the initial stages of Internet use, there was a limited capability to introduce many images into a single page, and most pages contained mostly text and links. The software to develop sites and the software to make web-graphics progressed hand in hand with the growth of Internet use.

Picture 2: Yahoo Web site in 1999
 Taken from: http://brand.yahoo.com/newyahoo/do_you.html



Next, in Picture 2 we can see *Yahoo's* initial page in 1999. Certainly this page was more elaborate than in 1994. In this webpage we can see that the company used an elegant logo instead of text as in the previous example. Also, it is important to notice the use of nicely designed pictures to accompany the links at the top part of the page. Furthermore, the directory links are better organized into two center columns, which make it easier

to navigate through for the user and more aesthetically pleasing to the eye versus the same page in 1994.

By 2002 the *Yahoo* site was even more elaborate. As we can see in Picture 3, the initial page of the site was further organized into box-like structures. We may see that these boxes on the right hand margin served to organize additional information of interest such as “In the News,” “Marketplace,” “Broadcast Events,” etc. It is also noticeable that there is a greater blend of colors in this page, such as yellow and light brown. Furthermore, this page uses more images at the top of the page to accompany the links versus the page in 1999.

Picture 3: Yahoo Web site in 2002
From: http://brand.yahoo.com/newyahoo/do_you.html



Overall, it appears to have more elements such as links and images, which seem to be even better organized than before.

Finally, we can see what *Yahoo's* Web site looked like in 2006 in Picture 4. This site evidently uses a lot more colors, images, effects and shapes than any of its predecessors. To begin with we may observe that the site actually got rid of so many plain links and instead organized

categories in a menu elegantly accompanied by images on the left hand margin. In addition to this, the menu on the left hand margin also has a graceful gradient in which the light blue color fades smoothly upward into white. As seen, many headings and buttons also have a similar fading effect. It is also possible to see that the site in 2006 looks more *iconic* than any of the previous pages. That is, in 2002 the site used six iconic images to accompany and visually represent links, but in 2006 the page displays eighteen icons visually representing their corresponding link of the menu on the left margin. There are also some icons accompanying links on the upper-right part of the page. The more prominent use of icons to accompany menu options and links may serve a double purpose. On one hand, it makes the site more functional as it provides a user-friendly interface which guides the user through various options by visually representing them. On the other hand, it also enhances the site by giving it an overall stylish visual presence.

Picture 4: Yahoo Web site in 2006

Taken from: http://brand.yahoo.com/newyahoo/do_you.html



Through this example it is evident that the organization, display and choice of images, animations, text and links are crucial in the way in which a user may receive and appreciate the overall site. In relation to the experience of visiting a site, it is also important to take into account that

components of Web sites can also be considered as signs that a user may perceive. In *Text, Image, Sound*, Charles Sander Peirce addresses the different types of signs and how they may interplay with each other to construct meaning. According to Peirce, a sign can be an icon, an index or a symbol. An icon refers to a sign which physically resembles the object it represents. An index is a sign that gives us an indication of one or more objects; for example, a map gives us indications regarding the roads we travel on. Finally, a symbol is a sign which bears no resemblance to the object it refers to, and it is typically accepted by convention. Spoken and written words are good examples of symbols as they bear no resemblance to the physical object they represent (Peirce 67).

Web sites possess all three of the signs that Peirce mentioned. The images and backgrounds on Web sites are mostly iconic signs, the site maps and the different animated or graphic features, which help to lead our attention to a particular element of the site, could be

identified as mainly index-like signs. The text and text links, in all forms and shapes, could be identified as mainly symbolic. According to Peirce, it is the interconnection and interplay of these different types of signs and how the interpretant approaches or “marshals” them that creates meaning for the individual. As evidenced by the example on the evolution of the *Yahoo* site, the interaction of these signs, how they are organized in a site and how an individual encounters them are all highly influential in the aesthetic reception of the site and in the perceived easiness to use it by visitors.

While taking into account the importance of the interplay of shapes, forms, colors and visual effects in the aesthetic reception of a Web site, we may place the aesthetics of a site within what Danto calls the “third realm of beauty.” Danto defines the “third realm of beauty” as: “The kind of beauty something possesses only because it was caused to possess it through actions whose purpose it is to beautify. It is the domain, in brief, of *beautification*” (Brand 134). In *Beauty and Beautification* Danto explains how his view of beautification is not quite covered by the aesthetic analysis of Kant or Hegel. Moreover, Danto argues that there is philosophical value in considering beautification as it pertains to human beings and those activities that humans undertake to *beautify* themselves.

While Danto’s analysis centers mainly on human *beautification*, that is not to say that Web sites, for example are excluded from the notion of beautification. After all, many corporate and institutional sites utilize an interplay of elegant graphics and visual properties specifically to “beautify” the information about it and its services rendered to interested visitors. In the previous example of *Yahoo*’s site, we can see the addition of shapes, forms and visual effects into the 2006 site further “beautifies” the information and services provided by *Yahoo* in contrast to the site in 1994.

While sites may serve to “beautify” the information displayed, that is not to say that their practical function is not valuable. As mentioned earlier, a fundamental element of

Hansson's aesthetic dualism is to take into account practical functionality as part of the aesthetic valuation. "When an object has a purpose or practical function, then some but not necessarily all the aesthetic judgments that can legitimately be made about the object refer to that function" (Hansson "The Thesis of Aesthetic Duality").

In Web site aesthetics, as in architecture, the functionality of the object plays an important role. The evaluation of a building, for example, would depend on its physical appearance and to what degree its spatial relations and overall design fulfill the practical purpose or purposes for which it was built. "Hence, even if the architecture of a house was largely based on geometrical principles (and thus on "pure" aesthetic considerations), it was more expedient to represent it as based on principles of functionality" (Hansson "Introduction").

Clearly, it is inadvisable to ignore the functionality of sites. After all, how could we cast any kind of valuation on a Web site that did not work properly? We can easily point to other examples which make the experience of visiting a Web site distasteful in the presence of malfunction. One common example occurs when one or more of the links on a site do not work or are inactive. When this occurs, the Web site appears to be incomplete, malfunctioning, and thus aesthetically objectionable. Some other instances that may illustrate a similar situation are: when a given page has too many animations or heavy images that make the page slow to load, or when the bandwidth of a site is not sufficient and not enough users can log on to it at the same time.

The apt functionality of a Web site is, then, innately related to the aesthetic experience of it. In that sense, Hansson even elaborates that the satisfaction of the practical function is key to the aesthetic appreciation. "[In] this thesis of aesthetic dualism [...] aesthetic valuations that refer to a practical function are in most cases positively correlated with satisfaction of that function" (Hansson "The Thesis of Aesthetic Duality"). One of the

fundamental elements associated with the correct functionality of a site is time. In contemporary life, busy individuals look at the use of technology in general, and Web sites specifically, as a way to save time or to use time more effectively. Thus, sites which are quicker to load and present information in a clear and organized fashion are more likely to satisfy this requirement of practical functionality than those that do not. A common problem that several corporate or institutional sites may have is that they present an excessive amount of unorganized information on a single Web page, which can ultimately be confusing and hard to follow. Another related problem is the disproportionate presence of banners and links which are unrelated to the main subject and color design of the site.

To conclude, due to their linkages to programming, networking and other computer-related fields, Web sites are not commonly analyzed in terms of their artistic and aesthetic properties. That is not to say that they do not exist. Through a discussion of various contributions to the definition of an art-work and the nature of aesthetic judgments we are able to integrate Web sites into the art-world and the realm of aesthetic appreciation. A Web site, then, can be considered an artifact which is designed to produce an aesthetic interest in which both its formal elements and practical functionality play a pivotal role.

The creative and artistic use of forms, colors, fade effects and animations are thus tied to the “beautifying” role embedded in the formalistic appreciation of a site. On the other hand, the proper functioning and the degree to which a site is able to save time for the user are properties linked to the aesthetic valuation based on the functionality of it. In analyzing the aesthetics involved in Web sites it is compelling to take into account that the thrust to make evermore technologically capable and functional sites has been paired with the desire to make them look aesthetically pleasing.

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