

The City between Social Rejection and Reception *Educational Design as a Promoter of* *Good Inclusive Practices*

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Abstract

Throughout history, the gaze resting on diversity, not only on individuals with disabilities, has moved from an original situation of marginalization and exclusion to today's reality where we increasingly speak of integration and inclusion. Educational design – availing itself of “pedagogical” mediators such as literature, cinema, music, photography, capable of making familiar what we tend to escape because of its diversity – can become a tool capable of promoting good practices of social inclusion.

Keywords: *disability, exclusion, inclusion, educational design.*

I. THE CITY THAT EXCLUDES

Behind the category of normality lies the perverse game of marginalization of all those subjects who, for one reason or another, have not recognized themselves in the values, culture and social and institutional models of the hegemonic classes. It is for this reason that human history, and not only Western history, is written in the letters of exclusion from social and cultural spaces of those subjects who manifest a heterodox, and for that very reason, divergent and subversive identity. The mentally weak, the morally disordered, the vagrant, the Jew, the woman, the heretic, the child, the elderly, and so on have often challenged the established order or the values or thinking of men who instead recognized themselves in that cultural universe; they have often been the object of marginalization mechanisms intended to obtain as a goal their erasure from social visibility and, consequently, the protection of the prerogatives of those who, on the contrary, have recognized themselves in normality, or rather in linearity of thought and behavior (Costanzo, 2007: 37).

The term inclusion is the act of including, that is, of inserting an element into a group, and to be socially included means above all *to feel welcome* and not simply *to be welcomed*, that is, to feel that one truly belongs to a group of people, to a collectivity, and to take full advantage of all the rights and opportunities that this kind of affinity inevitably implies. As Habermas

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(1998: 10) reminds us, “[i]nclusion does not mean assimilatory hoarding, nor does it mean closure against the different [...] it means rather that the boundaries of the community are open to all and especially, to those who are mutual strangers or who strangers want to remain”. Inclusion, therefore, is decidedly different from both assimilation and integration, and in order to feel included in a group, one does not need to conform or transform one’s personal characteristics to social approval. In short, an inclusive society must be able to temper differences as much as possible.

Cultural factors and social conditions have, and have in the past, played a preponderant role in achieving a consonant and appropriate habitat for nonconforming groups. Prejudice and cultural stereotypes have fostered the exclusion of the disabled, and not only in the West (Schianchi, 2019: 12). Vigor and grace, in the terms of perfection according to the principle of *kalos kai agathos*, have always been considered by human beings as ideals to be attained however, the more the latter ideal pushes toward the concept of perfection, the more it repudiates its opposite in the terms of deformity and infirmity, all requirements to be pushed away, not to be admitted because they are associated with evil, therefore the effect of guilt and/or divine will.

Everyone is familiar with the Spartan custom of abandoning deformed infants on Mount Taigeto where, inevitably, they ended up dying of hardship; although sources, primarily Plutarch, suggest that abandonment of children with disabilities was a relatively frequent phenomenon, it is still a noninstitutionalized practice. Plato (4th century B.C.) asserted that the duties of medicine and justice should be to assist citizens “healthy in body and spirit” and that “it is fitting that the best men should mate with the best women as often as possible and that, on the contrary, the worst should unite with the worst, as little as possible. And if the herd is to be truly purebred it is necessary that those born of the former be bred. Not instead those of others”. Plutarch himself (2nd century B.C.) reported that “it was indeed not convenient either for the Polis or for the child himself that he should be allowed to grow up to remain always weak and of unhappy physique”.

Even, Aristotle yearned inordinately for a Law to be properly created to kill deformed children because they were completely useless to the state. This was the case in Sparta.

In ancient Rome, the approach was not much different: children with obvious deformities were suppressed at birth, the others if they showed signs of deafness by the age of 3 were eliminated as incapable of learning.

“A clearly deformed child must be condemned to death”: so reads the Fourth Law of the Twelve Tables (5th century B.C.), from which we learn that the Latin world also took up the Greek conception of deformity as a result of the will of the gods and as a guilt to be atoned for. The idea of marginalization and elimination of the incurable sick remains, as we can see from the words of Lucius Seneca, in *De Ira* (40 C.E.): “We suffocate the monstrous born, even if they were our children. If they have come into

the world deformed or handicapped we should drown them. But not out of wickedness. But because it is reasonable to separate healthy human beings from useless ones”.

In the Middle Ages, women who begat deformed beings were accused of having carnal relations with the devil, and for this they were persecuted and killed. The poor creatures were mocked and reviled, their deformity displayed in the public squares. In the classical age, mental illness was turned away and boarded the ship of the insane, across the waters of the Rhine, to purify and amend from evil (Piazza, 2009: 16) while the modern age represented a period of imprisonment and segregation for the different. The political and social order of the time was based on systems of control and repression, with the aim of preventing and circumscribing social deviance. Infirmary was associated in this period, as it had been since previous centuries, with poverty, marginalization, crime, and vagrancy: it became an object of marginalization and confinement.

2. THE CITY THAT INCLUDES

During the eighteenth century, studies on education spread and, thanks in part to the publication of Rousseau's *Emile*, respect for children and their needs became widespread, although not all children are worthy of such principles:

He who takes on an infirm and sickly pupil mutates the office of educator into that of nurse. He loses in caring for a useless life the time he used to devote to increasing its value. He exposes himself to the risk of one day being reproached by a weeping mother for the death of the child he had long preserved for her. [...] I would not like to know of a pupil who is always useless to himself and others, solely occupied in the effort to survive and whose body prejudices the education of the soul (Rousseau, 2017: 88).

And then came Itard, who cares for Victor, a savage found in the forest of Aveyron. Rather than marginalizing him, locking him up, judging him, the French doctor gives the boy an identity through giving him a name and establishing a relationship with him: “Itard became someone by helping a being who was nobody to become someone” (Canevaro & Gaudreau, 2002: 62). Thus, with the baptism of the different, pedagogy is born and pedagogy is born special (Piazza, 2009: 17). The relevance of the French physician and pedagogue lies in having indicated the direct route to lead the person with disabilities to a condition of normality, capable of making him live and coexist with others, while respecting his diversity.

Long and troubled has been the journey to abolish forms of institutionalization, isolation, and separation of individuals with disabilities and, to date, this process is not entirely accomplished. Semantics is also important (Goussot, 2015: 40) since it is not a purely terminological distinction, but,

on the contrary, it is a theoretical and cultural distinction, which has repercussions both on the definition of the characteristics of individuals with disabilities and on diagnostic and assessment procedures.

Handicapped, different, disabled, special, differently abled, are all terms that mark a situation characterized by deficit; they are horizons of meaning that attribute meaning to existence and draw its identity. Words are never neutral and sometimes go to conceptions that contribute to stereotypes, prejudice and stigma (Milito & Salis, 2017: 14).

In our country, as in the rest of the world, the transition from exclusion to integration, and finally to inclusion of individuals with disabilities has undergone several stages, supported by a series of regulations and conventions aimed increasingly at removing all forms of discrimination and prejudice. Already the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, adopted by the UN in 1948, sanctioned, precisely because of the equality due to equal human dignity, the recognition of a series of fundamental rights, even in the absence of any explicit reference to disability. It was later to be the 1959 *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, approved by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, that defined a social model centered on the human rights of people with disabilities. The document, while not recognizing “new” rights for persons with disabilities, represents an important achievement of the international community in that it ensures that these individuals can enjoy, on the basis of the legal systems of the states to which they belong, the same rights recognized to other fellow citizens, in application of the general principles of equal opportunity for all. In particular, it directs attention to “children who are in a situation of physical, mental or social minority, who have the right to receive the special treatment, education and care that they require by reason of their state or condition”.

Moreover, through the adoption in 1971 of the *Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Mental Retardation*, the UN shows that it welcomes not only those with sensory and motor disabilities, but also those with mental disabilities, whose rights concern both the improvement of their living conditions and their effective social-work integration. In Europe, Italy holds the record for having totally eliminated special schools and for having become aware of the discriminatory and marginalizing role assumed by schools towards children with disabilities, inaugurating the first attempts to accommodate disabled persons in common classes of all levels, while other European countries continue to opt for separate schooling for them.

Over the years, in fact, there has been a shift from a medical approach, according to which it was considered “normal” to place the handicapped pupil within special schools and differential classes – achieving in return the social marginalization of the subjects and the consequent aggravation of the handicap – to the dismantling of such separate institutions, experi-

menting with models of interaction, through the inclusion of disabled subjects in common schools.

Let us consider the different stages in detail:

- the individual, or medical, model, according to which disability is a biological condition intrinsic to the individual that reduces his or her quality of life and participation in society, compared with “normal” human functioning. Disability is regarded as an individual deficit or disadvantage caused by personal impairments. In this case, the school’s response has shifted from exclusion to inclusion/integration.

- The social model (Disability Studies) rejects the idea of limitation to health as an impairment and focuses on the barriers that exist within the social context, which prevent a person from achieving the same level of functioning as a person without an impairment. It is society that needs to be redesigned so that it takes into account the needs of people with disabilities: “[T]he social model opposes the construction of disability as an individual phenomenon and chooses to identify the mechanisms that ‘disable’ human beings rather than to analyze the characteristics of the functioning of an individual with impairments” (Oliver, 1990). Thus, there is a shift from integration to inclusion.

- The capacity model (Capability Approach), according to which overcoming disability does not coincide with adjustment to a “normality,” but rather with the expansion of choice for the individual, with the promotion of his or her capacity for self-determination (Sen, 1979).

- The ICF (2001) represents the link between the individual and social models through a bio-psycho-social approach. Here, disability is defined as the consequence or result of a complex relationship between an individual’s health condition, personal factors and environmental factors. The ICF emphasizes the need to know the person, his or her potential and resources. That is why the assessment of health conditions (arising from the individual-environment relationship) cannot be assigned solely to the health professional but must involve different points of view, the family, the school, the individual himself. Precisely because it represents a dynamic classification, it does not simply consider the current snapshot of the state of the individual with disabilities but proposes a series of concepts and indications suitable for showing the change, or the possibilities for change, over time and especially the effect that the components play in relation to one another. Even at the terminological level, we move from “disability” to “limitation of personal activities,” from “handicap” to “different social participation,” from “functional deficit” to “physical, emotional and social well-being.”

Therefore, a school in line with the system of Inclusive education (Armstrong, 1998: 48-63) should recognize the needs of students and the differences that characterize them, designing and implementing interventions that ensure the educational success of everyone.

3. EDUCATIONAL DESIGN THROUGH THE PEDAGOGICAL MEDIATORS OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND CINEMA

Nowadays, in making a judgment about a person or an event that has happened, we often allow ourselves to be influenced by appearances, by an approximate and superficial knowledge, perhaps conditioned by prejudices (Allport, 1976: 10) and stereotypes. How often, we stop only at the exterior, captivated by what we see without aiming at the essence, at what we touch with our hands. Reality, then, has a dual aspect, one exterior and the other interior, and very often, in order to know a person thoroughly, it is necessary to look beyond, to cross the *extra* to discover the *intus*. And in order for this change of perspective to occur, it is often necessary to

equip oneself with tools, indeed mediators – in our case pedagogical or used to activate pedagogical reflection – that serve the function of companions to make familiar what we tend to escape in/by its atypicality or anomaly [...] Literature, cinema, theater, music, autobiographical narratives, dance-movement, photography, architecture and so on to give voice to the possible voices that narrate otherness, to create those backgrounds [...] that facilitate the reduction of the fearful extraneousness of the figure we are confronted with (Bocci, 2013: 12).

In a society dominated by the cult of beauty and the dogged pursuit of perfection, the *monstrum* – understood as that which is perturbing, that which subverts the rules, that which presents characteristics alien to the usual natural order – while instilling fear and terror, the “extraordinary” body, in the etymological sense of the term, generates awe and attracts the public gaze, oscillating between voyeurism and cruelty: “The forms of the ugly are possibly more apt to pique curiosity than the beautiful” (Saint Girons, 2003: 102).

Often, film production, breaking the mould with tradition, places the theme of disability at the center, staging, for example, the so-called freaks, *other* subjects, far from the dominant aesthetic canons and cultural models uniformed to a standardized *normality*. Even before they landed in cinema, *freaks of nature* are known as freaks, exploited by the entertainment world in the freak shows brought to the fore by Barnum in traveling circuses: dwarves, Siamese twins, giants, hermaphrodites, bearded women...they shake consciences on the borderline between fascination with the horrid and revulsion, between curiosity and revulsion. It will be in 1932 that Tod Browning will bring them to the fore in the film of the same name *Freaks*, a film that will serve as a trailblazer for the filmmakers of the genre, especially for the innovative way of presenting diversity: beyond the brutality of human relationships and acted violence, it is precisely in the *normality* that the true monstrosity is hidden, through a reversal of points of view. In the film’s finale, in fact, it will be the beautiful circus trapeze artist who will show her true nature, greedy and unscrupulous, attempting to poison the dwarf she

had married only for money. In the end, she will become the real *monster*. Moreover, playing the bizarre characters on the screen are not professional actors but real freaks who, through cinelanguage, trigger in the audience mechanisms of projection and identification (Bocci, 2013: 116), but at the same time of disquiet precisely because we could be in their place.

Not only cinema but also photography approaches disability through the gaze and shots of Diane Arbus, who, “eschewing the voyeuristic gaze, set out on a quest to know-understand otherness, making herself meet the other (she come to them) with authenticity always preferred the person, the human relationship to photography itself” (Bocci, 2013: 110). To encounter diversity is to learn to know it thoroughly, to call it by name, reducing the space that risks separating and feeding prejudice. Influenced by watching the very film *Freaks*, the protagonists of Arbus’s shots are photographed in common contexts, in *normal* situations, in attitudes that are part of the routine – the two posing twins, the games in the park, the two elderly people on the bench – further diluting that “distance” too often emphasized by the viewer.

Freaks in Tim Burton’s cinema

*For me the monsters, the somewhat bizarre creatures
are the characters closest to reality and
are always the ones that arouse the most emotion*
(Tim Burton).

An *other* vision on disability and diversity in general is surely that of Tim Burton, a visionary director who, picking up the legacy and revolutionary point of view of Tod Browning, often places at the center of his films the freaks, lonely and extravagant creatures, misunderstood and melancholy, grotesque and out of the box, beyond space and time (Sammarro, 2012: 30). Delicate souls, with huge eyes wide open to the world, surrounded by a halo of awe and wonder (Sbarbati, 2017: 2), disarmed and disarming, despite their appearance that incites *terror*. The bizarre in Burton’s cinema is often forced to clash with *normalcy* – the American province, bourgeois values, the world of the living, the mediocrity of the real and the common man – that condemns it to marginalization. In his poetics of diversity, to be humanized are the freaks of nature, diluting the singular aspect and showing their own hidden beauty, while the so-called *normals* are revealed to be the real monsters, through a change of perspective. From *Beetlejuice* (1988) to *Mr. Skeleton*, from *Batman* (1989-1992) to the young *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), from *Big Fish* (2003) to *Dumbo* (2019), Burtonian heroes are outsiders, freaks, subjects who bear the signs of mental or physical discomfort or disability, which makes them unique. Vampires (*Dark Shadows*, 2013), aliens (*Mars Attacks*, 1996) and demonic spirits (*Beetlejuice*, 1988) are no longer so scary, in fact they show us with obvious irony that they are not the real

monsters but those who hide behind the conformist and homologated veneer of appearance and goodism. In fact, these characters can be considered alter egos of the director himself: Burton knows what it means to be considered *strange*, he knows what they feel, and that is why he easily manages to delve into their personalities:

[T]he typically adolescent feeling of not being able to communicate and of being perceived outwardly in the wrong way was translated by a young Burton into a graphic image destined to become extremely pop, that of a boy with scissors instead of hands and obviously thick black hair (Sbarbati, 2017: 47).

The melancholy little boy haunted by the tales of Edgar Allan Poe, the protagonist of the short film *Vincent*, but also Edward Scissorhands himself, are nothing but characters invented by Burton in his own image, reflections of that lonely childhood that still continues to haunt and influence him:

Edward is Tim Burton, dressed in black in a world that seems to love only pastel hues, one who managed to bring out his black stories in a world, that of the 1980s, where it seemed there could only be color. Edward, like Tim Burton, wears black, has a slim figure, has a bush for hair. [...] Burton, as a boy, was often alone, without friends. People often tended to abandon him (Ermisino, 2020).

A clear metaphor for diversity is the film's protagonist *Edward Scissorhands*, a kind of melancholy freak, a romantic version of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, who does not belong to this cruel and banal world but, metaphorically, represents fantasy, the joy of living, the beauty of the purest and most spontaneous feelings. And that is why that seemingly perfect world fails to welcome him.

Behind the conformity of the terraced cottages, with their well-kept gardens and white picket fences, lie superficiality, the yearning for normality, the desire for standardization and suspicion for the different, but also horror and violence. [...] The gothic and gloomy castle located on a hilltop in which Edward leads his solitary existence before being found by Peg, contrasts with the colorful dwellings below, and in fact in the film the accentuation of color contrasts is skillfully used to emphasize, on a visual level, the difficulty of integration of those who differ from the norm (Sbarbati, 2017: 53).

Burton makes a critique of today's society, which is so frivolous and superficial, a victim of the prevailing hypocrisy and respectability, where prejudice and conformity become absolute rules of everyday life, a society that has forgotten the purest feelings, feeding a ruthlessly cruel world that does not allow room for sensitivity and diversity, and thus margin-

alizes outsiders like Edward, who “is not bad, just wrong” (Burton, *Edward Scissorhands*, 1990).

Even the freak’s attempted process of integration does not seek to enhance the uniqueness of the protagonist but rather turns into a series of behaviors aimed at homogenization: Edward will wear ordinary clothes and the scars on his face will be covered so as to make him, as far as possible, conform to commonly accepted standards. He will try to fit in, he will meet good-hearted people who will recognize his extraordinary humanity – “Never let anyone tell you that you are handicapped” (Burton, *Edward Scissorhands*, 1990) – but in the end Edward will fall victim to an underlying incompatibility for which there can be no solution. It is precisely his diversity that makes him both extraordinary and sadly misunderstood, welcomed within a society that seems to appreciate him only for his works, but which nevertheless marginalizes him, never being able to accept him completely. In the end, Edward, pursued by an angry mob just as in Mary Shelley’s novel, will be condemned by the masses and isolated forever, even after discovering love thanks to those who had appreciated him for his true nature.

Over the years, Burtonian characters have undergone a slow but steady metamorphosis, which has ended up radically distorting their relationship with the world around them, although a distinct predilection for freaks remains. If in the early filmography there is a certain underlying pessimism – loneliness, abandonment, impossibility of communication, dialogue and understanding between the “different” and the rest of the world, despite initial curiosity – and a constant desire for integration that is difficult to achieve, in the more recent films, we see an evolution of the outsider; in fact, the new freaks, such as Victoria from *The Corpse Bride* (2005) or Edward Bloom from *Big Fish – The Stories of an Incredible Life* (2003), eschew normality to take refuge in their diversity, refusing any kind of contact with a world that they consider mean and alien to feelings. On the chromatic level, if in *The Corpse Bride* the dichotomy between the world of the living – gray, dull and sad – and the underworld – a world full of lights and sounds, a cheerful place where laughter, music and color alternate – still lingers in *Big Fish*, a kind of excess of color is even perceived. Coupled with this particular color choice is a renewed drive toward inclusion and acceptance of all those who were considered different from the crowd: “It was that night that I discovered that almost all creatures we consider evil or bad are simply lonely” (Burton, *Big fish*, 2003).

Edward Bloom, despite his exceptionalism, does not suffer society’s rejection and manages to establish lasting relationships with the bizarre characters who populate the tale: as if we were watching a traditional freak show, we find the giant, the glass-eyed witch, the wolf-man, the Siamese twins, the obese man, and so on. Freaks who, through a reversal of viewpoints, no longer live on the fringes of society and are no longer forced to hide from public view, but can finally come out into the open and cross that boundary between the imaginary world and the real world. Creatures

who abandon the halo of brutality and feral condition to which they were relegated to find their own identity and place in the world: “Have you ever thought that maybe it’s not you that’s too big, but that it’s this town that’s too small?” (Burton, *Big fish*, 2003).

How much can a person’s uniqueness affect human relationships? This question, with a current flavor, is answered not only in the film itself, but also in everyday life. Often, diversity is not considered a peculiarity that belongs to each of us and makes us special, a characteristic to be discovered and appreciated; on the contrary, diversity takes on negative overtones, labeling the one who does not conform to others.

Toward possible inclusion: designing through cinema

If it is true that “formation is the personal and inner growth of the self, proper to each individual, which is accomplished through an intense dialogic exchange with social and cultural objectivity” (Cambi & Frauenfelder, 1994: 22), cinema, as a cultural product and producer of culture and social representations, becomes a place capable of contributing to the social construction of the subject, shaping its identity and the way it represents the real (Angrisani *et al.*, 2001: 55): “[C]inema creates and disseminates new social and cultural representations, continually producing possible worlds through the metaphorical transformation of the everyday and the conventional” (Bruner, 1997: 62).

Cinema, through the conscious and purposeful choice of films under discussion, becomes a subject for pedagogical reflection as an integral part of the typical cultural context of contemporary societies. Watching and interpreting such film productions according to an approach that is not only purely visual but also pedagogical and psycho-pedagogical, means approaching a series of phenomena such as otherness, disability, discomfort, deviance, triggering, especially in the younger generations, feelings of empathy and identification with the protagonists of the proposed events, but also critical and reflective skills.

Through the functions of memory and mirroring (Mancino, 2006: 14), cinema becomes a powerful pedagogical device “because of its intrinsic ability to accompany the narrative, invite participation and foster, for those who come into visual-sensory contact, the transport, the entanglement, the estrangement necessary for learning” (*Ibidem*).

An educational design (Torre, 2022: 34) focused on cinema as a pedagogical device could include several activities to be proposed to secondary school students in grades I and II or minors at risk (Bastianoni & Baiamonte, 2014: 7). A first activity to be proposed could be the viewing of films focused on diversity, difference, and disability; in particular, a possible film path to be proposed could be related to the cinema of Tim Burton. As a second activity, educators and teachers would work on the themes of film and education for active citizenship, including through connections with the direct experience of those involved and within the area in which they

live. As a final activity, a film workshop could be proposed, within which stakeholders will try their hand at participatory video making (Maurelli, 2019: 55) through a process of filmmaking, slinging the camera and reading the world through their own eyes (Roberts & Lunch, 2015).

Among the objectives of the project:

- enhance students' critical sense and raise their awareness of socially alarming issues;
- foster students' transformation from spectators to participatory and active cultural promoters;
- generate socio-cultural spillovers and educational effects in formal and nonformal contexts;
- make students protagonists as cultural promoters capable of arousing curiosity and reflection in the community;
- enhance the use of digital tools and digital competence.

The language of cinema, as well as that of music, literature, and art in general, precisely because of its ability to influence our worldview, should increasingly become the spokesperson for concrete and powerful messages in favor of the inclusion and acceptance of disability, by staging differently-abled characters, told in all their complexity and not exclusively linked, even on a pietistic level, to the one-dimensionality of pain and denial. Through art, one can make visible the invisible, the marginal, the excluded; one can operate socially, raise awareness of issues and emergencies, elevating artistic expression to a tool of learning, emancipation and unveiling its social and political significance. Educational planning that takes into account such languages has the function of making people reflect on respecting different models of life and choices, on welcoming special normality (Ianes, 2006: 19), on considering disability a resource and not an enemy, of helping to develop a critical sense through which to read significant aspects of contemporary reality, observing it from an unusual point of view or from glances from different points of view that intersect. Getting on the desk and looking at the world from different angles, just like the protagonist in *The Dead Poet's Society* (Peter Weir, 1989), means entering into a relationship with others, questioning our own view of reality, accepting and welcoming that of the other. In this way, we will have a greater awareness of our own identity and enrich our soul, as the other will have something new to teach us:

The gaze we place on the person who comes towards us or to whom we approach can generate the relationship or its denial. The negation of the relationship does not pass only in the act of looking away, of turning away, of escaping by moving away, but has more insidious, less blatant ways perhaps acted with a lesser degree of awareness; in fact, often the negation is carried out through the reduction of the other to one's own gaze, to the incorporation of the other into the system of values, beliefs, convictions, and expectations that govern the way of thinking, speaking and acting of the person directing the gaze (Bocci, 2013: 10).

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