

## On the fungibility of the symptom: Perversion, love and politics in the later teaching of Lacan

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Picture two glass panels, almost 3 by 3 metres, suspended vertically. The glass is shattered, and between the two pieces of glass, set in a metal frame with a wooden base, is a composition. The upper rectangle of this composition is known as the Bride's Domain, whilst the bottom piece is the Bachelors' Apparatus. Within each rectangle are geometric shapes structured to create mechanical objects.



The Bride is a cluster of monochrome geometric forms located along the left-hand side of the glass. She is connected to her halo, a cloudy form stretching across the top. The Bride's rectangular form branches out into slender projections, resembling tentacles. These include an inverted funnel capped by a half-moon shape, a series of shapes resembling a skull with two misplaced ears, and a long, proboscis-like extension stretching down almost as far as the horizon line between her domain and that of the bachelors'. The bachelors reside within the lower domain, and the bachelors themselves are a series of brown shapes. They are interconnected through a web of thin lines, tying them to conical cylinders. At the lower part of the bachelors' domain is a machine called a chocolate grinder.

The upper and lower realms are separated from each other forever by a horizon known as the 'bride's clothes'. As for the bride herself, she hangs in an isolated cage. The bachelors stare from below, left only with the possibility of masturbation rather than consummation. Nevertheless, when they get

excited their forms fill with ‘illuminating gas’, which causes a water wheel to turn beneath them, ultimately making the chocolate grinder churn. The gas that represents the bachelors’ desire for the Bride transforms into liquid and flows into the lower right corner. Next, the liquid is propelled through the three circular elements, and through a magnifying glass, and shoots into the Bride’s realm above. The goal for each bachelor is to land his shot within one of the three square windows inside of the cloud that hovers at the top of the glass. If he can do that, he will win the Bride and they will be able to consummate their love physically. The shots miss, and the sexual relation never occurs.

The work that I am discussing is entitled ‘The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even’, by French artist Marcel Duchamp. I can think of no clearer imaginisation of Lacan’s proposition that there is no sexual rapport. Apart from being mutually acquainted, the two Frenchmen have some other things in common. Duchamp (1973, p. 99) intended for his machine to be one in which the constituent elements were locked in constant movement, and rather like surplus jouissance, we can think of the satisfaction that is produced here as both the outcome of a process of production, analogous to surplus value in Marx’s *Capital*, but also as something never fulfilled or completed. In contrast to contemporary cynicism about love, which holds it to be a ruse for Darwinian purposes, there is a belief in love in both the work of Duchamp and Lacan, but it isn’t the love of the Romantics, and the subject who loves is not the consumer of contemporary liberalism.

Lacan and Duchamp are not the only ones to view subjectivity through the prism of the machine. Freud had his hydraulic metaphors, and psychoanalysis seems to need a machine age to function. This isn’t for technological reasons, as free association is relatively simple from a technical point of view, but psychoanalysis is largely unthinkable without the societal changes that ensued from the advance of industrial capitalism. With the other machine paradigms, such as the Behaviourists, and even more, the Cognitivists, the type of human machine in question is oriented to computing. Everything becomes data points, including affects of suffering or pleasure, and this reduction to mere data applies equally to language, which, in these paradigms, never rises to the level of discourse (namely, language constitutive of a social bond). In contrast to these thinking machines situated within atomised, Cartesian subjects, Lacan envisaged a *parlêtre*, defined by Jacques-Alain Miller as a speaking body.

Late in his life, Duchamp thought that painting was finished, at least for a time, and as with Duchamp, there is in Lacan a sense of narrative exhaustion at the end of his teaching, notwithstanding the tendency of both men toward provocation and change until the very end. Having gone from the Imaginary, to the Symbolic, then the Real, and finally to a knotting of all three registers via the Borromean structure, there was no next step. The narrative cycle was over, even if its subject, psychoanalysis, was not. Many have suggested, wishfully, perhaps, that psychoanalysis is dead. It isn’t, but its continued existence calls for an explanation, particularly in the Anglophone world, at least, where it maintains a distinct outsider status. We stand, in time at least, much further from Lacan than Lacan ever did from Freud. The term ‘late’ Lacan rolls off the tongue so easily that we can almost seduce ourselves into thinking that we know what it means when we, after Miller, use it as the key to the whole of Lacan..

In fact, the notion of a ‘late Lacan’ is a construction of Miller’s, intended to isolate certain elements of Lacan’s teaching (on this, see Biswas, 2015, and Miller, 2003). Miller differentiates a ‘late’ Lacan from the period around *Seminar XXI*, concerned with the non-rapport between the One and the Other, and a ‘latest’ Lacan, from *Seminar XXIV*. Much of Lacan’s effort in these seminars aimed at a dissolution of previous teachings, which does much to prevent them from ossifying into dogmas, but raises complex and ambiguous questions about how Lacanian psychoanalytic praxis can proceed.

Delusion is made universal in this latter teaching, and the big Other and Name-of-the-Father have largely fallen by the wayside. Diagnosis is relative, and linguistics gives way to *lalangue*.

Some of what is attributed to the later teachings of Lacan can in fact be found in the earlier. For instance, Lacan's (1992) discussion of sublimation, tied to the 'plasticity of the instincts' (p. 91) in Seminar VII is the forerunner of Joyce, the sinthome and the *escabeau* in *Seminar XXIII*. Lacan (2017) used the term '*suppleance*' as early as Seminar V, wherein some cases of psychosis can involve 'the suppletion of the symbolic by the imaginary'. (p. 6). The lack of sexual rapport that one finds in *Seminar XX* is foreshadowed in *Seminar XIV*, where Lacan says that there is no sexual act, and, in any case, Lacan had been spending years of his teaching denaturalising the sexual relation, and critiquing the pious myth of 'oblativity'. There are ruptures and discontinuities in Lacan's work, to be sure, but this is not the only story. Just as meaning is retroactive, and the ending of an utterance can come to alter what was said in the beginning, so too does Lacan's later teaching call into question many aspects of his earlier work. These questions remain open, in my opinion, and must be answered by each analyst in turn.

My own thoughts on these matters are but partial and provisional. There appears to me a clear need to amend some of the notions of subjective structure that are prevalent in popular understandings of Lacan within the Anglophone world. I am thinking in particular of the work of Bruce Fink (1999) and his student, Stephanie Swales (2012), and the construction of perversion as a rigid, distinct category radically separate from psychosis and neurosis. We have to follow the references here. What Fink and Swales offer is an ingenious elaboration of Lacan's separation and alienation schema of *Seminar XI*, now turned to diagnostic structure. For all of its virtues, however, there is nothing to suggest that Lacan intended for the schema to be used this way, and plenty of evidence to the contrary. The later teaching of Lacan suggests that, rather than a tripartite diagnostic system, there is one structure, with infinite variations. Even if one maintains that classical neurotic-psychotic division, with Oedipalisation understood as a *pret-à-porter* knotting, perversion becomes untenable as unique category linked to disavowal. In a sense, the later Lacan is not required to come to this conclusion. Lacan, in contrast to Freud, never conjoined disavowal with perversion or fetishism, and in any event, for one to disavow the Other's castration, it is logically necessary that it not be foreclosed in the first place. It is commonplace within Lacanian circles to focus very largely on psychosis and its treatment, but there is a need to re-examine neurosis as well. Rather than subjects being locked into a given structure – neurosis or perversion as the case may be – it seems to me more a case of movement within a structure, with shifts between symptoms, inhibitions and anxiety. In a paper cited by the relatively early Lacan, Hans Sachs (1986) discusses a man who came to analysis for 'psychical impotence'. His only other symptoms was being unable to urinate in the presence of others, for instance, in a public lavatory. His *jouissance* – when he could have it – involved being overcome by the urge to masturbate in public, and exhibiting his genitals to passing trains. Thus, as Sachs puts it, "perverse satisfaction became transformed into a neurotic inhibition". The arrangement of symptom and inhibition proved fluid, and fungible, from within a given structural arrangement, and we should recall the passage in Lacan's 16<sup>th</sup> Seminar wherein he uses the model of the turning plate (the *plaque tournante*) to illustrate the vicissitudes of the symptom (Lacan, 2006, p. 307). We do not necessarily need Borromean knots to grasp all this, but it helps. The subject himself can be entirely in the dark as to this substitutability of positions within a structure, putting the fungi into fungibility.

Once Lacan shifts from a desire-centric model of the symptom to one oriented to *jouissance* as a process of production, we have the possibility of fungibility at the level of the symptom, of economic alterations to satisfaction, and of structural arrangements that temporarily block the formation of symptoms qua satisfactions, namely, anxiety and inhibition. There is a long tradition of this sort of

fungibility in psychoanalysis, beginning with many of Freud's vignettes, to Helene Deutsch's work on perversion, to Rene Tostain's (1980) paper on the fetishisation of a phobic object, in which both the fetish and the phobia each provide different structural solutions to the same problem. In each case, there is not necessarily any absence of repression. Lacan says in *Seminar V* (p. 217) that 'whenever you have repression in neurosis, it's insofar as the subject does not wish to recognise something that it would be necessary to recognise...for perversion, it's exactly the same thing...In 1923, following Freud's article, Sachs and all psychoanalysts recognised that if you look closely, perversion carries exactly the same mechanisms of elision of the fundamental – that is, Oedipal – terms as we find in the analysis of neuroses.' Lacan says something similar at the end of 'Science and Truth' (Lacan, 2006b, p. 745).

Anybody taking comfort in the idea that the perverts are a category neatly insulated from the rest will have cause for anxiety by the time of the sexual non-rapport and the theory of sexualisation that goes with it. The same goes for the rather extraordinary idea that surfaces, from time to time, that perversion does not exist in women. Insofar as both sexes have any approach at all to the Real of sexuality, it is via phallic jouissance and the fundamental fantasy. The caveat here is that women's participation in this is not-all, and that another jouissance, beyond language, may be accessible to them. The reduction of the sexual partner to the *objet a* promotes a separation, to use Lacan's term from Seminar X, that tends toward fetishism, and indeed, Lacan emphasises that for straight women, the penis itself is a fetish-object (Lacan, 2017, p. 329). Once constituted as such an object, it too can enter into the realm of fungibility as object of exchange. Sex and economics have gone together in psychoanalysis, ever since Freud situated both as areas of hypocrisy among the bourgeoisie, and ever since he characterised libidinal ties as 'investments' (*Besetzung*), Strachey's mutilations notwithstanding. As Lacan (1998, p. 144) says in Seminar XX:

There's no such thing as a sexual relationship because one's jouissance of the Other taken as a body is always inadequate – perverse, on the one hand, insofar as the Other is reduced to object a, and crazy and enigmatic, on the other...Isn't it on the basis of the confrontation with this impasse, with this impossibility by which a real is defined, that love is put to the test? Regarding one's partner, love can only actualise what, in a sort of poetic flight...I called courage – courage with respect to this fatal destiny

If fantasy brings consistency to the jouissance of the sexual non-relation, it is love that 'allows jouissance to condescend to desire' (Lacan, 2014, p. 179). Love is also, in a sense, a bridge between the later teachings of Lacan and the not-so late. When Lacan invokes 'courage' in connection with love, I think that it is because it is what is required to not give ground relative to one's desire, vis-à-vis anxiety, in particular. Love is situated at the level of truth, and also of ethics, particularly the later ethics of Lacan, if this can be said to exist, since love operates at the level of the *bien-dire*. It is something that has to be said, and 'it's by speaking that one makes love' (Lacan, 2018, p. 133). For all of the discontinuities in Lacan's work, this seems to be a straight line linking the seminar on ethics to the later seminars. The question remains, however, as to how much of Lacan's earlier ethical stance survives the overturning of dogma that occurs during the later period, when desire is no longer the centre of the unconscious.

Before turning to what I think is one of the great discontinuities, one thing to be found in both *Seminar VII* and *Seminar XX* is a critique of Aristotle. *Seminar XX* upends Aristotelian views on logic and language. As Barbara Cassin (2017 p. 25) put it in her recent book on L'etourdit, 'Take my word for it, your conscious mind is structured like a (generally) logical Aristotelian language. And your unconscious is structured like an ab-sent language, like a lalangue.' Baby-talk is not the only

manifestation of *lalangue*. There is a *lalangue* of violence, for example, and we might think of Count Ugolino's gurglings in the 9<sup>th</sup> Circle of the Inferno as an instance of this (see Mandelstam, 1973, for a discussion). The logic of both sides of the graph of sexualisation serves as a rejoinder to Aristotle's law of non-contradiction. Perhaps, ultimately, such a critique could have been extrapolated directly from Freud. The critique of Aristotelian ethics in *Seminar VII* - which resembles the pleasure principle before death and jouissance are introduced - proceeds from the basis that Aristotle is exclusively addressing masters. Under the discourse of capitalism, we are dealing with consumers who are themselves consumed; the myth of mastery is that a moderate pleasure is possible. Aristotle was the philosopher cited by the classical liberals, such as Locke, in defence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In other words, just as philosophical fantasy had had a tendency to naturalise the sexual relation, so too has it done some ideological work in naturalising political and economic relations. This brings me to the discourse of capitalism, which is a major discontinuity in Lacan's later teaching, and also in the world itself. Capitalism had been around as an economic system for hundreds of years, but it emerged as a discourse mainly in the twentieth century, and as the dominant discourse from the 1970s onward. We need to distinguish capitalism as economic system as against capitalism as discourse, since one can exist without the other. In his early work, Lacan seldom spoke of Marx, and then, only to disparage him. By *Seminars XVI* and *XVII*, Marx was a major reference point, despite Lacan himself not being in any way a Marxist in a political sense.

What changes under the discourse of capitalism, and are these changes of any real significance? Taking 'classical' neurosis as a starting point, the effects of the capitalist discourse, things are ambiguous. Very often in the clinic, one meets an analysand who is bogged down in the trench warfare of imaginary, mirror relations with the Other, characterised by idealisation at one end, but, in difficult times, by envy, hatred and rivalry. One need only see a neurotic undergoing a relationship breakdown to know that this is not a purely psychotic phenomenon. Analysis can bring these imaginary relations toward the less ravaging domain of the symbolic, but this will tend to promote relations of exchange, which, paradoxically, risks acting as an inadvertent normalisation into capitalist discourse. Conversely, once a society is governed by principles of exchange and marketization, the result is not predominance of the symbolic order, but universal competition and precarity, namely, regression to the imaginary. The meaning of this in the clinic is ambiguous, and, I think, subject to the political and clinical perspective of the analyst. In a paper on this topic, Stijn Vanheule (2016) presented case material arguing that the discourse of capitalism was fundamentally equivocal in its effects, and could be deceptive on the one hand (in a case of neurosis), and offer therapeutically-useful semblants on the other (in a case of psychosis). Hysteria has arguably changed radically in its presentation since the time of Charcot. True hysteria may even be relatively rare now. Obsessional neurosis, on the other hand, has changed little. In our age of addiction, Ratmen abound, relatively unchanged and entrenched between ratification and gratification. Previously, there was a dialectic between a neurotic, hysteric subject and a master, who was always a sort of denuded emperor. The tragic dimension of classical Freudian analysis, which stressed the incommensurability of aims between family and society, between individual and the 'greater good', is no longer operative in the same way, since capitalism in the present discourse recuperates the family for society, and which expropriates the discontents of civilisation for the 'greater good'. So it is not that repression and foreclosure *per se* have necessarily changed since the time of Freud or Lacan, in terms of their operation or their effects, but the sorts of discourses into which they circulate have altered significantly.

The discourse of the capitalist is a variation of the discourse of the master, and to that end, it tends to disavow lack and non-rapport. This disavowal has ushered in an unprecedented era of biopolitical

surveillance and discipline, in which subjects are called upon to be the agents of their own subjection. It is true that programs of self-improvement and the like precede the discourse of capitalism, and can be found among the philosophers and the religions, but it is the conjunction of these imperatives with ideals of quantitative performance and ‘smart’ technology that is novel. If the goals of psychoanalysis were once to allow subjects to work, love, and suffer, the dominant capitalist discourse has altered subjectivity itself to promote a reorganisation of each of these domains, to at least a partial extent. The shift tends to be away from *bien-dire* over to *bien-être*, and here, psychoanalysis is an important counter-discourse.

Psychoanalysis was born of the hysterical discourse, but this by no means implies that it is obliged to stay there. One of its specialties is its ability to diagnose the hysterical protest as hysterical, which is to say, that, rather like the paranoiac’s *belle âme* schtick, the protestations betray a disguised complicity with a master-persecutor figure. The amelioration of symptoms is no longer the primary reason for interpretation, and the place of interpretation itself is given over to acting out rather than to symptoms. Acting-out is not a *bien-dire*, and, rather like Sophocles’ Antigone, it tends to be politically regressive. For all of the damage done to Creon, he is not unseated from his throne. The discourse of the master, on the other hand, tends to be undermined by psychoanalysis. Analysis does not sit well under autocracy, and is usually branded as degenerate by dictators. It is much more easily assimilated into the discourse of capitalism, however, which makes consumption the dictator, and which can accommodate a doctrine of ‘one at a time’, as well as various forms of subjective division. These leave psychoanalysis with political and ethical problems, especially in the wake of Lacan’s later teachings.

Some prominent Lacanians (see Soler, 2014, p. 217) are highly equivocal on this point, suggesting that analysts cannot speak of the capitalist discourse of our times from within that very discourse, but at the same time cannot feign political neutrality any more than they can uphold the fantasmatic notion being a ‘blank screen’. In other words, this is a reaffirmation of the impossibility of psychoanalysis, and one which essentially restates the problem without ever attempting to solve it. One alternative, and it is that recently practiced by the NLS, is to embrace politics, and whilst I myself am sympathetic to this approach, like everything else in psychoanalysis, it depends on the details. Some analysts have been able to engage with political questions in a nuanced way. Eric Laurent (2018, p. 159), for instance, argues that ‘although psychoanalysis takes subjects one by one, it is not liberal in its political model’. There is no ‘idea that the social link is the aggregate of isolated individuals’. This knotting of politics, ethics and ontology, and the rejection of liberal humanism that it implies, is not universal. For other analysts, the explicit embrace of politics has been rather more clumsy. The problem with liberal capitalism is that if you do not confront it head on and formulate a position with respect to it, you are likely to mime its duplicities unconsciously, as in the recent case of a prominent analyst who denounced all criticism of the state of Israel as disavowed *jouissance* in anti-Semitism (see Aflalo, 2018). Some of it is, of course, but not-all, and this high-handed dismissal is disturbingly similar to that made by IPA analysts in the face of the uprising of May ’68, in which the students and workers were denounced as ‘infantile’ (for more, see Rabaté, 2009). The liberals who enjoin us, rightly, to never forget the atrocities of the Nazis seem to never remember those of King Leopold or Andrew Jackson, who paved Hitler’s way. These issues take on an added poignancy with the recent death of Domenico Losurdo, who illustrated well how liberalism can preach the fiery gospel of autonomy and freedom at precisely the same time as embracing colonialism, genocide and slavery.

The later work of Lacan authorises a praxis freer of dogma in conceptualisation and interpretation than what had come before. Or, at least, this seems to be how things have been received by

contemporary Lacanians. Directive interventions proliferate in the case studies, aiming at subjects as *jouissant-bodies*, rather than as desiring-machines, and why not, we may well ask, since any interpretation may contain an element of suggestion. Such interventions, however, re-open the risk of psychoanalysis lapsing into conformism, authoritarianism, or mere therapeutics. Ordinary psychosis is a case in point. I myself have no qualms with the category on clinical or epistemic grounds, though it is clear – for me, at least – that the ordinary psychotic subject very often comes to analysis with a demand that he or she be made ordinary. Naturally, we can respond to this demand in many different ways. It could be heard as a demand for a reduction in suffering, or as a demand for help in being inserted into a social bond. Yet I think that we can also hear it as it is, namely, as a demand for normalisation, for ordinariness as a condition of life, and one that is moreover mandated by the dominant discourse of our times. Rather like Duchamp, Lacan's teaching – particularly in its latter stages – constitutes both a radical beginning and a kind of end. The *equivoque* is perhaps the psychoanalytic equivalent of the Duchampian ready-made, something 'found' that can be put to a brilliant new use, but also something which, under capitalism, is liable to turn into a disposable object, a fleeting fragment of *jouissance* destined for landfill. Lacan seemed aware of this double-sidedness in his own lifetime, being both the world's leading psychoanalyst and the object of a personality cult, and one of his last acts was the dissolution of his own school. Miller too has emphasised some of these ambiguities, for instance, in terms of psychoanalysis being both a therapeutic praxis, on the one hand, but one which will turn into a master's discourse if it makes the abolition of symptoms its primary business.

The great lesson for psychoanalysis after the exhaustion of structuralism is that a symptom – insofar as a symptom is a mode of *jouissance*, a substitute for sexual satisfaction, as Freud has it – cannot be cured, but only exchanged, or reorganised, or nominated. This position arguably intensifies the need for a return to Lacan, including the Lacan of the pre-late works, to distinguish between a symptom, for example, and an inhibition or an anxiety, and to distinguish between symptoms, modes of enjoyment, sublimations, etc. In other words, studying the last few seminars will not spare anybody the need to study the first 20-odd, or the task of reading Freud, for that matter. The beauty of structuralism, in a way, was to be radically anti-psychologistic, anti-humanistic, and trans-individualistic in its approach to the notion of cause. Once this paradigm ran out of steam, we end up with the One-all-alone, and whether this is a good or bad thing depends very much on one's political perspective. There is a risk of moving from dissolution to disillusion, in which the subject as an effect of structure is replaced with an atomised unit, producing endless iterations of masturbatory, even autistic *jouissance*. There's no question of nostalgia, as structuralism will not be revived, but there is an argument to be made for revisiting the old texts and seminars. Above all, the seminar on ethics, which Lacan regarded as one of his most significant, should be juxtaposed next to the others, and Lacan's five discourses, whilst probably not 'late' *per se*, provide an orientation to his entire teaching. The discourses describe the production of *jouissance* within various types of social bonds. Whilst psychoanalysis has therapeutic effects, these are not its primary aim, and when they become so, the risk is of slipping back into a Master's or University discourse, or in any event, an adaptationist project. The ethical problems are reduced when it is a question of constructing rather than eliminating *jouissance*, with the proviso that this *jouissance* be something livable. In terms of constructing a *sinthome*, Stijn Vanheule has emphasised the private and idiosyncratic nature of the *jouissance* at stake. My sense is that there needs to be an element of social recognition also. If one is to follow Lacan's teaching then a knotting must include all three registers, not only the real, and this further requires the detour via the Other. Roughly, fidelity to an event in Badiou's terms approaches something analogous to a *sinthome*.

Second, whilst there is every reason to believe that Lacan chose his words carefully, there is no reason to believe that he intended his words to function as something canonical. The paradoxes and ambiguities of Lacan's later work are not always acknowledged, and the possible readings of this work have been far from exhausted. As seemingly obvious as this point may seem, it is essential not to revise away these ambiguities, or to cleave them from their broader context. Lacan was clearly, in his earlier days, an enemy of conformism and doctrinaire authoritarianism, and the susceptibility of analysts succumbing to these ethical traps remains as great as ever. More than any other paradigm with the prefix 'psy' at the front of it, psychoanalysis is capable of addressing and transforming human suffering with an ethics of well-saying and care, yet the double-sidedness of this under the capitalist discourse is that unless its practitioners are politically and ethically engaged – and I exclude here forms of pseudo-engagement that mistake cynical liberalism for a form of heresy – it risks lapsing into the boutique clinical equivalent of a craft beer. This is an acute problem in the Anglophone world in particular, as it is here that capitalism as a discourse is most developed, and most interwoven into the ideological and cultural fabric. (We should recall that when Marx 'invented' the symptom it was by way of British political economy). Determination is negation, as Lacan well knew. Once everybody is delusional, nobody is. We then have a situation which is practically the fulfilment of the antipsychiatric dream, on the one hand, in which the divide between the normal and the pathological is completely abolished. On the other hand, we are also left with an amorphous, autistic normality with the potential for a Foucauldian nightmare. The problem is to conceive of a set of distinctions, such as that between psychosis and neurosis, without constructing a hierarchy, normative developmental sequence or deficit model. The late work of Lacan makes this possible, but by no means self-evident. Psychoanalysts have to get their ethical bearings from somewhere, and to do this requires a return to much more than Lacan's later work. It is surely not a matter of synthesising the 'whole' Lacan, as such a project is impossible in any case, but of finding the lack in Lacan himself, and deciding on the form of lack that one can live with, and above all, by refusing a contradiction-free, Aristotelian simplicity that would reduce psychoanalysis to merely one more voice in a cacophonous marketplace of ideas.

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