

"The Novel and Cinema in the Arab World: The Interaction Between Literary Narrative and Visual Expression"

Dr. Abdou Nadia¹

¹Lecturer Class A, Faculty of Letters, Languages and Arts, University of Zian Achour de Djelfa (Algeria).

The E-mail Author: n.abdou@univ-djelfa.dz

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Abstract:

This study aims to investigate the origins of Arab cinema, highlighting the local and international changes and developments that have shaped its trajectory. It also explores the reciprocal relationship between novelistic writing and the language of cinematic imagery, while emphasizing the fundamental differences between literary and visual narratives. The research further examines the concept of art from a philosophical perspective, clarifying the role of the director and the technical team, alongside the writer and their expertise, in shaping the cinematic work in its most refined form. Additionally, the study addresses the collective nature that characterizes cinematic art in contrast to the individual nature of literary creativity, stressing that cinema represents an integrated blend of culture and industry. Both components contribute to shaping public opinion and fulfilling a powerful communicative function.

Keywords: The Novel, Cinema, Literary Narrative, Visual Expression, The Arab World.

Introduction:

The relationship between the novel and cinema has long been a central point of interest for both novelists and filmmakers, serving as a fertile ground for discussion among literary figures and cinematic artists alike. This relationship has remained complex and subject to ongoing debate concerning the precedence of influence and inspiration between the two forms. Over the course of a century, cinema has emerged as an effective cultural medium, firmly establishing its impact on the collective memory of audiences through the production of a vast array of films characterized by diverse narrative and visual forms. This evolution has granted cinema a prominent role in shaping public consciousness.

These films were based on renowned literary novels, reimagining them through the art of cinema by transforming the written literary text into vivid and dynamic visual

imagery. This process relied on a detailed literary screenplay, restructured within a cinematic framework that converts literary narration into visual discourse. It involved a meticulously constructed script that undergoes deconstruction and reassembly into scenes and visual sequences, allowing the director and production team to visually reproduce the novel. This is achieved through the use of cinematic tools such as directing, cinematography, editing, set design, and other elements of visual storytelling.

It is worth noting that many of these films contributed to enhancing the fame of the original novels, which may have initially achieved literary success but reached far broader audiences following their cinematic adaptation. In this way, numerous literary works that had limited literary circulation found in cinematic adaptation a means to strengthen their cultural presence and attain amplified recognition that extended to a much wider audience after being transferred to the big screen.

Research Problem:

This study seeks to explore the relationship between the novel and cinema, and how the literary text is transformed from its narrative form into a visual cinematic representation, given the differing artistic styles and narrative techniques of the two genres. The research also addresses the issue of the impact both the novel and cinema have on public consciousness, the question of which medium holds primacy in influence and inspiration, as well as the challenges inherent in adapting a literary work into the language of visual imagery. In this context, the central research question emerges: What is the nature of the interactive relationship between the novel and cinema in the Arab context, and how has cinema contributed to the visual reconstruction of literary texts and their influence on cultural and popular awareness?

Significance of the Study:

The significance of this research lies in its focus on the complex relationship between the novel and cinema as two creative genres that reflect the intellectual and cultural transformations of society. The study is also valuable in its contribution to understanding the mechanisms by which literary discourse is transformed into visual discourse, and in highlighting the role of cinema in conveying cultural and aesthetic values to a broader audience—making it an effective tool for influence and cultural communication. Moreover, the research gains further importance by tracing the

origins and historical development of both the novel and cinema within the Arab context.

Research Objectives:

This study aims to trace the emergence and development of Arab cinema and to analyze the impact of both local and international factors on its evolution. It also seeks to examine the relationship between the novel and cinema in terms of mutual influence and the differences between literary and visual narration. Additionally, the research clarifies the concept of cinematic art from both philosophical and aesthetic perspectives, highlighting the role of the director and the artistic team. It compares individual creativity in literature with collective creativity in cinema. The study further addresses the significance of cinematic adaptation of novels and its role in expanding their reach and popularity. Moreover, it observes the evolution of the Arabic novel and its artistic transformations until it reached a stage of maturity

Research Methodology:

In this study, we have employed a historical, descriptive, and analytical approach to examine the phenomenon of utilizing the novel in the film industry.

Definitions of Terms:

Firstly: The Concept of the Novel:

In this research, the novel is defined as a literary narrative form that conveys the human experience through the construction of characters, events, time, and place. It relies on linguistic techniques and expressive styles to communicate ideas and emotions. Within this context, the novel is treated as the original source material upon which certain cinematic works are based.

1. Linguistic Definition:

According to Al-Mu'jam Al-Waseet, the verb "rawā" has multiple uses, all of which generally revolve around the notions of transmission, carrying, quenching, and stabilization. For example:

"**Rawā 'ala al-ba'ir riyyan**" means "he gave the camel water to drink";
"**Rawā al-qawm 'alayhim**" means "he fetched water for them";
"**Rawā al-ḥadīth aw al-shi'r riwāyah**" refers to "transmitting and conveying a narration or a poem," and the person who does so is called a "**rāwī**" (narrator), plural

"**ruwāt**".

"**Rawā al-ba‘īr al-mā’ riwāyah**" means "the camel carried and transported the water."

It is also said: "**Rawā ‘alayhi al-kadhib**", meaning "he fabricated a lie about him."

Other uses include: "**Rawā al-ḥabl riyyan**", meaning "he tightly twisted the rope."

Finally, the term "**riwāyah**"¹ denotes "a long-form narrative or story."

2. Terminological Definition:

These various usages indicate that the term "riwāyah" (narrative) in its linguistic sense denotes the act of carrying and transmitting speech. This closely intersects with its terminological meaning in literary and cinematic contexts, where "narrative" refers to the telling of a story or recounting of specific events intended to be communicated to an audience—whether orally, in written form, or visually, as in cinema.

As a literary term, the novel is defined as: "A long-form story composed of sequential events, portraying the lives of multiple characters within a specific time and place, and aiming to depict reality or express imagination through an artistic narrative style."

The Concept of Cinema :Secondly

The moving image constitutes the foundation of cinematic art. A rapid succession of still images is projected in sequence, creating a visual illusion that leads the human eye to perceive them as continuous motion. This phenomenon occurs due to the eye's ability to retain an image for a fraction of a second after it disappears. With the advancement of technology, recorded sound was later synchronized with the image through a separate track, giving rise to the emergence of sound cinema. The origins of this technique can be traced back to primitive devices such as spinning wheels and rotating cylinders, which simulated movement through rapid sequencing of images, in addition to the development of methods for filming moving objects.

1. Linguistically:

The word "cinema" is an abbreviation of the French term "cinématographe," which literally means "motion recording." This term is used to refer to both the

¹ Ibrahim Mustafa, Hamed Abdel Qader, Ahmed Hassan Al-Zayyat, and Muhammad Ali Al-Najjar, *Al-Mu‘jam Al-Wasīṭ* (The Intermediate Dictionary), Istanbul: Islamic Library for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, p. 384.

technical and artistic aspects of filmmaking, encompassing the processes of both production and exhibition

simultaneously².

2. Terminologically:

Cinema, as a term, refers to the art of motion picture photography presented to an audience within designated spaces such as movie theaters, or through other visual media like television screens. The word is derived from the French term *Cinematographie*, which literally means "motion recording." In the academic field, the term encompasses the entirety of the technical and artistic processes involved in film production, including screenwriting, directing, cinematography, editing, and exhibition. Furthermore, cinema is also conceived as a cultural and social space associated with the collective experience of film viewing and its institutional practices. The activities within this domain, as well as the history of cinema and the body of cinematic works, are classified into sectors such as American cinema³.

The Emergence of the Arabic Novel:

Modern studies indicate that the Arabic novel, in its contemporary aesthetic and structural form, is a product of the modern literary renaissance. It was not part of the prevailing expressive forms in classical Arabic literature. Although popular narrative forms such as *The Epic of Antara*, *Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan*, and *Al-Zir Salem* existed, they fall under what is known as folk literature or oral storytelling and do not fulfill the artistic characteristics of the novel in the modern, technical sense. Many scholars argue that the emergence of the Arabic novel is closely linked to the period of cultural encounter with the West, particularly during the early stages of the development of a modernist consciousness among the Arab cultural elite.

The Early Emergence of the Arabic Novel:

The earliest beginnings of the Arabic novel appeared between 1857 and the early twentieth century, influenced by the style of *maqāmāt*, characterized by ornate language and rhetorical embellishment. This gave these texts a formal and decorative tone, closer to rhetorical composition than to modern narrative construction. The novel *Zaynab* (1914) by Muhammad Husayn Haykal marked a qualitative turning point, as it

² Marie-Thérèse Journot, *Dictionary of Cinematic Terms*, translated by Faez Bashour, Damascus: Ministry of Culture Publications, 2007, p. 16.

³ Same source, p. 16 .

aimed to transcend this traditional style toward a fully developed artistic novel that emulated the Western model in both structure and technique.

Hanna Al-Fakhouri noted that the early Arabic novel emerged with a social and reformist orientation and was closely tied to the transformations in Arab consciousness during the nineteenth century. This is evident in foundational works such as *Al-Hiyām fī Jinān al-Shām*, *Asma'*, and *Salma*, which blended narrative with a social reformist purpose (Hanna Al-Fakhouri, 1986, pp. 24–28). This tendency is particularly manifest in works such as *Al-Hiyām fī Jinān al-Shām* (1870), *Asma'* (1832), and *Salma* (1878–1879) by Salim al-Bustani, as well as *Majma' al-Bahrayn* and *Al-Sāq 'alā al-Sāq fīmā huwa al-Faryāq* by Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, and the reformist treatises of Nāṣif al-Yāzījī. These texts represent foundational attempts to address social issues amidst the intellectual and political transformations of the Arab world at the time, despite their relative distance from the formal and narrative conventions of the modern novel.⁴

The Emergence of Cinema:

The emergence of cinema was closely linked to the human need to develop a technique capable of capturing moving images from reality, with the aim of visually simulating daily life. It also responded to a scientific necessity: the documentation of natural phenomena such as the movements of celestial bodies, planets, and living organisms—phenomena that the human eye is incapable of perceiving accurately due to their subtlety or speed.

However, scientifically oriented films did not attract the same popular interest as fictional and entertainment films, which better aligned with the audience's inclination toward amusement and escapism.

The theoretical origins of cinema are associated with the concept of the camera obscura (Latin for “dark chamber”), also referred to in French as *chambre noire*. This was a primitive optical device consisting of a darkened room with a small aperture in one of its walls. Through this narrow opening, an inverted and reduced image of the external scene would be projected onto the opposite wall. This principle laid the theoretical foundation for photography and contributed significantly to the development of visual perception and projection concepts that eventually paved the way for the birth of cinematic art.

⁴ See: Hanna Al-Fakhoury, *Al-Jami' fī Tarikh al-Adab al-'Arabi – Al-Adab al-Hadith* (Comprehensive History of Arabic Literature – Modern Literature), Dar Al-Jeel, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st edition, 1986, pp. 24–28.

Essentially, it was a room equipped with only a narrow hole in one of its walls, through which a precise reproduction of the external scene would be re-projected on the opposing interior surface.⁵

The Cinématographe of the Lumière Brothers:

"The Cinématographe, invented by the Lumière brothers in 1895, is considered a pivotal technical development in the history of cinema, as it combined both photography and projection into a single mechanism. This innovation opened up new possibilities for documenting reality and transforming it into a moving visual scene, marking the actual beginning of cinema as an art, audience, and independent field of knowledge." The birth of cinematic art was the result of intensive scientific and technical efforts, culminating in its official launch on December 28, 1895, through screenings presented by the brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière using their device known as the "Cinématographe," at the Indian Salon in Paris. This event represented a landmark moment in the history of visual arts, as France embraced the birth of film as a new art form combining both technique and visual expression. Therefore, cinema sought to explore the hidden aspects that theater could not reveal to the audience.⁶

The early cinematic screenings were primarily characterized by their simple documentary nature, lacking the artistic techniques and narrative structures that would later become foundational to cinematic language. At the dawn of the 20th century, cinema was still in its infancy, and the primary focus of filmmakers and inventors was not yet on creating fully realized artistic experiences. Instead, these early films aimed to captivate audiences through the sheer novelty and wonder of the moving image itself, which was considered a groundbreaking scientific innovation of the era.

Rather than presenting complex stories or characters, these short films—often no longer than one or two minutes—captured mundane moments of everyday life. They included scenes such as workers leaving a factory, trains arriving at stations, or street vendors selling their goods. These snippets were not driven by narrative logic but by the visual fascination they inspired. The absence of editing, dramatic arcs, or character development emphasized their role as spectacles of motion and life, rather than as forms of dramatic or artistic storytelling.

⁵ Mahmoud Abrakene, *What is Cinema? Cinema: Art, Language, and Means of Communication*, Vol. 1, Diwan of University Publications, Algiers, 2nd edition, 2011, pp. 28-29.

⁶ Kadour, Jidi. *Cinema in Algeria*. A thesis presented for the PhD degree, supervised by: Farqani Jaziah, Department of Dramatic Arts, University of Oran, p. 21.

The devices used for viewing these early films, such as Thomas Edison's **Kinetoscope** and the **Bioscope**, limited the audience to an individual or a small group at a time. This format reinforced the experimental and demonstrative function of cinema during its formative years. These machines were technical marvels, allowing viewers to peek into a box and watch a continuous loop of moving images through a peephole. The experience was more akin to watching a scientific demonstration than attending a theatrical performance.

Moreover, the simplicity of these films reflected the technological limitations of the time. Cameras were stationary, capturing action from a single, fixed perspective. There was no sound, no dialogue, and no editing as we understand it today. Lighting was natural or rudimentary, and performances, if any, were spontaneous and unscripted.

Nonetheless, these initial cinematic efforts laid the groundwork for future developments. They signaled the immense potential of cinema not just as a recording device, but as a medium capable of creative expression and cultural influence. The public's enthusiastic reception of these screenings demonstrated a deep-seated human fascination with the illusion of movement and opened the door for rapid advancements in narrative structure, cinematography, and cinematic aesthetics. Thus, while these early films may have been limited in their artistic sophistication, they marked the birth of a new visual language—one that would soon evolve into a dominant form of global storytelling.

Among the most prominent of these early scenes were those filmed by the Lumière brothers in the city of Lyon, such as "Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory" and "Arrival of a Train at the Station", in addition to various other scenes depicting everyday life in the city's streets. These short films attracted widespread public interest and enthusiasm. Spectators would gather in the evenings to watch themselves or familiar surroundings projected onto the screen, a phenomenon that laid the foundation for an early and powerful emotional connection between audiences and the cinematic image. This initial bond between viewers and the moving image not only reflected the novelty of seeing reality reproduced visually, but also underscored cinema's emerging role as a medium of collective identification and cultural resonance.

The Relationship between the Novel and Cinema:

The relationship between the novel and cinema represents a central critical issue that has long preoccupied both writers and filmmakers. This duality has remained a subject of ongoing debate concerning the primacy of influence and inspiration between the two forms. For over a century, cinema has served as a powerful cultural medium with a profound impact on collective memory, particularly through the adaptation of world-renowned literary texts into films. These adaptations involve reconfiguring the narrative structure of the novel into a visual language grounded in screenplay writing, scenes, and cinematic shots, thereby transforming literary storytelling into a distinctly cinematic discourse.

Cinematic adaptation of literary texts has provided an opportunity to reimagine these works through an innovative visual perspective, thereby enhancing their dissemination and transforming some novels into cultural icons whose fame has surpassed the boundaries of the original texts. This literary genre, however, had no precedent in Arabic literature prior to the Arabs' encounter with Western civilization in the nineteenth century⁷.

The novel is considered one of the most prominent literary genres that merges artistic creativity with aesthetic expression. It is a lengthy prose narrative form based on a coherent imaginative structure, through which a series of interconnected events are presented, carried out by characters who are either fictional or inspired by reality, unfolding within a specific temporal and spatial framework. Typically, the novel addresses human, social, psychological, and intellectual issues, reflecting the author's vision of the world and existence, thus rendering it a mirror of society and its transformations.

The novel relies on a range of narrative techniques such as plot, narration, description, dialogue, focalization, and polyphony. These elements contribute to enriching the artistic structure of the text and deepening its symbolic and semantic meanings. Moreover, the novel may draw upon historical or social reality, or be founded entirely on fiction—or it may combine both—granting it a high degree of artistic flexibility in representing or reimagining reality from an aesthetic and philosophical perspective.

The novel also serves as a fertile space for experimenting with forms and styles, which has rendered it the most developed and inclusive of all literary genres, capable of assimilating various cultural and intellectual discourses.

⁷ Qasim, Siza. *Binaa' al-Riwaayah* [The Structure of the Novel]. The General Egyptian Book Organization, Cairo, Egypt, no edition, 2004, p. 23.

In its early stages, the Arabic short story and novel were characterized by a traditional nature, largely marked by imitation of the Western model, particularly in historical and social aspects, without a clear adherence to a specific artistic school. These narratives were often written by non-specialist authors who engaged in narrative writing as a secondary activity alongside their journalistic work. This contributed to a limited degree of specialization and a noticeable lack of artistic elements in their literary production.

However, Mahjar (diaspora) writers, such as Gibran Khalil Gibran, presented a more mature and refined model due to their direct contact with Western literature. Their works, including *Ara'is al-Muru'j* (1906), *Al-Arwah al-Mutamarrida* (1908), *Al-'Awāšif* (1910), and *Al-Ajniha al-Mutakassira* (1912), were imbued with a spirit of rebellion against rigidity and a call for renewal and liberation. These texts reflected a deeper engagement with aesthetic and philosophical dimensions, setting a precedent for the evolution of Arabic narrative forms.

The close relationship between the novel and the seventh art—cinema—has been evident since the earliest moments of the latter's emergence, particularly during its silent era. At that time, films relied on intertitles inserted between scenes to convey dialogue content or clarify what the cinematic camera was incapable of visually expressing. From the point at which cinema began to move beyond the mere recording of moving objects and toward the presentation of narrative tales with dramatic structure—that is, narrative films—it found in literary texts, especially the novel, a rich source of inspiration for its themes, characters, and narrative frameworks.

This interaction laid the foundation for a complementary relationship between the two art forms, one that has endured to the present day, despite fluctuations influenced by cultural and industrial conditions across different countries and historical phases of cinematic development.

Furthermore, cinema did not merely borrow subject matter from literature; it also drew on some of its narrative techniques. For example, the concept of the "close-up" shot corresponds to detailed description in the novel, while the "cut" is analogous to the transition between paragraphs or scenes in literary texts. Accordingly, the relationship between the novel and cinema has never been one of simple imitation, but rather one of artistic and aesthetic interaction and cross-fertilization. This dynamic has enabled both forms to renew their expressive tools and expand their artistic horizons in response to the cultural and aesthetic shifts of modernity and the postmodern era "At a

time when written intertitles were used to convey the content of dialogue or to explain what the camera was unable to communicate visually at that stage." ⁸

Since its earliest steps—transitioning from merely capturing moving images to producing narrative films with integrated dramatic structures—cinema has found in literature, particularly the novel, a rich reservoir from which to draw its themes, characters, and narrative frameworks. From its formative stages up to the present day, cinema has relied extensively on literary works as primary sources for constructing plots and shaping its aesthetic and intellectual visions. This reliance has fostered a dynamic and enduring relationship between the two art forms, a relationship that has oscillated over time depending on cultural, political, and production contexts across various countries and stages in the evolution of the cinematic industry.

Cinema's engagement with literature has not been limited to thematic borrowing. Rather, it has also absorbed several narrative techniques intrinsic to literary expression and transformed them into visual tools. For instance, the "close-up" shot functions analogously to detailed literary description, while the "cut" in editing mirrors the shift between paragraphs or scenes in a written text. In this way, cinema emerged not as a mere replica of literature, but as an autonomous art form that reinterprets literary material through its own visual and montage-based language, creating a new expressive space that reconfigures meaning in a distinctively cinematic way.

Conversely, the influence of cinema on literature has been no less significant. This became particularly evident in the mid-twentieth century, especially after the Second World War, as writers increasingly absorbed the visual and dramatic dynamism offered by film. The discovery of "sound cinema" followed a period during which silent films had already exerted a profound influence on modern narrative fiction. Many writers began composing their texts with the foreknowledge or intention that their work might be adapted into a film. They even began to adopt narrative strategies that mirrored cinematic structures—condensed dialogue, accelerated pacing, and scene-like descriptive sequences.

Some authors went so far as to predict that this emergent art form, with its "revolving hand" (a metaphor for the film projector), would profoundly revolutionize their lives and creative practices. They foresaw the need to adapt to the language of the screen, the visual logic of the camera, and the demands of cinematic storytelling. Thus

⁸ Nader Abdallah Dassa, *The Art of Film Directing*, Dar Al-I'sar Al-Ilmi, Amman, Jordan, 1st ed., 2016, p. 298.

emerged the necessity to develop a “new form of writing”—one that would not only be inspired by cinema but also engage with it as a creative partner in the production of aesthetic and human meaning.

At the Arab level, the Arabic novel has enjoyed significant opportunities for adaptation into cinematic works. A number of the most prominent literary texts have been transformed into films that have left a lasting imprint on the history of Arab cinema. Among these are *Zainab* by Mohamed Hussein Heikal, *Qandil Umm Hashim* by Yahya Haqqi, *The Trilogy* by Naguib Mahfouz, *Men in the Sun* by Ghassan Kanafani, *For Bread Alone* by Mohamed Choukri, *The Yacoubian Building* by Alaa Al-Aswany, and *South Wind (Rih al-Janoub)* by Abdelhamid Benhedouga. These, along with many other literary creations, have significantly enriched the cinematic landscape in the Arab world.

In the same context, Egyptian cinema witnessed a remarkable surge in literary adaptations during the last five years of the 1950s. During this period, twenty-five novels were adapted into films, most of which became milestones in the history of Egyptian cinema, due to their artistic merit and cultural impact. This trend underscores the profound and dynamic relationship between literature and cinema within the Arab cultural sphere.

Among the most prominent literary works that were adapted into cinematic films in the Arab context are *Du'a al-Karawan* by Taha Hussein, *Qalbi* by Youssef El Sebai, and *Bidaya wa Nihaya* by Naguib Mahfouz. Additionally, Arab cinema witnessed a significant wave of activity from well-known writers who engaged in writing screenplays for films that were not adapted from literary texts. Among these writers were Naguib Mahfouz, Ihsan Abdel Quddous, and Al-Sharqawi, who actively contributed to enriching Arab cinema with their literary works, either reimagined or presented in innovative cinematic forms⁹

Conclusion:

Hence, the relationship between literature and cinema has become remarkably strong, to the extent that each art form now significantly depends on the other. The novel has emerged as a vital source of inspiration for cinema, while cinema has borrowed many artistic methods and stylistic tools from literature. This reciprocal relationship is clearly manifested in the success of novels after their adaptation into films, as well as

⁹ Mahamoud Qasim, *A Comparative Reading Between Literature and Cinema*, *Al-Bayan Magazine*, Kuwait Writers Association, Kuwait 1998, p. 73

in the large number of films based on literary works. The mutual influence between literature and cinematic art has transcended traditional frameworks, evolving into a more dynamic and multifaceted interaction. This relationship is no longer confined to the mere adaptation or promotion of literary or cinematic works; rather, it has expanded to include the development of narrative techniques in both fields, making it a rich relationship marked by artistic maturity and diversity.

The connection between literature and cinema—considered the seventh art after the linguistic, musical, and visual arts—is inherently complex and interwoven. It is not a one-sided relationship, but rather a continuous interaction between the two domains. This interplay has led some novelists, after watching cinematic films, to express the wish that they could write as vividly and visually as the camera portrays. Cinema, as an authentic and autonomous art form, has distinguished itself from literature in that it no longer merely transmits literary works as in the past, but instead utilizes literature as a creative tool to produce original cinematic works governed by the specific laws and aesthetics of filmmaking.

Now that the boundaries between the art of cinema and the art of literature have become clearer, cinema's reliance on literary works is no longer seen as problematic. Instead, it has become evident that the relationship between the two is complementary and reciprocal. Cinematic art often draws on literature, paving the way for novelists to enter the realm of screenwriting and directing. Moreover, narrative techniques derived from literary storytelling are increasingly evident in cinematic productions. Many films also carry the titles of famous literary works by renowned international authors, further reflecting the depth and richness of the relationship between literature and the seventh art.

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- . Same source, p. 163.

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