



**Art Academy  
of Latvia**



**IDEAS AND MATERIALS:  
CULTURAL HYBRIDITY OF THE BALTIC  
AND OTHER REGIONS**

ART ACADEMY OF LATVIA, 2021

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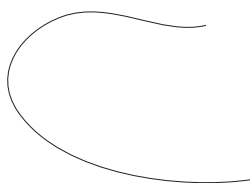
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Ojārs Spārītis, Agita Gritāne

## PREFACE

The conference of the Art Academy of Latvia is the result of our creative brainstorm and reaction on the theoretical discourse of Professor of the University of Cambridge Peter Burke, dealing with the phenomenon of cultural hybridity in the majority of his theoretical works. Since 2013, the translation of Peter Burke's book *Cultural Hybridity* has been available for scholars of humanities and social sciences in Latvia (translated by Dr. philol. Pauls Daija, publishing house "Mansards", 2013); however, its impact on new research methodology and conclusions is not yet noticeable in the theory of culture and art. The ambitions of the Art Academy of Latvia resulted in inviting the world-famous researcher of cultural phenomena to the annual conference organised by the Department of Doctoral Studies. The conference was organised as a platform for exchange of ideas at an international level. The goal of the conference was manifested not only in the need to provide insight in methodological approaches for research in art history carried out by lecturers and doctoral students alike, but also to help formulate a theoretical platform and offer innovative approaches for both research in traditional art disciplines and the ecosystem of interdisciplinary studies.

The organizers of the conference express their gratitude to Professor Peter Burke for the theoretical guidelines and for raising awareness of cultural hybridity in the context of contemporary culture studies. We would also like to thank each participant in this exchange of ideas for being interested in the analysis of art history, theory and interdisciplinary subjects. Following the assessment of an international Editorial Board, ten most outstanding papers in English have been included in the collective monograph, revealing each researcher's individual perspective on the research problem. The conference papers that were presented and written in Latvian are included in a separate compilation. Along with the compilation in English, the range of all studies is thus documented and offered to readers. It also encourages colleagues to test the hybridity theory as a method in art analysis. The compilers of the collection and the Editorial Board are of the opinion that the factual material included in the collective monograph, as well as the interpretation and application of the hybridity theory and the conclusions drawn will contribute to the Baltic and European space of knowledge production.

# IDEAS AND MATERIALS: CULTURAL HYBRIDITY OF THE BALTIC AND OTHER REGIONS

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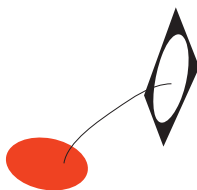
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# NETWORKED MEANING-MAKING AND HYBRIDITY: A FEW NOTES ON CONTEMPORARY ART PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE BALTICS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the construction of meaning and hybridity in contemporary photography, focusing on examples from the Baltics. Today photography practitioners from Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia increasingly produce works that not only are intermedial and hybrid in nature, but also function as elaborate artistic ‘systems’, where meaning is to be found within a large field of cultural references. While traditionally meaning in photography was seen to emanate from the content of a photograph, today this process is multi-layered and intricate. Photography practitioners increasingly invest images with meanings that gesture to outside and beyond the frames. Meaning-making takes place within an ever-expanding and arbitrary cultural field, of which the viewer is expected to have some knowledge to ‘unpack’ meanings.

This has much to do with the network turn. Today photography is fluid, adaptive and interconnected, with networked capabilities enabling new functionalities for photography and a further expansion into our daily lives, all of which reflects in artistic practices. A traditional two-dimensional photographic image plays just one part in artistic systems, where it is intermixed with sculpture, installation, video, performative elements, and written word. This hybrid nature of practice marks Baltic photographers as part of a global generation and allows their work to tackle complex contemporary issues.

**Keywords:** *contemporary photography, hybridity, intermediality, Baltic art photography, photographic meaning*

This paper explores two interrelated tendencies in contemporary art photography: multilayered meaning-making and hybridity. While the focus here is on examples by photography practitioners from the three Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the research is informed by and applicable to a wider international context. What follows takes as a point of departure the proposal that the regime of meaning-making in a number of contemporary photographic works differs quite fundamentally from the way the meaning was ascribed and attributed in photography in the not-so-distant past. Traditional art-historical understanding of photography has emphasized an image’s content, implicitly suggesting that meaning emanates first and foremost from that which is depicted in a photograph. A photograph was ‘about’ the visual matter, with the confines of the image delineated by the photograph’s frame seemingly demarcating the site of meaning. This analytical approach was (and, to an extent, still is) continually reinforced by the reliance of visual studies, film, and photography on the assumption that the relationship between the photograph and its object is indexical: this bond has been further described as special (Batchen, 2000, 72), existential (Rosen, 2001, 18), and even outright physical or causal (Smith and Lefley, 2016, 175). A



sense of physical continuity, what cinema scholar Jean-Pierre Geuens vividly referred to as “an invisible umbilical cord” (2002, 20), supposedly connects each photograph to its originary scene or object. This has translated to an emphasis on visual analysis comprised of close and intent looking at an image to analyse its visual content – which, as suggested by the concept of photographic indexicality, was formed by the very rays of the object at the moment of capturing.

The historical establishment of the special existential-physical link between object-turned-content and its image has direct affinity with the traditional belief in the veracity of photographic images, which was not only an ally of photojournalism and documentary photography, but also key for artistic practices, where it helped to make photographic images distinct from other forms of visual images. One fitting example in the latter context is Henri Cartier-Bresson’s idea of the ‘decisive moment’ – the flag-bearing slogan of the humanistic photography movement that flourished in the West following WWII – which has defined the photographic image as a careful and instinctive observation of the visible. A photograph was conceived as a mirror reflection of a moment when forms, shapes, and shadows meet in a composition that can supposedly reveal something true and genuine about reality. In other words, here the supposition that photographic capture is truthful is further infused with ideas about artistic vision and its symbolic elevation. Art photographers in the Baltic States successfully adopted the notion of ‘decisive moment’.

Practitioners of the so-called Lithuanian School of Photography constituted a generation specifically influenced by Bresson and wider humanistic aesthetic-philosophical ideals. This prominent art movement, most active in the 1960s and 1970s, produced (mostly) carefully composed black and white compositions that sought to capture and display something metaphorical about human lives. The works focused on widely relatable anthropocentric symbolic categories, such as work, study, youth, beauty, etc. Even photographic practices at the time considered edgy or counter to dominant narratives, like those by Violeta Bubelytė or Vytas Luckus, can be seen as more poetic and surrealism-inspired versions of the broader approach. While somewhat complicating the imagined conceptual unity of Lithuanian photography at the time, their works still maintained the overall primacy of the image-content. Despite some variance, works from the period can be characterised by the crucial bond between a scene and its image. The viewer does not need specific cultural knowledge to appreciate the photographs by Antanas Sutkus, Romualdas Rakauskas, or Aleksandras Macijauskas, or their Latvian colleagues Andrejs Grants and Inta Ruka (perhaps one reason why they were and remain popular). The popularity and accessibility are facilitated by the fact that humanism-, or more precisely, positivism-influenced ideas about certain qualities of humanity and togetherness, were often at the centre of their pictures. Not so much changed in the 1980s and 1990s. While Lithuanian photographers increasingly turned attention to scenes of the banal, producing what photography historian Agnė Narušytė described as an “aesthetics of boredom” (2010), the notion locating the source of meaning in the image itself remained, slightly twisted: by attending to that which most considered inconsequential and casual, photographers focused on the hitherto unnoticed. In spite of variances, we can say that in the case of the 20th century Baltic photography the regime of meaning was attuned to a rather simple formula: the photographic image largely is *what it depicts*, in tandem with a sought-after symbolic effectiveness coming from the artistic sensibility of its various operators.

This stance was further supported by the traditional system of presentation, meant to be equally accessible and emphasising the image-content. Standard display entailed a (framed) two-dimensional image, hung on or close to the wall, with its centre corresponding to the viewer’s eye-level, all this emphasizing the neutrality of the setting and foregrounding the



Fig. 1. Various photographic illustrations from *Camera Lucida*.

importance of the image-content. Such a mode of presentation aimed to minimize distractions from what was a statement of the autonomy of the photographic image.

Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* is in many ways a classic text on photography that reflects its traditional ideals. For Barthes, the medium's ability to present things the camera once saw – encapsulated in his famous 'that has been' – is the pinnacle of photography's allure and power, and the kind of photographs reproduced in *Camera Lucida* visually manifest this quality. This presentation is imbued with presence: the depicted scenes come to life, pricking the reader with vestiges of a felt presence. In typically poetic language he writes: "It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures" (1981, 5).

For Barthes, this fixed inseparability is the crux of photography's meaningfulness. In other words, the ontological source of photography's strength is in the bond it forms with the world via images. Both Barthes' 'that has been' and the indexical relationship, famously imported (or, one could argue, 'misimported') to photography theory by Rosalind Krauss and Peter Wollen from the semiotic framework by American philosopher Charles S. Peirce in the late 1960s–1970s, encapsulate the importance of what was in front of the lens at the moment of capture, providing theoretical ground for the idea that what the photograph depicts is where its true meaning lies. Effectuated by these and like-minded notions such as the concept of 'the trace', photographs were seemingly forever tied to their referents in a bond that became medium-defining. This helped ground photography's ontological uniqueness and academic stability, establishing the image's content as the site of meaning.

The meaning-within-an-image is a regime with clear boundaries; the frame around the image is the border that separates the site of meaning from what is not a photograph. This may seem almost self-evident, yet today practitioners increasingly invest their images with meanings that do not stem from what is in the photograph. There is a shift of emphasis moving the locus of meaningfulness away from the photograph's visual content, dispersing meaning into a wide cultural field. It is a shift from the primacy of the fixed and natural, towards the fluid, arbitrary, and



Fig. 2. Left: Paul Herbst, from series *Dream Material*, 2012–2015. Right: Cover of *Fantastic Man*, spring-summer issue, 2010.

context-contingent. Furthermore, functioning as part of a broader cultural field, the photograph asks to be decoded, thus actively engaging the viewer, who is tasked with activating the meaning via a combination of collateral knowledge, imagination, and understanding of cultural codes. *Dream Material* (2012–2015), a series by Lithuanian photographer Paul Herbst, offers a useful case study in this phenomenon. As a classical photographic work in form presented as a sequence of framed images on a wall<sup>1</sup>, its presentation only highlights its departure in terms of meaning-making. These photographs not only explicitly refer to cultural entities and topics beyond their frames, but also refer back to each other. The series as a whole operates as a body where a range of motifs recur, yet they repeatedly shape-shift or morph into something slightly different.

The sequencing of visibly constructed scenes across the series is highly deliberate. One motif morphs into another, weaving a dream-like narrative and acting as the unifying structure of the work as a whole. Looking at the first 6 photographs in the series, such inter-referencing, morphing and interconnectedness become evident. Characteristic of the conceptual character of the whole series, the first image shows a drawing fashioned after an iconic portrait of photographer Wolfgang Tillmans that graced the 2010 cover of *Fantastic Man* journal, and is thus a photograph of a drawing of a photograph. This multi-layered mediation in the opening image already suggests a rather complex set of operations whereby meaning is attained in the work.

The boomerang appears as a recurring visual motif across the series. Just decipherable in Tillman's shot, it reveals itself more specifically in images 4–6, varying in shape and size, and most prominently in the 6<sup>th</sup> photograph, one of a few genuinely black and white shots in the series. Here the boomerang is held by a topless young man, sitting cross-legged on

1 *Dream Material* was presented as part of Riga Photography Biennial 2016 central group exhibition *Restart*. It was on view 16 April–12 June, 2016.

a bed and looking pensively into the distance. This image is a direct reference to an iconic photograph by Larry Clark, on the cover of his then-controversial 1971 photobook *Tulsa*. While the gun in Clark's earlier portrait signifies the thrill and potential threat of the kind of life he and his young company were leading at the time, including gunplay and drug use, the boomerang seems to signify an elliptical network of references at play in Herbst's work, and can be seen as the central motif of his later series.

As a symbolic device to highlight shapes and motifs returning, the boomerang seems a suitable metaphor for the work and for the networked meaning-making in photography at large, not only gesturing to the repetition of objects and motifs in different photographs, but also functioning as a visual reminder of how external references are able to infiltrate or be 'thrown into' the photographic work after the fact.

Significantly, both the meaning-making and arguably the whole aesthetic pleasure of encountering these works remain restricted if the viewer fails to recognize references operating within the series. As the limited case studies here show, such gesturing beyond the photographic image itself is not restricted to extra-references to other photographic works alone, but can encompass visual and pop culture, film, even personal anecdotes and dreams. *Dream Material* may disappoint if the viewer encounters the work with the expectations of a beholder of traditional photography, for which meaning-making derives from the 'that has been' quality of the self-contained image. Herbst's series is more constructed than, for instance, works of the classical School of Lithuanian Photography. The demand on the viewer to actively engage with the work may partly explain why the audience of such work seems more limited.

Due in part to this complexity in meaning operations, photographic works can be successfully used to address today's urgent and complex issues. One example is the work of Estonian artist Kristina Õllek, regularly produced in collaboration with her partner Kert Viart, which are research-based and do not shy away from politically-charged topics. *Nautilus New Era* (2018), a multi-layered installation that combines photographic images with video work and sculptural objects, draws from Jules Verne's classical fiction text *Twenty-thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) to address the current problematic topic of deep-sea mining in the age of climate emergency. Whereas the *Dream material* series still adhered to the traditional mode of photographic display outlined above, Õllek emphatically departs from these conventionalities, instead creating a spatial installation using materials related to the mining industry to develop an artificial deep-sea-like environment, wherein questions concerning the ecosystem's fragility are brought closer to the viewer. In a related installation *Filter Feeders, Double Binds & Other Silicones* (2020), she explores marine ecology and man-made attempts at green-energy solutions, using traditional photographs whose simplicity is deceptive. In one particular image, for instance, a hand seeming holds a jelly-fish, which is in fact a water-bubble made by the artist herself based on current scientific experimentations to reduce plastic waste. This image is symptomatic of the depth of research and labour that may go unnoticed if we merely look at what lies inside the frame.

The opening-up of photography's meaning-making and its functioning within an ever-expanding field is intrinsically linked to the networked turn. Photography today is fluid, adaptive and interconnected, as networked capabilities enable a new functionality for photography and a further expansion into our daily lives, circumstances reflected in artistic practices. Images not only increasingly function on a wide plane of cultural meaning, but are also presented in mixed environments wherein a traditional two-dimensional photographic image (if it exists at all) is often just one element, intermixed with sculpture, installation, video, performative elements, and written word.





Fig. 3. Left: Larry Clark, *Dead*, from series *Tulsa*, 1970. Right: Paul Herbst, from series *Dream Material*, 2012–2015.

Some recent photographic work specifically reflects on the network and the logic of its operating principles<sup>2</sup>. Lithuanian artist Indrė Šerpytytė's *2 Seconds of Colour* (2015), presented as an installation of multiple lightboxes with a specially commissioned sound<sup>3</sup>, explicitly engages with *Google* image search. Writing the phrase 'Isis beheadings' into the engine, the artist focused on the brief moment while the visual information is not yet loaded and the interface instead displayed blocks of a dominant colour comprising the yet-to-be-loaded-photograph, as if slightly skewed giant coloured pixels. Showcasing this in-limbo moment and not the images of atrocities themselves, Šerpytytė engages in a philosophical dilemma taking up the issue of looking at atrocities, and the 'decision to not look' as a potent political gesture. These works actively not only engage with the viewer's imagination, but also require some knowledge of them. It would be hard to understand *2 Seconds of Colour* without being familiar with how *Google* image search operates or without personal experience of the characteristic moment of abstract blockness. The work simply could not function without the network. It also recalls that digital data is information-to-be that can transform into anything rather than existing in a fixed, solid state. Here images are as if in the moment of transition or latency, instead of being already formed and anchored by their visual appearance, as was the usual case with previous analogue photography. Engaging with the now-ubiquitous image search engine, Šerpytytė's work reminds us that the concrete shapes

2 A special 2018 issue of *Fotografija* journal and accompanying exhibition *New Tools in Photography: From Google to Algorithm* addressed this topic.

3 *2 Seconds of Colour* was presented in Šerpytytė's solo exhibition *Absence of Experience* at Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius in 2017.



Fig. 4. Kristina Öllek, *Feeling With the Water Jelly*, installation view, 2020.

which digital photographs assume via networks are code-dependent and somewhat arbitrary. *Undecidability*, as Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis have put it in one of the pioneering articles on post-digital photography, is the “key property of the networked image” (2013, 151). The examples of *Dream Material*; *Nautilus New Era*; *Filter Feeders*, *Double Binds & Other Silicones*; *2 Seconds of Colour*, are united by virtue of their meaning referring to wider, more diffuse, and seemingly less relevant (at least, on first sight) cultural phenomena and processes. Here the meaning of the photographic image gets divorced from a strict bond to its subject matter to the extent that what is literally seen is not necessarily coupled to what it means. This results in something of a masked ball wherein something else masquerades as that which can be seen on the image’s surface. The coloured blocks, boomerang, and jellyfish all point through cultural codes to something they are not strictly of, not to what they are per se. Put differently, the photograph may be about something totally different that its appearances reveal.

Today Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian artists increasingly produce photographic works that not only ask for the viewer’s rather active engagement, but also function as elaborate hybrid ‘systems’. While the expanded meaning-making is an invisible process, hybridity is a physical manifestation of the same underlying principles of fluidity and incipient links. The environments where photography is displayed today are becoming increasingly intermedial, hybrid, and site-responsive, including, among others, the settings for Marge Monko’s *Stones Against Diamonds*, *Diamonds Against Stones* (2018); Liga Spunde’s *When Hell Is Full the Dead Will Walk the Earth* (2019) and *What’s A Girl Like You Doing In A Place Like This* (2017); Vytautas Kumža’s *Shifting presence* (2021) and *Trust it, Use it, Prove it* (2016); *Trial and Error* (2017) by Reinis Lismanis. Sometimes hybridity may manifest in a rather straightforward and tongue-in-cheek way, as was the case with Robertas Narkus’ recent solo exhibition *The Board* (2020), where the artist used characteristic humour to pit life-size photographs of objects with some of the objects themselves in a whimsical display.

Contemporary photography increasingly responds to and engages with the present via hybrid and multi-layered displays, wherein images function as nodes in elaborate artistic ‘systems’. The meaning of photographs presented in these systems is likewise networked and multidimensional, not referring back to its referent as much as pointing to diverse and sometimes even contradictory nodes of meaning. When the photograph is divorced from its subject-matter and is ‘undecided’ it can be almost anything, context-dependent. Staking cultural associations, the photograph enables itself as an important currency in the cultural dialogue, able to shape-shift and act as a message of communication.

Intermediality and what has been framed here as a networked regime of meaning-making are noteworthy features of contemporary art photography from the Baltics and beyond. These phenomena are not isolated from wider social and cultural tendencies, but act as both reactions to and expressions of them. Culture is increasingly interconnected, such that fluidity, shape-shifting and adaptability are important cultural and practical principles. Today meaning itself is seemingly more changeable and fragmented. The real is less fixed, and reality is more about shaping notions, opining, and arguing. Contemporary works from the Baltic States correspond to these circumstances, showing that photography actively addresses and shapes complex social, political, and economic issues, while also raising philosophical questions and provoking thoughtful meditations. That this is increasingly done in hybrid forms is another aspect befitting our times. While no longer an unflappable and unflinching mirror of the physical world, photography remains an active mirror of the culture that makes it.

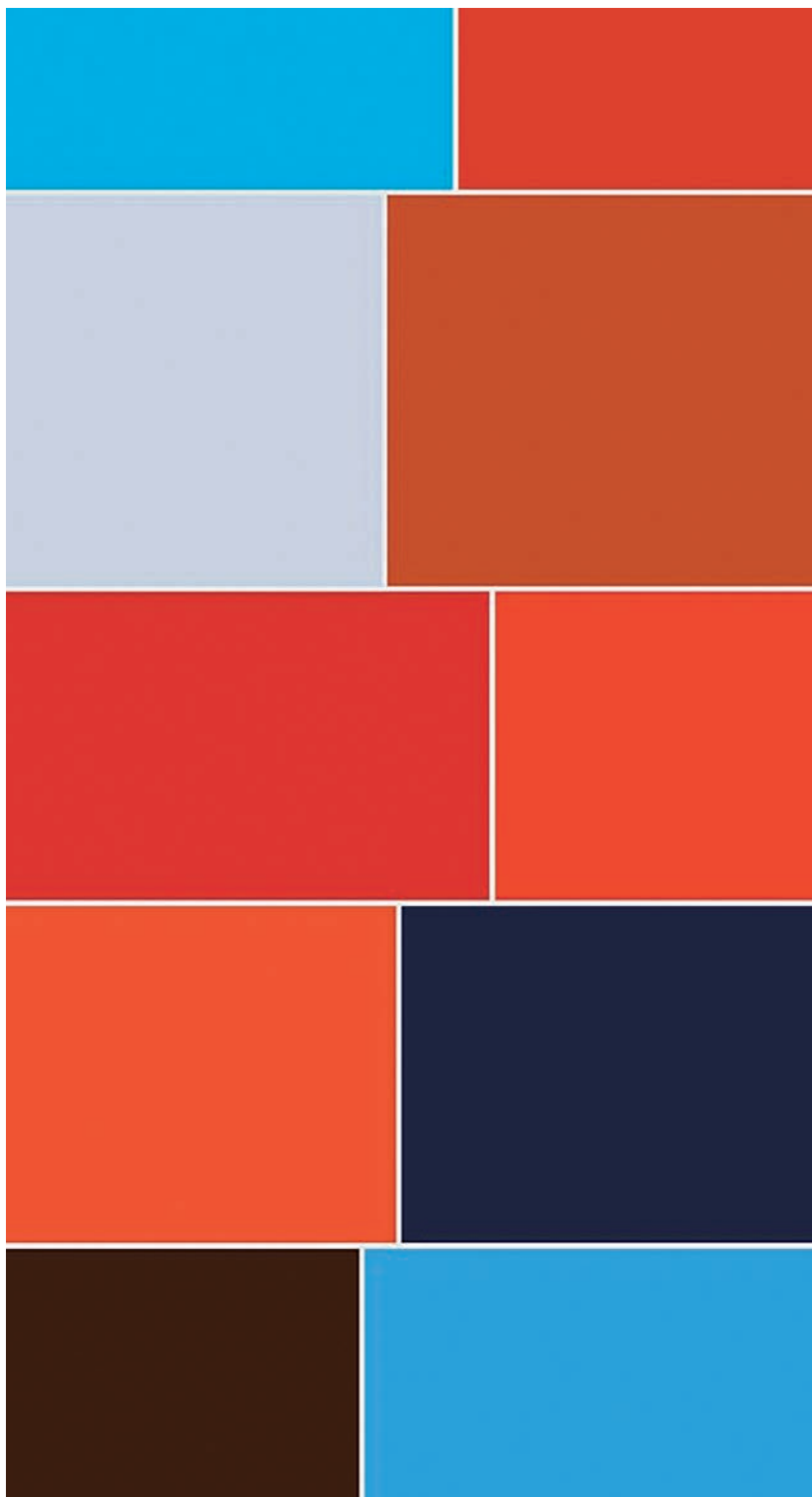
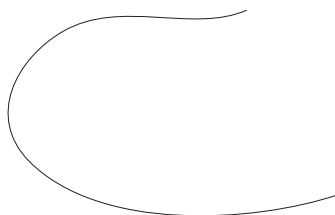


Fig. 5. Indrė Šerpytė, from the series *2 Seconds of Colour*, 2016.



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