


# Shock and the materialist conception of art: Considerations for a politicised cultural psychology

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## Abstract

The materialist conception of art understands art in relation to the material conditions within and by which art is produced and consumed. For cultural psychology, the materialist conception of art has been useful for developing insights into how individual perceptions are shaped, and are shaped by, culture as a collectively produced and historically embedded site of meaning-making. However, in much of cultural psychology, the relationship between progressive politics and the materialist conception of art remains under-appreciated. In this article, I consider how cultural psychologists might strengthen this relation through artistic shock, that is, a subjective, perceptual, and/or historiographical rupture brought about through the experience of art. In particular, I outline how Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin theorised and practiced artistic shock, and examine what the work of these thinkers could mean for cultural psychologists working with political collectives to grapple with psychopolitical questions related to subjectivity, contradiction, and memory. I conclude by reflecting on how future work that seeks to politicise cultural psychology might engage with the materialist conception of art.

## Keywords

Brecht, Benjamin, shock, cultural psychology, art, materialism

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## Introduction

There is little doubt that art, and creative expression more generally, can activate us emotionally (González Rey, 2016). Indeed, several studies have demonstrated the connection between art (its creation and its consumption) and improved psychological well-being (see Lehmann & Brinkmann, 2020). Cultural psychology has an especially rich tradition of exploring the effects of artistic objects and artistic creation on the psyche (see e.g., Brockmeier, 2010; Glăveanu, 2010; Malherbe, 2020; Moghaddam, 2010; Parolin & Pellegrinelli, 2020; Sammut et al., 2010; Tanggaard, 2013; Vygotsky, 1971). This tradition is far from monolithic. Cultural psychologists have sought to understand and engage with art through a range of interpretive paradigms, not all of which are compatible with one another. The materialist conception of art (i.e., basing our understanding of art on the physical conditions of its creation and consumption) represents one such paradigm that is, I will argue, especially compatible with emancipatory political activity (see e.g., Kelley, 2002). As such, in this article, I am concerned with how the materialist conception of art can politicise cultural psychology or, put differently, how the materialist conception of art can transform and reorient cultural psychology practice by putting such practice to work for a progressive political agenda.

In what follows, I outline what it is I mean by the materialist conception of art and how this relates to progressive politics more broadly. I then argue that cultural psychology has, for the most part, neglected progressive politics in its engagements with the materialist conception of art. Following this, I explain how artistic shock (i.e., art's capacity to rupture perception, historiography, and organisational forms) was theorised and practiced by Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin as an emancipatory and fundamentally materialist function of art (see Ezcurra, 2012), and how cultural psychologists working with political collectives can use artistic shock to critically interrogate subjectivity, contradiction, and memory. I conclude by reflecting on how future work that seeks to politicise cultural psychology might engage with the materialist conception of art.

## Politics and the Materialist Conception of Art

Although the material denotes a finite, physical substance, materialism as a philosophical orientation has been conceptualised in several different ways (e.g., New Materialism; historical materialism; mechanical materialism; vulgar materialism; Enlightenment materialism), not all of which are compatible with one another. Nonetheless, Eagleton (2016) posits that we can define the materialist approach, broadly, as a way of understanding the world that takes seriously the palpability of human relations, that is, people's "animality, their practical activity and corporeal constitution" (p. 35). For the materialist, matter - or the physical - is the primary basis of life, human power, consciousness, and society more generally (Williams, 1988). As such, materialism signifies the physicality of the body, its surrounding environment, and the relations between the two - the principle of which is labour, or how bodies go to work on the world around them. None of this is to say that the materialist view rejects human agency or the metaphysical, but rather that such

matters are always engaged in and against material conditions, including bodily constraints.

It follows, then, that a materialist view of art does not consider our experiences of artistic creativity as determined solely by cognition or a particular skillset (Tanggaard, 2013). Rather, the materialist view focuses on the real-world circumstances in and by which art is created and consumed, as well as the consequences of art as it is embedded in the physical world. The materialist view of art assists us in understanding how art is never an individualised affair. It is always tied in with perceptions, social structures, labours, and histories that are fundamentally social and collective (Eagleton, 1976; Moghaddam, 2010).

Materialists argue that our physical conditions constitute the point of origin for artistic creativity (Tanggaard, 2013). The tools we have access to, our socioeconomic circumstances, the levels of political repression we face, and the finances available to us all offer a better understanding of creativity than the individual traits of an artistic creator (Parolin & Pellegrinelli, 2020). Our material circumstances allow for some artistic practices while disallowing others (Glăveanu, 2010). Moreover, the realisation of our creative capacities is determined by the invisibilised work that makes artistic creation possible, such as the reproductive labour (i.e., cleaning, caring, cooking) that keeps artists alive (Malherbe, 2022b). With all of this in mind, the materialist view of art represents a lens through which to understand the conditions under which artistic creativity is distributed, which is to say, who can access art and the creative energies required to produce art, and why.

While it is certainly true that materialists prioritise the actual circumstances within which art is created, they are also attentive to the innovative ways by which art can depict these circumstances and reveal their ideological underpinnings (Eagleton, 1976). In its engagement with the representational capacities of art, the materialist viewpoint seeks to understand the open-ended, interacting systems that structure the relations between artists and audiences of art (see Glăveanu, 2010). These relations are complex. For example, audiences who consume art furnish it with meaning that may run contrary to the intentions of the artist. Marx, Engels, and Trotsky were all revolutionaries who found much value in how Balzac, a profoundly conservative novelist, depicted working-class social conditions (Birchall, 1977), just as many South African freedom fighters imprisoned by the racist apartheid state saw political resonances in Shakespeare's plays (Desai, 2013). For the materialist, the apparent intent of artists is less important than the web of socio-material practices that imbue a work of art with meaning in the world (Teo, 2017).

Materialism is often misunderstood as being concerned primarily with so-called political art. This is certainly not the case, with much materialist analysis grappling with art's capacity to express fundamentally human, or non-utilitarian, interests (Williams, 1988). A more accurate assertion is that materialists read politics (i.e., an action orientation towards materially constituted power differentials) into art by examining a particular artwork's relationship to the material world. As such, materialism makes clear that art is not free from politics, with broader political currents typically determining which art is valuable and which is not. Under capitalism, for instance, the most readily accepted or supported art is profitable art (Malherbe, 2020). Art is, after all, an industry, part of the capitalist economic base (Eagleton, 1976). As Jameson (2015) puts it: "The

world financial market is mirrored in the world art market” (p. 122). Such materialist analyses help us to understand how it is that some art, at the level of its content, can level unambiguous criticism towards capitalist ideology while remaining profitable (see [Malherbe, 2022b](#); [Teo, 2017](#)).

Materialists who are driven by a progressive political orientation seek not only to use art as a means for understanding exploitative social conditions. They are also concerned with how we might use art to draw out the possibilities for a more materially equitable society that lies hidden or obscured within the present, thereby fusing realism with romanticism in a politically potent manner (see [Eagleton, 1976; 2016](#)). [Williams \(1961\)](#) formulates this point well when he writes that “art also creates, by new perceptions and responses, elements which the society, as such, is not able to realize” (p. 86). Art can disturb our perceptions of the status quo not by describing oppressive social apparatuses, but by viscerally expressing the function of these apparatuses ([Graham, 1997](#)). Art can make clear the unreality of our ideological world, that is, how this world is made up of ideas and images that can be reconstructed, taken up, and repurposed at one moment, and altogether abandoned at another; looking beyond our material conditions while remaining rooted in them. [Kelley \(2002\)](#), for example, draws attention to how a materialist notion of art has, historically, been central to the formation of the political imagination of Black-led emancipatory social movements the world over. Yet, when art is confined to elite society, its politicising potential is constrained. The politically dissident capacities of art are unleashed most effectively when artistic creation and consumption are free and accessible to all ([Teo, 2017](#)).

The materialist view of art is a dialectical one that takes seriously the relations between the consumption, creation, meanings, and reception of art in the real world. Thus, art does not offer a straightforward conception of the political. Rather, art *feels into* the complex processes that constitute the material conditions by which all of life - including inner or psychic life - is realised. It is in this very particular sense that the materialist viewpoint offers to us a psychopolitical understanding of art.

## **Cultural Psychology and the Materialist Conception of Art**

How art affects the mind and body is not predetermined ([González Rey, 2016](#)). The ways by which art moves us - emotionally and physically - change with different historical milieus, meaning that how psychologists engage with art is inextricably tied in with material reality. In other words, how the aesthetic affects us and is affected by us is historically contingent ([Cupchik, 2002](#)). Jazz and theatre were, for instance, at one time understood throughout Europe as constituting so-called ‘low culture’ whereas today they form part of ‘high culture’ (see [Williams, 1961; 1988](#)). When cultural psychology takes seriously the materiality of art, it considers not only art’s variable psychological implications, but also how art - as it is composed in, with, and through material constraints - influences human activity.

Broadly, cultural psychology is a kind of psychology that strives to understand how psychological phenomena are mediated by culture, which is to say, cultural psychology is concerned with the shared ways by which people make meaning within particular cultural

contexts, focusing on psychological similarities and differences between these contexts (Gergen, 2018). Cultural psychology is not value-neutral. Cultural psychologists cannot avoid playing some kind of social and political role, and politicising cultural psychology in a progressive fashion requires probing into whose political interests this field of psychology serves (de Saint-Laurent et al., 2017). Although cultural psychology seeks to break from the psychologisation (i.e., explaining the effects of socio-political systems through the thinking and behaviours of individual psychological subjects) that characterises so much psychology, much of cultural psychology has been used to universalise particular subject positions while defining the ‘cultural Other’ along static or ‘knowable’ parameters (Malherbe, 2020). Resultantly, the individual has remained at the centre of much cultural psychology. Responding to this, the materialist conception of art strives to advance a practice of cultural psychology that takes seriously how emotion and the body work together in our experience of art and, in so doing, seeks to move cultural psychology away from its foundational *embryonic fallacy* that takes the apparently autonomous individual subject as the source and centre of all psychological experience (Moghaddam, 2010).

In his classic treatise on culture, psychology, and art, Vygotsky (1971) spoke of *perezhivanie* as the central emotion that characterises creative artistic performance, uniting intellect and affect as well as the material and the sensuous. It is in the Vygotskyian tradition that cultural psychologists have sought to understand how the experience of art connects our emotional and creative faculties with the social and the collective conditions of the material world (González Rey, 2016). Several cultural psychologists have, for instance, used public art as a means by which to study different interobjective relations, or the shared understandings of material reality that are held within and between cultures (see Sammut et al., 2010). We might then say that the materialist view has been taken up by cultural psychologists in efforts to understand how our experience of art is demonstrative of the mind and body, working together, against particular material constraints (see Lehmann & Brinkmann, 2020).

In his “theory of opposite feelings”, Vygotsky (1971) attempted to capture the complex set of psychological experiences that art can produce within the subject. He argued that the narrative within poetic fables, for instance, can move in two opposite directions. This evokes tension in the reader which is eventually resolved. As he put it “There occurs a short-circuiting of the two opposing currents. The contrast explodes, burns, and dissolves” (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 142). The composition of art is, therefore, constructed in a manner that simultaneously illuminates and transforms the subject’s feelings which, Vygotsky believed, had real-world effects. He wrote that “In order to perceive art, we must contemplate simultaneously the true situation of things and their deviation from this situation” (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 258), and thus the opposite feelings evoked by an artwork render art “the supreme center of biological and social individual processes in society” (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 259). Our experience of art, marked by the tension of opposite feelings, leads us to reflect on how things in the material world are constituted, as well as how they could be constituted (i.e., the social is characterised by tension, but it need not be), thereby bringing the cognitive and the biological to bear on the social and the material. Opposite feelings cannot be separated from the material conditions within which

art is created and consumed, and we can probe further into these conditions through the opposite feelings that art evokes within us.

Vygotsky's approach to the materialist conception of art affords to cultural psychologists a dialectical avenue through which to study individual perceptions and society. As [Lehmann and Brinkmann \(2020\)](#) put it, art can help us to understand the poetic instances (i.e., the tensions between life's beauty and tragedy) of human development, and in this sense it can assist in the task of facilitating a contradictory, fundamentally human depiction of reality within cultural psychology, one that is always shaped by the material conditions of that reality and driven towards an ethic of what this reality could be (see also [Abbey, 2007](#)). The task of a cultural psychology concerned with the materialist conception of art is, therefore, not to psychologise artistic production and consumption, but to use art as a pathway to understanding the ever-fraught action/perception nexus. Cultural psychology is not in the business of replacing everyday or seemingly dull emotional experiences with the potentially more titillating affective responses evoked by art ([Vygotsky, 1971](#)). Instead, cultural psychologists can use art to engage in the ways by which the psychological is lodged within the material, which is to say, cultural psychologists can examine how art makes people feel and link these feelings to the material conditions by which art and individual subjects are determined.

Art can de-automatise our perceptions and generate among people new hopes and fantasies (see [Cupchik, 2002](#)). When cultural psychologists endeavour to understand the psyche through a materialist conception of art, people may discover within themselves new ways of seeing the world, and from this find new ways of acting in it ([Moghaddam, 2010](#)). [Lehmann and Brinkmann \(2020\)](#), drawing from the work of [Abbey \(2007\)](#), refer to the ability of art to reappraise our conceptions of the possible as "poetic motion".

Researching poetic motion from within cultural psychology is challenging because it does not neatly align with conventional or taken-for-granted research paradigms (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods paradigms). As such, we can understand much of cultural psychology's engagement with art through what is known as the performative paradigm, whereby research findings are performed, usually through symbols ([Haseman, 2006](#)). The ability of this performativity to affect some sort of change (e.g., perceptual, subjective, social) constitutes the material basis of the performative paradigm ([Bolt, 2016](#)).

Drawing on the materialist conception of art within cultural psychology undoubtedly has implications for the practice of politics. Art can influence how we form psychic attachments to a political programme, as well as how we appraise and evaluate a political orientation and/or those who we perceive as adhering to this orientation. Nonetheless, because cultural psychology, generally speaking, seeks to understand how the psychological is influenced by culture, the politicising potential of the materialist conception of art is oftentimes a superfluous consideration in the field (see [Malherbe, 2020](#)). However, because culture is always constituted politically ([Eagleton, 2016](#); [Williams, 1961](#)), cultural psychology is urged to embrace progressive politics to a greater extent than it has previously.

There are, however, several ways by which we can draw on the materialist conception of art to politicise cultural psychology, and there are several cultural psychologists who

have done exactly this. It is often forgotten that [Vygotsky \(1971\)](#), himself, conceptualised his theory of opposite feelings from within a Marxist orientation willed towards class struggle (see also [González Rey, 2016](#)). More recently, cultural psychologists have insisted that art is able to extend the political purview of social movement activists, influencing how they envision and make changes in the world (see [Malherbe, 2020](#)). [Sonn and Baker \(2016\)](#), for example, demonstrate how art can instantiate community pedagogies between artists and audiences. These pedagogies can be used to challenge oppression, social exclusion, and marginalisation. Moreover, cultural psychologists from all over the world have drawn on participatory arts methodologies to advance a psychosocial approach to peacebuilding; using art to make links between social justice imperatives, peace, and psychological wellbeing (see [Seedat et al., 2017](#)). Cultural psychology work of this kind is, however, relatively marginal. There is much to be done with respect to moving the materialist conception of art within cultural psychology towards a progressive politics (i.e., using the materialist conception of art to politicise cultural psychology so that such a psychology may be of use to those seeking to advance a progressive political agenda).

In this article, I argue for artistic shock as a psychopolitical and fundamentally materialist function of art that has been considered inadequately by cultural psychologists. I use the word *shock* to refer, broadly, to art's ability to create ruptures within our perceptions, identification acts, political formations, and material practices ([Ezcurra, 2012](#); [Lunn, 1974](#)). As is apparent from the above discussion, elements of artistic shock can be observed in cultural psychology work that considers the materialist conception of art in relation to progressive politics. Yet, shock remains somewhat distinctive in that it offers us a conceptual tool to understand how the different material consequences of art interlink, and what this means for articulating and advancing a necessarily ambitious progressive political agenda. In cultural psychology, artistic shock is rarely harnessed as a central point through which to activate progressive politics, and there is yet to be a thorough or extended examination of artistic shock within cultural psychology. However, before we explore the potentialities of shock in politicising cultural psychology, a more detailed consideration of shock must be provided.

## Shock as a Materialist Function of Art

Although we can conceptualise artistic shock in several ways, it is perhaps best understood as a radical interruption in perceptions of the self and society, as well as how the self and society are reproduced ([Ezcurra, 2012](#)). By feeling into and disputing how we perceive material reality and the suffering contained within it (see [Dutta, 2021](#)), artistic shock endeavours to reveal a kind of political truth to which we can commit (see [Žižek, 2018](#)). Artistic shock is, therefore, willed towards catalysing political action, that is, politically motivated interventions into the material.

The playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) and the cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) are perhaps the best-known theorists of artistic shock. Heavily influenced by early twentieth-century Russian formalism and its emphasis on form over content ([Cupchik, 2002](#)), both Brecht and Benjamin advocated artistic forms that sought to disrupt

frozen patterns of perception, and in so doing shock subjects out of conformity; awakening within them a critical attitude that refuses historical inevitability (Ezcurra, 2012). For both Brecht and Benjamin, artistic shock offered a view into loosening people's psychic attachments to capitalism while simultaneously demanding a more materially and psychically appealing anti-capitalist alternative.

Brecht and Benjamin shared a personal friendship and a political commitment to materialist sociocultural analysis. Although each exerted an influence on the other's work, both thinkers disagreed on many fundamental issues, retaining distinct oeuvres (see Wizisla, 2007). While Brecht wrote about the theoretical and conceptual nature of his work, he is best known as a playwright and - although perhaps to a lesser degree - a poet. He drew primarily on Marxist theory to develop what became known as epic theatre, which strives to provoke, among audiences, new perceptions of the material world (Ezcurra, 2012; Jameson, 1998). Benjamin was not an artist in the way that Brecht was. He was primarily a cultural critic who favoured the essay form. He drew from Marxism, anarchism, mysticism, and idealism - among many other scholarly and political traditions - to advance complex understandings of the aesthetic, especially in relation to particular novelists, artists, and poets - including Brecht (Eagleton, 1981; Martel, 2013).

Fascinating as their lives and respective bodies of work are, I am concerned here with how Brecht and Benjamin conceptualised and practiced artistic shock, and what this could mean for politicising cultural psychology. Therefore, in what follows I do not offer a comprehensive analysis of the work of these two thinkers. Instead, and with the development of a politicised cultural psychology in mind, I consider some of the ways by which artistic shock serves as a theoretical, stylistic, formal, and substantive undercurrent in their work. Specifically, I outline how Brecht's instrumentalist understanding of artistic shock sought to attain a political truth upon which to act and how, for Benjamin, shock served as means to liberate our perceptions of emancipatory possibility (see Alizadeh, 2019; Ezcurra, 2012; Martel, 2013).

### *Brechtian Alienation*

To watch Brechtian epic theatre - an activity that Brecht insisted must be undertaken from a materialist, sociological perspective rather than a purely aesthetic one (Brecht, 1964) - is to be unsettled. Brecht was not interested in attracting bourgeois audiences. He insisted that ordinary people would willingly engage with complex, artistic shock if such art spoke directly to their material realities (Alizadeh, 2019). However, far from attempting to represent these realities, Brechtian theatre endeavours to make strange our experience of reality so that we might question it (Malherbe, 2022b). In what Brecht (1964) called *Verfremdungseffekte* (or "the alienation effect" in English), the theatre could bring audiences into confrontation with the gap between reality and historical possibility. The alienation effect attempts to shock audiences out of their complicity and into questioning their seemingly intractable realities (Lunn, 1974). Brecht (1964) maintained that by inducing the alienation effect, his plays decentred the playwright by bringing audience members together as a collective who were committed to a common project of interpretation which, in turn, would hopefully result in a shared commitment to political



action. Although some might reasonably argue that Brecht asks a lot, politically, from theatre audiences, we should keep in mind that his audiences were oftentimes comprised of oppressed social classes who were already predisposed to progressive political activity.

Brecht's plays realised the alienation effect in different ways. At the level of representation, actors would make it clear to audiences that they were, in fact, performing as actors (Lunn, 1974). Their refusal to convincingly embody the role that they were performing was part of the performance. Actors would, for instance, go in and out of character at different moments, sometimes freezing entirely or engaging in an unsettling mix of song, dance, and choreography (Eagleton, 1976). It was also made clear to audiences that the actors were reciting words that were not theirs (e.g., by projecting the scripted lines on a screen behind them), with the scenes themselves forming a kind of discontinuous monologue (Ezcurra, 2012). As Boal (1985) puts it, Brechtian actors do not perform behind a mask. They are, at different moments, beside, in front of, behind, and in conflict with the mask. The point to be made here was that structural forces determine how the actors embodied subjectivity (Ezcurra, 2012). These forces and their influence on individuals were thus the real subjects of Brecht's plays (Boal, 1985). The jarring discontinuity of the actors' performances emphasised that individuals are riven with contradictions and although we are influenced and in large part determined by sociological structures, if we understand the material effects of these structures, we may be better equipped to change them (see Malherbe, 2022a). The world and the subjects that comprise it are in this sense revealed as internally unstable and subject to change (see Boal, 1985).

Brecht structured his plays in a manner that resisted fetishisation. It was made clear to audiences that these plays were produced via collective labour (Lunn, 1974). The plays were frequently rewritten by Brecht, his comrades, and the actors themselves in light of audience reactions and in this sense, the plays were furnished with a contingent sort of dynamism (Jameson, 1998). The seemingly endless possibilities of Brecht's plays sought to make clear the contradictions that marked material reality, and that it was at these points of contradiction that reality was most vulnerable to emancipatory insurgency (Lunn, 1974). Moreover, the malleability of Brechtian theatre instituted a rupture in the audience-artist distinction. Just as Brechtian theatre sought to transform audiences from passive viewers of spectacle into a politicised collective (Boal, 1985; Caygill, 2002), artists were similarly shocked out of a presumed position of authority that presented to an audience an enlightened interpretation of material reality (Lunn, 1974). Instead, it was always to a collective of artists and audiences that such interpretation was deferred, with Brechtian theatre itself severing as a kind of experiment into aesthetically driven collective formations (Jameson, 1998). It was through this continued emphasis on the collective, Brecht seemed to imply, that the defence of culture demands a society that recognises and protects the productive capacities of the collective (Eagleton, 1981).

Consciousness-raising and transformation among audiences were crucial to Brecht's use of artistic shock (Ezcurra, 2012). He maintained that we are capable of thinking with feeling, while also feeling thoughtfully (Brecht, 1964). Rather than offering clear answers, Brecht's plays are predicated on revealing the instability inherent to the production and perception of material reality under capitalism by estranging us from this reality and making clear its collective constitution. To present material reality in this way is to stress

its outrageousness and absurdity, and thus also to stress social change as a political and humanistic necessity (Lunn, 1974). As such, Brecht offers several ways of thinking through the psychopolitical implications of artistic shock and its relation to the collective (see Jameson, 1998).

### *Benjaminian Interruption*

While Benjamin held Brechtian theatre in tremendously high esteem, his engagement with artistic shock was rather different. For Benjamin, artistic shock served to interrupt the fundamentally hierarchical imposition of capitalism (Martel, 2013). Of course, shock did not, for Benjamin, substitute political action. It is more useful to understand his engagement with shock as an artistic formation that relies on the same logic as radical political action. For Benjamin, memory was the central link between artistic shock and progressive politics. He believed that historiography's reliance on the written word forced a kind of linearity and static meaning onto memory, ignoring the uneven temporalities through which historical events unfold, as well as the material contradictions between classes that have driven history since the dawn of capitalist modernity (see Benjamin, 2008). Benjamin (2008) argued that art could institute a disruptive shock to this mythological conception of historical continuity. For Benjamin, artistic shock made clear the disjuncture between a system that demands linearity and certitude and our material reality whose contradictory nature evades such a definitive imposition (Caygill, 2002). This is perhaps why Benjamin was so interested in collecting trinkets and knickknacks, both of which have the capacity to honour the past - or, rather, *pasts* - through disparate material fragments, rather than clear-cut, supposedly coherent historiographies (Eagleton, 1976). Benjamin (1986) wrote that capitalism's imposition of certitude and hierarchy was a form of "mythic violence" which could only be countered with "divine violence" that embraced contradiction (see Martel, 2013). Although we tend to think of mythic and divine violence as existing in the political realm (Benjamin himself used the general strike as an example of divine violence that rejects the mythic violence of the capitalist workplace; see Benjamin, 1986), epistemologically, artistic shock can move us beyond the logic of mythic violence by embracing contradictory ways of knowing (i.e., the logic of divine violence). Artistic shock, in other words, represented the sort of radical freedom to interpret and represent that was, for Benjamin (1977), necessary for advancing a progressive political agenda.

Shock and interruption were central to the formal structure of many of Benjamin's essays. He was not a cultural critic in the conventional understanding and his writing style served as a kind of artistic shock. Throughout his work (e.g., Benjamin, 1977; 1986), we are presented with repeated interjections, such as the sudden appearance of quotes; the piling together of disparate analogies; montaged citations; and the disruption of one unfinished argument with a seemingly new one. It should be emphasised that Benjamin's style did not remove purpose, politics, or a central thesis from his writing. Rather, his work continually interrupts itself; rhetorically circling back and forth to make a point. Benjamin's style is in this way characterised by an imperative to disturb the sort of

linearity upon which mythic violence depends, reflecting in its very form the contradictions that mark material reality (Ezcurra, 2012).

Benjamin was attuned to how art was received in the material world, but not in the same way as Brecht, for whom the audience was crucial. Benjamin was instead concerned with the uniqueness of an individual work of art. He spoke of the “aura” that surrounds a work of art, by which he meant a compelling, almost magical force that marked out the unique character of a work of art. In the modern age, aura has become radically interrupted. Benjamin (2008) posits that the technological innovations that produce artworks - or rather, images (and even videos) of art - on a mass scale have interrupted aura. Although Benjamin appears to champion the interruption of aura at one moment and denounce it at the next, for our purposes, it is sufficient to note that for Benjamin, aura is indicative of the alienation that results from making an element of tradition foundational to present-day perception (Gelley, 1999). When we attempt to fix history via static formations, interruption of some sort will follow (Eagleton, 1976). To interrupt aura is then to remove art from mythological status and bring it into the realm of the social, and thus into politics. Of course, with mass reproduction comes commodification and further alienation (Ezcurra, 2012; Malherbe, 2022b), which raises concerns about how we can interrupt aura in ways that do not reproduce mythic violence. As such, the interruption of aura brings into question what art is for, who it is for, why it exists, and how we might begin to reconfigure the distribution of and access to art in radically egalitarian ways (see Benjamin, 1977; 2008).

Although Benjamin was perhaps more careful than Brecht with how he approached artistic shock, he was no less materialist (Ezcurra, 2012). In understanding artistic shock as a kind of interruption into historiography and unquestioned orthodoxy, Benjamin saw aesthetics (i.e., the appearance of creative artistry and the effects thereof; Williams, 1988) as a fundamental precondition for stimulating our imaginative political capacities (Gelley, 1999). Artistic shock Benjamin (2007; 2008) insisted, was most compelling and illuminating when it grounded itself in a psychopolitical conception of material reality.

## Cultural Psychology and Artistic Shock

For both Brecht and Benjamin, artistic shock is able to engage with psychology and politics through the languages and logics of one another and for emancipatory purposes. In what follows, I explore how artistic shock can put cultural psychology to work for progressive politics by embracing contradiction, instituting transformations in subjectivity, and critically appraising memory. I focus on these three areas (contradiction, subjectivity, and memory) partly because of my own scholarly and political interests, but also because I believe that they illustrate artistic shock - *a la* Brecht and Benjamin - in ways that are especially relevant for politicising cultural psychology. Brecht’s harnessing of estrangement, Benjamin’s sudden ruptures in form and narrative, and the manner by which both made use of seemingly opposite elements within a single text can, I argue, inform how a politicised cultural psychology makes use of artistic shock in relation to contradiction, subjectivity, and memory. Indeed, we can observe an attempt to transform

subjectivity and an engagement with contradiction in Brecht's theatrical form, just as we can see a reconciliation with contradiction in Benjamin's writing style as well as his conceptions of epistemology and the aesthetic. At the level of content, both thinkers privileged memory and meaning-making in the face of oppressive historical forces.

As we will see, though, contradiction, subjectivity, and memory differ somewhat in their respective relationships to artistic shock. Where contradiction can be understood as a mechanism of artistic shock, subjectivity and memory represent psychosocial phenomena that can be engaged through shock. Yet, despite being distinct from one another, each of these three areas of inquiry also relates to one another in particular ways. Contradiction is both a part of subjectivity (Stavrakakis, 1999) and memory-making (de Saint-Laurent et al., 2017); with individuals engaging in contradictory practices of memory-making through their contradicting subject positions. Our subjectivities are then, in turn, constituted by how history is remembered in the present (see Malherbe, 2022b). Thus, to reiterate, it is entirely possible that my focus on contradiction, subjectivity, and memory, seems arbitrary (and perhaps, to a degree, it is), but in focusing on these three areas, I hope that the politicising potential and necessarily ambitious nature of incorporating artistic shock into cultural psychology is made clear.

In the following elaboration on contradiction, subjectivity, and memory, my intention is to understand how cultural psychologists working with activists can draw from artistic shock to consolidate, strengthen, and broaden the scope of progressive political activity (see Malherbe, 2022b). In this, I do not prescribe how cultural psychologists should take up shock (perhaps the only prerequisite here is for the cultural psychologist to follow and stay attuned to the different kinds of social and perceptual rupture brought about by the creation and consumption of art). Instead, I focus more broadly on how incorporating shock - as a materialist function of art - into cultural psychology can politicise the field.

### *Subjectivity*

Human subjectivity is inherently unstable. Far from forming a coherent psychic whole, we are determined by conflicting demands; unconscious desires that undermine our conscious wishes; and modes of communication that fail to satisfactorily symbolise our experience (Stavrakakis, 1999). Ideologies are psychically appealing to us because they offer a mythic solution to our real experience of contradiction and psychological splitting. Indeed, ideology makes available structurally stable identities that allow for the seeming stabilisation of meaning (Malherbe, 2022a). Patriarchal ideologies, for example, hail gendered subjects through 'Male' and 'Female' - static identities that dictate how gendered subjects should and should not act, ignoring the ways by which the individual does not cohere with such proscriptive identifications. Under capitalism, ideologies hail subjects in accordance with the profit motive (e.g., the feminisation of unwaged or undervalued reproductive labour). We can, therefore, understand subjectivity as being made through continuous identification acts that are formed in and against the convergence of different ideologies (Stavrakakis, 1999).

Capitalist ideology transforms both art and subjectivity (Jameson, 2015). Marx himself was aware of this when he wrote that creating art "produces not only an object for the

subject, but also a subject for the object” (Marx, 1973, p. 92). At the same time, however, art can also be used to explore new, politicised subjectivities. As Brecht and Benjamin were well-aware, the experience of art can create ruptures within our subjective constitution, offering up the sorts of reflexive space required to reconceptualise the individual subject in relation to the political collective (see Malherbe, 2022a). As Brecht put it, art can assist us in attaining a kind of humanity that goes through the collective, hailing us not as we once were (Lunn, 1974). Cultural psychology’s concern with how psychological phenomena are mediated by culture renders the transformation of subjectivities through collective, artistic shock an especially germane - yet largely neglected - area of inquiry. Using shock in this way has the potential to politicise cultural psychology by offering glimpses of an emancipated subjectivity that is hailed beyond the oppressive ideological dictates of racial and patriarchal capitalism.

Although people are not entirely unaware of how ideology functions, ideology retains such a powerful hold over us because this awareness goes, for the most part, unspoken or repressed (Malherbe, 2022a). Herein lies the political impetus of Brecht’s alienation effect, which seeks to reveal in plain sight how capitalist ideology hails us as subjects. As explicated earlier, Brechtian theatre emphasises to audiences that stage actors are embodying their subjectivity through predetermined identifications (i.e., lines that were rehearsed beforehand). Brecht makes similar use of the alienation effect in his 1955 book *War Primer*, which paired war photography with lines of poetry that did not speak to the photographs in any discernible way (Alizadeh, 2019). In Brecht’s plays and in *War Primer*, artistic shock is used to demonstrate how static identification acts impose symbolisation onto material conditions and human subjectivity in ways that feel inadequate and unsatisfying. Cultural psychologists and the political collectives for which they work can engage with Brechtian alienation in ways that open up psychopolitical spaces in which to reflect on how individuals experience and enact ideological misrecognition in their political activity. These spaces are not intended to abolish identification (meaning would be impossible otherwise). Rather, artistic shock can be used to compel those engaged in political activity (i.e., attempts to identify and bring about new materialities) to critically assess predetermined identification acts and the kinds of mythic violence that may lie within these. In this, cultural psychologists may look to Benjaminian stylistic interruption as an example of unrestrained identificatory freedom that enhances rather than seeks to replace progressive political activity. As such, different kinds of artistic shock can be brought into cultural psychology practice to activate people’s signifiatory imaginaries in line with a progressive political programme.

While cultural psychologists may well engage in activism in their capacity as citizens, they rarely do so as cultural psychologists (see de Saint-Laurent et al., 2017). There is, of course, the ever-present risk that cultural psychologists will psychologise progressive politics, and this has left many activists feeling justifiably suspicious of psychology (Malherbe, 2022b). However, if cultural psychology strives to constitute itself in accordance with a progressive political agenda (rather than impose a psychological mandate onto this agenda), activists may be willing to work with cultural psychologists to politicise cultural psychology. Indeed, cultural psychologists can work with activists to draw on artistic shock in an attempt to move away from moralistic assessments of political purity,

and towards reflecting on how politically committed subjectivities can be hailed through and held accountable to a shared - yet democratically constituted and fundamentally *motional* - set of political commitments (see Malherbe, 2022b). In this way, artistic shock is used to grapple with, reflect upon, and learn from how individual subjects can *become* through the politically committed collective (see Lunn, 1974). Here, shock is used to disinvest from mastery, with progressive politics made through a democratic and continuous process propelled not by definitive categories, but by calling into question acts of identification. As such, cultural psychologists move away from pathologising uneven and conflictual subjectivities - as is the wont of so much cultural psychology (see Malherbe, 2020) - and move towards embracing psychic conflict. Artistic shock can facilitate subjects' embrace of otherness - including the other within themselves - beyond binaristic identifications (Dutta, 2021). This is a process that will undoubtedly reveal the kinds of anxieties that capitalist ideologies cover over, yet, at the same time, it may also articulate - and therefore make identifiable - the sorts of collective dissatisfaction with and anger towards the constraining subjectivities made available by capitalism (see Boal, 1985). A politicised cultural psychology should strive to be of use to this highly affective psychopolitical process.

Neither Brecht nor Benjamin saw artistic shock as restoring subjectivity in a coherent way. No matter how shocking artistic shock is, it cannot bring about entirely new identifications or make appealing the abandonment of identification (i.e., a disorienting subjectivity defined by permanent psychic rupture). For both thinkers, artistic shock could unsettle how we embody subjectivity by rupturing the kinds of identifications that are tied in with unjust material arrangements. This does not compel the cultural psychologist to *heal* subjectivity, but rather to engage in psychopolitical *healing* via a reflective, always-becoming set of identification acts that are shaped and reshaped by the political collective. These new, ever-incomplete subjective configurations - illuminated partially through artistic shock and the range of feelings that accompany shock - can thus mobilise subjective resources in ways that can lead to material change (González Rey, 2016).

### Contradiction

Contradiction can be understood as how an object or a system does not quite cohere with itself; an imminent sort of 'at-odds' that perpetually undermines something from within (McGowan, 2019). Contradictions speak to the unstable basis of ontology. At the systemic level, Marx famously analysed capitalism as a system defined by the contradictory forces of capital and labour (e.g., Marx, 1973). These were not external forces that acted upon one another. They were internal to the capitalist system and thus signified its inherent instability (see Malherbe, 2022a). At the subjective level, as noted earlier, we experience psychic contradiction through the inadequate identification acts available to us (Stavrakakis, 1999). The point of ideology is to obscure definitional contradictions by making contradictions appear to us as external differences that can be overcome in ways that support the material foundations of the dominant social order (McGowan, 2019; Žižek, 2018).

As noted earlier, most artwork functions as a commodity in the capitalist marketplace (Jameson, 2015). At the level of artistic content, most works of art have little concern with contradiction, presenting material reality and our experiences of it as seemingly whole, harmonious entities (Eagleton, 1976), and in so doing legitimise external difference by turning away from internal contradiction (see Bourdieu, 1984; McGowan, 2019). Benjamin (1979) is aware of art's ideological function when he writes that art regularly coheres with mythic violence by seeking to exert mastery over and ownership of the material world. The dissatisfaction - emphasised by Benjamin (1979) - which results from art of this kind is relevant for cultural psychologists working with activists in a psychopolitical tenor. As Eagleton (1976) puts it: "art does more than just passively reflect ... [i]t is held within ideology, but also manages to distance itself from it, to the point where it permits us to 'feel' and 'perceive' the ideology from which it springs" (p. 18). The psychopolitical appeal of artistic shock lies not in its presentation of a universal vision of emancipation (a new kind of ideological mastery), but rather in its embrace of a universal antagonism (see Žižek, 2018). Art, like progressive politics, need not strive to recover a lost harmony or to prefigure a future one (Eagleton, 1976; Martel, 2013), just as it need not point to the necessity of historical praxis to resolve all contradiction (see Lunn, 1974). For cultural psychologists working with activists to reflect on their political practices, artistic shock can be useful for engaging political commitments in a manner that draws psychic appeal not from the false promise of a contradiction-free politics, but from an avowed lack of mastery and the freedom of being and meaning-making that comes with this (see McGowan, 2019). Artistic shock, we might then say, finds resonance in radical democracy as a political formation. Just as artistic shock refuses finality, the radical democratic form shifts in accordance with the emancipatory needs of the collective, thereby refusing a definitive or settled centre (see Stavrakakis, 1999).

To introduce artistic shock into activist spaces is not, of course, to believe idealistically in the consciousness-raising effects of art. It is rather to feel, psychopolitically, into the limitations of capitalist ideology and to ensure that the mastery upon which this ideology depends is not replicated in these spaces. As Brechtian alienation has it, shock reveals the gap between capitalist reality and the emancipatory possibilities repressed by this reality (Lunn, 1974), or as Benjaminian interruption emphasises, artistic shock's embrace of contradiction points towards an opening in the system that allows us to act non-violently, that is, to behave outside of or against capitalism's hierarchical imposition (see Martel, 2013). In both cases, artistic shock can act to rupture perceptions and bring them in line with the progressive political projects to which collectives are committed. If cultural psychologists are permitted into activist spaces, artistic shock can be a useful means through which to reflect on the ideological underpinnings of how struggle is enacted. Certainly, artistic shock can be used to consider how issues of inclusion, solidarity, and democracy within struggle spaces might better reflect the logic of divine violence ("pure power over all life for the sake of the living"; Benjamin, 1986, p. 297) rather than mythic violence ("blood power over mere life for its own sake"; Benjamin, 1986, p. 297). As such, artistic shock can represent what Benjamin (1986) called "educative power" which discerns the difference between mythic and divine violence in order to move us towards enacting the latter.

Introducing artistic shock into activist spaces can be done in many ways. Cultural psychologists may do so by engaging with the kinds of shock that already exist in people's lives, or - as in the Brechtian tradition - by working with activists to create art that reveals the contradictions inherent to the everyday (see Boal, 1985). When collaboratively produced art is made part of daily life (e.g., some street art; see Teo, 2017; Sammut et al., 2010), Benjaminian aura and the fetishisation of the individual artist are abandoned for an embrace of what Bourdieu (1984) called the "the popular aesthetic" which seeks to establish a continuity between art and life, one that reflects "a deep-rooted demand for participation" (p. 32). In this, activists can reclaim public space by filling it with resisting content that reconciles with contradiction in a manner that is attuned to the collective constitution of the material everyday (Teo, 2017). Cultural psychology and the resources available to it can thus be useful for transposing artistic shock from political spaces into quotidian life.

Embracing contradiction is quite different to embracing difference. Where the latter implies a liberal tolerance of external separateness, or finding 'common ground', the former locates radical political commitment within an ontological grounding defined by a collectively determined becoming rather than a static being (Malherbe, 2022b). Artistic shock can assist cultural psychologists in working with activists to embrace contradiction in their work (both internally and how this work finds form in the material world); interrogate the ideological underpinnings of struggle (e.g., distinguish between divine and mythic violence); and reckon with the psychic and political implications therein.

### *Memory and History*

Where history signifies past events, memory denotes attempts to recall this past, with the most revered kind of memory known as historiography, or the writing of history. We can, therefore, understand memory as an organised system with its own texts and contingent commemorative practices (Eagleton, 1981). Memory is tied in with power and materiality. There is, for instance, a wilful forgetfulness - what Gqola (2010) calls *unremembering* - on the part of the ruling classes when it comes to naming how the legacies of colonialism live within and structure the material conditions of the present. This is because adequately reckoning with the material legacy of history would mean implementing radical change in the present and interrupting the seemingly endless accumulation and dispossession upon which global capital depends (Dutta, 2021). Although psychology has, since its formal inception, been preoccupied with memory, the discipline is oftentimes more interested in harnessing memory in the service of dominant ideologies than it is in determining which histories are remembered, how histories are remembered, and for what reasons (Malherbe, 2022b). For much of cultural psychology, memory studies - and collective memory studies in particular - have ignored individual differences, seeking instead to understand memory in terms of a homogenous group; the biases of lay representations of history; and the material interests of psychologists themselves (de Saint-Laurent et al., 2017). Brockmeier (2010) has similarly argued that for much of cultural psychology, memory is understood simplistically as one's cognitive capacity to recall events, with memory's sociocultural embeddedness - as well as its material, interactive, and negotiable aspects -



left unattended to (there are, of course, exceptions here; see e.g., [de Saint-Laurent et al., 2017](#)). Unlike most psychology, art - and artistic shock in particular - has a long and rich tradition of critically engaging with memory and unremembering ([Brockmeier, 2010](#); [Gqola, 2010](#)).

Meaning-making is undeniably crucial to cultural psychology practice ([Gergen, 2018](#)). As such, memory must be taken seriously by those seeking to politicise cultural psychology in relation to history. Although we do not necessarily need art to demonstrate how history structures the materiality of the present, art can make clear that memory is always a practice of meaning-making - rather than the material past itself ([Brockmeier, 2010](#)) - and that these meaning-making practices have ideological consequences ([Malherbe, 2020](#)). [Benjamin \(2007\)](#) wrote that although progressive politics undoubtedly needs memory, it needs it differently, or in new ways. He insisted that while we should disengage from mythically violent impositions of history that cohere with a capitalist conception of time (i.e., exchanging one indeterminate, dull moment for another), we should not be tempted by an aesthetics that sensationalises history and politics beyond their material banalities (see also [Vygotsky, 1971](#)). Through artistic shock, he argued, we can grapple with how history's disjointed, interrupted arch - including its oppressive traumas and its liberatory hopes - sits within the ordinary material textures of our everyday lives. As such, cultural psychologists need not approach memory and historical trauma through the demands of linearity, but through fragments. When cultural psychologists work with people to remember history through seemingly disparate, illuminating fragments they reject definitive readings of the past, looking instead to the contingent and discontinuous ways by which the past structures the material content of people's lives, including their psychic lives ([Malherbe, 2020](#)). It is through fragmented historiographic flashes, or what [Benjamin \(2007\)](#) called *illumination*, that artistic shock can disrupt the routinised nature of accepted memory (see [Eagleton, 1981](#)), that is, the ideological insistence that memory is history. By remembering through fragments, cultural psychology honours the Brechtian dictum that instructs us to turn away from ruminating on the *good old* and move instead towards changing the material conditions of the *bad new* ([Lunn, 1974](#)).

There are many ways by which cultural psychologists can use artistic shock to reconstitute memory through illuminating fragments. One way, favoured by Benjamin, is with different aesthetic artefacts. It is with these artefacts that we can advance a dialectical, yet materially grounded, approach to memory. As Benjamin famously put it: "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" ([Benjamin, 2008](#), p. 124). For cultural psychologists working with displaced populations, or populations for whom particular historical traumas - such as slavery - cannot be directly recalled, aesthetic objects can be drawn on to recall the affected, disjointed nature of repressed or partialised histories that sit within the present and affect people on material, political, and psychological levels ([Gqola, 2010](#)). In short, in the project of politicising cultural psychology, the cultural psychologist can work with people in whatever ways they deem useful (e.g., social intervention, counselling, group therapy, community engagement, activist organising) to illuminate their histories through different affect-laden cultural artefacts. Memory of this kind, we might argue, attributes an aura to those objects which honour the humanity that has been denied by mythically violent historiography.

Brecht (1964), for his part, also sought to recover fragmented memories through artistic shock. He typically refused to represent the devastating material conditions of his contemporary moment without centralising the past. Many of his plays were, for example, narrated through what had already happened, rather than with reference to ongoing events (Boal, 1985). Brechtian theatre, in this sense, refuses to release our consciousness from the burdens of history, while also remembering this history in necessarily fragmented ways that are determined by the materiality of the present within which people remember. Although we can understand our present conjuncture through history, we need not remember this history in a coherent manner that is free from contradiction or feeling. Collective memory-making, in particular, is based on an unstable set of interactions between historical knowledge and subjective experiences of the past (de Saint-Laurent et al., 2017). This is relevant for cultural psychologists who seek to move away from cognitive models of memory by bringing the material valences of history into the present. Speaking about the present through history is certainly not novel within cultural psychology, however, the spoken or written language on which the discipline typically relies can feel inadequate when attempting to symbolise the discontinuous, structural, affective, and material nature of history. Artistic shock can thus assist in the task of remembering history in psychopolitical ways that embrace, rather than turn away from, contractionary and collective meaning-making.

Benjamin (2007) remarks that we should be less concerned with assessing the potential for crisis within the present, and more engaged with how capitalism perpetually drives the present into crisis. It is divine violence, Benjamin claims, that pulls the breaks on this crisis-prone historical trajectory (Martel, 2013). Although capitalism's motion towards crisis is steady, we need not understand the material constitution of this historical crisis through uninterrupted or linear prose. Artistic shock offers cultural psychology a psychopolitical mode of memory-making that links history to the contradictory constitution of the material present – driving political action through this linking practice. In other words, to remember through artistic shock is to feel into - rather than romanticise or fetishise (de Saint-Laurent et al., 2017) - different pasts, and to use these feelings to inform progressive politics. As Benjamin puts it, our political commitments “are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren” (Benjamin, 2007, p. 260). Using art to create shocks within established historiography is a paradoxically future-oriented project. The past is only lost when the present seems entirely foreclosed (Benjamin, 2007). Cultural psychologists can work with people to punctuate such attempted foreclosure by using historical fragments to create openings for progressive politics.

## Conclusion

Cultural psychology does not define itself apolitically, nor does it refuse to deploy culture for political purposes. However, there remains a dearth of work that considers how cultural psychologists can draw from the materialist conception of art to politicise their field. In this article, I have attempted to engage with this line of inquiry through the notion of artistic shock (i.e., subjective, perceptual, and historiographical rupture brought about through the experience of art) as it was theorised and practiced by Bertolt Brecht and

Walter Benjamin. Cultural psychologists can, I argue, draw from artistic shock to consider how subjectivity, contradiction, and memory are deployed to advance collective, and fundamentally psychopolitical, projects of emancipation.

Neither Brecht nor Benjamin, I wish to emphasise, are beyond reproach. Both were highly Eurocentric in their thinking and were oftentimes inattentive to the intersectional nature of capitalist exploitation. Moreover, Brecht regularly echoed a vanguardist politics in his attempts to dismantle divisions between dramatists and spectators (Boal, 1985), while the idealistic and seemingly obscure nature of Benjamin's writing style often abstracted his work from political practice (Ezcurra, 2012). I do not wish to imply that artistic shock, as it was conceived by Brecht or Benjamin, should be incorporated into cultural psychology in an unaltered form. On the contrary, their work should be interpreted and refashioned by cultural psychologists and the activists with whom they work in accordance with the material requirements of particular struggles. If this means distorting beyond recognition how these thinkers conceived of artistic shock, then so be it.

Artistic shock is not the only way by which cultural psychology can engage with the materialist conception of art or with liberatory psychopolitical projects. Future work could consider other ways of doing so in conjunction with or in opposition to artistic shock. Furthermore, there are undoubtedly other conceptions of artistic shock that may reveal important psychopolitical avenues that were overlooked in this article. Therefore, my arguments here serve as nascent provocations, rather than definitive proposals, for formulating a politicised cultural psychology through the materialist conception of art. I encourage others to develop, build upon, and contest these provocations in the spirit of strengthening the political potentialities of cultural psychology.

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