

Reflecting on Catholic Women's Ordination in Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird*

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[Abstract] Sociologist Andrew Greeley's (1990; 1996; 2000) theory of a Catholic Imagination offers an insightful approach for analyzing Greta Gerwig's dramedy *Lady Bird*. Resonating with Greeley's discussions of the correlation between a Catholic Imagination and support for feminism, the film casts, in back to back scenes, *Lady Bird* and her mother, Marion, in the role of a priest-confessor. In both instances the women, rather than requesting penitence, offer comfort and (implicit) assurance that no wrong/(sin) was committed. *Lady Bird* hugs her ex-boyfriend Danny and promises to protect his secret that he is gay. The following parallel scene depicts a priest, ashamed of his depression, confiding in Marion. This paper considers the film alongside contemporary discussions of Catholic women's ordination as well ethnographic work on the Roman Catholic Womanpriests (RCWP) organization whose membership, despite being excommunicated by the Vatican upon receiving ordination, claims a Roman Catholic identity (Peterfeso 2020).

[Key Words] *Lady Bird*, Roman Catholic Woman Priests, Women's Ordination

Introduction

Andrew Greeley's (1990; 1996; 2000) theory of a Catholic Imagination¹⁾ that sees the world as sacred offers an insightful approach for analyzing Greta Gerwig's dramedy *Lady Bird*. This affirmation of the world is underscored when the teenage protagonist Christine/"*Lady Bird*," stands outside a church in New York City, and leaves a voicemail for her mother describing how emotional she felt when she drove through Sacramento for the first time and assures her mother that she loves her (by this point in the film the two had stopped talking to each other). Echoes of Greeley's theory/theology, can be found earlier in the film, when a more self-absorbed Christine is instructed by a woman religious that love and attention—in this case attention to/(love for) Sacramento—are the same thing. In the concluding scene viewers watch as Christine, now seemingly sharing this (theological) view, reflects on how she observed the sites of Sacramento from the driver's seat as she expresses gratitude and love for her mother over the phone.

Resonating with Greeley's discussions of the correlation between high scores on the Grace Scale—in which individuals use benevolent/feminine terms to describe God—and support for feminism, the film casts, in back to back scenes, *Lady Bird* and her mother, Marion, in the role of a priest-confessor. In both instances the women, rather than requesting penitence, offer comfort and (implicit) assurance that no wrong/(sin) was committed. *Lady Bird* hugs her ex-boyfriend Danny and promises to protect his secret that he is gay. The following parallel scene depicts a priest, ashamed of his depression, confiding in Marion.

The film's (white) feminism has been analyzed by a number of critics and scholars, who have largely overlooked *Lady Bird*'s religious context (Kaul 2021; Putra and Kharisa 2020; Williams 2018; Potts 2017). In contrast, this paper considers the film alongside ongoing discussions surrounding Catholic women's ordination. The Roman Catholic Church continues to refuse women into the priesthood in spite of the priest shortage and a Pew Research finding that six in ten U.S Catholics say that women should be allowed to be priests (Masci and Smith 2018). In 1975 the Women's Ordination Conference was established to appeal to the institutional church on the matter. However, in 1977 the Vatican's Conference for the Doctrine of Faith declared, on the basis that Jesus was male, that women were prohibited from the priesthood. In 1994 Pope John Paul II insisted that the Church did not have the authority to overturn the tradition of an all male priesthood thereby declaring the hierarchy's stance immutable. Pope Francis has reiterated this sentiment by referencing John Paul in his own refusal to admit women into the priesthood (Talbot 2022).²⁾ Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Womanpriests movement emerged in 2002 when seven women were ordained on the Danube river by an Argentinian bishop. Even though women priests face automatic excommunication upon receiving ordination, the RCWP continues to ordain and minister to Catholic communities (Peterfeso 2020). I argue that *Lady Bird* can be read as not only making a tacit call for women's ordination—while demonstrating broader support for Catholic feminism—but also embodies tensions that reside within the women's ordination movement.

Brief Synopsis

Christine McPherson is navigating through senior year at Immaculate Heart high school. In this liminal coming-of-age stage she adopts the name Lady Bird and hopes to leave Sacramento (“the Midwest of California”) for a university on the East Coast, ideally in New York City. Due to financial struggles and a fear of violence (the story unfolds in the immediate post 9/11 backdrop of the 2002-2003 academic year) Lady Bird's mother, Marion, disapproves and instead wants her to stay in California. The tension in the mother-daughter relationship is underscored in the opening scene when an argument between the two ends with Lady Bird jumping out of the moving car. The audience next sees Lady Bird standing at a Catholic Mass, a cast on her arm, the words “Fuck You Mom” inscribed in marker.

A myriad of melodramatic subplots unfold, many of which revolve around the school's drama program. Lady Bird finds out about auditions for the fall musical, co-produced with the Catholic boys' Jesuit school Xavier, when she's called into a meeting with Sister Sarah Joan (presumably the school principal). To run for student body Lady Bird made campaign posters with her head pasted on a bird's body. Sarah Joan expresses concern (other students complained the posters were disturbing) but also encourages Lady Bird's “performative streak” and suggests participation in the musical. At the auditions Lady Bird and her best friend Julie are enamored by Danny; and at the next rehearsal Lady Bird shows an interest in him and begins to pursue a romantic relationship.

The couple kisses after the school dance and Danny invites Lady Bird to his grandmother's Thanksgiving. She discovers that his grandmother lives in her dream house in an upper-middle-class neighborhood. They meet up with a group of friends afterwards, smoke marijuana, attend a live music performance at a café and end the night at Lady Bird's home.

The opening night of the fall musical is filled with merriment and the performance is met with a warm reception. Afterwards, the students go out to dinner to celebrate. When Lady Bird and Julie find a line in the women's restroom, they decide to try the men's room where they find Danny making out with a boy in one of the stalls. The incident results in the termination of their romantic relationship. Upset, Lady Bird refuses to hold Danny's hand at the next curtain call.

Ultimately, Lady Bird quits the theater program and begins hanging out with a group of rebellious (popular) classmates. With her newfound friend Jenna, she decorates Sister Sarah Joan's car with a "Just Married To Jesus" sign; and is suspended from school for mocking an anti-reproductive rights speaker. Embarrassed that her family is lower (middle) class, Lady Bird lies and tells Jenna that Danny's grandmother's house is her home. She embarks on another romantic relationship with her crush Kyle, an erudite outsider hipster with a nihilistic worldview, under the impression that they are both virgins. Immediately after they have sex, she learns that he "probably slept with, like, six people." Albeit with doubts that their relationship has any future she resigns to go to prom with him.

On prom night, to the dismay of Lady Bird's family, Kyle only honks when he picks her up. In the car Kyle and his friends decide to "ditch prom" for a party. At this point, Lady Bird asks him to drop her off at Julie's house. The two reconcile—their friendship had been ruptured ever since Lady Bird quit drama—and end up going to prom together. Under the watchful eye of a Catholic sister Lady Bird and Julie dance together. At dawn Julie and Lady Bird say their farewells as an uncertain post-graduation future draws near.

Unbeknownst to Marion, Lady Bird, with the support of her father Larry, applied to East Coast colleges and is placed on one school's waiting list. Marion remains under the impression that Lady Bird will attend UC Davis. She learns the truth when at a graduation after-party Danny asks Lady Bird about the wait list. Upset, Marion stops speaking with her daughter. Over the summer, Lady Bird works part-time jobs, turns eighteen (celebrated with the purchase of pornography and cigarettes) and passes her driver's license test. She is accepted by the school. Marion tries to write a goodbye letter to Lady Bird on a legal pad and is seen tossing crumpled drafts into the garbage. Larry secretly salvages them and stashes them into Lady Bird's suitcase. Once in New York, Lady Bird adopts her given name Christine. In the closing scene, having just attended a Sunday Mass, she stands in front of a church and leaves a voicemail for Marion describing how overwhelmed she felt when driving through Sacramento for the first time and says "Thank You."

Seeing the (Extra)ordinary as Sacramental

Andrew Greeley (2000, 6), inspired by the theologian David Tracy, described the functioning of a Catholic Imagination in which the ordinary world is seen as sacramental: “The objects, events and persons of ordinary existence hint at the nature of God and indeed make God in some fashion present to us.” This religious framework offers explanatory power for interpreting key scenes. For instance, Sarah Joan praises Lady Bird’s college essay: “You write about Sacramento so affectionately, and with such care.” In Sarah Joan’s view this is an expression of love. When Lady Bird counters that she merely pays attention, Sarah Joan posits a (theological) question: “Don’t you think maybe they are the same thing? Love and attention?”

The final scene finds Lady Bird/Christine reflecting on this notion and invites the audience to participate in her meditation. The viewer sits in the passenger seat, so to speak, as Christine recalls driving through Sacramento for the first time, overwhelmed with emotion by the familiar—now sacred—scenery. The sequence also confirms that Christine inherited/(acquired) this habit of appreciating the ordinary from her mother (one shot interchanges Marion and Christine behind the driver’s wheel) and Catholicism (Christine leaves the voicemail while standing outside a Church). In fact, immediately prior to the phone call, the audience watches Christine become emotional as the choir sings. This juxtaposition of the ritualized Mass and Christine’s meditation resonates with Greeley’s insistence that the sacramental stems from and extends beyond Catholic churches.

The fact that theater serves as the backdrop for the film’s narrative(s) is not without significance. Greeley posited that cathedrals and churches are storehouses of sacramental stories about the saints. Employing data from the 1993 General Social Survey³⁾ he investigated correlations between Catholics’ appreciation for the fine arts and church attendance as well as a graceful imagining of God (Greeley 2000, 23-45). Regular church attendance, and belief in a benevolent God positively correlated with Catholic interest in the fine arts. In sum, then, *Lady Bird* encapsulates the Church-theater-sacrament matrix embedded in Greeley’s theory of a Catholic Imagination.

In interviews, director Greta Gerwig—a Unitarian Universalist who attended Catholic school in Sacramento—touches on these points, echoing (albeit without reference to) Greeley’s theory. For instance, when discussing the impact that her Catholic schooling had on the film she explained:

The brother school to ours was a Jesuit school, and one of the things that St. Ignatius said was that you have to find God in all things. The idea was, you know, every person, every rock, every tree, everything—you have to find the divine in it, and I think I was treated that way (McFarland-Miller 2018).

Furthermore both Greeley and Gerwig stress the importance of communality found in religion and theater. Greeley (2000, 45-52) saw a connection between sacred stories of the saints, appreciation for theater and communal Catholic festivals. Similarly, while writing the script Gerwig "thought a lot about what saints were like as teenagers" (Blondiau 2017); she has also commented on the sense of communality found in not only religious gatherings but also theater and even cinema (McFarlan-Miller 2018).

For me, something that is important is that at the end of the movie when she's gotten in the place where she thinks she wants to be, she finds her way back into a church and listens to a choir and lets that wash over her. I can't speak to individually how people feel, but I do think that there is for me personally something deeply connecting about communal places and also communal rituals, and I think if you were raised with any kind of religion, there's a way that ends up feeling like home in some deep way. . .

My first love was theater, and that's another gathering of people in a room that suspends disbelief and emotionally invests in other people onstage. That's not very dissimilar in the sense of the gathering together and the being present in the moment. I think cinema is another version of that. . .

In sum, then, there is a strong resonance between Greeley's theory of "The Catholic Imagination" and Gerwig's *Lady Bird*. Echoes of Greeley's theory can be found in the film's insistence that the ordinary has a graceful, sacred quality—a point stressed by the director herself. Further, as discussed above, Gerwig's comments follow, point by point, Greeley's delineation. First, in Greeley's schema, churches serve as treasure-houses of sacred stories of the saints; (Gerwig found inspiration in pondering the lives of saints as teenagers). Second, for Greeley, a tradition that values stories translates into an appreciation for the fine arts; (theater serves as a cinematic site for the film's narratives). Third, Greeley speculated upon a co-relationship between "The Catholic Imagination" and communality; (Gerwig details the centrality of communality for religion, theater and cinema). Another parallel, discussed below, is Greeley's finding that individuals' imagining God as benevolent and/or feminine correlates with support for feminism. This is significant given that *Lady Bird* can be read as making a subtle argument for women's ordination. The next section examines the film's female protagonists in relation to the Roman Catholic Womenpriests movement.

Christine, Marion and Roman Catholic Women Priests

In the film, *Lady Bird* and Marion, in back to back scenes, assume the role of a confidante respectively to Danny and Father Leviatch in ways that resonate with the Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP) movement, which has, in defiance of the Vatican, been ordaining women since 2002.⁴⁾ Below I briefly delineate each respective scene and discuss them in relation to the RCWP movement while reading

Lady Bird and Marion as fulfilling the role of a (priestly) confidante/(confessor).

Lady Bird and Women Priests as LGBT Allies

Danny confronts Lady Bird to reconcile and ask her to keep secret his sexual orientation. The meeting, presumably the first since their breakup, begins with an altercation. Then, Danny asks her not to tell anyone, explaining that he is ashamed and has no idea how to come out to his conservative family.⁵⁾ As he conveys this he becomes emotional and Lady Bird, in turn, becomes empathetic. She comforts him with a hug, tells him not to worry and assures him that she won't tell anyone.

RCWP stresses inclusivity when administering the sacraments. Jill Peterfeso notes: "RCWP aims to create a radical inclusivity whereby all people present— Catholics, non-Catholics, and Catholics in poor standing with the Roman church—can receive the sacraments and facilitate sacramental grace" (2020, 98). In keeping with this stance, RCWP has ordained lesbians into the priesthood. Moreover, women priests often participate in gay pride events and affiliate with Catholic and Protestant LGBT affirmative organizations including Dignity and the Metropolitan Community Church (ibid, 154).

Marion and the Priest Shortage

The scene is bridged with a voice over of Marion, a mental health counselor, speaking to Father Leviatch, the school's theater program director, who is struggling with depression.⁶⁾ Marion asks if he has a support system or anybody he can talk to; the priest apologetically answers no, and Marion assures him that there is no reason for him to be sorry. Paralleling the previous scene, Leviatch asks Marion to keep their conversation confidential—and an empathetic Marion assures the priest in the same manner that Lady Bird assured Danny.

Marion's interaction with Leviatch resonates with vocational realities of both male and female priests. In their study on secular priests' depression and anxiety Sarah Knox et al observed that their male participants' responses "yielded a rate of depressed mood approximately seven times greater than that reported in the general population" (2002, 352). Moreover, even though Leviatch is presumably a Jesuit his case reflects the correlation between Catholic secular priests' mental well being and their lack of support systems. Scholars examining levels of depression and anxiety amongst the clergy have expressed concern that the decline in ordinations could result in an increase in pastoral responsibilities that, in turn, may further adversely affect priests' mental well being as they take on a greater workload (Knox et al 2002; Virginia 1998). Notably, the shortage of male priests is often cited by advocates for women's ordination.

In contrast to their male counterparts, ex-communicated women priests receive no financial institutional support and may juggle professional careers, familial and pastoral responsibilities. Thus, in this respect, Marion reflects the realities women worker-priests face. Of further significance is the fact that she is a mental health care worker. A significant number of women priests have career experience in fields

Reflecting on Catholic Women's Ordination in Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* including health care, public health, counseling and mental health. Women priests view their ministerial work as extensions of their careers and cite their credentials in arguments for ordination (Peterfeso 2020, 133). Marion's counsel to Leviatch, while working at the hospital, underscores women priests' view of the close proximity between professional, secular careers and religious, pastoral work.

Imagining the Divine as Feminine

In a strategic and subversive manner, women priests also draw upon Catholic gender essentialism when arguing for women's priesthood. For instance, at an ordination ceremony attendees were invited "to consider the similarities between motherly tasks like tending during illness, consoling during sorrow, teaching life lessons, and making sacrifices, and priestly, pastoral work such as visiting the sick, comforting the aggrieved, offering blessings, giving homilies, and leading worship communities" (ibid, 157). Of significance, in the sequence analyzed above, *Lady Bird* and Marion assume the role of a maternalistic priestly confidante/(confessor) who respectively assure Danny and Fr. Leviatch that no wrong/(sin) was committed.

The institutional Church often references Christ's masculinity to dismiss arguments for women's ordination. Thus, as Peterfeso observes: "RCWP's public priesthood further dismantles the maleness and heterosexuality of Jesus Christ . . . Like Christ as Word made flesh, as God incarnate, the women priests are both fully human (as women) and wholly sacred (as priests signifying Jesus)" (ibid 162-63). Furthermore, women priests tend to downplay patriarchal language in the lectionary and instead employ gender-inclusive terms when referring to God as "Mother and Father God" (ibid 183).

On the one hand, *Lady Bird* and Marion—read as signifying women priests—stand *in persona Christi* and present viewers with a feminine imagining of the divine. The scenes depicting them as confidants to Danny and Leviatch exemplifies this point. On the other hand, they act as female conduits through which the audience visually experiences a Catholic construct of sacredness existing in the mundane. This is underscored in the car scene when we alternately see *Lady Bird*, and then Marion, driving and affectionately viewing Sacramento's landscapes. In both these *mise-en-scènes* the Catholic sacrament(al) assumes a feminine quality and thus resonate with the RCWP movement's (re) conceptualization of the divine as feminine.

Conclusions

Numerous parallels can be drawn between *Lady Bird* and Andrew Greeley's theory of a Catholic Imagination. Hints of God's presence, according to Greeley, can be found in the everyday mundane world. Similarly, the Catholic sister Sarah Joan theologizes attention to the ordinary as an expression of love. A *mise-en-scène*, nearing the conclusion of the film, finds *Lady Bird* (now going by her given name Christine) and Marion in the driver's seat meditating affectionately on the physical landscapes of Sacramento seen through the window. Notably, this sequence—as well as the sequence in which *Lady*

Bird and Marion offer counsel to Danny and Fr. Leviatch—is accompanied by a piano solo that may be interpreted as both inviting the audience to participate in this act of paying attention and hinting that a sacramental quality exists in the ordinary.

Secondly, Greeley found a correlation between his concept of a Catholic imagination, stories of the saints and Catholics' appreciation for the fine arts. Director Greta Gerwig not only envisions Catholicism in the same terms as Greeley but also drew inspiration for the film by imagining lives of the saints as teenagers. Finally she deployed a high school drama club as the backdrop for many of the film's narratives.

Here I would like to elaborate further on Greeley's findings regarding a Catholic tendency to frequent art performances. A high score on Greeley's "Grace Scale" had a positive impact on individual's admiration for the fine arts (Greeley 2000, 43). Respondents were "asked to locate themselves on a seven-point continuum between four forced choices of how they picture God—father/mother, master/spouse, judge/lover, and king/friend" (Greeley 1990, 41). When Greeley refers to people with high scores on his Grace Scale he is referring to individuals who gravitated towards using benevolent/feminine terms (mother, spouse, lover, friend) as opposed to patriarchal terms (father, master, judge, king).

Interestingly, Greeley also found that people with a high score on the Grace Scale, specifically those who imagined God as a friend or a mother, were also more likely to support feminism (ibid 42). In reverse fashion—particularly if we read *Lady Bird* and *Marion* as signifying women priests standing *in persona Christi*—the divine is expressed as possessing a feminine quality to support a feminist cause (women's ordination). The Roman Catholic Women Priests movement also uses feminine or gender neutral terms in their liturgies and subversively employs Catholic gender essentialism to argue for the ordination of maternalistic women priests. On this point, we see a resonance between RCWP and *Lady Bird/Marion* offering maternal consolation to Danny/Fr. Leviatch.

Catholic identity also deserves further attention. The impetus for Greeley's investigation(s) was, in part, to explain why dissenting Catholics did not leave the Church (Greeley 1990, 1-14). The Roman Catholic Women Priests movement's choice to include "Roman" in their name as well as performing ordinations—with the support of male bishops—and pastoral work in spite of being excommunicated exemplifies a (tenacious) commitment to Roman Catholicism. In terms of *Lady Bird*, upon passing through a liminal phase our teen protagonist's completion of a rite of passage is demarcated by her choice to give up her nickname and go by her given name Christine, which may be read as a signifier for her inherited religious identity. After all, this decision is informed by accepting Sister Sarah Joan's theological conflation of love and attention and occurs moments after an emotional Christine steps outside of a Sunday Mass.

Yet, RCWP's commitment to not Catholicism per se but women's Roman Catholic ordination

has been the cause of controversy amongst Catholic feminists. On the one hand, RCWP aims to reform the institutional church; and feminists maintain that sexual abuse on the part of the clergy will persist if the priesthood remains celibate and exclusively male (Sands 2003; Hegarty 2020). On the other hand, many have, in the past, seen the women's ordination movement as holding the potential of replicating clerical kyriarchy and advocate(d) instead for an egalitarian Women-church (See Peterfeso 2020, 79-82; Reuther 2011).⁷⁾ Put plainly, in the view of critics, ordination, regardless of gender, cannot easily be decoupled from an abusive hierarchal institution.

A critical reading of *Lady Bird* allows opportunity to discuss this contentious matter. Jim Vorel (2017) aptly takes issue with Marion, the daughter of an alcoholic mother, as an abusive parent who is not redeemed by the film's conclusion. Vorel criticizes reviewers for not acknowledging Marion's abuse directed at Christine,⁸⁾ noting that others "have taken a decidedly more generous view of Marion than I would have expected." Vorel, echoing RCWP's critics, fears that Christine could in turn abuse her own children later in life; but holds hope that she can—like an aspirational RCWP aiming to reform the Church—break the "multi-generational chain of abuse."

Notes

- 1) Greeley theorized on his idea of "The Catholic Imagination." I am reluctant, however, to deploy the definitive article "the" in reference to a religious worldview as it delimits the myriad possibilities of (competing) visions of Catholicism. At the same time, faulting Greeley on this point overlooks the fact that he often deployed this term when criticizing the institutional Church. In other words, the term, deployed in this manner recognized the existence of different Catholicisms. Nevertheless, the definitive article still functions to imply that Greeley's vision of Catholicism possesses an authenticity that other visions/traditions lack. In this paper I alternately refer to "a Catholic imagination" or use scare quotes when using Greeley's own term "The Catholic Imagination."
- 2) Francis has changed Canon Law to permit women to be acolytes and lectors and the Vatican is, at the time of writing, deliberating on the possibility of ordaining women to be deacons. Nonetheless, the Pope remains unequivocal in refusing women to the priesthood (Zagano 2021).
- 3) I would be remiss to omit the fact that the survey questions regarding attendance at fine arts performances excluded high school events. Arguably though this is a rather moot point given that Greeley's discussion focuses on the relationship between religious storytelling and interest in the fine arts. As such, it is fitting that the film's multitude of stories revolve, in part, around a Catholic high school theater program. Put another way, since the theater performances (enacted stories) cannot be decoupled from the film's Catholic context, they function to underscore Greeley's argument that Catholics place a positive value on storytelling.
- 4) The sequences are adjoined with a piano solo soundtrack that ends with a glimpse of *Lady Bird* being anointed on Ash Wednesday, which, in effect, underscores the sacramentality of the *mise-en-scène*.
- 5) In an earlier scene *Lady Bird* spots a portrait of Ronald Reagan in Danny's grandmother's house and asks: "Oh my God, is this a joke?" to which he responds with an emphatic "No."
- 6) Apart from a student rumoring that Leviatch was once married and had a son who overdosed, the film gives scant detail to Leviatch's character and mental health.
- 7) Peterfeso notes that feminist critics of women's ordination have softened their stance and that "the current tenor is more conciliatory than contentious." This is largely due to the fact that there appears to be little evidence that ordination automatically results in kyriarchy. Nevertheless, as Peterfeso relays: "Feminist theologians are not giving RCWP a pass: the movement is still pushed to consider the ramifications of its actions and its public ministries. But if there's a villain in the women's ordination world today, it is a reluctant, kyriarchal Rome—not fellow advocates of greater women's leadership in contemporary Catholicism" (2020, 82).

- 8) Vorel proffers several examples. In the opening viewers watch Marion “dressing down Lady Bird’s intelligence” when the latter talks about going to an East Coast college. On graduation day, Marion comments that Lady Bird “walked weird” on stage. When picking out a prom dress together, Marion asks “isn’t it a little too pink?” But beyond the constant criticisms of her daughter, Vorel takes issue with Marion’s inability to extend the same empathy she proffered to patients to Lady Bird—and underscores the grave implications of a parent cutting off all communication with a child. Finally, in Vorel’s view, Marion remains unredeemed because she could not follow through with her attempts to complete and post an apologetic letter to Lady Bird. In contrast, Lady Bird (now Christine) is the one in the final scene taking the initiative to reconcile their relationship.

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